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Nerds: A Reclamation of an Identity

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Nerds: A Reclamation of an Identity

Angiola L. Gabriel

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

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Angiola L. Gabriel

Abstract

The term nerd has seen an alteration in usage since it was first used in the 1950s. Originally, nerd carried a negative connotation and people labeled as such were given or had traits such as being overly studious, socially inept, or physically unattractive. However, the term nerd has seen a change in usage since the 1980s; now, the term nerd is seen as a more positive identifier that denotes passion, as well as individuality and intellectualism. There a number of different studies that address nerd identities and cultures in the K-12 educational setting and a broader societal contexts. Yet, there is a lack of empirical data looking at college student nerd identity. This study uses an ethnographic methodology to explore nerd identity within a single student organization at a medium sized, Midwestern institution. This study found that college student nerd identity is expressed through appearances, conversations, and activities, as well as through their values and beliefs.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Problem Statement

Nerd identities have experienced an influx of interest and exploration both socially and academically since the 1980s (Kendall, 1999b); however, there is limited exploration of nerd identities expressed at higher education institutions. Nerd identities have been explored in both K-12 education settings and within the broader societal context (e.g., Kinney, 1993; Woo, 2012a). Exploration of nerd identities at higher education institutions is primarily limited to opinion editorials, these focus on programs or student organizations (e.g., Loftus, 2007; Reardon, 2008). This research study seeks to fill the gap in the literature by exploring *college student nerd identities*.

Background of the Problem

Nerd is often seen as a negative identifier in both popular United States culture and in academic settings (Kendall, 1999b, 2011). The word originated in the 1950s, where it was used in Dr. Seuss' *If I Ran the Zoo* as a nonsensical and negative term (Quail, 2011). It later became associated with being overly academic and socially limited (Bishop et al., 2003; Cross, 2005). The aforementioned original definition, of individuals being socially limited and overly academic, is still prevalent today. For example, the Oxford Dictionary defines nerd as "a foolish or contemptible person who lacks social skills or is boringly studious" ("Nerd," n.d.). However, there are groups and individuals who understand nerd identities using a positive lens, aiming to view participation in these communities as something to be celebrated rather than shamed. Today, the term nerd is not just about external factors, but is inclusive of definitions focusing on internal factors as well, such as individuality, intellectualism, interests, and hobbies (Kendall, 1999b; Woo, 2012b).

Importance of the Problem and Rationale for the Study

Literature surrounding the term nerd, nerd identities, and cultures is small, but growing. *Nerd identities* exploration has seen an increase of interest in both academics and popular culture since the early 1980s with the increased media attention, such as the film *Revenge of the Nerds* in 1984 (Kendall, 1999b). The early 2000s was another period of growth for nerd identities, as the term was increasingly utilized in newspaper articles and popular media; an example of this increased popularity is Weird Al Yankovic's *White and Nerdy*, which is a parody song changing the words to be about stereotypical nerds (Kendall, 2011).

The present study drew from literature addressing identity development and the use of the term nerd within K-12 education settings and in a societal context. Using this literature offers insight for understanding the term nerd in a larger context; this context is important for exploring the expression of nerd identities within postsecondary contexts. While there are a few opinion editorials written on nerds and campus groups, which are connected to nerd identities (e.g., Dodge, 1990; Loftus, 2007; Reardon, 2008), there is minimal research on nerd identities in higher education contexts. The goal of this study was to explore nerd identity expression within a university setting.

Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

This study was designed to explore nerd identity within a United States higher education context. The purpose of this study was to explore *college student nerd identity*. Since the literature on nerds in postsecondary institutions is primarily limited to opinion editorials, this study drew from literature exploring identity development nerd identities in K-12 education and broader society. Utilizing these works allowed for a contextual understanding of nerds. In addition, since higher education does not exist in a vacuum it is vital for exploration of these

contexts to better understand the expression of nerd identities within postsecondary settings. This study's aim was to gain a greater understanding of these students' identities in order to create a more complex and complete understanding of this identity, bringing focus to college student nerd identities.

Research Design

The research was conducted at a Midwestern institution focusing on a registered student organizations inclusive of students who self-identify as nerds. The target population for this study was one of the institution's registered student organization that self-identified as an organization for nerds; this student organization aims to involve the widest definition of nerd identities. This study utilized an ethnographic methodology. The study sought to describe and explore the self-proclaimed nerd identities by college students participating in the selected registered student organization. Data were collected in two ways. First, data were collected through researcher observations of the general meetings of the student organization.

Second, data were collected through focus groups; participants were selected from students who volunteered from the student organization. The first focus group focused on the students' experiences, thoughts, and beliefs about nerds, nerd identities, and nerd cultures primarily focused on the experiences at the institution and important external factors. During the second focus group, participants reviewed the researcher's analysis of the data. Data were analyzed using open coding; coding was used to find themes and patterns within the data.

Definition of Terms

There are several terms that need to be defined in order for the best mutual understanding of the study.

Cosplay – Cosplay is the blending of costume role playing and is the act of dressing up as a character from movies, television shows, video games, books, et cetera (“Cosplay,” n.d.).

Fan – Fan is considered the shortened version of fanatic and is a person who has “an obsessive interest in and enthusiasm for something” (“Fanatic,” n.d.).

Fan art – Fan art is art created by fans of different characters, activities, or places within different medias.

Fan fiction – Fan fictions are written materials by fans containing characters from a certain media, most frequently from television shows, movies, et cetera (“Fan Fiction,” n.d.).

Fanboy – There is a dual perception of fanboy. It is usually defined by sex and fanboys are consider to be obsessive male fans (“Fanboy,” n.d.). However, it is also considered by many to be more about how someone acts as a fan of something usually considered to be the more vocal and aggressive.

Fandom – Fandoms are communities based around a topic. The Oxford Dictionary defines a fandom as “the state or condition of being a fan of someone or something” and “the fans of a particular person, team, fiction series etc., regarded collectively as a community or subculture” (“Fandom,” n.d.).

Fangirl – Fangirls, similar to fanboys, has a dual definition. It can either be considered by sex or by how a fangirl interacts with something they are a fan of, usually considered to be more obsessive and primarily the creators fan fiction or fan art.

Geeky t-shirts – These are t-shirts that make references to different aspects deemed to be nerdy and act as a visual identifier for people participating in nerd cultures (Woo, 2012a).

MSTing – *MSTing* is a term from Woo’s (2012a) study, derived from *Mystery Science Theater 3000’s* (MST3K) of shouting out comments or interrupting during films or

presentations. *MSTing* often can reference other materials and can be both humorous and heckling (Woo, 2012a).

Nerd – This term is defined in different ways and depends on the context. The Oxford Dictionary defines nerd as a person who is “a foolish or contemptible person who lacks social skills or is boringly studious” (“Nerd,” n.d.). However, this definition is outdated for many. More frequently, nerd is being associated with intellectualism, individualism, and internal identifiers, such as interests and hobbies, scholarly pursuits, and participating within fandoms (Kendall, 1999b; Woo, 2012b). There other associated terms with nerd—dork, geek, freak, and dweeb to name a few—which have slightly different meaning and context to each, but overlap with nerd (Francis, 2009, as cited in Mendick & Francis, 2012). However, this study only used nerd to incorporate these different, yet interconnected terms.

Nerd culture – The active participation of collective individuals within common shared activities and pursuits identified to be within the realm of a particular nerd community (Woo, 2012b). These activities and pursuits can include, but are not limited to, reading books, graphic novels, and comic books; collecting items (e.g., actions figures, card games, etc.); playing games (e.g., video games, board games, role playing games, etc.); participation in fandoms (e.g., science fiction, fantasy, cult media, etc.); and engaging in scholarly pursuits (Woo, 2012b).

Nerd identity – Anyone who labels as a nerd, mostly through self-identification. This study explored the nerd identities from the viewpoint of those who accept nerd identifiers and participates in them freely. Nerd identities are complicated and often related to how an individual sees themselves within larger communities.

Referencing – Referencing is the act of “mentioning or alluding to something” (“Reference,” n.d.). Within nerd cultures this be to different medias or fandoms.

Shipping – Shipping is the desire for two people or characters to be in a relationship, often a romantic relationship (“Shipping,” n.d.).

Vlog – Vlog comes from the combination of the word blog and video as they are “A blog in which the postings are primarily in video form” (“Vlog, n.d.).

Delimitations of the Study

There are several delimitations of the study that are important to discuss. This study focused on a single institution. There are several student organizations that have self-defined as nerd groups; however, this study focused on only one of these organizations. The student organization is a local group of a larger international nerd community and the organization markets itself to all nerd students.

Limitations of the Study

There are a number of limitations that accompany this study. First, it only examined a subset of students that participated in one student organization, which does not necessarily encompass the entire scope of college student nerd identity at this institution. Second, this group has an open door policy and does not require members to attend every meeting. Thus, group observation sessions did not include the same students every time, which could limit the depth of information gathered. Finally, due to the relationship between the researcher to the student group, and to nerd identities and cultures, there could be possible biases within the research design, data collection, and analysis. Though precautions were made to reduce these biases, such as member checking the data analysis; it is important to note that the researcher’s positionality could still influence the study.

Organization of the Thesis

The rest of the research study is structured as follows: Chapter two is a literature review about nerd cultures and identities exploring identity development, K-12 educational settings and broader society. Chapter three details the research design, data collection, and analysis. Chapter four highlights the results of the study. Chapter five is a discussion of the findings and concludes with recommendations for practice and further study.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

Images of nerd identities have changed since the term was first used in the 1950s. Early in its definition, nerds were individuals who were overly focused on academics, uninteresting, undesirable, weak, and socially incapable (Bishop et al., 2003; Cross, 2005; Kendall, 2011; Kinney, 1993; Mendick & Francis, 2012). Over time, the term *nerd* has lost some of its negative associations as more individuals are reclaiming it as a positive identifier (Kendall, 1999a). This shift in perception is from using primarily external identifiers to using internal ones, such as interest, hobbies, and scholarly pursuits (Kendall, 1999b; Woo, 2012b). Given this shift, newer definitions opened up nerd identities to many individuals who might have previously rejected nerd identities due to the negative stigma. Woo (2012b) found that nerd cultures are increasingly valuing intellectualism and individuality. Now, to many, nerd identities and nerd cultures are about what people are passionate about, and as actor Wil Wheaton (2013) said, “It is not about what you love, it’s about how you love” (as cited in Black-Moir, 2013). This ideology of being passionate about and embracing something can now be seen within different aspects of nerd cultural groups.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section introduces research used to shape the study by drawing on studies from identity development, K-12 education, and societal frameworks. The second section is an exploration of the literature; it addresses the relationship between nerd identities and race, ethnicity, gender, sex, sexual orientation, and cultural movements. It also examines scholarship related to nerds within the higher education context. Finally, there is a summary of the key findings of the literature and a conclusion highlighting how this study addresses gaps in the literature.

Theoretical Framework

Due to the lack of literature and theories about nerd identities within postsecondary educational settings, this study is framed using broader theoretical frameworks about identity development, as well as scholarship nerds from K-12 education and the larger society, all of which are important to gain a holistic understanding of where and how *college student nerd identity* fits within the larger context.

Identity Development

In order to better understand *college student nerd identity*, it is important to look at identity development as a whole. Exploring identity broadly allows for a deeper understanding of how *college student nerd identity* connects with the current understanding of identity development. Two identity theoretical frameworks shaped this study: Erikson's identity development theory and Chickering's theory of identity development. Erikson's (1959/1980, 1963, 1968) theory explores identity development over an individual's lifespan and is divided into eight different stages each categorized by a crisis and two different outcomes (as cited in Hertenstein, 2002). Chickering's (1969) theory contains seven vectors that contribute to the development of identity and focuses on college students (as cited in Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010).

Erikson's identity development theory. Erikson's (1959/1980, 1963, 1968) identity development theory builds upon Freud's psychoanalytical approach to identity development; however, Erikson's theory differed as he explored both internal and external factors that influence identity development (as cited in Evans et al., 2010). Erikson's theory identifies eight stages: 1) *Basic trust versus mistrust*, 2) *autonomy versus shame and doubt*, 3) *initiative versus guilt*, 4) *industry versus inferiority*, 5) *identity versus identity diffusion*, 6) *intimacy versus*

isolation, 7) *generativity versus stagnation*, and 8) *integrity versus despair*; each of these stages contains a crisis that needs to be resolved in one of two ways in order to develop and individuals can go through a stage without resolving it or be in multiple stages at once (as cited in Evans et al., 2010). Erikson implied age ranges that accompanied each stage and later scholars have assigned more specific ranges (as cited in Jones & Abes, 2013); the first four are generally considered to be a part of childhood and the rest connected with adulthood (Erikson, as cited in Evans et al., 2010).

Stage one, *basic trust versus mistrust*, occurs in infancy and revolves around developing and maintaining trust with caregivers; lacking this trust can lead to mistrust later in life, as well as handling challenges (Erikson, as cited in Evans et al., 2010). Stage two, *autonomy versus shame and doubt*, occurs in early childhood with the development of skills and autonomy; “firm encouragement” is necessary in order to develop confidence and autonomy as opposed to penalizing or shaming, which can lead to doubt and uncertainty (Erikson, as cited in Evans et al., 2010). Stage three, *initiative versus guilt*, occurs in childhood and marks the development of moral awareness or conscience; children take initiative to try new things and mimic others, including behaviors consider to be wrong, which can lead to guilt (Erikson, as cited in Evans et al., 2010). Stage four, *industry versus inferiority*, this state occurs frequently in school settings and revolves around the development of news skills that without encouragement from others can lead to inferiority (Erikson, as cited in Evans et al., 2010).

Stage five, *identity versus identity diffusion*, occurs as individuals transition from childhood to adulthood; this stage is where a sense of self is developed and confirmed, if not it can lead to identity diffusion and confusion about purpose (Erikson, as cited in Evans et al., 2010). Stage six, *intimacy versus isolation*, occurs throughout adulthood and revolves around

building committed relationships; without a strong sense of self, this can lead to difficulties building relationships and thus, isolation (Erikson, as cited in Evans et al., 2010). Stage seven, *generativity versus stagnation*, occurs in midlife and involves creating a legacy and giving back to society, such as raising children, mentoring, or working for social justice causes; without these connections it can lead to feeling withdrawn and failing to engage (Erikson, as cited in Evans et al., 2010). Stage eight, *integrity versus despair*, marks late adulthood and being content with one's life; individuals can experience despair when feeling regret or wanting to start over (Erikson, as cited in Evans et al., 2010).

This study builds upon stage five, *identity versus identity diffusion*. This is due to the fact that Erikson's stage five addresses the development, exploration, and confirmation or not of that identity (as cited in Evans et al., 2010).

Chickering. Chickering built upon Erikson's work focusing on stage five of Erikson's theory, *identity versus identity diffusion*, focusing on the identity development in college students (as cited in Jones & Abes, 2013). In 1993, Chickering and Reisser revised the theory creating a more comprehensive work (as cited in Evans et al., 2010). Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theory contains seven vectors: 1) *Developing competence*, 2) *managing emotions*, 3) *moving through autonomy towards interdependence*, 4) *developing mature interpersonal relationships*, 5) *establishing identity*, 6) *developing purpose*, and 7) *developing integrity* (as cited in Evans et al., 2010). The vectors are not linear, nor sequential, but rather add to one another and the complexity of the individual (Chickering & Reisser, as cited in Evans et al., 2010).

Vector one, *developing competence*, contains three different competences (intellectual, physical, and interpersonal) that individuals work through in order to develop a sense of competence (Chickering & Reisser, as cited in Evans et al., 2010). Vector two, *managing*

emotions, is the ability to identify, accept, and properly and responsibly express emotions (Chickering & Reisser, as cited in Evans et al., 2010). Vector three, *moving through autonomy towards interdependence*, is the ability to work as an individual, but realizing and connecting with the importance of working with and connecting to others (Chickering & Reisser, as cited in Evans et al., 2010). Vector four, *developing mature interpersonal relationships*, involves developing an understanding and appreciation of other people and cultures and being able to forge long lasting and healthy relationships with others (Chickering & Reisser, as cited in Evans et al., 2010). Vector five, *establishing identity*, builds upon earlier vectors and is the development of a clear sense of self; this vector is complex since it involves the intersection of different aspects of an individual's identity, such as race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation (Chickering & Reisser, as cited in Evans et al., 2010). Vector six, *developing purpose*, establishes an individual's life direction, including vocational goals, personal and interpersonal commitments, and a dedication to all of these goals and commitments (Chickering & Reisser, as cited in Evans et al., 2010). Vector seven, *developing integrity*, is threefold containing humanizing values, personalizing values, and developing congruence; these three parts create a complex understanding of morals, values, and beliefs balanced between personal interests and social responsibility (Chickering & Reisser, as cited in Evans et al., 2010).

Chickering's vector five, *establishing identity*, is related to the present research study. The *establishing identity* vector is helpful since it addresses the holistic and intersectional development of establishing an identity, which is necessary for better understanding college student nerd identity. Chickering provides a framework for understanding of how identities intersect and develop in college students, and in the case of this study, how nerd identities develop.

The majority of the existing research surrounding nerd identifiers explores students' experience in the sixth through twelfth grade or nerds in societal contexts. Ultimately, in order to guide this investigation about college student nerd identity, this study builds upon literature from K-12 and societal context to further frame the study.

Nerds in K-12 Education Contexts

The term nerd still carries a negative connotation within K-12 educational settings (Anderegg, 2007). The labeling of nerd identity often occurs early on in development and tends to stay with the student through their K-12 education. In K-12 education, the nerd label is given for a number of different reasons, which can include being seen as socially inept or too academic (Bishop et al., 2003; Kinney, 1993). Students at this educational level manage the nerd label in three ways as seen through the literature. Kinney's (1993) study examined students' experiences outgrowing the identity ascribed to them in middle school. Bishop et al. (2003) found students are often seen as nerds due to academic engagement, cannot outgrow the label, and must accept it. Finally, Bucholtz (1998, 1999) found that students are able to move beyond just accepting the nerd label and embrace it as part of their own identity.

Outgrowing. Kinney (1993) conducted a qualitative study at a secondary school with approximately 1600 students. The study combined participant observations and interviews with 81 students from a number of different peer groups. His study examines the use of *nerd* in middle schools and its effect on self-perception, the perception of others, and how these perceptions translated into the high school years. Kinney found that there was a peer conception of two distinct social groups in middle school: "The unpopular nerds or dweebs and the popular trendies" (p. 26). Many students in the study recalled that there was a divide between being popular and being unpopular, and there was an awareness of social expectations depending on

which group a student fell into. Kinney also found that some students were singled out as nerds due to academic performance, low social skills, dressing unfashionably, or some combination of all of these different factors. As these students transitioned to high school, the students faced a different environment where they experienced “increased opportunities for membership in a greater variety of groups and a lessening of the desire for schoolwide popularity” (Kinney, 1993, p. 28). This allowed students’ access to different peer groups as high schools tend to see a blurring of rigid lines between different social groups, which decreased the stigma of being labeled a nerd (Kinney, 1993).

Students in middle and high school often cannot differentiate between what they think about themselves and what they believe others are thinking about them (Kinney, 1993). However, increasing the number of different social interactions and activities allowed students who were given the label of nerd in middle school, to outgrow the label by following one of two paths. Kinney discovered that students could either embrace what peers respected as non-nerd activities or outgrow peer expectations. Kinney found that both of these paths led to nerds becoming *normalized*, meaning that these students gained an understanding that the *adult world* requires independence and strong communication skills. Students participated in and took advantage of school activities and varying peer groups to alter the way they were seen by peer groups and internally (Kinney, 1993). Kinney’s study is a framework that addresses one-way middle school students manage being labeled a nerd by their peers.

Accepting. Bishop et al. (2003) studied the relationship between academics and academic engagement of students as it relates to close friends and peer cultures. The researchers conducted a mixed method study of middle and high school students using interviews and a survey completed by nearly 100,000 students between 1998 and 2001. Bishop et al. found that a

student did not have to be studious to be labeled as a nerd; for example, showing interest in academics and engaging in academic growth, such as asking questions or frequently studying, can give the perception to their peers that a student is a nerd. They found this stereotyping often lead to harassment of students for this deviation from the accepted norm of academic performance. Bishop et al. stated that simply changing activities or peer groups does not shed the nerd label, or other social stigmas, because social status is intertwined with the interactions and attitudes of others. Since it is often difficult changing social groups, students are forced to accept the label given to them by their peers, as it takes more than a positive attitude to breakdown social stigmas. Bishop et al.'s (2003) study offers a second way in which students manage being labeled a nerd in K-12 education setting.

Embracing. Bucholtz (1998, 1999) found that many students embraced nerd identity rather than reject it. She utilized data from ethnographic fieldwork from 1994 to 1995, focusing on social and linguistic practices observed at a high school in the San Francisco Bay area. Bucholtz's (1998) data reflect nerd identity embraced by a variety of students attending the school. Bucholtz (1999) argues that nerds are not outcasts seeking to shed or hide their identity, but rather, "distinctive[ly] and oppositionally define" their community (p. 211). This group of students tends to place a higher value on intelligence and resisting dominant peer social practices (Bucholtz, 1998, 1999). This valuing of intelligence and education can be seen by academic scores as being a source of pride for these students. Bucholtz (1999) found that one way nerds are resisting the dominant peer social practices was through the type of humor they used. She found that puns were frequently used and word choices were made to reflect knowledgeable and educated individuals. Bucholtz (1998) concluded that nerd identity is not seen as a source of

humiliation, but rather as a source of empowerment and close friendships. Bucholtz offers a final way in which K-12 education students manage being labeled a nerd.

Nerds in Broader Societal Contexts

A societal framework was drawn from Woo's (2012a) study exploring the subculture of nerds within a single city. While there are a number of different studies that address nerd identities within broader society (e.g., Tocci, 2009; Locke, 2012), the studies often focus on a single aspect of nerd cultures, such as technology or comics. Woo's study addresses nerd identities holistically and thus, was a strong framework to draw from in order to understand different aspects and influences broader society can have on *college student nerd identity*.

Woo's (2012a) study focused on stores and organizations associated with nerd activities and the experiences of participants utilizing semi-structured interviews and observations. Woo's study included five stores and four organizations where he did participant observations and interviews with staff and patrons. In addition, he conducted extensive interviews with six individuals in order to gain an understanding of the identities and cultural practices within the city.

Woo (2012a) begins by stating the most commonly understood images of nerds are "stereotypes and caricatures" (p. 26) left over from popular media's portrayal of nerds in such works as *Revenge of the Nerds* and *The Triumph of the Nerds*. But once these stereotyped images are discarded, it can be difficult describing what a nerd is and many fall back on the ideology of "we know them when we see them" (Woo, 2012a, p. 20). Woo acknowledges that there is no singular way of identifying nerds; however, there are shared characteristics by individuals who identify as nerds, which can be used to understand nerds identities.

Woo (2012a) found that intellectualism and individualism were both valued and it was critical for members to have a shared awareness of community practices in order for individuals to see themselves and others as nerds. This was noted through demonstrating these traits through a) *referencing*, b) *MSTing*, and c) wearing *geeky t-shirts*. *Referencing* is exercised in order to demonstrate an individual's connection to the community, as well as knowledge within their pursuits. These pursuits can encompass such activities as reading or collecting books, comics, or graphic novels, playing certain games (e.g., role playing games or some video games), participating in fan activities (e.g., attending conventions or fan art), or collecting memorabilia related to these pursuits (Woo, 2012a). Woo describes *MSTing* as interrupting or shouting out while others are speaking or presenting (often in the form of referencing) in order to show the individual's knowledge. Wearing *geeky t-shirts* or other nerdy clothing and memorabilia, such as buttons or collectables, is a way of expressing individuality as well as knowledge of certain subjects (Woo, 2012a). Woo states that individuals need to claim and accept these identifiers in order to be a part of nerd cultures, as it is often done visually, verbally, and through actions, furthering the idea that "nerdiness is as nerdiness does" (p. 91).

Utilization of Frameworks

These frameworks are useful in understanding the larger context in which nerd cultures and identities are understood. Given the lack of literature about college student nerd identity, drawing from identity development, K-12 education nerd literature, and societal nerd definitions provides a framework to explore the ways in which college student nerd identities may be expressed and understood.

Synthesis of Literature

Nerd cultures, like many subcultures, take on qualities and perceptions of broader society. This section addresses different qualities and perceptions within nerd cultures. This section will cover the intersections of nerd identities with mainstream culture, race and ethnicity, gender, sex, hegemonic masculinity, LGBT populations, and within higher education.

Cultural Movements

Kendall (2011) notes that, within the last decade, nerd culture has seen a huge influx into mainstream United States culture. This is partly due to the easy access of computer and Internet usage to interact with nerd cultures (Alasuutari, Luomanen, & Peteri, 2012). Online retailers, such as *DFTBA Records* or *ThinkGeek*, are good examples of this use. *ThinkGeek* prides itself as being the “retailer of choice for the ‘nerd community’” and revenue has roughly doubled between 2008 and 2011 (Peterson, 2013, p. 58).

Woo (2012b) notes that representation of nerds in popular culture is superficial; however, there is also an expansion of nerd communities to coincide with the increased access to nerd cultures. One example is the *Nerdfighter* community, which started online in 2007 as a vlog between two brothers (Vlogbrothers, 2007), which is a blog in video format (“Vlog,” n.d.). This community has expanded to encompass many different expressions of nerd cultures, such as online educational programming, a record label and online retailer of memorabilia, and a non-profit organization. As nerd cultures are highlighted more in society, other intersections that may not previously been addressed within nerd identities are also being addressed, such as race, gender, and other social constructions.

Race, Ethnicity, and Nerd Identities

Since its origin, nerd has been conceptualized as a White dominated group (Bucholtz, 2001). Nerd cultures use similar standards to United States culture when viewing racial and ethnic groups. Each racial and ethnic group is affected differently within nerd cultures; however, White culture is the neutral to which other racial and ethnic identities are compared with (Mendick & Francis, 2012). According to Bucholtz (2001), nerd identities can be seen as *hyperwhite* due to its rejection of standard White cultures. Bucholtz (2001) states that by rejecting stereotypical standards of coolness and displaying intelligence creates “an extreme version of whiteness” (p. 86), which designates any individual, regardless of race and ethnicity, as being seen as culturally White. For example, in nerd cultures there are racial stereotyping of Blacks as being too cool or unintelligent and Asian Americans as being too intelligent to participate within nerd cultures (Eglash, 2002; Mendick & Francis, 2012). Although, individuals with diverse racial and ethnic identities do participate in nerd cultures, they are often underprivileged due to the “racial politics in America” (Quail, 2012, p. 464). This intersection of race and ethnicity and nerd cultures demonstrates how larger society influences nerd cultures.

Gender and Sex within Nerd Cultures

Sexism is prevalent within nerd cultures, and as much as an issue now as it was when nerd cultures first emerged (Kendall, 1999a; Woo, 2012b). Women in nerd cultures are often given extra identifiers such as *nerd girl*, *lady nerd*, or *nerdette*, signifying that nerds are by default men and women may not be *real nerds* (Kendall, 1999a; Neal, 2013). Since nerds are considered by society to be unattractive and male, women in nerd cultures often feel pressured to alter their appearance in order to be considered attractive and feminine (Kendall, 1999a; Quail, 2011; Varma, 2007). For example, in November 2012, Tony Harris, a well-known comic artist,

made an electronic public statement calling women in nerd cultures fake, ugly, unknowledgeable, and needy of male attention (Romano, 2012); these comments are frequent within nerd cultures.

Many women feel threatened by their male counterparts in nerd cultures (Varma, 2007). This can be seen in actress Felecia Day's (2014), a gamer celebrity and self-proclaimed nerd, blog post about remaining silent due to "self protection and fear" about a recent online campaign. The campaign was supposed to be about ethics in gaming journals, but often comes across as more sexist rather than about journalism because of how nerd communities are responding to the situation (Day, 2014; Wofford, 2014).

In response to sexism within nerd cultures, there are movements promoting women nerds attempting to breakdown nerd stereotypes. Countless groups have made statements and started movements aimed at reframing nerd identities to include equality between men and women within nerd cultures. For example, this is seen through websites, such as *GeekGirls*, *NerdGirls*, and *GeekxGirl*, which aim to give women a separate place to explore and express their nerd identities. Albinwonderland (2012), a vlogger within a nerd community, created a video responding to Tony Harris' comments stating, "There is no such thing as fake geek girls. There are only girls who are at different varying levels of falling in love with something that society generally considers to fall under the nerd culture category." Day (2012) sent a similar message in her blog post to *represent* and stick with what individuals are passionate about. The movement for gender equality within nerd cultures still faces many hurdles (Kendall, 1999b).

Nerd identities are often seen in opposition to mainstream identities. This complicates the matter when addressing gender because there is an intersection between hegemonic male identity and nerd cultures, which seemingly clash. Nerd identities are seen as unmasculine by larger

society, even though nerds are traditionally seen as men (Eglash, 2002; Kendall, 1999a). There is a contrast within nerd cultures of nerd identity being seen as a mix of traditional masculine traits, such as being good with technology, against traditionally feminine traits, such as lower social skills and little to no sexual presence, which can cause tension within masculine identities when being addresses from the larger societal context (Eglash, 2002; Kendall, 1999a, 1999b; Varma, 2007). Kendall (1999b) stated that nerd identities “gets rehabilitated and partially incorporated into hegemonic masculinity” (p. 261) during the 1980s; this incorporation has continued and has given more weight to nerd identities, as seen by larger society, being more masculine. However, even with this shift, nerd identities are still understood differently from mainstream hegemonic masculinity somewhere between masculine and non-masculine (Quail, 2011). Gender stereotypes are prevalent within nerd cultures and sometimes contradict; understanding this offers insight into the complexities of nerd cultures and identities.

Heterosexism and Nerd Cultures

Currently, there is very little mention of sexual orientation and its intersection with nerd cultures. There are non-heterosexual individuals who identify as nerds; however, there is a strong tendency to view all nerds as heterosexual (Kendall, 1999a, 1999b). Nerds who identify as a part of the LGBT community are often given extra identifiers, such as gay or lesbian, in order to note their difference from the standard of heterosexual nerds (Quail, 2011). Bucholtz (1998) noted that LGBT middle and high school students may feel more comfortable with nerd students because “sexuality is not an organizing principle of nerds’ daily lives” (p. 123). From these and other sparse references to sexual orientation, it is clear that more research needs to be conducted before any assumptions can be made about the intersection of LGBT and nerd identities. All of

these factors covered above have an influence on nerd cultures within higher education institutions.

Nerds within Higher Education

Research about nerds in higher education contexts is limited to opinion editorials, and often addresses the use of the term nerd within different programs and organizations (see The Boston Globe, 2008; Loftus, 2007). A number of these different programs and organizations focus on education, particularly within STEM fields. A couple of examples of these programs are Tufts University's *Nerd Girls*, an outreach program to encourage young women to enter the engineering field ("Nerd Girls Create Excitement about Engineering," 2014), and *The Nerd Institute* at the University of Nevada-Reno, which is dedicated to education in science ("Nerds," 2014). There are also nerd student organizations at postsecondary institutions focused on nerd identities and cultures, such as North Central College's *Nerd Culture Club*, which aims to "promote and educate students at NCC about the Nerd Culture that is in their school" ("NCC Nerd Culture Club," n.d.). These different programs and organizations demonstrate how nerd identities are expressed at postsecondary institutions.

Summary and Conclusion

Nerd is a term that has been around since the 1950s and the meaning has changed with time. Originally nerds were seen as socially impotent, awkward, and knowledgeable; with time, definitions have shifted to include individuals who are both intellectual and individualistic. There is little research done on college student nerd identities at the postsecondary level. At the K-12 educational level, three studies address different manners in which students manage nerd identities. Kinney (1993) found that students are often assigned the label by peers and are able to outgrow it by altering their activities and social groups. Bishop et al. (2003) found that altering

activities and social groups may not alter identity as it is tied to the beliefs and ideas of others; thus, sometimes a student must accept being a nerd. Bucholtz (1998, 1999) explains that individuals in high schools can do more than just passively accept nerd identity, but can embrace it, which can lead to rich social interactions with like-minded individuals.

Nerd cultures can be seen as a microcosm of larger society. Nerds are often imagined as White, heterosexual males. These identifiers can cause tension when individuals who identify differently that also identify as a nerd. In addition, nerd is seen as both masculine and un-masculine at the same time, due to the belief that nerds are unable to both be intelligent and socially able. Nerd cultures are experiencing an influx of expression within mainstream culture during the past decade, which is greatly influenced by the prevalence of computers and Internet access in the home (Kendall, 2011).

Nerd cultures can be seen expressed at higher education institutions in a couple of different ways. First, nerd cultures are expressed through programs and events, which focus primarily on STEM field pursuits aimed to support and encourage students in their scholarly endeavors. Second, nerd cultures are expressed through cultural groups, which express and participate in nerd cultures. These spaces offer opportunities to explore nerd cultures and identities within postsecondary contexts; however, there is a lack of empirical research on nerds within higher education contexts.

From the literature, nerd identity can be understood as complicated and driven by individual communities. Nerds have some fundamental characteristics that create communities and the identities for the community members. Researchers have documented that nerd communities value intellectualism and individualism of its members. Nerds are often seen as being offset from the mainstream culture, whether within educational settings or larger society.

This research study on college student nerd identity sought to add to the knowledge and understanding on nerd identities and cultures within higher education contexts.

Chapter Three: Research Design

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore *college student nerd identity* within a postsecondary educational setting. It documents the experiences and definitions of students who self-identify as nerds. This is an area where research and scholarship is currently lacking and this study hopes to contribute to filling this gap. The chapter outlines the study as an ethnographic research study. This chapter details the participants, methodological approach, data collection methods, and data analysis. In addition, it includes sections on the researcher's positionality and trustworthiness of the study. The chapter concludes with a summary and conclusion section.

Participants and Setting

This study focused on one registered student organization at an institution in the Midwestern United States. The institution is a medium-sized, public institution. Student organizations are registered within the institution's office of student life. Currently, there are around 400 different registered student organizations at the institution. The student organization was selected for the study due to their organization's purpose statement that is to create an environment for all nerds to express and celebrate their nerd identities ("Student Organization Constitution," 2014). The student organization is based off a larger international community inspired by a vlog. The purpose of the organization—as reflected in its open nature—is to attract the widest number of individuals who may self-identify as nerds, which made the organization a prime candidate for the study.

The group held two meetings a week. The first is a formal meeting, which happens every Monday evening, where the members follow a weekly agenda. The second meeting is an informal meeting held on Thursday evenings; it is aimed at spending time in *nerdy pursuits*.

Methodological Approach

This study used an ethnographic approach to address the research questions.

Ethnographies study human societies, cultures, and values (Merriam, 2014; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The emphasis of ethnographies is an in-depth understanding and portrayal of the subjects everyday life (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

Ethnographic studies gather data using various methods, such as field notes, participant observations, and interviews or focus groups (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). These data collection methods are used because they seek to engage the individuals within the group, collect in-depth and unstructured data, and understand the participant's point of view (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). This study utilized these methods to immerse the researcher into the culture of the student organization and to gain in-depth understanding of the participants' point of view by attending meetings and arriving early and being the last to leave in order to gain a deeper understanding of the group's actions, interactions, and beliefs. The ethnographic approach is useful in educational research due to the fact that it seeks to understand communities and cultures. Ethnographies allow for an understanding of a group's experiences within higher education settings; this study used an ethnographic research methodology to gain an in-depth understanding of *college student nerd identity*.

Data Collection

Data were collected in two ways: Group observations and focus groups. In order to collect data, permission was sought from the students. The organization's student leaders were approached first, to receive permission to address the entire student organization in order to study the organization. Group leaders were accessible through their emails listed on the

organization's website. Consent was sought from all individual students participating in the study and the study received Institutional Review Board approval (See appendices A-B).

Group Observations

Data were collected through group observation. Group observations were done with the goal of understanding the holistic picture and used to answer descriptive questions as posed by the researcher (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Observations conducted for the study were short term, this means there was a time limit on the observations (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Observations were limited to five weeks, with two meetings a week for a total of ten meeting observations. Originally, data were going to be written into a structured observation protocol, with the intent to gather structured, targeted data based off of ethnographic observations (Merriam, 2014; see Data Analysis); however, this proved to be impractical and the protocol was altered. Data were instead taken in an open format, which better suits ethnographic research with observations being recorded by the researcher; the only structured portion explored: Meeting type/topic (Monday or Thursday), official start and end times, room layout, participant attendance, total attendance, and specific notes about participants (e.g., clothing worn, ringtones, or stickers on laptops; see Appendix C). In the research study, participants are referred to as "participant PX" where X is a number given to each student as they arrived.

Permission was gained to video record the group observations and the last seven of the ten group observations were recorded. Group observations were recorded in order to serve as a memory aid to the researcher, as well as to gather more in-depth and detailed data. Students were given an updated consent and research form to sign, either giving or denying permission to the researcher to be recorded (see Appendix D). Videos were stored on the researcher's computer and were destroyed after being reviewed.

Observations were conducted using balanced participation; this is where the researcher joins in some, but not all, of the group's activities (Savin-Barden & Major, 2013). The researcher participated in the presentations and engaged with students during open time, but did not participate in group activities. This allowed for deeper understanding of group activities, yet allows the researcher to continue their role as graduate advisor (see researcher's positionality).

Researcher observations were recorded in two of ways: Field notes and a researcher journal. Primarily, observations took the form of written field notes. The researcher used an observation protocol to direct the notes taken. Notes were made during and directly after observations were made. These field notes were taken in an open format and included actions taken by students, what was communicated, and the general flow of meetings. The field notes included topics discussed, the layout of the room, or the number of students who are participating in a particular meeting or activity. The video recordings of the meetings were reviewed by the researcher. The video recordings were utilized to capture data were originally missed during the group observation, such as conversations and dialogue, as well as actions and interactions. These recordings served as a rich source of data, and added to the understanding of the group.

A researcher journal was kept and documented the researcher's experiences. Researcher journals are "a personal statement of the researcher's feelings, opinions, and perceptions" about the contact and observations taken (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012, p. 513). The researcher journal was used to capture any thoughts about the activities and experiences of the students as well as the researcher's experience participating within that culture. The researcher journal entries were made no more than 24 hours after an observation occurred. Examples of this include: Notations about the passion students have for topics (e.g., *Warcraft* and *Super Smash*

Bros. 4), social justice issues (e.g., gender and sexual orientation inequities), and the amount of singing students did.

Focus Groups

The second data collection method was focus groups. The researcher conducted two types of focus groups. The initial focus group gathered data and the second served as a form of member checking. Members from the general assembly were selected on a voluntary basis, aiming to recruit four to eight students to participate in the focus groups. According to Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun (2012), this is an appropriate size for focus group data collection. Both the focus groups took place in a neutral location on the main campus and had the same four participants. The initial focus groups lasted 120 minutes and was audio recorded. These recordings were transcribed by the researcher and then discarded. The second focus group was 90 minutes and was audio recorded. Notes were taken from the audio recording and then it was discarded. In addition, the researcher took notes during the focus groups notating any comments or interactions that stood out. Focus group members received snacks as compensation for their participation.

The first focus group was modeled as focus group interviews, with the purpose to gather information about how the group operates and thinks, as well as to document ideas and opinions (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The focus group was conducted in a semi-structured format, which allowed for the researcher to ask specific questions while still allowing for natural conversation to develop (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). This semi-structured format was to get the important information required to understand the study, but still allowed time for the students to express themselves and their ideas about nerd identities and cultures. Questions were drawn from the literature (e.g., Kendall, 2011; Mendick, 2012) and

revolved around the following subjects: Use of the term nerd; what a nerd is thought to be in both activities and appearance; how these students think of nerd identities; if and why they use the term; and how they see nerd cultures being created and acted out on the institution's campus (for the complete focus group protocol, see Appendix E).

Data Analysis

Since the amount of data can be difficult to manage in its entirety, the data were divided into manageable sections; cutting data involves separating data into manageable and meaningful portions (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). This research study builds upon Merriam's (2014) six forms of observation for ethnographic studies: *Physical setting, participants, activities and interactions, conversations, subtle factors, and researcher's behavior*. This study focused on three of these forms of observation to divide the data: (1) *participants*, (2) *activities and interactions*, and (3) *conversations*. These three forms of observation were selected because they focus on the participants rather than the researcher or external factors, which gives meaningful sections of data to explore (see Appendix F). The goal of the study was to get a holistic view of what nerd identities meant to students within the student organization.

The data were coded first through open coding; this method of coding goes line by line through data looking for patterns and themes (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Patterns and themes may include thoughts, ideas, beliefs, speech, actions, clothing and manner of dress, and physical items. This was done by going through the different subsections of the data with different highlighters and highlighting similar data, such as television shows were highlighted in green and course related work was highlighted in pink. From this, over 100 codes were identified; these were then condensed into 80 codes. These codes were organized through axial coding, which is grouping codes into related groups (Merriam, 2009). The codes were then sorted by

related topics grouped into theme groups; this was done twice in order to best sort the data. For example, conversations pertaining to music, discussions, campus life, personal life, oddities, and standing out were all combined into open conversation. Finally, theme groups were sorted through selective coding to highlight the main themes of the research study, or tell a story (Merriam, 2009). There were five main themes (See Table 1).

Table 1.

Themes

Main Themes	Theme Groups II	Theme Groups I	Codes
1. Appearance	1. Stereotypical 2. Actual		1. Personal Appearance 2. Personal items
2. Who They Are	3. Gender and Sex 4. Race and Ethnicity		3. Sexuality 4. Sex 5. Harassment 6. Consent 7. Equal Rights 8. Women in nerd cultures 9. Race and ethnicity not Discussed/unimportant 10. Questionable Videos
3. Communication	5. Conversation During Interactions 6. Open Conversation	1. Music 2. Discussion	11. Questions 12. Comments 13. Jokes 14. Off-topic 15. Reminders 16. Music 17. Singing 18. Online Videos 19. Anime/Manga 20. The Internet 21. Actors 22. Movies 23. Video Games 24. Online Content Creators 25. Books 26. Websites 27. Comics 28. Television Shows 29. Crafts/Crafting 30. Board/Table Top Games 31. Fandoms

			32. Obsessive Fans
			33. Nerd Shipping
		3. Campus Life	34. Science and Science Fiction
			35. Course work
			36. Science Facts
			37. History Facts
			38. Mythology
			39. Student Organizations
		4. Personal Life	40. Campus Events
			41. Personal Experiences
			42. Friends
			43. Relationships
			44. Employment
			45. Hopes/Plans for the future
			46. Physical Activities
			47. Personal Appearance
		5. Oddities	48. Family
			49. Languages
			50. World Events
			51. Animals
			52. Food
			53. Sports
			54. Research Study
		6. Standing Out	55. Consent
			56. Equal Rights
			57. Acceptability
<hr/>			
4. Activities		7. Group Activities	58. Playing Games
			59. Watching Videos
			60. Presentation
			61. Student Organization Notebook
		8. Personal Activities	62. On personal Devise
			63. Artistic
			64. Course Work
			65. Reading
			66. Massages
<hr/>			
5. Student Organization as Nerds	7. Nerd	9. Nerd Usage	67. Nerd as Qualities
			68. Nerd as Endearing Insult
			69. Nerd as Activities
			70. Nerd as Greeting
		10. Hallmarks	71. Bullying
			72. Obsessive Fans/That person
			73. Nerd Shipping
			74. Nerd as interests
	8. Values		75. Inclusive
			76. Word Choice

Trustworthiness

In order to ensure the trustworthiness of the research, there were a couple methods the researcher used to enhance the usefulness and consistency of the research: Triangulation of the data and member checking. Triangulation is using several different methods of instrumentation to insure the meaningfulness and usefulness of data analysis (Fraenkel, Waller, & Hyun, 2012). The researcher triangulated the data through comparing the field notes, researcher journal, and focus group transcriptions. The sources were compared looking for any similarities or differences. Overall, the sources align in terms of themes and patterns, such as the activities done and topics discussed. The only points that did not align were the terms utilized; some examples include: Some students used abbreviations such as *KH* instead of *Kingdom Hearts*, referring to LGBT communities as LGBTQ communities (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning/queer), and using terms for sex and gender interchangeably (e.g., women and female). The terms used most frequently (e.g., LGBT communities) and the correct and full terminology (e.g., women for gender and female for sex) were utilized for this study to limit confusion and represent the terminology the majority of the group utilized. The data were then compared with existing literature.

Member checking—which happened during the second focus group—allowed participants to review the researcher’s interpretation of the data, checking for completeness and accuracy (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012). This was done by going through the findings

chapter of this study section by section with the focus group members noting where they agreed with parts, such as the appearance of nerds, and things they thought should change, such as *Nerdy News* and *Science News* being capitalized and clarification about comments over *Game of War* commercials.

Researcher's Positionality

A positionality statement is meant to communicate to readers the researcher's stance on the research topic, relevant beliefs, potential influences, and concerns about researcher bias (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). This section addresses my beliefs, stances, and possible biases that may influence the study.

It is important to address my personal beliefs about nerds. I identify as a nerd and was raised within a nerd culture. I fall in line more with the new definition where nerds are defined more individually based off of intellectualism, individualism, and internal identifiers, such as hobbies and interests. This can be tricky in not allowing my deep connection to nerd cultures color the study; however, having this experience and understanding of nerd cultures can also be an asset, as it allows for better understanding of students' experiences, ideas, and beliefs. I believe that nerd identity is important to the construction of my own identity. This stance on nerd identities can influence the ways in which I view the study and the data collected.

I am also familiar with the larger international group that the student organization is based on. Again, this can assist with understanding students and having an insider's understanding of the group's experiences. I believe that this organization offers many benefits to its community members (e.g., having a network of individuals who have similar beliefs worldwide who are willing to share information and assist when they are able).

In addition, I am the current graduate advisor for the selected student organization and have been since fall of 2013. This could possibly lead to students feeling pressure to participate in the study due to my authoritative role. This was minimized as much as possible by reminding participants of their right to not participate or exit the study for any reason at any time without penalty. My role as graduate advisor could also be beneficial as I have already gained the trust of the students and thus they could be more likely to disclose their experiences more fully and honestly.

Summary and Conclusion

The selected student organization was chosen due to its purpose of being a location for all nerds to celebrate and express themselves. Data were collected through observing behavior, language, and actions, as well as through conversations with members in the focus groups. General members participated in the observations and were selected on a volunteer basis for the focus groups. Data were coded using open coding in order to find any patterns or themes within the data. Trustworthiness of the study was improved through triangulation of the data and member checking. Finally, the researcher acknowledges there are several personal biases and beliefs that could influence the research study; however, the researcher took precautions to ensure these influences are limited.

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

This chapter addresses the findings of the research study. The chapter begins with an in-depth introduction to the context of the study. Next it addresses the findings of the study, introducing trends and patterns that emerged from the data. Finally, the chapter closes by summarizing the findings of the study.

Context

This study was conducted at a medium-sized, public institution located in the Midwest. The institution is approximately 12 miles outside of a major city. The institution has an enrollment of about 25,000 students, of which just over 21,600 students are undergraduates. Of the total number of attending students, 59.6% identify as female and 40.4% identify as male. The minority student population makes up 15.6% of the student population, with the rest identifying as either White or other.

Student organizations are registered through the institution's student life office; and presently, there are nearly 400 different registered student organizations ranging from club sports to special interests groups, among others. The student organization used in this study was selected due to their mission to create an environment for nerds to express and celebrate their nerdy passions ("Student Organization Constitution," 2014). This student organization is based off a larger international community that is built around vlogs celebrating nerdiness and serving nerd communities. During the study, the student organization held two meetings a week, one on Monday evenings and one on Thursday evenings. Both meetings took place in the same academic building, however, the meetings took place in different classrooms. A total of 44 different students, who are members of the student organization, participated in this study. The

average attendance for meetings was 20.6 students, ranging from 13-26 students (see appendices G-J). Based on pronouns used within meetings, there were 24 women and 20 men members.

Monday evening meetings were held from 9pm to 10:30pm. Students would start arriving around 8:30pm and sit in the hallway outside of the classroom, as there was a class utilizing the space until 9pm. Meetings usually ran within 5-10 minutes of the scheduled end time. The students followed a meeting agenda during Monday meetings. They begin with any announcements for the general group; announcements were followed by members sharing any *Nerdy News*, where students shared news, facts, and interesting information they found relevant to the student organization, such as video games, game development, television shows and movies, or events happening in society. After *Nerdy News*, a member presented *Science News*; this was when a student shared information, facts, and discoveries relating different scientific news, such as the National Aeronautics and Space Agency (NASA) or robotics. A vlog is selected by the president from the previous week's vlog, as two vlogs are posted online every week. To complete the meeting, a presentation was given by a member. Topics were selected by popular vote at the beginning of the academic year based off of member interests (e.g., literature, sports, television, different forms of games, the Internet) and members could volunteer for any selected topic. Occasionally, topics were chosen by the executive board to fill meetings that members did not commit to presenting or if a member had to withdraw from presenting. With any remaining time, students spent time watching video clips on *YouTube* or talking with one another. The average meeting attendance for Monday meetings was 23.4 students, ranging from 19-26 students (see Appendix I).

Thursday meetings took place from 7pm till 10pm. These meetings were to allow student organization members to participate in *nerdy pursuits* with other organization members (e.g.,

game contests, crafting, watching video clips, etc.). Students began to arrive by 6:30pm and were able to utilize the space immediately. On average, these meetings ended within 10 minutes of the scheduled time. Thursday meetings had an open schedule to allow students to decide what activities they wanted to participate in. The schedule included both individual and group activities and all activities were usually voted upon in the first thirty minutes after the official start time. The average Thursday meeting attendance was 17.8 students, ranging from 13-23 students (see Appendix I).

The majority of students (25) attended between 1-4 meetings total over the research period. Twelve attended 1-2 meetings and 13 attended 3-4. Nineteen students attended between 5-10 meetings; seven attending 5-6 meetings, six attending 7-8, and six attending 9-10 meetings (see Appendix J). Monday meetings were better attended with 38 students attending at least one meeting, whereas Thursday meetings had a total of 27 students attend at least one meeting (see Appendix K). Six students attended no Monday meetings as compared to 17 students that attended no Thursday meetings. Moreover, Monday meetings had a higher number of students attending more meetings, with seven, eight, and nine students attending three, four, and five meetings respectively, whereas Thursday meeting attendance was lower in general with four, three, and five students attending one, two, and four meetings respectively, with spikes at the two meeting mark with seven students and five meeting attendance mark with eight students (see Appendix K). The structure and times of the meetings are important to understand the ways in which and how often students were participating in the different meetings; it also provides can create a deeper understanding of how students were participating in nerd culture through this student organization.

Findings

This section addresses the findings of the research study. Data were analyzed using open coding searching for patterns and themes. Particular attention was paid to participants, communication, and actions and interactions. This section is further divided into five subsections. The first addresses the appearances of the participants, the stereotypical nerd appearance, and believed appearance of nerds. The second section addresses race, ethnicity, gender, sex, and sexuality within nerd cultures. This section is further divided into two subsections: the first explores the participant's ideas, thoughts, and beliefs about the intersection of sex, gender, and sexualities with nerd cultures and the second section examines race and ethnicity in nerd cultures. The third section explores the different forms of communication within the student organization and is divided into three subsections: Announcements and news, vlogs and presentation, and open conversation. These breakdown the different types of communication seen throughout different points in the meetings. The fourth section addresses what the students did during the meetings. This is divided into two subsections: The first focuses on how participants spent their time and the second focuses on what activities students participated in. The fifth section is divided into three subsections: The first explores the usage of the term nerd, the second addresses values of the student organization, and the third examines a couple of points that stood out from the data. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings.

Appearance

Appearance can be a challenging, but valuable, way of understanding how individuals and groups define themselves. When focus group participants were asked to describe a stereotypical nerd the first comment was, "Think of a nerd from the 50s" (P20), followed by, "As opposed to what we actually look like, we are the sexiest people on the planet" (P19). This immediately set the tone for nerds' appearances to be seen negatively. The definition they

arrived at was: High-waisted pants with the shirt tucked in; pocket protector full of pens; a calculator watch; glasses taped at the bridge from being broken; unflattering hairstyle; braces and possibly big teeth; male; whiter than white; unattractive; high squeaky voice; asthma; gets bullied; socially awkward; and unable to really talk to others, especially women due to nerds being “genuinely afraid of women” (P19).

These descriptions stand in contrast to how the focus group participants described what they thought nerds actually look like. Stating that nerds are “for the most part, normal human beings” (P18), wearing screen printed t-shirt that probably have a video game or TV show reference, possibly “not smelling of a nice fragrance” (P20; there was debate about this point and whether it was more situational, such as at an overcrowded convention), embracing something that “now may be considered mainstream, but wasn’t recently” (P20; nerd cultures have experienced an influx into mainstream culture over the past decade), which they are passionate about possibly to the point of obsession, and cannot stop talking about it. For example, three of the four focus group participants were wearing screen print t-shirts to match their description of nerds (e.g., P14- “NERD,” P18- “*Pokémon* trainer,” and P20- *Marvin the Martian*).

Many of the participants in the study fit into the latter definition of what the focus group participants thought a nerds’ appearance actually was. There were many students wearing “normal” clothes, such as button downs, vests, t-shirts without prints, and clothing with the institution’s logo or name on it. There were also many students who wore the screen printed t-shirts with references to video games, comic book characters, and movies and television shows; examples included *Captain America*, *Agents of Shield*, *Deadpool*, *Loki*, *Pokémon*, *Doctor Who*, *Star Fox*, *GameGrumps*, *Back to the Future*, *Game of Thrones*, *Star Wars*, and *My Little Pony*. This was accompanied by phone cases of *The T.A.R.D.I.S.*, *Captain America*, and *My Neighbor*

Totoro; as well as, laptop stickers, buttons, and bags with *Sherlock*, *Harry Potter*, and *Naruto* on them. Ringtones of *Final Fantasy VII Fanfare*, *Back to the Future*, and *Merlin* could be heard at meetings. Although there were a number of students wearing “nerd glasses,” which could be described as big, black glasses with heavy square frames that may or may not have tape in the middle (P14), none of them appeared to have tape holding their glasses together. The physical appearances described during the focus group matches well with the appearances of members of the student organization. The focus group participants agreed that expressing one’s interests visually was a part of nerd culture because “it’s a visual way to express your interests in that thing [you are passionate about]” (P19). They also shared it is frustrating when others wear clothing advertising similar interests and do not know what it is. For example, participant P14 stated, that it felt like a “less severe form of cultural appropriation” when people wore clothing for *nerdy things* but knew nothing about it. The focus group participants stated that it led to many awkward and uncomfortable situations “try[ing] to use [the reference on the clothing] as a conversation starter and it just backfires” (P18).

Who They Are: Race, Gender, and Sexuality

Gender, sex, and sexuality. Students frequently discussed gender, sex, and sexuality in meetings. As previously stated, 24 of the 44 students are identified as women by the pronouns used in meetings. The focus group participants were divided over whether or not there were significantly more women in the student organization or if it was divided fairly evenly. Participant P19 suggested that this might be due to the makeup of the institution, which enrolls more women than men.

There were many discussions about sexuality, consent, and gender roles between the student organization members. This included participant P5’s passionate discussion about *Beauty*

and the Beast's (an animated Walt Disney movie) Gaston being creepy, overly masculine, and terrifying by forcing himself on Belle. The group frequently discussed consent and relationships portrayed in the media, such as the highly debated *50 Shades of Grey* (a film that depicts a BDSM relationship; BDSM is a syllabification standing for “bondage, discipline (or dominance), sadism, and masochism as a type of sexual practice” [“BDSM,” n.d.]), which depicts at best, a really bad relationship (P15). For example, participants P15, P27, and P28 discussed how the film failed to accurately portray BDSM and glorified unhealthy relationships, as well as stalking and emotional abuse. Participant P1 stated, “It has become much more apparent in the world that there is a problem with [consent and sexual assault] and some people just don’t understand it,” and that the consent session at freshman orientation was seen as “a joke, no one takes seriously.” Participants P15, P42, and P27 had a conversation, lasting over an hour and covering a host of related topics, discussing the unacceptability of portrayals of sexual assault and rape in casual manners, such as those in *50 Shades of Grey*. Participant P30 even made a point to state in their presentation that *The Legend of Korra* (an American anime about Korra who can control elements) “gave their women pretty good writing,” as other shows have not given women as prominent of roles or strength.

The focus group participants also discussed gender inequities within nerd culture; however, three of the four participants, who all identified as men, seemed to believe that gender inequalities were mostly limited to the video game portion of nerd culture. They mentioned that women characters are often depicted as scantily clad and oversexualized, or as a “Mary Sue,” a character: “a) Without flaw or without any meaningful flaw and b) every character just loves them unconditionally” (P19). However, the focus group participants believed that Mary Sue’s are more frequently seen in printed medias, such as fan written content, rather than in official games.

Participant P19 also pointed out that there are some games that do aim to depict females as independent and in charge as well as sexual, such as *Bayonetta* (a video game about Bayonetta who fights angelic enemies), but these were often debated by the group and nerd cultures if they were accurate portrayals of women.

Participant P14 brought up the distinct lack of female armor in many games, such as Kate Upton's portrayal of Athena in the *Game of War* commercials, where she "should be wearing more armor and she would not be [wearing] pristine white [clothing] in a battle" and that she is "an idiot on a battlefield that should be dead already" (P14). This was met with participant P19's, "They are stupid [commercials]" and "She's *supposed* to be Athena," sentiments echoed by the other two men in the group. The male participants agreed that the portrayal was flawed and problematic, and participant P19 stated that the game "tried but failed" to create a good depiction of Athena and instead created a stereotype depicting the sexualization of women in video games. Participant P14 was adamant about the unjust portrayal of Athena, stating that, "She's not supposed to be Athena, because when you claim to be Athena and you're not, you get turned into a spider!" (Referencing a Greek myth about Ariadne).

Participant P14 brought up the fact the male gaze is often used in the media when attempting to sell something, with "scantly clad woman holding the thing [they are advertising];" however, conversation stayed mostly within video game portrayals. Participants P19 and 20 stated that they felt there was an increase of males being sexualized in video games; however, participant P20 noted, "We have yet to reach a threshold where a man in a video game has been too over-sexualized." Participant P19 iterated that context is important in order to understand characters and character portrayals, as some characters "would not go well" in other contexts and thus "can't consider it the same way" (P19), indicating that some characters written

in certain ways, such as Bayonetta who is a “powerful [character], in charge of everything all time... [and a] sexual kind of character,” (P19) and would not fit well into other games.

Participant P14 mentioned that she often felt like a Mary Sue in the student organization with members saying things like “Don't hassle P14!” and “Oh, she's so loveable.” Her statements was mostly made into a joke by the other three focus group members with responses such as “P14, you are a flawed individual” (P19) and “Now I know why you play elves; it's to make up for your height” (P20); these comments were used to poke fun at participant P14's concern over her treatment in the group.

Sexuality was discussed and depicted on numerous occasions within the student organization. This ranged from a “Queer and Proud” laptop sticker on participant P27's laptop to participant P15's frustration of pansexuals, which is an attraction towards people of any gender or sex, being silenced in the LGBT community. Participant P42 mirrored this sentiment with frustrations that the “LGBT community silences all non-mono sexualities.” Participants P15, P42, and P27 had an hour-long conversation about the LGBT community, sexuality, and other related topics. The focus group participants also briefly discussed sexualities. Three of the four participants identify as heterosexual, with one stating that they are “straight, so straight I can't be in *NASCAR*” (P20; *NASCAR* is a racing car sport where participants drive on oval tracks). The fourth participant, participant P14, defined herself as questioning. Overall, the focus group participants agreed that nerd cultures do not care about your gender or sexuality, but rather, how you interact within nerd cultures. Participant P20 stated that being in the student organization has “exposed [him] to much more than the traditional sense of [gender and sexuality than] what [his] family has just exposed [him] to,” allowing him to experience a broader understanding of other

people. Other than these few scattered discussions, there was little discussion about nerd culture interacting with sexuality.

Race and ethnicity. Overall, the students did not talk about race and ethnicity within their meetings. Forty-three of the 44 students would be visually identified as White and one student as African American/Black. The focus group participants, who all identified as White or Caucasian, agreed that the institution's location might play a factor in the racial make-up of the student organization, as the institution is majority White. Participant P18 added, "We're not the government, we don't need to fill a quota of ethnicity. If they want to come that's cool, no one is pushing them out."

The only times race and ethnicity was addressed in meetings was when questionably racist video clips were played or when members, such as P1, were worried that "something horribly racist will end up in the [research study]" (P1). One clip played on a Thursday meeting, "Harry Potter in the Hood," received a general negative reaction from the group (though mostly due to video quality) and participant P25 pointed out that they could "see a bit of racism" within the video and the video was stopped having watched less than a minute. The other time was when, the video "Beauty and the Beat" was played; the video is a parody of Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*'s song "Belle" by changing the setting to a stereotypical American Ghetto. Participant P5 protested the playing of the video if it was offensive, stating that "[P1] has a higher tolerance for [offensive content]" in response to participant P1's comment, "[The video is] not *that* offensive." The video was played, although the majority of students seemed disengaged. Due to the nature of the meeting, only about two minutes were played. In my role as graduate advisor, I asked for the video to be stopped and had a conversation with the group about cultural competence focusing on the video and expanding the conversation to be more general. This was

a difficult situation due to my dual role as a researcher and as the graduate advisor. There may have been interesting data gathered from allowing the video to be played; however, ethically I had a duty to the students, higher education, and society as the graduate advisor to have these difficult conversations with students. I did provide an opportunity for the students to stop the video on their own, as they did with “Harry Potter in the Hood;” however, since no one asked for the video to be stopped, I felt that it was more important to have a conversation about cultural competence rather than see what data could be gained. From the conversation reactions to the video ranged from participant P20’s, “It pokes fun at a lot of things” to participant P25’s, “It’s pretty racist.” A couple of the participants, participant P25 and P33, were particularly passionate about the topic and took lead roles in the conversation, facilitating conversation about parodies, cultural appropriation, and college as a place to gain knowledge and understanding about these topics. When the focus group participants were asked if they saw racism intersecting with nerd cultures and their student organization, there was the hope that it did not (P14, P18), but participant P19 noted, “Different races have different cultures, and different ones might be more...open to nerds” (P19). However, no mention of which cultures may be more open or less open to nerd cultures.

Communications

The student organization members spent quite a lot of their meetings participating in different forms of communication. This section introduces readers to topics discussed during announcements, *Nerdy News*, and *Science News*, as well as interactions during vlogs, presentations, and open conversations.

Announcements and news. These three interactions are introduced together because of the short length of time spent doing them and the interconnectedness of how they flowed into

one another. Of the seven announcements made over the course of the study, four of them were participant P2 inviting other members to join them in watching *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* trilogies over the weekend. One announcement was related to the present research study, reminding students to sign up for the focus group if they desired and to not worry about the camera as the researcher was going to be the only one to review the tapes. One announcement was me, in my graduate advisor role, reminding students to have meaningful conversations with one another rather than getting frustrated. The final announcement was participant P1 reminding the group of a volunteer opportunity.

During *Nerdy News*, students mostly shared information about films, television shows, video games, or people related to these topics; for example, Lenard Nimoy in his role of Spock on *Star Trek*. Examples of *Nerdy News* included anime release; TNT's announcement of cast of upcoming show *Teen Titans*; the release of *Majora's Mask* on Nintendo's 3DS; the possibility of a *Final Fantasy* arcade game; *RWBY* and *The Interview* being on Netflix; the movies *Kingsmen* and *Jupiter Ascending* were recommended; and excitement shared about the Game Developers Conference. Actor David Tennant's upcoming role in Netflix's *Jessica Jones*, the death of web-based animator Monyreak "Monty" Oum, and the hospitalization of actor Leonard Nimoy were all discussed. However, there were a few that stood out, such as the naturalization of relations with Cuba, the Oscars, and participant P2 declaring that iPads are difficult to type on, which participant P1 claimed was not nerdy since P2 was not excited about it.

Participant P24 shared *Science News* with the group, aiming to share what was happening in the world of science broadly, and giving an overview of the scientific news that could be understood by all student organization members. Topics brought to the forefront included photon entanglement, edible plastic eating fungus, and NASA's *Europa Clipper* receiving funding to

explore the possibilities and conditions for life on Jupiter's moon Europa. Students would often ask questions about the *Science News* presented in order to gain a better understanding of the material. For example, participants P2 and P9 asked what the *Europa Clipper* is going to be doing and what signs of life would it be measuring. Students also joked with participant P24 about their sharing *Science News* every week; students have come to expect it and were disappointed when participant P24 was absent for a meeting or did not present, both of which happened once during the study. Participant P37 once jokingly asked participant P24 if they were planning on becoming a supervillain due to the notebook filled with notes for *Science News* kept in participant P24's vest pocket. Participant P24 quipped back with, "You spend six months with an ankle bracelet, you'd think people would forgive you," (implying that participant P24 has already started becoming a supervillain) much to amusement of the group. Participant P1 even suggested that P24 start their own show, "Tales from the Lab," to share "terrifying stories about what science has done." These three times dedicated for sharing events and news, taken together, highlights what these college students thought was important enough to share with the student organization.

Vlogs and presentations. These two portions of communication are introduced together because of the nature of how students interacted with them. During the showing of vlogs, students were relatively quiet, laughing at jokes and actively watching the video, but occasionally would share a joke or comment out loud. For example, when the vlog showed a bust and participant P2 commented, "Is that Bill Nye?," participant P5 responded with, "No, that's Abe Lincoln." The larger group laughed at the exchange. Another example was when discussing acceptable pet rat names during a vlog, students were adding their own recommendations, such

as participants P1's *Scabbers*, P14's *Peter Pettigrew*, and P9's *Wormtail* (referencing the *Harry Potter* character who goes by these names).

Conversations during the presentation took place in the form of jokes, comments, questions, off-topic comments, and reminders to pay attention. Jokes were often references to other topics or other parts of the presented topic. For example, participant P8 jokingly stating, "All must die who relate to Sean Bean," during the *Game of Thrones* presentation, as Sean Bean is infamous for his many screen deaths. Comments usually added additional details and information about the topic to the presentation from other members of the organization, such as participant P11 adding details to the *Warcraft* presentation about the lore and gameplay. Questions were asked to get clarification about the presentation's topic, for example, participant P9 asked about what happened during the time period between *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and *The Legend of Korra*. Off-topic comments were anything said to the group that did not have to do with the presentation topic, such as participant P2 stating they wanted water. Participant P2 usually gave reminders and often asked the group to be quiet and focus on the presentation. Presentation topics were: *Game of Thrones*, *Warcraft*, *Naruto*, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and *The Legend of Korra*, and *My Little Pony*. Some presentations had more engagement than others; for example, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and *The Legend of Korra* had 56 different interactions, whereas *Naruto* had only 16 (see Appendix L).

Open conversations. During the meetings there were usually open conversations that occurred. There was time set aside at the beginning and the end of Monday meetings, and during Thursday meetings conversations took place throughout the entire meeting. Topics of conversation covered a wide range of interests and activities. By far, the most popular topics of discussion were video games, movies, and television shows. This also includes discussion about

characters, actors, and mediums to interact with those, such as social media, online content providers, and video game companies (e.g., game systems, *Tumblr*, and *YouTube*). Some of the more popular video games discussed included *Portal*, *Final Fantasy*, *Kingdom Hearts*, and *Dragon Age*. Popular movies and television shows included *Firefly* and *Serenity*, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and *The Legend of Korra*, *Harry Potter*, *Star Trek*, and *Star Wars*.

Open conversation allowed for students to express their opinions, ask for recommendations, and debate different topics. For example, one Thursday meeting a group (P1, P4, P8, P18, P19, P20, and P24) spent about 45 minutes discussing *Final Fantasy* and *Kingdom Hearts*. Their discussion covered topics such as gameplay, game tactics and weapons, characters, companions, different games within the franchise, jokes about characters, music, related films, plots and storylines, and what they thought was good or bad about the games. At another meeting, participants P15, P27, and P42 debated the difference between *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*, with P4, P18, and P21 jumping in to add to the discussion.

Other conversations can be considered general life conversations. These included what food to get and where, coursework and classes, what plans people had for the weekend and upcoming break, what mutual friends are doing, when to have a study session, and what movies to watch. An example of this is participants P4, P20, P24, and P33 discussing the weather, difficulties getting around, and if they wanted to go get food after the meeting.

In general, the student organization felt comfortable discussing any topic that came to mind. However, there were a couple of notable exceptions. As previously noted, the casual acceptance or portrayal of rape and sexual assault in the media was seen as unacceptable by many members in the student organization. Participant P5 shared a story and frustrations about students—not in the student organization—discussing how fantastic *50 Shades of Grey* was and

another male student telling a female student, who were not in the student organization, that “any guys which are talking to you are only after one thing” (P5). Participants P15, P27, and P42 had a long conversation about how casual portrayals of sexual assault were unacceptable. Other group members, such as participants P1, P3, P4, P5, P28, and P37, were all found weighing in on conversations questioning the current state of addressing sexual assault and rape in the media.

The other notable conversation was when participant P8 jokingly said “Faggot.” This was immediately met with negative reactions of “Not okay” (P18) and “It’s in poor taste, don’t do it” (P1). Participant P21 was “glad we all had a negative reaction to that.” 20 minutes later, participant P1 brought up how unhappy they were about the incident and stating their belief that no words should be off limits, but it is important to know location and acceptability of use.

Occasionally, topics would arise that made some members uncomfortable, such as other member’s sexual habits. For the majority of the time, members would ask for the topic to change, on occasion, I would step in as my role of graduate advisor to ask for a for the conversation to change. When a discussion arose about what topics were discussed during meetings, participant P1 responded that “it’s more of an age than a nerd thing,” which the other student there (P3, P4, P5, P28, and P37) agreed, when participant P3 expressed concern over what was being observed for this research study.

It is also important to note that students sang during a number of their meetings. During one Thursday meeting, almost an hour was dedicated to singing along to *Disney* movies songs, such as *Mulan*’s “I’ll Make a Man Out of You,” which all members in attendance were singing. Songs were also sung as a reaction to occurrences in the meeting, such as singing the songs that came up in Facebook’s *Guess the Song* game like Red Hot Chili Peppers’ “Californication,” or in reaction to video games, like students singing Linkin Park’s “Crawling” and “Numb” as theme

songs for video game characters. Students would also occasionally break out into song spontaneously; for example, on five different occasions, students sang Blue Swede's "Hooked on a Feeling," a song featured in recent film *Guardians of the Galaxy*.

What They Did

Time. As previously stated, during Monday meetings students began showing up about 30 minutes before of the start of meeting, with two occasions of students showing up even earlier. During this time students would participate in open conversation either in the hallway or in the classroom, when available. Announcements took 3-6 minutes. *Nerdy News* ranged from 3 to 8 minutes, averaging 6.6 minutes. Two meetings did not include *Science News*; the three that did ranged from 10-14 minutes. Vlog showings, on average, took about 4 minutes, ranging from 3-6 minutes. Presentations took up the bulk of the meetings, averaging about 35 minutes with a range of 31-39 minutes. Open conversation at the end of the meeting averaged 23.6 minutes and a range of 19-31 minutes. This overview of time does not include side conversations and transitions that took place (see Appendix M for overview). It was clear that the students focused on the presentations portion of the meetings and valued having time to speak with each other spending more than 20 minutes, on average, after the end of the presentation doing so.

The Thursday meetings overview is slightly messier, as the format of the meetings are open (some minutes may overlap in this overview, but this was minimized). Students would arrive about 30-40 minutes prior to the meeting time, occasionally arriving earlier. On average students spent 38 minutes in open conversation or sometimes quietly doing personal activities (see Activities section) prior to the official start of the meeting. For three of the five meetings little time was spent deciding on what to do; the majority of the time one student would begin an activity and others would join in, such as participant P20 playing a *YouTube* clip and others

giving suggestions on which ones to watch next. The two meetings where students did spend a significant amount of time deciding on what activities to do varied greatly, with one meeting taking five minutes and the other 24 minutes for them to decide. During Thursday meetings there were two major ways students spent their time: a) Either in open conversation and/or personal activities or b) participating in a group activity. On average students spent 87.8 minutes in open conversation and/or personal activities, ranging from 44-177 minutes. Group activities took up the bulk of meeting times (although not all students participated), averaging 142.2 minutes and ranging from 120-181 minutes (see Appendix N for overview). The time spent during Thursday meetings aligned with Thursday meetings' goal: To participate in nerdy activities.

Activities. Students participated in a variety of personal and group activities. All students participated in personal activities at some point during the study. These activities included being on their laptops, cellphones, or personal gaming device—Nintendo's 3DS seemed to be the most popular. Other students would read or do homework and books included one of George R. R. Martin's works as well as a book of Homeric hymns. Students were seen working on a variety of coursework with topics ranging from ancient Greek to chemistry. A number of students, such as participants P8, P13, and P41, were seen wearing headphones during meetings and on a personal device. Participant P41 was seen watching anime on a portable DVD player during both meetings they attended. These personal activities often took place at the same time as group activities. When the focus group participants were asked what students were doing on their laptops or cell phones, they responded with more than likely students on *Tumblr* or other social media sites, playing games, such as *Trivia Crack* or other computer games, and occasionally working on coursework. A couple of personal activities stand out from the rest of them and these activities include knitting, often being done by participants P14 and P32 and occasionally

participants P13 and P26. The other frequent activity, which stands out, is participant P20 giving massages to other students; this took place both in Monday and Thursday meetings. In the focus group, participant P20 shared that he is a licensed masseuse.

Group activities varied from week to week, including watching videos, playing video games, and playing Sardines. Sardines is a game where one person hides and the others must find them, hiding with them when they do. The goal is not to be the last person to find the group hiding. The game gets its name from the group hiding becoming more and more cramped, like sardines in a can. Sardines was played at two of the five meetings and student participation ranged from 5-13 depending on the game.

When watching videos or playing games interactions became similar to those at Monday meeting presentations (see Appendix O). Videos watched included *Star Trek*, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, and *RWBY*. This was before it was determined that this was a violation of copyright laws and the group was unable to continue watching them in the meetings. Students also watched a number of video clips, which ranged from comedy shorts of Victor Borge, anime clips such as *Batman of Shanghai*, and game reviews like “Real Talk with Square Enix.” The more active the activity, such as *Super Smash Bros. 4*, the more frequent and loud interactions between students became.

Students also engaged in playing Disney and other music videos and singing along. There were two types of games played within Thursday meetings. Games included flash games, such as *Trivia Crack*, *Logo Pop*, and *Guess the Song*, as well as more traditional games, such as *Super Smash Bros. 4*, which was brought by a participant, and *Pokémon*. Although not all students participated actively in playing the games, a number of them engaged by discussing the games with those who were playing. One group activity of note was the creation of rules for the Student

Organization Notebook, where students could write stories together, draw pictures, or other written activities they decided upon. The creation of the rules took a total of about 20 minutes to create (see Values section).

“What a Neeerrrrrd!”

“Nerds in the wild.” Student used the term nerd in a number of different ways. First, nerd was used in reference to certain activities or items, like video clips and movies, such as *Batman in Shanghai* and a Goofy (a Disney character) rendition a popular songs. Nerd was utilized in reference to the students themselves, such as participant P4’s greeting to a group asking, “What up nerd?” Participant P14 stated “nerds in the wild” when asking for clarification about the purpose of the researcher’s observations; participant P1 called out “nerds gone wild” when participant P20 stole participant P19’s hat and there was a slight chase to get it back. There was also discussion by participants P14, P17, P18, P20, P28, and P31 about *nerd shipping* within the group, referring to different members in the group dating and creating *ship names*. *Shipping* is when there are two people who you wish to see or are currently in a relationship be together and a *ship name* is the meshing of their names to create a relationship name; for example, in the popular television show *Arrow*, the characters of Oliver Queen and Felicity Smoak are referred to as *Olicity*. The focus group participants, in line with the usage of nerd within the student organization, stated that nerd is often used as a “term of endearment” (P19) and has stopped being seen as a negative term. Using nerd as a term of endearment was seen with participant P20 talking about integrals and participant P32 stating “Nerd,” or participant P30 referring to Tenzin, an important character in *The Legend of Korra*, as a nerd for teaching Korra how to airbend. The focus group participants saw differences between the terms nerd, geek, dork, and other terms, but most were not negative or were “an endearing insult” (P18).

The focus group participants believed nerd identity is “either [something] you really want to claim or just happens to be a part of who you are” (P20). There was an agreed belief that nerd cultures are “very community [based] and, especially, family related” (P19). Participant P14 stated that her family was also nerdy and “nerdy bits of culture have surrounded [her],” her entire life. However, the focus group participants stated that growing up nerdy is not a requirement of being a nerd as participants P18, P19, and P20’s families would not identify as nerds, even though some of them like certain things considered to be nerdy, such as *Star Trek*. In reference to how they got into nerd culture, participant P19 stated, “I met other nerds who were like, 'I’m a nerd about this' and I was like 'oh, I guess I’m a nerd about it too;' I'm nerd adjacent.” Participants P18 and P20 cited different but similar stories about being interested in video games at a young age as an entry point to nerd culture. The focus group participants found that nerdiness was “kind of an infection of awesomeness” (P14) and nerdiness could be spread between individuals by introducing nerdy topics to others who do not consider themselves to be nerds prior to interactions with the newly introduced nerdy topic.

Another point the focus group participants went back and forth about was whether or not bullying was a part of nerd culture. Two of them said that they were bullied to some extent and two of them said they were not. Participant P20, who was bullied, stated, “I am now greatly appreciative of nerd culture because I can [associate] with something that other people will also greatly enjoy and can talk to me in positive aspects. Rather than just make fun of me.” However, the focus group members debated whether this was an aspect of K-12 education or had some link to nerd culture. The conclusion was: “being bullied isn’t really a part of nerd culture” (P19); however, some nerds may experience bullying for their nerd identity, particularly in the K-12 education setting.

Other hallmarks of nerd cultures that the focus group participants discussed can be divided into two sections; the first being fandoms and the second is passion. Fandoms are “the community [where] all nerds are about this one thing” (P14) and often include aspects of fan art, fanfiction (writing stories about a fandom, that are not official), cosplay (dressing up as characters), shipping (the desire for two people to form a relationship often romantic), and fangirl and fanboy. The focus group participants defined fangirls and fanboys not in terms of gender, but rather, in terms of what they are passionate about. Fangirls are defined as an individual who is interested in “shipping, or fanfiction writing” and a fanboys are defined as someone who is “really defensive, will defend [their passion], [and] is mostly associated with the gaming community” (P19). These terms were originally gendered, but since have lost that connotation; thus, regardless of gender a nerd can be both a fangirl and fanboy depending on how they interact with their fandoms. Participant P19 gave the example of “[he] will fangirl over Katara and Aang [characters from *Avatar: The Last Airbender*] and I will fanboy over [the video game] *Kingdom Hearts*.”

The second hallmark is a passion for something either slightly out of mainstream or was not, until recently, considered to be mainstream (P20). These interests include things such as “video games, TV shows, movies, [and] comics” (P18). Although interests could extend to any number of interests, there are some topics that are debated whether or not they can be considered nerdy, such as sports. The main theme of this hallmark is that nerds have an interest that they are very passionate about and often “[they] can just get lost in the details” (P14). However, “nerd culture has that [a] scaling” (P19), meaning some people are more interested in topics than others. This scaling can often lead to some people crossing the line between passion and obsession, where it can develop into an individual who “seem[s] incapable of talking about

something else” (P19). The focus group participants also noted that this scaling could lead to internal prejudices in nerd cultures over who can be considered a “real” nerd.

Values. The student organization never directly addressed what their values are in meetings, however, they can be seen in the rules for the Student Organization Notebook, and through the focus group discussion. The Student Organization Notebook rules were generalized to “Keep it PG13... as we realized we could just list everything” (P14). Participant P1 followed this up with, “We reserve the right to tear out anything that is really dumb and inappropriate... just use good judgment.” The rules were changed from a list starting with “don’t draw penises, don’t draw vaginas,” (P14) but was changed because the students wanted to be inclusive and not “just list everything” (P14).

The focus group participants added three values of the student organization. First, is the student organization being a “comfortable environment” (P14) where students feel safe, included and can express their nerdiness without concern or fear of rejection. The student organization also aims to be a place where people can “count on [student organization members] to be critical but not [cruel]” (P19). For example, a couple of students brought in a video game they were working on that was “very much an alpha [game]” (P20) in order to receive feedback on what needed to be fixed or improved during the early stages of development. Participant P14 stated that “[she] could very comfortably bring any of the stories that [she is] writing” for feedback. The final value was individual members’ “ability to balance passion with obsession” (P19) and not having one of “*that* person who has crossed the line from passion into obsession” (P19). The focus group participants defined *that person* as someone who is obsessed to the point of losing awareness of normal social within nerd cultures and societal norms within the United States. Participant P20 stated, “It never becomes a conversation [with *that person*]. It’s them explaining

to you why they like this thing.” Participant P14 added that a conversation with *that person* is “like a soliloquy [and] they are just going on and on and on and it doesn’t matter if you are listening.”

Standing out. There were a couple of points that stood out in reference to the usage of nerd in the student organization. There were a few students who were concerned with whether or not the student organization is matching up with the values of the larger nerd community. Participant P30 expressed this concern after getting frustrated that students were sharing details about their sexual habits. Participant P14 mentioned in the focus group that other students, participant P14 included, were not sure that the student organization really follows the larger nerd community; stating, “Our group does not do a lot of community service... and [the student organization] could probably work on that,” as community service is a value of the larger nerd community. Participant P14’s comment was mitigated by other members noting the student organization is “a safe circle rather than some[thing] that will go out and seek others...[and the student organization limits reaching out since they] are college students with limited transportation, limited time” (P20), which places limits on what they are able to do. The other point, which was salient, was one student stated that nerd culture is not really comparable to other cultures: “It’s not a thing” (P33). Participant P18 said that comparing nerd cultures to other cultures is like comparing “apples to giraffes...since apples and oranges are still both fruit.” There was general agreement among the group that nerd cultures are not really comparable to other cultures.

Summary

In summation, these students offer a complex understanding of what it is to be a nerd at a higher education institution. According to the focus group participants, the image of a nerd has

become more normal, with highlights of nerd cultures, such as a t-shirt with a video game reference or a *Final Fantasy* ringtone. Gender, sex, and sexuality is a topic frequently discussed and inequities are seen between genders and sexes, although the extent is debated. Race was barely mentioned by students except in reference to concern about racist comments recorded in the research study and when certain aforementioned video clips were shown. The students spent the majority of their meetings interacting and having conversations with one another; this included making jokes, references, and comments during a presentations and in depth conversations about *nerdy things*, such as video games, movies, and television shows. Even with larger group activities, like the presentations or games, students still participated in personal activities. Students were often seen on cellphones, laptops, and personal gaming devices as well as reading, knitting, and working on homework. The term nerd is often used as a term of endearment by members. Nerd cultures and identities are linked to community and is seen as infectious by sharing nerdy passions. Nerd cultures are hallmarked by the participation in fandoms and a strong passion for a topic, which may not be accepted by mainstream culture. The student organizations demonstrated values of inclusion and comfortable environment to express and share nerdiness. A few students expressed concerned about whether or not the student organization is living up to the larger nerd community values; others expressed concern about whether or not nerd culture is a separate culture. The next chapter explores how the data analysis is connected to and adds to existing literature.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Introduction

This final chapter includes a summary of the research study, conclusions drawn from the findings, a discussion of the findings in comparison to the existing literature, and finishes with recommendations for further study and use.

Summary

The purpose of this research study was to explore nerd identity at a higher education institution. There are a number of research studies exploring the term *nerd* as utilized in both K-12 education and larger society. What little work that addresses nerds in higher education contexts is limited to opinion editorials; this research study sought to help fill that gap. The aim of this study was to gain a greater understanding of college student nerd identity in order to create a more complex and complete understanding of this identity.

This research study utilized an ethnographic approach to collect in-depth data about college student nerd identity. The study sought to describe and synthesize self-proclaimed college student nerd identities of students participating in a registered student organization focused on nerd identity, culture, and expression. Data were collected through researcher observations of student meetings and through focus groups. The research study was conducted over a five-week period, totaling ten meeting observations. The focus group participants were recruited from the student organization and four students participated. The intent of the focus group was to collect information about how the student organization operates, thinks, and to document ideas and opinions about nerd culture and identity. A second focus group was held for member checking; this allowed students to check for accuracy and completeness of the data

analysis. Data were analyzed using open coding, looking for patterns and themes that emerged from the data; these themes included actions, beliefs, and appearances.

The findings of the study depict a complex understanding of the college student nerd identity. A major pattern that emerged was that students had certain topics that they were extremely passionate about. These topics included video games, movies and television shows, as well as seeking to be inclusive in the student organization. Students demonstrated their passion through presentations, activities, and conversations. Nerd identities were strongly linked to community and were often linked to being a part of family who participates in nerdy activities. The term nerd was used as a term of endearment in the student organization as they valued a safe space for members to express their nerdiness.

Conclusion

This study sought to gather an understanding of college student nerd identity. The findings create a complex understanding of different ways in which this student organization expresses nerd identities and cultures. These include actions, conversations, and appearance, as well as values and beliefs. Since this is a qualitative study, this cannot be applied to all students in college who may identify as a nerd. However, it does offer an understanding of how college students in this student organization use the term and view themselves. The study also creates a snapshot of this student organization as they participate in and create nerd culture at their institution.

Discussion

This section discusses and explores the connections between this research study and the larger body of literature on nerd identities. First, it addresses links between college student nerd identity and identity development, then addresses frameworks in K-12 educational contexts and

societal contexts through Kinney's (1993) outgrowing, Bishop et al.'s (2003) accepting, and Bucholtz's (1998, 1999) embracing as different ways of managing being labeled a nerd in K-12 education and through addressing how nerd identities and cultures are expressed in the larger societal contexts. Then this section examines the connection between the findings and the synthesis of the literature exploring culture movements, race and ethnicity, gender, heterosexism, and nerds within higher education. The section finishes with a brief conclusion.

Identity Development

This study drew upon Erikson's (1959/1980, 1963, 1968) and Chickering's (1969) theories of identity development. Erikson's framework addresses identity development over an individual's lifetime and Chickering's theory addresses identity development during in college students. Both of these offered ways of understanding the establishment and confirmation of identities. This study found that participant's encountered situations that made them question their nerd identities; however, these mostly occurred in the K-12 education system. One student did question their identity, but it revolved around the difference between nerd and geek rather than if they identified with nerd identities. However, there are students who question the validity of nerd cultures as a separate culture. This can be seen as a way of students struggling with the intersection of nerd identities with other identities, but more research is required to understand this intersection.

There is little in this study that points to participants questioning their nerd identities. However, by participating in a student organization based around nerd identities and cultures, students are affirming their nerd identities by interacting with others who hold this identity. This study did not find many connections being made by students between nerd identities and other identities, such as the lack of understanding for the intersection of nerd identities and racial and

ethnic identities. Participants did note the intersection of nerd cultures with gender and sex identities, commenting and questioning the connection and question between the two (see Gender and Sex in Nerd Cultures).

K-12 Education Contexts

The literature review examined three different frameworks exploring student experiences' and nerd identity in K-12 education settings. The first was Kinney's (1993) study, which examined students outgrowing nerd identity that was ascribed to them in middle school by peers. There was no indication in this research study that any student had similar experiences outgrowing nerd identity as those described by Kinney. The second framework was Bishop et al.'s (2003) study that found students often cannot outgrow the nerd label, and must accept it. Some participants indicated experiences where they initially rejected nerd identity in attempts to avoid the negative stigma, but eventually accepted it. Half the focus group shared experiences and beliefs of not wanting to identify with nerd identities due to the negative stigma it carried. The final framework explored was introduced by Bucholtz (1998, 1999), who found that students will move beyond just accepting the label and embrace it as part of their identity. The half of the focus group participants expressed embracing nerd identities as their own, as described by Bucholtz. These students stated they embraced nerd identities during their K-12 education and had continued to embrace their nerd identity while at their postsecondary institution.

College student nerd identity exploration is an area that is lacking empirical studies and has primarily relied on opinion editorials. The present study begins closing the gap, providing readers with an understanding of nerd identities and cultures experienced by college students. The students' different experiences connecting to nerd cultures help to create a broader understanding of how these students may have created their nerd identities prior to entering into

higher education, such as the focus group members sharing experiences that aligned with Bishop et al. (2003) and Bucholtz (1998, 1999) studies. The construction of nerd identity continues through the higher education experience and is shaped by prior experiences, such as interactions K-12 education or experiences with nerd cultures in a broader societal context. This research study adds to the literature by creating an understanding of where and how nerd identities are being developed by college students. These identities are expanded upon and enriched by the close community this student organization offers.

Societal Contexts

Woo (2012a) found that many portrayals of nerds in popular culture are stereotypes, such as the one described by the focus group participants where stereotypical nerds were described as unattractive, socially incapable, and overly studious. The exact appearance of a nerd is difficult to pin down. This ranges from Woo's (2012a) "we know them when we see them" (p. 20) to the focus group participants' difficulties deciding what a nerd looked like, offering up a number of different possible traits. Overall, the consensus is that nerds look like normal people and are identified through their expression of their identity and culture.

Woo (2012a) found three hallmarks traits of nerds were *MSTing*, *referencing*, and wearing *geeky t-shirts*; these were used to express individuality and intellectualism. This research study found that college students who identify as nerds exhibit all three of these hallmarks that Woo found. During presentations or group activities *MSTing*, or calling out, was frequently seen, often taking place in the form of references to other activities, movies, or video games. Students were seen wearing *geeky t-shirts* (t-shirts that make references to nerdy activities or traits, such as a video game) to their meeting, frequently references to video games and television shows. The focus group participants also found wearing *geeky t-shirts* as an

important factor in nerd cultures and included it in their definition of what a nerd actually looks like: Screen printed t-shirts with nerd references, a strong passion for nerdy things, and a normal appearance. The student organization valued expressing individuality and personal interests through the expression of *geeky t-shirts* and other *nerdy* memorabilia, such as cell phone cases and laptop stickers. The connections between college student nerd identity and the societal framework are important to address as higher education does not exist in a vacuum; having a larger perspective can help build understanding of nerd cultures expressed on college campuses.

Nerd identities, as seen in the societal framework, are varied and complex. This research study examined how some of these habits, tendencies, and cultural hallmarks are beginning to develop in college students as they grow into young adults, as well as how these two parts intersect. By exploring the college student nerd identity, it expands the understanding of students' growth and progression through higher education and into society, as well as how society is influencing college student nerd identity, such as the use of social media sites (e.g., *Tumblr*) and other online mediums (e.g., *YouTube*) to interact with larger nerd cultures. This research study adds to the literature by exploring this gap and seeking to understand how nerd cultures and identities are expressed in this student organization. Although this study is not applicable to all college students who may identify as a nerd, the study offers insights into the expression and creation of college student nerd identities and cultures, as well as the influences of broader society on them.

Cultural Movements

Kendall (2011) noted that there has been a huge influx of nerd cultures into the mainstream culture over the course of the past decade. Students noted that nerd cultures are increasingly considered to be mainstream, although some parts of nerd culture, such as playing

video games and superhero movies, are considered more acceptable than other parts of nerd cultures, such as cosplaying (dressing up as characters) or writing fan fiction. This influx of nerd cultures into the mainstream can be linked to the increased access through such mediums as the Internet. This study revealed that the students were participating within nerd cultures, frequently utilizing technology (e.g., cell phones or personal computers) as a way of interacting with it, such as engaging with fandoms through *Tumblr*—a frequent activity in the group. The influx of nerd culture is also demonstrated by the fact that the student organization is based off of a larger nerd community that began online and has expanded across the globe.

Race and Ethnicity

Woo (2012a) noted that ethnic diversity was often thought to be proportional to the location of the nerd culture (even when it was not) and Quail (2012) stated that this marginalization often led to an underprivileged status for ethnic and racial minorities in nerd cultures. This was reflected in the student organization with only one of the 44 students being visually identified as a student of color. Perhaps this finding reflects how larger society can have an effect on subcultures, and the focus group participants mused it may also be linked to the racial and ethnic make-up of the institution, which is about 85% White and links with Woo's findings of racial makeup of nerd cultures.

In addition, this study does support the literature where nerds are conceptualized as White. The focus group participants did not see racial inequities within nerd cultures, particularly not within their own student organization. However, when asked to describe a nerd, White was the race ascribed to nerds. This is in line with Bucholtz's (2001) findings that nerds have been conceptualized as White. There was little data in the study that addresses the status of students of color in the student organization, which connects to question of if they not attending due to

institutional demographics or if they are not attending due to other factors, such as the intersection of racial and nerd identities as discussed by Quail (2012). More research is needed to better understand these complex intersections.

Gender and Sex in Nerd Cultures

Sexism is still prevalent within nerd cultures (Kendall, 1999a; Woo, 2012b). The focus group participants stated that there is some sexism that persists, though mainly within video games, which differs from the literature that finds sexism permeating all aspects of nerd cultures. This all-encompassing sexism is still evident by the amount of times the woman focus group participant was cut short during the focus group, particularly when discussing gender in nerd cultures, or their concerns were made into a joke.

As seen within the literature (e.g., Varma, 2007; Day, 2014), there is some understanding of women needing to have a stronger role in nerd identities and cultures; this is seen by the participants of this study mentioning when there are strong women roles in television. The concept of *fake nerd girls* was also discussed in both the focus group and in the literature. Both the literature and the focus group participants rejected the notion that the concept of *fake nerd girls* as a way of accurately understanding women's experiences in nerd cultures. Women in nerd cultures are often told they are participating, not because of their passion, but rather because of other reasons (e.g. needy for attention or forced to by family or friends). This concept is still around in many nerd cultures and many women face this barrier. This goes to show that sexism is still prevalent in nerd cultures and to some degree the focus group noted this beyond just video games.

What is interesting here is that there are more women in the student organization than there are men, though this could be connected to the institutional population that is about 60

percent women. Perhaps this could also be connected to the idea that nerds are both masculine and unmasculine at the same time, which could lead to fewer men self-identifying as nerds in higher education. However, further research would be needed to support this claim.

Heterosexism in Nerd Cultures

There was little discussion about sexual orientation and its intersection with nerd cultures in the student organization, but some students were open about their non-heterosexual orientation. Bucholtz (1998) noted that LGBT students in the K-12 education setting may feel more comfortable in nerd cultures, as nerd cultures are not formed around sexuality. Although, the students in this study were open about their sexuality and indeed spent ample time discussing sexual orientation, it is unclear if there is a connection between LGBT communities embracing nerd cultures or if nerd cultures are more open to participants who identify with the LGBT community. What can be drawn from this study is that there is an intersection that is gaining traction between these two identities, at least in a higher education setting.

Nerds in Higher Education

Literature about nerd cultures and identities at higher education institutions is primarily limited to opinion editorials, and these editorials often address different programs and student organizations. There is a connection between the idea that many students participate in nerd cultures through student organizations focused on nerd identities and cultures, such as the student organization for this study. This research study helps to fill in the gap where literature is limited to opinion editorials. This research study also sought to create a more complete understanding of students who identify as nerds while they navigate higher education. This exploratory study gathers interesting data about college student nerd identities, which is an area that has yet to be fully and intentionally explored. Although this study cannot be applied to all students, it is one of

the first studies to explore nerd identity within higher education contexts. Nevertheless, there is still much to learn about this identity and more research is necessary in order to build a complex and robust understanding of college student nerd identity.

Conclusion

From comparing the findings of the study to the literature it is clear that there are similarities that span across nerd cultures, no matter the education level or context. This information is useful when seeking to create a holistic understanding of nerd identities, as drawing from many different sources and diverse contexts can add depth and breadth to our understanding of nerds, and in this case, college student nerds. Filling this gap in the literature also offers a more complex and holistic understanding of these students' experiences, which can allow for deeper and more meaningful connections. This study sought to create an awareness of this identity that is not traditionally recognized.

Recommendations

In order to create a better and more complete construction of college student nerd identity, there are a number of different ways in which the understanding of this identity can be addressed and expanded upon. First, I recommend longer ethnographic studies observing and working with a larger group of students that identify as nerds. This could be accomplished by studying more student organizations that self-identify as a nerdy student organization or by seeking out a larger population of students who may identify as a nerd, but do not participate in any student organization. Another recommendation for future studies is to follow a cohort of self-identifying nerd college students as they progress through higher education. This would allow for greater understanding of the evolution and growth in nerd identities and cultures at a

higher education institution. A final recommendation would be to conduct a larger scale quantitative study seeking to gather data about this student population.

One way of understanding college student nerd identity is for institutions to demonstrate interest in their culture. As stated previously, nerd cultures are community based; thus an institution needs to be invested in understanding the nerd culture and community on that campus in order to better understand and connect with students who identify as nerds. There is no doubt that there are professionals at an institution who may also identify as nerds; however, this is not often conveyed to students. By better connecting with college students who identify as nerds, it can assist in erasing stereotypes of nerds and nerd cultures, as well as foster a strong community. It can also create environments where students feel their nerd identities are valued.

There is still much to learn about college student nerd identity, but this study sought to close this gap in the literature and to create awareness of college student nerd identity.

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Appendix A- Consent and Information Form

Consent and Information Form

Nerd: The Reclamation of an Identity
Researcher: Angiola Gabriel
Faculty Advisor: Donald Mitchell, Jr., Ph.D.
Institution: Grand Valley State University

Research and Purpose

Nerd is often seen as a negative identifier in both popular American culture and academic settings. However, many are reclaiming the identity as a positive one focusing less about external factors and more on internal ones such as individuality, intellectualism, and interests and hobbies (Kendall, 1999; Woo, 2012). There has been research done on nerd identity both at the secondary education levels (K-12) and within the larger society.

This study aims to create a working definition of nerds with the context of higher education. This will be done through group observations of your organization as well as through focus groups with individuals from your organization who self-identify with the nerd identity and have attended the institution for at least one academic year.

Location and Eligibility

Group observations will occur during the regular scheduled organization meeting on the institution's campus. Focus groups will meet twice during the study, also on the institution's campus. Times will be selected for best group attending. Each focus group will last 60-90 minutes.

Any member of the organization group is eligible for the group observation. However, in order to participate with the focus groups individuals need to have attended the institution for at least one year.

Participation in the study is voluntary and may be stopped at any time for any reason without any penalties.

Confidentiality and Privacy

All electronic data will be stored on a password protected personal computer owned by the researcher. Audio recording will be taken and stored on the same computer. These will be transcribed and subsequently destroyed. Any physical data collected will be stored in a secure and locked cabinet. After three years, physical data will be discarded.

Focus group participants will be asked to keep all proceedings private. However, the researcher cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. The second focus group will be utilized for community review of the researcher's findings. All personal identifiers will be removed.

Risks and Benefits

The possible risks associated with this study are emotional or psychological discomfort. All of focus groups and observations shall be conducted in a way that should not cause any harm. However, the focus groups will ask for participants to talk about their identity, thoughts, and beliefs, which may be uncomfortable. If at any point you decide that you do not wish to participate in the study, you can leave the study. The risk of emotional or psychological discomfort is minimal. The possible benefits of this study are the dispelling of negative stereotypes which surround the term nerd and nerd culture. In addition, it can lead to a more complex understanding of the group. Any individual can request copies of the results from the researcher.

Compensation

All participants will receive thank you letter. In addition, focus groups will include snacks. Please notify researcher of any dietary restrictions.

Contacts and Questions

If you have any questions about this research project, please contact:

Angiola Gabriel (586) 879-9142 Gabriea1@gvsu.edu

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact:

HRRC (616) 331-3197 hrrc@gvsu.edu
Donald Mitchell, Jr., Ph.D. (616) 331-4502 (Allendale) mitchedo@gvsu.edu
(616) 331-6591 (Pew)

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Appendix B- Human Research Review Committee Approval

This research protocol has been approved by the Human Research Review Committee at Grand Valley State University. File No. 15-039-H Expiration: October 6, 2015.

Appendix C- Observation Protocol

Observation Protocol

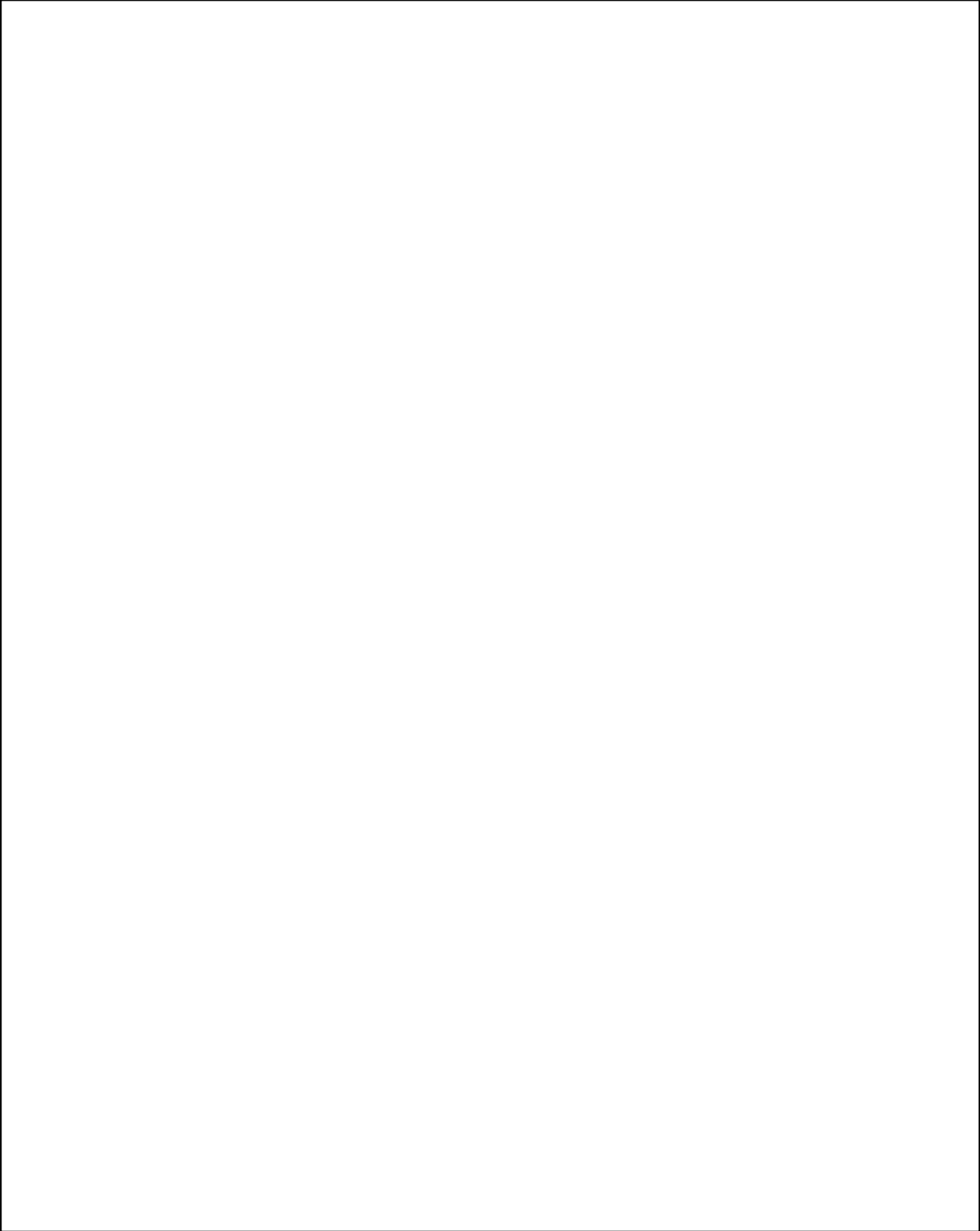
Date _____ Meeting Type _____ Meeting Topic _____

Total participants: _____ Meeting Start Time: _____ Meeting End Time: _____

Participant	Member	Previous Attendance	Present	Notes
P1				
P2				
P4				
P3				
P5				
P6				
P7				
P8				
P9				
P10				
P11				
P12				
P13				
P14				
P15				
P16				
P17				
P18				
P19				
P20				

P21				
P22				
P23				
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P33				
P34				
P35				
P36				
P37				
P38				
P39				
P40				
P41				
P42				
P43				
P44				

Room Layout



Notes:

Appendix D- Revised Consent and Approval Form

Consent and Information Form

Nerd: The Reclamation of an Identity

Researcher: Angiola Gabriel

Faculty Research Advisor: Donald Mitchell, Jr., Ph.D.

Institution: Grand Valley State University

Research and Purpose

Nerd is often seen as a negative identifier in both popular American culture and academic settings. However, many are reclaiming the identity as a positive one focusing less about external factors and more on internal ones such as individuality, intellectualism, and interests and hobbies (Kendall, 1999; Woo, 2012). There has been research done on nerd identity both at the secondary education levels (K-12) and within the larger society.

This study aims to create a working definition of nerds with the context of higher education. This will be done through group observations of your organization as well as through focus groups with individuals from your organization who self-identify with the nerd identity and have attended the institution for at least one academic year.

Location and Eligibility

Group observations will occur during the regular scheduled organization meeting on the institution's campus. Focus groups will meet twice during the study, also on the institution's campus. Times will be selected for best group attending. Each focus group will last 60-90 minutes. Any member of the organization group is eligible for the group observation. However, in order to participate with the focus groups individuals need to have attended the institution for at least one year.

Participation in the study is voluntary and may be stopped at any time for any reason without any penalties.

Confidentiality and Privacy

All electronic data will be stored on a password protected personal computer owned by the researcher. Group meetings shall be video recorded for researcher reference. Due to the fast paced nature of the meetings and the fleeting existence of the spoken word, these video recordings are important to allow the researcher to use them as a memory aid and collect more data from group observations as this would create a more complete understanding of nerd culture and identity within this student organization. These will be kept on the researcher's personal computer and discarded after being reviewed by the researcher. Accommodations will be made for any student who does not wish to be recorded. There will be a section of the room which would not be recorded for these students.

Audio recording of focus groups will be taken and stored on the same computer. These will be transcribed and subsequently destroyed. Any physical data collected will be stored in a secure and locked cabinet. After three years, physical data will be discarded.

Focus group participants will be asked to keep all proceedings private. However, the researcher cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. The second focus group will be utilized for community review of the researcher's findings. All personal identifiers will be removed.

Risks and Benefits

The possible risks associated with this study are emotional or psychological discomfort. All of focus groups and observations shall be conducted in a way that should not cause any harm. However, the focus groups will ask for participants to talk about their identity, thoughts, and beliefs, which may be uncomfortable. If at any point you decide that you do not wish to participate in the study, you can leave the study. The risk of emotional or psychological discomfort is minimal. The possible benefits of this study are the dispelling of negative stereotypes which surround the term nerd and nerd culture. In addition, it can lead to a more complex understanding of the group. Any individual can request copies of the results from the researcher.

Compensation

All participants will receive thank you letter. In addition, focus groups will include snacks. Please notify researcher of any dietary restrictions.

Contacts and Questions

If you have any questions about this research project, please contact:

Angiola Gabriel, Researcher	(586) 879-9142	Gabrieal@gvsu.edu
Donald Mitchell, Jr., Ph.D.	(616) 331-4502 (Allendale)	mitchedo@gvsu.edu
Faculty Research Advisor	(616) 331-6591 (Pew)	

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact:

Human Research Review Committee	(616) 331-3197	hrrc@gvsu.edu
Donald Mitchell, Jr., Ph.D.	(616) 331-4502 (Allendale)	mitchedo@gvsu.edu
	(616) 331-6591 (Pew)	

- Yes, I give my permission to be video recorded in accordance to this consent form.
- No, I do not give my permission to be video recorded in accordance to this consent form. I would like to be accommodated in the area which is not being filmed.

Participant Signature _____
Date _____

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Appendix E- Focus Group Protocol

Focus Group Questions

This is a semi-structured; all questions will be used to guide conversation.

1. How do you see the term 'nerd' being utilized on campus? Where? In what context?
2. How do you react when people utilize this term?
3. Is nerd acceptable in mainstream culture?
4. How would you describe a nerd?
 - a. Appearance, sounds, act, believe
5. Define nerdy
 - a. Actions, thoughts, beliefs, etc.
6. How did you decide if you were a nerd or not?
7. How did you decide to join this student organization?
8. What does being a part of this organization mean to you?
9. How do you define your student organization?
10. What aspects of this organization do you participate in?
 - a. Why?
11. What is nerd culture?
 - a. Activities, ideas, beliefs, community support systems
 - b. Who, when, where, how, why
12. What aspects of nerd culture do you participate in?
 - a. Why?
13. Is nerd culture accepting of individuals?
 - a. Race, gender, sex, fandom
 - b. Why or why not?
 - c. Is your organization?
 - d. Why or why not?

Appendix F- Divided Data Sections

Activities & Interactions

Activity	Participants	Active or Passive	Time/Duration

Interaction-Reason/Topic	Participants	Active or Passive	Time/Duration

Communication

Participants	Topic	Frequency	Duration

Time Start- End	Activity

Appendix G- Focus Group Participant Information Form

Focus Group Participant Information Form

Pseudonym _____

Age _____

Race/Ethnicity _____

Gender _____

Sexual Orientation (optional) _____

Years at institution _____

Years in organization _____

Appendix H- Individual Participant Attendance

Individual Participant Attendance- divided by meeting day and total attendance

Participant	Monday Attendance	Thursday Attendance	Total Attendance
P1	5	5	10
P2	5	0	5
P3	3	0	3
P4	5	5	10
P5	3	1	4
P6	3	0	3
P7	4	2	6
P8	4	4	8
P9	4	0	4
P10	2	4	6
P11	5	0	5
P12	1	0	1
P13	2	5	7
P14	5	5	10
P15	5	4	9
P16	1	0	1
P17	5	3	8
P18	5	5	10
P19	3	5	8
P20	5	5	10
P21	3	5	8

P22	4	0	4
P23	4	0	4
P24	4	2	6
P25	1	2	3
P26	0	4	4
P27	1	4	5
P28	4	2	6
P29	0	1	1
P30	2	1	3
P31	4	3	7
P32	0	2	2
P33	0	3	3
P34	0	2	2
P35	1	2	3
P36	1	0	1
P37	3	0	3
P38	1	0	1
P39	1	0	1
P40	3	0	3
P41	2	0	2
P42	0	1	1
P43	1	0	1
P44	2	0	2

Appendix I- Total Meeting Attendance- Average and Range

Total Meeting Attendance- Average and Range by meeting day.

	Monday	Thursday
Total number of student attendance	38	27
Range	19-26	13-23
Average attendance	23.4	17.8

Appendix J- Total Meeting Attendance

Total meeting attendance- divided by attendance range.

Total Meetings attended by range	Number of students
0	0
1-2	12
3-4	13
5-6	7
7-8	6
9-10	6

Appendix K- Meeting Attendance by Day

Total student meeting attended by day.

Meetings attended	Monday	Thursday
0	6	17
1	9	4
2	5	7
3	7	3
4	8	5
5	9	8
Total attendance	38	27

Appendix L- Presentation Communications

Different communications made during the presentations.

	Jokes	Comments	Questions	Off-topic comments	Reminders	Total
<i>Game of Thrones</i>	7	21	5	0	2	35
<i>Warcraft</i>	2	25	4	5	1	37
<i>Naruto</i>	1	4	5	5	1	16
<i>Avatar: The Last Airbender and The Legend of Korra</i>	2	40	10	3	1	56
<i>My Little Pony</i>	7	27	7	4	0	45

*Note. Comments and question responses were lumped together into a single counting.

Appendix M- Breakdown of Time in Monday Meetings by minutes

Breakdown of time in Monday meetings by minutes.

Meeting topic	Open conversation prior to meeting start	Announcements	<i>Nerd News</i>	<i>Science News</i>	Vlog	Presentation	Open conversation at the end of meeting
<i>Game of Thrones</i>	Not Recorded	8	8	12	4	31	19
<i>Warcraft</i>	35	None	8	14	6	38	20
<i>Naruto</i>	38	5	8	None	4	38	22
<i>Avatar: The Last Airbender and The Legend of Korra</i>	70	6	3	10	3	33	31
<i>My Little Pony</i>	33	3	6	None	4	39	26
Average	44	5.5	6.6	12	4.2	35.8	23.6

*Note. None denotes that the activity did not occur at that meeting.

Appendix N- Breakdown of Time in Thursday Meetings by minutes

Breakdown of Time in Thursday Meetings by minutes.

Thursday meeting recorded	Time prior to official start (Either open conversation or personal activities)	Open Conversation or personal activities (total, not doing other activities)	Deciding what to do (total)	Group Activity (total)
First	Not Recorded	53	24	140
Second	25	108	--	137
Third	40	177	--	181
Fourth	70	44	--	120
Fifth	18	57	5	133
Average	38.3	87.8	14.5	142.2

-- means having spending a minimal amount of time

**Note:* Some meeting minutes may have been double counted depending on the break out of the group

Appendix O- Interactions during Group Activities- Thursday

Communications during group activities in Thursday meetings.

Group activity	Jokes	Comments	Questions	Off-topic comments	Total
<i>Star Trek</i>	2	21	0	15	38
<i>Avatar: The Last Airbender</i>	0	13	7	8	28
<i>RWBY</i>	0	8	5	16	29
<i>Notebook</i>	2	7	2	9	20
<i>Flash Games</i>	7	30	0	20	57
<i>Super Smash Bros. 4</i>	33	80	2	11	126
Video Clips	20	115	2	40	177
<i>Pokémon</i>	8	41	2	19	70

*Note. Comments and question responses were lumped together into a single counting. This only counts student who were actively engaged with the activity, there were other students engaging in personal or other group activities.