'Gus, don't be the comma in Earth, Wind & Fire': Understanding Psych's (sometimes) lonely blerd Burton Guster

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Abstract

Whereas Black identity is the standard for cool, nerds are typically seen as anything but. Nerd identity is exemplified by characters who are awkward, highly intelligent, lonely and undoubtedly uncool. This article seeks to extend scholarship on nerd identity by critically examining the fictional representation of the Black nerd Burton 'Gus' Guster, a lead character in the American program Psych (2006 – 2014) and subsequent made-for-television movies. Gus both embodies and extends our understanding of nerdiness by considering not only Blackness, but also types of loneliness. Despite meaningful friendships and a close-knit family, Gus experiences loneliness throughout the series. It is not until the made-for-television movies that we see Gus enter into a long-term, committed intimate relationship, thereby addressing the most painful type of loneliness.

Keywords: Black American; blerd; identity; loneliness; nerd; Psych

Burkhalter. Exchanges 2022 9(3), pp. 30-45

30

Introduction

Psych is a buddy detective comedy that 'features as its primary relationship a Black-white friendship '(**Thornton, 2011: 425**). The American series aired for eight seasons (2006 – 2014)[i] on the USA Network spawning one made-for-television musical during the show's run and three made-for-television movies after the series concluded (**Del Rosario, 2021**). As of this writing, *Psych* is available via streaming platforms such as Peacock, Amazon Prime and iTunes. Most, but not all, episodes begin with a flashback to the late 1980's or early 1990's to provide insight into the lead characters 'origin stories, highlighting relationships and experiences from their childhoods and teenage years.

Burton 'Gus 'Guster is the show's lead Black character and his best friend Shawn Spencer is the lead white character. The series begins when the buddies are in their 30's and open a private detective agency called Psych. While Shawn is the actual 'psychic' detective, Gus is his partner and plays an integral role in solving their myriad cases. Unlike characters such as Dr. John Watson, the sidekick of Sherlock Holmes, Gus does not simply stand in awe of his detective counterpart (**Leone, 2012**). Instead, he brings his vast pharmaceutical knowledge via his career as a pharmaceutical sales representative as well as his worldly knowledge to bear case-to-case.

Gus is another character in the growing collection of fictional Black nerds, or 'blerds, 'depicted in American television (**Flowers, 2018**). Like other blerds before him, Gus is an 'exception to the normative presentation of the straight white male nerd '(**Flowers, 2018: 169**) and serves as the focus of this article. Analyzing this character affords the unique opportunity to study the life of a blerd across almost five decades thanks to *Psych*'s use of flashbacks and the movies released after the show's conclusion thereby offering a fuller picture of Gus's life as compared to previously studied fictional blerds as discussed in the next section.

In the remainder of the article I first review literature about nerds, blerds and loneliness. I then present two research questions before detailing my methodology. Next, I provide a critical analysis of the character, identifying major themes that emerged. I conclude by examining Gus's status as a lonely nerd and how he embodies the Black nerd.

On Being Nerdy

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, nerd is a 'mildly derogatory ' term and is defined as 'an insignificant, foolish or socially inept person; a person who is boringly conventional or studious. Now also: *specifically* a person who pursues an unfashionable or highly technical interest with obsessive or exclusive dedication '(**OED Online, 2020**). These stigmatized

Burkhalter. Exchanges 2022 9(3), pp. 30-45

31

individuals embrace the world of education and knowledge and are at once intellectual overachievers and social underachievers (**Bucholtz, 2001**). Nerds are good with computers and bad at sports. They are frail, eye-glass wearing consumers of media – especially science fiction (**Kendall, 1999, 2000**). Awkward, math-savvy, sexual failures (**Quail, 2011**), nerds seldom use slang, possess a poor fashion sense and explicitly reject coolness (**Bucholtz, 2001, Flowers, 2018**).

To be cool is to 'diverge from the norm in a way that seems appropriate ' (**Warren & Campbell, 2014: 557**). Though commonly discussed in terms of adolescent development and rebellion (**Bucholtz; 2001; Dar-Nimrod et al., 2012**), coolness has its roots in Black American culture as keeping cool was a key survival tactic and required one to exert control (**Bucholtz, 2001; Majors & Billson, 1992; Morgan, 1998; Zimmerman & Griebe, 2014**). Staying cool began as a 'form of resistance to the denial of life opportunities generally and of recognition and respect in particular ' experienced by Blacks in America and manifested through casual improvisation, creative expression and self-control (**Zimmerman & Griebe, 2014: 27**). Restraint was exerted both emotionally and physically with Black Americans often hiding or redirecting their emotions. To be cool, to keep cool, to improvise, then, was to be at once rebellious and aloof and became deracialized as coolness was adopted by other cultures (**Bucholtz, 2001; Zimmerman & Griebe, 2014**).

Since cool comes from Black culture and is inherent in Black identity (**Bucholtz, 2001; Eglash, 2002; Flowers, 2018**), the rebuff of cool is seen as the rebuff of Black culture (**Bucholtz, 2001**) thus entangling nerds ' rejection of cool with a rejection of Blackness. It is easy to see then how nerd identity became associated with whiteness (**Flowers, 2018; Kendall, 2000**) and in opposition to Blackness. Blacks then are stereotypically anti-nerd (**Eglash, 2002**). And so, with few exceptions, nerds have been portrayed in American television as white males (**Kendall, 2000; Flowers, 2018; Quail, 2011**). Notable exceptions include Dwayne Wayne (*A Different World*), Carlton Banks (*Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*), Geordi LaForge (*Star Trek: The Next Generation*) and Steve Urkel (*Family Matters*).

Commonly referred to as Urkel, Steve Urkel is perhaps the most-studied Black nerd from American television because he highlights the tension between Black identity and nerd identity (**Flowers, 2018**). The 'spitting image of nerddom, '(**Quail, 2011: 463**) Urkel conformed 'strictly to the iconic image of the American nerd '(**Flowers, 2018: 178**) aside from being Black. Urkel's Blackness presented a conundrum because he never came across as cool and was distanced from Blackness (**Flowers, 2018**). Too Black to be nerdy and too uncool to be Black, Urkel was a highly-intelligent young man who spoke in a high-pitched voice and lacked fashion sense,

social graces and sexual prowess. Urkel, like other blerds, existed outside of both Black and nerd spaces as he did not clearly belong in either (**Eglash, 2002; Quail, 2011**). Whether a blerd intentionally distances himself through, for example, the use of superstandard vernacular (**Bucholtz, 2001**) or this distance is imposed by others who may diminish his Blackness or reject him for his dark skin, blerds exist in a liminal space (**Quail, 2011**) and may experience a heightened sense of loneliness.

On Being Lonely

Loneliness is a common and distressing discrepancy between one's actual and desired levels of social contact that can result from perceived deficits in one's relationships (**Perlman & Peplau, 1981; Russell et al., 1984; Weiss, 1973**). There is consistent evidence that individuals who lack friendship, community and/or intimate romantic relationships perceive insufficiency in their lives and consider themselves to be lonely (**Perlman & Peplau, 1981; Stokes, 1985**). Lonely individuals tend to inflate the meaning of minimal cues, misinterpreting or exaggerating 'the hostile or affectionate intent of others '(**Perlman & Peplau 198: 36**). This misinterpretation may result from a social ineptitude which predisposes individuals to become lonely overtime. As social failures who lack relational skills and sexual prowess, it is no wonder that nerds are perceived to be lonely.

According to Weiss (**1973**), there are two forms of loneliness: emotional and social. Whereas emotional loneliness results from the absence of an intimate personal relationship, social loneliness results from a lack of community or social connection (**Perlman & Peplau, 1981; Russell et al., 1984**). Emotional loneliness drives individuals to be vigilant and consistently appraise 'others for their potential as providers of the needed relationships '(**Weiss, 1973: 21**). This is supported by work from Schmidt & Sermat (**1983**) which found that married people experienced significantly less loneliness than those who were single, separated, divorced or widowed. However, Schmidt & Sermat (**1983: 1043**) also found that 'deficiencies in the friendship area showed the highest correlation with self-reported loneliness 'as friendships are important in coping with loneliness as people turned to friends when other relationships were in crisis. Building strong social networks may be another way to combat loneliness as there is evidence to suggest that the stronger one's community (e.g., the denser their social network), the less lonely one tends to be (**Stokes, 1985**). Other coping mechanisms may range from focusing on solitary activities to entering into a series of romantic relationships (**Perlman & Peplau, 1981**).

Burkhalter. Exchanges 2022 9(3), pp. 30-45

33

This essay continues with a discussion of Gus's status as a blerd, his experiences with loneliness and his liminal existence throughout the series and post-series movies. I focus on understanding how Gus's character echoes or disrupts our understanding of the blerd character in American television as well as how the character may challenge or uphold the idea of the nerd as the 'lonely other.'

Gus's Black Identity

Gus's Black identity is something that we are introduced to over the course of *Psych*. This occurs through a mixture of self-presentation and comments from others. For example, Shawn constantly compares Gus to Black actors such as Sidney Poitier, Omar Epps, Blair Underwood and Taye Diggs as an implication of Gus's coolness in various situations. Also, in *Psych: The Movie* (**2017**), his future girlfriend Selene encourages him to 'Get Out! ' before leaving him alone in a room full of white people – a reference to the 2017 American horror film by the same name in which a Black character finds himself in danger when spending the weekend with a white family.

Shawn has also chided Gus for using a distinctly different voice when imitating a white person. For example, in the episode 'Death is in the Air' (**Season 4, Episode 13**) Shawn says to Gus, 'First of all, you have to stop using the banana in the tailpipe voice every time you imitate a white person.'

With respect to self-presentation, Gus is adamant about being connected to Blackness again in the form of Black entertainment. For example, as both a child (e.g., Lando, Billy Dee Williams's character from *Star Wars*) and an adult (e.g., the titular character from the Blaxploitation film *Blacula*), with only one exception, Gus chooses a Black character when it was time to don a costume. Notably, there were even occasions when Gus specifically chose to pay homage to blerds from American television including the aforementioned Dwayne Wade of *A Different World* and Geordi LaForge of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Even when he was dressed as the white character Harry Potter in the episode 'Lock, Stock, Some Smoking Barrels and Burton Guster's Goblet of Fire' (**Season 8, Episode 1**), he refuses to allow Shawn to call him 'The Wizard 'during their time undercover, instead insisting that he be referred to as 'The Whiz – 'a reference to the 1978 American musical film based on characters from the children's novel *The Wizard of Oz* featuring an all-Black cast. Finally, while in college, Gus and three of his Black friends founded an acapella group called Blackapella. Thornton (**2011**) highlights this singing group as perhaps Gus's clearest connection to his Black identity.

[Burkhalter. Exchanges 2022 9(3), pp. 30-45](#)

34

Gus also is clear about the stereotypes he faces as a Black man in America and is conscious of protecting himself. In 'Death is in the Air' (**Season 4, Episode 13**), Gus keeps reminding his colleagues that the potential viral outbreak they're facing is of a 'rare virus that targets people in Africa – which makes it racist by the way.' He even makes indirect reference to racial profiling – a common and deadly problem for Black men in America – before the episode ends. When visiting a small town in the 'Dual Spires' episode (**Season 5, Episode 12**), Gus immediately feels his otherness and realises he is the lone Black person in town (**Gordon, 2012**). Before he can convince Shawn that he's right, a young girl comes up to him and asks him if he is Frederick Douglass. In the 'Office Space' episode (**Season 7, Episode 11**), Gus is indignant when Shawn suggests that they call the police. 'You're talking like a real white guy right now, Shawn,' Gus says. 'Brothers don't get the benefit of the doubt. I will not rot in a cell.' Gus highlights stereotypes as they arise such as being paired with the only other Black person in the episode '100 Clues' (**Season 7, Episode 5**) or noting that, as the only Black contestant, there is no way he would be kicked off his first appearance on a reality show in the episode 'Shawn & the Real Girl' (**Season 6, Episode 12**).

Gus's Black identity is something he embraces throughout the series. While there are times when Shawn has questioned Gus's Blackness (e.g., 'Man, I wish I knew you when you were Black,' in the episode 'High Top Fade Out,' (**Season 4, Episode 7**), Gus never shies away from his Blackness. However, as we see below, he also embraces his nerdiness which may be seen as a direct affront to his Blackness. Further, '[as] a consequence of racism, Black masculinity in the United States … has long been ideologically associated with a hyperphysicality that involves physical strength, hyper(hetero)sexuality and physical violence' (**Bucholtz, 1999: 444**) none of which are characteristics which Gus displays in any heightened sense.

This is particularly notable in Gus's case as nerds are typically depicted as physically weak characters with small bodies who lack sports skills. Though Shawn often teases Gus about not being athletic, Gus demonstrates his physicality in various ways throughout the series. We see Gus race against Shawn on a horse track as adults and with him in a 3-legged race as a child. We also see Gus play softball, baseball and golf and learn that Gus is better than Shawn when in the softball league in which they compete. In the episode 'Earth, Wind and … Wait for It,' (**Season 3, Episode 12**) we see Gus carry a heavyset man out of a burning building. Though it is not an easy task, it is one that Gus accomplishes successfully, bringing the man to safety.

Burkhalter. Exchanges 2022 9(3), pp. 30-45

35

Gus's Nerd Identity

In his analysis of blerds in American television and film, Flowers (**2018**) notes that 'appropriately Black' nerds use slang, engage in sexual banter with and about women and demonstrate their physicality while those who are not appropriately Black lack fashion sense, social graces and sexual prowess. Interestingly, Gus reflects aspects of each. Throughout the series, he uses slang and proper English, engages in sexual banter – though at times awkwardly – and has demonstrated his physicality on various occasions.

Again, nerds are highly intelligent individuals who excel in and enjoy school, living in a world of school, books and knowledge. Gus excelled in school from grade school through college and refers to himself as the brains of the operation and regularly reminds Shawn that he is the only one who went to college. In the episode 'Shawn & Gus Truck Things Up' (S**eason 8, Episode 11**), we learn that Gus has never earned a D grade. In the episode 'Lassie Jerky,' (**Season 7, Episode 3**) upon learning that Shawn has enrolled him in a class about hermeneutics because he thinks the class is about *Harry & the Hendersons*, Gus gets extremely anxious saying, 'Shawn, hermeneutics is the study of theory … Oh my gosh! I could have an exam on Friday! I need to find a syllabus!'

Knowledge of science and math are common characteristics of nerds. Gus is adept in both fields. In our first introduction to adult Gus in the Pilot episode, he is sitting in front of a computer, playing video games – both characteristics associated with nerds and their deep connection with technology. We also quickly learn that he has a love of science as he is thrilled to hear that 'forensics guys 'will likely be at the crime scene. Throughout the series we come to know that Gus possesses vast knowledge about a variety of topics. While his knowledge of pharmaceuticals is likely assumed due to his career as a pharmaceutical sales representative (**Leone, 2012**), Gus also shares facts about paleontology, mummies, federal law, fruit, film speeds, local fire code, taxidermy, diseases, medical trials, math, cars, local publications, the Dewey decimal system, planetary science and medical science including childbirth. With respect to math, in the episode 'Shawn & Gus in Drag (Racing),' (**Season 5, Episode 5**), Gus explains that Detective Lassiter can determine where the shooter's car was by extrapolating based on how long it took for the car to coast to a stop. Gus also subscribes to a publication all about opening safes and vaults and is an avid watcher of the History Channel.

While Gus does use slang, it is not uncommon for him to choose more formal language. For example, in the Pilot (**Season 1, Episode 1**), he talks about having something in his 'esophagus' when the more common

statement would have used 'throat' instead. In the episode 'Dis-Lodged,' (**Season 2, Episode 14**), via a flashback to 1987, we learn that Gus also has a love of proper grammar when he and Shawn begin a club for boys under the age of 12 and are each allowed to have one special rule. Gus's rule? Members must have a love of correct grammar:

> 'That's not a rule!' Shawn yells.

> 'You said we could have one special rule – that's mine,' Gus responds.

> 'And that's the best rule you could think of?' Shawn asks.

> 'I think you mean "That's the best rule of which you could think,"' Gus responds.

> 'I'm not being in a club with this,' yells Shawn as he storms off.

> 'Fine. I don't need you and your misplaced prepositions!' Gus yells back. (**Season 2, Episode 14**)

Gus's focus on grammar is consistent and we see a present-day example in 'Disco Didn't Die. It was Murdered!' (**Season 3, Episode 5**) when he evaluates Chief Vick's grammar saying, 'You split an infinitive.'

Like other nerds, Gus is also an avid consumer of science fiction film and television. In addition to dressing like characters from *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*, Gus also attends sci-fi conferences such as Tri-Con, Comic-Con and Potter-Con. Gus also experiences teasing from his friends who use nerdy nicknames for him such as Chocolate Einstein and G-Whiz.

Though we never see Gus in the stereotypical high-water pants, glasses or pocket protector associated with nerds such as Urkel, his attire is consistently more formal than that of his best friend, Shawn. When we first meet adult Gus in the Pilot, he is at work and wearing a suit, button-down shirt and tie. When we first meet young Gus (**Season 1, Episode 2**), it is 1989 and he is on stage, competing in a grade school spelling bee wearing a button-down shirt tucked into a pair of khaki pants. The closest we see Gus come to more traditional nerdy attire is when he appears in a sweater vest while at the beach on Spring Break as a college student in 1997 in the episode 'There's Something About Mira' (**Season 2, Episode 11**). Though he sometimes appears in polo shirts and jeans, the suit or button-down shirt with khakis is essentially Gus's uniform throughout *Psych*. Gus is always coordinated and takes pride in his appearance.

Another way Gus deviates from the typical nerd is that he is not a virgin. Beyond simply dating various women throughout the series, Gus also speaks of knowing various women 'Biblically' and in the episode 'Gus's Dad May Have Killed an Old Guy' (**Season 2, Episode 10**) he blurts out, 'Trust me, I get mine … I mean I'm just waiting for Mrs. Right,' when his mother

Burkhalter. Exchanges 2022 9(3), pp. 30-45

37

questions why he is still single. And at the end of *Psych 2: Lassie Come Home* (**2020**), we learn that Gus and his girlfriend Selene are expecting their first child. While Gus has ample dating experience, we often see his awkwardness as well – a key characteristic associated with nerd identity. This awkwardness is most evident in heterosexual relationships. For example, in the episode, 'The Tao of Gus,' (**Season 6, Episode 8**), Shawn confronts Gus about the inappropriate way he sometimes approaches women:

> 'Dude you gave a necklace to the FedEx girl last week,' Shawn says to Gus.

> 'That's because she kept stopping by for no reason,' Gus responds.

> 'She kept stopping by to deliver our FedEx packages,' Shawn replies.

> 'Fine, fine,' says Gus, 'Maybe I want someone special in my life, too. Ever think of that? And if putting out a slightly stronger signal is gonna help well that's something I'm willing to do.'

> 'Not sure it's helping,' Shawn responds. (**Season 6, Episode 8**)

Though Gus does change the register of his voice from time-to-time by making it deeper when he is talking on the radio or trying to impress a woman, his regular voice is not high-pitched. In fact, we only hear a high-pitched voice when he is incredulous during an argument with Shawn, or when he is afraid. So, while the high-pitched voice is thought to be a standard of nerd identity on American television, it is not something that we consistently see from Gus.

Gus's Struggle with Loneliness

Loneliness is a relational deficit which 'typically results from a poor match between the individual's interests, social skills or personal characteristics and his or her social environment '(**Perlman & Peplau, 1981: 54**). According to Weiss (**1973**) two types of loneliness are social which is most connected to friendships and community, and emotional which is most related to intimate/romantic relationships. Though Gus has various relationships throughout the series, there is evidence that he indeed experiences loneliness.

In the episode '9 Lives' (**Season 1, Episode 5**), Gus notes that he would like to have a girlfriend and that Shawn is his only non-work friend. By episode 8 of that season, we are introduced to friends of Gus at a science fiction conference. And later in the series during the episode 'Ferry Tale,' (**Season 5, Episode 7**) we meet more of Gus's friends who are conservationists. This is especially important to note as deficiencies in friendships are highly correlated with loneliness. These newer relationships imply that Gus

Burkhalter. Exchanges 2022 9(3), pp. 30-45

38

established new friendships as a way to cope with his feelings of loneliness.

Another mechanism for coping with and alleviating loneliness is the pursuit of solitary activities (**Perlman & Peplau, 1981**). Gus's solitary activity is tap dance. As both a child and an adult, we see Gus tap dancing. In the episode 'Feet Don't Kill Me Now' (**Season 5, Episode 2**), young Gus is initially ashamed when Shawn finds him tap dancing alone in the backyard. However, Gus ultimately insists that tap is cool and suggests Shawn try it out, too. In present day, we learn that Gus still takes tap lessons – a revelation at which both Shawn and Detective Lassiter balk and to which Gus replies, 'I don't care that you and Shawn don't get it … I'm doing things for myself, getting back to things I love.' This highlights the gratification that Gus finds in the activity and is consistent with those who experience loneliness seeking out alternative forms of gratification (**Perlman & Peplau, 1981**). Gus's choice of tap dance is of particular importance as it has a direct connection to his Black identity. Tap dance possesses 'visible and palpable' African influences (**DeFrantz 2002: 1**) and was heavily influenced by Black music throughout the twentieth century. It is an often-solitary pursuit which has come to focus on an individual's interpretation of the music and is commonly associated with Black masculinity (**Pugh 2012**).

As discussed in the previous section, Gus was in constant pursuit of romantic connection throughout the series which is another way to cope with loneliness. As highlighted in the aforementioned FedEx example from season six, Gus inflates the meaning of minimal cues, exaggerating women's affectionate intention towards him as he consistently evaluates women as potential romantic partners. He does so to the point of desperation as exemplified by this exchange from the episode 'Chivalry Isn't Dead but Someone Is' (**Season 5, Episode 4**). After being rejected by Eugenia, a lesbian several years his senior who goes to prison for committing three murders, Gus visits her to figure out why she rejected him:

> 'It's just been bothering me,' Gus tells her from the other side of the glass.

> 'You know,' she replied, 'you should meet a nice girl and focus on her and never ever come back here.' (**Season 5, Episode 4**)

Notably, Gus only engaged with Eugenia as a result of the case he and Shawn were investigating in response to Shawn's insistence that Gus attend a double-date so Shawn could learn more about a suspect. Gus had no interest in Eugenia but became dismayed as she rejected every kindness he offered. Despite his lack of romantic interest in Eugenia, Gus

Burkhalter. Exchanges 2022 9(3), pp. 30-45

39

still sought her out in prison to find out why she rebuffed him. Due to his loneliness, Gus has a difficult time giving up control (**Horowitz & de Sales French, 1979**) and properly interpreting social cues sometimes to the point of bewilderment (**Weiss 1973**).

Without a doubt, his relationship with Shawn is most important. They have been friends since at least the age of three and share a small but interconnected community. Shawn and Gus both rely heavily on Shawn's father Henry Spencer for advice and guidance as they investigate cases. When Shawn's mother, Dr. Madeline Spencer, comes for a visit in the episode 'Ghosts,' (**Season 3, Episode 1**), both she and Gus express excitement about seeing one another and in 'Murder? Anyone? Anyone? Bueller? **(Season 3, Episode 2)**, she makes a beeline to greet Gus upon seeing him at an event. Shawn briefly dated Gus's older sister, Joy, and though the buddies' closeness is a concern for Gus's mom, the friends have spent holidays with one another's families. Their dream, expressed in multiple episodes and two movies is to live next door to one another with a pool that stretches across both of their backyards. If that dream is realized, it will only serve to strengthen Gus's community as Shawn's wife, Detective Juliet O'Hara, and Gus's now-fiancé, Selene, refer to one another as best friends in *Psych 2: Lassie Come Home*.

Though Gus experiences emotional and social relationships over the course of the series and subsequent movies, he battles with loneliness throughout. Gus's markers of awkwardness and challenges with healthy heterosexual relationships are consistent with his nerd identity and his feelings of loneliness. Now that Gus is engaged and entering fatherhood, it is possible that he will experience less loneliness due to his growing and interconnected network and romantic relationship (**Jones et al. 1982; Schmidt & Sermat, 1983**). His relationship with Selene and the birth of their first child will be the focus of *Psych 3: This is Gus* (**Del Rosario, 2021**).

Discussion

I began this study with two central questions: (1) How does Gus's character echo or disrupt our understanding of the blerd character in American television? and (2) Does Gus's character challenge or uphold the idea of the nerd as the 'lonely other'? Based upon a character analysis conducted across eight seasons and two films, I find that Gus both echoes and disrupts our understanding of the blerd while also upholding the idea of the lonely other.

Whereas, Black identity is the standard for cool, nerds are typically seen as anything but. Black nerds, or blerds, then provide a unique opportunity to look at the juxtaposition of the two in order to understand how the identities might co-exist. My findings extend previous research about

Burkhalter. Exchanges 2022 9(3), pp. 30-45

40

blerds in American television in three key ways. First, this study introduces the *Psych* character Burton 'Gus 'Guster to collection of blerds previously studied. Second, since *Psych*'s storyline extends from the 1980s into the 2020s, we are able to see not just teen and adult blerds such as Steve Urkel and Carlton Banks, but also the child blerd, Young Burton 'Gus 'Guster. Third, I find that Gus echoes noted aspects of both Black and nerd identities and does so in ways that disrupt and extend what we know of blerds. By embracing and publicly displaying aspects of both identities, Gus does appear to span the boundaries of each (**Quail 2011**). Notably, Gus does not appear to distance himself from either. Despite this, he still appears to experience loneliness which is the focus of my second research question.

Aspects of Gus's nerd identity such as awkwardness, lack of friendships and sometimes poor social skills appeared to be antecedents to his bouts with both social and emotional loneliness. And, aside from his tap dancing, most of the ways that Gus copes with loneliness – from entering into numerous romantic relationships to finding more friends – are tied most directly to his nerd identity.

Gus may have also experienced loneliness due to his Black identity. As Thornton (**2011**) notes, aside from his family and his musical group, Gus is often the only Black person we encounter in an episode. Though Gus is never intentionally alienated because of his Blackness, it is notable that he did feel 'othered 'at times which could also lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation (**Gordon, 2012; Quail, 2011**). With the introduction of Selene, Gus's Black fiancé, and the potential for future movies (**Sorren 2020**), future research may extend the present study with a focus on the relationship between Gus's Blackness and his experiences with loneliness.

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Burkhalter. Exchanges 2022 9(3), pp. 30-45

41
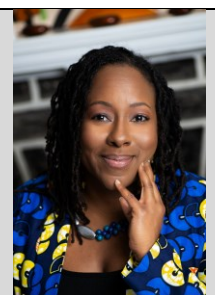
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Burkhalter. Exchanges 2022 9(3), pp. 30-45

42

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Burkhalter. Exchanges 2022 9(3), pp. 30-45

43

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Endnotes

[i] For all specific episodes referred in this piece, please see the **Media Bibliography** section.

Burkhalter. Exchanges 2022 9(3), pp. 30-45

45