Socially Inept? The perceived loneliness of nerds
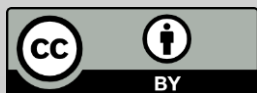
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Abstract

This introduction establishes the main perspectives of the special issue on the relationship between loneliness and nerds. We argue that the stereotype of the lonely nerd is becoming increasingly reductive in the technological age at the turn of the 21st century, in which being a nerd is not only perceived as cool but in which nerds also occupy central positions of power. We also stress the transnational perspective of the special issue. While the majority of studies on fictional representations of nerds focuses on the Anglo-American context, the issue moves away from this hegemony, also engaging with studies on narratives of nerds produced in other cultural contexts, ranging from Europe to Asia. This informs the issue's interdisciplinary approach, whereby intersections between different cultural contexts are reflected in connections across various media that have shaped the perception of lonely nerds. Finally, we challenge the traditional perception of the nerd as white, male, heterosexual, and middle class and establish five analytical categories that will help us to present a more diverse image of the nerd, particularly with regard to race, gender, and sexual orientation.

Keywords: nerds; loneliness; perceptions; special issue; introduction

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The idea for this special issue originated from a series of informal conversations on a potential future collaboration that we had both at Durham and Oxford. Discussing an interdisciplinary project that would bring together our different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and our research interests in literature, film, and popular culture across distinct regions, nerds and loneliness soon emerged as a common denominator. Whilst the topic of fictional representations of lonely nerds initially – arguably due to the presumed infantility and lowbrow character of nerd culture – rather seemed to be a *Schnapsidee*,[i] it soon became apparent that nerds are a much more complex cultural reality. Fiction on the one hand plays a crucial role in the formation of nerd networks: As avid consumers of popular culture, nerds around the globe can be connected through a shared fandom, so that the appreciation of fiction establishes the basis for new meaningful relationships. On the other hand, nerds represent a global cultural reality that, through its variegated fictional representations, articulates critical visions of momentous issues in contemporary society. Analysing especially representations of nerds in the arts allows to interrogate a plethora of intersecting aspects, such as gender, race, sociological implications, consumer culture, and enables to understand how fiction itself may posit transgressive recombinations of the lonely nerd archetype. Thus challenging long-standing assumptions, this special issue uses the lonely nerd archetype to interrogate the formation and dissolution of social bonds in 20th and 21st century societies.

The association of nerds with loneliness proves particularly crucial in light of the connotations surrounding the definitions of nerds. For example, the 2016 entry in the Oxford English Dictionary defines a 'nerd' 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.' The use of a dictionary entry attests to the term's popularity in the public domain. While a nerd may be perceived as such because of specific interests or intellectual prowess, the association of the category with a lack of social skills is fundamental. Studies have highlighted how in schools high-achieving students, although they may be appreciated by their families, fear to be identified as 'nerds' exactly because of the widespread understanding of the term's derogatory implications and indications of unpopularity (**Brown, Mory & Kinney, 1994; Pelkner & Boehnke, 2003; Pelkner, Günther & Boehnke, 2002**). Rentzsch, Schütz and Schröder-Abé (**2011: 144**) illustrate that in such environments the label 'nerd' includes traits of 'being ambitious, intelligent, having good grades, studying a lot, displaying success publicly, being shy, having few friends, not wearing fashionable clothes, not being athletic, and not being

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physically attractive'; being considered a nerd then 'goes along with a lack of acceptance and being rejected.'

On the other hand, the widespread identification of nerds as social outcasts extends also outside of the school environment, and can involve serious consequences beyond popularity in a group of peers. Japan is a prime example of this as the birthplace of the phenomenon of *otaku* who, while not emphasising intelligence and studiousness like 'nerds', still are perceived as 'dedicated, even obsessive fans, most commonly of *anime* (Japanese animation), *manga* (comic books) and computer/console games' (**Slater & Gailbraith, 2011**), are inextricably linked with a generic lack of social common sense (**Kam, 2013**), and are therefore included in the broad transnational approach to nerds in this issue. *Otaku*'s perceived social inability has put them on the spot for a wide range of social debates surrounding their propensity for anti-social behaviour and perverse sexuality. This escalated emblematically with the media response to the incident of Miyazaki Tsutomu, a young man who was arrested in 1989 for molesting and murdering four elementary-school girls. After the police found over 5,000 videotapes, manga and anime-related materials, and pornographic items in his room, he was labeled an 'otaku' by the media, and made to symbolise a whole category in the ensuing moral panic which spread in Japan, and which, Kinsella writes, implicated larger concerns on contemporary youth such as the negative influence of popular culture (especially manga) on their sexuality, and their extreme individualism impeding social relationships with others (**1998: 313-14**). Therefore, wherever they may be coming from, both in terms of geography and socio-cultural backgrounds, the discourse on nerds can hardly be separated from notions of asociality or anti-social behaviours.

Despite shifting particulars, the trope of the anti-social or socially inept nerd carries over in the fictional representations across cultures; audiences expect this too (**Bednarek 2012: 203**). A foremost example of this is the popular comedy show *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-2019), that plays exactly on the above elements of intelligence, obsessive popular culture interests, and lack of social skills. Even though a group of high-achieving nerdy scientists are not isolated, but come to the foreground as protagonists, still in most situations they are characterised as deviating from a widespread connotation of social normality, both because of their skills and interests, since the 'sitcom reflects and perpetuates an understanding of scientific knowing as explicitly divorced from (and even opposed to) sociality' (**Willey & Subramaniam, 2017: 17**), but also for the way they speak (**Bednarek, 2012**).

Following the perceived exclusion from and opposition to sociality, identifying and particularly being labelled as a nerd – which equals being

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rejected from or even victimized by a peer group for not conforming to its rules – is a main cause for loneliness (see e.g. **Juvonen, Nishina & Graham 2000** or **Rentzsch, Schütz & Schröder-Abé, 2011**). The loneliness of the nerd stemming from social exclusion can then lead to further mental (e.g. **Prinstein & La Greca 2002; Erzen & Cikrikci 2018** or **van den Brink et al. 2018**) and physical ailments (e.g**. Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008** or **Hawkley et al. 2010**) so that loneliness can be understood as embodied, which transcends earlier notions of loneliness that defined it as a purely psychological condition (for the development of various notions of loneliness see **Bound Alberti, 2019**). In this respect, it does not surprise that loneliness enters the public interest as a crucial societal health issue and is increasingly understood as a mass disease or epidemic (e.g. **Monbiot, 2014** or **Spitzer, 2018**) at the turn of the 21st century. Public discourse hence centres around a pathologisation of loneliness, which follows breakthroughs in medical research on loneliness – e.g. by US neuroscientist John T. Cacioppo – that proved that loneliness can pose a severe health risk (e.g. higher risks for cardiovascular diseases, stroke, and obesity) and leads to an increased mortality rate. Societies around the world have started to react to the problem. In the UK, for example, the government created a Ministry for Loneliness in January 2018, in order to fight the real and diagnosable scourge of loneliness that particularly affects teenagers, the elderly and the disabled (**Prime Minister's Office, 2018**); in Sweden, housing projects such as the Sällbo experiment with new forms of communal living, bringing together various generations and nationalities (**Robertson 2020**); in Israel and Japan, companies are testing social robots as a cure for loneliness (**Rosenzweig, 2020**), just to name a few examples. What becomes clear is that particularly in the past decade, which also saw the publications of various self-help companions such as Cheryl Rickman's *Navigating Loneliness: How to Connect with Yourself and Others* (2021) or popular scientific works such as Olivia Laing's *The Lonely City* (2016), loneliness is not only recognised as acute societal issue but is also actively fought.

If we follow Cacioppo et al., who suggest that 'efforts to reduce loneliness in society may benefit by aggressively targeting the people in the periphery to help repair their social networks and to create a protective barrier against loneliness' (**2009: 989**), it becomes clear that nerds, who are positioned in the periphery or outside of their peer groups, represent an ideal test case in early 21st century debates on loneliness, when particularly new technologies such as the internet and social media are complicating traditional notions of loneliness when we are constantly connected through social media and still feeling lonely (see e.g. **Turkle, 2011** or **Papacharissi, 2018a**). Whilst nerds are perceived to be lonely, they are not only creating the technologies that connect people globally but

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also engaging in virtual and non-virtual social networks based on the passion for a shared interest. Eventually, this special issue on fictional representations of loneliness and nerds will ask whether nerds, as the public stereotype suggests, are necessarily lonely or whether particular nerd communities united by enthusiasm – be it, for example, for science, technology, or a specific cultural fandom – indeed create the barrier against loneliness and provide the nerd with meaningful social bonds.

Especially in times when the psychological and physical tolls of loneliness are highlighted by the pandemic and lockdown experiences, early 21st century societies have been forced to rethink notions of loneliness, the value of unmediated human interaction in our daily lives, and the desire for connection in embodied or virtual spaces. Focussing on fictional representations of nerds, our special issue aims to intervene in contemporary debates on loneliness and social bonds via an analysis of the nerd's positionality within or outside of society. Nerds provide an ideal test case for critically engaging with these societal processes as questions of intergroup behaviour dynamics, belonging, and loneliness – both derived from physical and/or emotional isolation – are inherent to the nerd's cultural and societal perception. Hence, this intersection with relevant societal discourses on loneliness and social bonds bestows debates about nerds with cultural and societal significance so that the articles on the representations of lonely nerds in various artforms contained in this special issue not only allow us to challenge the perception of the nerd as the lonely 'other' but also to interrogate relevant phenomena of isolation and loneliness in general.

Another important feature of the special issue is its transnational perspective. Whilst academic studies on nerds as the subjects of artistic representations are increasing, most of them remain firmly anchored in North America, for example Kathryn E. Lane's edited anthology *Age of the Geek* (**2018**), analysing the influence of television, film, and social media on spreading the stereotype in the US. On the other hand, studies on comparable phenomena outside of this region, such as Galbraith, Kam and Kamm's edited volume *Debating Otaku in Contemporary Japan* (**2015**), apply a variety of approaches, but equally consider the phenomenon as inherently rooted in the East Asian country's specific cultural context. Conversely, while still acknowledging cultural specificities, our issue's focus on nerds' defining association with loneliness highlights a transnational aspect in their representations which allows a comprehensive comparative approach that exceeds specific regions, ultimately identifying relevant parallels with marginal identities across different traditions and formats. Thus, at a broad level, the articles included establish an overarching dialogue that moves between cultures (from France to Japan, from the US to Germany), also showing crucial

intersections between genres and media that have traditionally influenced perceptions of nerds (superhero comics, science fiction, TV, animation), and those not usually associated with (re)articulations of the lonely nerds (detective stories, biopics, novels, musicals).

These dialogues underscore our overall approach that brings together objects of analysis from various media and regions under wider thematic analytical categories in order to broaden the scope of how sociability can be construed beyond archetypical representations of the young, white, middle-class, and male lonely nerd. To show the alternative potential for connections across different cultures and media, the articles in this issue to varying degrees address the following five analytical categories: The *first category* focuses on works that productively engage with prior nerd-narratives to subvert traditional notions of the lonely nerd and that enable us to re-read the fictional predecessors through the lens of nerds' ability to form social bonds. The *second category* highlights gender aspects in the formation of nerds' spaces and interactions. Articles examine alternative constructions moving away from clear-cut notions of stereotypical masculinity and heteronormative practices. The *third category* examines the relationship between loneliness and mental health. Nerd identities and stories are deeply intertwined with emotional and psychological challenges, ranging from the lonely exceptionality of genius, to the ramifications of traumatic experiences that need to be worked through to firmly ground the nerd amongst peers. The *fourth category* explores nerd communities' capacity to encompass kindred spirits from ethnic minority groups, which are marginalised within predominantly white societies because of their skin colour or religious beliefs. Articles analyse both processes of othering but also how a shared nerddom has the potential to instigate a reconsideration of the marginality of the non-white nerd. Studies on the *fifth category* explore how nerds' potential for sociability is articulated through navigating space, a space that can be intended in multiple iterations, from the ideological and technological divide between the city and the countryside, to a liminal space that may be physica within the same city, or emotional and social, inhabited by individuals at the margins.

The five analytical categories should not be understood as compartmentalised units but are in dialogue with each other – highlighting the overlaps in the various treatments, and the complexity of the nerds' identity. Thus, the scholarly approach of the issue reflects exactly the hybridity of the lonely nerd trope, one that cannot be read in isolation from comparable interactions, but which should be considered within a network of multi-faceted societal processes. At the end of this journey, what started as a *Schnapsidee* has become a volume that, while engaging with themes acutely debated across various disciplines and public

discourses, reinforces the capacity of fiction to rearticulate and shape social and cultural realities, and to envision future social communities providing tangible alternatives to the nerds' perceived loneliness.

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Endnotes

[i] The beautiful German term for a foolish idea and literally one born out of liquor.

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