

Call for Papers

Lonely Nerds?

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We are seeking expressions of interest in contributing to a special issue of *Exchanges. The Interdisciplinary Research Journal*

We are looking for contributions to our special issue exploring fictional representations of nerds and loneliness across various media and cultures.

Traditionally associated with a particular niche culture, nerds entered the mainstream through popular formats such as the highly successful TV show *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-2019) in the early 21st Century. Besides, the pervasiveness of the popular image of nerds has crossed linguistic borders and depictions of nerds are frequent beyond the Anglo-American context, as attested by the term “nerd” being widely used in languages such as Italian or German.

Although nerds are a frequent subject of cultural representations, and academic studies on them are slowly increasing, there is still a dearth of comprehensively structured comparative studies. Most studies on nerds remain firmly anchored in North American culture: Kathryn E. Lane’s recent anthology *Age of the Geek* (2018), for example, analyses the influence of television, film, and social media on spreading the stereotype in the US and asks the question why American culture can accept a geek character in the media but not in real life. Whilst Lane claims that “the nerd stereotype is accepted as is” it becomes clear that nerds nonetheless often occupy the position of the “other”. This suggests that the term “nerd” is used as a “label” for shifting perceptions of what is deviant from the norm, which correlates with Kam’s analysis of the germane Japanese notion of *otaku* (2015). Our issue will identify relevant parallels with other marginal identities across cultures and explore them in a comparative transnational context and across different media.

The second main premise of the special issue is to challenge the perception of the nerd as the lonely “other”. 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.” Although more specific definitions are up for debate, it is clear that nerds are closely associated with anti-social behaviours, isolation, obsessive interests (especially for technology and popular culture) or mental pathologies. Within nerds’ supposed confinement and isolation, loneliness is an aspect that is often associated with their interaction with and consumption of technology, particularly since the rise of the tech industry in the 1980s and 1990s. At the turn of the 21st century, technological advancements such as the rise of the internet, Artificial Intelligence and advancements in robotics have complicated notions of loneliness in the context of human-machine interaction. On the one hand, people are constantly tethered together in machine mediated interactions, but are still feeling lonely; on the other, Sherry Turkle argues for a “robotic moment” (2011), when people are ready to accept machines as partners and mediators so that technology becomes the tool with which loneliness can be defeated. This conflicting assessment of technology’s potential to solve the central societal issue of loneliness mirrors the broader polarised discussion of whether machines will solve problems or lead us down a dystopian path (Husain 2017).

Through its analysis of artistic takes on nerds, our issue aims to intervene in the debate about technologies’ and popular media’s influence on social bonds, with a particular focus on loneliness. We suggest a broad understanding of loneliness that includes a wide range of societal issues such as stances vis-à-vis society, the positionality of nerds within or outside of it, their intergroup behaviour dynamics and belonging, their feeling of loneliness both derived from physical and/or emotional isolation, or even conceptualised as loneliness *within* a group.

The issue will hence analyse varying cultural representations of the nerd’s relationship with society in order to critically discuss how various art forms approach the notion of the “lonely nerd”. We want to ask questions such as: Can we still find common characteristics in representations that are not overtly about nerds? Is loneliness inextricable from any representation of nerds, or do we see narratives where nerds actually become, quite anti-

canonically, the centre of their community, as small as it may be? And if so, what do these representations tell us about their culture? Are they representational? If this is the case, how can it be used to interrogate relevant phenomena of isolation and loneliness in general?

Possible topics include, but are not limited to, fictional explorations of nerds and loneliness in relation to gender, ethnicity, (mental) health, genius, social status and space, as well as their questioning of traditional cultural representations and genres.

Abstracts of up to 300 words and queries should be submitted to lonelynerds2021@gmail.com by 6th April 2020. Articles should be written in English. Please note: We are also planning a preparatory workshop for accepted submissions, that will be held at SOAS (London) in early 2021.

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