

FROM MISS AMERICA TO MR. POPO: EXPLORING RACE AND GENDER
WITHIN NERD-THEMED PODCASTS

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DEDICATION

To my wife.

Without your support, dedication, and overwhelmingly enthusiastic encouragement, this paper would never have been written.

ABSTRACT

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This paper examines public accounts of women and people of color within nerd fandom podcasts. Current sociological literature provides a symbolic interactionist framework for analyzing identity and community within nerd fandom. Social constructionist frameworks provide explanation for gendered social systems and racialization, both of which are clearly visible within nerd fandom.

This study supplements the literature with direct accounts from marginalized nerds via podcast episodes recorded within the preceding five years. Content analysis of twelve episodes from three different podcast series outlined key elements of representation: direct representation (e.g., characters of color in media), indirect representation (e.g., queer- or feminine-coded characters in media), and representation behind the scenes (e.g., writing, directing, and/or producing media). These themes provide critical context as to the experiences of marginalized nerds within nerd fandom.

KEY WORDS: Nerd, Fandom, Race, Blerd, Gender, Community

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

For many years, the label of “nerd” or “geek” brought with it an inherently anti-social connotation. In the proverbial high school cafeteria of 1980s sitcoms, the nerds were shunned away from the popular kids and the football jocks and situated between the freaks and the geeks. Into the ‘90s, nerds were illustrated with an uncomfortable amount of knowledge – often portrayed as the class president, spelling bee champion, or captain of the Star Trek Fan Club (or all three). While the 21st century did not eliminate these perceptions, the last two decades have marked a steady increase in the social acceptance of previously “nerdy” topics. Comic book conventions host thousands of attendees, superhero movies dominate the theaters, and fantasy series captivate television sets.

In this emerging environment of the socially-accepted nerd, formal literature surrounding the identification and interaction of nerds has developed as well. The underlying theories and frameworks built into sociological analysis of the topic center around the social construction of reality.

Through this lens, sociologists can interpret both gender and race as social constructs. These constructs thus influence individual and group identity regarding gender and race and serve as the backbone for gendered and racialized social systems. These paradigms influence the development of individuals interacting in social environments. As such, identity and identification are tools social actors use to understand their place in various social contexts.

Before understanding the specific phenomenon of fandom, it is important to review sociological literature on community and culture broadly. The development,

popularization, and mass-consumption of the internet has led sociologists to apply and reexamine understandings of community. Before the advent of cyberspace, scholarly interests in community typically involved conceptions of “place.” Over the last decades, however, it has no longer been sufficient to assume most social interaction occurs within a particular geographic context. From the cultural perspective, the increased types and prevalence of various forms of media have led to a number of diverse subcultures built around specific shared interests. In addition to regional groupings (such as the Dallas Cowboys or Houston Texans), online media enables the relatively easy facilitation and participation of shared-interest subcultures.

Of these subcultures, fandoms serve as a strong and unique component of study. As a heightened interest-based subculture, participation in fandom typically depends on, develops, and reinforces the identity of fans who participate within it. This participation can lead to experiences that are shared among fans, however the impacts of gender and race on fandom participation are underdeveloped in the literature.

This study aims to address that gap by examining nerd-themed podcasts created by and for ethno-racial minorities, women, and LGBTQ+ nerds. Content analysis will be conducted on multiple episodes from three different podcasts to identify themes, experiences, and perceptions of women, people of color, and people of marginalized sexual orientations within the nerd fandom.

As a nerd of color, I likely would have listened to all of these podcasts without the goal of direct analysis. I was inspired to conduct this research after watching King Vader’s *Hood Naruto* videos on YouTube. The videos (and others in the *Hood Anime* series) involve Vader and friends dressed up like characters from the anime series *Naruto* and

engaging in a dance battle. I was curious as to what made this depiction “Hood.” Was it the style of dance? Or simply the fact that most of the people in the video were Black? This led me down a rabbit hole which culminated in the current research.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

The Social Construction of Reality

Although modern sociological literature has a multitude of influences, Berger & Luckmann (1966) have outlined key sociological perspectives relating to social organization and structural features. These organizations, features, and interactions serve to establish and reinforce our understandings of social systems. Knowledge is distributed in social circles and interpersonal relations, leading not only to the spread of concepts, ideas, and values, but the wholesale creation and construction of reality itself.

While this may seem analogous to the reality-bending Infinity Stones from Marvel comics and movies, the social construction of reality, as coined by Berger & Luckmann (1966), is a foundational sociological paradigm that has gained prevalence in both the scientific and non-scientific communities (Knoblauch & Wilke, 2016). In short, social concepts are constructed in social contexts, leading to ideas and perceptions that, for all intents and purposes, are fact. Elements of society that undergo this development are commonly referred to as social constructs.

Gender as a Social Construct

Gender can serve as both a fundamental example of social constructs and as an exploration into the implications of utilizing symbolic interactionism to understand social concepts. As Judith Lorber (1994) notes, “Gender is so much the routine ground of everyday activities that questioning its taken-for-granted assumptions and presuppositions is like thinking about whether the sun will come up” (p.13).

Instead of conceptualizing gender as something a person *is*, West & Zimmerman (1987) conceptualize gender as something a person *does*: each individual within a gendered society interprets, manages, and performs actions and behaviors within the context of social norm's related to their sex category. For example, most public restrooms are designed separately for males and females, yet it is gender, not sex, that determines social response to who is appropriately using which facility. If a woman washing her hands in a public restroom sees someone she perceives to be a man enter the facility, her response will be generated by that *perception* rather than the codified definitions based on that individual's genitalia or birth certificate. As West & Zimmerman (1987) note "...female and male natures achieve the status of objective facts" (p. 142).

Although "doing gender" is an action that can be performed by individuals, gender as a concept is broader than a simple classification or performance. Barbara Risman (2004) classifies gender as a social structure, deserving of theoretical analysis "on the same analytic plane as politics and economics" (p. 431). This framework allows for an understanding of the interconnected elements of institutions and social relationships that identify, categorize, enforce, and reinforce gendered norms and behaviors. As Raewyn Connell (2008) articulates, "Studying institutions is a vital step in the general understanding of men and masculinities, and... women and femininities" (p.238).

Race as a Social Construct

Race is another social construct that, like gender, is often considered "real" due to biological differences. Before delving into the social construction of race, it is important to differentiate between race and ethnicity. Although they are commonly used interchangeably in non-academic circles, racial groups are typically categories defined by

familial origin whereas ethnic groups are distinguished by culture (Morning, 2005). As with most social labels and classifications, this is not consistent in every environment. For example, Hispanics are commonly (and often formally) referred to as an ethnic group rather than a racial group, however ethnicity is often incorporated into race when studies analyzing race are conducted (such that data with racial breakdowns will commonly have categories such as “Black or African American, White Non-Hispanic, White Hispanic, Asian,” etc.).

Symbolic interaction and social construction frameworks view race as “a product of particular historical circumstances... not rooted in biological difference” (Morning, 2005, p. 46). Historical circumstances where racial differences were believed to be rooted in biology can create structures and institutions that attempt to reinforce this belief and perform actions as if this belief were reality.

Similar to gender, a “biological reality” surrounding race *can* be generated using specific phylogenetic taxa (Andreasen, 2000), however social institutions, policies, and behaviors based on and influenced by race do not utilize those specific biological classifications. Instead, race, like gender, is a social construct built on expectation and performance. As Marianne Modica (2015) explains, “genetics determines physical appearance, but assigning roles to people based on that appearance is purely a social enterprise” (p. 25).

Identity and Identification

In a sociological framework whereby race, gender, and virtually all other common categories are socially constructed, identity serves as a method for individuals to classify and place themselves within these categories. Sociologically, identity is “both a category

of practice and a category of analysis” (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 4). The term itself can be used to illustrate how an individual views themselves through the lens of a collective “sameness.” Snow & Anderson (1987) distribute identity across three components: social identity, personal identity, and self-concept. Social identities situate individuals as social objects, personal identities represent “meanings attributed to the self by the actor,” and self-concept serves as “a working compromise between idealized images and imputed social identities” (Snow & Anderson, 1987, pp. 1347-1348). Just as reality is constructed, so too is identity. Snow and Anderson (1987) refer to this construction as “identity work” (p. 1348).

Gender Identity and Gendered Social Systems

Identity work on gender often begins before we are born. Parents frequently gender their children during a mother’s pregnancy, with gender reveal parties and gendered decorations and expectations. Even when parents claim to disagree with the impact of gender socially, they often still participate (and have their children participate) in gendered norms and expectations. In Emily Kane’s (2006) exploration of parents’ perceptions of their children’s gendered behaviors and attributes, one mother explains her decision to succumb to the pressures of dressing her son in a traditional masculine manner despite his preference to dress more femininely: “This stupid world cares about what we look like, unfortunately... You know, it shouldn’t, probably shouldn’t matter. It’s a piece of cloth, but that’s the way the world is and I wouldn’t want him to feel out of place” (p. 168). In this regard, the blame for the social expectation is placed on “the way the world is,” yet the decision to assimilate to the world’s ways are made by the parents, not the children.

As soon as children begin participating in social institutions (such as daycare, youth camps, or early schooling) institutional expectations impact how a child does gender. Explicit curriculums, like dress codes and bathroom assignments, reinforce traditional behaviors. “Hidden” curriculums include the policing of behaviors and bodies as a means of reinforcing the school as an institution. These include unstructured behaviors encouraged or discouraged by school officials, such as sitting “on your bottom,” raising one’s hand, or covering one’s nose and mouth when sneezing (Martin ,1998, p. 501).

The forces involved in doing gender are not purely external; children take on an active role in their own gendering as soon as they are conscious of the “social relevance of gender” (Martin, 1998, pp. 149-150). Individuals identify with a particular gender and self-regulate their own and others’ conduct regarding gender ideals and gender identities (West & Zimmerman, 1987). With that said, gender exists not only on the interpersonal level, but as the foundation of gendered social systems.

Allan Johnson (2014) articulates how institutional social systems cannot be reduced to the people who participate in them. They are instead a collection of interrelated parts (such as social interaction, occupations, behaviors, norms, etc.) that people participate in. Patriarchy is one such system, built upon male-dominated, male-identified, and male-centered relations. Within the patriarchal system, certain ideas about manhood, masculinity, and gender overall combine to define and construct reality. Although individuals act and do gender within this system, the overarching social structure “creates action indirectly by shaping actors’ perceptions of their interests and directly by constraining choice” (Risman, 2004, p. 432).

Racial Identity and Racialization

Racial identity is but one of the many interlocking identities developed through social interaction. As Jenny Ungbha Korn (2015) notes: “The categories by which individuals label themselves is dependent upon the context, such that a person’s gender may supersede the person’s race in one setting, but the person’s race may become more salient in other social environments” (pp. 14-16). When an individual develops a subjective understanding of themselves as a racialized person, acknowledging that they are “both similar to and different from other people,” that person develops a racial identity (Korn, 2015, p. 14).

In the United States, people of color often analyze themselves through comparing their traits to a conception of Whiteness; conversely, Whiteness (and even “White” as a racial category) has been developed primarily through “othering” of non-White races. The actions and behaviors of White people (predominantly White males) are not seen as “White activities” because their identities are linked to their status as dominant social players (Modica, 2015, p. 25). As such, Whiteness is typically considered the “default”, serving as “the invisible norm against which the behaviors of Blackness are measured” (Korn, 2015, p. 17).

This prevalent conception of Whiteness is a symptom of systemic racialization. As Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (1997; 2009) notes, race and racism are not psychological phenomenon to be examined at the individual level. Instead, racism and oppression should be understood through racialized social systems. This system exists and persists based on the hierarchical practices that maintain one race in a superior position. These practices build, develop, and reinforce systemic inequality and racial oppression.

Matthew Desmond & Mustafa Emirbayer (2009) detail how these hierarchical systems further racial domination. These scholars identify five common fallacies attributed to the notion of racism: (a) racism is individualistic (i.e., that it is “a collection of nasty thoughts”); (b) abolishing racist laws automatically leads to the abolishment of racism in practice; (c) the presence of people of color in influential positions is evidence of the eradication of racial obstacles; (d) the history of racism and racist laws is irrelevant to a modern context; (e) racism is “fixed” and does not develop over time (Desmond & Emirbayer, 2009, pp. 342-345). It is important to identify these fallacies as they can undermine overall understandings of racial domination, whereby one race utilizes its symbolic power to classify one group of people as “normal” and another as “abnormal.”

The behaviors and attitudes that are deemed appropriate for particular racial groups are defined via racialization and the development of a racial identity. While the essentialist physical descriptions are typically assigned immediately (e.g., a dark-skinned person may be assumed to be African American instantly on sight, without inspecting their ancestral lineage), the non-essentialist aspects of what is and is not appropriate for a member of a socially constructed race are attributed to performative actions (Stubblefield, 1995).

Community and Culture

As with many elements in sociological literature, terms such as “community,” “culture,” and “subculture” have different conceptualizations in academic versus non-academic settings. In non-academic settings, “community” commonly refers to physical regions (suburbs, neighborhoods, or even large regions such as “the South”) or groups of people with some shared identity (“the Hispanic community” or “the LGBT community”). Aside from these more descriptive terms, community is also referred to in the affective

sense, such as having a “feeling of community” (Fernback, 2007, p. 53). While these conceptions are still present in sociological literature, scholars have attempted to iron out more precise definitions of community.

Sutton & Kolaja (1960) centered their definitions of community around actions, defining the term as a “structural unit” and developing criteria for distinguishing actions around “degrees of community-ness” (p. 203). Kenneth Wilkinson (1991) expanded on this by identifying three key elements of community: “a locality (a territory where people live and meet their daily needs together), a local society (a comprehensive network of associations for meeting common needs and expressing common interests), and a ‘community field’ (a process of locality-oriented interrelated actions through which residents express their common interests in the local society)” (p. 2).

Community, Place, and the Internet

Inherent in these definitions of community is a central tenet of a shared geographic location or “place.” According to sociologists such as Thomas Gieryn (2000), “place” represents a geographic location, a physical and material form (such as buildings and cities), and an investment with meaning and value: “...place is space filled up by people, practices, objects, and representations” (pp. 464-465).

A key component of the internet is that it bypasses many of the geographic restraints of physical location. As such, much of the literature surrounding the sociology of community in recent decades involves the discussion of place and debates the importance of place as a central tenant of community conceptions. Although cyberspace does not place its users within the same geographic restrictions as physical social

interaction, it can still be conceived of as a “new social space” that is “materially analogous to physical space (Fernback, 2007, pp. 51, 66).

Some sociological scholars argue not only that place is still a fundamental element of community, but that cyberspace only reduces distance rather than place (Walmsley 2000, p. 17). Others, such as Gieryn and Stephen Graham (1998), argue that cyberspace cannot be place: “Websites on the internet are not places in the same way that the room, building, campus, and city that house and locate a certain server is a place” (Gieryn, 2000, p. 465). Online video games serve as a unique way to analyze interest-based communities that often replicate physical spaces. Although players may not share much (if any) physical space in the real world, their avatars could interact in virtual areas that fulfil many of the sociological definitions of place (Sarbu 2011).

Ted Bradshaw (2008) has argued not only that place is not synonymous with community, but that “the essential characteristics of community are the social relations (solidarity or bonds) between people,” a component that can exist without a shared “place identity” (p. 5).

Interest-based Communities

Following Bradshaw’s (2008) assertion that community can exist through social relations without a specific place identity, it is necessary to identify not only what a community without place is, but how its participants operate within that environment. Although individuals can use the internet for brief social interactions (such as purchasing an item to be delivered or commenting on a social media post), discussions around sociological conceptions of community tend to require “intense” social relations, typically through “communities of interest” (Bradshaw, 2008, p. 8).

Communities of interest are defined not just by a shared interest, but how the individuals with a shared interest interact. Henna Syrjala's (2016) foray into the distinction between "casual dog agility enthusiast" to "serious hobbyist" outlines the latter's relationship to "a distinct social world whose members recognize each other, and which is to some degree also recognized by outsiders" (p.184).

Cultural Objects

Wendy Griswold (2013) separates culture from the social structure of a community. Griswold (2013) differentiates a community's "jokes and slang, conventions, stereotypes, typical practices, and common knowledge" from its "network of relationships among members, its institutions, and its economic and political life" (11). This differentiation serves as a consequence of the Cultural Diamond, a sociological device whereby every cultural object is produced by a creator, interpreted by a receiver, and examined within the social world it exists in. These four points on the diamond interact with each other, resulting in six links (e.g., object to creator, creator to social world, etc.) that aid sociologists in identifying culture and cultural contexts.

Nerd Fandom and Nerd Communities

Often derived from the term "fanatic," "fans" typically represent individuals who have a strong, positive interest in a particular topic. A fandom represents the social interaction of multiple fans, forming a group of people shaped around common shared ideas and interests. Within the last few years (and heavily aided by the internet), fandoms have expanded from a relatively marginal practice to a large social movement (Fuschillo, 2020).

“Nerd” fandom, also referred to as “nerd culture,” serves as a specific fandom centered around topics commonly considered to be nerdy: reading or collecting comic books, playing tabletop or video games, or consuming science fiction media (Woo, 2012). It should be noted that the label “nerd” is not formalized: one person may self-identify as a nerd for watching every movie in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, whereas another person may argue those are simply popular blockbuster films that non-nerds can enjoy. Historically, the label of nerd (or geek, dweeb, etc.) was applied not only to those who exhibited a heightened interest in fictional content, but also those who exhibited interest in academic pursuits. The president of the local Math Club might be considered a nerd even if they hated science fiction and fantasy.

Although interest in space, science, or engineering might get someone the label of nerd, it is rare for academic pursuits to be identified as fandoms. Fandoms illustrate interest-based communities where members have personal (sometimes intimately personal) connections to cultural media objects. Some fans may produce or consume fan work (such as fan fiction or artwork) or be involved in the administration of online communities (McInroy & Craig, 2020).

Gender and Gender Identity in Nerd Fandom

Interest in fandom is commonly portrayed in media as obsession, and fans are considered “social misfits who have become so obsessed with [media] that it forecloses other types of social experience,” becoming “feminized and/or desexualized through their intimate engagement with mass culture [and thus] infantile, emotionally and intellectually immature” (Jenkins, 2012, p. 10). As Close (2016) articulates, “Fans, even if they are White, straight, and male, are far from the top of the cultural hierarchy” (p. 3).

These social expectations shape fan communities into a unique social world. The internet allows for greater anonymity than physical social situations. A particular strength of online fandom is that said anonymity provides important opportunities to “explore and/or experiment with emergent identities, allowing [fans] to ‘work things out’ and ‘figure out’ or understand who they were and/or how they identified” (McInroy & Craig, 2020, pp. 239-240). For many fans, their respective fandom serves as a place of safety and exploration of personal identity. Fandom communities can even develop into “extended families [that] provide mutual support and loyalty when people pass through extreme hardships in their life” (Fuschillo, 2020, p. 349). In McInroy & Craig’s (2020) survey of Sexual and Gender Minority (SGM) identity and fandoms, 71% of participants who identified with an SGM identity and participated in a fandom stated that their online fandom participation contributed to that identity.

It is important to note how masculinity varies across contexts. As Raewyn Connell (2008) notes, “organizational gender is not homogenous. Different masculinities are produced in different organizational contexts, including different units and levels of the same organization” (242).

Not all fan interactions occur exclusively online. Cosplay, a combination of the terms “costume” and “play,” is a practice of wearing (and often designing) costumes or outfits representing characters from anime, TV, comics, or video games (Wittich, 2015). Cosplayers (those who dress in cosplay) may present their attire at comic conventions or hold photoshoots and share their portrayals on social media sites such as Instagram or Twitter. Inherent in the notion of cosplay is the idea of becoming someone else, although cosplayers frequently choose to cosplay as someone they like –someone they relate to,

draw inspiration from, or someone that just looks cool. Joel Gn's (2011) exploration of cosplay serves as an important foundation for the analysis of gender expectations within the more performative elements of fandom (such as comic and anime conventions). According to Gn (2011), cosplay provides a unique perspective to analyze the performative elements of gender since it represents both the adoption and the transformation of a work.

A significant part of cosplay is not just the outfit, but the social performance of presenting one's cosplay at conventions. This public display often involves more than just showing off a costume, but actively (and accurately) portraying the character that is being cosplayed. This may include reciting iconic lines, standing in iconic poses, or other active portrayals. Some cosplayers choose to stay "in character" during an entire convention, acting as the character they are portraying for multiple days and refusing to "break" (or stop acting like the character).

There is little debate that female characters in video games, anime, and other forms of nerd media are frequently hyper-sexualized (Avery-Natale, 2013; Leng, 2013; McQueeney et. al, 2013). Samantha Close's (2016) experiences of fanservice illustrate this clearly: "Fanservice, or gratuitous shots and images of female characters, is a fairly common aesthetic feature of anime. It irritated me every time I saw it and served as a constant reminder that I, as a female and even as a lesbian, was not the imagined audience for the texts that I loved" (p. 12). Regarding cosplay, some authors, such as Edward Avery-Natale (2013), point to the construction of the characters chosen to be cosplayed, rather than the individuals who wear or perform the cosplay, as the predominant source of heightened sexuality placed on cosplayers.

The performative nature of cosplay, coupled with the oversexualization of female characters, ignites a situation where fan expectations (typically male fan expectations) of *characters* are placed onto *cosplayers*. Some conventions, such as New York Comic Con, have posted signs with the phrase “cosplay is not consent” (Romano, 2014). These signs are meant to illustrate that the decision to wear a cosplay is not synonymous with consent to be touched or photographed without permission. These signs are unfortunately rarely proactive, but a reaction to inappropriate interactions between fans and cosplayers.

Demetrakis Demetriou’s (2001) identification of two separate forms of hegemony can be implemented to help understand why allegedly non-masculine men conduct such misogynistic behaviors. According to Demetriou (2001), internal hegemony outlines hegemony over subordinated masculinities whereby external hegemony emphasizes hegemony over women (p.341). These interlocking hegemonies result in varying behaviors by men who aim to develop or retain social perceptions of masculinity.

A potentially less toxic portrayal of masculinity and femininity can be seen in crossplay: the act of cosplaying as a character of the opposite gender of the cosplayer. This is somewhat similar to gender-bending, where a character’s gender is changed to match the cosplayer’s, however crossplay involves the cosplayer retaining the *character’s* gender. For example, a gender-bent Iron Man cosplay would present Iron Man as a woman (ex: Iron Woman), whereas an Iron Man *crossplay* would be performed by a woman *presenting as the male character* (potentially with Tony Stark’s trademark goatee in an effort to reinforce the male components of the character).

Crossplay is typically considered an authentic transformation rather than a form of parody (Tompkins, 2019). In many respects, crossplay can serve as a method of utilizing

“effeminate masculinity” to reinforce gendered expectations (Leng, 2013, pp. 105-106). Crossplay “presents an added dimension pertaining to fan identity and artistic expression that theories of gender performance and cross-dressing in Western culture does not consider.” (Leng, 2013, p. 97).

Racialization and Racial Identity in Nerd Fandom

The opportunities for identity and expression in fandom are not only present for sexual and gender minorities, but for racial minorities as well, yet social science scholarship has largely failed to address issues of race within fandom (Gatson & Reid, 2011). Direct visual cues are not present on the internet and, as such, racial perception and identification present differently within cyberspace: “On the Internet, a body that reads physically as a certain race is not required as a prerequisite or justification for racialized membership” (Korn, 2015, p. 16).

Nerd fandom is notable for its social component. As Sarah Gatson and Robin Reid (2011) explain, media is designed not just for direct consumption, but also for a group experience. Black people who identify as nerds often create subgroups or activities specifically for “blerds” (Black nerds), such as Blerdcon, an annual convention aimed at Black nerds. Groups and events such as Blerdcon can create comforting and welcoming spaces for Black people who are often expected to be uninterested in the typical comic convention fair of science-fiction, cosplay, and comics (Hill 2018). These conventions and dedicated spaces also serve as a way of managing contrasting identities. In everyday life, black nerds may experience intersectional difficulties relating to non-Black nerds and Black non-nerds (Hill, 2018).

Nerdiness is commonly presented in media as belonging to “White, unpopular, unsociable” males who are “the antithesis of masculinity” (Modica, 2015, p. 32). A clear example of this depiction is in the television series *The Big Bang Theory*. The show centers around four socially awkward “nerd-scientist” characters (exhibiting interest both in fictional fandoms and academic pursuits). Notably, there are virtually no Black nerd characters aside from cameos by celebrities such as LeVar Burton and Neil DeGrasse Tyson (Willey & Subramaniam, 2017).

This lack of Black representation is not unique to television. As Walter Thompson-Hernandez (2018) notes, “Black characters are rarely central to the imaginary worlds that fill the pages of comic books, which often depict them as sidekicks or villains rather than the superheroes” (p.1). The depictions Black people see regarding nerds are frequently presented as not being cohesive with expected Black behaviors. Nerds are the “opposite of cool,” whereas Black people are more often expected to adopt “cool” personas, such as that of the “gangsta” (Modica, 2015).

Black cosplayers can use cosplay not only to identify with, but to directly embody the characters they choose to dress as. Due to the lack of Black representation in the types of media that are common for cosplay, Black cosplayers are often presented with a choice regarding cosplay subjects: they can choose from the significantly limited selection of Black characters, or they can cosplay as a traditionally White character. For the latter, there is an unfortunate negative response that often responds to their portrayals. It occurs not only online, but also at conventions and related cosplay gatherings (Wittich, 2015).

Regardless of who Black cosplayers choose to cosplay as, there is usually a feeling by many that Black cosplayers are denied the ability to engage meaningfully in Non-Black

cosplay spaces. Although many Black cosplayers may not feel comfortable cosplaying until they see other Black cosplayers, that visibility is largely dependent on the development and maintenance of Black cosplay communities (Wittich, 2015). This can include inclusive social media accounts such as the Instagram page *Cosplay of Color*, the Facebook group *The Extraordinary Journey of a Black Nerd*, or the #28DaysOfBlackCosplay movement on Twitter and Facebook to highlight Black cosplayers throughout the month of February (Thompson-Hernandez, 2018; Wittich, 2015).

CHAPTER III

Current Study

Research about participation and interaction in nerd culture has occurred throughout the late 20th and early 21st century, yet the impact of the internet on these interest-based communities has only been the subject of study largely within the last decade. As sociologists begin analyzing and identifying how people interact within nerd fandom, little research has been done on the participation of women and people of color within that space.

Women and people of color have participated in nerd fandom for many years. As such, it is imperative that sociologists explore records and content created by these fans in an effort to understand how they interact with these communities. This study aims to do just that by asking: “How do women and people of color experience nerd culture”?

With the advancement of the internet and modern technology, online spaces provide a capacity for individuals to communicate across multiple locations and for ethnographic researchers to identify content across a connected network (Gatson & Zweerink, 2004). Additionally, a growing number of people are able to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and share their thoughts, feelings, experiences, and creative works. This ease of access, defined as “Web 2.0” by Tim O’Reilly (2005), has provided avenues for women and people of color to not only access elements of nerd fandom and participate in nerd communities, but to “adapt, alter, and even produce content” on a global stage (Nuendorf, 2017, p. 202).

There are clear themes in the literature that is presently available. Race and gender are social constructs with performative elements, and those elements influence the actions,

behaviors, and interests of individuals as they develop racial and gender identities. Traditionally, nerd identities are presented as the domain of non-masculine White males. Due to these expectations, race and masculinity have a unique place *within* fandoms. For example, in some sections (such as with crossplay), certain aspects of male femininity are permitted, whereas in others (such as with Close's [2016] foray into Anime Music Videos) traditional masculinity is fervently defended. Additionally, fandom communities (particularly online communities) allow for subcultures to develop and embrace groups that do not meet those standard definitions.

The current literature is lacking in research exploring specifically *how* women and people of color enter and engage with nerd fandom. Most research serves as explanatory studies depicting how nerd *spaces* operate, but there is limited research directed explicitly at the experiences of women and people of color *inside* those spaces. Within the last five years some scholars have begun this process, such as Lauryn Collins's (2018) interview with blerds, however additional research could contribute to existing debate and discussion within this field. In particular, there is limited research on Latinx nerds.

There is a breadth of first-hand accounts presented by women and people of color that can identify issues and topics not yet covered in formal sociological scholarship. This study aims to shed light on these minority experiences within nerd fandom. More broadly, this study will draw attention to how racial and gender experiences are shaped by – and may shape – a cultural field.

CHAPTER IV

Data and Method

This study involves a content analysis of publicly available, user-generated podcasts. To address the central research question (“How do women and people of color experience nerd culture?”), I will focus on content created by women and people of color about their interaction with nerd culture.

I have selected podcasts as a media source due to their relatively low barrier to entry and high popularity. Podcasts have been growing steadily over the last few years, with over 50% of Americans 12 years and older having listened to a podcast (Edison Research, 2019). Unlike some popular user-generated content (like YouTube videos), creators only need to produce (and potentially edit) audio rather than also utilize a camera for video production.

For the purposes of analysis, I have chosen three separate podcasts. I have detailed the specific media and justifications below.

Initial Selection of Podcasts

The first podcast selected is *Nerdificent*. This podcast ran from March 2018 through August 2020 and was published on the iHeartRadio network. The hosts of the podcast are Dani Fernandez and Ify Nwadiwe, two comedians and people of color. Dani’s bio covers writing and acting, with host credits for Geek & Sundry, Funimation, Machinima, and commentator credits for IGN, San Diego Comic Con, and VH1. Her co-host, Ify, is an actor and comedian who has appeared on Key and Peele, Workaholics, and Comedy Bang! Bang!

I included this podcast in particular because it illustrates a relatively popular and successful production by two people of color who specifically target issues of

representation in nerd culture. Although there are 117 episodes in the run of the podcast, there are six episodes in particular that I believe can shed light on the particular research I have outlined. Each episode selected includes topics specifically related to ethno-racial minorities in nerd culture, women in nerd culture, or both. The episodes were chosen based on their titles and episode descriptions. The episode titles are included in Table 1. Note: Episode titles with an asterisk were removed from analysis. The reasons for removal are explained in the *Preliminary Coding* section.

Table 1

Nerdificent Episodes

Episode Title	Air Date	Guests
Episode 24: Queer Representation in Geek Culture	9/11/2018	Christopher Smith Bryant and Kanon Spackman
Episode 49: Afro Anime	3/19/2019	Onyi and Obi Udeh
Episode 50: The Bechdel Test	3/26/2019	Jamie Loftus and Caitlin Durante
Episode 70: America Chavez	8/19/2019	Vanessa Gritton and Toni Sanchez
Episode 98: Dwayne McDuffie	2/25/2020	Johnny Parker
*Episode 110: Queer Gaming Revisited	3/19/2019	Christopher Smith Bryant and Kanon Spackman

The second podcast to be analyzed is the *For All Nerds Show*. The *For All Nerds Show* is a member of the LoudSpeakers network, a significantly smaller podcast network compared to iHeartRadio, Spotify, and other juggernauts in the podcast space. Despite this, the podcast has been airing consistently since October 2014 and is currently still “on the

air” at the time of this writing. The hosts of the podcast, DJ BenHaMeen and Tatiana King, serve as “cultural guides” for “topics and controversies that affect the world of fandom” (BenHaMeen & King, 2020a).

I included this podcast for a number of reasons. Firstly, the content of many episodes addresses the core research question directly. Secondly, it illustrates the primary benefits of Web 2.0: the hosts are able to create high-quality, consistent content without going through a traditional gatekeeper. Finally, the podcast is recorded live on Twitch, with viewers able to chat with the hosts during the recording. This provides an added level of engagement with members of the nerd community.

With a release every few weeks, analyzing each episode of this podcast alone would almost encroach on definitions of “big data.” As such, there are specific episodes that should be included in the content analysis. These episodes were chosen based primarily on the following criteria: the episode titles, episode descriptions, and the presence of featured guests. I selected four episodes whose description covered topics of race, gender, or both within the nerd space as well as three episodes that touched on these topics and also featured additional guests. I chose these last episodes to further focus on potential marginalization within these spaces, as the selected guests include comic book writers, illustrators, and fellow marginalized content creators. Titles of these episodes are included in Table 2.

Table 2*For All Nerds Show Episodes*

Episode Title	Air Date	Guests
All Skinfolk Ain't Kinfolk	6/3/2021	N/A
The Real Women in Comics	3/4/2021	Regine Sawyer and Alice Meichi Li
We Need Black Supervillains	2/18/2021	N/A
*Exaggerated Swagger of a Black Teen	12/10/2020	N/A
America Is Ghetto	9/24/2020	Fantastic Frankey
*The Juneteenth Extravaganza	6/18/2020	Janicia F & Brandin Collins
*Oscars Still So White	1/16/2020	N/A

The final podcast I included is *MEGASheen*. This podcast, hosted by Nick and Viktor (last names not included), discusses “geek and gay culture from the queer people of color perspective” (Nick & Viktor, 2022). On the podcast’s website, *podofthesheen.com*, Nick describes himself as “an avid gamer, drag/female impersonation enthusiast, and lover of cartoons and classic films.” His co-host, Viktor, is a writer, activist, and creator of a queer supernatural webcomic entitled *StrangeLore*.

While the other two podcasts in this list also discuss nerd culture from the lens of people of color, *MEGASheen* specifically focuses on the queer people of color perspective. Additionally, the podcast is self-produced, with no major ties to any podcast network. The official Twitter account for *MEGASheen* only has 323 followers, compared to the 13,000 followers of @ForAllNerds and the 6,000 still following @nerdificent. (It should be noted that the former hosts of *Nerdificent*, Dani Fernandez and Ify Nwadiwe, have 100,000 and 70,000 followers, respectively, on their personal accounts). This is not an insult to the

creators of *MEGASheen*; the hosts have made no claim to attempt to reach the number of people other podcasts have accumulated. Instead, this serves as a method of placing *MEGASheen* in line with the goals of Web 2.0 and with the research interests of this thesis.

MEGASheen has been posting podcasts since 2016 and, similar to *For All Nerds Show*, it would be a significant endeavor to analyze every episode. As such, I selected the following episodes for analysis based on the same criteria as outlined in *For All Nerds Show*.

Table 3

MEGASheen Episodes

Episode Title	Air Date	Guests
Black Folks Play D&D Too, Y'Know	6/7/2021	Tanya DePass and B. Dave Walters
*Comics, Sex, and the Presidency	11/16/2020	Michael Alvear
Let Black Sci-Fi Characters THRIVE!	9/7/2020	Jordan Clark
New Mutants, Same Racism	8/31/2020	@hoodopulence
*We Tired	6/8/2020	N/A
*The Gaymer Episode	5/11/2020	@iamBrandon and Chris Lam
*I Am Moira X	8/11/2019	Ed Williams and Jermain Dickerson

This is by no means an exhaustive or even necessarily representative list of the most popular nerdy podcasts by women and people of color. There are many others (such as *theblerdgurl*, *Queer and Present Danger*, *Big Gay Nerds*, and more) that fulfil the criteria to be relevant to this research. In developing the selection of podcasts, my aim was to include multiple episodes from fewer podcasts in an effort to try and identify themes and similarities across episodes (and reduce the likelihood of having any single episode be

explicitly unrepresentative). The presence of other podcasts (and other media more broadly) does not limit the significance of this research, but instead suggests additional research with more available resources is necessary. *Nerdificent* aired between 2018 and 2020. As such, I aimed to have most of the selected episodes from *For All Nerds Show* and *MEGASheen* be those that were released within this time frame.

With all of the episodes listed above, there are over twenty hours of discussion and commentary about gender, sexuality, and race as it pertains to geek and nerd culture. These episodes detail personal experiences, either from the podcast hosts or their guests, regarding participation in nerd communities.

Qualitative Analysis

Transcription

With the initial selection of episodes completed, the next step involved analyzing the content of each episode. I first listened to each episode and took minor notes, highlighting recurring themes and topics that arose throughout the episode. Notably, I also took account of which episodes were less relevant to my research question than initially anticipated. Because my focus was on the interaction between race, gender, sexual orientation, and nerd culture, there were often topics that arose in the podcast discussions that did not cover these concepts. This is a clear limitation of the study; however, I feel it was a necessary one to provide a specific scope for this thesis.

After a preliminary listening to the selected episodes, I took the audio of each episode and ran it through transcription software. The *Nerdificent* and *For All Nerds Show* episodes were transcribed using *Descript*; however, after reviewing the transcripts I felt the quality of the transcriptions was insufficient. Many of the words used in nerd fandom are

“made up;” a dictionary full of obscure words might not recognize terms like “Kakarot,” “Firaga,” or “Gundam.” This was expected when I chose to use transcription software, but my decision to change software was largely influenced by *Descript’s* error rate around any text that was not Western American English. *Descript’s* initial transcription of the name of the co-host of *Nerdificent*, Ify Nwadiwe, was frequently “If I am wide awake.” Many Japanese and African names were also commonly misinterpreted. As such, I opted to utilize *Otter.ai* for the last set of transcriptions: the *MegaSheen* episodes.

Preliminary Coding

After completing the transcription, I imported all of the generated transcripts into *Dedoose*, a cloud-based qualitative analysis software. I first developed a set of emergent codes to establish an initial codebase, and then went back through the transcriptions to code each episode more accurately. Emergent coding, outlined within Grounded Theory by Kathy Charmaz (2008), is a method of qualitative analysis whereby researchers approach data with “the systematic, active scrutiny of data and the successive development and checking of categories” (p. 161).

This process, combined with my previous notes, resulted in the decision to remove a few episodes from the overall analysis. For *Nerdificent*, episode 110, “Queer Gaming Revisited,” was a re-upload of episode 24, “Queer Representation in Geek Culture,” with a re-recorded intro discussing the reason for revisiting the topic. Because episode 24 was already selected for analysis, episode 110 was removed.

After processing the coding of *For All Nerds Show*, the episodes “Exaggerated Swagger of a Black Teen,” “The Juneteenth Extravaganza,” and “Oscars Still So White” were removed. The content of these episodes focused less on nerd-specific topics and more

on race more broadly. While these were excellent episodes to listen to, I felt each episode included in this analysis should have a stronger focus on topics related to nerd culture.

The podcast with the largest number of episodes cut was *MegaSheen*. The episodes “Comics, Sex, and the Presidency feat. Michael Alvear (Nov 16, 2020)” was cut primarily because much of the topic revolved around the (at the time recent) presidential election. Again, this topic was incredibly important, but outside the scope of analysis here. In a similar vein, the episode “We Tired,” centered largely around the Black Lives Matter protests occurring around Summer 2020. The last two episodes initially selected that were not included in the final analysis were “The Gaymer Episode” and “I Am Moira X.” These two episodes in particular had significantly fewer lines of dialogue that fit into the codes defined in my previous reviews as compared to other episodes and podcasts.

After these updates, I was left with 12 of the original 20 podcast episodes: 5 episodes (339 minutes) for *Nerdificent*, 4 episodes (284 minutes) for *For All Nerds Show*, and 3 episodes (292 minutes) for *MegaSheen*.

Excerpt Descriptors

I identified approximately 300 excerpts from the combined episodes that covered the topics at interest in this study. I then classified each excerpt based on Podcast title, Episode Title, the name of the speaker, the gender of the speaker, the race/ethnicity of the speaker, and the occupation of the speaker.

The following includes ratios of these classifications based on the number of excerpts. It should be noted that this does not account for excerpt length; excerpts ranged from approximately 120 characters to ~2,800 characters. I chose to identify the ratios based on number of excerpts in an effort to remove any weighting based on the length of a

particular excerpt. To reduce redundancy, identify speakers clearly, and to account for the conversational nature of a podcast, excerpts were combined and sorted by context. For example, if two hosts were discussing a specific topic back and forth, I combined Host A's comments into a single excerpt and Host B's comments into a separate excerpt.

Utilizing this methodology, I was able to make the following identifications. Two-thirds (66%) of the excerpts were from *Nerdificent*, with 47 excerpts (15.8%) from *For All Nerds Show* and 54 excerpts (18.2%) from *MegaSheen*. Figure 1 shows the number of excerpts associated with each selected episode. Figure 2 outlines the distribution of excerpts across the speaker's race/ethnicity, and Figure 3 identifies the distribution across Gender. Race, ethnicity, and gender were identified either through a speaker's self-identification in the podcast episode or through their biographic material (website, Twitter bio, etc.).

Figure 1

Excerpts per Episode

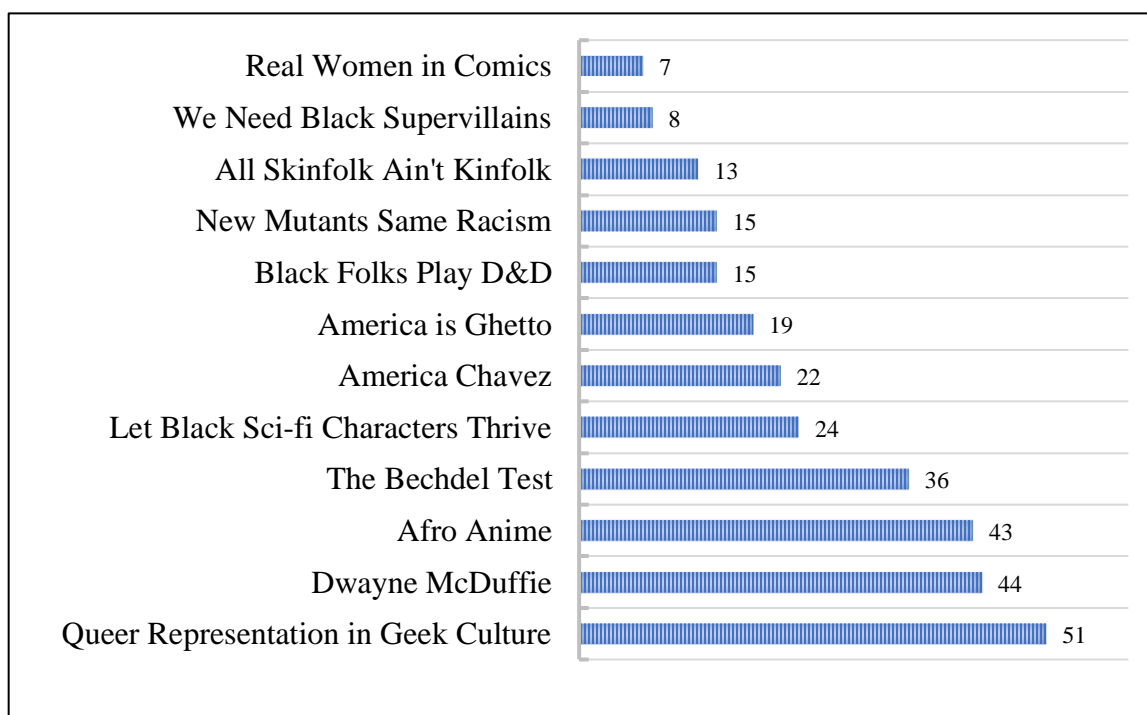


Figure 2

Excerpts by Race/Ethnicity

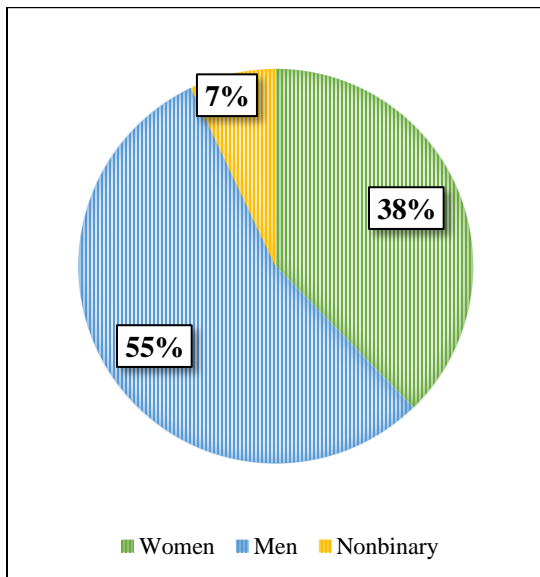
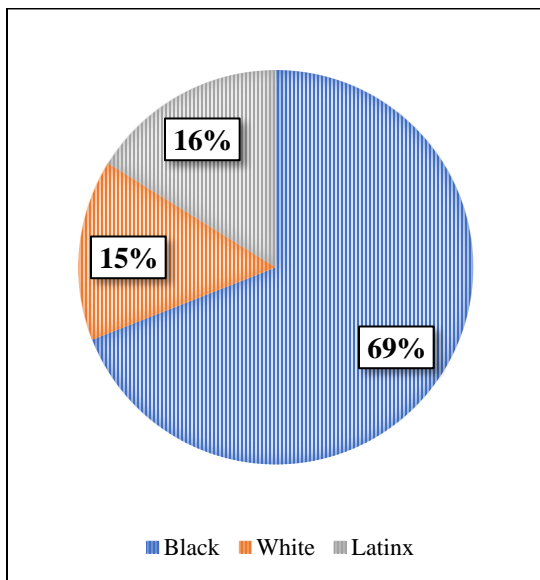


Figure 3

Excerpts by Gender



CHAPTER V

Findings

Jordan Clark, a comic book writer who authored two issues of DC's *Aquaman* comic in 2020, shared an anecdote on the *Let Black Sci-fi Characters Thrive* episode of *MegaSheen* that illustrates both the personal excitement of seeing nerd topics become mainstream as well as the communal aspects of sharing these interests with others:

When *The Dark Knight* came out, I skipped my morning class at college to go see the movie... I go in there [and] it's packed at 10:30 in the morning. I sit down next to this dude in a suit, who I think told somebody he was going to work and did the same thing that I did - skip back to come and see this movie... After the Joker robbery scene in the beginning, we both look at each other like "we made the right choice," - [no matter where] we're *supposed* to be, we should be here watching this movie (Nick & Viktor, 2020e, 49:35).

In an ideal world, fandom provides a space for all people, regardless of race, gender, or sexual orientation, to share in their excitement and interest in the amazing and the fantastical. While these components are still very present in reality, more traditional social pressures eek their way into all communities, even those developed around the fictional. These social facts present themselves as early as the ways in which nerds "become" nerds (i.e., become interested in nerdy topics).

Some guests, such as Tanya DePass and B. Dave Walters, entered into the community through tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) like *Dungeons and Dragons*. Cartoons were also frequently cited as the initial entry point to nerd fandom. Jordan Clark attributed his interest in the genre to *X-Men the Animated Series* and *Batman the Animated*

Series. Obi and Onyi Udeh, co-founders of the animation studio Kolanut Productions, reflected on the importance of *Toonami*, a block of programming on Cartoon Network in the '90s and early 2000s that featured anime. As Onyi Udeh explains:

I gotta first and foremost give a shoutout to whoever made the decision on Cartoon Network to create *Toonami*. You don't realize how you've affected an entire culture of people. I'm talking about from hip hop to like animation to even comedy. It's so much ingrained into the culture. I just heard this new artist [Megan Thee Stallion], and she had a bar that was like 'hair yellow like Goku.' I was like 'See, this is what I'm talking about...' I know we used to rush and get our homework done just so we can get in at that primetime hour from [*Dragon Ball Z*], *Gundam Wing*, *Cowboy Bebop*, *Samurai Jack*, *Rurouni Kenshin*... That was like our introduction (Fernandez & Nwadiwe, 2019b, 4:58).

It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of *Toonami* on many fledgling nerds. All of the anime series cited by Udeh were created in Japan and, in the '90s and early '00s, it was a financial risk to dub over the original Japanese voices with English casts since the Western market was not yet established. For example, *Dragon Ball Z* began airing in 1989 in Japan, however the English dub did not premiere until 1996. From the '80s through the end of the 20th century, anime was typically shared through anime clubs or convention screenings (Close, 2016). *Toonami* provided direct access to a localized version of anime, requiring only a cable or satellite connection to Cartoon Network.

Other common entry points identified in the podcasts were comic books and video games. Both of these provided prospective nerds with the ability to judge a product by its cover. Whereas anime and cartoons provided a set schedule of release, physical materials

contained eye-catching logos and artwork to encourage readers and gamers to pick up a particular issue or game.

Although there is no universal entry point or experience for all nerds, it is important to identify how nerdy content handles representation, both on-screen (or in print) and off. This study identified three main themes brought up throughout the included podcasts: direct representation, indirect representation, and representation behind the scenes.

Direct Representation

Multiple Black guests cited Dwayne McDuffie's work as their first time seeing a Black character headlining a comic book or television series. McDuffie, a comic book writer and founder of Milestone Media, created many characters of color such as Static Shock, Icon, and Hardware (Fernandez & Nwadiwe, 2020). Static Shock, in particular, served as an icon (pun only slightly intended) to many nerds of color across all ages and provided an example of what could be possible in the future. Joelle Monique, writer and podcaster, articulates her experiences with Static clearly: "I was just bowled over by the fact that there was a kid who kind of looked like me, who had superpowers, who got to fight alongside Batman. Like... whoa" (Fernandez & Nwadiwe, 2020, 10:32).

It was not just the *presence* of a Black character on a television show that provided such a strong impact on the podcast guests, but also the guests' perception of the character's sincerity. Although Monique was drawn to *Static Shock* because he "looked like her," what kept her reading the comics was McDuffie's ability to portray Static as complex and multi-dimensional. Monique elaborates further: "[Static] avoided almost any stereotype...he skateboarded, which people were like, 'that's not a Black thing' [but] it's totally a Black

thing... [He] had parents that were both there and meant a lot to him and he didn't have a lot of tragedy going around” (Fernandez & Nwadiwe, 2020, 10:58).

The depth of characterization present in *Static Shock* inspired audiences and future comic book creators. One such creator is Johnny Parker, who has worked on numerous original comics such as *Teen Horror* and *Black Fist and Brown Hand* and whose creative endeavors were directly influenced by McDuffie’s works:

When I used to create my own characters as a kid growing up, it was also always so hard to create characters of color. Everybody came out White, but the moment I read *Static*, I was like, oh, snap, I see myself. I can do this. And that's when I started [creating] my Black characters, my Latino characters. I started like creating this like diverse array thing. So, thank you Dwayne, because he inspired that in me. If he didn't do that then I wouldn't have the books I'm making. (Fernandez & Nwadiwe, 2019b, 15:21).

Parker articulates an unconscious perception felt by many minorities. Stories with predominantly White and male casts may entertain audiences of color, but diverse representation increases the possibilities for audiences to identify with and even self-insert themselves into pieces of media. This action can then inspire others to expand the array of individuals presented and ripple into further interest from wider demographics.

Sincerity in representation is perhaps more salient for women characters on-screen. It is typically more common for a comic book or animated series to have more women characters than characters of color, but that does not necessarily mean that women are more fairly represented. Gail Simone (1999), writer on the comics *Birds of Prey*, *Batgirl*, and *Wonder Woman*, developed the term “fridging” to reference “superheroines who have been

either depowered, raped, or cut up and stuck in the refrigerator” (p.1). In many instances, these deaths of female characters are used as plot points for male characters, such as Rachel Dawes in Christopher Nolan’s *Batman* films or Gwen Stacy in *Spider-Man*. Jamie Loftus and Caitlin Durante, the hosts of *The Bechdel Test*, cite tests that can be applied to media to identify the significance of the female characters present. One notable example is the “Sexy Lamp” test. As Durante explains, “if you can replace your female character with a sexy lamp and the story still basically works, then that movie fails” (Fernandez & Nwadiwe, 2019c, 44:46). While these tests are not formal dives into appropriate representation, they do serve as a stimulating lens to view female characters in nerd media. These perspectives help highlight certain tendencies in media, such as how women of color are often relegated into the tokenized role of the White protagonist’s best friend.

Highlighting these tropes is also a risky endeavor for many women. The field of nerd media criticism is vast, yet women face a steep burden to participate. Each of the women featured in the selected podcasts discussed their experiences handling online harassment. Dani Fernandez, the cohost of *Nerdificent*, summarized her experiences with the following metaphor:

I look at it as a glass of water and it fills up, fills up, fills up, fills up, and then eventually I can't take it anymore and [it] overflows. And then I kind of spiral from the harassment and I might take a break. I might step back. And it sucks, I agree, because I want to read all my comments. I want to answer the messages, but that means I have to see all the really bad ones. And it's very hard mentally to handle (Fernandez & Nwadiwe, 2018, 37:18).

As Fernandez explains, just participating in nerd spaces as a woman can often be mentally and emotionally draining. Women in nerd spaces often face harassment influenced by a social expectation that the harassment is justified. As discussed previously, comic conventions have resorted to placing signs indicating “cosplay is not consent” in a direct effort to combat the fallacy that sexual harassment and assault are encouraged based on the outfit a woman is wearing (Romano, 2014).

Even when diverse characters are included in media, it is not always presented with the sincerity and care of someone like McDuffie. The inclusion of a racial or gendered minority character does not inherently mean that the inclusion will be done properly. Some characters, such as Mr. Popo from *Dragon Ball Z* or The Spirit’s sidekick *Ebony White*, range from racially insensitive to explicitly racist. Other characters can be seen as a “cop out,” as described by Dani Fernandez: “it’s kind of like a cop out to just make someone brown or make someone queer and then not address it at all. That kind of happened a little bit... with JK Rowling and Harry Potter... when she revealed that Dumbledore was gay... and then we thought in *Fantastic Beasts* or in other stuff that it was going to be addressed and it’s not” (Fernandez & Nwadiwe, 2018, 25:42).

Defenses of the lack of representation in nerd media often present narrative justifications for minimizing the presence of women and people of color. Some complaints are specific, such as when a known character is changed into a non-White non-male character. This can be seen frequently in Marvel comics, such as when Sam Wilson (a Black man) took up the role of Captain America, when Riri Williams (a Black girl) took on the role of Iron Man, or when Jane Foster (a White woman) took on the role of Thor. Each of these instances were temporary, running only a few issues before the White male

version returned to reclaim their mantle, but the refrain from detractors was consistent: “go make your own characters and stop stealing *ours!*”

Other justifications for failing to diversify casts and characters center on the assumed profitability of “traditional” characterizations. Ify Nwadiwe, the other cohost of *Nerdificent*, points to how many media platforms will target “Middle America” in an effort to capitalize on the largest market, excluding marginalized groups:

To say that you don't think this movie will do well because of Middle America is to say that you don't believe that there's a young gay kid in Middle America, that there isn't a young Asian kid in Middle America, there isn't a young Black kid in Middle America, or that there's no one in Middle America that has the empathy to take in this story and enjoy it and understand it...(Fernandez & Nwadiwe, 2018, 43:00).

Nwadiwe’s point here provides important context to Johnny Parker’s comments cited earlier. Parker discussed the importance of diversity for inspiring creators and Nwadiwe emphasizes the importance of empathy in storytelling. The beauty of nerd fiction is that it allows for audiences to find shared meaning outside of direct relationships. A queer teenager may not have experience hiding their superhero costume from their parents, but the themes of identity and deception in comics like *Spider-Man* or *Nova* can provide a space for that teen to feel understood.

Indirect Representation

The proliferation of nonexistent and/or superficial representation led many marginalized nerds to adopt “indirect representation.” These are instances where audiences and nerds ascribe traits to a character that are not explicitly defined in the media, artificially increasing the level of representation in that content. For example, although Mr. Popo is a character with Black skin in the anime series *Dragon Ball Z*, many nerds of color do not consider him to be the primary person of color in the series. That role is reserved for Piccolo, an alien character with green skin and antennae. Despite his skin and extra-terrestrial origin, he is perceived by many fans to be coded as Black. Christopher Smith Bryant, a Los Angeles-based digital designer, describes a similar phenomenon for queer nerds and video games:

When you ask queer nerds who do they find that represents them, it's usually a lot of female characters because there aren't many gay characters, especially in video games. I think there was like the *Ballad of Gay Tony* in *Grand Theft Auto 4*... [but] it's been very lacking obviously in video games and nerd culture (Fernandez & Nwadiwe, 2018, 24:00).

Many nerds take it upon themselves to increase the diversity of characters in their favorite media. Some marginalized creators have the ability to formally create new content, but those without access to industry mechanisms have an informal process they can utilize: fanfiction. As the name implies, fanfiction is the creation of informal, non-canonized content by fans that expands on the existing world, lore, and characters of a particular media (Nichols, 2019). These may simply be new, imaginary adventures with a known cast of characters or an exploration of alternate events that fans wish to delve into. These are

often shared through dedicated fanfiction websites, such as FanFiction.net or Archive of Our Own (AO3). For example, the adult-themed *Harry Potter* fanfiction *Manacled* by the user senlinyu on AO3 has amassed over 2.5 million views, includes formal illustrations, and has been translated into more than ten languages.

Fanfiction provides a path for many nerds, particularly queer nerds, to explore sexuality through a medium that historically did not have many examples of LGBTQ+ relationships. AO3 hosts over 375,000 works of fanfiction tagged “LGBTQ Themes.” When prompted to cite the first queer relationship they had seen in any kind of media, both Dani Fernandez and Christopher Smith Bryant almost ashamedly realized their first glimpse of queer relationships came via fanfiction.

That is not to say that all representation in nerd media is negative. The most commonly cited character across all of the podcast episodes included in this analysis was America Chavez, a queer Latina superhero introduced in 2011 by Marvel Comics. America was portrayed by Xochitl Gomez in the 2022 film *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness*, however the podcasts included in this analysis were recorded before the film’s release, therefore all references were to the comic book depiction.

In science fiction it is common for alien races to be either an allegory for human races (such as the Tosok race in Robert J. Sawyer’s *Illegal Alien*) or for the alien’s appearance to be indistinct from human races (such as Clark Kent in *Superman*) (Leroux 2004). America Chavez is an example of the latter. Similar to Piccolo, she is not *technically* Latina since she is from an alternate dimension, but unlike the green Namekian, America is clearly coded as a Latina. It is not just her skin tone, but her unapologetic characterization that presents her as a fan favorite. As Toni Sanchez, writer and reviewer, explains:

She's attending college and she's going to Sotomayor University - named after the first Latino Supreme Court Justice Sotomayor... there's an actual hologram of Justice Sotomayor greeting the students... and that two-page spread [there] is a campus map and something called like the Department of Radical Women and Intergalactic, Indigenous peoples or something like that. And I just was like... I am never going to read that anywhere else but in this book and I love this book so much because of just that one little detail. And from that point, I mean, that's only, I think make maybe the fourth or fifth page at that point, but at that point I was just hooked (Fernandez & Nwadiwe, 2019a, 18:25).

Both the written and illustrated depictions of America embrace her existence as a strong Latina, despite the comic book-y origin that technically makes her not even human. Returning to earlier discussions of empathy and diversity, it is hopefully clear that these depictions intentionally code America as a queer Latina.

America is seen as an icon not only for her backstory, but also for the representations of her as a character. Similar to depictions of *Static Shock* by Dwayne McDuffie, audiences who are drawn to Chavez see her depiction as authentic and sincere. As Vanessa Gritton, the co-founder and Head of Production at Yakuto Games, articulates further:

Women of color, especially women of color in superhero type roles, never get to really be soft. If we are, we're soft in a way that's very broken and people don't respond to it well, and a big part of that is both in comics and in reality, Latinas tend to have to be very strong for the outside world, but at home is the only time

we can feel that softness, that world-weary weakness. (Fernandez & Nwadiwe, 2019a, 12:18).

America Chavez, as a comic book character, wears a denim jacket and punches holes in the universe (literally), yet it is the authenticity of her characterization that draws audiences in. Gritton notes how female superheroes typically have small frames and ranged powers (guns, energy blasts, etc.), yet Chavez is presented with a brute physical strength: "...they draw her that way... you see muscles flex, you see her legs tense up..." (Fernandez & Nwadiwe, 2019a, 37:23). While this might contrast with the softness cited earlier, this duality is important to marginalized communities. Often, marginalized people must balance a strength to persist in a White-dominated patriarchy and the expected stoicism of inspiring others. As Dani Fernandez states, "...people of color in general don't really get the luxury of [being vulnerable] ... it's like, suck it up, don't let them see you cry." (Fernandez & Nwadiwe, 2019a, 13:01). America Chavez serves as an ideal combination of both the strength and the empathy necessary to survive as a marginalized person.

Representation Behind the Scenes

A major impact on the significance of marginalized characters involves who is working behind the scenes. America Chavez was created by two White men in 2011, but she gained significant popularity when she was featured in Marvel's all-female Avengers squad *A-Force* in 2015. The *A-Force* comic was written by two women: G. Willow Wilson (the co-creator of Marvel's first Muslim and South Asian American character with their own comic book) and Marguerite Bennett (writer of *Bombshells*, *Angela*, and a multiple GLAAD Media Award nominee for her depictions of LGBTQ stories and characters). This growth in popularity (despite criticism from those who felt her character was "too

feminist”), resulted in the debut of her own self-titled comic *America* in 2017, written by Puerto Rican author Gabby Rivera. Rivera’s 2017 series serves as the source of most of the comments surrounding *America Chavez* included here.

The podcast guests and hosts all discussed the need for increasing the number of racial and ethnic minorities as well as women and sexual minorities “behind the scenes.” Some of these discussions involved direct organizations, such as Regine Sawyer’s work with *Women in Comics International* or Tatiana King’s work with *Black Girls Create*. *For All Nerds Show* and *MegaSheen* both consistently dedicate portions of their show to highlight new work from Black and brown creators.

Both the podcast hosts and their guests discuss the difficulty with improving diversity. For one, the content creators acknowledge that just because a person of color created a piece of media does not mean it is inherently worth promoting. On the other hand, being critical of the already minimized number of creative works by minorities risks further reducing the prevalence of work by disenfranchised creators. As DJ BenHaMeen explains:

I watch a lot of stuff and y'all just never hear me cause I just be like, “oh, okay” and keep ‘em moving. Because I do work in this business and I understand how difficult it is to get something put to screen. I understand how a writer might write one version of a script and then when they see that show, it's a completely different version of the shit they wrote and they had no control over any of that. So it's like, there's so many levels to this and it's a business first before it's a creative place. And so understanding that about Hollywood, I'm not quick to dog things now (BenHaMeen, D. & King, 2021f, 33:08).

While this mentality can reduce the criticism new minority creators experience, it also runs the risk of perpetuating tropes and concepts that make it through to the mainstream audience. For example, the Marvel film *Black Panther* represents a significant cultural milestone in both its box office sales and its extensive Black and African cast (McSweeney, 2021). Yet, even with its success, there are elements of its interpretation of African culture that simultaneously inspire and frustrate viewers of African descent. Onyi Udeh elaborates:

[The Black Panther comic] was not written by someone of African descent... So, when you start there, you can just start to understand how, if you keep moving and don't address what's happened in the past something's going to go horribly wrong. You have a wealthy society of Black people in Africa, who's removed from the continent who has all these resources, right? All this technology, all this stuff... They literally have the power to create hegemonic unity within the continent – [but they] do nothing. At the end, after everything happens, they're going to open up their borders to start helping out people. Where do they go? Because technically they're kind of supposed to be in East Africa, so the logical thing is - if you're going to start helping people out, you'd probably start with the person right next to you. Nope. You skip all of Africa and end up in Oakland (Fernandez & Nwadiwe, 2019b, 42:39).

As Onyi Udeh articulates, although *Black Panther* was the first blockbuster movie to feature (and celebrate) the African Diaspora, it is still within the lens of American audiences first and foremost. This does not diminish the accomplishments of the film's cast

and crew, but it does indicate the importance of expanding the roster behind the camera, in the writer's room, and throughout the production.

Despite the success of the Marvel Cinematic Universe and mainstream nerd properties, the creative space is still a major risk – especially for minorities. To make it in “the industry,” creators have to persevere through significant hardship. Before women and people of color can even get into the room to provide creative input and artistic decisions, they often must first pass through a gatekeeper. Whether a social network connection, nepotism, or a financial leg-up, there is usually a consistent path that is difficult for women and people of color to follow. Sometimes these restrictions are couched in institutional boundaries, such as required experience or a certain number of years in the industry.

Many of the podcast episodes selected for study include women and people of color who successfully made it past these barriers. There was a consistent theme across these professional guests (published authors, artists, etc.): getting into the industry requires hard and consistent work. This is not an uncommon thought in any industry, but it was notable since certain creators seemed to simultaneously place responsibility on not only the industry itself but also the individuals facing difficulty within it. For example, B. Dave Walters, screenwriter and lead designer of the Motherlands RPG, provided the following motivation for new artists:

I give everybody the same speech: there is only one thing that every human being is equal in. We are not all the same sizes, we're not all the same shapes, not equal intelligence, strengths, capabilities - there's only one common thread through the human race and that is *time*. We all have 168 hours in a week and there is time for everything if you manage it right. Maybe not a day, maybe not even in a week, but

over two weeks, over a month, you can get it all in if you are diligent about it. And I hear all the time, people are like, “Oh, I don't have time for this, I don't have time for that.” Just replace the words “I don't have time” with “it's not important to me.” You might have to go do your day job and then when you come home, spend some time with your family, walk your dog, decompress or whatever, but six to ten, six to midnight, that's gonna be when you grind. Because the opportunities will present themselves, if you are conscious of it (Nick & Viktor, 2021, 15:01).

The “hustle and grind” mindset is not exclusive to the movies, television, or comics industries. Other creators also talked about the importance of accepting failure and never giving up, but few acknowledged the survivorship bias inherent in these accounts. The podcast hosts ask relatively successful guests to appear on the podcast, not those who never made it. Everyone might have 168 hours in a week, but not everyone has the same ability to utilize those most effectively. Disabled creators may not have the ability to “grind” from six to midnight after working a full shift at a day job.

CHAPTER VI

Conclusion

I was initially concerned that this study would be perceived as irrelevant, not only to the wider world of global social problems but also to the more niche academic literature. Prominent sociological scholars provided an initial reprieve for my concerns. Berger & Luckman (1966) reminded me that “sociological interest in questions of ‘reality’ and ‘knowledge’ is thus initially justified by the fact of their social relativity” (p. 15). The words of bell hooks (2012) also ring strongly in my ears: “movies do not just mirror the culture of any given time; they also create it” (1). Defining, identifying, and critiquing social constructs allows for a deeper understanding of social interaction. While the findings in this study may not outline explicit causal outcomes of societal strife, they do serve to show the ways in which institutionalized racism and sexism permeate every aspect of daily life.

The findings from this study build on existing sociological research in the contexts of race, gender, identity, and culture. Marianne Modica (2015) and Barbara Risman’s (2004) emphasis on the social structures impacting race and gender (respectively) provide foundational context for understanding the experiences of women nerds and nerds of color, even when they participate in communities that do not directly highlight their race or gender (such as online communities). These overlapping communities (and the nuance provided by online interaction) emphasize Desmond & Emirbayer’s (2009) articulation of intersectionality as a “web of relations within which struggles over opportunities, power, and privileges take place” (p. 335). Rather than a single point of intersection (such as being a Black woman nerd), there are multiple manifestations of social categories.

The results from this study also provide nuance for sociological understandings of identity. Snow & Anderson's (1987) components of identity can be utilized to contextualize the experiences presented in the podcasts; the authors differentiate between social identities (assertions "based primarily on information gleaned on the basis of appearance, behavior, and the location and time of action") and personal identities ("the meanings attributed to the self by the actor"), with self-concept serving as a "working compromise" between the two (pp. 1347-1348). The podcast hosts and their guests featured in this study outline the transient nature of self-concept. Nerds can simultaneously (often even paradoxically) feel included in a tightly knit community of likeminded fans interested in similar media while also feeling excluded by that very same group due to the social facts of the world they exist within. This was emphasized by Dani Fernandez, a prominent host, writer, and media personality. If there was a certification for being a full-fledged nerd, Fernandez would have it, yet she has, on multiple occasions, had to withdraw from social media due to the negative comments she received from fellow nerds.

The works of Bradshaw (2008) and Fernback (2007) provide additional justification for the sociological impact of this research. Regardless of theoretical debates on "place versus space" in academic literature, there is common consensus that the internet, at minimum, connects various communities together. As mentioned previously, most of the guests featured in the selected podcasts were working professionals in and around the nerd space. While this inherently biases the content selected for review, it also provides a context for understanding the experiences of women and people of color who work within these spaces. Some organizations, such as *Women in Comics International* or *Black Girls Create*, were created specifically to facilitate the development of communities for

marginalized nerds. These organizations function within Fernbeck's (2007) conclusion that "online social structures are influenced by institutional relationships, power, nationalism, global information and capital flows, crisis management strategies, and other processes that construct our 'communal' practices" (p. 66).

The podcast hosts and guests all exist in a White-dominated patriarchy that influences their day-to-day lives as well as the fictional worlds they enter, maintain, and discuss (Allan Johnson, 2014; Risman, 2004). Almost all of the hosts and guests used the word "tired" at some point in each episode. Although removed from the analysis for this paper, *MegaSheen* had an entire episode simply labeled "We Tired." The emergent coding process enabled me to codify the recurring context of this term. Each instance of the phrase was uttered after expressing frustration and grief around the topic of inclusion. The hosts and guests were not tired from work or from poor sleep; they were tired of constantly trying to *exist* in a White-dominated patriarchy. Hood Opulence, brand and entertainment publicist and nerd culture commentator, illustrated this feeling directly while on the *MegaSheen* podcast:

I've been on calls [where I'm] the only Black person there and... there's certain things they'll joke about that I'd be like, "What are you talking about?" If nobody is even in the room to call them out for that, then they'll keep on saying it. So, it's definitely a bigger problem when the recruiters or the headhunters aren't even looking for a diverse talent. They say "we about diversity" but it's bullshit... So, until they are doing that, it's still gonna be more incidents like this, where people are going to be on, you know, livestreams or Twitter just saying whatever and

thinking “Oh, it wasn't meant to be like that.” But it’s so- it's just... ah, **I'm so tired**. (Nick & Viktor, 2020a, 1:00:02).

This was a moment that illustrated the necessity of listening to each episode rather than just reviewing the transcript. In this quote, Hood Opulence is speaking about the frustrations of being the only person of color in the room, but he eventually loses energy from the sheer exhaustion of the topic. Nick, the co-host of MegaSheen, discusses a similar frustration. In the following quote, Nick outlines both how nerd media can provide a “little piece of happiness” and how important that piece is to people going through significant struggles:

Losing Chadwick [Boseman] in that role of Black Panther, you know, that was our little piece of happiness. And so we lost that and it felt even harder to deal with now that we're dealing with a pandemic, now that we're dealing with unemployment that is the greatest since the Great Depression, now that we're dealing with this motherfucker [Donald Trump] that thinks that he is a dictator, now that we're dealing with, well, the ongoing of police brutality, and White people thinking that they are above the law, and all of these things, you know, it is relevant. And so is everything. It just feels like it's all too much. Personally, for me, dealing with personal issues, on top of being stuck at home, on top of everything else, like goddamn, can I please get a fucking break? (Nick & Viktor, 2020a, 1:31:13).

Nick’s comments here solidify the significance of nerd culture on nerds. Despite any concerns about the subject matter or the plot or the use of computer-generated graphics, nerds of color gravitated to Chadwick Boseman’s role as T’Challa in *Black Panther*. The film and its associated social interactions provided a temporary reprieve from extreme

hardships and, when the actor passed in 2020, many nerds felt like it was the final straw on a disastrous year (Fuschillo, 2020).

There are some very clear limitations in this study. The longform nature of podcasts made it difficult to include a larger sample and the conversational and freeform flow of the discussions made the coding process extensive. Additionally, while the presence of featured guests provided valuable input, it skewed many of the topics into those of nerds within the professional industry rather than nerds within just the community itself. More direct data collection, such as interviews with nerds at comic conventions or in online forums, would serve to increase the input from nerds who actively participate in the culture as a patron.

With that said, there is still valuable information from this study that can supplement the current literature. From the comments and testimony shared throughout these podcast episodes, it is clear that nerd culture can provide a source of warmth and inclusion for nerds of all races, genders, and expressions. This can be illustrated directly, through diverse casts and characters, or indirectly, through fan fiction or new stories. No matter the media, being a nerd provides a momentary respite from the tiring world that is reality.

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VITA

Education

2014	B.S. Sociology Major: Sociology	Texas A&M University Minor: Psychology
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Grants, Honors, & Scholarships

2021	Prof. Ramsey M. Woods Sociology Endowment
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Research Experience

2022-2023	<p>Texas Lifespan Respite Care Program – Respite Innovative Technology Enhancements (RITE)</p> <p><i>Texas Health and Human Services Commission</i></p> <p>The primary goal is to increase availability and provision of respite care services to enhance current state and local coordinated Lifespan Respite Care systems.</p>
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2019-2022	<p>Texas Congregate Meal Initiative (TCMI)</p> <p><i>Administration for Community Living</i></p> <p>The primary goal of TCMI is to increase participation in the state's congregate meal program. TCMI provided select members of the aging network with business acumen and project development training and the opportunity to implement innovative practices at the local level with the support of the TCMI established learning collaborative. TCMI collected evidence on these innovative practices through systematic social scientific evaluation and disseminate the findings on what works and what does not work to the stakeholders.</p>
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2019-2020	<p>Identifying the High-Priority Needs of Texas Veterans and the Services Available to Address those Needs: A Comprehensive Needs Assessment Study</p> <p><i>Texas Veterans Commission</i></p> <p>PPRI developed and implemented a well-defined, comprehensive, inclusive, and participatory study to identify and assess a list of priority needs for the Texas veteran population.</p>
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2018-2021	TAMU Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner Program
	<i>Health Resources & Service Administration</i>
	TAMU's three-year SANE program's purpose has been to recruit and train nurses from rural and underserved areas in South Texas to become certified adult sexual assault nurse examiners (CA-SANE), along with enhancing experiential learning and/or certification for the forensic nurses currently in practice in the region. The program's overall context was defined by the fact that prior to this grant, there were only two certified CA-SANEs in Webb County and neither were practicing locally.
2016-2020	Long-Term Services and Support (LTSS) Needs Assessment
	<i>Texas Department of Aging and Disability Services</i>
	PPRI administered the National Core Indicators (NCI) Adult, Children/Family, and Participant Experience Surveys to solicit feedback regarding services. These surveys were designed to measure satisfaction with services and supports in domains such as: living situation, choice and control, access to health and behavioral health care, respect/dignity, community integration/inclusion, quality of life, and health status.

Professional Experience

2019-Present	Research Specialist Public Policy Research Institute - TAMU
	As a Research Specialist, my role is primarily to perform specific research support and facilitation tasks. I serve as the primary point of contact for web-based survey development. I have also facilitated dozens of focus groups, both in-person and virtual. I often conduct qualitative interviews of project participants, program implementers, and key project stakeholders.
2015-2019	Research Assistant Public Policy Research Institute - TAMU
	As a Research Assistant, my primary role was as the field supervisor for the data collection of the Long-Term Services and Supports (LTSS) Needs Assessment. I managed the hiring and training of 30-50 field staff each project year and supervised the data collection efforts for the project.

Presentations

- (upcoming) Chaudhuri, N., Jackson, A., & Alvi, L. H. (October 2022). *Supplemental Instruction Facilitates Student Success: Lessons from three Federal Grants at a Border Region University*. Poster presentation at the Texas Conference on Student Success at Texas A&M University.
- Jackson, A. and Williams, A. (October, 2021). *Assessing the Priority Needs of Texas Veterans & Families: A Multi-Method Study Conducted by the Public Policy Research Institute*. Poster presentation at the College of Liberal Arts Centers & Institutes Showcase at Texas A&M University.
- Chaudhuri, N., Halperin, L., and Jackson, A. (March, 2021). *Rethinking & Modernizing Texas Congregate Meal Programs: Identifying What Works & What Doesn't Work from Needs Assessment*. Presented to the Texas Association of Regional Councils (virtual).
- Chaudhuri, N., Jackson, A., and Benavides, M. (January, 2021). *Evaluating a Sexual Assault Nurse Examination Program in Rural Texas: Outcome Findings and Relevant Policy Implications*. Presentation at the Southern Political Science Association (virtual).