

Geek Policing: Fake Geek Girls and Contested Attention

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I frame the 2012–2013 discourse about “fake geek girls” using Bourdieu’s theory of fields and capital, complemented by the literature on geeks, authenticity, and boundary policing. This discourse permits me to identify the reciprocal relationship between the policing of identity (e.g., Am I a geek?) and the policing of social boundaries (e.g., Is liking an *X-Men* movie sufficiently geeky?). Additionally, geekdom is gendered, and the policing of fake geek girls can be understood as a conflict over what is attended to (knowledge or attractiveness), by whom (geekdom or mainstream), and the meaning of received attention (as empowering or objectifying). Finally, despite the emergence of a more progressive and welcoming notion of geeks-who-share, the conversation tended to manifest the values of dominant (androcentric) members. That is, in a discourse started by a woman to encourage other women to be geeky, some of the loudest voices were those judging women’s bodies and brains according to traditionally androcentric and heteronormative values. Consequently, in this boundary and identity policing, women faced significant double binds, and the discourse exemplified a critical boomerang in which a critique by a woman circled back to become a scrutiny of women by men.

Keywords: authenticity, boundaries, capital, geek, gender, policing, subculture

In March 2012, Tara Tiger Brown (2012), a self-described “tech entrepreneur, educator and opinion writer,” wrote an article entitled “Dear Fake Geek Girls: Please Go Away.” The article prompted much discussion, generating 250 comments below the article itself as well as thousands of comments elsewhere. Although Brown’s article signaled the start of a spirited conversation that continued into 2013, it was not the first to decry the decline of geek authenticity. Indeed, Brown referenced Patton Oswalt’s (2010) earlier *Wired* article “Wake Up, Geek Culture: Time to Die.” Granted, it is a truism that “old-timers,” as Brown described herself, bemoan the loss of the good old days. But whereas Oswalt had published his lament in a geeky venue (*Wired* focuses on tech culture), Brown carried the conversation into the mainstream (writing at *Forbes.com*). More controversially, she gendered it.

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Pretentious females who have labeled themselves as a “geek girl” figured out that guys will pay a lot of attention to them if they proclaim they are reading comics or playing video games. Celebrities are dressing up as geeks to reach a larger audience. Richard Branson labeled himself a geek for crying out loud. How do we separate the geeks from the muck? (Brown, 2012, para. 4)

A common reflex among those discussing a subculture is to first declaim their own authenticity (e.g., through their history and credentials). Brown (2012) did the same, noting that she had once known the names and backstories of all the *Transformer* characters, among other geeky claims. Furthermore, Brown is tech savvy, having worked as a high-level technologist in various capacities. And despite the judgmental tenor of the article’s title, Brown (n.d.) is an advocate for women’s involvement in geek culture. For example, she began the organization DIY Girls to increase women’s and girls’ interest in technology and engineering (DIY Girls, 2014). Although part of her essay scolded those not willing to obsessively master something (e.g., “do everyone a favor and call yourself what you are: a casual hobbyist” [Brown, 2012, para. 14]), much of her message was aimed at encouraging girls “who genuinely like their hobby or interest and document what they are doing to help others, not garner attention” (Brown, 2012, para. 13).

Although some challenged this policing of geek identity, others extended it with more controversial claims focused on “sexy” cosplay (i.e., fantasy-related costuming and role-play, such as the bikini-clad Slave Leia character from *Return of the Jedi*). For example, essayist and journalist Joe Peacock (2012a), writing for CNN’s *Geek Out* blog, complained of “pretty girls pretending to be geeks for attention” and comic book artist Tony Harris wrote on Facebook: “Hey! Quasi-pretty-NOT-hot-girl, you are more pathetic than the REAL nerds” because “you have this really awful need for attention, for people to tell you your [*sic*] pretty” (Harris, as cited in Johnston, 2012, para. 3).

Each of these posts about “fake geek girls” (hereafter, FGG) shows that questions of attention (i.e., who gets it and why) are of significant concern within geek culture. To understand this, I use Bourdieu’s theory of fields and capital, complemented by literature on geeks, authenticity, and boundary policing, to frame the 2012–2013 discourse about fake geek girls. This discourse permits me to identify the reciprocal relationship between the policing of identity (e.g., Am I a geek?) and the policing of social boundaries (e.g., Is liking an *X-Men* movie sufficiently geeky?). Additionally, geekdom is gendered, and the policing of fake geek girls can be understood as a conflict over what is attended to (knowledge or attractiveness), by whom (geekdom or mainstream), and the meaning of received attention (as empowering or objectifying). Finally, despite the emergence of a more progressive and welcoming notion of geeks-who-share, the conversation tended to manifest the values of dominant (androcentric) members. That is, in a discourse started by a woman to encourage other women to be geeky, some of the loudest voices were those judging women’s bodies and brains according to traditionally androcentric and heteronormative values. As a consequence of this boundary and identity policing, women faced significant double binds, and the discourse exemplified a critical boomerang in which a critique by a woman rebounds into a scrutiny of women by men.

Idiot Nerd Girl: Geeks, Gender, and Hierarchy

To consider whether someone is a fake geek, we should first understand what is meant by *geek*. J. A. McArthur (2009) wrote:

To be geek is to be engaged, to be enthralled in a topic, and then to act on that engagement. Geeks come together based on common expertise on a certain topic. These groups may identify themselves as computer geeks, anime geeks, trivia geeks, gamers, hackers, and a number of other specific identifiers. (p. 62)

(I will speak of *fans* and *nerds* as geeks who are enthusiastic about fiction and learning, respectively, though some sources use these terms interchangeably.) The term *geek* originally had some negative connotations, as did *nerd*, but decades ago enthusiasts appropriated these terms for their own identity (Tocci, 2009). An early articulation of this identity was the "Geek Code," first posted "as a lark" on the Internet in 1993 (Hayden, 2001); it permitted people to concisely express the many facets of their geekiness in the signature of their online messages. By 1996, the code had categories for type of geek, computer and entertainment affinities, physical characteristics, sexuality, and relationship status; each of these had half a dozen or more attributes. For instance, *t* designated one's affinity for *Star Trek*, pluses and minuses showed one's level of enthusiasm, and the @ qualifier indicated that one's affinity was not rigid. "Geeks who happen to very much enjoy *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, but dislike the old 60's series might list themselves as *t++@*" (Hayden, 2001). The term *geek* is now widely used outside such traditional domains. For instance, a *reef geek* is someone who is really into aquariums. Indeed, for some the word has become too popular, as seen in complaints over Richard Branson calling himself a geek. Despite the increasing popularity of the *geek* label, I focus on the traditional domains alluded to by McArthur, sometimes referred to as *geekdoms*, and their response to increasing popularity.

Purportedly, geekdom (as a whole) is diverse and accepting: It is a space that values difference and creativity in contrast to the bland normality of the mainstream. As in any culture, its social norms and structures sometimes contradict this ideal of inclusivity. Although often done in good fun, geeks are keen to not only identify the various facets of their identity (e.g., via the "Geek Code") but test, characterize, and even rank, themselves and others. The older (but still available) "Geek Test" ranks those who answer an extensive questionnaire as a "poser," "geekish," or "geek," which is in turn qualified as "total," "major," "super," "extreme," "god," or "dysfunctional." One gets five bonus points for being a "female geek" (Beaudoin, 1999). Podcaster and cartoonist Scott Johnson's (2007) illustration of "The 56 Geeks" depicts anime, Trek, Jedi, electronics, and cosplay geeks, among many others. Surprisingly, only three of Johnson's 56 geeks are unambiguously female: the scrapbook, cosplay, and ren faire (medieval cosplay and reenactment) geeks. Internet humorist Lore Sjöberg (2010) attempted to capture relative geekiness within a hierarchy. His diagram showed that science fiction authors consider themselves the least geeky, followed by different types of fans, furies (those who like dressing up as animals), erotic furies, and finally "people who write erotic versions of *Star Trek* where all the characters are furies." Whereas this hierarchy is written as a relationship between *self-identified* claims of geekiness, it also can be understood as levels of relative ignominy.

Fandom scholar Kristina Busse (2013) wrote that Sjöberg's hierarchy implies that

wherever one is situated in terms of mockable fannish behavior, there is clearly a fannish subgroup even more extreme than one's own, . . . most fans can rest secure in their knowledge that erotic furry fan fiction remains less acceptable than their fannish hobby. (p. 78)

Busse also noted that such hierarchies are gendered with respect to the topic and the extent of (too little or too much) enthusiasm. (In effect, where and how women *place* their attention is policed; later, I address the *movement and meaning* of the attention women receive.) For example, being too enthusiastic about the wrong thing, such as the teen vampire romance *Twilight*, can prompt derision rather than respect (Busse, 2013). This has led some male fans of *Twilight* to hide their interest or try to defend it as masculine (Click, Miller, Behm-Morawitz, & Aubrey, 2015).

Furthermore, women's interest in a historically geeky topic can seemingly devalue it. Busse (2013) wrote of a character in the comic *Foxtrot* who lamented that "Orlando Bloom has ruined everything" (p. 84) because of his sister's new interest in the *Lord of the Rings*: "Not only does the comic clearly present the varying fan activities that often tend to be gendered, it also indicates how these fan activities fall on an implicitly acknowledged hierarchy" (p. 87). This devaluation also can be seen in the 2010 Idiot "Nerd" Girl image macro and blog (idiotnerdgirl, 2014). A *macro* is an (often viral) image complemented by large captions, as in a motivational poster. (These are called macros because of the ease with which an early tool allowed one to add captions to an image.) In this case, the image is of a bespectacled young woman with "NERD" written on her palm. The Idiot "Nerd" Girl blog has about 70 macros using this same image. Typically, the caption above the image represents a potential claim on geek identity, such as the question "My favorite superhero?" The caption below undercuts the legitimacy of that claim: "Probably X-Man: Hugh Jackman is soooooo hot." The young woman's failure to recall the character's name (Wolverine), combined with her reason (her desire) for liking the film, is intended to signify her idiocy and fakeness.

Because nerd and geek identities have typically been understood as White and masculine, geeks and scholars have wrestled with the question of what it means to be a geek and atypical. Scholar Ron Eglash (2002) documented how the "mutually reinforcing constructions of masculinity, femininity, and technological prowess" of the traditional nerd identity force "Black nerds, Asian hipsters, and geek grrrls" (p. 60) to seek alternative paths around traditional gatekeepers. The 2006 collection of essays "*She's Such a Geek!*" focused on the experiences of women in "science, technology and other nerdy stuff." The contributors wrote of gendered expectations (i.e., "good for a girl"), the intersections of geek and "girly" things, and the challenges of managing both identities (Goodman, 2006; Newitz & Anders, 2006; Seltzer, 2006; Wells, 2006). On this latter point of identity, Rhiannon Bury (2011, p. 48) found that women working in information technology had geek identities that "were equivocal, ambivalent and context dependent": "They were at risk of being assessed by themselves and others as either too geeky in relation to nontechnical women or not geeky enough in relation to male IT experts." Similar discussions can be seen on the "Geek Feminism" wiki and blog, online spaces for women "in a range of geeky cultures/communities/activities," including technology and fandom (Wikia, 2013).

The double bind of being too geeky and not geeky enough is a recurrent theme in discussions of geek women, as seen in reviews of another book, Leslie Simon's (2011) young-adult title *Geek Girls Unite*. Simon moved beyond science and technology toward popular culture and the worlds of "fangirls, bookworms, indie chicks, and other misfits." She advocated that young women be proud of their geekiness. Some of the reviews on Amazon have been critical of Simon's focus on *actual* girls and popular culture. A review by martin_r (2011) complained it was only "Elementary level geekiness at best" and "read like a Seventeen magazine article on how to be a geeky poser."

From all this we can see that geekdom is often hierarchical and frequently gendered. Geeks can use a surprising degree of specificity in the presentation of their identity and in the ordering of their worlds. This ordering can be unfavorable toward women, many of whom face a double bind of being too geeky and not geeky enough.

Hot Chicks: Cultural, Symbolic, and Erotic Capital

I use the term *geek* to speak of those with a passionate enthusiasm that may eclipse other life activities. This engagement is an expenditure of attention that is typically associated with the accumulation of knowledge, or what Bourdieu (1986) referred to as *cultural capital*, one of four types of what I'll call *personal capital*. *Economic capital* is a person's financial assets, perhaps accumulated through labor. *Cultural capital* is a person's cultural values, habits, and tastes acquired both explicitly and tacitly; it includes things such as education and style of speech and dress. Sarah Thornton (1996) followed Bourdieu with the notion of *subcultural capital*, a subtype of cultural capital that designates the knowledge necessary for understanding what is "hip" within a subculture. An example of geeky (sub)cultural capital is knowledge of appropriate cultural references and in-jokes. *Social capital* is the value of one's social network, a "durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group" (Bourdieu, 1986, para. 19). For example, wearing a comic conference T-shirt might indicate one is part of that particular network. Although social capital is dependent on one's embeddedness in a group, *symbolic capital* is related to the honor and recognition of the individual (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 242). A geek who breaks a world record solving a Rubik's Cube would likely attract symbolic capital.

Just as it takes effort to accumulate capital, that capital can be used to mobilize effort toward one's own ends, which includes transforming it from one type into another (Bourdieu, 1986). For instance, YouTube stars ComicBookGirl19 and EmergencyAwesome have been able to transform their cultural capital (geek knowledge) into economic capital (ad revenue from YouTube). Consequently, we can understand geekdom as a Bourdieusian field, which "constitutes a potentially open space of play whose boundaries are dynamic borders which are the stake of struggles within the field itself" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 104).

In the geek subculture, cultural capital is realized through the attention of others. We can see this in fandom debates about which stories are more important or "canonical" within a fictional universe (e.g., comics versus movies) (Brooker, 2001) and which practices are of greater worth (e.g., writing new fiction within a universe versus creating parody); as noted, much of this can be gendered (Brooker, 2014;

Jenkins, 2013; Scott, 2013). From this perspective, FGG is a struggle to define the boundaries of the geek field and the valuation of different types of capital. As Noah Berlatsky (2013), editor of the comic website *The Hooded Utilitarian*, explained, the occasional mean-spiritedness of geek culture arises because

geekdom is built on cultural knowledge; on how much you've consumed; on what you've consumed; and on how long before everyone else you were able to consume it. . . . There's not much point in defining yourself as the knower if you cannot define others as those who do not know.

Central to the FGG debate is a concern that women receive undue attention because of their (relatively rare) gender or attractiveness in a traditionally androcentric space, something seen in online gaming as well (Beyer, 2012). This type of attention is characterized by sociologist Catherine Hakim as *erotic capital*, which includes beauty, sex appeal, and social skills (Green, 2008; Hakim, 2010). (Hakim [2010, p. 501] coincidentally mused that technology workers may be "stereotyped as 'geeks'" because their occupation does not typically require sex appeal and social skills.) In this approach, complaints like Peacock's (2012a) criticism of "hot chicks" wearing "skimpy outfits simply to get a bunch of gawking geeks' heads to turn" can be understood as an attack on the deployment of erotic capital. In these terms, both Peacock and Harris objected to the supplanting of subcultural capital by way of women's erotic capital.

For the moment, I will put aside the legitimacy of erotic capital—I return to it later in the discussion of Slave Leia—and stress that the FGG debate can be understood as the defining of a (Bourdieuian) field wherein participants struggle over its boundaries, including the legitimacy and conversion rates associated with different types of capital.

Posers: Identity, Boundaries, and the Other

In the progression of critiques from Brown to Harris, one thing remained constant: a complaint about "posers." Brown (2012) wrote that "we just need to expose the posers for who they are and shine the light much more brightly on those that are the real deal." Harris (as cited in Johnston, 2012) rhetorically asked whether (and denied that) he was a misogynist just "because I frown upon Posers who are sad, needy fakers who use up all my air at Cons." The distinction drawn between subcultural members and posers suggests that one's identity is often defined relative to others. In their study of two gender support groups, Michael Schwalbe and Douglas Mason-Schrock (1996, p. 115) defined "identity work" as what people do to "give meaning to themselves or others." Identity work can be understood as a process of defining, coding, enacting, and policing a social category and related identity. Importantly, the coding of an identity also includes a set of rules dictating who can "adjudicate identity claims and bestow the identity"—that is, "who it is important to impress, whose affirmation matters, and how affirmation should be offered" (pp. 123, 127). Again, we see that positive attention (affirmation) is a generative force in the creation of personal capital. Within this process, we also see a relationship between claims about *individual identity* and claims about a *category's boundaries*. Granted, each is a reflection of the other, but it is worth making this symmetry explicit.

To police an identity claim is to challenge a person's association with a category. To police a boundary is to contest the contours of a category. Often, one happens by way of the other, such as in defining the boundaries of geekiness by way of affirming an identity claim. For example, a claim such as "Felicia Day, creator of the series *Geek & Sundry*, is obviously a geek, so women can be geeks" affirms an identity so as to delineate the boundary of geekdom. Conversely, the claim "Olivia Munn, former correspondent on *The Daily Show*, is not a geek but a mainstream celebrity" posits a boundary so as to contest Munn's identity as a geek. Hence, *policing* is the establishment of mutually reciprocating definitions of personal identities *and* social categories. I then understand *authenticity* as the purported congruence between an individual's subjectivity and his or her enactment of an identity. This process is both social and performative; it is an ongoing negotiation, a step in "identity work," and part of a game in a Bourdieusian field. It is the tension between individual claims of authentic identity (e.g., "I played Dungeons & Dragons as a kid") and constitutive claims about a group (e.g., "geeks are obsessive") in which the meaning of both emerges.

Geeks are not alone in their concern about identity and what is worth knowing. Punks have long been preoccupied with the distinction between "real punks" and "pretenders"; other subcultures have similarly distanced themselves from "phonies" and the "mainstream" (Daschuk, 2010; Fox, 1987; Thornton, 1996). Similarly, the straight-edge scene formed in response to the perceived excesses of punk, and its adherents advocate abstention from intoxicants and promiscuity; they have also continued, and perhaps magnified, punks' concern with authenticity and boundaries in the Internet age (Peterson, 2005; Williams & Copes, 2005; Wood, 2003).

In any case, subcultures often define themselves by way of stated differences from others. That is, the attempt to create a "'distinction' occurs through the construction of a . . . mainstream 'Other' as a symbolic marker against which to define one's own tastes as 'authentic'" (Weinzierl & Muggleton, 2003, p. 9). This does not yield a discrete result: "the boundaries between the subculture and the mainstream are not concrete, but are negotiated by individuals and groups through an ongoing process of (re)classifying certain tastes and behaviors as legitimate or illegitimate" (Williams, 2011, p. 9). For example, some fans understand themselves in relation to the mainstream Other (Jancovich, 2002; Whiteman, 2009), just as straight-edges position themselves as distinct from a corrupt and intoxicated society. This is why one can find evidence of geeks who once felt closeted or "bullied for being 'out,'" but who now fear being overrun in their own spaces (Letamendi, 2013). Additionally, mainstream attention can sideline or bring unwanted scrutiny to subversive subcultural practices. Hence, subcultures make use of derogatory labels for mainstream transgressions: Those who enter a subculture from the mainstream can be labeled as posers, and those who obtain some mainstream attention at the supposed expense of their authenticity are called sellouts.

6 of 9: Who Merits Attention?

Two concerns underlie Tara Brown's (2012) desire that fake geek girls "go away." First, she expressed a typical subcultural concern with authenticity and mainstream encroachment. As she commented, "many of us old-timers believe that when it was harder to learn about something and you did it anyway . . . that's when your passions really shined through." For her, being a geek was not typically

considered a prized label. This concern is amplified by the use of the geek label by mainstream figures such as Richard Branson. Second, Brown feared that casual hobbyists and "pretentious females" seeking attention were creating conditions in which real geek girls were sidelined or inhibited; hence, she encouraged women to "Dig deep, dig to the roots, dig until you know things that others you admire in the subject matter don't know or can't do. Then go ahead and proudly label yourself a geeky girl."

Brown's (2012) second concern about attention-seeking women became an impetus among some men to challenge women more broadly. This challenge included judgments of women's worth and attractiveness. A few months after Brown's missive, in June 2012, Ryan Perez, a blogger for the popular gaming site Destructoid, tweeted Felicia Day asking: "Could you be considered nothing more than a glorified booth babe? You don't seem to add anything creative to the medium" (Perez, as cited in Hoevel, 2012). Calling Day a "booth babe" questioned her authenticity and devalued her subcultural and symbolic capital. Yet Day is about as geeky as a geek can get. Although she is a minor mainstream celebrity, having appeared in the geeky shows *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Supernatural*, she also produced, wrote, and starred in *The Guild*, an award-winning Web series about online gaming. Like many, Joe Peacock (2012a), writing on the CNN Geek Out blog, defended Day, claiming that she was called out "because she's a girl, and some men are disgusting." Perez was subsequently let go from Destructoid. Yet Peacock's post and defense of Day was not without its own problems. According to Peacock, although Day was deserving of the geek label, women like Olivia Munn, former tech show host and *Daily Show* correspondent, were "models-cum-geeks" paid to put a pretty face on a now lucrative industry. This is how the booth babe role is typically understood: Attractive women are paid to draw (traditionally hetero-male) geeks' attention to a sponsor's booth. (That is, they convert their erotic capital into economic capital for the sponsor.) This practice is increasingly challenged as demeaning to women and insulting to men (Aurora, 2013). But here the concern about the objectification of women became a *critical boomerang*.

In such a rebound, women (rather than the androcentric culture and economy) become the focus of the most intense scrutiny and policing. Meanwhile, men are seen as innocents in need of protection from the "attention addict trying to satisfy her ego and feel pretty by infiltrating a community." Peacock (2012a) referred to these women by way of a geeky reference to the *Star Trek* character Seven of Nine:

I call these girls "6 of 9". They have a superpower: In the real world, they're beauty-obsessed, frustrated wannabe models who can't get work. They decide to put on a "hot" costume, parade around a group of boys notorious for being outcasts that don't get attention from girls, and feel like a celebrity. They're a "6" in the "real world", but when they put on a Batman shirt and head to the local fandom convention du jour, they instantly become a "9." (Peacock, 2012a)

On the surface, this allusion to the character Seven of Nine seems apt, as the character was introduced as a (successful) ratings gambit in Season 3 of *Star Trek: Voyager*; she was portrayed by beauty queen Jeri Ryan (who knew nothing of *Star Trek*) and outfitted in a widely commented-on skintight catsuit (Winslow, 1998).

The greater irony is that the character Seven of Nine herself was in a double bind: She was a human who had been assimilated by the Borg, but who later wrestled with recovering her own humanity. She was neither Borg nor human. Similarly, many women geeks face a double bind with respect to how they are received. "Science geek and costumer" Emily Finke (2013) wrote about the "slut shaming and concern trolling" she experienced while cosplaying a classic *Star Trek* minidress:

Women who, at one end of the spectrum, put too much effort into their looks, whether in costume or not, are ostracized. Women at the other end of the spectrum, who don't meet the standards of nerdy attractiveness set by the menfolk, are ignored entirely. If you don't fit that happy medium of "kinda hot, but not hot enough that you know you don't have to sleep with me," you're either a non-entity, or a walking Barbie and treated as such.

Peacock's (2012a) "6 of 9" obviously referenced the practice of rating women's attractiveness. In a somewhat bitter-sounding turn, Peacock complained that such a woman seeks "the attention of guys she wouldn't give the time of day on the street." Peacock implicitly positions himself as the arbiter of women's geekiness *and* attractiveness. "Flaunt it if you got it—and if you're a geek, male or female, and you're strikingly handsome or stunningly beautiful, and you cosplay as a handsome or beautiful character, more power to us all. Hot geeks are hot." Yet it seems that women who are reasonably attractive (to Peacock's standards) but not geeky enough (to his standards) are "poachers": "They're a pox on our culture." Peacock (2012b, 2012c) did eventually apologize for and moderate some of his statements; he also attempted to defend Tony Harris.

Harris is a comic book artist who took to Facebook to (crudely) express his concern about a loss of attention, especially on behalf of the artists and writers who built the comic scene. Although some women "love and read Comics," they were exceptions to the rule. Consequently, creators like Harris were losing the attention of the comic and mainstream press to the "COSPLAY-Chiks," the "posers who are sad, needy fakers who use up all my air at Cons." Like Peacock, Harris doubted these women would give male geeks "the fucking time of day" outside of conventions. And Harris took the judgmental tone further, complaining that, although these women were "quasi" or "Con hot" ("average on an everyday basis"), they only received attention at conventions because many of the men were shy virgins lacking confidence, and the women were "almost completely Naked in public." In Bourdieusian terms, their erotic capital was more valuable in geekdom than in the mainstream. Harris concluded that these men "are being preyed on by YOU [attention seeking women]" (as cited in Johnston, 2012).

Others took issue with this position. Relationship blogger Dr. Nerdlove (2012) characterized Peacock's judgments as part of "the long-running attitude still prevalent in geek culture that women are allowed to partake in fandom and geek culture if and only if they fulfill specific criteria and even then, only if they participate in the pre-approved manners." Additionally, the concern about model "wannabes" and "attention addicts" who illegitimately seek (or "prey on") the attention of male geeks (whom they would otherwise reject) led Noah Berlatsky (2013) to conclude that "'Fake Geek Girls' paranoia is about male insecurity, not female duplicity."

In any case, this discourse reveals that the policing of some women as “fake” can be understood as a conflict over what is attended to (knowledge and attractiveness) and by whom (other geeks and even mainstream attention). Additionally, although this began as Tara Brown’s encouragement for women’s geeky enthusiasm, it quickly boomeranged into the broader scrutiny of women’s bodies and worth. The concerns of a minority were co-opted by the majority; in an androcentric culture, Brown’s original “please go away” devolved into the scrutiny of women by (seemingly embittered) men.

Slave Leia’s Metal Bikini: The Meaning of Attention

A well-known costume within *Star Wars* fandom is that of Slave Leia: a bikini-style outfit worn by Princess Leia while chained to the grotesque creature Jabba the Hut—a chain with which Leia eventually strangled Jabba. This outfit has been a popular cosplay and the subject of its own fan site and online store, *Leia’s Metal Bikini*. (This is the store that supplied Olivia Munn, characterized as a model-turned-geek by Peacock, for her own cosplay in 2007.) It was even referenced as the nerdy fantasy of the character Ross on the mainstream television show *Friends*. However, by 2010, the costume had become lewdly passé. In the following year, it became a joke: Kaley Cuoco (2011), an actress from the *Big Bang Theory*, appeared in a satirical “Nerd Public Service Announcement” warning that “every thirty seconds in this country a woman shows up to a sci-fi gathering as Slave Leia only to discover thousands of women dressed the same way”; these women needed to know that there were many other “sexy options” to choose from—ridiculing the presumption that women must be sexy in order to participate. Amusingly, in 2012, Felicia Day wore a Slave Leia apron in a 2012 cooking episode of her show *Geek & Sundry*.

Slave Leia was not only overplayed, she was suspect: The costume was from a popular (mainstream) fandom and prioritized sexiness over skill in its design and construction—since it could easily be purchased. Additionally, just as the concern about “real” geek women being discouraged by fakes boomeranged into the scrutiny of women’s attractiveness and bodies, the concern about Slave Leia became an exercise in judging women. Discussion focused on the intended and interpreted meaning of sexy costumes: Were they empowering or objectifying?

In the empowering camp, Olivia Waite (2011), “romance author, practicing feminist, [and] general-purpose nerd,” wrote “In Defense of Slave Leia.” She shared that “for me, Slave Leia and the gold bikini were life-changing” because “wearing that gold bikini does not mean: Here I am, a sexy toy for your amusement and gratification. To me, that gold bikini says: If you fuck with me, I will end you.” For Waite, “female sexuality can be a power as well as a commodity.” Similarly, Emily Finke (2013) decided that she would not let her nerdy excitement about her *Star Trek* minidress and “screen-accurate seams” be depressed by “women who want to make sure I know I look a little slutty” and men who quiz her via “every hot button of geek gatekeeping they can.” In these cases, women argue for a right to dress as they choose and to claim geek identity without the policing of others (Dempree, 2012). From this perspective, not only is the dress empowering, but so is wearing the costume in the face of such pressure. Similarly, some defenders of Finke argued one need not have an encyclopedic knowledge to play a character. One commenter thanked Finke for her essay, writing “The fear of being grilled on my knowledge has kept me from dressing up at Cons. (Like, I’m sorry I don’t have EVERY DOCTOR WHO EPISODE EVER MEMORIZED! JEEZ!)” (kwill255, as cited in Finke, 2013).

Even so, others found the objectifying origins of these costumes troubling and inescapable. In response to Finke's defense of her *Star Trek* costume, commenter Eridani wrote that "Most of the geek costumes for women originated directly from the male gaze."

When you are wearing it, you are a walking billboard stating "this is how the men want a geek girl to look" flashing over your head. And here you are, ardently defending your right to comply. That's the real rub here. You want to be free to wear things that were designed by men specifically to showcase women as sex objects, yet not be treated like a sex object. (Eridani, as cited in Finke, 2013)

Similarly, blogger Whiskeypants (2012) responded to Waite's (2011) defense of Slave Leia, noting that "Along with the 'Grrr, don't mess with me or I'll choke your blubbery ass' is 'I am a lap dog.' Along with 'I am a sexy object, covet me' is 'the smaller my outfit, the better I look, the more I am worth'." Some then likened this criticism to victim-blaming (Yog-Sothoth, as cited in Finke, 2013).

This sequence of arguments—from empowering, to objectifying, to victim blaming—is complicated and shows that breaking Slave Leia free from her bonds is not so easy, because she, and the women who play her, are trapped in a double bind. This was the conclusion arrived at by Ryan (2011), a male cosplayer and blogger for the Mad Art Lab site. In 2011, Ryan argued that women should not dress as Slave Leia because it was objectifying and pressured women who wanted "attention and acceptance" into doing the same or leaving the community. In February 2013, he revisited the topic after many conversations in person and online: "Who am I to say that they shouldn't be allowed to do that?" The crux of the issue was that,

on one hand we want a welcoming, healthy and supportive environment for everyone and at the same time we want people to be free to express themselves. Tied up in that is a massive popular media, body-image, slut-shaming, prude-shaming quagmire. Fuck it, I give up. Next topic.

Ryan, however, did not give up. The following week he posted photos of his "gender bent" (or *crossplay*) version of the costume, "Slave Leo."

This bit of humor allowed Ryan to extricate himself from the quagmire, but women remained in a bind. Finke (2013) noted that the options available to women were to be "ignored or objectified." As explained by "cosplay feminist" Courtney Stoker (2011): "Women aren't the problem, whether they crossplay [performing as a different gender] and eschew femininity altogether or they pull out the sexy Leia costume." The problem "isn't what women do, but a culture in which the only way that women can be recognized as a desirable part of the culture is when they participate by making themselves consumable sexy objects for geek men."

Finally, some challenged the *knowledge versus sexy* argument itself as a false dichotomy. Andrea Letamendi (2013), a "nerdy psychologist" writing at *The Mary Sue*, asked why attractiveness and knowledge are seen as mutually exclusive attributes (and why seeking attention is such a bad thing in the

first place). The unfortunate result of this dichotomy is that both women's attractiveness and knowledge end up being judged and characterized as "fake": "nothing seems more damaging to a women than the simultaneous attack on both her body and her brain" (Letamendi, 2013).

This discourse about cosplay demonstrates that identity and boundary policing is contingent on the construction and interpretation of meaning. In this case, meaning is dependent on the intentions and interpretation of costumes, especially those that initially arose in objectifying contexts. This conversation also shows that the legitimacy of women's erotic capital (i.e., dressing "sexy") continues to be much debated. This is not a debate I can resolve here, but it is important to note that, when this debate takes place in a traditionally androcentric culture, what began as a concern about women's objectification often rebounds on women.

Redefining Geekdom

Although the FGG discourse provides a useful case for understanding identity and boundary policing, there is no simple solution for those women being ignored and/or objectified. Yet the community did offer some responses, as hinted at by Tara Brown (2012) when she wrote of women "who genuinely like their hobby or interest and document what they are doing to help others, not garner attention." Here we see a notion of geekiness that is predicated on documenting and helping others rather than on "defining yourself as the knower . . . [by defining] others as those who do not know" (Berlatsky, 2013). Indeed, one of the more heartening responses to the FGG discourse was people's recognition that vital subcultures benefit from new members, who, by definition, are not yet supergeeks. Geeks (regardless of their gender or purported attractiveness) have to start somewhere. Writing in response to Brown, social media journalist Leigh Alexander (2012) wrote, "Curiosity about other societies and people, and a desire to be included, is a perfectly valid reason to adopt or espouse a new hobby." When people do so, they naturally want to be liked and fit in: "This does not make them 'fake.' It makes them human. It's normal. Everyone, whether they will admit it or not, secretly wants to be liked."

In response to Joe Peacock (2012a), science fiction author John Scalzi (2012) declared "I outrank you as Speaker for the Geeks." He wrote that geekdom is best characterized by sharing:

Many people believe geekdom is defined by a love of a thing, but I think—and my experience of geekdom bears on this thinking—that the true sign of a geek is a delight in sharing a thing. It's the major difference between a geek and a hipster, you know: When a hipster sees someone else grooving on the thing they love, their reaction is to say "Oh, crap, now the wrong people like the thing I love." When a geek sees someone else grooving on the thing they love, their reaction is to say "ZOMG YOU LOVE WHAT I LOVE COME WITH ME AND LET US LOVE IT TOGETHER." Any jerk can love a thing. It's the sharing that makes geekdom awesome.

This part of the FGG discourse reveals an attempt to contest the traditional coding of what it means to be geek. Rather than a category based on one's knowledge of trivia or rejection of the mainstream, it can be based on a love of sharing. In effect, this is a manifestation of a long-standing

difference between geeks who hoard their knowledge—and lord it over others—and those who openly share it (Reagle 2015).

Although I conclude my recounting of this discourse on a progressive turn, this is not to say that the notion of sharing is now the dominant understanding of geekiness. Nonetheless, this understanding can now be referenced in future “struggles” within the geek field (to use Bourdieu’s terminology). Moreover, it shows how subcultural boundaries can be shifted as part of the policing dynamic.

Conclusion

A critical dynamic within the geek field is attention. Geeks enthusiastically pay attention to certain things that they deem worthy of their interest (e.g., *Star Trek*), learning (e.g., knowing Klingon), and money (e.g., to spend on collectibles). Similarly, being paid *attention to* for one’s knowledge and skills (i.e., one’s cultural capital) can be coveted as inherently valuable and translated into other forms of capital, such as social status and economic gain. At the heart of the FGG discourse is a negotiation about the objects and exchange of attention. As noted by Busse (2013), the fact that a woman’s attention might be thought excessive or focused on the wrong thing (e.g., attention on a handsome young man in a film rather than a female character in an anime) is a scrutiny of where women place their attention. Conversely, the placement of men’s attention is often taken for granted: The gratuitous titillation (e.g., bouncing breasts and panty shots) of *fanservice* in anime and comics are so common as to be considered a staple of the genre (Anime News Network, 2015).

Even the depth and breadth of women’s knowledge of traditional geek topics can be challenged and declared unworthy. Above and beyond this, the FGG discourse reveals a fear that the attention traditionally accorded to knowledge is being supplanted by undue attention to women by virtue of their (relatively rare) gender and attractiveness in a traditionally androcentric (heteronormative) space. As Tara Brown (2012) wrote, these women have “figured out that guys will pay a lot of attention to them if they proclaim they are reading comics or playing video games.” For Brown, this discouraged and overshadowed genuine geek women. In the hands of others, this critique became a “simultaneous attack” on both the brains and bodies of women (Letamendi, 2013).

It is not surprising that a subculture polices claims about its membership (i.e., the affirmation of identity claims) and its boundaries (i.e., the positing of categorical contours). In this case, what are the contours of this thing called *geekdom*, and who is accepted within its bounds? Indeed, geekdom is actually constituted by these ongoing struggles. Some of those wrestling with geek identity are those who have found a home away from the alienation they experienced in the mainstream. It is a subculture in which enthusiasm, knowledge, and skill are appreciated and praised over good looks and attendant popularity.

Hence, the popularization of geekdom itself has caused a crisis, because the geekdom/mainstream boundary has become more porous. It is feared that newcomers arrive from the mainstream without having paid the same dues as the “old-timers.” Worse yet, some worry that newly arrived women attract attention by virtue of their (relatively rare) gender or attractiveness rather than their accumulation of knowledge and skill. Worst of all, the (sometimes coveted) attention of the

mainstream alighting on these newcomers as representatives of the field robs the old-timers of "air" and weakens the definition of the field's boundaries.

Although policing is often seen in the context of controversy, as a social process it is not necessarily detrimental. First, policing is inherent and unavoidable in social groups. Second, useful insights and redefinitions can emerge from the discourse about that policing, as happened in the fake geek girl discourse. Finally, if a subculture is losing its vitality to appropriation or commercialization, it should struggle with this issue. Similarly, the pigeonholing and objectification of women is problematic. Therefore, the FGG discourse was an important conversation to have.

What was confusing was the variety of interpretations different people brought to the discussion (e.g., a "slut-shaming, prude-shaming quagmire"). And what was troubling, but unsurprising, was how quickly a concern by a woman for women boomeranged into a bitter scrutiny of women by men. Although a discourse of policing can yield progressive redefinitions or boundary movement, minorities are likely to suffer disadvantage relative to the dominant cultural context, because the existing culture dominates the terms of the discourse and policing. In this traditionally androcentric context, the valuation of personal capital is likely to be gendered: Where and how women give and receive attention is scrutinized. Also, women encounter various double binds. They might be considered too geeky relative to the mainstream, but not geeky enough within geekdom. And within geekdom, women who wish to be accepted have to calibrate their "sexiness" between being received as "a non-entity or a walking Barbie" (Finke, 2013).

The fake geek girl case demonstrates how a subculture can be gendered, how identity and boundary policing interact (especially with respect to attention), and how the renegotiation of subcultural identity and boundaries are dominated by the existing culture. It also shows that it is possible for a more progressive understanding to arise out of such a process (as confusing as it may be), though this is not without some costs to minority members of the community. These insights may be of use in the (many) other discourses about women entering historically male-dominated subcultures.

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