Analyzing the Change in the Perception of Geek Culture

A. Research Questions

For my project, I examined how there has been a change in the perception of nerds and geeks in the recent turn of the century and how this altered perception came about amongst students in high school, where social groups are a focus of their life. In order to conduct my research, I was guided by the following questions:

1. What is the operational definition of a nerd and a geek?
2. For what reasons have aspects of "geek" culture become mainstream in the United States?  
    A. Is it the result of a shift in the stereotype?  
    B. Have the amount of nerds/geeks increased in this generation?
3. Where is "geek" culture more prevalent? To whom is the term "nerd" more associated?
4. How does mass media influence the way people perceive those labeled as "nerd" or "geek"?

B. Hypothesis

Based solely on my experience in life and my access to the student environment in my highschool, I will find come the end of my research that the rising popularity of "geek" culture is a result of the stereotype changing. People nowadays attribute different characteristics to a nerd or a geek making that person more accepted and praised rather than socially isolated and mocked. The reason the stereotype changed was a result of the lifestyle that arose come the twenty-first century, in which youth began appreciating what was once rejected such as types of clothing or certain hobbies. Another conclusion I assume will be reached is that a majority of high school students who don't self-identify as a nerd or geek will find themselves entertained by things they view as either nerdy or geeky.

C. Methodology

Data was collected primarily by means of research, a survey and an interview. There were 52 participants who took the online survey which was administered online. The survey was spread via social media and by the experimenter. Those who took the survey were within the age ranges of 10 to 24+ with the hopes of administering to a population that lived during this "change". In addition to their age, their academic standard was accounted for. Those who took the survey remained anonymous and random with hopes of receiving a random sample of the desired population. The interview was conducted within school and in person. Along with the survey and the interview, statistics, articles and lectures were used to support my findings.

D. Survey Question

**1. What is your age range?**

- 10-13  
- 14-16  
- 17-19  
- 20-23  
- 24+  
  
**2. What would you consider yourself academically?**  
- I'm a regular student  
- I'm a regular student who takes APs  
- I'm an Advanced student  
- I'm an Advanced student who takes APs  
- I'm not in high school anymore  
- I haven't been in high school for a while  
  
**3. Would you self-identify as a nerd/geek?**  
- Um...no.  
- Yeah, I am pretty nerdy.  
- I do tend to geek out.  
- Why choose? I'm both!  
- I attribute it to others, mostly as an insult  
  
**4. When you think of a nerd who better fits this image?**  
Ernie: This guy has it all! Thick, round glasses, plaid shirt, khakis to his navel. He's president of the Robotics and Chess club however he needs to improve his grades in some classes.  
  
Beth: She's the valedictorian and has a flawless GPA. She loves her Anatomy class and enjoys partying on the weekends.  
  
**5. When you think of a geek who better fits this image?**

Carmen: Call of Duty and comic books. If you want a girl who can do it both Carmen is it! She loves PC gaming and tends to spend entire weekends binge watching shows. However she can't remember the last time she took a shower...  
  
Joshua: He's a pretty chill dude who is the captain his high school's basketball team. You can catch him at the movies watching the latest Marvel film. Just don't mention it to him once he gets going he can't stop!  
  
**6. What traits would you associate with a nerd/geek? (Choose all that apply)**  
- Intelligent  
- Introverted  
- Pretentious   
- Competitive  
- Cooperative  
- Determined   
- Obsessive   
- Outgoing  
  
**7. Do you find entertainment in any of the following? (Choose all that apply)**  
- Comics (DC/Marvel)  
- Anime  
- Science fiction/ Fantasy  
- PC Gaming/ any other form  
- DC/Marvel films   
- TV Shows (ex: Game of Thrones, Breaking Bad)  
- Dystopian films (Hunger Games, Divergent)  
- None of the above  
  
**8. How do people usually react to your interest in the above? (1 being extremely positive and 4 being extremely negative)**  
1\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ 2\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ 3\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ 4\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ N/A\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  
  
**9. What got you interested in what you checked above?**  
- Social Media  
- My friends/my family  
- I have always been interested in stuff like that  
- N/A  
- Other (please specify)  
  
**10. Would you see films like "Captain America: Civil War" or go to events like Comic-con?**  
- No I am not into stuff like that.  
- Yes, they are really popular now.  
- Yes, I have always loved stuff like that.  
- No that stuff is a bit too geeky for me.

E. Interview Questions

1. Do you believe that there has been a shift in the stereotype concerning nerds and geeks over the years? Or has there been an increase in confidence of those who are perceived as such?
2. When compared to those who consider themselves as a nerd, geeks feel more comfortable with their label. Do you think this is applicable to present day?
3. What is your opinion concerning the drive to produce MCU and DC films in the recent years? Is it due to popularity? Is it motivated by the money?
4. How does our culture tend to treat nerds and geeks? To what extent are they praised or punished?
5. What are some factors that could have lead to this appreciation?
6. Could it have been a dissolution of social barriers that has lead to this change?

F. Sample Group

For this project a survey containing 10 questions was administered online. Of the 52 surveys fortunately not many questions were skipped only 2 of the participants chose not to record their age. Out of the 50 participants who did respond, 33 were between the ages of 14-16 and 13 were in the range of 17 and 19. By recording the those particular characteristics about the participants, I hoped to gain an opinion amongst students of a different academic status as well. A majority of the participants to who took the survey considered themselves to be advanced students who took APs (36 out of the 52) and only seven of the participants considered themselves to be regular students. As a result of the academic status of the participants, the data derived from the survey is slightly skewed.

For the interview portion of my data collection, I conducted one interview. The sample size was quite small and intentionally limited to one person as my purpose of the interview was to gain insight from someone who is knowledgeable about the subject and could provide well thought out responses. The interviewee was a white male who was over the age of 24 and considered himself to be a geek.

G. Results and Analysis

Question #1: What is your age range?

* 33/52 participants are in the age range of 14-16 (66%)
* Only 1 participant was within the 10-13 age range (2%)
* 13/52 participants of are in the age range of 17-19 (26%)
* None of the participants are within the age range of 20-23
* However 3/52 participants are over the age of 24 (6%)

The purpose of this question as stated above was to see how participants of specific age cohorts felt concerning the stereotype. This question was purely for the purpose of seeing how the influence of age range had an effect of the results that the survey concluded and there was a significant influence. In the article, *5 Things Modern Kids Don’t Understand About Being A Nerd*, the author created a distinction amongst commonly associated geek hobbies and how within recent years that hobby that was once shamed or done in secret is now commonplace. But the main point that the author is trying to make was that there is a distinction in the attitude towards this behavior between the perceived “modern” generation and the kids of the 60s and 70s.

Question #2: What would you consider yourself academically?

* An overwhelming 36/52 participants considered themselves Advanced students who took APs (69%)
* Only 1/52 considered themselves just an Advanced student (2%)
* 7/52 participants were regular students (13%)
* 4/52 participants were regular students who took APs (7%)
* 1/52 participants were not in highschool anymore (possibly in college) (2%)
* But 3/52 participants had not been in high school for a while (possibles college graduates) (3%)

In examining the data that was collected, it seems that in addition to the age range being a mostly students between the ages of 14-16, a majority considered themselves to be AP students who took APs. This was another question with the sole intention of categorizing the results I received. In fact, most of the data received was favorable to nerds and geeks and it could be a function of the large amount Advanced AP students. The outgroup tends to hold the belief that Advanced AP students are nerds and geeks. This could function as a self-fulfilling prophecy, as others refer to them as nerd and geeks these Advanced AP students will attribute that label to themselves unconsciously.

Question #3: Would you self-identify as a nerd/geek?

* 23/52 participants identified as a nerd (44%)
* 10/52 participants identified as a geek (13%)
* 8/52 participants didn’t identify themselves with either label (15%)
* 7/52 participants identified with both labels (14%)
* 4/52 participants identified with neither but associated those labels negatively and as insults. (8%)

After examining the data that was collected, a majority of the students identified with at least of one of the labels (specifically nerd). Statistically, 87% of people prefer to be called a geek rather than a nerd, and in general 41% are comfortable with being called a geek. Only 24% are comfortable with being called a nerd however while 66% of millennials think being called a geek is a compliment. Although this research was not conducted to see how comfortable people feel with labels, whether or not participants comfortable self-identifying with these label shows how over time people felt more confident in being a nerd or geek.

Question #4: When you think of a nerd who better fits this image?

* 34/52 participants choose Ernie as representing their image of a nerd. (65%)
* Only 18/52 participants, on the other hand, choose Beth. (35%)

In providing scenarios that displayed the varying characteristics of a nerd, I was provided a view on what were the more important factors concerning each stereotype. In the case of the nerds, *Ernie* was more likely to physically fit the image people held of a nerd considering the clubs he was in and how he looked but *Beth* fit the academic standard that is commonly held for nerds. By allowing participants to chose who was more nerdy it allowed for the conclusion to be reached that in the case of a nerd, physical attributes outweighed educational. However in the geek v. nerd statistical data collection, nerds were considered to be extremely concerned with academics as that was their outstanding characteristic.

Question #5: When you think of a geek who better fits this image?

* 43/52 participants chose Carmen to represent their image of a geek. (83%)
* Only 9/52 participants chose Joshua. (17%)

After examining the data collected, it showed that concerning the stereotype of a geek there are certain factors that have a larger influence on someone attributing the label to others. In the case of the geeks, *Carmen* was more likely to be socially isolated and obsessed which fit the image that most held towards geeks. However despite the fact that *Joshua* too enjoyed “ geeking out”, him being captain of his high school basketball team was likely to influence participants to not choose him as opposed to Carmen. So in the case of geeks, how social and obsessive the person is determines whether or not the person is labeled a geek.

Question #6: What traits would you associate with a nerd/geek? (Choose all that apply)  
- Intelligent (86%)  
- Introverted (58%)  
- Pretentious (19%)  
- Competitive (56%)  
- Cooperative (15%)  
- Determined (54%)  
- Obsessive (60%)  
- Outgoing (10%)

After examining the data, it is clear the out of all the traits when describing a nerd/geek, people would use traits such as intelligent, introverted, competitive and obsessive. Out of the all traits that were selected the most contained a mixture of positives and negatives. This refers to looking-glass self (if the majority of Advanced AP students is considered) which is a theory that we form our self-images on the basis of what we perceive to be others’ views of us. In this situation, if nerds and geeks feel that others attribute these characteristics to them they will then, when asked to create a self-image, reflect those perceptions.

Question #7: Do you find entertainment in any of the following? (Choose all that apply)  
- Comics (DC/Marvel) (42%)  
- Anime (40%)  
- Science fiction/ Fantasy (65%)  
- PC Gaming/ any other form (48%)  
- DC/Marvel films (65%)  
- TV Shows (ex: Game of Thrones, Breaking Bad) (67%)  
- Dystopian films (Hunger Games, Divergent) (60%)  
- None of the above (only 8%)

After examining the data, participants felt most comfortable admitting they enjoyed TV Shows loosely associated with geek culture. Sci-fi/fantasy and the DC/Marvel films tied however surprisingly at 2nd place. Only 4 out of the 52 participants reported no interest in the following. So although 23% of participants did not self-identify with either label only 8% claimed no interest. This confirms my hypothesis that although people don’t identify with that label they can still enjoy geeky activities.

Question #8: How do people usually react to your interest in the above? (1 being extremely positive and 4 being extremely negative)

* The average reaction received by participants from others was 2.0
* Only 2/52 claimed that upon sharing their interests they receive a very extremely negative response.

In analyzing the information collected, the average reaction was 2.0 which meant that when people shared their “geeky’ interest other people gave a generally positive response. People don’t like to be the outlier or outcast in a group and tend to stay with the norm so they conform to what is approved. When these interests becoming more of the norm and less and less known as these isolating activities then people won’t feel as much of a social pressure to abandon these hobbies and change themselves to fit the social standard.

Question #9:What got you interested in what you checked above?  
- Social Media (19%)  
- My friends/family (29%)  
- I have always been interested in stuff like that (44%)  
- N/A (6%)  
- Other (please specify) (2%)

By analyzing the data, the information collected showed that a majority of participants were not influenced in their interest but rather it was a internal fascination. If it was not internally motivated then the passion was fostered by a family member mostly likely someone close and/or a friend. Social controls are the ways that society devises an encouragement to conform to norms. In this situation, the current norm is to watch these TV shows and films and to be well informed on the subject. To encourage this norm, society has made such interests mainstream and thus if you are not with the the current mainstream culture which now consists of geeky entertainment, you feel motivation to be involved.

Question #10: Would you see films like "Captain America: Civil War" or go to events like Comic-con?  
- No I am not into stuff like that. (31%)  
- Yes, they are really popular now. (19%)  
- Yes, I have always loved stuff like that. (48%)  
- No that stuff is a bit too geeky for me. (2%)

This question was quite repetitive looking back however it does reiterate the point that although people may claim to not be a geek they still find interest in geeky entertainment. The point of the last choice was to see if participants would not be interested in those activities because they were *too geeky* and in fact most chose just to simply say that they were not interested. Aspects of geek culture have now become part of the dominant culture (which is held by the majority in the United States) and are accepted. As a result it’s not the the “geekiness” of the activity that repels people but a general disinterest.

H. Interview Response

1. Do you believe that there has been a shift in this stereotype over the years? Or has there been an increase in confidence of those perceived?

“ I think there has been a correlation between geekdom and popularity. I also think for a while what was linked with geek culture was also linked to the unpopular. I also believe that people found out a way to sell and market what geeks liked to make it popular. As a result it has become a situation where it doesn’t matter whether you are a jock or the star in the musical, you can talk about Ironman and everyone will know what is going on. However *unpopular* people still have their clique things, like League of Legends. For the most part, no one on the football team will play that. So I think the traditional geek stereotype has branched out into different categories and that no one has changed or become more confident.” - Anonymous Interviewee

1. People usually prefer to be called a geek by others. Do you think this is a applicable to present day?

“I think that when people think of stereotypes like a nerd they think of someone with a pocket protector or their hair sticking up, someone with not many friends. On the other hand, when people think of a geek, they think of someone who may not be the smartest person but that person does their own thing and may be outside the box. So that probably why people feel more comfortable being called a geek.”- Anonymous Interviewee

1. What is your opinion concerning the drive to produce MCU and DC films in the recent years? Is it due to popularity? Is it motivated by the money?

“It has become more socially acceptable to create films like that now. Things that are nerdy and even shows like Big Ban Theory have been capitalized on. But all of this was a result of the growing popularity.”- Anonymous Interviewee

1. How does our culture tend to treat nerds and geeks? To what extent are they praised or punished?

“I think that if you are at the top of the top you will get praised but only because our culture can be very anti-intellectual, whereas if you are the kid in class who is always raising their hand to answer questions that is going to ostracize you and your peers will give you a hard time. So it is tough to be smart in America because people have this perception that you are always talking down to them or patronizing them while instead you should be praised for your intelligence. Nevertheless, people who are smart need to do a better job of, not marketing themselves, but making sure that they can help others understand things the way they do.”- Anonymous Interviewee

1. What are some factors that could have lead to this new found appreciation?

“I think that there is no true ‘appreciation’ and that we have to make it more acceptable to be smart, not just by praising the top of the top but by praising people who will do well. We have to reward innovation and creativity. By doing this, it will make us more accepting in general.”- Anonymous Interviewee

1. Could it have been a dissolution of social barriers that has lead to this change?

“As a result of the Internet, there has been a dissolution of social barriers. The lines have been blurred and people of different social groups are feeling more comfortable finding interest in other things. These ‘things” are most likely to be popularly accepted and discovered through the Internet. Even people are ascribing different label to themselves no longer are there just AP kids there are the ‘popular/ barrier crossing AP kids’ and ‘video game playing lacrosse players’.”- Anonymous Interviewee

I. Outside Sources

In addition to the research that I conducted, I found multiple articles supporting my topic and they generally all held the same views that in recent times labels such as "nerds" and "geeks" have become far more positive terms. In an article entitled "We're All Nerds Now", the author, Noam Cohen illustrates how people feel more comfortable being in touch with their geeky side and as a result this confidence is distinguishing the millennial generation from any other. Especially since everyone is doing things that were once considered nerdy such as being concerned about or carrying around electronics, and placing an emphasis on academics, specifically in the S.T.E.M. field. In the article the author claims that never before has the barrier between geek culture and what is mainstream been so “porous” and that what was once an isolated obsession has become everyone's obsession. The results of this change can be seen in how computer programmers and Silicon Valley workers are a necessity in our country. Noam Cohen himself is a technology and media writer for the New York Times.

J. Works Cited

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