

Made of Awesome:
The Online Culture of Nerdfighteria

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Abstract

This study examines the culture of Nerdfighteria, an online community, in order to discover the major beliefs and values of the community. Through an online questionnaire sent to members, certain themes emerged such as an acceptance of all members and nonmembers, 'decreasing world suck', fostering self-esteem and group pride, and enthusiasm. Geertz's cultural theory and Blumer's symbolic interactionism theory were used to examine the symbols of the culture. Goffman's theory of stigmatization was employed in order to analyze how the label of nerd affected the themes in the culture.

Academic research regarding online communities has become more prevalent over the last few years (William and Copes 2005). Previous research such as the work of Brent (2009) and William and Copes (2005) shows that research on stigmatized online communities is not new. Despite the increasing number of articles, more research still needs to be done in order to create a better understanding of these communities. Previous studies (William and Copes 2005, Brent 2009) fail to acknowledge what role stigmatization might play in how members define the culture. Other studies such as McKenna and Bargh's (1998) study focus on stigmatization in online communities but do not discuss the culture of these communities. This study will add to the existing literature by employing a theory of stigmatization to analyze the symbols and themes of the culture.

Baym (1998) argues that offline theory regarding culture can be used to analyze online communities because both online and offline communities rely on communication to achieve cultural consensus. This study will apply theories of offline culture to better understand the culture of Nerdfighteria. Geertz's (1973) work on culture, Blumer's (1969) work on symbolic interactionism, and Goffman's (1963) work on stigma will be used in order to analyze the symbols and meanings of the culture.

This study will examine the culture of an online community known as Nerdfighteria using theories of offline culture. The culture will be illuminated through a focus on shared beliefs, values, and symbols. This study will also discover how members of the community view the label of nerd and how this stigma shapes the beliefs of the culture.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Groups

It is first necessary to understand online groups as groups in general. An important aspect of communities is how the group identity is maintained. In Friedkin's (2004) article on group cohesion, he argues that members' attitudes towards the group and towards others in the group help maintain group cohesion. Group cohesion is also strengthened through an individual's length of membership, desire for membership, and participation in the group.

Polletta and Jasper (2001) define collective identities as a connection, whether it be cognitive, emotional, or moral, to the broader community. They note that collective identities are shared traits among members of a group where as personal identities are those aspects of a person that makes him or her unique. However, a collective identity can be part of one's personal identity. Collective identities rely on a sense of shared status, whether the shared status is real or imagined (Polletta and Jasper 2001). A group identity may be chosen by group members or placed on a group by outsiders. Either way, there is a sense of group pride.

Stigma

Group identities may be more difficult for stigmatized groups. Stigmas are a part of a person's identity which does not fit mainstream norms and is devalued by the mainstream population (McKenna and Bargh 1998). People with un-concealable identities such as the physically disabled are more likely to know others with a similar identity because of its visibility. Those with a concealable identity may have a harder time finding people similar to them because of their hesitation to reveal an embarrassing part of their identity. McKenna and Bargh's (1998) study found that people in online groups with concealable identities posted more often and considered feedback from fellow members to be more important compared to groups with an un-concealable identity or groups not associated with a stigma.

Kinney's (1993) article discusses how high school students have learned to cope with the label of nerd. Kinney notes that nerds do not fall into the usual categories of popular or delinquent. Nerds are typically viewed as intelligent but lacking certain social skills. Many participants stated that in middle school, a person was either popular or not, and being not popular was akin to not existing. However, in high school, Kinney found that many students became "normal" by adopting popular norms, dress, and activities. However, they did not necessarily become "popular." Those who didn't become "normal" or "popular" often found a group of friends with similar interests and status. These friendships gave the students self-confidence and a sense of belonging that many were lacking in middle school (Kinney 1993).

Kaplan and Liu (2001) argue that social movements may be a way for people with a negative social identity to cope with that identity. They performed a long term study on a group of people beginning in middle school. The seventh graders were asked questions about their perceived rejection or acceptance by their teachers and parents as well as their self-perceived lack of desirable attributes. In addition, they were asked questions about whether they had control in their lives and whether they believed their fellow students participated in social protests. Then when the subjects were in their 30s, they were asked about their participation in social movements. Those that perceived social rejection in middle school but felt they had a high amount of control over their lives or believed students were involved in protest movements were more likely to be involved in a social movement (Kaplan and Liu 2001). The authors speculated that people feel the need to have a positive social identity and working to change social norms is one way to achieve this.

Subcultures

People with a stigma or people who reject mainstream norms may turn to the internet, a subculture, or both for support. Anime is often considered a “nerdy” interest. Yet many fans of anime devote much time and energy to their passion (Brent 2009). They develop a deep emotional attachment and often re-interpret works of anime. Fans of anime also develop a strong sense of community with other anime fans because their activity is not as respected in “real life.” Anime fans believe the time they put into their interests are worth the stigmatization that may arise from being involved in such an activity (Brent 2009).

Similar to anime, those who belong to the subculture known as straightedge are often not understood by their peers. Williams and Copes (2005) conducted a study on an internet forum dedicated to straightedge culture in order to learn what values these members hold and how they create borders to define who is and is not straightedge. They found that members placed high value on their views against drugs, alcohol, and sexual promiscuity. Some members emphasized the need to belong to the music scene associated with the group, while other members believed that core values were more important than the music (William and Copes 2005). Some of the members on the forum did not consider themselves straightedge either because they didn’t like the label or because of their drug use, but other members were still willing to interact with them. In general, William and Copes (2005) found that members tended to view themselves as individuals making good decisions while they generalized and stereotyped outsiders.

Instead of focusing on one subculture, O’Connor (2004) looked at subcultures as a whole. He describes how previous work on youth subcultures focused on the link between social class and subcultures. Lower class youth may turn to subcultures because they cannot succeed under mainstream norms and seek to create their own norms. O’Connor (2004) notes that people from

different social classes have different experiences, and these experiences lead to different life choices. This might cause people in a certain social class to gravitate towards one subculture. O'Connor criticizes previous work that discusses subcultural capital as something to be strived for. Subcultural capital, such as knowing the right bands, might be prestigious in the subculture, but it is not useful in advancing one's status in mainstream society. O'Connor (2004) also writes that subcultures may be different in different countries because of different social norms, social classes, language, and access to resources like the internet.

The Internet and Communities

Wilson and Peterson (2002) state that people are involved in many communities both offline communities and online communities. People can create new identities for themselves online, just as people have always taken on new roles for different situations in offline interactions (Wilson and Peterson 2002). Wellman et al. (1996) state that online communication allows people to express themselves more freely than they would in "real life." People tend to reveal more about themselves online than in face-to-face conversations (Wellman et al. 1996).

Baym (1998) argues that it is appropriate to call online groups "communities" because of the interpersonal connections and the internal organization of the groups. Baym (1998) believes that offline cultural theories can be applied to online cultures because both are dependent upon communication as a method of achieving cultural consensus. She claims that culture is created and recreated through the interactions of pre-existing social structures and everyday interactions. Every interaction is dependent upon previously agreed upon symbols and their meanings. Members of a group use resources such as language to reach consensus on cultural meanings. These interactions of a community help to create and recreate social meaning.

Kahn and Kellner (2004) argue that online communities can have an effect not just on group members, but also the larger society. They note that internet campaigns are often grassroots movements that work to challenge the status quo. People turn to internet communities in order to form new social norms because they are dissatisfied with mainstream norms (Kahn and Keller 2004). People can use the internet to raise awareness about certain issues. This can be seen when a community “Google bombs,” which is when many people link to one article so that it will be at the top of a Google search. For example, people may link to a blog post that is critical of McDonald’s so it appears when people search for McDonalds.

People are not limited to blogs and forums to create online communities. YouTube is a video sharing website established in 2005. YouTube has made uploading and accessing of videos convenient and easy for the general public. Burgess and Green (2008) note that YouTube has become more than a video sharing site; it has become a social media site. Many YouTube users feel a sense of community with fellow YouTubers (Burgess and Green 2008). YouTube allows for interaction through the ability to upload, view, comment on, and post video responses to videos. According to Molyneaux et al. (2008) vlogs (video blogs) allow for more personal communication. Unlike most online communication, vloggers (people who create vlogs) can use nonverbal gestures and tone inflections to express themselves.

These articles have provided useful background information on previous studies regarding stigma and internet cultures. Some such as Williams and Copes (2005), Brent (2009), and McKenna and Bargh (1998) have discussed belonging to a stigmatized group on the internet. This study will be similar to William and Copes’ study on straight-edge culture because of its focus on group values and borders. However, this study will also be different because it will include a focus on stigma in the analysis and will examine a different online community.

THEORY

In *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), Geertz defines culture as a “pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life” (89). These shared meanings lead people in the same culture to share a similar worldview. The overall system of meaning helps to orient people and guide them through new situations. The symbols of a culture embody those aspects that are most important to the culture.

Geertz (1973) notes that in the past cultures had more clearly defined boundaries, mostly in the form of nation-states. However, this is no longer the case. There may be many different cultures within one country or cultures that cross nation-states’ borders. In addition to diversity of geographic location, LeVine (1993) acknowledges that people in a community can have individual beliefs and behaviors; however, there is still an agreement on what certain aspects of the culture represent. Without consensus of meaning among people in a group, communication is severely hindered.

Herbert Blumer (1969) builds on Geertz’s understanding of a culture by explaining how symbols in a community get their meaning. He argues that humans play an active role in the creation, maintenance, and reinterpretation of meaning. Blumer’s work on symbolic interactionism emphasizes the role of social interaction in the acquisition of meaning. Blumer notes that “human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them” (Blumer 1969: 2). Blumer refers to symbols as objects, which he then goes on to define as “anything that can be indicated or referred to” (Blumer 1969: 11). These objects can be physical, social, or abstract.

Blumer explains how meanings are acquired through the example of a gesture. A person who sees a gesture must first acknowledge the gesture or object he or she is acting towards. He or she must then select a meaning for the object or gesture and possibly transform the meaning. Once a meaning is chosen, the person then acts towards the object based on that meaning. Then other people who are present must restart the process by interpreting the new action. Thus it is through social interactions and the interlinking actions of others that meanings are defined. Additionally, how others have defined an object in the past may impact how a person chooses to redefine the object's meaning in a new situation. Since the creation of meaning is a process, objects have no fixed meaning. Each interaction with an object either reaffirms or alters the previous meaning. Some meanings and gestures seem to be stable while others are more fluid. It is through the active role of group members that a culture and its symbols are created and defined.

Blumer (1969) suggests that people can be symbols and objects as well. In *Stigma* (1963), Goffman discusses the meanings assigned to stigmatized people and groups. He begins his discussion of stigma by explaining the origins of the word. The ancient Greeks had "signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier" (Goffman 1963:1) Signs were cut in people's bodies to mark them as "a blemished person" (Goffman 1963:1). Today, a stigma still refers to a person with a physical or moral characteristic that is not desired or considered unusual.

Goffman (1963) discusses how people with undesirable traits have various strategies for dealing with their stigma. Some people go to extremes to try to remedy their fault. Others may believe their characteristics are normal despite others' perceptions. The stigma also affects the way people interact with other stigmatized people. Some people may try to distance themselves

from the group in attempt to disassociate themselves from the stigma. Others may find comfort and relationships in a stigmatized group.

Goffman argues that people in a stigmatized group are not a true group because they have no “capacity for collective action, nor a stable embracing pattern of mutual interaction” (Goffman 1963: 23). However, Goffman also notes that groups can have publications in which they define their ideologies, articulate their goals, and characterize both the in group and out group. It seems that shared goals, a similar worldview, and a definition of membership would make a stigmatized group a community, but it appears Goffman disagrees. Goffman also discusses how stigmatized groups have symbols, which seems to give further proof that they are an authentic community. According to Goffman certain symbols convey the presence of a stigma (1963:43). For example, a cane may indicate the person is blind or handcuffs may indicate the person is a convict. Additionally, a stigma symbol may mean something different to different groups. A normal person may view the stigma and the person negatively while a stigmatized person may take pride in the symbol.

This study will apply the previous theoretical work on culture and meanings to elucidate the nature of the community called Nerdfighteria. The study will use Geertz’s work to define the culture by focusing on shared values, meanings, and worldview of the community. Emphasis will be placed on Blumer’s symbolic interactionism and how community members define symbols. Additionally, questions will be asked to discover if members view themselves as part of a stigmatized group, and Goffman’s work on stigma will be used to interpret the results. By incorporating the work of multiple authors, this study hopes to provide a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of Nerdfighteria.

METHODOLOGY

The Sample

The study was conducted through questionnaires given to people who consider themselves Nerdfighters and were 18 years of age or older. A total of nine participants completed the questions. The researcher asked a group of Nerdfighters she knew with if they would be willing to participate in a survey. The resulting convenience sample yielded eight completed questionnaires. Later, two members of the first group were asked to inquire if any of their Nerdfighter friends would be willing to participate. This snowball sampling led to one additional participant.

The Survey

Participants who expressed interest in taking the survey were emailed information regarding the study and an informed consent document (See Appendix A for the form). The participant then typed his or her name at the bottom of the form and emailed it back. Only after the consent form had been received were participants emailed the questions.

The questionnaire consisted of approximately 20 open ended questions followed by demographic questions (see Appendix B for the questions). Some questions asked participants to define common expressions used in the community. Others ask them what beliefs and practices are considered important to the group. These questions hoped to expose the underlying meanings of symbols and values of the community. There were also questions regarding how participants felt they are perceived by outsiders to discover if members felt a sense of stigma.

Coding

Responses were coded using an open coding system. Responses to each question were given multiple codes. Similar codes were combined in larger themes. Those codes that appeared most frequently and with the strongest emotions were used to create the categories found in the *Findings* section.

Demographics

A total of nine people completed and sent back the questionnaire. The ages of participants ranged from 18 to 20 years old, with a mean of 19 years. Two of the respondents were 18, five were 19, and two were 20 years old. Six participants (67%) were female. Five respondents live in the United States, three in Canada, and one in England. Eight out of nine participants marked “some college” as their highest level of education. The mode amount of schooling for father/guardian 1 was High School/GED with 3 responses. The mode amount of schooling for mother/guardian 2 was 4 year bachelor’s degree with 4 responses. With so few respondents, no level of schooling for the guardians held the majority, and answers for both guardians ranged from high school to Master’s degree.

Background on Nerdfighteria

The Community known as Nerdfighteria was started by two brothers, John and Hank Green. John and Hank started vlogging back and forth to each on January 1st, 2007. It was eventually decided that the group that had been following Hank and John’s vlogs would be called Nerdfighters. Nerdfighters were defined by John as “a person who, instead of being made out of, like, bones and skin and tissue is made entirely of awesome” (nerdfighteria video wiki

2011). He also clarifies that Nerdfighters do not fight nerds but “are clearly pro-nerd” (nerdfighteria video wiki 2011). Nerdfighteria is the name of the community of Nerdfighters. Hank described Nerdfighteria as “basically, we just get together and try to do awesome things and have a good time and fight against World Suck” (nerdfighteria video wiki 2011). He then goes on to define world suck: “World Suck is kind of exactly what World Suck sounds like. It's hard to quantify exactly, but, you know, it's, like, the amount of suck in the world” (nerdfighteria video wiki 2011). There is also a strong sense of community and friendship among Nerdfighters. The community is open to everyone who wants to be a member. As John said, “If you wanna be a Nerdfighter, you ARE a Nerdfighter!” (nerdfighteria video wiki 2011). Those who are not part of the community are sometimes labeled decepticons. Today, Nerdfighteria is a thriving community, and Hank and John continue to post new videos every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Their YouTube channel, vlogbrothers, is the 129nd most subscribed to channel on YouTube (as of December 2011) with over 600,000 subscribers (vidstatsx 2011).

FINDINGS

Shared Values and Beliefs

One of the aspects that attracts people to the community is the belief that Nerdfighteria is full of similar people. As one participant wrote: “I realized that there are TONS of people just like me. I finally had a group of people who I related to.” Seven out of nine participants mentioned that Nerdfighteria was a place for people with similar interests, hobbies, values and/or beliefs could come together. One participant expressed her joy at finding others with similar interests: “I feel like I can act like myself, because it is a whole group of people who love youtube, Doctor Who and several other things my non-nerdfighter friends don't understand.”

Acceptance of All Members

Even though Nerdfighters share many similar “nerdy” interests, there is also a lot of room for diversity. One participant discussed how the community can be both diverse and share core values. When asked what values Nerdfighters hold she wrote:

“The importance of not forgetting to be awesome. (This generality is useful in addressing a mass audience of different faiths, political beliefs, nationalities – don’t forget to be awesome allows the community to encourage itself to do good things, without specifying what those good things might exactly be. One Nerdfighter might petition their congressman in favor of the “sanctity” of marriage – another might actively campaign for marriage equality.)”

Another participant wrote: “Values shift from person to person and it is the same within the community of Nerdfighteria. Majority of Nerdfighters, however, tend to be mutually accepting of all faiths, mannerisms, and beliefs.” When asked about what Nerdfighters should participate in, one person responded: “Whatever they like! I don’t think being a Nerdfighter is necessarily about ‘should’s and ‘shouldn’t’s – to me that would imply a kind of strict doctrine.” Even though Nerdfighters may have different beliefs and opinions, it seems that all of the Nerdfighters interviewed for this study shared the same belief in acceptance. In fact, it is this belief in acceptance that allows for the community to continue to thrive despite the diversity.

When asked whether it was necessary for a Nerdfighter to be a nerd, everyone responded that it was not necessary. However, many people noted that most, if not all, Nerdfighters are nerds. One respondent wrote: “Nerdfighters, as a rule, aren’t an exclusive group. (Although, being enthusiastic about Nerdfighting might, in fact, make one a nerd . . .).” Another participant replied:

“Nerdfighteria is so open to new people that even this qualification [being a nerd] is rather unimportant. Nerdfighteria is for nerds, but not necessarily exclusively so. (To be honest, however, most people could find some bit of their person that qualifies as nerdy in some way, shape or form anyway. Depending on your definition, anyone could be a nerd; some just don’t know it yet.)”

While these respondents acknowledge that the group is open and accepting of people regardless of nerd status, he also expresses a belief that Nerdfighters are nerds. The second respondent believes that all people, not just Nerdfighters, have some nerd-like qualities. While the participants are stating their acceptance of diversity, they are also hinting that despite the diversity, there seems to be underlying commonalities.

Acceptance of Non-members

When asked how they felt about people outside of the community, there was very little sense of negativity towards outsiders. One participant expressed her belief that everyone is a Nerdfighter: “I think that the majority of decepticons [non-Nerdfighters] have some characteristics of Nerdfighters in them, they just don’t understand, or take the time to understand Nerdfighters enough to see that.” Another participant wrote: “I don’t understand why people who know what the community is about, and understand the ideas of it, would not choose to support it.” One respondent even offered a request for friendship to non-Nerdfighters:

“There are so many people that don’t even know that Nerdfighteria exists and that’s depressing to me. As for decepticons: What did we do to you to make you dislike us?? Is it because a lot of us don’t want to be “jocks”? Just open your heart to us. We’re quite a lovely bunch. Let’s be friends...maybe. You bring the cookies.”

This echoes the belief that all Nerdfighters share some commonalities. Some Nerdfighters also believe that this commonality extends to those outside of the community as well. While some participants expressed a desire for more people to become Nerdfighters, others acknowledge that it isn’t for everyone. Nerdfighters value an individual’s choice, as explained by one respondent: “Everyone has the right to believe in what they want to believe in, and I understand that not everyone is going to share the values and ideals presented through Nerdfighteria,”

When asked how non-members viewed the group, many participants discussed that outsiders probably didn't understand the community. When asked if these views affected their own view of the community, eight out of nine participants said that it did not affect their view or that they still had a positive view of the community. The other participant did not discuss how it affected her view of the community. This shows that while Nerdfighters are accepting of many views that does not necessarily mean they agree with all the opinions of others. It is understood that deciding to be a Nerdfighter is a personal choice, and that choice is to be respected.

Decreasing World Suck

Nerdfighters may be diverse, but they share core values such as acceptance and the desire to decrease world suck and increase world awesome. Decreasing world suck was defined by the participants as creating positive change in the world and decreasing negativity. Most participants noted that decreasing world suck is an important community value and group activity. One respondent wrote that she wished decreasing world suck played a bigger role in Nerdfighteria.

Acceptance and Decreasing World Suck

The importance of decreasing world suck is connected to the theme of acceptance. By accepting a diversity of opinions both within and outside of the group, members are able to decrease the negativity in the world. In response to how people felt about decepticons or people who are not Nerdfighters, many people made the distinction between decepticons and nonmembers. When this distinction was made, decepticons were defined as people who increase negativity in the world. These people were looked down upon. Nonmembers were often described as people who did not have negative feelings towards the community, whether they

consciously chose to be neutral or as a result of not knowing the community exists. As previously mentioned, while some participants wished that these people would join the community (and its goal of increasing positivity), others stated that as long as there was no negativity, they were fine with nonmembers.

By accepting diversity, Nerdfighters avoid fighting within the group, which would increase negativity. This goes for both members and non-members. While Nerdfighters do not need to agree on every issue, they respect every person's individual choices and opinions. It also allows Nerdfighters to take into account the various backgrounds of the members.

Fostering Self-Esteem and Group Pride

While a lot of energy is focused on increasing the positivity in the larger community, there is also a great deal of effort put into fostering positivity inside the community. Many of the answers received discussed the importance of accepting yourself for who you are. While there were many definitions given for DFTBA (Don't Forget To Be Awesome), they all focused on positivity. Many described DFTBA as a reminder that the individual and/or others are awesome the way they are. Others saw it as a broader reminder to decrease world suck and negativity. The following are some answers regarding to the importance of DFTBA:

“Don't Forget to be Awesome' is important because it's a gentle and wonderful reminder to everyone to continue rocking at life.”

“Sometimes people forget that they're worth something and they get down on themselves. This one little phrase makes them remember that they can be brilliant in every part of their life.”

“This phrase is a mantra carried among Nerdfighteria in order to keep moral[e] high and is a continuous reminder to be the best possible person you can”.

“Nerdfighters believe that EVERYONE is or can be awesome and that everyone has the potential to be something great.”

“DFTBA is a reminder to do good in the world and to others.”

“DFTBA embodies the true goal of Nerdfighteria: try your hardest to do something kind or awesome whenever you’re given the opportunity. It reminds us that being awesome, helping others, is rewarding in itself and often so simple, but easy to forget or lose sight of.”

The passion expressed in fostering individual confidence is also expressed through a strong sense of group pride. All of the respondents held very positive views of the community. This is natural given that they consider themselves members of the community. Many love the community so much they expressed a desire for others to join the community so that more people could have the same amazing experiences. The pride in the “nerdy” qualities of the group translates to a sense of pride in one’s own nerdiness. Also, pride in one’s individual nerdiness fosters a love for nerdiness in others. It is cycle that encourages one to be proud of oneself and the community.

Enthusiasm

This positivity towards all areas of life, especially the community and one’s own self-esteem is expressed in terms of passion and enthusiasm for life in general. Many respondents noted that people should be proud of themselves, their beliefs, and/or their activities. When asked to describe a nerd, many listed various things people could be a fan of (Doctor Who, Harry Potter, history, Wikipedia, YouTube, etc). This expression of love and pride manifests itself in passion and enthusiasm. If a person is going to enjoy something, they should take pride in that love and not be afraid to express it. Indeed, many people noted that it is important to be enthusiastic and passionate about things. One respondent described a nerd as “Someone who enjoys things with unironic enthusiasm.” Another person said that “to be made of awesome is to

appreciate the wonder of the world, to be unabashedly enthusiastic about it, and to seek to help others understand and appreciate this wonder...” Seven out of nine respondents described nerds as people who are enthusiastic about or enjoy things. All but one participant discussed the importance of passion and enthusiasm in at least one of the answers.

It should be noted that in one of the vlogbrother’s videos John defined a nerd as someone who is passionate about things. The following is John’s discussion of nerds and their passion:

“...nerds like us are allowed to be unironically enthusiastic about stuff. We don't have to be like, 'Oh yeah that purse is okay' or like, 'Yeah, I like that band's early stuff.' Nerds are allowed to *love* stuff, like jump-up-and-down-in-the-chair-can't-control-yourself-love it. Hank, when people call people nerds, mostly what they are saying is, 'You like stuff', which is just not a good insult at all, like 'You are too enthusiastic about the miracle of human consciousness'. “(nerdfighter video wiki 2011)

This particular quote is from a video from 2009. It cannot be determined if the participants were consciously aware that John discussed the idea of a passionate nerd or whether the participants came to this conclusion on their own. However, it still shows that many Nerdfighters are embracing this idea of enthusiasm and taking pride in being a nerd.

DISCUSSION

Kinney (1993) discussed how high school students learned to cope with the label of nerd by finding other people with similar interests. This appears to have happened with Nerdfighters. However, instead of relying upon similar people in a close geographic region, people today are able to turn to the internet to find similar people. While Nerdfighters are not “popular” they do manage to find acceptance and self-confidence with their chosen group of friends.

Kaplan and Liu (2001) found that people who perceived social rejection in middle school but felt they had control over their lives or believed other students were involved in protests were more likely to be involved in social movements. Nerdfighters seem to be aware that they are not

accepted by mainstream society, and there was a lot of interest in changing the values of the larger society. Kaplan and Liu suggested that participating in social movements may be a way to try to change social norms so as to make one's own social identity more acceptable. Fostering acceptance would help improve Nerdfighters' status. This is not to imply that Nerdfighters wish to decrease world suck solely for their own gain. It could be that because of their experience with rejection, they desire to make all people feel accepted.

One way Nerdfighters feel more accepted is through their shared values with others in the community. This is similar to the straight edge subculture studied by William and Copes (2005). Straight edge members emphasized their shared values as one of the main requirements for membership. As discussed in the *Findings* section, while Nerdfighters have many different views, they do share certain core views such as a respect for diversity and acceptance. The straight edge culture created a sense of community by stereotyping outsiders and viewing them as inferior. While Nerdfighters obviously viewed their group very highly, they were not negative towards outsiders. There was a dislike for people who created negativity, but there was not the same sense of hatred or superiority as with straight edge.

The shared values and beliefs of Nerdfighters are to be expected according to Geertz. Geertz (1973) describes culture as way for people to "communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life" (p. 89) which can lead people from one culture to have a similar worldview. This can be seen in Nerdfighteria. Although members may have differing opinions on some issues, certain values were very apparent upon analyzing the surveys. Participants expressed a desire for decreased negativity and increased acceptance and positivity in the world. They also shared the belief that all people should be proud of themselves and desired to cultivate a sense of pride in others. Geertz (1973) also discusses how symbols embody

those things that are most important to the culture. This study asked participants to define the meaning behind certain phrases such as ‘decrease world suck’, ‘made of awesome’, and ‘DFTBA’. These symbols and their meanings became major themes in the results.

Blumer (1969) discusses how the meanings of symbols are created through interactions. Because interactions determine meaning, meanings can be renegotiated and change over time. The data reflects the consensus and fluidity of meaning. There was a consensus that to decrease world suck meant to decrease negativity, though participants varied slightly in their explanation of what exactly this entailed. DFTBA was the most fluid symbol. Some participants saw it as a reminder to help others while others saw it as a reminder to see themselves and/or others in a positive light. While these explanations seem different, all explanations were based on a desire to decrease negativity and/or increase positivity in the world.

Blumer (1969) notes that symbols acquire and change their meaning through interactions. It is interesting that the symbol ‘DFTBA’ is used most frequently in interactions and this study found that it also had the most fluid meaning. Within Nerdfighteria, DFTBA is often used as a greeting and salutation. Nerdfighters also enjoy leaving the letters DFTBA in places where other Nerdfighter might find them. Because this symbol is used the most, it is constantly subjected to reinterpretation. The phrase’s constant use and the ambiguity of the word ‘awesome’ help to make the meaning very fluid. The ability of the phrase to mean many things to many people may also explain why it is used so frequently.

DFTBA is a symbol used to help Nerdfighters deal with the stigma of being a nerd. In order to determine if participants felt a sense of stigma, they were asked how they defined a nerd, if they considered themselves a nerd, how they felt other perceived the group, and whether the views of other affected their own views. A few participants mentioned that the term nerd has

negative connotations to others, but all seemed proud of the fact that they were a nerd. Some people acknowledged that others might not understand Nerdfighteria or find it strange but that it did not affect their own love for the community. This shows that members seemed aware that they were not part of the mainstream culture, but they did not seem to mind. Goffman (1963) acknowledges that people with a stigma may take pride in the stigma and choose to redefine the term. This seems to be the case with Nerdfighteria.

While Goffman (1963) wrote that stigmatized people could find acceptance and friendship with other stigmatized people, he did not believe that a stigmatized group could be considered a community. However, this research has shown that Nerdfighters are a community, and that this community is based on the idea of being a nerd. However, while Nerdfighteria may have its origins in a shared sense of stigma, it is much more than a group of stigmatized individuals. Goffman wrote that stigmatized groups have no “capacity for collective action, nor a stable embracing pattern of mutual interaction” (Goffman 1963: 23). However, Nerdfighters are working together to help improve the world and have their own set of values, symbols, and means of interacting. The creation of the internet has helped communities based on stigmas grow in terms of members and meaningful interactions. This has helped a geographically dispersed group overcome the limitations of distance to create a true community.

Geertz (1973) believed the way to study the culture of a community is through ethnography. While a true ethnography is not possible with an online community, one of the strengths of this study is that the researcher considers herself a Nerdfighter. It is through her own experience with the community that the researcher was able to know what questions to ask. Additionally, it hopefully led to more accurate interpretations of answers. The researcher was aware of certain phrases, their meanings, and how they are used. She was aware of what the

vlogbrothers discuss in their videos, which helped explained why certain themes emerged. The participants were aware that the researcher considered herself a Nerdfighter, which may have allayed fears that their answers may be misinterpreted or that the community would not be taken seriously.

While the fact that the researcher is a member of Nerdfighteria is beneficial, it is also a weakness. The researcher had to be careful not to read the answers through her own biased perspective of the community. Additionally, the researcher's own views affected the types of questions asked, which may have had an effect on the themes of the responses. However, the researcher still maintains that it is necessary for a researcher to be part of a group like Nerdfighteria in order to know what questions to ask and understand the context of the answers. It is possible that her own membership may have made participants feel the need to discuss only the positive aspects of the community. However, the strong theme of pride and excitement regarding the community seems to imply that the members were genuinely enthusiastic about Nerdfighteria.

Another weakness of this study is that the sample of respondents was not a representative sample but rather a convenient snowball sample. All the participants were between the ages of 18 to 20, and most were in college. There is no data on the demographics of the group, but from the researcher's participation in the group, it appears that Nerdfighters tend to be fairly young (ages 14-26) and are most likely students. It would have been nice to have a sample with more varied ages. However, those under age 18 were not allowed to participate in the study due to concerns about ensuring parental approval. Nerdfighters under age 18 make up a decent portion of members, and it would have been interesting to see if their answers differed from older members.

Despite drawbacks to the methodology, there were also advantages to using a questionnaire. With a written questionnaire, participants have time to think through their answers and arrange their answers in a coherent manner. Also, because this is an online community, most members are familiar with communicating through text-based means on the internet. However, no questionnaire can capture all aspects of a culture. As Williams (1995) points out, simplifying a culture to a single signifying system fails to account for more subtle aspects of the culture. At the same time, without signifying systems, accurately describing a culture is impossible. While this study does not pretend to be a comprehensive guide to Nerdfighteria, it does hope to illuminate certain major themes of the community.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that the community known as Nerdfighteria is a true culture with shared symbols and meanings. The beliefs are expressed through symbols in the form of phrases such as ‘made of awesome’, ‘decrease world suck’, and ‘DFTBA.’ Nerdfighters share the belief that all people, including themselves, other Nerdfighters, and non-Nerdfighters should be confident and proud of who they are. There is a desire among members to help people throughout the world through various means in order to decrease world suck. Members acknowledged that others may not have the same positive view of the group or its members. It is because of this social stigma, not despite the stigma, that Nerdfighters are more accepting of themselves and others and wish to make the world a more positive place.

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Appendix A. Statement of Consent

INFORMED CONSENT

You are being asked to participate in a study of Nerdfighteria. This research hopes to illuminate the culture of Nerdfighteria through a survey about the values and beliefs of Nerdfighters. The survey contains open ended questions in which you are asked to write a short response. There are no right or wrong answers to the questions. I am interested in your perspective of the community. **You were selected for this survey because you have identified yourself as a Nerdfighter and are 18 years of age or older.**

The survey should take approximately 20-30 minutes.

It is not expected that you will experience any risks or discomfort as the result of this survey. The survey will ask you to analyze your feelings and attitudes towards Nerdfighteria. This may lead to a deeper appreciation for the community, a more analytic perspective on the community, and/or a greater appreciation of the community.

All answers will be kept confidential. Only the researcher and her advisor will know your name. Please note, your answers may be quoted in the final report; however, no identifying information will be included with the quote(s). Participants will be given another name in the paper so as to protect their identity. You may print a copy of this consent form for your records.

If you have any questions about the research or your rights as a participant, feel free to contact the researcher (Caroline Proulx) at cproul01@saintmarys.edu or her faculty advisor, Mary Ann Kanieski at kanieski@saintmarys.edu.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may choose to discontinue at any time. You do not have to answer all questions. You may be asked follow up questions for elaboration or clarification after turning in your answers. Your participation in the follow up questions is also voluntary. There will be no penalty for deciding not to participate. Those who choose not to participate at any time during the process will not be included in the final report and any information they have provided will be deleted.

.....

By typing my name below and returning this form, I hereby give my consent to participate as a volunteer in this study. I have been informed of the general nature and purpose of the study and the expected duration of my participation. I have been told of the extent to which confidentiality of the records identifying me will be maintained. I have been instructed whom to contact for answers to my questions about this exercise. I understand that my participation is voluntary, that refusal to participate will involve no penalty, and that I may discontinue my participation at any time.

Name

Date

Appendix B: Questionnaire

1. Do you consider yourself a Nerdfighter? (Yes or No)
2. What led you to realize/decide you were a Nerdfighter?
3. How would you describe a nerd?
4. Do you consider yourself a nerd? Why?
5. Do you have to be a nerd to be a Nerdfighter?
6. What is a Nerdfighter?
7. What is Nerdfighteria?
8. What values do Nerdfighters hold?
9. What do Nerdfighters believe in?
10. What does it mean to be made of awesome?
11. Explain the importance of DFTBA.
12. What activities should Nerdfighters participate in?
13. Do you know any other Nerdfighters through the internet or in real life?
14. How important is the community to Nerdfighteria? Why?

15. What are your thoughts on deceptions or people who are not part of the Nerdfighter community?
16. How do you think others view Nerdfighteria? Does this affect your view of the community?
17. What roles does decreasing world suck play in the community?
18. Is there anything else you would like to add about Nerdfighters, Nerdfighteria, or anything else?

Demographics

How old are you?

What is your gender?

What country do you reside in?

What is the highest education level you have achieved?

- a. Some school
- b. HS graduate/GED
- c. Some college
- d. 2 year Associate's Degree
- e. 4 year Bachelor's Degree
- f. Master's Degree
- g. Doctoral Degree
- h. Professional Degree (MD, JD)
- i. Choose Not to Answer

What is the highest level of education achieved by your father/guardian 1?

- a. Some school
- b. HS graduate/GED
- c. Some college
- d. 2 year Associate's Degree
- e. 4 year Bachelor's Degree
- f. Master's Degree
- g. Doctoral Degree
- h. Professional Degree (MD, JD)
- i. Choose Not to Answer

What is the highest level of education achieved by your mother/guardian 2?

- a. Some school
- b. HS graduate/GED
- c. Some college
- d. 2 year Associates Degree
- e. 4 year Bachelor's Degree
- f. Master's Degree
- g. Doctoral Degree
- h. Professional Degree (MD, JD)
- i. Choose Not to Answer