

A Matrix of Marginalization: LGBT and Queer Women's Experiences in Nerd Spaces

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Tonya A. Maynard

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This thesis titled

A Matrix of Marginalization: LGBT and Queer Women's Experiences in Nerd Spaces

by

TONYA A. MAYNARD

has been approved for

the Department of Sociology and Anthropology

and the College of Arts and Sciences by

Christine Mattley

Associate Professor of Sociology and Anthropology

Robert Frank

Dean, College of Arts and Sciences

ABSTRACT

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A Matrix of Marginalization: LGBT and Queer Women's Experiences in Nerd Spaces

Director of Thesis: Christine Mattley

Through ethnographic research methods, this thesis investigates the lived experience of self-identified LGBT or queer women in nerd and geek cultural spaces. Collecting interview data from fan convention attendees, the researcher found five common themes central to the experiences of her respondents. Those themes were safety and sexuality, discrimination and prejudice based on sexual orientation and gender, community and welcoming, gender expression, and the importance of visibility and representation to marginalized social groups. Summarily, the researcher found that negative aspects of nerd and geek cultural spaces tend toward sexism rather than homophobia and transphobia, though both forms of exclusion are present in the subculture. These negative aspects of fan conventions in particular are endured by LGBT women in favor of the strong sense of community and acceptance by those who share their stigmatized statuses. Those interviewed also offered suggestions for creating a safer, more inclusive environment for all who may attend fan conventions.

DEDICATION

To my Yoda, Dr. Scott Douthat. Thank you for everything. There are no words.

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INTRODUCTION

“Jinkies!” Velma Dinkley has always been a favorite character of mine. Frequently seen with a huge magnifying glass in hand, Velma is the resident lady genius of Mystery, Inc., pal to Fred Jones, Norville “Shaggy” Rogers, Daphne Blake, and everyone’s favorite Great Dane, Scooby Doo. I have spent many hours, comically large magnifying glass in hand, roaming convention floors dressed as the iconic female sleuth. While in costume as Velma, I have met some of the kindest, most interesting, most creative people I know; I’ve made some of my fondest memories and formed friendships that have lasted for years. I have also been harassed and assaulted while in that costume, to the point where I hesitated to wear it for fear of making myself a target for abuse.

“If the Mystery Machine’s a-rockin’, don’t come a-knockin!” A man dressed as Khal Drogo from HBO’s *Game of Thrones* shouted at me from across a row of vendor booths, rolling his hips and raising his eyebrows suggestively. “She was my first girl-crush...” The fresh faced girl next to me at a panel about Anime and Religion blushed, straightening the skirt of her Sailor Scout costume across her stocking-clad legs. She was dressed as Ami Mizuno, another 90’s cartoon nerdy girl, and group genius on *Sailor Moon*. Velma has long served as a queer nerd icon, and the range of interactions I’ve had while embodying her in convention halls over the last six years serve to illustrate a queer woman’s experiences in nerd spaces very well. To those in the know, who make the personal connection with certain characters, a home-away-from home can be found at fan conventions, but the price of entry, the obstacles in the way, can be daunting for some.

In this thesis, you will find a review of the literature regarding the intersection of

womanhood, LGBT identity, and nerd subculture, an overview of the methods I used to study this intersection of the population and my rationale behind those specific methods, as well as a summary and analysis of data collected from one-on-one interviews with eight self-identified queer women who have a combined 66 years of lived experience in nerd cultural spaces, namely fan conventions. The common themes gleaned from these interviews, of safety and sexuality, sexism and homophobia, community bonds, gender expression, and visibility and representation, are considered and discussed at length.

Convention culture is a space of extreme experience, a rocket-fueled expression of geekery and fandom, and a pressure cooker for cultural phenomena, both supportive and discriminatory. These interviews show an increased support of LGBT people in con space, as compared to mainstream cultural experiences; they also show an increased awareness of, if not increased occurrence of, misogynistic attitudes and poor treatment of women, again, as compared to mainstream cultural spaces. When considering the intersection of queerness and womanhood in nerd-dom, con culture renders this group either invisible or fetishized. However, for those who are a part of it, the knowledge of its existence offers an experience of acceptance and belonging not felt anywhere else.

CHAPTER ONE: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Every year, in convention halls all around the nation, hundreds of thousands of adults gather, many in elaborate and expensive costumes, to celebrate their identity as nerds and the media about which they feel so passionate. While big-name conventions like San Diego Comic Con in California or DragonCon in Georgia attract media attention and have found more widespread notoriety in recent years with the popularity of shows like *The Big Bang Theory*, to the people who attend them, the conventions are more than just a weekend to enjoy panels and buy merchandise; they are a place in which nerds and geeks can present themselves without having to hide their love of things society deems childish or silly. Their presentations of self can shift, and while they don't talk about their love of *Star Trek* or *Sailor Moon* at home, they can do more than just talk at conventions - they can gush, they can debate, and they can intimately discuss their fan theories with hundreds of other people who share the same interests. They have a freedom of expression and a sense of acceptance that they find nowhere else.

In this literature review, I will discuss how the identity of an individual is built and maintained, how their presentation of self is managed, and how that presentation changes in the face of stigma, whether that person is LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) or a member of convention culture. While LGBT culture is no stranger to academic discourse and nerds/geeks (which are defined and redefined variably in several academic bodies of literature) are more and more often being studied as an established subcultural identity, it is rare to see a researcher address the intersection of these populations and rarer still to focus on only women as another intersectional filter. I

believe that it is important to look at the way in which these two distinct subcultures interact and how the women who consider themselves a part of both groups are treated within that subcultural space - the fan convention.

Dramaturgy and Stigma

Much of what makes a convention so enticing to members of fandom (people who have love for a particular franchise or series) is that their fanatical interest in comic books, television shows, or movies, is no longer something they have to hide or be ashamed of; at conventions, their identity as a nerd is respected and the stigma of their passion, experienced in everyday life, is removed. Goffman's works regarding dramaturgy and stigma are two of his most well-known and are the theoretical basis for some modern discourse on members of subcultures' attitudes and actions. Dramaturgy refers to the understanding of social interactions as similar to actors performing roles (Goffman 1973). Goffman used terms like front stage, backstage, offstage, and other theatrical jargon to refer to the ways in which individuals present themselves. He proposed that people display their 'self' as whatever aspects are most acceptable or palatable for a given interaction with another person. While some people may choose the path of least resistance, Orne argued that some LGBT individuals will purposefully perform their 'self' as one that is disagreeable for the interaction in order to forward a political idea or to educate people with whom they're interacting on LGBT or interpersonal issues (2013). Identities that deviate from the norm, or groups of people who are not accepted as meeting the ideals of society at large (be it through clothing choice, physical disability, sexual orientation, etc.), are considered stigmatized; this

means that those people may face alienation, oppression, or ridicule at the hands of those Goffman refers to as ‘normals’ ([1959] 1973). According to Goffman, there are discredited stigmas, those that are visible and noticeable, and discreditable stigmas, those that are able to be hidden. Both nerd-related stigma and LGBT stigma are discreditable and can therefore be concealed if the individual chooses to do so (Bosson 2012). The discussion on whether or not to reveal a stigmatized identity is prevalent in much LGBT discourse, as ‘coming out’ and revealing yourself as LGBT is considered a major part of LGBT culture. Many LGBT people who come out face harmful backlash in the form of family and friends breaking ties, denial of rights that would be afforded to a straight or cisgender person, physical violence, etc. (King 2008). Similar, though often less extreme forms of backlash are experienced by members of nerd or geek subculture who reveal their identity to ‘normals’ (Bucholtz 1999; Kendall 1999; Morris 2000; Woo 2011).

Nerd Identity

“A subculture is a social subgroup distinguishable from mainstream culture by its non-normative values, beliefs, symbols, activities [...] Subcultures are rarely clearly delineated, closed groups rather, they are fluid networks constantly interacting and overlapping with other scenes and elements of popular culture.” (Haenfler, 2013) The stereotypical image of a nerd is a bespectacled, acne-ridden, white male in his early 30’s – he is obsessed with games and comic books, wears a pocket protector, and is overly literal or otherwise socially inept (Bucholtz, 2001; Ma’ayan, 2011; Varma, 2007). “Nerds are unpopular, weak, shy, and asexual” defined in contrast to the stereotypical jock. (Kendall, 2002) There is also a distinct sense of masculinity, whiteness, and

intellectualism that pervades this stereotype (Gosse, 2011; Hiramoto, 2010; Kunyosiying, 2012; Woo, 2012).

The rise of geek and nerd identity as a positive label rather than a negative one in recent years is often attributed to the boom in the business sector of information technology and computing beginning in the 1980's (Wright, 1996). The prestige and financial security afforded to those who took part in this technological revolution completely reshaped how the world conceptualized 'nerds' (Tocci, 2009; Christopher, 2016; Woo, 2012). Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft, and other Silicon Valley style tech entrepreneurs were suddenly enviable. For the purposes of this research, I will not devote efforts to clearly defining what a 'nerd' is, but rather simply establish that they are a living and thriving subculture with their own distinct language, material culture, norms, and so on (Haenfler, 2013). Nerd is no longer such a dirty word, but for some a badge of honor and defiant pride.

The presence and visibility of female nerds has risen even within this marked overall increase in a societal acceptance of nerds as a whole (Simon, 2011). Images of women as nerds appear more and more often in shows like *The Big Bang Theory*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and *Arrow*, not to mention the ultimate female nerd - Hermione Granger of J.K. Rowling's best-selling book series *Harry Potter*. Nevertheless, women in nerd culture are often subject to gatekeeping – being asked obscure questions with the purpose being that the asker will exclude you or degrade you for not knowing the answer. They are also condescended to by men in a phenomenon known as mansplaining, sometimes even having their own professional lives explained to them (Doyle, 2014;

Christopher 2016). In March of 2016 Gail Simone, a comic book writer most famous for her work on the Marvel comics series Deadpool, tweeted a painfully ironic mansplaining instance in her life: “In the line to see Deadpool, a film where they mention me by name, a guy started explaining who Deadpool was to me.” These may be interpreted as gendered iterations of ‘the obligation to know’, a marker of subcultural credibility (Reagle, 2014). Kendall (1999) supports Reagle’s implications that a passive-aggressive version of toxic masculinity pervades the image of nerds in popular culture, perpetuated in actuality by identity policing through gatekeeping.

The Gendered Atmosphere of Nerd Culture

I find it important, at this point, to discuss the relevant literature in regard to sexualized gendered atmosphere at fan conventions specifically. In Joseph Reagle’s discussion of empowerment versus objectification for women in fandom, he addresses the ‘double-binds’ that women face within the subculture: That they must be sexy, but not so sexy as to be unattainable; that they are obligated to present themselves as sexual objects via cosplay, but when they do, they are shamed as ‘slutty’ or ‘attention seeking whores’. If they wear a costume or t-shirt from a specific comic book or television show, they may be subjected to endless questioning to prove that they’re not ‘fake geek girls’; yet when they show interest in a particular series, like J.R.R. Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings trilogy, they are met with male fans complaining that “Orlando Bloom ruined everything” because now their sisters and mothers are interested in something that had once, in their minds, only been for men They assume that women are only interested in the series because of the handsome actors in the films. Women are often viewed as either

inauthentic scenery begging for men's validation or non-existent, as one blogger writes:

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. – Emily Finke (2013) as quoted in Reagle (2015).

In 2012, comic book artist Tony Harris, best known for working on the Justice Society of America and Iron Man, posted a Facebook rant that gave way to a worldwide discussion of “fake geek girls.” He claimed that women have no knowledge of comic books and only choose the skimpiest costumes they can find so that they can sexually tease men at conventions. A famous blogger and YouTube partner, albinwonderland, gave a 9-minute response to this allegation, a video which now has nearly one million views and is heralded as a rallying cry to geeky women and men everywhere to end the gatekeeping and denigration of women that is so regrettably enmeshed in nerd culture.

An excerpt from her video “Fake Geek Girls” (2012):

Newsflash: You're becoming the assholes who pushed your face into a locker in high school. You are hurting our community. And you do not represent the tons of men who are awesome and amazing and super supportive of women in this subculture.

These men paint themselves as sufferers, their empire crumbling at the hands of women, in an effect termed by Kunyosyng (2012) as “geek melodrama.” His theory of the over-sympathizing of otherwise unlikable white, male, geek characters as determined underdogs fighting for their corner of the world speaks to the entitled attitude seen by con-goers who are harassed and then told that they ‘asked for it’ based on the clothing they wore. He also discusses “geek rage”, or the belief that many men in geekdom hold

which implies that women and other minorities are given preferential treatment in the form of affirmative action and other equity based programs or ideologies. This idea is very similar to Michael Kimmel's notion of aggrieved entitlement (2013). Whereas he relates his concept of aggrieved entitlement to conservative, right-wing, white men, I would apply it here to white geek men, the 'gate keepers' - the ones who have enjoyed the most advantages in geekdom for the longest period of time, and who still hold the majority of impactful positions within the community, all the while claiming to be victims of the populations that they, themselves, marginalize.

This is where my study sits: at the very lived-in intersection of nerd culture, queer identity, and womanhood. The following data and my analysis represent a small, early step toward a deeper understanding of how LGBT women operate in nerd culture - how they are treated and what is expected of them, what they experience and how they affect others' experiences in the context of fan conventions specifically, and nerd subculture more widely. Researchers conducting further study in this area may want to pay special attention to the phenomenon of visibility and representation within fandom - interactions between media and lived experiences - as I (and my respondents) feel that this area is currently insufficiently explored.

Through my interactions with both my respondents individually and the convention community that I personally interacted with over the course of data collection, I have come to a clearer understanding of what it means to be a queer woman in a nerd subcultural space. This thesis, I hope, will serve to share that understanding with the academy at large, with researchers who are interested in the several identities

involved herein, and with those outside of academia. The research I have conducted and the experiences I and my respondents have shared serve to exceed the usual space allotted to us in an academic survey of a male-dominated subculture. As I filtered through the existing works on each subset of my interest (nerd culture, LGBT studies, and women), I was consistently confronted with the intersections of these subsets being delegated to a subheading, to an appendix, or even a footnote. When reading books on nerd culture I very easily found my way to the section on ‘Women’, much like Gen Con’s subcategory of events “Spousal Activities”; these make queer women at best an exotic minority, at worst an afterthought. My work is, to my knowledge, the first of its kind – one that addresses LGBT women in nerd spaces directly, not questioning if they exist, but rather, how.

CHAPTER TWO: METHODS

Data Collection

Identifying potential participants posed a challenge early in the stages of research planning. I was encouraged by several colleagues to set up a table in the merchant's room, or another area of the convention with heavy foot-traffic. I would have signage that indicated the type of convention attendee I was looking for, and I would explain the aims of my research to anyone who approached my table, with the hopeful outcome of gaining a participant. At first this method seemed like a viable option, but I considered what I would do as an attendee and decided against this method. Aside from the knowledge that this method would bias my sample in favor of extroverted and exceptionally open LGBTQ+ women, I worried that my table might become a target for intolerant and bigoted individuals. I did not want to put my prospective participants in any danger of being harassed, nor did I want to give sexist or homophobic attendees a chance to denigrate the population I was attempting to contact.

Time was also a factor. Knowing that attendees often plan their convention experience months in advance and spend large amounts of money on tickets for admission, hotel fees, travel costs, and costuming, I felt that I would be disrespectful in asking them to give up the leisure time they spent so much effort arranging for themselves. As a member of the community, I know that when I go to a convention, it may be the only one I can attend all year. That two or three day long convention may be my only fan experience that year, and as such, I do my best to enjoy the community, the panels, and cosplaying. I would not want to take an hour out to give someone an

interview. It is not uncommon for convention attendees to cut their normal sleep time in half just to attend late night panels, dances, game-playing events, or simply to socialize. Energy drinks, protein bars, pizza, and sugary imported Japanese snacks are the most common methods to keep an attendee on their feet for the 72 hour marathon of a weekend convention. Given that the social norm is to be on the convention floor as much as possible, if I had to conduct interviews face-to-face during convention hours I had no doubt I would have very few participants, if any at all.

Given my previous firsthand experiences at conventions, I opted to find nerdy LGBTQ+ women the way they had always found me: through convention participation and friendly discussion. I attended all of my thesis-research conventions wearing various modest cosplay outfits, a type of participant observation. By engaging in subcultural fashion, an aspect of material culture, I fit more naturally into the nerd subculture environment, and this made talking to other attendees easier in many cases. People complimented my cosplay's execution, my wig, makeup, props, or simply gushed their love for the character I was portraying (a common method of social bonding at conventions); through this connection I could easily turn the discussion to my professional involvement at the event.

When attending a convention, I would search out booths or areas that displayed LGBT-friendly merchandise, such as pride flags, art of queer couples from visual media, or safe space signage. When I saw a product that appealed to me I regularly struck up a conversation with the artist or vendor about it and used the talking point as a segue into discussing my research. If the vendor seemed interested I would give a little more

information, pausing and stepping aside if other customers/attendees had questions or wanted to make a purchase. Many vendors offered me their business cards to contact them for interviews and seemed enthusiastic about someone studying “their little corner of this world,” as one artist phrased it.

I have approached fellow convention attendees in this way for years to have casual conversations on the topics of gender, identity, and sexual orientation in fandom and it has never failed to result in enlightening conversation. Once I had introduced myself, if they were receptive, I gave them a consent form and exchanged contact information in order to conduct the interview remotely at a later date. While conducting my research for my thesis, I also made a particular effort to integrate myself into gaming sessions and panels, rather than just walking the convention sales and display floors or observing behavior in the halls of the conventions I attended; I did this to record a fuller experience for the sake of my recounting.

I did not operate from a script when speaking to convention attendees, but through repeated interaction with hundreds of potential participants over months of events, a pattern of conversation coalesced. After a conversational opener, usually a compliment or acknowledgement of a shared interest in something at hand, I would often ask how long they had been attending conventions. They would ask in return, and I would say “Casually for around 6 years, but right now attending conventions is actually my job! I’m a graduate student doing research for my Master’s thesis.” If the person seemed interested or asked directly, I would explain the aim of my research and sometimes self-disclose my status as a queer woman, depending on the perceived comfort level with the individual. I

spoke with any and all convention attendees I could.

In many instances when speaking with male attendees, I would be met with curious glances from people around me, seemingly wondering why I was talking to men about research on LGBT women's experiences. Overall, most men I talked to had something positive to contribute: a story about women at conventions, a woman they knew who would fit my research parameters, or some words of encouragement.

Interestingly, at one event in particular, I received a high number of sarcastic dismissals from men. While attending Gen Con - a board-game convention in Indianapolis, Indiana - I began to notice a general sense of dismissal from the men I spoke to. Having seen a trend beginning to form, I decided to tally how many men I spoke to and how many seemed to take my research seriously. (It may be relevant to mention here that I am a white female, around 5'4" in height, and was 23 years old at the time of data collection.) Approximately 75% of the men I spoke to during that weekend scoffed at the idea of queer women existing in the convention space.

One young man who looked to be in his early 20s said that I would have better luck finding unicorns, while an older gentleman laughed harshly and said "Yeah, good luck with that!" as I excused myself from our short conversation, telling him that I was off to look for more participants for my research (i.e. queer women). Gen Con had an older, more male demographic than the other events I attended, so this attitude did not surprise me, though it was admittedly unpleasant. Gen Con is a board game focused convention and the demographics of board game players tend to be more often male, older, and more conservative, while anime conventions tend to attract younger, more

liberal attendees, and a more balanced ratio of women to men. According to a marketing brochure for Gen Con 2015, their core audience consists mostly of “college-educated adult, male gamers, ages 18-45 with earnings \$50,000+” while their “key growth demographics”, or the populations they most want to attract, are “families, female gamers ages 20-35, and Hoosier gamers.” (Gen Con Sponsor Marketing Book, 2016)

Limitations

I would have liked to include a visual element to my data collection, for the sake of the cultural importance of costuming at conventions. However, given time constraints, I opted to omit any visual elements from my data collection process and relied on the descriptions provided by the members of my sample. Including conventions from other regions of the United States would be ideal if I were to attempt to replicate or continue my research in this subject area. Attending larger conventions like San Diego Comic Con, New York Comic Con, and DragonCon, each of which has an attendance rate over 100,000 every year, would be of interest and possibly have an impact on further study; attending LGBT-focused conventions would also be of interest for the sake of replication and expansion on my sample. Each convention has a unique demographic and including a wider variety in terms of location, theme, and scale would allow for more generalizability regarding any results.

Data Analysis

Initially, I became interested in studying this subset of the population because I am a member of this particular group, this specific intersection of gender, sexuality, and subculture; to my knowledge, queer women in nerd subcultural spaces was a group

previously unstudied and any unstudied group of people is a gap in the field of sociology. I aimed to fill that gap and to bring attention to this particular group so that further research can be encouraged. The stigma faced by such a minority group, I hypothesized, is damaging to the group as a whole and does not allow for their voices to be heard. When one thinks of a "nerd" they often picture a straight, white male in his mid-40s, and this stereotype is not "left at the door" when people come to conventions. Women in nerd spaces, especially queer women in my personal experience, are often ignored or silenced and the aim of my research is to better understand this specific intersection of the population. I hoped to bring to light the experiences of a minority population found within nerd subculture and in nerd spaces.

This study was done with the intention of better understanding the experiences of LGBT/queer women who participate in nerd and geek culture at conventions, comic shops, and other nerd spaces. By listening to this subset of the nerd community speak on their personal and group experiences, I intended to assist in raising their voices in the academic discussion of nerd subculture through ethnographic methods and in-depth interviewing.

Looking back on encounters that I have had in convention halls and other nerdy subcultural spaces as a self-identifying queer woman, I developed a short list of questions that I might ask LGBT women at conventions to get a scope of their particular experiences in this context. In total, I asked thirteen questions of each participant - the first half being short answer, the second half of them open-ended - allowing them to share as much of their viewpoint with me as possible rather than using only short, closed

questions (See Appendix A for full questionnaire).

My chosen method of data analysis for my collected interviews was analytic induction. First I did open coding: I located initial themes in respondent's statements by reading through the interview documents and surveying which phrases and themes appeared more than once. From there, I did axial coding, looking for instances in which connections between categories of themes and phrases are formed. Finally, I did selective coding to get a general overview of axial codes so that I could compare and contrast categories. I used the patterns that emerged to better understand the overall concerns of my participants, queer women at conventions. The overarching themes most prevalent were discrimination, social bonds, safety and sexuality, gender identity and expression, and representation in media. Within each of those, more nuanced messages coalesced, which I address in each chapter.

In chapter three I look at issues regarding safety and sexuality, divided into two sections: problems posed by my respondents, like sexualizing women, unwelcome sexual advances, and threats, and followed by solutions they suggested, like having safe spaces. Chapter four covers experiences of prejudice and discrimination, namely sexism and homophobia. Welcoming and community is the theme for chapter five, wherein I discuss my sample's considerations of the positive and negative aspects of social interactions at conventions. Gender and self-expression are the topic of chapter six, which includes stories of acceptance, body image issues, and a young transgender woman's first steps to public presentation as female. Finally, in chapter seven, I highlight the importance of representation to my sample, both in convention spaces and out.

Sample Characteristics

Once I made contact and received responses from all collected contacts all participants were given a pseudonym to protect their privacy. All interviews were conducted via email correspondence. I sent all interested respondents the questionnaire found in appendix A. Video conference or phone interviews were also offered, but all respondents opted for communicating by email. In total, I received completed interviews from eight women, ranging in age from 18 to 35. I conducted follow-up interviews with three respondents, also via email. All members of my sample identify as non-heterosexual, and all identify as female. Two of the eight identify as lesbians, two identify as queer, and the remaining four identify as bisexual. I interviewed one African American participant, the remainder identified as white or Caucasian. I did not ask respondents about socioeconomic status markers like education or income, as I believed it may have further limited interest in participation.

Half of my sample are merchants at conventions who make the majority of their earnings by selling their art or merchandise. One is an author who sells her works at conventions, as well as signing books and meeting fans. Another works as a game demonstrator/staff member at conventions, and still another competes in gaming tournaments and live-streams her play sessions as a way to earn money. All counted, seven of my eight respondents earn income in some way through convention attendance or nerd culture. When totaled, my sample has attended conventions for a collective 66 years - 72 if you were to include my 6 years as auto-ethnographic experience. See Appendix B for a chart of my sample's characteristics.

CHAPTER THREE: SAFETY AND SEXUALITY

Having done previous research on women and their experiences in cosplay, both in convention spaces and online, and given my own experiences at conventions while collecting data for this study, I anticipated a great deal of information regarding sexuality and safety would appear in my participants' responses. In interviews with eight women, the idea of linking the sexualizing of women at conventions with danger or disrespect appeared independently more than 40 times - women mentioned it with no prompting language or wording that might imply linking these two - this appeared the most frequently of all focus codes in my data. I considered sexualizing women in general, sexualizing female cosplayers, unwelcome sexual advances, and threats of violence to all fall under this category of safety/sexuality. Along with those negative aspects of this focus code, there were suggested solutions - in particular, the women I interviewed suggested that conventions might implement safe spaces to help alleviate issues with harassment.

Problems - "It's Dangerous to Go Alone, Take This."

The majority of the women I spoke to in the course of my research had a story about either them or someone they know being sexually harassed, assaulted, or similarly disrespected at conventions based on the way they dressed, looked, smiled, didn't smile - in other words, no matter how these women conducted themselves, they were regularly met with criticism in a way that men in the same setting don't experience. Bo tells a story about educating members of her friend group about the objectifying gaze after an encounter with a man who wouldn't stop staring, Carolyn talks about concealing her

sexual orientation because she experiences fetishization from men at conventions, and Willow and Clarke share stories of issues they've had with customers at conventions who just don't know when to give up and the kind of bind that puts them in as merchants.

Sexualizing Women

The objectification, sexualization, and fetishizing that women experience at conventions was a topic mentioned often in the course of my interviews. Bo, an artist and presenter, recalled a troublesome incident.

One other story I recall was a very deep discussion about the objectifying gaze. I caught a man [staring at a woman] with such desire it made me uncomfortable. After pointing it out to him his pride put him on the defense so he wasn't able to learn from the experience, however bringing it up made other friends in my group learn a little bit more about objectification. -Bo

Her response and the impact it had on her friends was significant. She confronted the man, who refused to acknowledge his poor behavior. While she could have let the issue end there, she opened up a discussion with her social group and took the opportunity to make this into a learning experience for everyone present. This approach resonates with several other respondents' suggestions that the convention community must take personal responsibility for the social climate at events, solving conflicts on their own and spreading awareness of these problems themselves. By using the relatively minor incident to educate her group on the male gaze and objectification, Bo may have had an impact on the people she was talking to and how they view that kind of behavior, despite the fact that the offending party defended his actions.

One interviewee expressed her frustration with the fetishizing of lesbians in geek culture: "I keep my queerness really, really buttoned down as a general rule because

lesbians are a huge fetish for geeks and it pisses me off. And if I complain about it, I get subjected to endless harangues [bothersome comments] about Willow and Tara and how they're proof that women are included and lesbians aren't sexualized and Whedon is the best feminist EVAR. Exaggerations actually not really mine." Carolyn goes to the effort of purposefully concealing her "queerness" in order to avoid being fetishized. If and when she does take an open approach to convention space, she has representation thrown in her face as a response to her critique of the subculture's fetishizing of her sexual orientation.

The notion that one prominent couple being shown on television counteracts all possible discrimination for queer women in the subculture is not unique to Carolyn's experience. When speaking with attendees about my research I regularly heard people bring up Willow Rosenberg and Tara Maclay, a lesbian couple featured on later seasons of the popular television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The couple shared the first network-televised lesbian kiss and are a ubiquitously recognized example of queer nerdy women. I find it particularly ironic that Carolyn's harassers used Willow and Tara as an example of the fair treatment of women, specifically lesbians, in nerd culture; Tara was violently killed in the sixth season of *Buffy*, leading Willow to murder another character in retribution, forever damaging her reputation for being 'one of the good guys' and ultimately destroying the innocence that is core to Willow's personality. This touches on two tropes in media, 'Bury Your Gays' a.k.a. 'Dead Lesbian Syndrome' and 'the Psycho Lesbian', which I will discuss at more length in my section on representation.

Admittedly, male attendees are not the sole purveyors of misogynistic or

offensive sexual comments about women at conventions. Jenny addressed her own problematic behaviors while discussing running game demonstrations at a tabletop board game convention:

[This] crowd was very “clean-cut”. Everyone had good hygiene, and no one laughed at my dirty jokes. Normally I would assume my jokes were just bad (which is most of the time). However, this time, I could sense I genuinely made people uncomfortable by “that’s what she said” comments. Normally, being a girl gets me a sort of “get-out-of-jail-free-card”. It didn’t really occur to me until this con that it’s probably better that it doesn’t.

Jenny’s position as a game demonstrator allows her a platform to lead and shape attendees’ and players’ experiences. She acts much like a teacher and a guide in this role, telling the players not just the rules of play, but also setting the tone of the session, acting as social moderator in discussion, and directing the flow of attention. If she decides to, she has the power to make a character more influential, she can encourage the group to take a certain path, she can espouse certain values through the themes she incorporates in her sessions, etc. As such, Jenny can have a profound effect on her players’ interactions, both with her and with one another. She openly acknowledges her privilege, while taking responsibility for her abuse of that privilege. Her self-critique is a great example of how many women in my sample would like the convention culture as a whole to operate. They understand that people will not be ‘perfect’ in regard to prejudices and judgements, but rather than have authoritarian rules set down by convention staff and administration that might stifle the community, most expressed a wish that the convention community would make self-led improvements to their treatment of LGBTQ+ and female members.

Jenny has further introspection about her dual role in the sexualization of women, as a woman who is attracted to other women.

You go to the “artist’s alley” and are confronted with tons of prints of your favorite characters represented as Maxim models with super powers. As a bi woman, I get drawn to these images because they are very attractive. My husband and I may awkwardly chuckle about some of this together. [...] And then there is that voice in the back of your head that causes you to fight yourself. Can you enjoy this stuff? Or is an insult? These characters are more than just the sum of their (body) parts, but is it okay for me to enjoy this and not perpetuate or approve of breaking these women down?

Jenny also presents the idea that women are sexualized differently than men in nerdy art and media. This double standard seems to frustrate her, “With the abundance of erotic imagery of women at the cons, there is very little of men. Booths or artists with these things are generally organized around erotic art. Like, scantily clad dudes are erotic, but ladies are art? For straight women, they go and giggle at imagery that is considered fan-fic or fan art and considered either a joke or a fetish. Meanwhile, we [queer women] are surrounded by mostly naked women and it’s normal.”

Erotic art and media, both canon and fan-created material, is readily available at the majority of conventions. This hyper-sexualization of female characters seems to be as old as the art forms themselves, be it television, comic books, or written content. Some con-goers apparently struggle with the line between fantasy and reality when milling about the convention floor surrounded by cosplayers embodying characters they know and *love*.

Sexualizing Cosplay

“I do notice that at anime conventions, the [sexualization] of females can get a little out of hand - a lot of the art and merch sold at these conventions can be very degraded, and female cosplayers are often treated as eye candy.” Cosima makes a clear connection here between the art and merchandise displayed within nerd and geek cultural

spaces and the way members of the community treat women in cosplay.

Lily attributes her lack of harassment to her modest choice of cosplay and the fandoms to which she belongs, while insinuating that other women have experienced these things and that their experiences are valid:

I PERSONALLY have not had anyone make a sexist remark toward me at a convention, but I also tend to be into fandoms more associated with women, so it's not like I'm into a bro-y fandom where my credibility as a nerd gets tested, because I tend to like cartoons and anime that is geared toward women anyway. I also have never dressed in a revealing manner at a cosplay, so I have never had the experience of being oogled at at a convention, either

Lily's involvement in "non-bro-y fandoms", she says, means that she doesn't experience as much (if any) gatekeeping, an exclusionary social practice, which I'll discuss in more detail in a later chapter on community. She also indicates that her choice to wear non-revealing cosplay has effectively deterred the male gaze – she directly relates wearing a revealing costume to being "oogled". Another participant, Carolyn, expressed a different viewpoint. I asked her during our interview if her status as a queer woman ever affected her convention experiences and, if so, how. This was her reply: "Absolutely. I don't allow myself to drink or be impaired in any way. I don't go to parties alone. I am constantly on alert because I get harassed at the most random and innocuous places." She reports that there is little rhyme or reason for her harassment.

Cosima says that this attitude toward women is a reflection of mainstream Western culture, that these ideas about women's bodies don't get left at the door when people enter the convention center. "As for sexualization at conventions, I think it's the same kind that you'd find in a clothing commercial or plastered outside of a Victoria's Secret. It's the clothing-bound male gaze-drawing kind of sexualization that pervades

casual conversations and marketing ploys. It's a big part of anime culture as a whole and it neatly parallels the same kind of communities that are rooted in Western culture - stuff like Pin-up girls bears a strong resemblance to idol figures.”

‘Idol culture’ is huge in Japan and it has gained global popularity over the last two decades. Much like the boy band craze of the 1990’s in the United States, where the U.S. has ‘pop stars’, Japan has ‘idols’. These are often real life entertainers who devote all of their time to providing world-class performances as well as upholding a certain image for themselves, be it the ‘rebel’, the ‘good girl/boy’ type, the ‘sporty’ type, etc. (think Spice Girls here). However, flesh and blood appeals less to the convention circuit than pixels. Vocaloids are idols in the traditional sense that they are singers, dancers, and general entertainers who often adhere to a personality archetype. Where they depart from the formula is their appearance. These performers, who net millions of dollars in sales for ‘live’ concerts every year, don’t actually exist. They are computer generated ‘holograms’, or projections, with computer generated voices and melodies (Johnson, 2012). The majority of Vocaloids are personified as female and Hatsune Miku takes the top spot with synth-pop melodies, long blue pigtails, and an idealized body literally designed for consumers to love.

As an apt example of the normalized objectification of women in convention space, a popular item sold at anime conventions are dakimakura. Translated directly, ‘daki-’ means “to embrace” and ‘-makura’ means “pillow”, i.e. hug-pillow, or sometimes love-pillow. These are similar in size and shape to body pillows in the West, usually measuring about 5 feet in length and about 1.5 feet wide. On some of these are printed

innocuous images of artistic designs featuring nature, cute animals, or geometric patterns. The grand majority, though, depict women and girls from popular intellectual properties in suggestive poses and varying stages of undress. Often one side will have a popular character clothed, while the other shows her topless or completely nude. Hatsune Miku is one of the most common characters printed on dakimakura (Galbraith & Schodt, 2013). While male images do sometimes appear on these pillows, it is much less common. In fact, dakimakura are colloquially referred to in the West as ‘waifu-pillows’, a play on the English word ‘wife’ said in a Japanese accent. The men who buy these products often brag about how their favorite character is the best in its’ franchise or the ‘best girl’ ever, treating them as pretend wives. This obsession with and fanaticism over fictional women is a phenomenon that has been widely documented in Japan and has translated to American fan culture in the last decade (Katayama, 2009).

While existing in close quarters with skilled cosplayers, it is easy to forget that the person you’re looking at isn’t really Chun-Li from Konami’s *Street Fighter*, but in actuality a college student and sales manager from Cleveland. It feels similar to meeting face-characters at Disney parks, and many cosplayers spend their day not just in costume, but also acting in character. “I have never experienced any mistreatment of the LGBT community. There were however some stories of women in cosplay being disrespected.”

-Bo

When discussing and handling issues of sexual harassment, convention policy and staff reactions can vary, according to Carolyn:

[...] it’s ranged, from the World Fantasy where a violent harasser was defended by the con staff to Emerald City Comic Con, which has clearly posted anti-

harassment signage and processes.

Cosima, though, made specific mention of how positive her interactions were with staff as a transgender woman: “As for being trans, the on-site community and staff are generally very accepting and kind. [...] As not just an attendee but a runner, I had to deal with staff and the stream. Staff was incredibly accommodating and willing to work with me to ensure my runs went smoothly and safely.” Her dealings with staff are particularly important to her because she competes in gaming tournaments and has a lot of contact with convention staffers compared to the average attendee. I’ll discuss Cosima’s experiences as a trans woman more in chapter six, a chapter on gender identity and expression.

While on my research outings I did not see any convention staff dealing with incidences of harassment, but I did see posters reminding attendees that ‘cosplay is not consent’; this is a phrase and a movement that has gained notoriety in the last few years. The movement developed in response to widespread harassment of female cosplayers.

The ‘cosplay is not consent’ initiative is an alternative to the usual example of women being expected to take measures to avoid being sexually victimized, further contributing to victim-blaming rhetoric. Instead of telling women to wear more ‘modest’ cosplay attire, the initiative encourages the convention community at large to respect women (and men, though there is a clear gendered focus towards women in the initiative, as in instances of harassment) regardless of how exposed or covered their body might be. The movement also addresses the ‘-play’ element of cosplay in that it discourages people from assuming that someone cosplaying as a normally very sexualized or promiscuous

character is giving permission for others to engage them in a sexual way.

For example, Harley Quinn is a very popular - and very sexualized - character originally appearing in the Detective Comics title *Batman* as the villainous sidekick and romantic partner of the Joker. Her character (for a great portion of her fictional existence) has been focused on by the fan community at large primarily in her romantic and sexual aspects. While the writing of her character and the costumes she's been given by the various artists who have contributed to her image are a fascinating aspect of nerd culture and history, and are ripe for sociological analysis, I'll refrain from doing so for the sake of brevity in this thesis. Instead, I'll say that her coy and flirtatious characterization is often given as justification by those who interact inappropriately with people cosplaying as Harley. It might be construed as an offshoot of the "look what she was wearing" or "she was asking for it" type of victim-blaming excuses that have been used to defend sexual harassment or outright assault for a very long time (Fletcher, Buchwald, and Roth, 1993/2005). An example of this type of behavior outside of convention space might be a park patron trying to kiss a Disney parks employee who is dressed as Princess Aurora, Sleeping Beauty. A kiss to wake her up is part of her fictional narrative, so someone may use that as an 'in' for initiating inappropriate behavior. Similar situations happen to cosplayers.

In my interview with Bo, I asked her what advice she would give to queer women attending their first convention and this was her reply: "Feel free to dress how ever you want without judgment. Remember your consent is VITAL." She offers advice that speaks loud and clear against the idea of women censoring their cosplay and clothing

choices for the sake of deterring would-be harassers. Bo makes and sells costumes, creates diverse art and comic books, and travels from convention to convention selling and giving panels full-time. She is a creator in the truest sense when looking at subcultural norms and values. Her only other advice to LGBTQ+ women was to make friends and give people compliments. While she has recognized that harassment of women in cosplay is a problem at conventions, she actively encourages women in attendance to express themselves. She makes her intent clear when she gives capitalized emphasis that the consent of women in any type of clothing is of the utmost importance.

Unwelcome or Aggressive Advances

Being approached by someone showing sexual or romantic interest can feel awkward in even the best of circumstances. One of my participants had multiple experiences with unwelcome and insistent advances from other attendees.

I was hit on by some drunk men in the hotel restaurant but they weren't too aggressive but still annoying, even when it was obvious me and my friends were gay. I wouldn't say this has anything to do with the convention or its staff, just the attendees fault. Other conventions I can't recall too bad of incidences regarding a con directly, mostly other attendees trying to hit on me [...]. -Clarke

She repeatedly recognizes that it is not the fault of the convention hall or the convention staff, but instead a misgiving of other con-goers - an issue with the culture, not the venue or organizers. I asked Clarke if her status as a lesbian affected her convention experiences personally. This is what she had to say:

Yes and no. Usually it doesn't come up however if men are being aggressive/pushy about hitting on me I will tell them that I have a girlfriend and usually they will awkwardly back off. As far as the con itself or staff I've never had issues, it's always other con attendees. -Clarke

Clarke couldn't be reached for further comment, however, her response indicates that her

self-identification as a gay woman wasn't always sufficient in deterring men being aggressive in their advances.

On Merchants' Catch-22

Most conventions have a space for vendors and artists to sell their goods, take commissions for art pieces, and interact with the community as a professional. Some of my participants are not just attendees, but also sellers at conventions. This gives them a unique 'between-worlds' liminal experience as both consumers and producers of the subculture in which they operate. Regardless of what they sell, these women spend the majority of their convention time behind their table or at their booth. This, they tell me, has led to some less-than-ideal exchanges.

A common complaint among artists I interviewed revolved around the unwelcome advances from potential customers at conventions. These women sell their art full-time, this is their profession. Convention halls are their offices and they seem to be experiencing sexual harassment on the job.

[I have] other general common complaints about presumptions/expectations/treatment based on being female. Comments about appearance, awkward/uncomfortable complements or flirtations (typically having to do with my being a "sexy curvy/large girl" or their attraction to large women), etc. – Willow

If the con-goer doesn't read the social cues well enough, or simply doesn't care about how their behavior is making the artist feel, their insistence can create an awkward situation:

I've been fortunate enough to not have too many stories to share in regards to my sexuality. I however know that many women have issues with being hit on on guys just not backing off. An issue I have as a seller is that I am usually trapped at my table so I have no means of excusing myself when a male customer is hitting

on me or making me uncomfortable. If it gets too much I will ask them to leave or just give short answers, luckily it usually doesn't get this bad. – Clarke

You can see how this Catch-22 might cause stress to these female merchants. As both the creator and the saleswoman, they must interact with their customers and provide customer service. This emotional labor can become more intense than usual when their potential clientele, the people whose money pays the merchants' bills, harass them. These women have been forced to choose between mitigating their discomfort by refusing a customer, or allowing the uncomfortable interaction to continue in order to make a sale. Whereas the average attendee usually has the option to disengage their pursuit or leave the area, these women must choose between their personal comfort and their livelihood.

I often worried that I, myself, was 'cornering' merchants at booths when I was searching for participants. At artists' booths in particular I would offer apologies for taking up their time, but I was unanimously met with sentiments that I was the least of their worries. I heard time and again of "skeezy" or "gross dudes" that would stand at their tables for an hour or more asking them invasive questions, inviting them to their hotel rooms, staring them down, or generally giving off "bad vibes" and making these women uncomfortable. As disturbing as I found this consensus, there was room to descend further.

Threats and Violence

The world is a dangerous place. There are whole fields of study dedicated to understanding and preventing violence against women. There are benefit concerts and safe houses and community programs and this is routinely not enough to address the issue. The world is a particularly dangerous place for transgender women. That is a truth

proven year after year as trans women continue to be widely victimized. In 2016, the Human Rights Campaign (2017) reported 21 hate-motivated murders of transgender individuals; 19 of those 21 were women. Only one of them lived past the age of 40.

During my research I was fortunate enough to speak to Cosima, a transgender woman of 18, who plays video games online as her main source of income and who has just begun her first year of university. She looks stunning in pink and has a sense of enthusiasm that is highly infectious. We met at a panel about the LGBT community in nerd culture. She seemed very eager to participate in my research and I was glad to have someone as excited about my project as I was. As a woman who spends a great deal of time on the internet, I have received my fair share of online abuse. Cosima, though, tells me about receiving death threats as though she's reading the weather.

As for GDQs, being gaming events, the treatment of women is never ideal - sexualization, nitpicking, obsessive fanship over particular individuals, et cetera. As for being trans, the on-site community and staff are generally very accepting and kind. However, the chat audience watching the event on the internet is anything but. I watched the recordings of my runs to find insults, slurs, and death threats being spit into the chat. There has been a long-running discussion in the community over what to do about twitch chat, but no solution has been reached.

Games Done Quick, or GDQs, are meetups that facilitate and internet broadcast (or stream) speed runs of video games. A speed run is an attempt to complete a game in the least amount of time possible. One may be racing in real time with other players, or racing the clock to beat a personal best or even world record. A single attempt is referred to as a run. The streaming videos of runs are most commonly hosted on Twitch.tv, a website mostly dedicated to live feeds of people playing video games, both speed runs and more casual play. While she's streaming a run, whether from her home computer or

at an event like GDQ, Cosima's viewers can write messages and send them to a chat window that is visible to all other people watching the stream. This chat is similar to the running lines at the bottom of a newscast, but consists of viewer commentary. It is in this "twitch chat" that Cosima receives these abusive messages. A large part of training for speed running is re-watching your old runs to find weaknesses in your technique upon which you can improve, much like a dancer or boxer. If Cosima wants to review her performance in order to train for future runs, she will be faced with discrimination and threats over and over.

Hostile play environments aren't just online. When competition heats up, what might usually manifest as a run-of-the-mill sore loser can quickly escalate to personal attacks, and prejudiced ideas can come to bear. Jenny relays one such incident:

One of the top tournament competitors in a game that one of my friends judges is trans female. Before she transitioned, she was also competitive. After she transitioned, she started dating one of the other competitors, even higher ranking than herself. The last world championship, her boyfriend barely took first against another player. That player proceeded to shit-talk after the tournament about game play at first. But then, the rant turned to how "and he's dating a fucking tranny! An ugly fucking tranny!" What struck me about this wasn't just the fact that dating a tranny was an insult, but that this particular tranny had been playing competitively in this community, with this individual for over a decade. Now, she no longer existed to them. She was just the tranny that her boyfriend was dating.

Solutions and Suggestions

"We're a lot better than we used to be, but it's a drop in the ocean." -Carolyn

There have been several issues laid out by my participants regarding the treatment of women at conventions: the sexualization, objectification, and fetishizing of women; unwelcome and unrelenting sexual advances from men; threats of violence and murder. To be subjected to this treatment seems to be a universal experience among my sample –

if they haven't experienced it personally, they know someone who has. These women have not just highlighted problems, however. They have hope for a better community and they have ideas on how to get from where they are to where they want the community to be.

Safe Spaces

Willow, Lana, and Jenny all expressed desire for a safe space for women and/or LGBTQ+ attendees at conventions. This term "safe space" has gotten quite a bit of press in recent years, usually regarding academic environments and free speech. Safe spaces, broadly defined, are areas set aside that promise to be a place where the indicated group (a specific race, gender, or orientation usually) can feel safe from harassment or discrimination and feel open to be themselves without fear of judgement. Safe spaces can also serve as a hub for meetups, topically appropriate panels, or education on sensitivity and tolerance, they suggest.

I would love to see at least an [It] Gets Better panel and a specific safe space at each con. I think that would help members of the community be themselves and realize how much of a support system is actually at conventions for them. -Lana

[...] As an exhibitor, I would like some guidance on how to make it a safe space for people. The same way SDCC made a big deal about how cosplay does not equal consent, that sort of PSA would be great for other things, like pronouns [...] I would like some guidance for all of us. -Jenny

I think the safe space and acceptance should be demanded of the fandom communities themselves, not specialty programming for LGBT attendees. -Willow

Willow is specific in her vision for a safe space: the entire convention. She doesn't want LGBT programming or panels, she would rather see a community that is open and accepting without singling out particular groups. She isn't alone in this, as

Jenny shares a similar sentiment: “I don’t want to see “the Lesbian Show in Hall C” on the event list. There are lesbians everywhere and I would like to see that represented in everything else we see.”

There's a couple different things I've seen that are great examples. At Wiscon I know they have a POC safe room that is only for women of color to attend. My partner went in a couple times just to see and she said how it was a really nice atmosphere to just relax and not have to worry about certain things. Similarly at other cons I've seen GLBT safe rooms, quiet rooms, and the like. They're usually marked with signs at the door and a couple volunteers at the front to make sure no issues arise. I think my favorite are safe space stickers which can be worn by attendees, staff, at tables, on doors. Stuff like that. Then there's a visible presence of safe places all around the con and even if someone doesn't take advantage of them, seeing them there gives them that extra support they might need to feel safe. – Lana

Advice for First-Timers

The last question in my interview was whether there was any advice they would like to give to a queer woman attending a convention for the first time. Several of the responses to this question dealt explicitly with gender, sexuality, and safety.

Lana insists that conventions aren’t dangerous, but proceeds to tell this hypothetical first-timer how to react when things go wrong. “Don’t go alone. Not because it’s dangerous, but because bringing a friend will expose you to a variety of events that you yourself might not consider going to. Don’t be afraid to talk to people, but be safe, of course, and take care of yourself. Just be yourself and have fun, this should be a safe place for everyone. And if, for some reason you discover it isn’t, tell someone so that it can become a safe place for you and everyone else.” Her advice is similar to Carolyn’s, telling the first-timer to speak out against situations that make her feel unsafe.

Cosima emphasizes a balance of safety and carefree self-expression in her advice. “Stay with a friend for security, but don’t be afraid to have fun! Conventions are about enjoying and expressing yourself and almost everyone you will meet and see at conventions are simply trying to do the same.”

Carolyn says that queer women should be unapologetically honest about their identity and speak out if they receive a negative response. She, like Lana and Cosima, tells the first-timer to be careful, implying that there is danger of discrimination at least, violence at worst. “Own it, and if anyone gives you grief, make noise about it. Talk to your people, make friends, and don’t let them drive you away. You’re awesome and we need you. But be careful, there’s still a long ways to go.”

Jenny’s plan involves subterfuge, likening the process of changing people’s minds about LGBTQ+ people and women to going behind enemy lines. She tells the first-timer to be brave, to be sneaky, to be a boss. If someone isn’t showing you respect, she says, befriend this person and earn their respect, thus making them change their opinion about you and (hopefully) people like you.

Don’t assume people are out to get you. Be brave and assume the best about everyone. If someone is being an idiot, assume it’s because they don’t know any better, at first at least. If you are going to stand up for yourself, do not attack other people or their character. Insulting someone just puts them on guard. If you want something to change, come up with a doable or actionable task or behavior change, and be peaceful and respectful when suggest it. We women get accused of being bitchy and emotional, and I know it is not true. I know and I’m sorry no one wants to listen to you. So you have to put your gamer-hat on and use [some fucking strategy]. DON’T be emotionable. DON’T be a Bitch! Be better than them. Be fucking sneaky and be a fucking boss. Worm your way in and break it up from the inside. Make them like you, and then get them to respect you.

Whether by the inclusion of safe spaces or subterfuge, the women in my sample

are not simply shrugging off the harassment they encounter in a place they feel just as entitled to as any other attendee. Being harassed on the job, having their orientation fetishized, and receiving death threats doesn't sufficiently deter them from inhabiting this space, rather it seems to have inspired them to tell others in a similar position to continue their struggle for visibility and a right to exist peacefully in their own community's physical cultural domain.

CHAPTER FOUR: PREJUDICE AND DISCRIMINATION

The topic presented most often after the connection between safety and sexuality by my respondents was discrimination. Discrimination and/or prejudice was something that every woman in my sample brought up in one form or another, though I did not directly address or call it by name in any question in their interviews. I received reports of sexism, transphobia, homophobia (with a particular emphasis on bisexuality), and many interviewees addressed these issues intersectionally.

Willow told me that the convention community's treatment of women and LGBT people has improved since she began attending 13 years ago. "I definitely feel like things have changed for the better in recent years. I still hear about overt/aggressive discrimination, but it seems less and less common as time goes on." Still, she warns first-time convention attendees that "[...] it's likely to be a place you can find more accepting people and other members of the LBGT community, but still expect some of the typical bullshit tailored for geek culture."

The Token Girl, or "Do a Saving Roll for Patience"

Like any minority, queer con-goers and women are sometimes tokenized, or made a part of an event or discussion as a defense against claims of exclusion by those in charge of a given operation. On tokenizing women/LGBT people, Carolyn had this to say: "There is seldom any LGBTQ programming at conventions, there is sometimes female-oriented programming, but very few of them move beyond the basic 'Hey, there are women/LGBT people in gaming! You should come look at the two or three of them we found and listen to them affirm that they do exist!' Which is a bleak way to look at it,

but that's what it feels like. Even better when you end up with straight white guys on panels about women and LGBTQ in geek spaces.”

Being the ‘token girl’ is something that I have personally experienced often throughout my years in nerd-dom. In fact, while researching at Gen Con in 2016, I joined a session of tabletop gaming for a role-playing game (RPG) that looked interesting. Tabletop RPGs are games that ask players to take on another persona for the sake of play. While playing the game, your character has certain abilities, both strengths and weaknesses, that you are then expected to act out in an improvisatory way while working with (or against) other players in the session with you. For example, if one is playing Dungeons and Dragons (a popular tabletop RPG that was first introduced in the 1970's) and has opted to play as an elf who is a wizard, they might act and speak differently than someone who is playing a human warrior. While you are not required to play a character who shares the same gender that you do, it is more common than ‘cross-playing’, a term that is also used when someone cosplays as a character that does not share the same gender identity as themselves.

That said, I arrived to the game session as last out of 9 players, and as I took my seat and made my introductions, I was handed a character card by an older gentleman who looked to be in his mid-60's. Often at convention sessions instead of creating your character from the ground up, you'll be given a pre-made character sheet containing all of the information you need to play, a predetermined personality, and predetermined stats and abilities to save time and allow for more play. There were several pre-fabs (pre-made character profiles) on the table, but there was only one female character, whose card was

given to me without question or comment; the character was a ranger, an aggressive warrior-type, not at all my usual choice, but as I was last to the table and a few minutes late, I quietly smiled and accepted the card. I was the only woman at the table, and clearly the youngest person in the room at 23 years. Only one other person at the table appeared to be under 30, with the majority present looking to be over 45. We began our game session, a murder mystery set in medieval France, in a fantasy world that incorporates magic - imagine a middle point between the worlds of *Lord of the Rings* and *Game of Thrones* and you might have a decent idea of the setting.

A woman had been mysteriously killed in the village my band of adventurers was traveling through and it was up to us to solve the case. I had never played a fighter-type in my years of RPG experience (I usually play caster-class characters who wield magic and stay on the fringes of combat), but after about an hour of sexist jokes and jabs, crass insinuations that the murdered woman probably “had it coming to her” or that maybe she had “slept with the wrong woman’s husband” or had “gotten knocked up by the wrong Lord” I felt the need, then, to be a bit more outspoken - as a character, of course. Notably, the vast majority of the degrading comments were made by two of the oldest men in attendance. Most of the table laughed along, but of the 8 present, excluding myself, those few who didn’t laugh and looked as uncomfortable as I was were the youngest in attendance, looking closer to 30 years old. Others in our session even openly acknowledged me as the ‘token girl’, calling each other’s characters by their given names, while simply referring to me as ‘the girl’ or ‘the woman in our group’ when talking to other characters in this fictional world.

When I had reached my threshold, I decided to have my character take the lead in the investigation and break away from the group (in-game). Unsurprisingly, those who hadn't been laughing at the decidedly misogynistic humor decided to join my investigative party. This meant that our characters didn't have to interact with the others as much. Hours passed with less casual misogyny, seemingly a result of the tensions that rose at the table when I initiated the party-split. The more logical and assertive I was in the game, the more respect I seemed to garner from the men who had initially clearly disregarded me. Suddenly they would listen to my character's suggestions and follow leads that I pointed them towards - things they hadn't done before I took the initiative to split our party and made my dissatisfaction with their behavior very clear. We solved the mystery and finished the encounter just in time with the end of our 4-hour session as it had been scheduled in the program. It turned out that the woman in the village had been murdered because she had learned a judge was being paid off by nobles one town over to look the other way on certain criminal cases that involved favorites of the nobility. She had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Sexism and Misogyny

Women experience gender-biased treatment quite often in convention spaces, past 'everyday' kinds of sexism. Nerd culture has long operated as a bit of a boys' club (Reagle, 2016), a space wherein the interests and operations are considered to belong primarily (if not exclusively) to men. This tendency, regularly enforced via gatekeeping and perpetuated by widespread mansplaining and condescension, is a feature of convention culture that I'll discuss further in chapter five, Community. Keeping those

themes in mind, below is a woman's first experience hosting a panel at a convention.

I would like to share my experience of hosting my first panel. It started with my curiosity about why breasts were so outrageous in anime. So I called it "Massive Mammaries of Anime." My subject was the feminist perspective of anime and Japanese culture with a major focus on the treatment of bodies. I don't think many people read the panel description, because the line to get into the room was insane! With a capacity of about 80, only one third got in. I started my panel with the question posed to the audience, "what is feminism?" The crowd got tense and the first person to answer was a Luigi [cosplayer] with smarty pants answer. After keeping my cool and taking some serious answers I broke down the truth and stripped off some stereotypes then moved on to applying it to Japan and anime. Usually people get a taste of the panel and slip out of the room if they are not interested, but only one group slipped out, but they gave me a thumbs up and a wave so it seemed they just had somewhere else to be. I had never seen this happen before in all my convention years!

I left the end of my panel open for discussion and a few people did leave then, but the conversation was lively! I was pleased to see that it was mostly men talking too! They kicked us out of the room for the next topic and there were still a group of about ten men that kept the discussion going in the hallway.[...] It felt good to feel like I have made an impact. I will be doing more of it again...hopefully soon. I am looking into more collaborations. -Bo

Bo was nervous that her panel wouldn't be well received, but was pleasantly surprised when a group of mostly men stayed after to discuss feminism! On its face, this story might paint the picture of a welcoming, open space in which ideas of equality and equity are encouraged. What stood out here, for me, was the surprise Bo showed at her audience's response. The entire story serves as a counterexample to the norm; she says that she had never seen so few people excuse themselves from a panel. Bo points out that the majority of her crowd likely misunderstood the subject matter of her panel before they entered - she implies that the majority of those in attendance, or even in the queue to enter her presentation room, believed her panel would be about breasts in a sexual context. (This wouldn't be out of the ordinary at all. Adult-themed panels about fan-service, sexual themes, or pornography are featured at the majority of anime and pop-

culture conventions I have attended, and this stayed true for the conventions I attended to conduct my thesis research. These panels usually occur after 9 PM and are 18+ entry only.) The fact that all but one small group of attendees stayed for the entire presentation was shocking for Bo, and what's more, the positive reception of her espousing of feminist ideology and the discussion that followed seemed to blow her away. Her amazement at the outcome of her panel is a powerful indicator of the norm in this subcultural space, and she would know these norms all too well - she is a full-time content creator and presenter at fan conventions.

I interviewed another convention circuit regular: Willow, a very talented visual artist. When I met her I was wandering the aisles in an artist's alley, an area inside the convention hall set aside for artists to display and sell their works. Her booth sported a wide range of merchandise from shirts and canvas bags, to art prints and embroidered patches. A sticker set themed around a popular animated series, *Steven Universe*, caught my eye; *Steven Universe* airs on Cartoon Network, a channel aimed at preteens, and is a notable favorite of the LGBTQ+ community. The show regularly features positive depictions of lesbian relationships and openly acknowledges gender identities outside of the gender binary. The show's content has been edited to remove homosexual references in several countries, including a controversial decision made by network executives in England to censor a homo-romantic encounter between two female-identified characters.

Willow and I easily struck up conversation about *Steven Universe* and within minutes she told me she would love to contribute to my research. She had so much to say about sexism in her workspace that she sent me a bulleted list. Willow told me about

several subtle ways that her gender has been considered a hindrance or detriment in her line of work, and exactly who insinuated those ideas.

As far as gender, I've never personally experienced anything major or overtly antagonizing; mostly presumptions/indirect insulting comments based on my being female.

Some common examples (pretty much always from cis men):

- comments about my art not being typical for a female artist/something they wouldn't expect from a female artist/general surprise that the work is mine, at times with the inference that they thought my husband made it [and not me]. My portfolio is somewhat polarized, half dark and gory, half cute and designy; it's frequently presumptions that I made the cute art while my husband made the darker work
- a general preference to talk to my husband instead of me even if my husband tries to include me/it's a subject I'm more knowledgeable about. There was a distinct decline in men's interest/willingness to interact with me as my husband transitioned from female to male
- "correcting" me on subjects I know a great deal about, even if their "correction" is blatantly wrong, or I seem more knowledgeable about the subject than they do. Sometimes, (particularly men) seem to make up facts about the game/series/etc we're talking about as if I won't know it's not a fact. If I correct them, or know something they didn't, sometimes they seem indignant about it, and/or their interest in our talk suddenly drops.
- other general common complaints about presumptions/expectations/treatment based on being female. Comments about appearance, awkward/uncomfortable complements or flirtations (typically having to do with my being a "sexy curvy/large girl" or their attraction to large women), etc.

The tendency for male attendees to disregard Willow in favor of her husband was something she had discussed with me in person, emphasizing the shift in respect and attention she received as a merchant before and after her husband transitioned from female to male. Similar sexist micro-aggressions plagued Jenny, who does demonstrations (demos) of games at conventions - "At BGG I was working as a demoer [...] I think this gave me some sort of authority to some people, but I definitely got some of the same crap I get every con. I had dudes look past me and ask me "who do I talk to

about...” whereas if they went up to one of the men at the booth, they never prefaced with that question. When I was explaining games to people, there was definitely a calibration period for several of my male players. Much rules lawyering and skepticism.” ‘Rules lawyering’ is overly technical and unnecessary argument by players who want to steer the game in their preferred direction, trying to justify their dodgy play-style or garner an advantage by intimidating the game moderator into fudging or modifying the rules.

Jenny also seemed to imply that women aren’t inherently respected in con spaces; she said that women have to establish respect before advocating for equality:

They want to talk, to complain, to commiserate about their guy problems. Regardless of any privilege, they have straight-dude problems for sure, and this is where they used to come for a peer-group. But now, I’m here. Before they know me, they are uncomfortable, and they talk to each other in whispers and go out to eat with each other. But something magical happens when they find out that I like the okay to talk to me about the same stuff they talk to each other about. All of a same things they do, including: women, whiskey, and games.

She continues,

All of a sudden, it’s sudden everyone breathes a sigh of relief. They feel, for a lack of a better word, safe. Granted, this safe-zone makes them feel comfortable enough to say some really stupid shit. The nice thing is, at least I’m there to hear it, and provide some peer criticism. Now, that sounds a little warm and fuzzy. The reality is, if I step up on a gender-based soap-box, I can very quickly alienate myself from some of them. However, if I put my soap box off to the side until these guys start to respect me and care about me, I can generally dust it off and start getting some use out of it without losing them. The same thing can happen while I’m demoing a game.

In her recounting of her interactions with men in gaming, Jenny told me that she has to work to get these men to respect her and care about her before advocating for her gender as a whole while it’s being attacked or belittled.

Transphobia

“I was (and continue to be, unfortunately) primarily harassed, insulted, and chastised for being transgender.” -Cosima

Just as Willow’s husband seemed to gain social status and authority as he transitioned from female to male, Jenny shared with me a story about how a competitive gamer lost status as she transitioned from male to female.

One of the top tournament competitors in a game that one of my friends judges is trans female. Before she transitioned, she was also competitive. After she transitioned, she started dating one of the other competitors, even higher ranking than herself. The last world championship, her boyfriend barely took first against another player. That player proceeded to shit-talk after the tournament about game play at first. But then, the rant turned to how “and he’s dating a fucking tranny! An ugly fucking tranny!” What struck me about this wasn’t just the fact that dating a tranny was an insult, but that this particular tranny had been playing competitively in this community, with this individual for over a decade. Now, she no longer existed to them. She was just the tranny that her boyfriend was dating.

This woman’s skill was no longer the most important thing about her in the subcultural space. In this instance, she was berated for her gender by a sore loser, displaying a troubling mix of sexism and transphobia.

In chapter three, *Safety and Sexuality*, you read about Cosima’s experiences with direct threats because of her status as a transgender woman. Here I will focus more on the microaggressions (casual disrespect based on personal bias or prejudice) and day-to-day transphobic remarks transgender convention attendees have received. Some remarks and interactions that might be interpreted as transphobic are made by those with the best of intentions, like an issue that Cosima raised regarding a fashion phenomenon called ‘brolita’.

[...] I do find that at conventions like Matsuri, Colossal, or anime cons in general,

the gender-expression acceptingness of the community leads to a problematic situation with trans people - ever heard the term "brolita"? When people are generally okay with anyone wearing anything no matter their gender, they forget that peoples' appearances - not their expressions - are not necessarily correlated with their genders. As such, trans people that are not far enough in transition to "pass naturally" are misgendered for the sake of acceptance. -Cosima

I contacted Cosima for a few follow up questions and asked that she define brolita more clearly, in her own words, for the sake of my readers. "Brolita is simply men dressing in lolita fashion. While this in and of itself is not a problem, and the acceptance of the brolita community into the wider anime/cosplay/convention community is, in my opinion, a very good thing, the problem it poses is that most con-goers are quick to assume someone who does not "pass" as female is a brolita rather than a transfeminine person." Lolita fashion is distinctly feminine - it consists mostly of doll-like clothing including petticoats and parasols, and thus it creates a social difficulty when trying to use mainstream measures of fashion as indicators of gender. An attendee in brolita fashion who is a cisgender male may appear similar to a transgender woman dressing in Lolita fashion if she has traces of facial hair, square facial features, or other mannerisms or features that might signal masculinity.

This misunderstanding occurs at non-anime conventions as well. Jenny related a story about how she repeatedly misgendered a player in a game she was demoing: "As opposed to being on the receiving end of judgement and confusion, this time I was on the giving one. I found myself accidentally applying multiple pronoun types during the demo to this individual before I got ahold of myself and stuck to using "they" as a default for everyone. My slip ups made both this individual and the others at the table noticeably uncomfortable. I never ascertained with certainty the nature of the cosplay, but I have

learned a valuable lesson. In the future, I will encourage my co-workers to stick to a neutral pronoun from the start to prevent this.” Being misgendered, being referred to by the wrong pronouns, can be terribly uncomfortable, as Jenny pointed out. Cosima took particular care during her interview to describe how little she has had issues with misgendering at conventions and gaming events, and the specific lack of transphobic behavior; gender expression will be discussed further in chapter five.

Some cisgender creators and members of the community, like Lana, take pride in their fair and equitable treatment of transgender attendees. She is a costume maker who said that making feminine costumes for transgender women is her favorite part of her involvement in convention culture and commerce. Other costumers had denied service to one trans woman because of her gender identity, and being able to create a princess gown and fulfill the request of this woman made a serious impact on Lana.

My favorite experience will always be the trans women who come up to me at conventions. Specifically because we run panels about cosplaying who you want and I’ve even had the honor of making a woman her first real princess dress, especially after she’d been turned away from several cosplay makers who refused to make the dress because she was a ‘man.’ I firmly believe that everyone deserves the right to feel beautiful in their body and seeing that look in her eyes was a moment I will always cherish and remember.

Homophobia

Another form of prejudice experienced by my sample was homophobia - particularly biphobia, or prejudice against bisexual individuals. One of the demographic questions I asked my respondents was ‘Do you identify as non-heterosexual/queer/LGBT?’. Out of 8 respondents, 50% identified specifically as ‘bisexual’, 25% of the sample identified as ‘queer’, and the other 25% identified as

'lesbian'. Lana particularly had issues with biphobic remarks and poor reception when she had disclosed her identity in everyday life, which led her to conceal or modify her label of sexual orientation at conventions. "Yes, bisexual, however when asked I generally say lesbian to avoid the stigma of bisexuality being a 'phase' or 'not existing'". - Lana

She clarified upon further inquiry about the 'stigma of bisexuality' that she had mentioned:

The stigma is mostly present overall in life, not so much at conventions specifically. But I honestly have said 'lesbian' or 'queer' most of the time at cons to avoid any issues, so that might have part to do with it. I don't have any specific times at conventions, but in over all life, I have run across people who tend to believe that bisexuality is just a phase until you find the right guy. -Lana

With the majority of my sample being constituted by self-identified bisexuals, I was a bit surprised by some of their comments regarding bisexuality: "The only open members of the LGBTQ community that I have worked with are other "bi" women (I must re-emphasize OPEN). And I say "bi" because many of these folks may or may not be "out" for the attention of our male counterparts." Here Jenny calls into question the given orientations of her co-workers, similarly to the way Lana describes her mainstream dismissals as a bisexual woman. This is a common problem for bisexual women, often being told that they are confused, going through a phase, or feigning interest in women to be sensational and garner attention from men.

Lily expressed frustration with attention being given to burgeoning identities instead of the more traditionally recognized identities of 'gay, lesbian, and bisexual', saying "I've never gone to a LGBT specific panel. I'm honestly wary of them because

I'm very skeptical of identity politics that have gotten popular on the internet, and I feel like gays and lesbians would honestly be neglected at such panels and they would focus more on demi-romantic pansexual people or whatever. If there was a panel about LGBT CONTENT I would go, though." Her dismissal of spectrum identifications like pansexual and the parsing of sexual attraction versus romantic attraction indicates a distaste for the more recent explorations of sexual orientation and the wider range of terms for these preferences; this view was not supported by vendors and artists I saw while conducting my research, as one of the most popular LGBT-themed items were pins or shirts or other items printed with the different identity flags' patterns (stripes of blue, pink, and purple for bisexuality; black, grey, white, and purple for asexual; pink, yellow, and blue for pansexual; etc.).

Despite the considerable number of encounters with homophobic and sexist prejudice and discrimination that my respondents have shared with me, there was a distinct opposition to this idea in their interviews as well: they also shared stories of acceptance and community. "I haven't experienced or heard about much discrimination against queer people (overall and recently), though I'm straight-passing (trans husband) so that's likely a factor for my own experiences." In the following chapter, Willow and several other respondents talk positively about the reception of the LGBTQ+ community at conventions.

CHAPTER FIVE: WELCOMING AND COMMUNITY - “FRIENDSHIP IS MAGIC”

Many of those who attend conventions do so, at least in part, to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance. They search for this feeling when revealing a usually hidden stigmatized aspect of their personal identity (like nerdy interests), or multiple hidden stigmas at once (sexual orientation, interest in nerd culture, and non-normative gender expression in the case of this research). These individual statuses may be concealed at different times in their daily lives, but most have responded in a way that indicates full disclosure and openness while in convention spaces. A sense of welcoming, the prospect of more easily attained social connections, and community support were present in many of my respondent’s interviews.

Positive Aspects of Community

The sense of feeling welcome and accepted for who you are and how you identify was taken to be one of the most positive aspects of the convention community for the women in my sample. Knowing there is a large and vocal LGBT population at most cons has been encouraging for Willow, Lana, Carolyn and others. That potential for full disclosure, thanks to the welcoming atmosphere at conventions, allows for connections based around the franchises attendees enjoy (fandoms). A common way of signaling your membership in a fandom is cosplaying as a character from that intellectual property - this method worked for Lily, who shares her experiences regarding fandom as family.

Welcoming

Carolyn emphasized feeling welcome in convention space, both during her first time at a convention, “I went to Dragon Con. It was a definite trial by fire just on size, but

nothing weird happened there. I felt rather welcome.”, and during a more recent experience. “I was at OrcaCon this past weekend. Their entire existence is dedicated to diversity and inclusion, including sexual and gender identity and racial identity. [...] OrcaCon was excellent and welcoming.”

A sense of welcoming towards minority groups like LGBT attendees at conventions was discussed by Willow, Lana, Lily, Bo, and Clarke. Willow, Clarke, and Bo all said that they see more respect and acceptance of LGBT people at conventions than they do in non-convention spaces.

[...] it’s likely to be a place you can find more accepting people and other members of the LBGT community, but still expect some of the typical bullshit tailored for geek culture. -Willow

I genuinely think there is a large circle of LGBT women all over the convention scene. I honestly associate with solely/mostly LGBT people in my home life and at conventions, there are plenty at conventions so I don’t think you have to feel alone. -Clarke

I have never attempted to interact with anyone at a convention romantically or sexually, besides a significant other I brought with me. I do think it would be a positive reception though because it feels like the majority of people have a queer lifestyle. -Bo

Lana told me about an experience she had at an LGBT-focused convention she attended with her partner, who also identifies as female:

Every convention is different and largely varies [...]Gaylaxicon 2016 – Held in October, this convention was small (about 300 people) and focused specifically on glbt fans of sci-fi. In spite of the small size, it’s easily the most welcoming convention I’ve ever been to as a bisexual woman. It felt like a small home and while we didn’t know most of the people who showed up, there was a welcoming atmosphere that made me feel like I’d known these people all my life and we were the best of friends. My partner and I were celebrating our 15 year anniversary and word got around, a lot of people we didn’t know came up to congratulate us. [...] It was a very freeing feeling and I would go back in a heartbeat. Every member of the glbt community needs a chance to experience

such a welcoming convention. -Lana

She relates the convention's atmosphere to being at home and highlights how accepted, welcomed, and cared for she felt. This would understandably provide a strong draw for her to continue being a part of the convention community, as well as to be open about her usually stigmatized statuses when she is in these spaces. She also suggested, in another part of her interview, that a safe space at conventions would "help members of the community be themselves and realize how much of a support system is actually at conventions for them." so that at conventions that don't have an LGBT theme, LGBT attendees will have a sense of the size of their presence.

An organization called Tabletop Gaymers attends conventions in the United States and helps to raise awareness and show support for LGBT community members by offering queer programming, hosting LGBTQ+ social events, and distributing rainbow ribbons for self-identifying as a 'gaymer' or an 'ally'. These ribbons, which are meant to adhere onto the convention badge that you are supposed to wear at all times when at a convention, function as a visual reminder that there are more LGBT-friendly people at the convention than one might initially assume. Tabletop Gaymers hosted several events while I was attending Gen Con and their ribbons were a common sight throughout the weekend on attendees of all ages, races, and genders (Tabletop Gaymers, 2016).

Ribbons and pride flag buttons aren't the only way LGBT people have of recognizing each other or identifying themselves at conventions. Sometimes a person might be assumed to be LGBT through the characters they embody when they cosplay, as Lily points out,

Also my first time at a convention, when I was still really nervous about being myself, and I was wearing my utena cosplay, this one woman said something about utena being a lesbian [...] I think that same year at a different convention (Matsuricon) I talked about utena with some attendees and they said something about her being gay, and I said something like “me too, kinda...” quietly, when I’m much more brave about it now. I’m glad that I feel recognized and seen, though.

Utena Tenjou, the character that Lily was cosplaying, is the protagonist from the 1990’s anime Revolutionary Girl Utena, about a high school girl who decides that she doesn’t want to wear the girls’ uniform, but instead she wants to dress as a male student and rescue other girls in her class like they’re princesses, considering herself a prince. Utena has long been considered a queer icon in nerd culture, much like Michiru Kaioh and Haruka Tenou, a lesbian couple featured on another popular 90’s anime, Pretty Soldier Sailor Moon.

Friendship and Fandom

The connection between members of the same fandom (or people who share an interest in the same intellectual property/franchise) can be another strong draw for attendees. Recognizing and meeting others in your fandom at a convention can feel a lot like coming home, as Lana put it earlier, or ‘finding your tribe’ as I’ve heard from other convention attendees. Some meet face-to-face for the first time while at a convention. Others, like Lily, make connections online with people planning to go to the convention at hand, and then meet up to enjoy the convention together. I asked Lily. “Can you tell me about your first convention experience?”

My first anime convention was Ohayocon at the beginning of 2014. I honestly planned on going alone, but found friends to go with through a tumblr tag. I dressed up as a character who was really important to me because she is a tomboyish girl who defies the patriarchy and loves another girl (Utena Tenjou,

Revolutionary Girl Utena). Not a lot of people recognized my cosplay, but those who did really appreciated it.

Lana connects her continued participation at conventions to lasting social bonds she has with friends and her partner: “My first experience was Anime Central, I believe 2000. I went with a few classmates from my college anime club, we drove from St Cloud Minnesota to Chicago Illinois for it and stayed the whole weekend. I remember all the costumes and the events, the people and the all-around creativity. I was heavily into anime at the time and decided that I wanted to go back the next year and that I also wanted to cosplay, and I haven’t stopped since.” Bo also made mention of attending her first convention with a group of friends and how that contributed to her having a positive experience.

Lily, Bo, and Carolyn all mentioned friendship when asked to give advice to first-time conventions attendees who were also queer women. Bo said, “Everything is more fun with friends, so make lots of them!” and continued to say that giving compliments was the best way to make friends, mirroring Lana’s comments on cosplay positivity and encouragement within the community: “we’ve had people come up to us at conventions letting us know that we gave them the courage to dress up as a character they loved that they previously thought they could not and I really do love all of those moments.”

Lily seemed specifically concerned with making genuine social bonds, encouraging queer women to feel comfortable and safe enough to show their true colors. “We exist! Be yourself and be open and you’ll find people who will appreciate you.” Carolyn also endorses genuine self-expression as a way of making connections. “Own it, and if anyone gives you grief, make noise about it. Talk to your people, make friends, and

don't let them drive you away. You're awesome and we need you. But be careful, there's still a long ways (sic) to go.”

Jenny made an interesting observation about how members of her game sessions relate to one another. She argues for community building through co-operative gameplay and says that most stigma and prejudice disappears while playing.

A lot of the games I demo tend to be fairly long demonstrations or learn-to-play events. When I'm with a group of people either fighting with them, against them, or coaching them through something for up to several hours, a sort-of battlefield camaraderie tends to form. I tend to get this sort of imaginary stamp of approval from the attendees. In these longer games, people may start talk in between turns and stuff. Total strangers getting to know each other. [...] Attendees that are very obviously, or perhaps not as obviously part of the LGBTQ community are now people in their eyes. Maybe they are teammates. Maybe they are enemies, or a tentative alliance. No matter what we learn about each other in these sessions, or do not learn about each other, these sorts of games break people down into what they do in the game. As soon as I get up from the table and start wandering booths, myself, that goes away. All of a sudden, I feel like the summation of everyone's judgements of me again. -Jenny

While Jenny seems pleased with social interactions and connections happening during the game, she seems doubly bothered by the return to a stratified social order. She only applies this feeling of a return to judgements to herself, but I believe a more pointed look into this phenomenon would garner similar responses from others, myself included.

Social pecking order and hierarchical structures were discussed by other women in my sample as well, namely as mansplaining and gatekeeping.

Negative Aspects of Community or “The Boys’ Club: Mansplaining and Gatekeeping”

Nerd culture is often cited as a boys’ club - a subculture in which males dominate in numbers and in social power (Reagle, 2016). Jenny, who does demonstrations and runs game sessions at tabletop-focused conventions, had clear opinions about what gendered

expectations are at conventions and some the ways in which they are perpetuated, like biased marketing.

Collectible games are not only marketed as almost strictly masculine, but they are enjoyed in the same way. It's not that they are not enjoyed by feminine players, but that the culture surrounding these games has been a locker room for a long time.

She recognized the tensions of cultural transitions and change:

Being a bi woman actually helps put my male coworkers at ease. The thing about the locker-room nature of these hobbies, is that straight males view these venues like a retreat. [...] Because men organize their social time around hobbies, and those hobbies are becoming more and more inclusive, you can sense the transitional tension of the guys you work with.

She recommends that women should rise above any unfair treatment they receive as a result of this transitional tension, telling them not to fight fire with fire, "Don't shame or ostracize even if they made you feel unwelcome. Don't do the same to them."

Jenny also states that she doesn't feel like men are as accepting of her in social situations until they realize that she is also attracted to women. Only when they find out that she is sexually attracted to other women do they include her in what she called 'locker-room talk' and feel free enough to speak openly to her, often saying things which make her want to defend women. She doesn't "get up on her gender-based soapbox", however, because it might be seen as abrasive or out of a fear no one will listen to her. She establishes rapport, then tries to dismantle their problematic opinions from the inside.

This sense of ownership over the nerd subcultural space of convention halls is often indicated by two phenomena - mansplaining, or a male condescendingly explaining something to a woman after interrupting her, and gatekeeping, or the act of setting up tests and boundaries for others to pass before being accepted as an equal on a given topic

(Charles, 2016). Willow told me about a particular convention atmosphere that featured more mansplaining - notably an older, more male crowd - much like Jenny's experiences with rules lawyering at board game conventions and my experience of being the 'token girl', which I discussed earlier.

The crowd [at Magfest] is generally more mature (both in age and temperament), but since it's largely a gaming community there's a slightly higher occurrence of male gamer-guys who think of gaming as their territory, so I've personally experienced a bit more "mansplaining" at Mag even if the overall community feels more open/accepting. -Willow

Willow also described a mix of mansplaining and gatekeeping that she regularly experiences at her artist's booth:

[Cisgender, white men] "correcting" me on subjects I know a great deal about, even if their "correction" is blatantly wrong, or I seem more knowledgeable about the subject than they do. Sometimes, (particularly men) seem to make up facts about the game/series/etc we're talking about as if I won't know it's not a fact. If I correct them, or know something they didn't, sometimes they seem indignant about it, and/or their interest in our talk suddenly drops.

While Jenny works sale booths as part of her duties as a game demonstrator, she told me that women feel more comfortable talking with other women, so having women in authority as demo staff creates a welcoming atmosphere for other women.

At the conventions, every time I'm working the booth, for the most part, other women will come up to me to ask questions before they will go to the men in the booth. There is a certain level of tentativeness and timidity with other women at the conventions. In my own experience, being "tested" on my knowledge when I want to talk about something puts me off a hobby for sure.

And she makes clear that this gatekeeping interaction is mitigated by the presence of women in positions of guidance or authority.

Lily, on the other hand, avoids gatekeeping (called credibility testing here) by not being involved with fandoms that are heavily populated by men. In avoiding male-

dominated, or “bro-y”, hyper-masculine fandoms at the anime conventions she attends, she avoids gatekeeping interactions to a greater degree. “I PERSONALLY have not had anyone make a sexist remark toward me at a convention, but I also tend to be into fandoms more associated with women, so it’s not like I’m into a bro-y fandom where my credibility as a nerd gets tested, because I tend to like cartoons and anime that is geared toward women anyway.” -Lily

I would also like to make a short reference here to the previous chapter’s section on ‘brolita’, as an example of good community intentions resulting in misgendering and negative interactions with the transgender population at conventions. This would be another negative aspect of a welcoming community, regardless of intent.

In this chapter, I covered what my respondents considered the positive and negative aspects of the community at nerd conventions. The positive aspects were mostly only applicable to the internal LGBT population within the larger convention culture; a sense of welcoming, the knowledge that a large number of LGBT attendees were present, feeling free to be genuine to your self-concept, and making social bonds with others through shared fandom. The negative aspects of community reported by my sample focused exclusively on the male-dominated “boys’ club” atmosphere and repeated instances of mansplaining and gatekeeping, condescending and socially exclusive behaviors towards women.

CHAPTER SIX: GENDER IDENTITY AND SELF-EXPRESSION - “+100 EXP”

When viewing gender as a social construction, as West and Zimmerman (1987) and Butler (1990) so famously have, one understands that gender is not a static status that one is born with and cannot change; rather, gender is understood as an act - it is performative. We act out our gender by signaling to others with our speech, our behavior, and (most noticeably) our appearance - our mode of dress, hairstyle, choice of jewelry, etc. Which gender we perform as is most commonly based on the gender we were raised to perform, it is a fairly consistent lifelong performance for most people, and many go through life without questioning it too much. In this chapter, I have collected the parts of my respondents' interviews that pertained to gender identity, self-expression, and the acceptance or rejection they've experienced during their exploration of the way they present themselves.

Acceptance

Self-expression and self-acceptance were often mentioned by participants, in different ways. While Bo mentioned her love of Lolita fashion, Lily talked about how freeing it felt to dress androgynously; both consider conventions to be a space where they can not only express their personality and identity through fashion choices, but are often celebrated for it. Bo shared her first convention experience with me, telling me that she dressed in Lolita style, and clarified what she meant by 'dressing in Lolita' when I asked her to define it in her own words during a follow up interview.

My first experience was great. My best friend invited me to go to Ohayocon with her. My partner and I came and I was in love with taking photos of cosplayers. I dressed in lolita that year. [...] Lolita in the terms I referred to is a fashion style. Popular in Japan at the time that includes lacy tea party style dresses, petticoats

ribbons, curls and all things dainty. It plays with the idea of looking like a traditional doll archetype. -Bo

Bo's hyper-feminine style contrasted with Lily's more fluid, androgynous choice of gender presentation:

I like being able to present in a gender non conforming way, something I believe has ties to my lesbianism, via cosplay and get complimented for it. -Lily

Lily directly related her gender presentation to her sexual orientation and told me how good it felt to be celebrated for exactly who she identifies herself to be, especially by people that she considers peers in her statuses - other nerdy, queer women.

Body Image and Unrealistic Expectations

Cosima and Jenny have had rather negative experiences with gender expression at conventions in the past. Jenny is regularly displeased with double standards regarding reactions to erotic art between straight and queer women, as well as the double standard regarding women's bodies versus men's bodies and the extreme gender exaggeration/sexualization in media/merchandise associated with comic book and anime figures.

With the abundance of erotic imagery of women at the cons, there is very little of men. Booths or artists with these things are generally organized around erotic art. Like, scantily clad dudes are erotic, but ladies are art? For straight women, they go and giggle at imagery that is considered fan-fic or fan art and considered either a joke or a fetish. Meanwhile, we [queer women] are surrounded by mostly naked women and it's normal. -Jenny

Extreme proportions in comic books and animation inevitably lead to attempts to recreate those looks in cosplay. The cosplaying corner of YouTube is full to bursting with video tutorials on how to stuff your bra and contour your chest to achieve the effect of excessively large breasts, how to change the look of your facial bone structure and eyes

to better resemble anime girls, reviews on which large contact lenses to buy, and other tips and tricks to look like characters that literally cannot exist. Cosima commented that they made her feel inadequate, not intentionally, but inadequate still.

The biggest issue I had at Matsuri was my own self-image issues - seeing a lot of the more “feminine” cosplayers always makes me feel inadequate, but I never felt that anyone else was pushing those views on me.

The common thread here is one of unrealistic expectations, particularly on female bodies. Despite those unrealistic depictions, Cosima used convention space as an experimental testing ground for some of her first explorations presenting in a feminine way.

Testing the Waters: First Steps to Feminine Presentation

As I’ve established, my cisgender respondents clearly feel that conventions are spaces that are particularly permissive and welcoming when it comes to non-normative gender expression and presentation. I was curious as I was conducting interviews if Cosima, the only transgender woman in my sample, would feel the same way. Given the reputation for being a boys’ club, would this nerd subcultural space be as receptive to a transgender woman who makes her living playing games, operating in core geek territory? It seems so.

I was in a Homestuck cosplay group. I cosplayed as Nepeta [a female character whose image is themed around cats]. At the time, I already knew I was trans but was only out to my then-girlfriend who was in the group as Gamzee. The experience meant a lot to me as it was the first time I wore “girl’s clothes,” even if those clothes were just a t-shirt, jeans, and a cute cat-themed hat thing. -Cosima

During Matsuri, one of my close friends helped me buy a pink fashion/cosplay wig, something I have always wanted to do but never been brave enough to do on my own. I ended up wearing it for the rest of the night [...], taking far too many selfies, and having a generally great time. ***This was a very important step in my continued process of exploring my fashion sense and gender expression [emphasis mine].*** -Cosima

Summer Games Done Quick 2016 - I spent 6 days at SGDQ16 and got misgendered 0 times. I wore mostly but not overly feminine clothes and generally did my best with my appearance. During this event I went swimming for the first time in female swimwear, and while I was very anxious at first I got very comfortable by the end. -Cosima

Cosima shared with me several instances of her presenting in feminine ways for the first time and being well received, specifically in convention spaces: her first time in a pink wig, her first time in 'girl's clothes', and her first time in 'female swimwear'. This insinuates to me that not only does Cosima feel welcome and safe enough in convention spaces to try branching out with new forms of gender expression, but given the number of firsts she debuted in those spaces, I would say that conventions might constitute her most secure environment for doing so. She called one of these experiences "a very important step" in her exploration of her identity through fashion.

Jenny and Lana also made note of this tendency for transgender women to feel safe in expressing and presenting however they please without having to worry about negative responses, implying that this would contrast with how they might feel in other, non-convention spaces. You may recall that Lana considers one of the greatest memories of her participation in the convention community to be fulfilling a transgender woman's costume commission for her first ever princess cosplay.

Last con I went to was BGG Con. [...] There were several trans individuals that were in the beginning of their transitions and stuck out like a sore thumb. I didn't really see these folks sequestered with the same "safe" group all con at all. They were moving around and playing games with strangers just like everyone else and if anyone was making them uncomfortable it was probably very subtle. -Jenny

I also noticed that quite a few women (including trans women) were able to walk around freely and wear whatever they wished without a thought about how they might be treated. -Lana

Misgendering

While the general populace at conventions seems to have a positive disposition towards the transgender community contained within it, there have been issues of misgendering, like the earlier mentioned ‘brolita’ situation that Cosima raised. “[...] the problem it poses is that most con-goers are quick to assume someone who does not "pass" as female is a brolita rather than a transfeminine person.” The appropriate use of preferred pronouns is still a controversial topic in mainstream media, but the convention circuit seems to be ahead of the game, at anime conventions in particular.

It could be a result of a younger, more liberal demographic, the fluid sense of gender depicted in modern anime, the consequential gender fluidity in cosplay, or other socio-cultural factors. Cosima said, about an experience she had while competing at a speedrunning event, that those around her used the pronouns she preferred, regardless of the fact that she was not wearing particularly feminine clothes or undergoing hormone replacement therapy (HRT) as of yet: “Awesome Games Done Quick 2016 - I had not started hormones as of AGDQ16, nor had I built up a feminine wardrobe, so I had more issues with misgendering during this event. However, once I made my pronouns/gender explicitly known, my friends adapted quickly and without complaint.”

When asked for advice to give to queer women attending conventions for the first time, a veritable chorus of voices in my sample responded with resounding calls to freedom of expression and being genuine - something they may struggle to do outside of convention and nerd culture spaces.

Conventions are about enjoying and expressing yourself and almost everyone you will meet and see at conventions are simply trying to do the same. -Cosima

Feel free to dress however you want without judgment. -Bo

Own it, and if anyone gives you grief, make noise about it. -Carolyn

We exist! Be yourself and be open and you'll find people who will appreciate you. -Lily

Knowing that you are not alone, that there are others like you, is a feeling that minorities often strive to capture their entire lives. One way that feeling is obtained is through representation - seeing others like you existing. Lily's proclamation that queer women exist speaks strongly to a widespread belief in nerd culture that queer women just aren't present - that they don't make up a significant portion of the community. In fact, while conducting my research, I was repeatedly laughed at by men I spoke to when I told them I was looking for queer, female nerds. This situation happened so often that I began to take a tally and in a single day was laughed at for this specific reason more than 10 times. Representation and visibility are crucial when it comes to being a minority member of a subculture, as my respondents would point out to me.

CHAPTER SEVEN: REPRESENTATION

Seeing yourself represented in the world around you is important to human beings. We are constantly, according to sociologists Berger and Luckmann (1991), in a process of reality maintenance; we look around us and try to make sense of the stimulus we're presented with - we use these various stimuli to construct our sense of reality. Depending on where we are, we might see people driving cars, riding their bikes to work, holding hands and walking down the street. We see them wearing certain clothes and speaking to one another, maybe in English, maybe in Spanish, or Arabic. We might see people of all shapes, sizes, colors, and genders; we might see only people who look, dress, and speak the same way we do. We put those bits of information together and use them to form a cohesive understanding of the world around us. Americans spend hours every day interacting with media, be it news, social media, television, etc. This, in Berger and Luckman's view, would certainly have an effect on their sense of reality, an effect that would vary depending on what they were exposed to. In other words, what you see is what you assume you have; what you are exposed to is what you understand to be normal.

LGBT Panels at Conventions

At nerdy conventions, panels and presentations are given on topics relevant to the theme of the convention - from cosplay tutorial events, to the influence of religion on animation throughout history, to fan-theory and appreciation of a particular intellectual property. Panels and presentations are scheduled for practically every available minute, with weekend schedules beginning as early as 6AM and ending as late as 4AM,

guaranteeing something for attendees to do at virtually all hours. While conducting my interviews I asked my respondents “Do you think that there is enough LGBT programming at conventions?” and there was a variety of answers:

Cosima and Carolyn were unimpressed with the offerings they’ve had in the past, saying that the panels they have seen were not to the standard they would like. Cosima specifically attended a convention, Maturicon 2016, just to go to a one hour LGBT panel. I also attended this panel in the course of my research and would agree with Cosima about the less-than-stellar quality of the information presented.

The only LGBT program I have been to at a convention was Maturi 2016’s LGBT panel. I actually made the day trip to attend Maturi specifically for this panel because my stream was to be featured at it. I thought attendance was disappointing, but more importantly, I felt the content was lacking - it was a 20 minute talk on “here’s what LGBT means” to a small audience of nearly entirely LGBT listeners, and then Q&A. I feel more convention- or fan-culture-specific discussion could be more beneficial in the long run. -Cosima

Carolyn objected to a tendency at conventions to tokenize a few members of a minority group and hold them up as examples of inclusivity, all the while undermining their authority and importance by featuring mainstream voices at minority-themed events:

There is seldom any LGBTQ programming at conventions, there is sometimes female-oriented programming, but very few of them move beyond the basic ‘Hey, there are women/LGBT people in gaming! You should come look at the two or three of them we found and listen to them affirm that they do exist!’ Which is a bleak way to look at it, but that’s what it feels like. Even better when you end up with straight white guys on panels about women and LGBTQ in geek spaces.

Not every woman in my sample felt this way, however. Clarke, Bo, Jenny, and Lana had positive things to say about LGBT-focused panels they had attended. They did

all say that they would like to see an increase in the number of queer friendly or queer focused panels.

[...] there can always be more, there could never be less. -Clarke

I don't think there can ever be enough representation, especially because it's so tilted at the moment, so I would love more programming. [...] I think that would help members of the community be themselves and realize how much of a support system is actually at conventions for them. -Lana

Since I have only seen 2 women's studies panels and one year with an LGBT support group of course I would like to see more! -Bo

Bo continued her discussion of panel availability and representation contributing to a sense of belonging and acceptance, but rather than relating it directly to LGBT issues, she had this experience regarding race.

I was really impressed by the panel option specifically to support the LGBT members. [...] Getting disappointed and pissed off with what kind of panels were being chosen. It was actually going to be my last because I had been slowly feeling a disconnect from that part of myself and not feeling represented. Then I attended a panel called Black and Nerdy and found it was run by some other black women I had met at Ohayocon a while ago. They helped me see myself again in a community that I loved but didn't see myself in anymore. -Bo

And Jenny wants inclusivity without feeling singled out. She wants conventions to normalize queer life and culture through its programming, saying that LGBT people are simply a part of the world, and as such, should be represented appropriately; it should not be as part of some special effort to be inclusive, but more as a measure of common sense.

Yes I would like to see more. But I don't want it branded as LGBTQ programming. ***I want it normal.*** Like it's totally normal, and it's just slipped in there like it's no big thing. I want it to be incorporated into our daily life. [...] I would like some guidance for all of us. But I don't want to see "the Lesbian Show in Hall C" on the event list. ***There are lesbians everywhere and I would like to see that represented in everything else we see.*** -Jenny [*emphasis mine*]

Media Representation

Many members of the LGBTQ+ community consider lack of representation in media (a vital cornerstone of geek culture) to be a problem of great importance. Since media plays such a large role in the average person's life, not seeing yourself being portrayed well, or not seeing yourself at all, could be an understandable point of stress and frustration. The little representation they do receive is often hyper-sexualized or cut short by killing the LGBT character. It's become such a common occurrence that it's been coined as a television trope "Bury Your Gays" or alternatively "Dead Lesbian Syndrome." Those names may seem flippant and humorous at first, but the numbers are admittedly alarming.

LGBTfansdeservebetter.com was established in early 2016 after the killing off of four queer women within a single month on network television, beginning with a popular female queer character on *The 100*, a cable television science fiction drama. The website operates on a platform of the importance of visibility for LGBT characters in television. They keep up statistics regarding LGBT representation and character deaths, as well as information on how LGBT people are characterized in television. The site has numbers on how many female LGBT couples get a happy ending, how many are portrayed as sexually deviant or promiscuous, how many are shown to be evil, and so on.

Stories are powerful. They can move us, they can teach us – they can shape us as individuals or a collective, and transform our worldview or append to it. But this influence is not created in a vacuum, and the cold hard data behind which stories are being told, and for whom, shine a light on how negative portrayals of marginalized communities are being continually reinforced. The numbers and the statistics behind these messages are as shocking as they are heartbreaking, particularly to those part of the LGBTQ+ community. It is said that it's just fiction, just a story, but stories always have and always will shape our culture. That is the

overarching purpose of a story, from as far back as humans were able to tell them: to impart a message that can be carried on and form the pillars of our culture and society.

In their tally for the broadcast network season for 2015-2016, 1.75% of total main or recurring characters were lesbian or bisexual women. Of those characters, by the end of the season, 38% of them were dead. While they represented less than 2% of all characters, they made up 10% of the total deaths on the network that year.

To many fans, especially the young ones, television becomes a coping mechanism to help them survive in a hostile environment and escape from their real lives. The heroes they idolize on TV can give everyone, especially young LGBT+ fans, the tools, the invisible armor, the knowledge and weapons to survive a life that may not be kind to them. [...] How can they dream of a better future when 38% – 13 lesbian and bisexual women so far this year alone – end up dead? This alarming trend of LGBT+ character marginalization and death severely impacts the audience who most look to stories for a message of hope and escape; instead, they have their worst fears reaffirmed, that this life will not be kind to them, that they don't have a future where they can be happy. (LGBTfansdeservebetter.com, 2016)

They also engage in charity work by using hashtags to spread awareness and organize donations. In just over 1 year, they have raised over \$166,000 for the Trevor Project, a non-profit organization that seeks to prevent the suicides of LGBT youth.

Meeting in the Middle

Lana and her female partner produce works that are representative of who they are and what they want to see. “Occasionally we’ve received strange looks because we sell gay romance and books with glbt characters, but those are rare. In most cases, people are quite happy to see at least some form of representation and have no issue with it.” I attended a panel they gave on how to be more inclusive and diverse in your creating, be it writing, drawing, gaming, etc. One point that they made was of great interest to me, both

as a consumer and creator of nerdy media, but as a researcher as well. Underrepresented populations are often told ‘If you want to see it, go out and make it yourself!’ While this is usually intended in a positive way, as in ‘Be empowered! Be the change you wish to see!’, many members of these minority groups, Lana and her partner included, think that this is a bit of a cop out on the part of production studios and those who have the means with which to produce diverse content, and choose not to. All the same, these women are just two of many who have been spurred into work as artists and creators as part of a group or groups that are not portrayed in the art forms these women love so much.

When I asked her about whether or not she felt that there was enough LGBT programming at conventions, Willow connected the two sides of this coin: LGBT representation at conventions with LGBT representation on mainstream television and media.

There doesn’t seem to be much available, but also a lack of much representation or LGBT-themes in media might be a contributing factor on why there’s not a great deal of queer-specific programming. The only programming I would personally care to see more of in that regard is how to write/what makes a good LGBT (or female) characters/themes/romances/etc, to aid good representation in media and fandom understanding. -Willow

Lily, a lesbian who specifically cosplays as characters she feels connected to as part of her sexual orientation and gender identity, seemed to feel the same way that Bo feels about LGBT representation and its’ effect on fan culture and convention trends. She told me that an increase in television shows that feature same-sex female relationships has led to an increase in members of the femslash fandom, or fans of female/female relationships, and from there she’s noticed an increase in lesbian representation at

conventions. “Also there has been a huge spike lately in the femslash fandom, and I see more and more women taking an interest in f/f ships (Legend of Korra, Life is Strange, Steven Universe, etc) so I see more lesbian representation at conventions lately than when I first started going to them.”

CONCLUSION

Feeling like you belong is tantamount to breathing when it comes to socialized living. When you care enough about a television series or book to have a phrase or image from that work tattooed on your body or engraved on your wedding band, most would consider it safe to say that you are a ‘nerd’ for that intellectual property - an extreme fan, if you will. Knowing that you have a space to come to that is filled with people who will not only accept your deep love of obscure Japanese animation or 1000 piece board games from Germany, but who will actively celebrate that special interest and share in their appreciation for it, is knowing that you belong somewhere - that you have a community. This is the function that fan conventions serve for members of nerd subculture.

Identifying as a nerd and entering a convention can feel a lot like coming home, like “finding your tribe” according to my respondents. Being surrounded by others who share your level of enthusiasm for something you love is a great feeling. Wearing whatever clothes you’d like to wear and being confident that you won’t be harassed for it is a great feeling. Having other people treat you like an equal is a great feeling. For the majority of convention attendees, these things are not out of reach. For queer and transgender women, however, according to the lived experience of the women I interviewed, not all of those freedoms are as accessible.

In chapters three and four, I compiled instances of sexual harassment, prejudiced behavior, and discrimination to the point of threats on a young woman’s life. My respondents shared their experiences in convention space with sexism and homophobia, with the former being much more common and severe than the latter. These are an ugly,

but very real part of convention culture. In this way, one might argue that their stigmatized identity, as laid out by Goffman, is not in their status as queer, or as a woman, but in a combined identity of ‘LGBT woman’ in a space that largely denies their existence when not ostracizing or fetishizing them. A sense of community and friendship, as laid out in chapter five, is crucial to having a positive experience at conventions, especially for those who fall into minority groups. The practices of mansplaining and gatekeeping support Reagle’s concept of the ‘obligation to know’, a burden of proof that further alienates an already-discriminated-against double-minority (2014). And in chapters six and seven, the focus was on reports of how gender presentation and representation factor in to experiences of LGBT women in a nerd cultural space. Even though representation in the media is sparse at best and often negative for LGBT women, there is an air of experimentation and freedom of expression within convention space. Conventions allow for more variation in presentation and seem to be more progressive than mainstream media, though this may be expected given that conventions are a focused niche market and mainstream media must cater to a wider, and possibly less tolerant audience.

My sample’s discreditable, or concealable, stigma (Goffman, 1969) is that of the LGBT woman. In a space that has an overarching sense of male dominion and a problem with heteronormative sexual harassment, these women must make a choice between revealing and not revealing their status. Choosing to reveal their status can put them at risk of being fetishized, excluded, even physically threatened. However, in concealing their status, they are depriving themselves and others who share their stigma of a

connection that they report they cannot find anywhere else. According to my findings, the majority of LGBT women who continually attend conventions choose exposure and risk over isolation and shame.

As to nerd identity, my study provides a necessary account of a clearly sizable portion of nerd subculture. This acknowledgement of the erasure and/or fetishizing of my sample demographic is the most important contribution my research offers to the field. Any academic discussion of nerd-dom needs to address queer and LGBT women to have a realistic and accurate understanding of nerd subculture. As Lily pointed out in chapter seven, with a rise in LGBT friendly media, nerd subculture is experiencing a more visible and active LGBT presence at conventions. If the academy is to look at nerd and geek culture through an analytical lens, we must look at all of it, without omitting an entire demographic based on subcultural biases that are already present. That approach will only further contribute to the erasure and mistreatment of the group in question. This could be said for a significant minority group of any subculture.

Overall, the trend I have found through the course of in-depth interviews with eight LGBTQ+ women who have a collective 66 years of convention experience – 72, including my 6 years of experience as a member of the community as well as a sociologist - is that the convention community is very accepting of the LGBT population found within it. Nerd culture's treatment of women, however, is still sub-par. Sexual harassment, threats of violence, and nearly ubiquitous condescension and objectification is experienced by women routinely at conventions. The masculine-privileging atmosphere of nerd culture is perpetuated through these acts of discrimination and

exclusion or othering (Kunyosying, 2012). This is not to say that all men in the convention community enact these disturbing behaviors, but it is to say that the grand majority of women in convention spaces experience them.

As a researcher with a special focus on gender and sexuality in the context of nerd and geek subculture, I would urge equality-focused organizations like Tabletop Gaymers and LGBTFansdeservebetter.com to continue their support of marginalized communities at conventions. As members of my sample stated - safe spaces, specialized programming, and efforts toward visibility have a positive and profound effect on those populations they are aimed to help. These efforts also contribute to a more informed, and usually more accepting, subculture in its' entirety. By acknowledging and showing support for LGBT women (or women and LGBT individuals separately) these organizations make conventions a more open cultural space, with less discrimination and stigma overall.

Through not only formal organization, but also one-on-one support, LGBT women can help craft a safer, more welcoming space for themselves, as they have within convention culture for the last several decades. Several of my participants remarked on how the convention scene has improved for LGBT people and women, particularly in the last ten years. As a researcher, I would attribute that to the powerful sense of self-led improvements and personal responsibility for shaping the subculture one inhabits. One must keep in mind that these pro-diversity subcultural organizations are made up of nerds to begin with – they are created and staffed and operated by members of the community that wanted to make a change. In this way, I want to make a clear connection, arguably equating the individual efforts of marginalized subcultural participants to the

organizations that exist within those same subcultural boundaries. These individual and combined efforts are easily the greatest way to forge a more open and accepting convention culture – a task that has been well underway for some time now.

Further questions viable for research in the areas related to my study might be informed by the focus codes gleaned from my sample's interview data. Chapters four through seven in this thesis each focus on a reportedly important aspect of LGBT women's experiences in nerd cultural spaces, fan conventions in this case. A more in-depth look at the intersection of safety and sexuality, experiences of discrimination, the importance of community, gender expression in nerd cultural space, or the interplay of media representation with fan community perceptions are all possible individual avenues for further, more focused exploration. A larger sample size, the incorporation of visual methods, or replication under different regional or attendance demographics would also serve as a logical continuation from the starting point that my research provides on a virtually unaddressed intersection of identities.

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APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE

Thank you so much for participating in my study. Just to get some demographic information:

1. Do you identify as female/a woman?
2. Do you identify as non-heterosexual/queer/LGBT?
3. How old are you?
4. How do you identify racially?
5. How long have you been attending conventions?
6. What kind of conventions have you attended? (Anime, pop culture, sci fi, etc)

So to get little more in depth, now:

7. Can you tell me about your first convention experience?
8. How would you characterize your most recently attended convention in regard to their treatment of women and members of the LGBT community? Other conventions you've attended? (Please list the convention's name)
9. How would you describe your latest (or current) convention experience? (Please list the convention's name)

10. Do you think that your status as a [however you identify your sexual orientation] woman ever affected your convention experiences? Why or why not? How so?

11. Do you think that there is enough LGBT programming at conventions? Programming regarding [your sexual orientation]? Would you like to see more? Less?

12. Are there any other experiences or stories you'd like to share with me regarding conventions and LGBT women?

13. What advice would you give an LGBT/queer woman coming to her first convention?

14. Is there anything you want to tell me that I haven't covered with these questions?

APPENDIX B: SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>ID as Woman</u>	<u>ID as LGBT</u>	<u>ID as Transgender</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Race & Ethnicity</u>	<u>Years at Cons</u>	<u>Merchant</u>
Willow	Yes	Queer	No	30	White	13	Yes
Lana	Yes	Bisexual	No	35	White	16	Yes
Clarke	Yes	Bisexual	No	23	White	7	Yes (Artist)
Cosima	Yes	Lesbian	Yes	18	White	4	No
Bo	Yes	Bisexual/Heteroflexible	No	33	African American	8	Yes
Carolyn	Yes	Queer	No	29	White	10	Yes (Writer)
Lily	Yes	Lesbian	No	23	White	3	No
Jenny	Yes	Bisexual	No	28	White	5	No (Demoer)



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