

The Rise of the Geek: Exploring Masculine Identity in *The Big Bang Theory* (2007).

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Abstract:

This paper will analyse the growth in representation of geeks as a form of masculine identity in popular culture using examples from US TV sitcom, *The Big Bang Theory* (2007) Previously represented as marginalised, male geeks, and the characteristics of geek identity, rationality and incompetence at social behaviours are now drivers of narratives. A number of reasons are given as to why the geek is currently a central character in popular culture, which are related to wider social, cultural and economic matters: the decline in support of corporate capitalism and a wider interest in science. This paper seeks to offer a workable definition of what constitutes a geek, which differentiates it from broader parlance, and distinguishes it further from more traditional representations of masculine hegemony by focussing on the way in which sexuality is represented. Other representations of men portray sexuality and sexual prowess as popular indicators of masculine hegemony, yet the geek is distinguishable in the denial of sexuality and an increased focus on asceticism.

Keywords: Masculine identity, The Big Bang Theory, Geeks

'Geek'¹ lerin Yükselişi: “The Big Bang Theory”deki (2007) Eril Kimlikleri Keşfetmek

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Özet

Bu makale “The Big Bang Theory” (2007) isimli ABD televizyon komedi dizisinden örnekler kullanarak ‘geek’lerin eril kimlik olarak popüler kültürdeki temsiliyetlerini analiz edecektir. Daha önceleri rasyonalite ve asosyalleşme ile marjinalleştirilen erkek ‘geek’ kimliği şimdi öykünün itici gücü olmuştur. Popüler kültürde bir *geek*’in neden ana karakter olarak kullanıldığı ise daha geniş sosyal, kültürel ve ekonomik sebeplerle açıklanmıştır: kurumsal kapitalizme olan destekteki düşüş ve bilime duyulan geniş ilgi. Bu çalışma *geek*’i daha geniş tanımlamalarından ayırarak onu neyin oluşturduğuna dair çalışır bir tanımlama önermek ve cinselliğin nasıl simgelendiğine odaklanarak eril hegemonyanın daha geleneksel temsillerinden ayrıştırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Erkeğin diğer temsilleri olan cinsellik ve cinsel yeterlilik eril hegemonyanın popüler belirtileri olmasına rağmen ‘geek’ cinselliğin reddi ve münzeviliğe odaklanmasıyla bu noktada ayırt edilebilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Eril kimlik, The Big Bang Theory, Geeks

¹ *Geek* özellikle fen bilimleri alanında çalışan, zeki ancak anti-sosyal karakterleri niteleyen bir terimdir. Türkçede tam karşılığı bulunmadığı için *geek* kullanımı uygun bulunmuştur.

Introduction

This paper explores the rise in representation of the geek as a form of masculine identity in popular culture through an analysis of male characters in the popular US TV sitcom, *The Big Bang Theory* (2007). Increasingly prevalent in the media, male geeks can be recognised through heavily framed glasses, their lack of grooming and disinterest in contemporary clothing. They are commonly depicted as having a higher than average intelligence, but poor social skills, and are especially bad at sexual relationships. This paper explores the refiguring of masculine identity, from highly recognisable, physically heroic characters, who are framed through success and conventionally attractive appearances, to identities which are based much more on a celebration of scientific expertise and varying degrees of domestic success. What is at stake here is a shift in the way that masculine hegemony might be conceptualised, and a move away from domination in both public and private spheres (Connell 21). I argue that this shift has arisen as a consequence of wider cultural concerns about the decline in the economic market. As a consequence of the recent global financial crisis, equating masculinity with economic success is problematic, as the issues in the financial sector indicate failure rather than achievement. As mastery over financial expertise has waned, representations of masculinity and the constitution of hegemony, which has been portrayed through financial expertise, glorifying personal wealth and heteronormative sexual prowess, for instance, are in decline. The rise of the geek suggests a shift away from equating masculine hegemony with economic success and prowess, towards a reclaiming of male scientific expertise (Kelly 135) and rationality (Beynon 200) coupled with failure in domestic relationships, and an indifference to financial wealth. Representations of male failures and breakdowns are not uncommon in popular culture, but might be represented as leading to catastrophic or comedic consequences, such as in the films, *Falling Down* (1993) and *The Full Monty* (1997), for example.

As characters in the media, geeks are familiar as being less attractive, in order to differentiate them from more conventionally attractive main characters. Occupying a supportive role as sidekick, as a foil to the main character, they often demonstrate some essential element that the main character does not possess or needs, such as technical knowledge, Benji from *Mission Impossible III* (2006) for example. They also demonstrate signs of subordinate and marginalised masculinity, in relation to active, hegemonic males (Connell 25), especially in terms of sexual relationships. Recent television representations of male geeks locate them as main characters and drivers of narrative, rather than being in supporting roles, evidenced in *The Big Bang Theory* (2007). The storylines to this sitcom are based around the geek characters encounters with the outside world, which they approach literally, and which demonstrate their obsession with knowledge and expertise, and the comedic effect of applying scientific rationality to domestic situations.

A proliferation of geek characters in representation suggests more acceptance and approval of the geek as a legitimate form of masculine identity. Contemporary interpretation of adult male geeks has shifted from formerly negative to positive (Hoppestand 809; Feineman 4; Kendall 261), and they have become more 'popular' as a consequence.

While the geek becomes an acceptable form of masculinity, the marginalisation of geeks comes from being portrayed as sexually incompetent. Sexual incompetence is a conventional code in the representation of geeks. This can be explained with reference to normative, heterosexual masculinity as domination of women (Connell 25), which is represented through 'getting the girl', yet when 'getting the girl' is portrayed as being too difficult, is unsuccessful, or, for some characters, is of little interest at all, then the relationship between sexual prowess and hegemonic masculinity might be considered to have changed.

In concert with the rise of geeks in popular culture, there has been an increase in academic research on geeks. In their study of

mathematicians in popular culture, *Constructions of Mathematical Masculinities in Popular Culture* (2007) Moreau, et al. explore the representation of mathematicians as principally male identities and the gendered effects that these have on audiences. They argue that mathematics is still considered to be a highly male, white domain, conjuring up images of older men or geeks, amongst audiences (141). Mendick and Francis in *Boffin and Geek Identities: Abject or Privileged?* (2011) examine the geek as part of youth identity in secondary education in the UK, and find that the term 'geek' is used perjoratively to denote academic diligence (22). Other research explores sexual and racial identity of geeks, with a focus on the diluting of white geek identity (Eglash 50), the shift from marginalised to more mainstream hegemonic masculinity, through expertise at computing (Kendall 261), and racial identity and stereotypes (Kendall 505). Bell (43) also explores geek identity in terms of the changes in the creative urban landscape. This paper contributes to these existing analyses by suggesting that social interaction and a range of sexual behaviours displayed through the rise of the geek in popular culture are competing with values of heterosexuality and more traditional forms of hegemonic masculine identity that have been represented in the past.

The following section identifies the characteristics of male geeks, makes a clear differentiation between geeks and nerds, and explores the ways in which geeks adhere to hegemonic values of masculinity. The paper then outlines Connell's highly debated theory of hegemonic masculinity, with a particular focus on the representation of hegemonic masculinity as 'the businessman' (58). It examines a shift away from the time specific definition of business masculinity towards an understanding of masculine hegemony that reclaims mastery over scientific discourse, and considers the issue of competence in sexual relationships. The paper then moves on to a close analysis of the popular TV sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* (2007). It will explore the male identities and the range of sexual behaviours within the show in order to highlight changes in the way that masculinity is being portrayed, and the ways in

which these depictions might contribute to a more diverse form of masculine hegemony.

The Rise of the Geek

As popular culture is believed to be a vehicle which conveys ideologies to the masses (Storey 4), especially hegemonic narratives (Peele 7), the ways in which masculinity is depicted is an important issue, and Gauntlett (12) emphasises the educational value of representing gender identities through the media and popular culture. Television series play a key role in representations of gender identities as they ‘simultaneously teach us and reinforce the division between acceptable and unacceptable’ (Peele 2). As they tend to be broadcast regularly, Television series allow for identities to build and grow at a much slower pace than in film for example. While representations of masculinities of the past have been criticized for their one dimensional nature (Gauntlett 50), Peele (7) suggests that, in television series in particular, there are now greater opportunities for more nuanced, and presumably, more ‘accurate’ representations of a range of gender identities, of which the male geek is only one.

There has been a steady rise in representations of male geeks in popular culture since the 1980s, and the terms ‘geek’ and ‘nerd’ are much more widely used in popular discourse. Kendall (506) associates this increase with an alliance between geeks and the concomitant growth in the popularity of the computer industry and the Internet. I also suggest there is a resurgence of scientific discourse and greater public interest in investigative procedures, such as detection and pathology, through TV shows such as *NCIS* (Bellisario and McGill, 2003) and *Silent Witness* (BBC, 1996) which populate popular culture, and which further raises the profile of the geek.

The terms geek and nerd are used interchangeably, (in US parlance, they appear to mean the same thing, and are used interchangeably in the quotes in this paper) and there have been various attempts to explain the etymology of both terms. For example, the British

actor, Simon Pegg claims that the word, nerd, derives from the phrase, 'ne'er do well', a good for nothing or loser (Pegg in Crocker). Conversely, Kendall (*Geeks May Be Chic...*) argues that the term nerd has no etymology and is nonsensical. Traditionally understood as being part of the 'less masculine' end of the male spectrum (Connell 19) along with 'wimps', geeks and nerds are now more likely to be represented as an accessible form of male identity, and are represented as 'cool' in popular culture (Feineman 5; Hoppenstand 809). Geek symbolises a specific set of characteristics that individuals might identify with, which will be developed further below.

Kendall asserts "'Geek' is something you can do and then leave behind, but 'nerd' is what you are" (*Geeks May Be Chic...*), suggesting that nerdiness is embodied, easily read and played out through everyday social interaction, whereas geek is more about a knowledge base. However, there is a noticeable representational difference between nerds and geeks in popular culture. Nerds are represented as subordinate males (Connell 21), socially and economically incompetent, often failing to demonstrate the usual accoutrements of hegemonic masculinity where skills, knowledge, expertise and sexual prowess are highly prized characteristics (Kimmel *Global Masculinities: Restoration and Resistance*; Connell and Messerschmidt 830). Nerds are represented as being accident-prone, they struggle with everyday tasks from which comedy emerges, live with a parent rather than being independent, and they might only find friendships with social outcasts with whom they identify, for example, the eponymous Napoleon and his ally, Pedro, from *Napoleon Dynamite (2004)*. Moreover, they often exhibit a highly organised, parallel fantasy world, to which they aspire, and which elevates their status as heroic main protagonists. This is a common theme found in the TV comedy, *Flight of the Conchords (2007)* where the characters of Brett and Jemaine imagine themselves to be successful musicians rather than struggling ones, or having lasting and meaningful sexual relationships with women, rather than being consistently rejected and sexually unsuccessful. They are presented to audiences as

marginalised, subordinate men, and audiences read and identify them as such.

In contrast with the way that nerds are represented, geeks are portrayed through demonstrating vast intelligence and expertise, coupled with an inability to engage with normative values of social expectation and interaction. They are intelligent, often expertly so, but the level of intelligence contributes to social ineptitude; the focus on science means that the social is ignored (Traweek in Eglash 54). The personal and social lives of the geeks in *The Big Bang Theory* (2007) demonstrate a disjuncture between success at work and their personal and social accomplishments. The characters demonstrate consistent characteristics of expertise, above and beyond the everyday: working for NASA, for example, which signify hegemonic masculinity. Yet, they frequently demonstrate social awkwardness and a range of successes in personal relationships from unsuccessful, to an increasing preference for seldom seen asceticism: a complete abstinence of sexual behaviour, as a form of sexual identity.

Hegemonic Masculinity

Connell suggests that hegemonic masculinity is a desirable state for men as it represents the pinnacle of power and achievement (21). This conception has been widely criticised for being too vague, broad and relying too heavily on stereotypes (Beasley 88; Demetriou 337; Hearn 50). Yet, hegemonic masculinity provides a useful framework when considering visual representation that focuses on stereotypes and an accepted system of codes (Hall 25). Hegemonic masculinity is also portrayed in such a way that is comprehensible to a variety of audiences, who tend to be able to identify the hegemonic male through his heroic tendencies and conspicuous success, via the male gaze (Mulvey 11). Moreover, the range of masculinities identified by Connell from hegemonic to subordinate are commonly portrayed through stereotypes in popular culture and frequently occupy binary positions (55).

In the latter half of the 20th century, the most identifiable form of hegemonic masculinity was the businessman, easily perceived as such through demonstrations of authority, enacting power, sexual prowess and financial wealth. According to Connell, the dominant form of masculinity in the early 80s was associated with driving capitalism, globalisation and financial expansion. The men who created global markets and worked within them were embodied through 'transnational business masculinity' (51-52), evoking the time in which it was conceived. The 80s was a time of free market economy, and the 90s saw an increased global economic expansion with developing countries started to embrace capitalism. Within this world economic setting, transnational business masculinity was characterized by thrusting neo-liberal individualistic capitalism, was heterosexualised and trans-global.

Connell envisaged him to be a businessman, driving the capitalist machine (82), which is also reflected more recently in Toynbee and Walker's study of some of the highest earners in London (*Meet the Rich*). In his study on the relationship between masculinity and consumerism, Edwards identifies this form of identity as the 'yuppie', demonstrating wealth through ostentatious consumer accessories, evidenced by the physical trappings and baubles of masculine business such as cufflinks, expensive male grooming products and filofaxes (38). This form of masculinity resonated in representations in popular culture by characters such as Gordon Gecko in the film, *Wall Street* (1987), and Patrick Bateman from the book by Brett Easton Ellis, and later, the film, *American Psycho* (2000). This novel is a highly colourful indictment of 1980s hyper consumerism brought about through utilitarian business techniques and relentless competition. When adapted into a film in 2000, the character of Patrick Bateman is: 'exceedingly handsome, possesses a muscular body, attracts beautiful sexual partners, his career requires very little effort or work but makes him wealthy and powerful' (Cunningham 42). Bateman embodies the stereotype of the Wall Street Trader as the 'Big Swinging Dick' (Lewis 200) from the 80s, 'resonant with virility, sexual prowess and masculine sensuality' (Lewis 206).

Thirty years later, the global economic crisis of 2008 seems to have been a product of the performances of exemplary transnational businessmen, which have been highly questioned (Toynbee and Walker *Meet the Rich*). This is evident in the backlash against international banking practices (Flannery *Respect for the Banks Drops in US*) and the call for the bonuses of exceptionally high earners to be moderated (Hillman *Why we've interviewed RBS but not Lloyds*). As pleas for moderation and greater control over capitalism gather momentum, a number of high profile wealthy men appear to be indifferent to wealth as a signifier of masculinity. Bill Gates, Warren Buffett, George Lucas and Mark Zuckerberg, amongst others, have pledged to give away most of their money to philanthropic works and charitable organisations (givingpledge.org: 2012). While Eikenberry points to the issues of philanthropic donations and their influence on governance (588), these drives towards charitable donations, rather than ostentatious displays of wealth suggests that accumulated wealth, once a signifier of masculine hegemony described by Connell (89) and Kimmel (*Global Masculinities: Restoration and Resistance*) might now be considered an undesirable characteristic.

As representations of hegemonic masculinity as the 'businessman' stereotype have declined, coupled with a wider cultural downturn in financial mastery, once more, masculinity might be considered to be in crisis (Clare *On Men: Masculinity in Crisis*). Yet, rather than any obvious catastrophic effect on hegemonic power, male success might now be represented differently.

The relationship that sexual behaviours have to hegemonic masculinity might be questionable. Donaldson (645) summarises the sexual aspect of masculine hegemony, which is that 'women exist as potential sexual objects for men while men are negated as sexual objects for men'. Kimmel (*Global Masculinities: Restoration and Resistance*) suggests that the businessmen's tastes in sexuality have become 'liberal' which indicates a possible shift in sexual behaviours without undermining masculine hegemony. In popular culture, in concert with hegemonic values of monogamy, liberal approaches to sexuality are rare:

men still desire women, and the 'getting the girl' storyline is a common one. Geeks are usually portrayed as being unsuccessful in sexual encounters with women, which marginalises them, yet they appear to be successful in other areas. This might suggest an acceptance of failed normative heterosexuality or a refiguring of hegemonic masculinity as the geek.

Representations of masculinity through scientific discourse, rationality and technical investigation, in concert with a diverse range of sexual prowess, and homosocial (Sedgwick 25), rather than sexual kinship ties have increased in representation in popular culture. This is also a reflection of wider social patterns: Roseneil (415) refers to a number of studies which suggest that in the late 20th century, close kinship ties between groups of friends were often stronger than familial relationships as a consequence of greater geographical mobility and decline in 'traditional' family structures.

Geeks as 'Men of Science'

Representations of men as single, engaged more fully in homosocial relationships than familial ones, with varying degrees of success in both work and relationships are increasingly apparent in a range of popular culture texts from the 1990's to the present day, most notably, *Friends* (1994), *Two And a Half Men* (2003) and *How I Met Your Mother* (2005). This suggests that there is an appetite in representation of masculine identities for men who are less obviously successful and heroic and more ordinary in terms of success and failure, and a growing fascination with extreme rationality and scientific endeavour.

Arguably, geek as a form of identity has become synonymous with science, which has experienced a renaissance in television representation, especially in the UK. Scientific discoveries are commonly reported in the news and funding science is publicly debated, and representations of science in the media vary. The economy is volatile

and has long lasting and often detrimental consequences on individuals, whereas science appears to be the epitome of rationality, objectivity and abstract application. Representations of science carries its own controversies, especially when portraying female scientists as 'sexy' (Chimba and Kitzinger 5), but interestingly, science, especially cosmology appears to have a greater media presence in times of economic depression.

In the 1980's, when it is claimed that the recession was worse than that of the 1930's (Auxier *Reagan's Recession*), the astronomer and cosmologist, Carl Sagan, popularized science and astronomy through his television series: *Cosmos* (1980). In 2010, in the UK, the British particle physicist, Brian Cox presented *Wonders of the Universe* (2010) with viewing figures of 3.6M (Rosser *BBC2's Universe Starts with a Big Bang*). Despite the thirty-year difference in these TV shows, they were screened and became extremely popular in times of acute western economic depression. They were also presented in such a way that the subject matter is accessible, through the personal enthusiasm for the subject by the presenters, yet is given greater gravitas by the fact that the men presenting are real scientists, and therefore their knowledge and expertise is applied. This contributes to their status as hegemonic males: while their knowledge is watered down for the public, behind the scenes, they are able to apply their knowledge to advance science.

The decline in economic mastery has elevated the position of the geek from the sidekick to centre stage in science as well as in representations of science. The hegemonic male of the past was identified by his suit, his bonus and the trappings of economic capital, but now is increasingly reinscribed through knowledge and technical expertise, rather than through physical embodiment, signaling a shift in the power of the material, to the abstract. Drawing on the representation of the male characters in the *Big Bang Theory* (2007) television show, this paper examines the ways in which masculine success is represented through knowledge and expertise, but conflicts with unsuccessful social interaction and lack of sexual prowess.

The Big Bang Theory

The American sitcom, *The Big Bang Theory* (2007) is a popular television comedy show occupying a top ten position in American viewing figures and regularly drawing in an average of 14 million viewers (Digital Spy). The show features an ensemble cast of actors and primarily centers on the fictional lives of a group of four male scientists, working at the fictional California Institute of Technology and their relationship with the outside world. This relationship is often mitigated through their female, non-scientist friend, Penny, who lives in the apartment opposite two of the characters, Sheldon and Leonard. All four scientists embody geekiness in their clothing, which is often unfashionable, roll-necks and sleeveless jumpers for example. They also talk regularly about their knowledge and expertise, their parallel knowledge of science fiction and their social inadequacies. Much of the humour and comedy derives from the characters applying extreme rationality to everyday situations, the lack of social awareness and skills in sexual and everyday relationships, set against the more common, normative values of their stereotypically blonde neighbour, Penny.

The Geek mise-en-scene

In Sheldon and Leonard's apartment, where much of the narrative takes place, the geek mise-en-scene is carefully and lovingly constructed. There are prominent white boards displayed in the apartment, covered with formulae and algorithms' to demonstrate science as always being 'in process', and is a key signifier of the protagonists scientific identity. That they have white boards in their home suggests that being a scientist is more of a personal vocation than nine to five role. This distinction contributes greatly to their scientific identities, and implies that scientists are not subject to normative work-life values, thus elevating their status. There are a number of clues throughout the apartment signifying their interest in science and a further parallel interest in science fiction, from the Batman lunchbox in

the kitchen, to the Periodic Table shower curtain in the bathroom. The apartment is neat and prim, and significantly tidier than a normal person's apartment, or indeed an apartment shared by male roommates, and while the tidiness reflects the sitcom style, it also suggests meticulousness and an obsessive desire for a rational and orderly life, espoused by Leonard and Sheldon. As Gorman-Murray suggests, 'The home is ...an increasingly important marker of personal identity' (229). The desire for orderliness is further reflected in Sheldon's daily habits, which are recorded: 'everyone at the university knows that I eat my breakfast at 8 and move my bowels at 8:20'. What appears to be important in the way the geeks are dressed and how they live, is that audiences can easily read their geek credentials, and that the audience is in no doubt as to what the content of the show will be about i.e. geeks negotiating everyday life and the emergent comedy from that.

Notably, in his summary of male representations, Beyon (74) refers to the commercialisation of masculinity, where masculine identities were embodied through clothing and actions of men. Geek is now a type of fashion, suggesting that while some people put it on as part of the bricolage of fashion, for others, it is a constant reflection of identity (Feineman 5). That the characters dress casually reinforces their expert status: they are already scientists in a University, which does not often require them to interface with the public and there are few people they need to impress. Through action and discourse, there is also the suggestion that they are at the top of the scientific game, for example, Sheldon regularly speaks of winning the Nobel Prize for Science as the next stage in his career.

There is a great deal of reflexivity around the geek identity, and the characters frequently refer to themselves as 'nerds', which is worn as a badge of honour and signifier of membership of their group.

Sheldon: Excuse me Penny, but we're playing Klingon Boggle.

Leonard: Aw, don't tell her.

Howard: What do you mean, 'aw', like she didn't know we're nerds?

Howard's point is a useful one, the characters are all styled in such a way that makes their geek status easy to 'read' and is embodied, from their hairstyles and old-fashioned clothing to their average or under average body size. Howard and Leonard are noticeably short for men, and rather than going to the gym to make their bodies bigger, they make up for their weedy physiques through demonstrating their technical expertise and knowledge. For example, Howard tries to impress women by driving the Mars Rover. As scientists, they are comfortable in their scientific identities because their vocation already positions them as experts, and they enjoy the marginality their expertise brings them, which is present in the 'scientific banter' they share with other colleagues, yet their social and sexual identities remains more indefinite, which will be explored in more greater depth below.

Personal Relationships

Most of the geek characters in the show, especially Sheldon, struggle with the conventions of common social interaction, from ordering food to understanding jokes.

Leonard: For God's sake, Sheldon, do I have to hold up a sarcasm sign every time I open my mouth?

Sheldon (intrigued): You have a sarcasm sign?

That the geeks often lack proficiency in social interaction is an implied consequence of the nature of their work. The need to demonstrate proficiency and adroitness, as science is in itself, a job of work, there is little time and energy to engage with others. But most notably, they all lack proficiency with women. For example, the character of Raj becomes mute in the presence of women and can only carry out a conversation with one after he has been drinking alcohol. All of the characters except for Sheldon fervently desire relationships with women, which reinforce

heteronormative relationships, which in turn, are supported by masculine hegemony.

Sheldon often shows a blatant disregard for social conventions and etiquette, not because he fails to understand them, but because he does not consider them to be important, and his ability to 'read' a social situation is often very limited. Key components of hegemonic masculinity are authority and rationality (Connell 25) and Sheldon evokes a sense of hyper-rationality that takes him beyond usual representations of masculinity. As the quote below suggests, rationality frequently obstructs usual social conventions.

Penny: So how've you been?

Sheldon: Well, my existence is a continuum, so I have been what I am at each point in the implied time period.

Yet rather than making him seem authoritative, the hyper-rationality renders Sheldon child-like in social interactions and he struggles with relationships daily; the characters of Leonard and Penny often act as protective parental figures to Sheldon's child.

Penny: Oh, honey, did your mom not have the talk with you? You know, when your private parts started growing?

As he appears to be in need of protection, it is difficult to equate Sheldon with an identifiable model of hegemonic masculinity; therefore, the rationality that often elevates men, in this instance at least, seems to undermine the masculinity of this character.

Sexual Relationships

The struggle that Sheldon experiences with daily social interactions is also present in the other geek's relationships with women. One of the main factors that make *The Big Bang Theory* (2007) stand out from other representations of masculine identity in popular culture is the way in which male sexual relationships are portrayed. Rather than presenting a straightforward portrayal of

heteronormativity, *The Big Bang Theory* (2007) portrays a range of sexual relationships within heteronormativity. The relationships range between successful, non-successful, ambiguous and ascetic.

Other than Sheldon, all the male characters seek sexual relations with women, including those on the periphery of the homosocial group: Stuart who owns the Comic Book Store, and Barry Kripke, another scientist colleague, which reinforces the ideal of heteronormativity of the geek identity; gay geeks, or any gay characters are not represented at all. Characters representing something other than the binary between heteronormative and (often implied) homosexual sexualities are rare in popular culture. While Bell (48) suggests that there is a distinct relationship between gay and geek identities in urban environments in that both groups have been marginalised, in the landscape of popular culture, themes of homoerotic desire emerge, but are never dealt with seriously, nor, as Peele suggests, are they represented as a 'desirable state' (2). That men desire women remains a constant in representations of geeks, and the lack of sexual prowess threatens the masculine hegemony of the characters.

In *The Big Bang Theory* (2007) all of the geek characters refer to sexual relationships as 'coitus'. Referring to sex as 'coitus' does a number of things: it describes male and female sexual interaction, which reinforces heteronormativity; it is a 'proper' scientific term signifying heterosexual relations only, and which creates formal distance between the act of sex and emotion, and finally, as it is a scientific term, it elevates its status, making it the zenith of relationships and therefore, more exotic and unattainable. Freud referred to coitus as being distinguishable from everyday sexual intercourse due to its 'ceremonial' nature (268), and for many of the characters, sex is elevated to a higher, unattainable, plane. Most of the characters fantasize about acting out sexual ceremonies at which they will be masters, in which women occupy fantasy roles where they will do what ever the men desire, even though the geeks do not fully understand or fail to comprehend what that might be. Sexual relations become a game to be played with specific rules, attainable only to the winner, or part of science fiction fantasy to be acted out.

While the protagonists mainly desire sexual relations with women, it is unattainable to the geeks due to their lack of prowess that in turn, appears to be a consequence of their focus on expertise surrounding their work. When past relationships are recalled, they only occurred singly or as a fantasy, therefore, there is little experience to be called upon. In the early series, Leonard has an intermittent sexual relationship with Penny, and Howard hits unsuccessfully on a number of women, before finding a lasting relationship with biologist, Bernadette. In this respect, Howard's status becomes elevated above others in the homosocial group, his identity shifts from a 'man in waiting', successful in only one area of his life, to the more traditional characteristics of masculine hegemony, and part of the patriarchal norm of the successful married man.

While identifiable heterosexuality seems to be a signifier of hegemonic masculinity, which is based on the idea proposed by Connell (25) that heterosexuality dominates and oppresses homosexuality, what constitutes 'success' in heterosexual relationships seems to be a more fluid concept, and one that is seldom addressed as Connell (25) herself notes – moreover, the contribution that success in sexual relationships makes to hegemony is debatable.

In the show, the characters of Raj and Sheldon remain the most anomalous. The character of Raj reminds us of the gendered and global dominance of western scientific thought and the reach of the American Dream. He embodies the cultural stereotype of an alien trying to assimilate, sometimes unsure of the ways of the west, yet embracing the positive aspects afforded by consumerism and distance from cultural constraints. In another context, the character of Raj would demonstrate 'compulsory nerdiness for orientalized others' (Eglash *Race Sex and Nerds*), but in the *Big Bang Theory* (2007), he is just another science geek, yet his sexual orientation is more undefined than the others. Occasionally, there are homoerotic overtones between Raj and Howard, each sometimes taking on the feminine role that is missing from their lives in the early episodes which suggests a queering of Raj's identity. As he is so unsuccessful with women, and seemingly terrified of them (yet,

sometimes sleeps with them, notably, Penny) he occasionally wonders if he is gay. But his muteness around women reinforces his sexual fears, which might be related to fear of being weakened both sexually and professionally by women (Freud 269). Rather than troubling the norms of heterosexuality present in the text, Raj's ambiguous sexuality reinforces his otherness and outsider status as being culturally different. It is Raj who benefits the most from the homosociality of the group's dynamic and his sexual identity is the most threatened when Howard gets engaged to Bernadette, which upsets the order of the group and the friendship. Not only does Raj lose his best friend, his singleness and awkwardness amongst a group of people who are monogamous and heterosexual defines him as other, and also serves to situate him as a marginalised male, despite his high status as a scientist.

It is to the most sexually anomalous character of the group that I now turn. In *The Big Bang Theory* (2007), the character of Sheldon Cooper is differentiated from the other characters by his hyper-geekiness and ascetic sexuality, which is a thread running throughout the whole series. In the first episode, play is made around the sexuality of the Sheldon and Leonard living together as roommates, and other characters refer to their possible latent homosexuality. Sheldon's lack of sexuality is a highly explored subject throughout the sitcom. Sometimes, it is attributed to ignorance about the act of sex, and his childlike approach to social situations. Yet we discover that Sheldon is aware of sex in its most rational form, but that he simply chooses not to engage with it, and moreover, considers it a base act.

Sheldon: I'm quite aware of the way humans usually reproduce, which is messy, unsanitary, and based on living next to you for three years, involves loud and unnecessary appeals to a deity.

Disengaging with sexuality reinforces Sheldon's highly rational nature. Whereas his childlike approach to social interaction appears to undermine his masculine identity, his logical understanding of sexuality is admirable and demonstrates profound self-mastery. Sheldon's actions

suggest that in the rational world of science, sexuality appears as an irrational spectre on the horizon: sex is risky and uncertain, as well as being 'messy and unsanitary', and Sheldon is highly risk-averse.

Moreover, to some extent, as science is based on fact and rationality, the scope for risks is limited; something can either be proven now, in the future, or not at all. Sex and sexuality challenges rationality, the boundaries are more fluid as they are entwined with the uncertainties of emotion, which Sheldon is keen to distance himself from. Sheldon does not engage in sexual activities of any sort, either alone or with others. Such self-discipline in modern culture is rare, and usually directed toward honing the surface of the body through food and dietary regimens, rather than controlling the 'urges' of the body (Twigg 208).

Control and orderliness might be a reaction to postmodern hedonism that we have traditionally absorbed. While Sheldon's self-discipline appears to be in line with modern values of a socially integrated citizen, that he chooses to avoid sex has a substantial impact on his identity as a man. He is no longer defined by his sexuality, but by his position as a scientist. Sheldon has sacrificed himself to the higher power of science, which elevates the status of science as something that is worthy of such a tribute. Rather than engaging with sex and its symbiotic relationship with consumerism, the character of Sheldon as an ascetic, promotes the importance of science. Arguably, giving up, or avoiding sex, and leading the life of an ascetic requires far greater self-mastery (Peeters 25) than engaging in what might be termed as normative sexual relations. Whilst portraying men who do not engage in sexual relationships is not entirely absent from popular culture, as evidenced in the film, *The 40 Year Old Virgin* (Apatow and Carrell, 2005), that a man who is disengaged from sexual behaviour as a lifestyle choice, rather than as a consequence of a medical issue, and is a popular character in a very successful TV sitcom suggests an interesting shift in the representation of masculine identities.

Yet despite his adherence to asceticism, in the fourth series, Sheldon is set up on a date with a woman as a joke by Raj and Howard,

and embarks on a platonic relationship with her. Partly aware of some social conventions, Sheldon is keen to remind everyone that 'she is a girl who is my friend' and Amy becomes another member of the gang. What creeps into this relationship, is the way in which Sheldon is then able to display his authority as a man over a woman, by taking the unusual step of refusing to have sex with Amy, despite her desire. By refusing sex, Sheldon is as much in charge of the relationship as a man who demands sex of his partner.

Amy Farrah Fowler: Proposal: one wild night of torrid lovemaking that soothes my soul and inflames my loins.

Sheldon Cooper: Counter-proposal: I will gently stroke your head and repeat "Aww, who's a good Amy?"

Amy Farrah Fowler: How about this? French kissing. Seven minutes in heaven, culminating in second base.

Sheldon Cooper: Neck massage, then you get me that beverage.

Amy Farrah Fowler: We cuddle. Final offer.

Sheldon Cooper: Very well.

Despite the rationality that appears to render him child-like, it is through his asceticism that we understand and appreciate that Sheldon is, after all, a man, capable of displaying masculinity and his link to patriarchal values of power and control over others. Withholding sexual relations appears to be as powerful a form of control as enacting sexual relations over others, in this instance. Furthermore, what emerges here is that the character of Sheldon sees little difference between men and women. Rather than adhering to traditional binaries of male vs. female, Sheldon views men and women as basically the same, the way in which they differ is through degrees of intellectualism rather than through gender or sexuality. In this way, he is a 'saposexual' (Peckham *Urban Dictionary*). As he is not driven by his own sexuality, and he sees no hierarchical difference between genders, it is no longer a lens by which to read and assess others. This raises an important point around the way in which genders are represented. Gender is portrayed in a way that audiences can understand, but for the character of Sheldon, at least,

gender differences might be less of a power struggle than we understand it to be.

Conclusion

The landscape of popular culture has shifted, allowing for more nuanced representations of masculinity (Peele 2) and geeks are now more available as acceptable masculine identities. In the past they might have appeared as marginalised identities, but waning transnational business masculinity (Connell 25; Kimmel *Global Masculinities: Restoration and Resistance*) linked to the decline of economic prowess has meant that male success has been refigured. While male success in business is still very much present, in representations of men in popular culture, the geek is now no longer marginalised, but appears regularly as a popular form of identity (Feineman 5; Hoppenstand 209). The relationship between geeks and science appears to be paramount in representations of geeks and demonstrations of knowledge and expertise differentiates them from the more 'loser' characteristics of Nerds. Geeks represent a reclaiming of male scientific endeavour and a shift away from representations of hegemony through consumption and beauty, and more towards abstract knowledge, rationality and authority over others. In *The Big Bang Theory* (2007) tropes of heteronormative male/female sexual relationships appear highly familiar, but the way they are portrayed through the geek characters of Raj and Sheldon specifically, represents a new approach to the way that sexual relationships might be portrayed.

While varying degrees of male success is a prevalent theme in popular culture, abstinence from sexual relationships, disinterest in emotions of any degree and lack of differentiation between genders appear as new themes, and while hegemonic masculinities are still highly available in representations of popular culture, they are refigured in the characters of *The Big Bang Theory* (2007).

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