"No Geek Girls": Boundary-Work and Gendered Identity in the Israeli Geek Community

HADAS GUR-ZE'EV
NETA KLIGLER-VILENCHIK
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel

Boundary-work theory describes the discursive efforts of groups to limit access to membership and collective symbolic capital. In this article, we explore the gendered nature of boundary-work within an online community of Geeks—a subcultural identity that has been culturally and historically constructed as male dominated. Employing in-depth interviews and qualitative content analysis of posts on the Israeli Facebook group The Geekery, we examine how different voices negotiate the Geek identity. We identify 3 distinct spaces of struggle within which these negotiations occur: the group's collective identity, the self-identity of members, and the group's identifying of "others." In each space, we find a similar struggle between voices protecting the male-hegemonic identity and voices attempting to challenge the status quo. By identifying the emancipatory potential of boundary-work, the research thus contributes to a wider understanding of the relationship between digital technologies and gendered power relations.

Keywords: participatory culture, fan communities, boundary-work, geeks, gender

Geek communities are a prominent type of highly engaged audiences, growing in visibility and cultural influence. Over the past two decades, geeks have become a dominant cultural force, a powerful audience for the media industry, and achieved both academic and public attention (Barton & Lampley, 2013; McCain, Gentile, & Campbell, 2015; Stanfill, 2013). Although technology has helped the widespread adoption of geek culture (Dunbar-Hester, 2016; Lane, 2017), it has also endangered its exclusivity by opening up the boundaries for new audiences, forcing the group to patrol and enforce its perceived boundaries. This study focuses on the *gendered* nature of such boundaries. Seeing that access is influenced by power struggles, how does gender play into the negotiation over who can—and cannot—be a geek?

Scholars studying boundary-work—the discursive efforts of groups to construct and maintain boundaries around shared symbolic capital (Gieryn, 1983)—describe it as mostly an exclusionary mechanism. As practiced by geeks, boundary-work can refer to evident efforts of group members to police the boundaries of geeks' shared identity, with gender often identified as a major factor (Busse, 2013; Reagle, 2015; Yodovich, 2016). The gendered bias in women's access to the geek community can be

Hadas Gur-Ze'ev: hadas.gur-zeev@mail.huji.ac.il
Neta Kligler-Vilenchik: neta.kv@mail.huji.ac.il
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understood as a product of the structural inequality of technology more generally, which was historically constructed as a masculine trait (Baym, 2010; Bury, 2011; Ging & Siapera, 2018; Ott, 2018).

While most studies of geek culture focus on external understandings of geeks as a social and cultural category, often comparing and distinguishing it from fans (Barton & Lampley, 2013; McCain et al., 2015), this study focuses on *how self-defined geeks construct and police their shared identity*. Unlike early descriptions of geeks as deviant outcasts, scholarship today emphasizes geeks' power to protect their perceived status from outsiders. Studies describe this as masculine hegemonic power, with boundary policing seen as a mechanism enabling the exclusion of female participants or practices (Busse, 2013; Reagle, 2015). Yet, as we will argue, the focus on masculine dominance may not fully capture the dynamic and multifaceted nature of boundary-work, which could also be practiced *by women* to protest and change the group's boundaries*.*

To understand boundary-work as a gendered power struggle between group members, this study focuses on the case study of the Israeli geek community. Specifically, we examine discussions around geek identity taking place in the popular Facebook group The Geekery. We analyze participants' perceptions and definitions of the label "geek," conceiving of boundary-work as negotiations around identity construction. In describing this process, we offer the term *spaces of struggle*: a symbolic conflict of values occurring around three distinct arenas of identity formation: (a) the shared in-group identity, (b) the self-identity of members, and (c) the construction of the group's "other." In each of these spaces, we ask what conflicting values are represented through practices of boundary-work, and how they represent gendered power struggles. The research thus contributes to our understanding of the relationship between digital technologies and gendered power relations in the current, technology-saturated environment.

Marginal Gone Mainstream: Geeks, Values, and Boundary-Work

The term *geek* is widespread nowadays, both in everyday use and in scholarly research, as an identity label containing a mix of loosely connected characteristics, such as an association with technology, genres of sci-fi/fantasy, or personal attributes such as curiosity or even obsession. Examining these common perceptions shows that there has never been a single static meaning of the word *geek*. Thus, many scholars consciously avoid a definition (Barton & Lampley, 2013; McCain et al., 2015), and instead suggest viewing it as a social construct whose meanings are derived in use and change over time (Lane, 2017; Woo, 2015).

While the contents of this label may vary, researchers agree regarding the transition it has made from its original negative connotations and into the spotlight of today's popular culture (Barton & Lampley, 2013; Lane, 2017; McCain et al., 2015). Geeks' new position as market influencers and tastemakers has also been recognized by the media, with increasing references to geeks as "conquering the world" (Barton & Lampley, 2013, p. 1) or "inheriting the earth" (Scott, 2019, p. 65). The rise of geek culture is tightly connected to the digital revolution, with geeks attributed a central role in shaping the digital age (Dunbar-Hester, 2016; Peters, 2016).

The construction of the term *geek* as a social category can be understood using boundary theory. The term *boundary-work* was coined by sociologist Thomas F. Gieryn (1983) as the discursive

attempts to construct symbolic boundaries distinguishing between different fields. Boundary-work is described as an ideological rhetoric tool (Gieryn, 1983) also used for the distinction of social groups, whereby group members attribute selected values to their group, creating its public image by contrasting it to what it is not (Yeshua-Katz, 2016). In our case, boundary-work can be understood as a social practice used by geeks both for the acquisition of authority over symbolic resources as well as the denial of resources to others.

The Evolution of Geek Identity and Digital Technology

The etymological origins of the word *geek* are found in 16th century German, meaning a fool or a simpleton, and in English refer to a worthless, offensive person (Lane, 2017)—clearly negative, undesired characteristics. Later recorded uses of the word *geek* present it as a term applied by society to those who are excluded from it (Dunbar-Hester, 2016)—for example, in the early 20th century it referred to carnival freaks in American sideshow festivals. Thus, these first uses of *geek* position it as a deviant social category, defined by its otherness and exclusion—both spatially (a group living on the borders of society) and morally (physically and mentally inferior).

In the 1950s, the word *geek* retained its sense of marginality while shifting to a more mundane context—referring to antisocial, overly studious individuals (Dunbar-Hester, 2016; Lane, 2017), excluded for obsessively following hobbies seen as "marginalized or obscure" (McCain et al., 2015, p. 2). This exaggerated nature and choice of fringe interests maintained the geek's original negative association of social disfunction, often seen as coming at the expense of normal, healthy life. Given the function of boundaries as providing an active distinction from unwanted values and reassuring a group's social norms (Gieryn, 1983; Yeshua-Katz, 2016), the early meanings of *geek* imply a label *given to them by society* in an effort to maintain a separation from the negative values geeks represented.

Since the early 1980s, the term *geek* broke into consciousness in relation to then-obscure interests such as home computing (Bury, 2011). This stage marked the beginning of a shift wherein the increasing centrality of new technologies contributed to geeks' rising status (Dunbar-Hester, 2016; Lane, 2017). This shift was accompanied by a newfound power for geeks to define their own identity boundaries positively, as a label *adopted by geeks to describe themselves* (e.g., Scott, 2019). Alongside the rise of networked communications, geeks' early adoption of new technologies (Bury, 2011; Jenkins, 2006) has enabled them to celebrate their identity in the form of growing online fan communities. With this, the meaning of *geek* shifted, from a word suggesting pathology to an asset group members protect.

"Fake Geek Girls" and Gendered Boundary-Work

Gender has always received much attention in geek/fan studies, mostly focusing on stereotypical representations of men and women—both in the portrayal of fictional characters and in describing geeks (Barton & Lampley, 2013). Even though women participate in geek communities in increasing numbers, the male bias is still present in geek culture (Dunbar-Hester, 2016; Lane, 2017). Geeks are generally imagined as young, middle-class, White males, and geek practices are assumed to represent inherently masculine tendencies. This bias can be understood in relation to the social construction of gender and technology

(Baym, 2010; Ging & Siapera, 2018). Since early history, technology has served as a source of masculine power—from war tools in the iron age to hardware skills, science and computing in the current age (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016; Dunbar-Hester, 2008). Even today, the construction of technology as a masculine trait is closely related to "fundamental, structural conditions of inequality and discrimination in the technology sector" (Ging & Siapera, 2018, p. 521).

Ironically, the *geek* label itself was in the past devalued based on its association with femininity—seen as failed, endangered, subordinate masculinity in comparison with the strong masculine ideal of physical labor (Bury, 2011; Scott, 2019; Woo, 2015). Still, geek men and boys maintained superiority over women by using technology, effectively granting them privileged access and control over geek identity. They rejected feminine values and performances to separate themselves and their practices (Orme, 2016), thereby protecting their shared capital from the threat of lower status outsiders and their stigmatized taint of femininity (Scott, 2019). Specifically, women (and/or feminists) were targeted not only as "others" but also as instigators of the "injury" of geek masculinity. One of the responses to this perceived threat is the circulation of toxic masculinity (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Salter & Blodgett, 2017)—the use of misogyny and violence to police and delineate female (geek) identity.

While the geek remained conceptually connected to a masculine image, the rise of digital media increasingly lowered the barriers to engagement (Jenkins, 2006). Online spaces allowed for women to take an equal part as digital media users, in many spaces even outnumbering men (Baym, 2010). Especially, social media were associated with a turn from the masculine image of technology to more feminine-identified concepts of social communication (Ott, 2018), offering—at least in theory—opportunities for empowerment and liberation (Hurley, 2019).

In recent years, much of the literature around geek culture focused on gender relations and hierarchies within online communities. Kristina Busse (2013) describes geek identity policing through efforts to assign negative values to female practices—rejecting them for being "too girly" (p. 76)—as an attempt to protect geeks' positive identity. A similar tactic of geek identity policing is at the center of Joseph Reagle's (2015) analysis of the "fake geek girl" (p. 2863) discourse. In connecting positive values to the male identity, women fans are described with stigmatized values of superficiality or forgery, as being too emotional or childish (Reagle, 2015; see also Yodovich, 2016). Ascribing desired values (e.g., insider knowledge, authority, authenticity) to certain practices while excluding others is described as a key function of boundary-work (Gieryn, 1983; Yeshua-Katz, 2016). Yet while previous research of gendered hierarchy in geek culture considered the devalued female identity, these studies did not pay much heed to the multifaceted nature of boundary-work, which can also be practiced *by women* to protest and change the group's boundaries and values. Here, we use boundary-work theory to understand identity negotiation and ask how gender plays into the negotiation of geek identity, focusing on the case study of the Israeli geek community.

Case Study and Method

The Geekery

The term *geek* has only recently been adopted as the preferred term for self-identification among young Israelis. As an illustration, in 2005, the first author witnessed an incident where, on an Israeli message board for Dungeons & Dragons, a long-time participant told a newcomer: "There are no damn geeks here!"— revealing how deeply participants rejected the label. Only 15 years later, the Israeli Facebook group The Geekery, which has replaced message boards as the main platform for Israeli geeks' online discussions, is growing by the thousands, with more than 26,000 self-identified geek members. Although geeks in Israel have several annual meetings and conventions, as well as other online groups (on Facebook and other platforms), none is as big and diverse as The Geekery, which serves as a public group for anyone identifying as a geek or interested in geek culture. With about 23,000 active members (65% male and 35% female[1]), more than 1,500 new posts and 9,000 comments a month, this group was selected as a key site where geek identity negotiation occurs organically in daily online discussions.

Based on the nature of *geek* as an umbrella term for different subcultures and practices (Lane, 2017), The Geekery communicates openness, proclaiming in its description that the group is "dedicated to geek culture in all its colors and shapes" (The Geekery, n.d.) and thus allowing anyone who wishes to join the group and to be a part of this collective identity. At the same time, the group rules explicitly *prohibit* any *direct* discussions about definitions (e.g., what is a geek?) as well as any discussion of political or gender-related identities. These prohibitions are specified in the "Group Rules" document, classified under "Explosive Debates" and "Definitions and Labels" (The Geekery, n.d.).[2]

Rules and restrictions often signal phenomena that are of importance (Ortner, 1973). Thus, these rules and their active enforcement by admins can be seen as evidence of the centrality of the debate around the group's identity—even if such debate is prohibited from direct discussion. Although posts directly tackling the subject are forbidden, or deleted within hours if published, we focus here on how participants *construct the meaning of the concept geek in practice*—within the limitations allowed within The Geekery. To allow a deeper understanding of this meaning-making process, the article combines a content analysis of the Facebook group—examining values attached to the geek identity—with in-depth interviews with participants that enable raising those aspects that are forbidden—or for other reasons missing—from the Facebook group conversation. User details were removed to protect participants' privacy. The research was approved by the ethics committee of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (IRB).

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[1] Group statistics were received from the group administrators.

[2] In interviews, a group admin explained that these rules were established because of the recurrence of heated discussions in the past that required deleting and blocking content on almost a daily basis. They thus chose to forbid these discussions altogether.

Data Collection and Analysis

To create the corpus for content analysis, we used a keyword strategy that allowed us to capture conversations surrounding the meanings assigned to the concept geek, in both posts and related comments. We searched for the keyword *geek* in Hebrew, with specific declensions: *geek* [male], *geek* [female], *geeky* [single and plural], over a period of 12 months in 2017. This time period was selected as one where gender struggles online were salient, particularly—toward the end of that year—with the rise of the global #MeToo movement. To detect the discussions that particularly resonated with group members, we selected from within the corpus the five most commented upon posts per month. This resulted in a corpus of 60 posts and their 2,400 related comments, which enabled us to interrogate the values, perceptions, and understandings associated with the concept of *geek*—with a particular focus on its relation to gender.

In addition, the first author conducted eight in-depth interviews with Geekery participants. The aim of the interviews was to highlight topics that could not be discussed in the group—such as the perceived boundaries of the geek group identity—as well as other perceptions interviewees may feel more comfortable raising in conversation than in the public group. We use these interviews to complement and contextualize the content analysis vis-à-vis the interpretations of the participants themselves, by eliciting the point of view of several participants from varied backgrounds. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and followed a semistructured interview protocol that focused on definitions, labels, and boundaries, as well as reflections about how these are managed (or policed) in The Geekery.

Interviewees were all self-identified geeks, recruited from the group through a recruitment post authorized by group admins. Of the many volunteers who responded, we selected four women and four men. We also selected participants according to the level of activity in the group: Based on a preinterview questionnaire, participants were selected to include admins, very active users, silent readers, and participants who chose to leave the group. We used an interview guide that was adapted slightly to fit male and female participants, with different experiences in the group. All interviews were conducted in person, recorded, and fully transcribed into the Hebrew original. Interview excerpts used in the article were translated by the authors.

In the analysis stage, we first followed a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to trace the emergent discourse around the geek identity. In this stage, we first identified recurring concepts that group members connected to geek identity, and then considered how these related to each other. We then connected the emergent analysis to boundary-work theory, to consider how the values and perceptions of the geek identity can be understood as negotiations around the group's (gendered) boundary construction.

Findings—The Three Spaces of Struggle

In our analysis, we find conflicting values around the definition of the geek identity, taking place in three distinct areas of identity construction, which we refer to as three "spaces of struggle" (see Table 1). The first is the space of shared in-group identity, or boundaries around the definition of the *group*. Here, we include discussions around the defining contours of the group, reflected through the shared cultural

repertoire (i.e., *what* is geeky). The second is the space of *self-identity*, or the performance of the geek identity. Here, we consider discussions around what counts as the "correct" or accepted behavior for a geek (i.e., *how to be* a geek). The third space involves identifying and defining the contours of distinct groups perceived as *the other*—those who *cannot* be geeks. As our analysis shows, in each of these spaces, there is a negotiation between voices that seek to maintain and police existing boundaries, and voices calling to open them up.

Table 1. The Spaces of Struggle.

Space of struggle	# artifacts (posts & comments)	Example of narrow boundaries	Example of broader boundaries
In-group identity	96	"*Until you're not wearing a Superman swimsuit and dreaming of Ned Stark, you're not a geek*" (The Geekery, n.d.)	"*There is no geek-canon, as long as you love something—you're a geek*" (The Geekery, n.d.)
Self-identity	107	"*Your nails are long and groomed and what kind of a gamer can play like that?*" (The Geekery, n.d.)	"*Being a woman doesn't make me any less of a geek*" (The Geekery, n.d.)
The "other"	71	"*It's the feminists that turn every good corner into SJW crap*" (The Geekery, n.d.)	"*Geek culture is always the first to accept anyone rejected or different*" (The Geekery, n.d.)

Defining Shared In-Group Identity: "Wearing a Superman Swimsuit, Dreaming of Ned Stark"

The first layer of boundary-work we identified concerned negotiations around the shared in-group identity: a shared understanding of the group's contours, as well as in-group norms and reliance on cultural resources. For geeks, in-group identity is strongly tied to the genres, topics, or specific contents group members see as their common cultural repertoire.

The existence of an (assumed) shared repertoire is evident in the recurring topics discussed in The Geekery. As explicitly stated in the group description, the group employs a liberal approach as to the geek repertoire, inviting participants to discuss "*anything geeky . . . genres of fantasy, sci-fi, books, TV shows, conventions, video and board games, science, philosophy, computers . . . and anything to do with the general theme*"[3] (The Geekery, n.d.). Yet even if the proclaimed intention is for inclusivity, this specifically selected list still indicates a limited set of items that fit common descriptions of geek identity (versus, say, sports, fashion or politics). When asked about the profile of participants in the group, Ofir (M, 35), a group admin, said that "in large, the most prominent geeks, or if you picture the traditional stereotypical geek, it's sci-fi and fantasy."

In both group discussions and interviews, participants refer to an identity that largely aligns with common conceptions of geeks. Ayelet (F, 31) describes the geek cultural repertoire in an interview as a

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[3] Posts and comments from the Facebook group are italicized, to distinguish them from interview quotes.

"very narrow range of things: Star Wars, Star Trek, fantasy, sci-fi—those only. . . . Things that are stereotypically very geeky." She describes group members' expectation to see the well-established repertoire items, while rejecting others that are less common: "If you bring something that's a little on the 'geeky margins,' it won't be received well."

When they fear they may be departing from the well-established geeky repertoire, participants constantly request affirmation from the group. Many posts in the group open with the statement, "*I hope this is geeky enough.*" Sometimes, receiving validation to one's geekiness is the poster's sole purpose:

> Say, am I considered a geek? I'm a gamer who likes Marvel and DC, loves Star Wars and am crazy for Dragon Ball, and all of that since I was seven. Now I'm 12 and still love all these things, does that make me a geek? (The Geekery, n.d.)

Boundary-work functions as a form of self-regulation of a group, to maintain its established norms (Yeshua-Katz, 2016). Along these lines, participants police those boundaries against those who fail to adhere to the correct repertoire, as in this admonition: "*Until you're not wearing a Superman swimsuit and dreaming of Ned Stark, you're not a geek*" (The Geekery, n.d.).

As previously mentioned, the boundaries of geek identity are in many cases gendered, with geeks' common repertoire consisting mostly of products aimed at a perceived-male target audience (Lane, 2017). Discussions of this bias are quite common in the group. For example, both male and female participants criticize the number of female characters in geeky contents:

> Even if we really exaggerate and force ourselves to count characters that no one remembers . . . or girlfriends-of . . . we still literally cannot reach an equal number, or even close to it. This is pretty unbelievable. Women are not a negligible minority. (The Geekery, n.d.)

Both in the Facebook discussion and in interviews, participants also criticize representation on a qualitative level, mentioning sexualized stereotypes like the "cliché badass warrior woman," or, as Marina (F, 28) describes it: "It's not that there aren't enough women, but the question is, are they dressed."

The social climate that enabled the rise of broader gender protests online, such as the #MeToo movement and other forms of grassroots feminism (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016), is reflected within geek spaces by a mix of top-down and bottom-up actions directed at improving representation/s of women in popular culture content. In this context, the gender bias is addressed in the group through discussions of female presence in marketing, merchandise and leading roles. The common notion is one of a positive over time change: "In our time, regarding gender, it's very clearly improving" (Rotem, F, 26). This change is particularly notable when considering the same type of content just a couple of years ago, as pointed out by a Geekery member: "*The first* Avengers *movies received criticism for not having merchandise for their female characters. In comparison, the marketing of the new film has a very strong female presence*" (The Geekery, n.d.).

Some members attribute this change largely to the actions of fans themselves in protesting unequal representation in the geeky repertoire, as a form of fan activism (see, e.g., Lopez, 2011). Ayelet (F, 31) specifically refers to the cultural realm as a stage where (fan) activists can act on and change the geek repertoire: "Women's voices are now sufficiently loud and self-confident to point at the things in geek communities that are not representative of the gender perceptions we hold today."

While participants in The Geekery are aware of these changes, some consider it a necessary shift and an outcome of their collective efforts, while others are critical of the political correctness (PC) trend: "*I'm tired of this PC they put into everything today*" (The Geekery, n.d.). The struggle over the boundaries of in-group identity can thus be seen as two opposing reactions to PC culture: the first actively calls for new, corrected, contents to enter geek repertoire; while the second rejects any changes of the established canon. On either side of the struggle, we find both male and female participants, yet it was usually men who were more dominant in the objections to change raised in the group—and the ones benefitting from hegemonic control over the boundaries.

A recurring justification for preventing PC culture's change of the geeky repertoire is presenting the preservation of the canon as the uppermost value. As seen in this post, participants acknowledge inequality, but perceive it as an indispensable part of geek identity and history: "*It was an industry aimed at men. . . . . If comic books were meant for men and written by men, of course there will be inequality*" (The Geekery, n.d.). Some members self-identified as nostalgic—one member even describing geeks as "*hardcore purist fanboys*" (The Geekery, n.d.)—and thus felt justified in protecting any aspect of the revered geek repertoire, even at the expense of denying equal representation.

The terminology used by some members suggests the view that canonic contents are *natural*, whereas any change is always considered *forced* or *artificial*, external to geek identity. Marina (F, 28) complains that this could lead to the content being "abused . . . in order to fit some proper social scheme." Resisters to change also use the idea of historical accuracy to reject new, more diverse contents, claiming that they lack credibility and go against the "true intention" of the piece. Benny (M, 30) explains:

> Look at the new Battlefield [video game]. They made a trailer with lots of women. And yes, there were women in WWII. . . . But they put women in situations where there weren't any, in battalions that didn't have women, only to please and to create this marketable idea of "Battlefield for all" . . . . It shouldn't be at the expense of historical accuracy . . . the whole idea of the game is realism.

Using the canon to argue for or against cultural adaptations is often considered an "intellectual" justification (Yodovich, 2020). Such a justification could work against PC changes but could also serve to justify the changes. Reflecting the flipside of the struggle over boundaries is the view that, while the canon is important, it should always be subjected to change and innovation. To these group members, a continuous transformation is in and of itself *an intrinsic part of geek identity*, as this identity has always responded to social change and adapted new concepts. Ayelet (F, 31) specifically mentions sci-fi as a polysemic genre, and geek culture as particularly open to social change: "It [geek culture] was always more open to strong female characters than general society. The likes of Xena and Buffy were much harder to find on mainstream

in the 1990s." Similarly, some participants justified the existence of a female Doctor Who because the series itself is to them characterized by fluctuation—"a series of constant change," according to one interviewee. So, just like those objecting PC culture, those calling for more dynamic boundaries are also using the geek repertoire to justify what should be counted as geek identity.

Shared in-group geek identity is thus constantly debated in the group, by using geek repertoire as a reference point. Both sides can be seen as practicing boundary-work: while one side attempts to protect narrow boundaries, preserving the known canonical contents, the other side calls to shift and broaden existing boundaries to include more diverse contents.

Negotiating the Boundaries of Self-Identity: "I Was Born This Way!"

The second "space of struggle" we identified involved negotiations around self-identity, focusing on how group members present and perform geek identity. As aforementioned, geeks have undergone a historic process of reclaiming the term, using it nowadays as a self-ascribed identity label to express pride in their membership (Lane, 2017; McCain et al., 2015). In doing so, they are framing their supposed "anomalies" as positive identity traits. As a Geekery member describes it: "*To be a geek is to be grown-up, but still a child at-heart. To be a geek is to be interesting . . . smart . . . and colorful*" (The Geekery, n.d.). Reclaiming the term as a source of pride thus counteracts the former negative value, making the term a valuable asset within the group, one to openly state, present, perform—and protect.

The most tangible evidence of the importance of geek performativity was found in recurring instances of members declaring their geekiness with phrases like "*self-proclaimed geek since middle-school*"; "*I define myself as half-geek from first grade on, and full-geek from fifth grade on*"; "*from the age of 22 I added to myself the title—geek*" (The Geekery, n.d.). Benny (M, 30) emphasized: "It's important to me to say that I am [a geek]. Also, I always say 'huge' [geek], to emphasize how deeply I'm into it." In the Facebook group, members also used visual markers, like posting images of merchandise and clothing to demonstrate their geekiness. This performance of geek identity, in turn, requires demonstrating specific types of geek knowledge.

This insider knowledge is based both on knowing the correct *contents* of geek repertoire, building on the cultural repertoire discussed in the first section, as well as on the *depth of knowledge.* As Marina (F, 28) explained: "There's a difference between nongeeks who might know there's a Superman film, and geeks who know the complete history of planet Krypton and can talk for hours about why he's called Kal-El."

As with boundary-work around the shared in-group identity, negotiations of self-identity reflect a tension between two trends: on the one hand—and more common in The Geekery—are attempts to limit the geek identity only to those with insider knowledge of the geek cultural repertoire (which, as we saw in the previous section, is often limited and protected). On the other hand, there are alternative attempts to define geek self-identity not by holding specific knowledge but through more inclusive aspects. For example, according to Ayelet (F, 31): "You're a geek if you have unconditional love for some things." In comparison to the hierarchy of "authorized" knowledge, this view allows for broader access, focusing more on the opportunities to acquire insider-status through participation.

As part of this debate, participants discussed not only the type of needed knowledge, but also whether (and how) it can be acquired. The more open view perceives geeky knowledge as something anyone can gain—it might require hard work, but an option available for anyone with enough dedication. As Benny (M, 30) described it: "[You] need to put in a lot of time and learn a lot . . . you have to really want it and invest in it and make it a part of who you are." Other responses in The Geekery were more restrictive, perceiving a dichotomy between a geek tendency that's innate and authentic, and other performances that were seen as a "fake," "poser," or "wannabe" geek.

Boundary-work scholarship often describes this tension between insiders' claim for authenticity and how they perceive the danger of outsiders' infiltration (Busse, 2013; Scott, 2019; Yeshua-Katz, 2016). In The Geekery, we see boundary-work in action through the rhetorical efforts to assign values of authentic or real in a way that separates between "us"—those possessing a natural tendency, and "them"—the "pretenders." Marina (F, 28) illustrates this when describing the differences between her and her boyfriend: "I've always been one [a geek], I was born this way! He [her boyfriend] could never be a geek, even if he really wanted to, he can't do it. He doesn't have what it takes." Even one of the group admins, Ofir (M, 35), who has an official role to protect the all-inclusive approach of the group, employed an exclusionary dichotomy when distinguishing himself from a friend: "He's not really enthusiastic. I don't like using this phrase, but he's kind of a fake-geek."

In the scholarship (and in contrast to the two examples just discussed) the term *fake-geek* is almost always used to describe female geeks, as exemplified in the concept "fake geek girl" (Busse, 2013; Reagle, 2015; Scott, 2019). In The Geekery, we do not find this discussion directly, as it would have been prohibited by the group rules. However—and even though women make up about a third of The Geekery's members—we can see many of the group discussions as contributing to the *construction of the geek as a male identity*. In some posts, it was clear that female geeks perceive their (female identified) characteristics and choices as being devalued and even rejected as a "false performance." One member shared the type of comments she received about her looks, disqualifying her of being a gamer: "*Your nails are long and groomed and what kind of a gamer can play like that?*" (The Geekery, n.d.).

Several female participants described a narrative in which The Geekery was perceived as a somewhat hostile male-dominated environment, where they did not feel equally welcome. Ayelet (F, 31) described it as "not very accepting for women." Indeed, Itzik (24), one of the dominant male participants in the group, said he perceives it as a place *for guys* to meet and share their world: "I see it like locker-room talk; guys meet and exchange pictures and stuff. To a girl, we wouldn't talk this way." Although this view was not explicitly stated by many, it points at the persistence of the bias imagining geek identity as male (Dunbar-Hester, 2016), with any "request" to make the identity more inclusive seen as encroaching on its authenticity or "naturalness."

Still, boundary-work may also point at how excluded minorities may find ways of "breaking in": alternative paths to evade boundaries set by insiders to exclude them (Reagle, 2015). Our analysis points at three possible variations of roles assigned to women in relation to the geek identity: an anomaly, a sexual object, or "one of the guys."

An Anomaly

Female geeks are regarded as an exotic type of fan (Orme, 2016), a rare find, or—in participants' terminology—a "unicorn" or a "magical fairy," meaning that they are an unnatural, though wonderful, phenomenon. One female Geekery participant posted about her experience of being identified as an anomaly: "*[A] random geek notices that my ringtone is the opening theme for 'Durarara!!' [an anime series] and says: 'what?? You like Anime?? You're a geek?? Wow, surprising'*" (The Geekery, n.d.). A female is usually presented from the perspective of the male identity, as a sort of trophy. As Itzik claims (conversing with a female interviewer): "I mean, Dude! I'd die for my ex-girlfriends to know how to play videogames. That [a gamer girl] is really a valuable commodity."

A Sexual Object

Here, women are seen as placed on a dichotomy, opposite from the geek. Women are portrayed as sexual, dangerous beings who use their sexuality to "cheat" and force their way in to get attention, as opposed to the authentic geek male. In a post in The Geekery, a female participant shares: "*I was once told that I'm too pretty to like comics*" (The Geekery, n.d.). Itzik describes a discussion in The Geekery where a female participant was told: "You're not even a geek, you're a hottie! You can't be both!" The perceived danger of the sexual female identity can be gleaned by a few comments from male participants, complaining that female participants get undeserved attention: "*Geek girl shows some flesh and boom!—comments and likes as far as the eye can see*" (The Geekery, n.d.).

One of the Guys: Adopting the Male Identity

A third possible position for women is to internalize the values of masculine geek identity and their attached status, by referring to their own identity as "male," using a gendered language that codes geek identity as something belonging to men (Orme, 2016). Some female participants described a conflict between being a woman and being a geek: "*I was told I might not really be a woman, because I like Spiderman,*" or "*I always say 'bro' to girls when I talk to them about geeky stuff*" (The Geekery, n.d.). Some female geeks even refer to themselves as male, as one Geekery participant described a conversation with a female geek: "*I raised an eyebrow, and she just said: 'Yep, frankly I'm a guy.'*" (The Geekery, n.d.)

Yet beyond these three "sanctioned" options, there was another choice for women: to protest these boundaries and try to change them. This view was very dominant both in group discussions and in interviews, where (female) participants denied the notion of one "real" performance of the geek, and instead suggested a broad range of performances of geek identity. Ayelet (F, 31) explained her objection to being "authorized" by (male) others: "My identity as a geek will be authorized when no one doubts me simply for being a woman."

Taking their protest one step further, female members who left The Geekery opened a separate Facebook page called "No Geek Girls," devoted to sharing problematic statements they received for being female geeks, and to mock those, all in an empowering, female-only environment. While negotiations are

made toward both directions (more/less inclusivity), some predict that the construction of geek self-identity is bound to open up over-time as new and diverse audiences join the leagues.

Yet even if there is a shift, some members don't feel it's fast enough, or good enough. Just like the struggles around the shared in-group identity, we see two conflicting tensions around the required performance of geek self-identity: Some try to protect the boundaries around a (male) identity, in which women are assigned the role of the sidekick; other voices attempt to reimagine and recreate a geek identity that does not rely on being sanctioned by its male-oriented origins.

Distinguishing Geeks From "Others": "Feminists Have Ruined Marvel!"

Groups are defined not only by what they share, but also by how they distance and oppose in-group norms and practices from those of out-groups (Baym, 2010). This separation between "us" and "them" is identified as the third space of struggle, in which geek identity is favorably contrasted with different kinds of others. The attempt to maintain their positive value is achieved by rejecting the negative values previously attributed to geek identity and shifting it off to others. This "projection" of unwanted values can be to other members of their own category (Stanfill, 2013), but also by contrasting geek identity with other social identities seen as its opposite.

The label *nerd*, sometimes used as synonymous to *geek*, seems to serve for group members as a way to consciously reject negative values they wish to distance themselves from (Woo, 2015). This was often evident in the group; though a few members used *geek* and *nerd* interchangeably, most of the responses featured a distinction between geek—as the more valued identity, and nerd—as the devalued stigma. As Itzik (M, 26) explains: "Geek is something positive. Nerd is sort of negative, like a word to describe someone who's too bookish."

Another form of distinction is created by the clear separation of the geek from social identities seen as opposing it. In American scholarship, geeks are described in contrast to the stereotypical high school jock (Barton & Lampley, 2013). In the local context of Israel, the main oppositional identity seems to be the "ars"—a derogatory term referring to men perceived as coarse, boorish, or aggressive, stereotypically often attached to men from Sephardic/Arabic origin. When group members describe the "ars" as someone who is "by definition opposed to geek culture" (Ayelet, F, 31), they highlight the positive geeky traits through the contrast to the undesired social group.

In addition to policing group boundaries by flagging nerd and ars identities as outsiders, geeks also use boundary-work toward the mainstream, in an effort to protect the unique attributes of their sub-culture as marginal (Dunbar-Hester, 2016; Woo, 2015). This kind of boundary-work describes geek identity positively in contrast to the general public, presented as dull, shallow, uninspired or unintelligent, as in this Facebook post lamenting geek culture going mainstream: "*What interest would I have in something that used to attract only intelligent and creative people, but now will be passed through the hands of the gray mainstream masses?*" (The Geekery, n.d.).

By othering the mainstream, group members add to their own identity the quality of a special, exclusive subculture. This was evident in recurring discussions in the Facebook group taking pride in distinguishing geeks from "normal people." Indeed, the term "normies," along with other terms like "Muggles" and "No-Majes" (nonmagical people in the Harry Potter series), were very popular in discussions, serving to set a barrier against those who do not possess geek qualities.

Just as in the case of in-group and self-identity, gender was a central topic in the boundary-work toward "others." Over and above the nerd, the ars or the normie, the most dominant group of others—and the one most violently protected against—was feminists, or feminism as an ideology. This group was depicted as oppositional to geek identity, external/foreign, and dangerous. Some Facebook group posts discussing feminism presented it not only as an ideological group, but as a malicious outside force (e.g., "*They only act in spite, that is the problem*"; The Geekery, n.d.). In another example, in a long debate about the first female lead in the series Doctor Who, one participant admits that for him the debate isn't really about the authenticity of the canon: "*I don't care about The Doctor, I just hate the arrogant progressive feminism bullshit. Even if it's reasonable for the series, all the feminists turned it into provocation*" (The Geekery, n.d.).

In post-GamerGate[4] climate, the idea of the danger of the feminist woman was very present in some discussions. Benny (M, 30) describes his rising suspicion toward (female) others since Gamergate: "I have a strong antagonism since that incident . . . the one [woman] who led it is very extreme, very dangerous." Others often used the term SJW (social justice warrior), a derogatory term claiming that those who argue for social causes are actually only interested in self-promotion. This term was repeatedly used in The Geekery to describe attempts promoting a feminist agenda (e.g., "*The whole SJW shitstorm started without noticing that feminism today is bullshit and not real equality,*" The Geekery, n.d.), together with recurring mentions of PC culture as a threat to geek culture (e.g., "*There's a difference between 'any character' and 'an annoying politically-correct character that was added only for SJW,'*" The Geekery, n.d.).

Thus, feminist values are depicted as infringing on the values that are deemed more central to geek culture (e.g., artistic freedom or the authenticity of the popular culture text). In Benny's view, "If you want and choose to objectify women as a creator, that's your right." Within this debate, some participants link political ideology with economic incentives. In a heated discussion in the Geekery, a male participant wrote: "*I'm tired of pleasing liberals. Don't they know that the comic book audience is mostly libertarian? With every movie like that they lose money*" (The Geekery, n.d.). This post, in turn, presented the opportunity for others to confront him with the fact that the more diverse films have also been the more successful ones economically. Economic success of popular culture contents is thus presented as an indicator for societal trends—and for the need for geek culture to adapt:

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[4] GamerGate is a public online harassment movement first organized in gamer communities in 2014 against a female game developer, which later incorporated continual attacks on women and feminist issues on these platforms (see Salter & Blodgertt, 2017).

> They [the movies] must be adjusted according to modern values, even at the cost of alienating (a statistically small) part of the fandom that cries over every change . . . you and the likes of you can shout "bullshit SJW" all day long, but the money these movies make shouts louder. (The Geekery, n.d.)

Presenting this conflict even more clearly are those group members who identify as feminists, and call for open, inclusive boundaries. Rotem (F, 26) further connects the theme of economic incentives and political causes, referring to creators' economic incentive to create inclusive content—and the wider ramifications of this choice: "Even if they do it for money, because it's trendy, it does create a change here. We need to find the point where men—the rulers, let's call them that—let women in, and then open the boundaries." In this view, rather than defining geek identity by the opposition to other groups, it should be defined by norms of tolerance and by the acceptance of others. Rotem (F, 26) perceives the geek community in a way other participants aspire to, as a "unifying and accepting shelter," a place where "anyone who would not feel secure outside can be a part of, and get a sense of security in their identity."

Discussion

The case of the geek community in Israel exposed two conflicting positions in the negotiation around geek identity: on the one hand, those advocating for the preservation of narrow boundaries, while justifying this through the reliance on existing symbolic resources, such as the popular culture canon, and, on the other hand, those calling for broader or more fluid boundaries that attempt to incorporate new perspectives—and new audiences. We found these same basic conflicting positions (maintaining closed boundaries versus advocating for the opening up of boundaries) in all three "spaces of struggle"—that of group identity, of self-identity, and of the distinction between "us" and "them."

In each of these spaces of struggle, this conflict included specifically gendered aspects in which those advocating for closed boundaries attempted to reinforce the (masculine) canon, to call for preserving (masculine) authentic performances, and to present feminist progress as the dangerous "other." Employing a birds-eye-view to the three spaces of struggle, we could identify, in each of these spaces, two conflicting power groups. On the one hand, boundary-work was used to protect rather limited, existing boundaries, and ensure the exclusivity of those already in a powerful position. On the other hand, similar practices of boundary-work were applied to protest and change those boundaries, to include new participants and values.

This research thus highlights the role of gendered boundary-work as the discursive efforts to set, defend, or—alternatively, reimagine—the boundaries of a social group, reflecting dynamic processes of in-group gender power struggles. As geek culture gains increasing public attention, while still maintaining a perceived exclusivity as a subculture (McCain et al., 2015), recent literature has discussed the struggles of women in this gender-biased, masculine-hegemonic sphere (Busse, 2013; Reagle, 2015; Scott, 2019; Yodovich, 2016). However, contrary to previous descriptions of boundary-work as solely an exclusionary mechanism, our findings uniquely point at how similar rhetoric tools can also be used to reframe geek identity around different, more inclusive values, thus using boundary-work to open up, rather than to close off. As our findings show, boundary-work can be used to readjust existing boundaries, built on the values

of inclusiveness, diversity, and equality—that stand in contrast to previously revered values of insider knowledge or authenticity of the canon (Busse, 2013; Reagle, 2015; Scott, 2019; Yeshua-Katz, 2016).

Our analysis of the practice of boundary-work as a two-sided strategy—that can open up as well as close off—can be contextualized within the broader societal context in which these shifts occur. These include both technological and sociocultural changes, such as the increasing use of digital participatory platforms among broader populations (Baym, 2010; Ott, 2018), as well as recent feminist activism such as that associated with the #MeToo movement (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016; Scott, 2019). The history of the connection between geek culture, technological innovation, and masculine dominance shows the gender bias constructed in this subcultural environment (Dunbar-Hester, 2016). Accordingly, as opportunities for participation change and open up, new participants bring with them new ideals and values. As Ott (2018) claims, ideally online participation should be based on values of "openness, collaboration, and networking, which in theory align with feminist values such as access, cooperation and inclusion" (p. 93).

Notwithstanding our aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of identity dynamics in the geek community, a few limitations must be acknowledged. First, while we focus here on opening up boundaries in the context of a binary gender distinction between masculine/feminine values, and male/female participants, we acknowledge that this focus is a partial one. We did not include here other gender identities (e.g., trans, nonbinary), nor forms of exclusion enacted in the group toward different kinds of minorities (around race, class, religion, sexual orientation, etc.). A fruitful area for future research may be to consider how other minorities' struggles represent a similar dynamic wherein boundary-work may be used not only to protect existing definitions, but also to open up participation for different kinds of others.

In this study, we analyzed the gendered power relations in a specific context, that of the Israeli geek community. While this is a limitation, we can also see it as pointing to an important lacuna in scholarly understandings of fandom outside the Anglo-American realm. Perceiving geek culture as a global phenomenon, we understand that geek identity is uniquely shaped by local cultural contexts (Dunbar-Hester, 2016), while the nation-state is only one among a constellation of relevant contexts, including gender, popular, or fan cultural contexts (Chin & Morimoto, 2013). Identifying specific local meanings, as well as cross-cultural or transnational exchanges, may help us understand trends and phenomena as applicable to an increasingly global scale.

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