

Nerd-Chic Look— Cultural Capital and Signs in the Relationship of Knowledge and Power

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Abstract. In contemporary media and fashion discourse, the image of “nerd” has undergone a significant transformation —from a marginalized character to a symbol of authority and appeal in films and television. This article analyzes the Nerd-chic style of Sheldon from *The Big Bang Theory*, Sherlock Holmes from *Sherlock*, and the menswear outfits worn by Annie in *Annie Hall* as case studies, by combining with Foucault's theory of power and knowledge to further fill the existing gaps in the field also with the supplement the concepts of cultural capital, consumption symbols, and power discourse. The cases examined on the formation of the Nerd-chic look indicate that intelligence has become a symbol of cultural capital, and consumers purchase these signs to construct their own social discourse power. This study combines media narrative with fashion semiotics to fill a gap in academic research on the sociocultural construction of knowledge elitism and its gendered and symbolic fashion expressions. Furthermore, it offers a new perspective on understanding how knowledge and power intersect through fashion and symbolism within popular culture.

Keywords: Nerd; Nerd-chic look; Knowledge and Power; Intellectual Worship; Cultural Capital; Fashion and Consumption.

1. Introduction

The term “nerd” has long been associated with negative stereotypes because it represents poor social skills, being boring, and not fashionable enough. However, with the reconstruction of this identity by mass media and the internet, it has gained a unique charm. As Lee and Lee mention, the “nerd-chic” look reflects both the external traits and internal values of the “nerd” by reordering classic bookworm styles and incorporating retro elements such as glasses and plaid patterns [1]. For example, the luxury brand Miu Miu blended preppy style with a girlish charm on the runway, designing popular knitted vests and ultra-short skirts that embody the aesthetic of intellectuals. However, existing research does not indicate that this trend implies the consumption of cultural signs and the extension of power relations. This article will use the Nerd-chic outfits in *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-2019), *Sherlock* (2010–2017), and *Annie Hall* (1997) as case studies to analyze Foucault's discussion of the relationship between knowledge and power, as well as the application of cultural capital and the consumption of signs to fill the current gap in academic research on the social construction of intellectual elitism and gendered power relations, also to enrich the understanding of “nerd” culture [2-4].

2. Literature Review

In the early 20th century, sociologists like Simmel viewed fashion mainly as a marker of social class or novelty, with little attributing significant academic value to it. By the late 20th century, however, the cultural significance of fashion began to receive more serious academic attention. For instance, Bourdieu and other scholars suggested that haute couture discourse was a form of “haute culture” (Andò and Campagna, 2022) [5]. Therefore, the social role of the intellectual increasingly includes engagement with fashion and style.

The existing literature has explored the definition and evolution of the term "nerdy." The word "nerd" first emerged in the children's book *If I Ran the Zoo* from an American author, Dr. Seuss, in 1950, it was used as the name of a fictional and weird creature [6]. While the term originally referred simply to this odd character, it was gradually accepted by the public to describe individuals who were seen as weird or socially awkward. According to Lee and Lee, the term evolved significantly over time. For example, the Oxford Pocket Contemporary English Dictionary defines a nerd as a foolish person who lacks social skills and is obsessed with academic research, and also as a smart and dedicated expert in a particular field. Wikipedia further expands this definition, describing a nerd as a high-intelligence person who may suffer from social difficulties, also spends a lot of time engaging in unpopular activities, such as advanced science and technology [1]. Similarly, as Quail mentions, the nerd image in popular culture and media is expressed through a series of interwoven historical discourses and real-life situations [7]. Over the next few decades, the concept of nerd also took on the meaning of an intellectual and a studious person, and this meaning still persists to this day. Although the term "nerd" has traditionally carried negative connotations and been associated with stereotypes, some individuals still regard it as a way of expressing pride and self-identity. Therefore, the characteristics of a nerd can be summarized as: displaying extraordinary cognitive abilities in fields such as mathematics, programming, science, or other specialized academic fields, often seen as a "walking encyclopedia", struggling to communicate with social groups due to interpersonal challenges, and be seen as "freaks".

Although existing research has explored the representation of nerd culture in popular media and the evolution of the term "nerd", there is still a lack of in-depth academic analysis on the underlying reasons for the formation of intellectual worship, as well as the social power structure and the evolution of culture as capital behind it. In particular, there has been no systematic research to reveal why certain intellectual traits are granted higher social value and how this value assignment intertwines with social factors such as gender and class, influencing individuals' positions within cultural and societal hierarchies. In addition, how female intellectuals challenge gendered power relations remains a blank area in academic research.

3. Case Analysis

3.1. Nerdy Fashion Pride—Case Study of Sheldon Cooper from *The Big Bang Theory*

As Lane points out, the emergence of the "nerd" stereotype is directly linked to television [8]. An iconic representation of the "nerd" in mass media culture is Sheldon Cooper from *The Big Bang Theory* [2]. He is a theoretical physicist with high intelligence and often regards himself as the smartest person, and dislikes others questioning his knowledge. At the same time, he has a strict routine and structured lifestyle patterns, including a designated seat, a fixed bathing schedule and regular eating habits. Meanwhile, he has some social difficulties, such as because of not being good at understanding others' emotions and social cues often saying something inappropriate. In the show, his iconic outfit is Superhero T-shirts (especially those featuring DC characters like The Flash and Green Lantern) with long-sleeved shirts as undershirts, khaki pants and sneakers. This "uniform-like" style of dressing is like his highly regulated lifestyle, presenting an obsession with order and rationality. Although his style of dress may appear monotonous, repetitive, childish, and even "anti-fashion" by mainstream aesthetic standards, it creates a unique "nerd authority" because his style of dress functions not merely as a means of personal expression, but as an extension of his intellectual identity and symbolic authority. This "anti-mainstream" style builds up his alternative authority as a "knowledge elite". The application of elements related to mathematical symbols and computer graphics into clothing is often perceived as a way to express a sense of superiority and a distinction from the ordinary. For instance, science fiction comic elements on his T-shirts (such as *Green Lantern* or *Star Trek*) or DNA models not only show his personal interests and intellectual ideas but also create a closed symbolic system, because only those within the same cultural group can understand the meaning, it establishes a "knowledge barrier."

3.2. Brainy is the New Sexy— Case Study of Sherlock Holmes

If Sheldon from *The Big Bang Theory* represents the wired nerd, then Sherlock Holmes—portrayed by Benedict Cumberbatch in the British TV series *Sherlock* embodies a more charming and symbolically significant "chic nerdy style", as it is said in the play "Brainy is the new sexy" [3].

In the series, Sherlock is a highly intelligent genius detective, whose language is always sharp precision and frequent irony. His character design shares certain similarities with that of Sheldon, who appears emotionally detached and has a high-functioning social disorder. However, his style of dress reflects an elegant and rationally restrained aesthetic, embodying his identity as an intellectual elite. For example, the sharply tailored high-collared overcoat, paired with a deep blue scarf and the checkered deerstalker. Traditionally, overcoats are used in the military to protect soldiers from rough conditions such as cold weather at sea. It implies that Sherlock needs a strong and tough character when handling criminal cases, which fits the durability of the pea coat. Meanwhile, a special hat with double caps can also cover up the ear can allow him to avoid the paparazzi. In addition, this deerstalker has once been used for hunting, which shows the dangers of this profession and the need for protection [9]. Typically, his wardrobe consists of black, grey, and deep blue tones, reflecting his rationality and pragmatism. The occasional appearance of burgundy (such as in his dressing gown) implies his repressed emotions.

Although both Sherlock and Sheldon are portrayed as high-IQ, low-EQ characters, Sherlock's calmness, self-restraint, and black humor with the background of romanticized Britain ultimately become his personal charm. In the series, he also has intense, sexually charged interactions with his opponents.

One of the femme fatales, named Irene Adler, says that "Brainy is the new sexy," which summarizes the qualities that make Sherlock Holmes a potent icon [10]. Therefore, intelligence is no longer exclusive to the academic realm; it has become an important resource of power in a societal context, symbolizing personal charisma and social status.

3.3. Gender and Power in Menswear— Case Study of Annie Hall

In Woody Allen's *Annie Hall*, the protagonist Annie's menswear-inspired outfits—waistcoat, tie, shirt against traditional gender norms [4]. According to Ardeshiri (2020), the feminist movement of the 1970s was the cultural background of the film. Annie's dress reflected her mindset. She does not limit herself to the conventional gender-based dress code, women freely choose what to wear and who to be [11]. In Judith Butler's 1990 book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, she mentions a theory of performativity, which shows that gender is not nature but can be performed [12]. To connect with this film, Annie's menswear look subverts the gender power relationship by employing traditional symbols that are typically associated with men. In the movie, Anne gradually grows from being self-deprecating and afraid of not being smart enough in her romantic relationship to having self-awareness and taking responsibility for her own feelings.

4. Discussion

4.1. Foucault: Knowledge as Power

In French philosopher Michel Foucault's works *Discipline and Punish* (1975), he argued that power possesses a productive function because it not only constructs reality but also brings into being the domain of objects and the rites of truth. Both the individual and the knowledge they acquire are constituted through these processes of production. In addition, power and knowledge constitute the individual, and the individual is the atom of social ideology [13]. According to Zhou, knowledge, power, and the subject have long been the three central issues to which Foucault devoted his attention. Unlike traditional understandings of these three axes, power and knowledge are not incompatible; on the contrary, the development of scientific branches is closely linked to the operation of power [14]. At the same time, power also with knowledge shape individuals through disciplinary techniques. Take

Sheldon as an example, in the series, he gains respect and achieves social status not through his appearance or wealth, but through his knowledge. His body becomes the vessel for his rational thought, suggesting that true power lies in cognition, rather than physical strength or social charm. The insistence on dress style actually reflects his rejection of mainstream social norms and a commitment to self-identity, demonstrating a personalized embodiment of the idea that "knowledge is power". Furthermore, *Sherlock* has packaged the marginalized image of the bookworm into an attractive figure, making intelligence and knowledge objects of desire and symbols [3]. This aesthetic supplements Foucault's interpretation of the power of discourse, transforming it into a principle that whoever holds knowledge controls the power of discourse. At the same time, Annie's menswear also functions as her power suit in challenging traditional gender discipline.

4.2. Intellectual Worship and Consumption of Cultural Signs

The use and misuse of IQ tests have been a subject of debate within both the scientific community and broader society because these intelligence-focused assessments overlook other valuable human qualities (Castles, 2012) [15]. Intelligence is manifested as abstract thinking, reasoning and problem-solving abilities in social evolution, and is regarded as part of "leadership". From the perspectives of psychology and evolution, humans tend to trust those leaders who can guide them to survive. As Bourdieu (1997) mentions, Capital has three forms: economic capital, social capital and cultural capital [16]. Therefore, intelligence is not only an individual ability but also a social capital, it determines an individual's social class and discursive power. Whether it is Sheldon, Sherlock, or Annie Hall, their styles of dress have all become symbols of power. In Baudrillard's book *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (1998), he argued that modern consumption has transformed from the consumption of material goods to the consumption of signs [17]. Furthermore, the trendy Nerd-chic look that has gained popularity on the internet serves as a symbolic simulation of intellectual authority. Under the influence of consumerism, consumers worship and replicate the imagined intellectual by using some trendy items, such as a pair of retro metal-framed glasses and a grey high-neck sweater. Unlike the "old money" aesthetic, which emphasizes economic accumulation and family background, the Nerd-chic style creates a sense of intellectual superiority and an illusion of class status that seems attainable through individual effort and imitation.

5. Conclusion

The transformation of the "nerd" from a negative stereotype to a symbol of charm implies intellect as a personal ability to transform into cultural capital. Through the cases of Sheldon Cooper, Sherlock Holmes and Annie Hall, the nerd identity became popular and influential. In addition, this article supplements the mutual influence among fashion, media and social values that knowledge, as a form of power, has become a symbol of mass cultural consumption and a sign of social status. Public admiration for intelligence has shifted from a utilitarian focus on practical skills to an aesthetic practice within the realm of cultural consumption. This transformation opens up new theoretical avenues and research opportunities for the sociology of consumption. Furthermore, future research can further conduct cross-cultural comparisons to explore how "nerd" symbols are represented and interpreted across diverse cultural contexts. For instance, including case studies from different ethnic groups and contrasting Eastern and Western cultural perspectives on the "nerd" archetype, in order to promote the presentation of more diverse and complex intellectual figures in global media.

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