

## Geeks may be chic, but negative nerd stereotype still exists, professor says

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Lori Kendall, a professor in the Graduate School of Library and Information Science, says despite the increased popularity of geek culture and the ubiquity of computers, the geek's close cousin, the nerd, still suffers from a negative stereotype in popular culture. Kendall holds a familiar tool of the nerd: a slide rule. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

Despite the increased popularity of geek culture - movies based on comic books, videogames, virtual worlds - and the ubiquity of computers, the geek's close cousin, the nerd, still suffers from a negative stereotype in popular culture. This may help explain why women and minorities are increasingly shying away from careers in information

technology, says Lori Kendall, a professor in the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

The popular stereotype of the nerd as the sartorially challenged, anti-social white male hasn't faded from our collective cultural consciousness, and is more prevalent than ever as a stock character in television shows, movies and advertisements.

"Ten years ago, I thought the nerd stereotype would fade as more and more people started to use computers in their everyday lives," Kendall said. "I thought, 'Since we're all using computers, we're all nerds.' Well, that hasn't been true."

Kendall thinks the durability of the negative nerd stereotype reflects a basic uneasiness with computer technology and the influence it exerts over our increasingly hyper-connected digital lives.

"I think it's part of the bigger picture of how we view computers and technology," she said. "We make a distinction between business people who use PDAs and are tethered to their laptops but aren't really into it, and the 'nerds' who are really into it. So, there's some discomfort with computers that we still haven't quite resolved."

In her research, Kendall analyzed how nerds were represented in "all sorts of fun things," including advertisements for Best Buy's Geek Squad; NBC's television series "Chuck"; "Weird Al" Yankovic's "White & Nerdy" parody video; the hip-hop subculture called "Nerdcore"; and, of course, the 1984 film "Revenge of the Nerds."

The stock character nerd is typically depicted as a white male with glasses and large sets of obscure data committed to memory. (Think Martin Short as nerd-extraordinaire Ed Grimley.) But more important,

Kendall discovered that nerds are often represented in a way that is specifically contrasted with black males.

"In the 'White & Nerdy' video, it shows 'Weird Al' as this white nerd, and then it contrasts him with stereotypical images of black gangsters," she said.

The implication of that stereotyping is "we have an expectation that people who understand computers are more likely to be white males," Kendall said, "and that has an effect on how women and minorities are viewed when they go into a computer-related profession."

Kendall said that though the number of minorities earning degrees in computer science has remained steady, the number of women has declined in recent years. But, she noted, those women and minorities who eventually earn computer science degrees don't always get jobs in the field after they graduate.

"When you look at who's being employed, a far lower percentage of women and minorities are being employed in computer science than are getting degrees in computer science," she said. "There's been plenty of research into why women don't go into computer science, and it's at least in part because they associate it with this kind of nerdy thing, and they think that if they go into computer science they're going to have to be anti-social. That turns people off who don't see themselves as fitting that stereotype."

If the nerd stereotype is so toxic, then why is being a geek so chic? Why, for example, are PCs personified as nerdy and Macs as the apotheosis of geeky cool in the now infamous "PC vs. Mac" ad campaign?

Kendall said there's a distinct difference between "nerds" and "geeks," despite their apparent similarities.

"The valence of the word 'geek' has really changed over the years," she said. "People talk about 'geeking out,' which indicates a very intense focus on an interest, and sometimes it's an interest that not a lot of people share. It tends to indicate expertise and passion about something."

" 'Nerd' is a stickier term that is applied to people in a more negative way," Kendall said. " 'Geek' is something you can do and then leave behind, but 'nerd' is what you are."

Source: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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