

The Nerdfighteria Discord Server: A Gathering Place for Awesomeness

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Abstract

The Nerdfighteria Discord server is one of the several gathering places of the broader Nerdfighter community. As of November 2022, it houses 6,645 members (also known as Nerdfighters) from different walks of life and different corners of the world. Nerdfighters here participate in a nebulous variety of nerdy discussions, spanning all sorts of topics such as nature, facts, languages, books, science, math, space, podcasts, art forms, and much more. They find this space to be a safe haven for sharing, seeking advice and comfort. We found it to be an open, educational, and supportive space, filled with people who are curious about the world, believe in the power of education and free speech, are compassionate towards others, and who truly wish to reduce “world suck”.

In this paper, we take a closer look at this unique community. We start off with a literature survey, and evaluate the community in terms of Amy Jo Kim’s 9 Design principles. Next, we present our research questions crafted around the various aspects we found interesting in the community, and answer these questions through our observations, readings, and interviews with Nerdfighters from the server. We investigated and found how the server is unique when compared to other Nerdfighteria platforms, and also discovered that the Nerdfighteria lexicon serves many crucial roles - it encodes Nerdfighter values, promotes communication, screens for good potential Nerdfighters, and creates a positive feedback loop between content and community.

Introduction

“It is very hard to describe the Nerdfighteria Discord without making it sound like a cult.”

- A Nerdfighter

Whether or not it is a cult, the Nerdfighteria Discord is an awesome place to be. But before we get into the Discord, we will first give some background on Nerdfighteria as a whole. Nerdfighteria is a subculture that spawned around the sibling pair of John and Hank Green, and their YouTube channel titled “Vlogbrothers”.

Back in 2007, the brothers started the YouTube channel with the intention of connecting with each other via vlogs instead of the drier alternative of texting. In this initiative (which they named “Brotherhood 2.0”), the brothers decided to post a vlog on each alternative day as a means of communicating with each other. Through these blogs, they would ask questions to each other, and talk about a variety of things such as literature, politics, etc. [2].

The origin of the word “Nerdfighter” can be traced back to a video released on the channel in February 2007, wherein John came across an arcade game titled “Aero Fighters”, but mistook it for “Nerd Fighters”. In this vlog, John mentions:

“Here’s my question about Nerd Fighters. Is Nerd Fighters a game about people who fight against nerds, or is it a game about nerds who fight against other

people? I've come to believe that Nerd Fighters is a game about nerds who fight, nerds who tackle the scourge of popular people. And I've been thinking to myself, this would be a great video game."

This struck a chord with the channel's subscribers, who ended up adopting the term, labeling themselves as "Nerdfighters" [2].



Figure 1: A poster of the “Aero Fighters” arcade game

Soon after, the Green brothers started “Ning”, a separate website that had a discussion forum where Nerdfighters could converse. According to [2], this was a pivotal moment, as this is where Nerdfighters first got a chance to interact and share with each other, thereby building up a community that we now know as Nerdfighteria.

In the years since its inception, Nerdfighteria has evolved to become a subculture on its own. The Nerdfighteria community has gone beyond the confines of the Vlogbrothers’ videos, taking the shape of a community full of like-minded people who advocate for

intelligence, compassion, and non-violence as a means of reducing “world suck”. John himself commented about this expansion once:

“I like the idea of Nerdfighteria being about more than us, and I like to imagine a world where people identify as Nerdfighters, who embrace the values of Nerdfighteria, without even necessarily knowing who I am. That sounds great to me.” [2]

In line with the noble values that Nerdfighteria embodies, the Green Brothers and Nerdfighters collaborate to work on several annual social good projects such as Project for Awesome (P4A) and Pizzamas. The Green brothers describe this as:

“The very first Project for Awesome was organized in 2007, and has been held annually on December 17-18 every year since. During Project for Awesome, thousands of people post videos about and advocating for charities that decrease the overall level of world suck. As a community, we promote these videos and raise money for the charities.” [1]

As mentioned, these projects are charitable in nature, and is how Nerdfighters do their bit towards reducing world suck. The scale of earnings that these projects achieve is massive too, as the 2022 earning from P4A reached an astonishing \$ 3,236,501 [7]. All the raised money is finally donated to the top-voted charities.

The Nerdfighteria community is enormous, with millions of subscribers on many of the channels they run. For a sense of scale, there were 64,654 participants in the

2020-2021 Nerdfighteria census polled on their Youtube channel, which is only a small percentage of the community at large [4]. There are 3.5 million subscribers on their Vlogbrothers channel, and 14 million subscribers on Crash Course. Nerdfighteria is spread across a constellation of social networking sites such as Reddit, Facebook, Discord and many more. In our study, we will be focusing on one of the platforms in this constellation: the Nerdfighteria Discord server.

Related Work

The Nerdfighteria community has kept researchers intrigued for a long time now, and has been studied by several researchers in the past.

“Don’t Forget to be Awesome: An In-Depth Exploration of Nerdfighteria” (Castellini 2013) serves as a great introduction to the community and its core ethos. It talks about how the community started, its educational and charity-oriented actions, and the community at large.

The key attraction of the paper, however, is the narrative about the author’s own experiences as a Nerdfighter. Castellini, when still a kid, was introduced to the Nerdfighteria community. Together with seven other like-minded Nerdfighters, she started a spin-off collaborative YouTube channel titled “TheseFolks”. In the paper, she

describes the entire journey of this channel, right from TheseFolk's glorious beginnings to its gradual end. She describes how these seven Nerdfighters started out as mere internet acquaintances, building a YouTube channel together, deciding video themes weekly, and collaborating in this manner. Their friendship grew stronger, and they soon met up eventually in their travels. And then, she talks about the slow end of the channel, wherein the members, who now grew up and are juggling various responsibilities, couldn't contribute with the same frequency as they did earlier. Castellini however points out that they are still close friends, and do keep in touch. Castellini's story tells us about how a portion of Nerdfighters interact with each other, and how they form bonds, thanks to common interests.

"French the Llama, I'm a Nerdfighter" (Glatt 2013) studied the Nerdfighteria YouTube community specifically. The paper gives a great introduction to what Nerdfighteria is, its roots, and how it functions now. Additionally, the author analyzes how collaboration is crucial towards building the Nerdfighteria YouTube community, and how Nerdfighters interact with each other on an interpersonal level.

In [2], Glatt reports that the Nerdfighters collaborated together to make the videos for Project for Awesome (P4A) pop up on YouTube's front page by liking, subscribing, or commenting on all the P4A videos made by fellow Nerdfighters. Additionally, Nerdfighters once managed to make the #p4a hashtag trending above #avatar on Twitter. Through such collaboration and supporting each other, Nerdfighters became more connected to the core value of "decrease world suck". As a member, the feeling of

being able to positively contribute, irrespective of the magnitude, becomes central to the success of the overall community and its social good projects.

“Made of Awesome: The Online Culture of NerdFighteria” (Proulx 2011) presents another critical study, which aimed at eliciting the central themes that enveloped the Nerdfighteria community. Proulx recorded responses to the questionnaires sent out to participating Nerdfighters. The answers to the questions were then coded to unearth themes. The discovered themes were “acceptance of all members and nonmembers, decreasing world suck, fostering self-esteem and group pride, and enthusiasm” [3].

Going through the existing relevant literature, we were able to gain a holistic view about the community, its origin, core ideologies, members, and the overall impressive impact it has on the world.

Methods

In order to conduct our study, we initially started out by engaging with the community on the Nerdfighteria Discord server. We each devoted a substantial amount of time to observing the nature of interactions in the community, and even participating in the “nerdy” discussions ourselves.

Recruitment

For recruiting interviewees, we began with directly messaging members to check if they are interested in helping us out with our study. Later, after discussions with the

moderation team, we pivoted to a different approach, wherein the moderators informed the server about us and our study, and asked for members who would like to volunteer to interview. We received an overwhelming response to this, as Nerdfighters who're by definition an-ever curious crowd, enthusiastically reached out to us, offering to help. We recruited 9 people to conduct the interviews.

Interviews

All 9 interviewees were first asked if they were 18 years old or above. They were then sent an informed consent form (created by the teaching team of CS 6470: Online Communities), asking for consent to interview. After we received the responses to the consent form, we scheduled interviews with the 9 interviewees individually at their preferred timings. For conducting the interviews, we researchers collaborated and compiled a list of 16 core questions best suited for answering our research questions. We used this compiled questionnaire as our core template while interviewing the 9 participants, and asked additional follow-up or clarifying questions whenever deemed necessary.

Demographics

Our interviewees hail from North America and Europe. Some of them explicitly mentioned that they are students enrolled in universities. In terms of gender distribution, the participants consisted of males, females, and members of the LGBTQ+ community. For the sake of preserving privacy, we decided not to reveal the participants' names or pseudonyms, and instead would be referring to them as P1, P2, J1, etc. in this paper.

Evaluation of the Nerdfighteria Discord Server based on Amy Jo Kim's Design Principles

Purpose

Discord: Discord is a Voice over Internet Platform (VoIP) and instant messaging (IM) social platform that allows users to perform a broad array of communication tasks securely with other users either directly or through communities called “servers”. It was first launched in May 2015 by Jason Citron and Stanislav Vishnevskiy, who both envisioned Discord to be primarily used by gamers. However, the flexibility offered by servers and their extensible structure meant that it quickly attracted non-gamers who create Discord servers for a variety of non-gaming related interests such as stock trading, anime, fandoms, etc.

Nerdfighteria Server: The Nerdfighteria Discord server was created in January 2017 by two Nerdfighters, who found the app to be a great place for Nerdfighters to chat with each other in an unstructured manner. For the first year of Nerdfighteria Discord's existence, it seems that the server remained quite small, as signaled by a lack of an announcement channel or a rules channel (common for servers with many newcomers). However, the server gained a lot of traction in 2018 due to its listing on the official Nerdfighteria website regarding Nerdfighteria-related online communities. The

overarching purpose of the Nerdfighteria Discord server has been succinctly summarized by the introductory sentence in the #welcome-and-rules channel

“We are a super-rad server made for Nerdfighters to meet and hang out with Nerdfighters. Happy to have you here and DFTBA!”

What is a Nerdfighter? When asked how they would define what a Nerdfighter is, J2 gives the following response:

“The canonical explanation [to what a Nerdfighter is] is that it is a self-defined term. You are a Nerdfighter when you say you are one. However if I were to give it a definition, then they must follow some of the following three criteria: that they are nerds, they fight against world suck and for awesome, and they are fans of John and Hank Green and the things that they make online”

While the term “Nerdfighter” is often associated with fans of the Green brothers and their creative products in popular media, from J2’s response, it seems to have a much broader meaning and is based on shared values (e.g. being a nerd, trying to make the world a better place) more than simple consumption of the Green brothers’ content. That being said, the shared values of the community are informed by the content they make. This is not a unique or particularly interesting finding from creator-centered communities. As we will discuss in our Research Question section, two aspects that are interesting to investigate are the directness of values communicated through their content (such as vlogs that do directly address or reflect on community values), and the way that the content is shaped by those values (Project 4 Awesome).

Distinct and Extensible Gathering Places

Server structure: Given that the main purpose of the Nerdfighteria Discord is to give Nerdfighters a place to meet and hang out with other Nerdfighters, the Nerdfighteria Discord server provides substantial amounts of unique gathering places that are also extensible in the form of “channels” organized around certain topics. There are 51 channels within the Nerdfighteria Discord, organized into 7 distinct sections: Nerdfighter Info (e.g. #welcome-and-rules), Commooon[sic] Area (e.g. #general-1, dear-nerdfighteria), Community Projects (e.g. #secret-sibling-2-point-0), Conversation Starters (#creative-endeavours), Nerdy Topics (#book-nook, #today-i-learned), Media Spoilers (#marvel-spoilers), and Miscellaneous (e.g. #world-suck). Many of the interviewees confirmed that the channels are created upon the request of the server members, and these requests are more often than not approved by the moderators. For instance, several server members suggested that there should be a channel where members can ask other members for advice regarding any issues they faced in their daily lives, and thus the #dear-nerdfighteria server was created. In addition, channels are also created to handle the significant increase in discussions caused by the surge of membership within the server. There used to be only one #general channel, however a second #general was created in March 2019 to ensure that multiple conversations can happen at once without disrupting one another.

Topic Locality While there are many channels focused on a single topic of discussion, conversations around topics with channels of their own are not limited by design to that channel. J1, who is an admin for the Nerdfighteria Discord, recalled that when the

moderators decided to create a channel for LGBTQ+ related topics, there was a server-wide discussion on whether to limit LGBTQ+ related discussions to the newly-created #rainbow channel. The server overwhelmingly decided against such a restriction as it would stifle conversation regarding this important topic. From our observation, the only channels built to contain certain topics are the Media Spoiler channels (so that members can enjoy new media spoiler-free), #world-suck and #current-events. The latter two host conversations regarding contentious topics, so they are also the only channels not immediately available to newcomers to the server.

In addition, there are also voice channels that leverage Discord's robust VoIP system. Users can join in these voice channels and speak to anyone else that is also within the same voice channel. However, from our observation of the server, the vast majority of users on Nerdfighteria Discord do not utilize voice chat, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic had subsided. As noted by J2:

“Like, if I'm gonna go into the voice chat and wait for someone to come in and have just some banter with, it's probably gonna take a while before anyone shows up.”

Member Profiles Over Time

Non-members of a Discord server such as the Nerdfighteria server cannot view or post messages on a server unless they formally join the server. In the case of the

Nerdfighteria Discord, this only requires an existing Discord account and a click on the “Join Server” button.

User Profiles: Upon joining the Nerdfighteria Discord, the user profile will be at its default status and includes the username, profile picture, and the account’s creation date. The user can immediately customize their profile on the Nerdfighteria server through two options. The first option involves filling out the “About Me” section, where users can write anything about oneself. The second option involves acquiring “roles”, which are tags attached to the user profiles that serve to inform other users of one’s preference within the server. A new user to the Nerdfighteria Discord can immediately go to the #reaction-roles channel in order to attach roles regarding the color of their username, their preferred pronoun, and what they want to receive pings for.

Roles: Surprisingly, almost all of the available roles on the Nerdfighteria Discord can be received by everyone on the server, regardless of their seniority. The only exception to this would be the role “Newfighter”, attached to Nerdfighteria Discord members who have been part of the server for less than 10 days. The only restriction put on Newfighters is that they cannot acquire the roles “decrease” and “world-suck”, which gives access to restricted channels. After that period, all Nerdfighteria Discord members receive the role “Nerdfighter!”. There are also roles for admins and moderators, but they are straight to the point and do not contain any cosmetic modifications that might further distinguish these members from non-moderator members. Finally, there are a few roles that are granted to members who participated in certain server events, such as the

winner of the annual Nerdfighteria sudoku tournament. To our knowledge, this is the only signifier for the seniority of a user on Nerdfighteria Discord beyond the machine-generated server join date.



Figure 2: The author's profile on the Nerdfighteria Discord

Wide Range of Roles

The Discord server currently has 6,625 members, and houses members belonging to various different categories, namely new members, regulars, and moderators.

New Members: When a member joins the server for the first time, they are greeted at the #hello-new-folks channel. They are suggested to visit the #welcome-and-rules channel to understand the rules and regulations of the server, and last but not the least, reminded to be their awesome selves! However, new to the server, members don't have

access to certain channels, such as #vent (which unlocks after the 10th day). Each member has a level associated with them, which is governed by the volume of their activity on the server. New members start out with level 0, and then gradually progress as their interactions increase.



Figure 3: The author leveling up after their initial posts on the server.

Regulars: The server has many members who can be considered as “regulars”. These regulars frequent many channels of the server, and actively take part in conversations. Sometimes they initiate these conversations, while the other times, they take part in ongoing conversations. These members are crucial to the server’s ecosystem, as they set a light-hearted, inclusive, participation-conducive, welcoming ambience for everyone.

Moderators: Like most online communities, this server has dedicated moderators too. The moderators hold power to create new channels, flag and ban trolls/spammers, and specific to this server, rename the name of the general chat channel. Another moderator function that we found to be unique to this server is that the moderators try to steer the conversation towards more amicable grounds in the rare cases when discussions become too heated between members from different schools of thought. In addition to the usual channels, moderators have write access in a moderator-only channel. Moderators are usually highlighted with the “Mods” header on the Member List.

Effective Leadership

The Nerdfighteria Discord would not be what it currently is without its dedicated team of moderators and admins. As mentioned in the previous section, moderators are responsible for enforcing the rules of the server and to maintain the cordial atmosphere between its members. As confirmed by J1, who is a current admin to the Nerdfighteria Discord, moderators are recruited from the most active members within the community who would, theoretically, be the most familiar with the server’s culture and expectations for its members.

Moderator Onboarding: If a member agrees to become a moderator, then they will be first be given the “Mod” role and added to the #mod-chat server. There, they would be on-boarded regarding the duties of the position through the “moderator handbook”, which is a collaboratively-written document by the existing moderators on the A-Z of

moderating the Nerdfighteria Discord. The document plays a crucial role in transmitting knowledge and experience from older moderators to newer moderators, and contains everything from how to deal with a troll to what the egg emoji means during deliberations (it is used to denote agreement).

It is sometimes the case that moderators and admins for Discord servers form cliques of their own with the #mod-chat serving as their homebase. This might have a negative influence on the moderators' ability to effectively lead the server. Such is not the case with the Nerdfighteria Discord. As emphasized by J1:

“I also want to make one thing clear: the moderators are very intentional about, which I really appreciate is that in our moderator chat, we very intentionally make mod chat not a social space. That channel is only for talking about moderator actions, which means that that chat will go days up to like a week without a single message sent.”

This decision meant that moderators are often found conversing normally with other non-moderators within the open channels of Nerdfighteria server, exhibiting a culture of “Members First, Mods Later”. From our perspective, this increases the love and respect non-moderators have for the moderators, and thus solidifying their influence and authority across the server.

Clear-yet-flexible code of conduct

The Nerdfighteria Discord has a detailed code of conduct, which is displayed on the top #welcome-and-rules channel. New users coming to the platform are recommended to

review the server's rules before joining the discussion. The rules of the Nerdfighteria Discord server serve two crucial goals: to maintain a culture of mutual respect between members and to uphold the quality of discussion within its various channels.

Clarity: A main part of the Nerdfighteria server code-of-conduct concerns the types of content that are banned or quarantined on the server. Sexually explicit and illegal content is forbidden, and the moderators have final say on what is explicit/illegal and what is not. There used to be a #nsfw channel in the first year of the server, but it was deleted by the mods feel that a channel which suggests sexually explicit content was not in line with the Nerdfighteria culture. What is more interesting is the moderator's decision to quarantine discussion relating to politics to #current-events and triggering topics (such as drug abuse, sexual violence, etc.) to #world-suck. The decision to quarantine these topics to separate channels was made by the moderators because discussions regarding them are likely to lead to low-quality conversations that bring out the worst in community members, thus requiring more moderation efforts.

Flexibility: The Nerdfighteria code-of-conduct is clear, but it is also flexible in its ability to enforce the two aforementioned main goals responsible for the server's atmosphere. The first rule within the code-of-conduct, above all other rules is:

"Please DFTBA (Don't Forget to be Awesome)! We are here to be kind, assist others, meet people, and hang out!"

That rule is often used by moderators to take action on behavior that doesn't go directly against any other rules in the code-of-conduct, but still goes contrary to the server

culture of mutual respect and striving for awesomeness. On this topic, J1 has the following to say:

“If somebody's coming in to be negative, I would be like, that's not very awesome. And so we can cite that rule (rule #1) and be like, you know, like, this is why we can't have you in this community, because you're not behaving in accordance with this value.”

Organize and promote cyclical event

In order to promote the tenets of the wider Nerdfighteria community and to increase participation among the members of the Nerdfighteria Discord, both the moderators and the active members of the server organize and promote events that occur on a regular basis. These events are either directly related to events that are occurring elsewhere in Nerdfighteria, or are similar in spirit to those events.

Among the biggest events that occur yearly across all Nerdfighteria online communities and the Nerdfighteria Discord specifically is the Project for Awesome (P4A), the annual Nerdfighteria charity drive organized by the Green brothers, and Pizzamas, a part-fundraiser part-anniversary event where the Green brothers return to their hometown and make daily videos similar to those made in the earliest days of YouTube. Whereas during other times of the year, conversations regarding the Green brothers and their media are in the minority, during P4A and Pizzamas, almost all the activity on server is related to the charity drive. Several interviewees described the events as

“holidays” for the Nerdfighteria and tried their best to contribute towards the fundraising efforts. However, these events are unintentionally US-centric, as they can be prohibitively expensive if ordered from outside the country. On these fundraising events, P3, an European Nerdfighter, exclaimed:

“There have been some recent legal changes that make both of those projects kind of really hard to participate in if you're not in the US because they just will make the money you spend on them really ineffective. You will spend like 30 to 50% on top just in terms of exchange rates, shipping and customs fees. So, it kind of makes both of these priorities, if you want to spend your money effectively on charity, it doesn't make that much sense.”

However, that doesn't stop other European members of the Nerdfighteria Discord from participating in these Nerdfighteria “holidays”. J2, who is also from Europe, contributes to the Project for Awesome in the following manner:

“I, like, try to get people enthusiastic about it. I watched the stream, I tried to get other people's people to watch the stream. I talked about the stream, with my Nerdfighter friends, and with my non-Nerdfighter friends, too.”

In addition to the Nerdfighteria-wide events, there are also cyclical events specific to the Nerdfighteria Discord server. The biggest of which is the Secret Siblings project, which is a server-wide vlogging project in a similar style to that of vlogbrothers (Vlogging channel by the Green brothers). Although videos can be posted anytime of the year, there is a concerted effort during July to post a video once every month. All videos are

then compiled on a YouTube channel for all to see. Many members (J3, J2) agree that the Secret Siblings project is a good avenue to unleash the creativity of the Nerdfighteria Discord community.

User-created groups, events, contests

Given the member-driven nature of the Nerdfighteria Discord and all other Discord servers, essentially all the groups, subgroups and events that occur in the Nerdfighteria server are user-created instead of orchestrated by any top-down directives from Discord. We initially thought that only moderators and admins can host events (defined as social occasions that are held with no expectation of cyclicity) on the server, however it seems that any member of the community can plan an event and ask the moderator to create an official server-wide event reminder. According to J2 who has both created and participated in these events, these events are very informal and often only attended by a small group of server members. During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, these events were crucial in providing social interaction that was unavailable elsewhere.

Integrate Online and Real World

Given that the Nerdfighteria Discord server is a tight-knit community, the integration between the online space and the offline space is significant. Even though there is nowhere on the official user profile that specifies a member's IRL birthday, regulars on

the server who have disclosed their birthday will invariably receive happy birthday messages from the other regulars of the channel.

Several of the interviewees had met up with other members of the server offline, and some have extended their relationships on the Nerdfighteria Discord beyond the server. For instance, someone J2 met on the server introduced him to Dungeons & Dragons, and they were soon playing sessions with each other and several other people in a separate Discord group. He actually met that person in 2017, and recalled it to be a pleasant experience for him.

Relationships built from the Nerdfighteria Discord can be romantic in nature too. For instance, P3 met their current girlfriend on the server. They recalled the following about the experience:

“I met my girlfriend on the server, she joined in like September 2020. Then I don't know, we were just talking like, I talked in #rainbow (LGBTQ+ channel), and she was like: Hey, can I DM you about some trans stuff? And I was like, Sure. And now they would be talking about our trans stuff like yeah, and until like, a few days later, she was like, Oh, I'd like someone to draw, like, some profile pic for me and I was like: Hey, I can do that. So that we talked more and then we started floating into the DMs.”

Research Questions

Through our initial interactions with the Nerdfighteria community on this Discord server, we were immediately intrigued by several aspects of it. We then crafted our research questions around these aspects. In this section, we answer these research questions by deriving insights from various readings and the conducted interviews.

What makes this Discord server unique when compared to the other Nerdfighteria sub-communities?

As we mentioned earlier, the Nerdfighteria subculture is spread across a constellation of social networking sites, such as Reddit, Facebook, Instagram, and more. This made us wonder whether members preferred a particular site over the other, and if so, what exact factors governed this decision. We were interested to find out the various factors that made this Discord server unique when compared to all the other available options out there.

The Nerdfighteria Census

In order to find answers, we first studied two conducted censuses -

1. The overall Nerdfighteria census [4]
2. The Nerdfighteria census specific to the Discord Server [5]

As we expected, the distribution of age ranges were quite similar across both censuses, with the majority of Nerdfighters being in the 20-30 age group. Interestingly, [4] didn't

mention Discord as a platform for Nerdfighters when comparing all the available platforms. However, currently the Discord server hosts a total of 6,625 Nerdfighters, but the mods say there are 200-300 regular members. 234 completed the server specific survey.

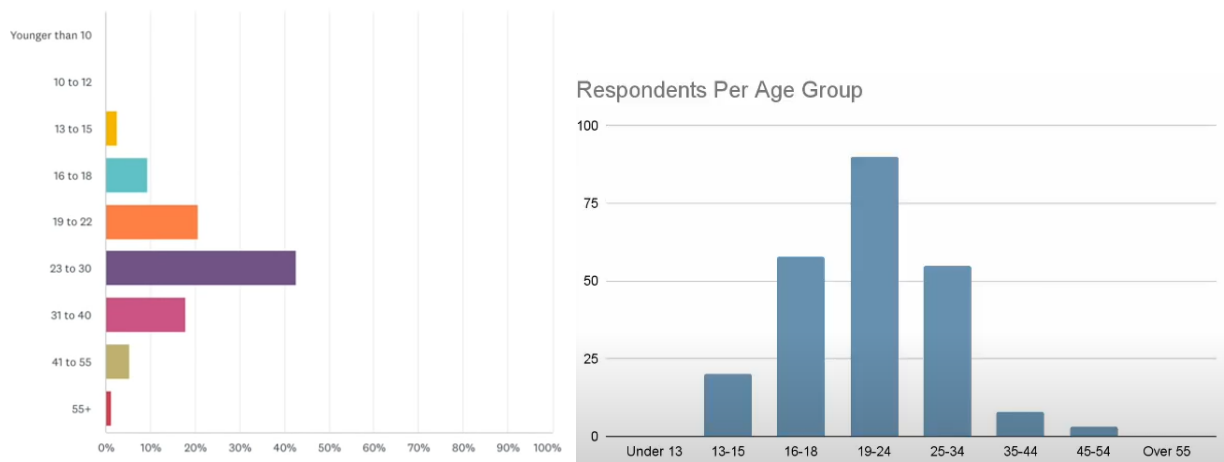


Figure 4 & 5: General (Left) and Discord-specific (Right) Age Charts [4,5]

Nerdfighteria as a whole is mostly young, under their 30s. However, the Discord is a much larger percent of students (under 24) than the broader community, which reflects in 43.2% of the Discord survey respondents saying they were full-time students.

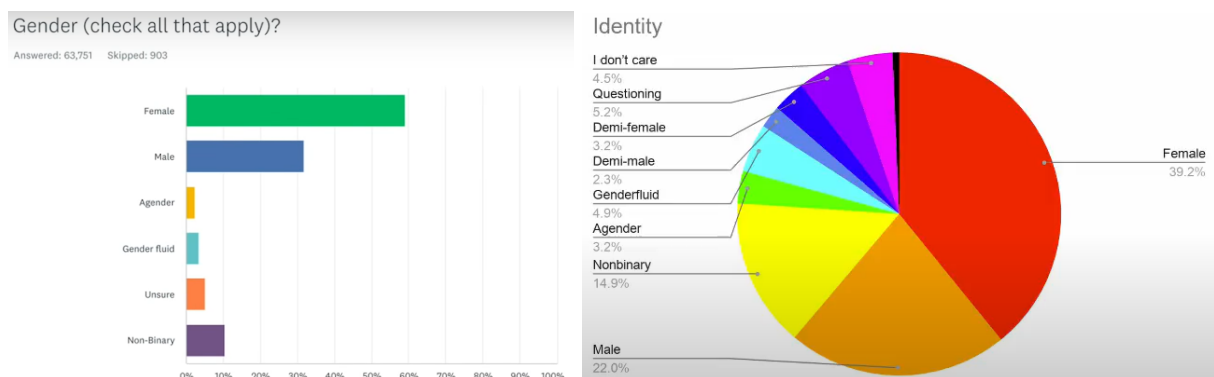


Figure 6 & 7: General (Left) and Discord-specific (Right) Gender Charts [4,5]

Nerdfighteria as a whole generally has more females than the broader population, as well as more non-binary, genderfluid, or people that are unsure. How much is uncertain since the numbers are under-reported in general censuses, but it is a pretty safe assumption that at least they identify more so than the general population. As for the Discord, there are less males and a much larger portion of queer gender identities than in the broader Nerdfighteria community.

Migration within the Constellation - And the Reasons

Through our interviews, we observed the common trend of migration within the constellation of Nerdfighteria platforms. All the participants that we interviewed were introduced to the Nerdfighteria community through the Green brothers' YouTube videos. P1 even mentioned how they were influenced in picking the major they study by the Crash Course videos by the Green brothers. Be aware that all testimony is heavily biased towards the Nerdfighteria Discord community, with most participants preferring it to other sub-communities. This investigation of differences between sub-communities and the participants' preferences are not meant to be a holistic study of the cohesiveness of different sub-communities as we don't get perspectives from active participants in those communities, but rather understanding what factors are important to users and why they are drawn to the Discord.

After watching the YouTube content, and gradually getting familiar with the Nerdfighteria culture, these members then start hanging out with other like minded people, at a gathering place of their choice. P2 mentioned how they started out as a member of the

Nerdfighteria Facebook group, and then trickled to the Discord server. When asked for a reason, P2 explained by saying: “I feel *far* more at home and safe here on the server, than I do on the FB group.” and “I just feel the discord is a little more...alive?? than the FB group. More intimate, I feel. It feels more like you're a part of a family rather than just a member of a group posting stuffs.” P1 had a similar story, as they moved from the subreddit to the Discord server. P3 too helped us see why the Discord server is more preferable than the subreddit to its members, citing the ephemeral nature of the Discord conversations as a reason. Since Discord conversations aren’t “Google Search-able”, members can freely talk about stuff that’s on their mind, without having to worry about their content lingering on the internet for eternity. In P3’s words - “if you post a selfie on like, general chat, then just let it roll for like a week. No one will be able to even find that selfie. In the subreddit, it stays on the internet.”

Migration from Tiktok was another interesting trend that P1 indicated. According to P1, a significant chunk of younger Nerdfighters were initiated into the community via Hank Green’s Tiktok content. “I think it is really interesting. It’s a new kind of group of them that have joined the community through a new platform. Before as most people joined through either John’s books, Crash Course, or just the Vlogbrothers channel” P1 added. Information gained from [4] possibly corroborates this, as Tiktok showed a significant rise (from #10 to #3) in TikTok’s Nerdfighteria membership size during the pandemic.

P3 helped us see the preference for this Discord server from another angle: governing structures. During the interview, P3 drew parallels between this server and Tuataria, a

sister server that's another popular Nerdfighteria adhering space. Tuataria follows a more rigid, government-like structure. According to A2, they drafted a Constitution as a fun role-playing activity, but it nonetheless stuck around and was adopted as a guideline. As a result, it is, in essence, a more orderly place. The decision-making, as expected, takes more time. A2 participates in both servers actively, but describes Nerdfighteria as more "chaotic," whereas Tuataria has more "structure and rules". However, due to its rigid regulations, Tuataria lacks genuine and creative conversations, at the expense of being a more orderly, less-chaotic space. P3 cited this as a reason why they left Tuataria and stuck to the Nerdfighteria server instead, saying "They'll have the same discussions over and over and over again, with the same arguments, and like, nothing happens."

How members perceive moderation is a big factor as well when it comes to migration within the Nerdfighteria constellation. J2 talks about how he was a part of the Nerdfighteria Minecraft server before joining the Discord server, and didn't enjoy his time there. He felt that the moderation on Nerdcrafteria is too strict, and that you are forced to partake in certain builds in order to continue being a member on the server. In stark contrast, the moderation on the Nerdfighteria Discord server is much more holistic and inclusive, while still ensuring rules are being safeguarded. Members are free to participate and engage in the server however they might like. A2 mentioned that there was a saying in the Nerdfighteria discord that "mods are members first, mods second" which does a good job encapsulating their position in the community. They mostly talk like normal members and spend time on the channels they enjoy. This is aided by the

fact that there is nothing that makes a moderator distinguished from a normal user besides a tag hidden in their profile. Participants noted that sometimes they didn't even realize they were talking to a moderator, and often don't actively think of them as such. This is different in a space like Tuataria, where the moderators do have a special, restricted color. While A2 does point out they are also very down to earth, there is still the reminder of the power dynamic between moderator and normal member, and they think that informs the vibe of the interaction.

Nerdfighteria Discord as a Third Place

In his book *The Great Good Place*, Ray Oldenburg introduces the concept of a third place, which is a third location outside of our home and work meant for socialization without specific or obvious purpose, like cafes, clubs, bars, bookstores, or other hangout locations [9]. At their best, they provide “homes away from home,” a place to meet and maintain friendships, socialize, and just have fun [9]. As Oldenburg points out, forces like suburban sprawl, increased working pressures, more focus on consumption as leisure, and increasing use of the internet all contribute to the decline of third places within our community, which he connects to immense individual stress and a general sense of loneliness in modern communities. We argue that Nerdfighteria is designed and used like a third place by its members. We do not make judgements about the other sub-communities as or not as third places, but rather argue that the Discord in particular performs this function well for many of its members.

Oldenburg describes several features of third places that we will discuss in the context of the Nerdfighteria Discord: they have a set of regulars, they act as levelers, conversation is the main activity, they are neutral ground, they are accessible and

accommodate their patrons, and they have a playful mood [9]. The moderators gave a rough estimate of regular users to be around 200, and through our participation we recognized many familiar faces with distinct personalities and whom we've learned about over time. The server acts like an effective leveler, where all users are treated equally, and freedom of association not only exists but is encouraged. For instance, we observed a user who was a teacher casually interact with other users who were students, which would not be the same in the context of a school environment. Even more so than in physical spaces, indicators of status like clothing are obscured or chosen. There are no tags to indicate status/identity, which might be common in say a school Discord for major or year. It's often not even apparent the age or gender of users, whereas physical interaction would push people to find out. Rather, people have a lot of customizability in how and to what extent they express their identity through profile picture and description.

Conversation takes center stage in the Discord. They even found that the discussion in one general channel was too chaotic, so there are two general channels now that allow for more general chatting to take place. Beyond that, 39 out of the 52 text channels are dedicated to discussion. The remaining are dedicated to rules, community projects, announcements, posting todo-lists, bot commands, and moderation logs. Most of those 39 are specific places for asking questions and talking about a wide variety of interests or activities from media to nerdy topics to conversation starters. All of these channels are used to varying extents, with the general channels being more popular in general, but with the more specific channels being more sporadic but having bursts of chatter. As new members, we found that the lessened activity and specificity of the channels

allowed for smaller and more direct conversations to happen. A key drawback of online spaces is that there are no longer physical constraints to the number of conversation participants. Because there are so many members, the creation of these many channels allow for a variety of conversations and participation levels to occur simultaneously. This structure also allows people to more seamlessly enter and leave conversations, or participate in several at once.

By neutral ground, Oldenburg means that third places are where people can “come and go as they please” [9]. The server is a place that users can come and go. Formally, any person can connect to the Discord with a valid account, and they can likewise leave the Discord at any time with no penalty. We observed an instance of a regular rejoining and other regulars welcoming them back to the server. Beyond formally joining and leaving, there are different expectations of participation compared to a physical space. Many of our participants mention that they used the Discord server daily, and that it was often on in the background. The ability for communities and third places to be online and thus omnipresent can change the dynamic of accessibility. In Oldenburg’s writing, he assumes that third places are physical locations, so thus more accessibility means wider active hours that can accommodate various work and home responsibilities. In the digital setting, the bar is always open, and there are always people happy to chat. This is especially true because many users are students or live in different time zones, meaning there is a wide range of times that people are active. However, a problem could arise as the third place is meant to be a separate space, but there no longer are distinct physical spaces between work, home, and third space as one can participate in them simultaneously. Stresses from work and home do show up and make the

discussion less playful at times. Despite these issues, members of the Discord successfully create separation through dedicated spaces and time for work/home while also taking advantage of the overlap between school and Nerdfighteria community to receive emotional support, be held accountable, and receive good advice. Dedicated space and time is found in the #beehive channel, which is a channel dedicated to peoples' todo-lists. They commonly include both household and work tasks. People acknowledge others' todo-lists by reacting with an emoji of a charizard (a reference that J1 did not even understand). J1 noticed that people sometimes react with a todo-list specific emoji, like for instance if they include watering plants as a todo, they might include a plant emoji. This was a small but meaningful gesture that someone is taking the time to know what they have planned. J1 said that this was their functional todo-list for the day, and that they wouldn't create one otherwise. They found putting it on the #beehive channel was better compared to physical todo lists because editing allows them to better add/remove tasks, and generally a nice experience because people can give little updates and even have a bot give another person a "cookie" for doing a good job (the cookie is just a picture). On the topic of accountability, J1 will often ask someone in the server to ping them and ask for a work update. The idea that someone will be seeing the progress makes them feel more motivated to work. There is also something known as "Productivetime", which is an informally scheduled meeting once or twice a week where Nerdfighters will sit in the "Productivity Zone (Shh)" voice channel with their microphones on mute and without cameras on to do work at the same time. There is often a bot playing music in the channel while this happens. By segmenting out time and participating in this event, the participants are basically agreeing that they are

going to be doing work. They shouldn't post too much in the Discord, creating a clear separation between third place and work. The voice channel for productivity can be joined at any time outside of this scheduled event too, and there is relatively frequently a person or couple of people in that channel. J1 said that if there is only one person there, they might join even if they aren't doing work. The thought process is that by seeing another person's icon in there, they know someone else is doing work and "now I have to be productive because somebody's being productive with me." J1 mentions a time where they were alone in the channel and getting discouraged in their work, but then someone else joined and their mindset was: "Okay, I'll push through this hard thing... I'll keep going for a little bit longer." Through both the #beehive todo list channel, the "Productivetime" scheduled event, and the "Productivity Zone (Shh)" voice channel, there is both a clear separation between work and conversation while also allowing Nerds to support and hold each other accountable in their work goals.

Outside of these channels, the community space also allows for users to ask questions and discuss work and home life. For instance, J1 has received a lot of mentorship and support from other Nerdfighters on the server about their undergraduate research work. They have struggled finding peers in her physical network who can empathize or give advice on those experiences. In the Discord, however, they found many Nerdfighters who could fulfill those needs. They point out one particular Nerdfighter, who was a PHD candidate, that has been a consistent mentor figure on the server. In one specific instance, J1 had expressed immense struggles with their research and the other Nerdfighter reached out privately to check in on them and offer advice, which helped J1

through that tough time. J1 found that when they didn't know what to do for something related to school, they could ask this Nerdfighter, who would be like "I know. And if I don't know, I know a guy... so hold on". This is a benefit of third places as there are people from a variety of walks and stages of life participating. Beyond expanding your perspectives, this also has the benefit of increasing your network and the type of advice and knowledge you have access to. A physical third place might be less inclined for this type of mentorship or advice-on-work type of interaction, as there are only so many people that you can talk to, but the design of the smaller, more specific discussion channels on the Discord allows for your question to reach an audience of 200+ regulars, and only the ones that have practical advice will respond.

What role do the Nerdfighteria Lexicon, catchphrases, and inside jokes play in community cohesion and group identity? What do they say about the community?

Nerdfighter - (n.) Someone who, instead of being made out of bones and organs and stuff, is made entirely out of awesome. How do you know if you're a Nerdfighter? If you want to be one, then you are. (To clarify - a Nerdfighter does not fight nerds. A Nerdfighter fights for nerds.) Term coined after John played an arcade game called Aero Fighters in an airport in [video link]. The font used in the game made the words "Aero Fighters" look like "Nerd Fighters". [6]

The Nerdfighteria Lexicon serves several vital roles in defining values and reinforcing the cohesion of the Nerdfighter community. We notice that through the size, exploratory

nature, and terms chosen, the lexicon defines and supports values of curiosity, knowledge, unironic enthusiasm, silliness, openness, and charity. One can see pieces of this definition in the above definition, all succinctly captured by the term *awesome*. The most common Nerdfighter chant, Don't Forget to be Awesome! (DFTBA!), is an exclamation of unironic enthusiasm. The Lexicon and references in general also plays a key role in several parts of the membership lifecycle by acting as a barrier to unwelcome visitors, drawing curious people in and rewarding their curiosity, providing a clear measure both internally and outwardly about membership status, and creating a positive cycle between community engagement and content.

Community Values

There are 342 documented words or phrases in the Official Nerdfighter Lexicon page of their website [6]. This Lexicon is descriptive of the past 7+ years of Nerdfighteria and what terms and references Nerdfighters have picked up. There are over 100 Nerdfighters that contributed to curating this list. These have a wide range, from references to their books, videos, podcasts, and projects, to John's wife Sarah's youtube channel (Art Assignment, The) where they give out art assignments to the viewers. There are also 145 custom emojis on the Discord server, which include even more specific references to content and server events/people. The Lexicon, through its sheer size, breath, and background knowledge required, exemplifies the value of knowledge within the community. The terms themselves are also quite silly. Within the lexicon, there are made-up terms like "Dooblydoo," which means the description section of a Youtube video, that are just fun to say. Many of the Nerdfighters we talked to

emphasized they didn't understand the full backstory to a lot of the words and they just knew them from their usage, but that the lore wasn't that important anyways. For instance, A2 mentioned the Bogpire, explaining *"the joke is like, I don't entirely understand it... but you take all the bogs in the world, and then that's like, the Empire [from Starwars]..."*. Importantly, they said that *"the bog pyre episode was a bit confusing at first, but it's all like, just a fun thing."*

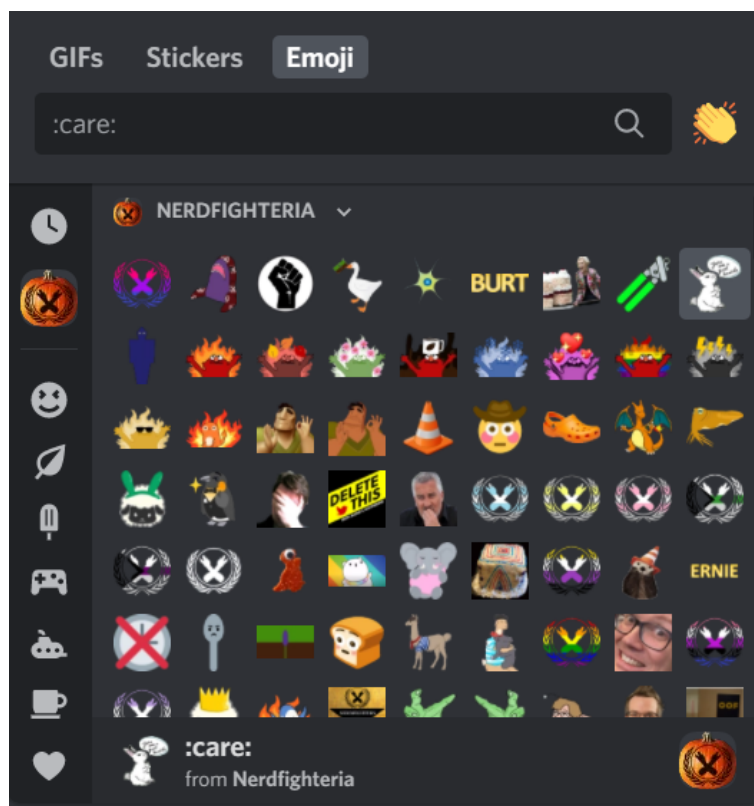


Figure 8: Some of the available Nerdfighteria specific emojis on the Discord server.

The Lexicon also provides alternative definitions for existing terms, like the following definition:

***I love you** - (n.) A phrase of endearment not exclusive to romantic love. On Esther Day, to honor her, Hank and John tell each other “I Love You,” in an extraordinarily begrudging manner.*

This definition of love encodes values of open affection, expanding the norm of who we can express love towards beyond romantic love. Searching the chat of the Discord server, there are 80,000+ results for love; while the majority are used to refer to loving things, there are a significant portion (10,000) that explicitly express love for other members of the community. The power of this redefinition is not within the actual Lexicon definition, but rather the practice of it. That practice creates the atmosphere that so many participants felt was open and accepting of them.

There is also the idea of “dubious advice” that is said in the intro of Dear Hank & John, which is about the Green brothers answering questions and giving “dubious advice” in their own words. The phrase sets the stage for their podcast as a more lighthearted place for their banter, where any actual advice they give has likely not been given too much thought. This idea of dubious advice is commandeered in the #dear-nerdfighteria channel, which is the question-answering channel. Question-askers will sometimes specify if they want dubious, non-dubious, or both types of advice. Question-answerers will sometimes ask for clarification themselves before answering. The creation of this explicit language allows Nerdfighters to better express how they want their questions responded to. If they want serious answers only, asking for non-dubious advice allows that. As noted by A1 though, for serious topics, people often say that “dubious and not

dubious advice appreciated.” In this case, there is an interesting dynamic of funny answers which can “help get the ball rolling for real answers”. A1 describes the dynamic to answering these questions as follows:

“[When] somebody says something funny, we can be like, Oh, haha, that's funny. But seriously, here's an actual answer now. Instead of being like... Oh, God, how do I word this in a respectful correct way, we have the option of like, that's funny. But seriously, though, try this.”

Through the creation of these concepts of dubious and non-dubious advice, and their normalized usage in the vocabulary, the community is able to better navigate difficult questions. This ties into the value of openness, where A1 and A2 have felt that the #dear-nerdfighteria channel is one of the best places to receive advice on the internet, in large part to the culture, openness, and varied experiences of the members. Of course, many communities do have established, effective norms around navigating serious topics, but there is power in explicitly encoding those norms in language. Language informs what types of interactions people can have and things they can communicate, and shared language usage creates norms around those new possibilities. Instead of coming up with a new way to express the ideas, it encodes complicated ideas succinctly. By being explicit, it also lowers the barrier for newcomers to understanding the social norms. Thus, we can see that the Lexicon gives the community effective tools for communicating and navigating social norms.

On the value of charity, two main objectives of the community are to “decrease worldsuck” and “increase awesome.” These terms situate the fight: worldsuck is what the nerdfighters are fighting against, and their main tool against it is to increase awesomeness. While to an outsider this may seem a bit childish, community members don’t take them too seriously as terms but do take them seriously as objectives. To that end, they have collectively loaned nearly \$4,000,000 on Kiva, and the past year’s Project for Awesome raised a total of \$3,235,161.42 for charity. In our interviews, many participants also view it as a very important part of the community, and as a main incentive to buy merchandise, because the extra proceeds always go towards charities that the Green brothers talk about and support. The usage of worldsuck and awesome make projects like The Foundation to Decrease Worldsuck or Project for Awesome both understandable to outsiders but uniquely Nerdfighter brands.

Nerdfighteria Lexicon and the Membership Cycle



Figure 8 - 5-Stage Membership Lifecycle [8]

In Amy Jo Kim’s book, *Community Building on the Web*, she creates a useful paradigm of the membership lifecycle, as portrayed above [8]. These define the different roles of community members along temporal lines, with visitors gradually understanding the norms of a community, becoming regular participants, and then eventually leading and

retelling stories to reinforce values. Each step plays a vital role in the community ecosystem. While all communities have this lifecycle, the way that people progress along this membership track and the interactions between different groups is shaped by the design and social norms of the communities. The Lexicon plays a vital part in many steps of this cycle.

Firstly, the Lexicon plays an important role in screening out unwanted visitors while naturally encouraging curious visitors to explore further. As A3 points out, the Lexicon naturally screens out those who might approach the vocabulary ironically or cynically. This is not to say that they want to exclude newcomers from the vocabulary. J1 explains as follows:

“you know, when we, when we use these inside jokes, like people will kind of be confused by it. And whenever, whenever someone asks about, about something, or like what something means we're always like very willing to explain it. And we never want to like keep that information from people, because that's how you form like cliques.”

The point of the inside jokes are to create shared values and experiences, but they make it a key point to not exclude others that want to join in on the joke. It is those who don't want to be in that are repelled. A3 also nicely captures the fact that to those curious and lore-minded, the Lexicon can be a “ fun kind of journey of sorts... a motivation to uncover that lore, to uncover that history, and to go back to the early days of Nerdfighteria to uncover where those kinds of inside jokes or that kind of lore originates from...” He further says that people will find that “there's a sense of history

and rich depth to that community, that there's a sense of lore and really constructed sense of culture there.” The Lexicon is like a candy trail that brings you further into the content, history, and culture of the Nerdfighteria community. Because the Lexicon is so tied in with the values, norms, history, and culture of Nerdfighteria, the number of Lexicon words/references you understand can provide a good signal for how far along the membership cycle you are, for you and for other Nerdfighters. It also defines a key form of interaction between veterans and new members: knowledge transfer. In asking for an explanation, new members are exposing some vulnerability in their lack of knowledge, and veterans are given the chance to assuage that vulnerability by being friendly and taking their time to explain.

A3 also importantly highlights the interplay between content and community. By participating in the community and hearing more references, each of those lead to other content, even in different modalities. If you initially came through the Vlogbrothers, you might not know about Hank’s science Tiktoks or channels, or their podcast together. The Lexicon provides a natural way through references to find new content that you might be interested in, while watching more content allows you to understand and connect with the members of the community better. Despite growing into a bigger thing than just Hank and John, the Discord does still actively discuss their content. That is how we witness a positive feedback loop between community participation and content.

Conclusion

The Nerdfighteria Discord server is a vibrant gathering place for Nerdfighters from around the world. It embodies all ideological and cultural values of the larger Nerdfighteria community, and in its own way, also exhibits certain unique aspects as well. Through our interviews, readings, and interaction sessions with the community, we discovered the mechanics, design decisions, and values that build and sustain a community of this sort. Studying the community from the lens of our research questions helped us discover why this Discord server is becoming increasingly popular among the Nerdfighter circles, and how the Nerdfighteria-specific lexicon speaks volumes about the community.

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