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1 Introduction

The socially awkward nerd, with their old-fashioned clothes and black thick-rimmed glasses, is a reoccurring figure in today's popular culture, be it on the internet, in film, on television or even in music. Whereas the nerd used to be a largely unlikeable character, over the past decade, there has been a shift towards a more positive perception of the nerd, also as a consequence of a less comically stereotypical and more complex representation of the nerd. Although both male and female nerds appear on popular television, the latter still are somewhat of a rarity in academic discourse. While some work has been conducted on male nerds, an exact and clear-cut definition is still lacking, which makes it harder to conceptualise the female version of a nerd. Basically, nerds are perceived to be outside the norm although it is not quite clear exactly what this norm is, and of course there is a subjective nature to norms and how we define them. For example, when looking around and observing other people on public transport, we immediately and unconsciously categorise them as within our norm or outside it, but the boundaries are fuzzy and change over time. Looking at characters in a sitcom, this is even more difficult because they are relatively stereotyped and what we see as norm in the real world does not necessarily have to be a norm in this genre. This is also the reason why the sitcom is the perfect genre for analysing nerds: the characters are based on stereotypes, and the nerd is a stereotype. What makes it possible for us to understand a character as a nerd are their clothes and accessories, social behaviour and interests. Of these, clothes and accessories are the items that allow instant categorisation of a character as inside or outside a sartorial norm, while the other factors take a little longer to decode. This constitutes a serious research gap in cultural studies, and this thesis is therefore going to address the representation of the female nerd. I place my focus on female nerds in two U.S.-American sitcoms, namely *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-present) and *30 Rock* (2006-2013). The characters I will analyse are Bernadette Rostenkowski-Wolowitz and Amy Farrah Fowler from *The Big Bang Theory* (henceforth *TBBT*), and Liz Lemon from *30 Rock*. While *30 Rock* will be analysed in full, *TBBT* is still on-going, and my analysis will encompass its completed ten seasons.

This thesis poses the question of how female nerds are represented in contemporary U.S.-American sitcoms by drawing on theories of the nerd as well as

fashion studies and looking at audio-visual material focusing especially on appearance and behaviour. A subordinate question is whether female nerdiness is a character trait or whether it can also be understood as a style in the sense of an expression of subculture as defined by Hebdige (2-3). Taking a stereotypical definition of male nerds as a starting point, it is clear that the representation of female nerds deviates from it. I expect to find a broad range of representations of female nerds in U.S.-American sitcoms that might even allow me to categorise characters as particular kinds of nerds.

2 Representations of the Nerd

It is often assumed that the concept of the nerd has its origin in stereotypes. This is due to its representation being a cluster of stereotypical characteristics that, of course, cannot be applied to every nerd. In order to pursue an analysis of nerds in TV sitcoms, some explanations are required. It is essential to define, firstly, representation, secondly, stereotypes, and eventually the nerd.

2.1 Representation

For the concept of representation, this thesis draws upon Stuart Hall, who claims that “representation is the production of meaning through language” (16). Language, then, uses signs and symbols which do not necessarily have to be only spoken words as they can also be “written words, electronically produced images, musical notes, even objects” (1). Consequently, the close analysis that follows in this thesis focuses on visual and verbal material portraying each character.

Representation can be powerful if it portrays something or someone in a positive as well as a negative way. Within media, for example, representations have the power to influence a potentially huge amount of viewers. This is connected to the concept of discourse, which “is the social process of making and reproducing sense(s)” (Hartley 73). There are dominant and non-dominant discourses (Hartley 73). Nerds count towards the latter but are frequently represented in dominant media, namely TV. If this trend continues, it is possible for the nerd discourse to grow more powerful and eventually become dominant. This would also mean that the negative stereotype of the nerd would lose at least some of its power as the representations of nerds would no longer be seen as other.

2.2 Stereotypes

A stereotype is a reduction of a group of people to certain identifiable characteristics, which are frequently connected to appearance (Cranny-Francis et al. 140). It is essential that a stereotype is produced from outside the group. Consequently, they are often inaccurate due to inadequate knowledge about the target group and restricted access to it (Cranny-Francis et al. 141). The reason a group produces stereotypes about another is to “maintain its own access to power”. This includes but is not limited to “the power to name,” which means one group has the ability and influence to create a stereotype, circulate it, and therefore “circumscribe the other – how it will be seen, how it will see itself”. This has a dividing effect, sorting groups into what is ‘normal’ and what deviates from it. It is important to note, however, that not every stereotype is necessarily negative. Those of marginalised groups are, though, whereas “powerful groups are endowed with positive stereotypes,” which eventually become the norm (Cranny-Francis et al. 142). This does not mean that powerful groups cannot be subject to negative stereotypes as well, for example, there are commonly known stereotypes of a nation’s people. What Cranny-Francis means is that positive stereotypes occur only in powerful groups because other groups envy them. In this thesis, specifically negative stereotypes can be found within the selected TV shows. On the one hand, sitcoms use them to portray each type of character and, on the other hand, the representations of nerds, be they male or female, relies on negative stereotypes as they are the small out-group. Sitcoms partly rely on stereotypes for humour, which is why they make excessive use of them – see chapter 5 The Genre of the Sitcom.

2.3 The Nerd

In popular culture, spotting a nerd happens within seconds of their first appearance because they look different from other people, mostly because of mismatched clothes and glasses but also because of their social awkwardness. They tend to be white, middle class men. Although there certainly are female nerds in popular culture, who look like a version of male nerds, they are hardly discussed in academic discourse, where the male nerd is prevalent. For that reason, it is difficult to find a suitable definition or even description of the female nerd to work with. This is not due to the fact that there are no female nerds as there are enough women on TV, for example, that can be categorised as nerds at first glance. The problem is that they are hardly

talked about in favour of the analysis of male nerds, which is partly due to there being more male than female nerds in popular culture. Still, when first appearances can determine female nerd status, there have to be certain features responsible for this. In order to define them, I have to investigate what has been said about the male nerd first.

Lori Kendall, sociologist and leading scholar with regards to nerds, has been working on this subject for many years now. In 1999, she published two articles: “‘The Nerd Within’: Mass Media and the Negotiation of Identity Among Computer-Using Men” and “Nerd nation: Images of nerds in US popular culture.” The former analyses the representation of nerds in media by focusing on how exclusively male “participants on an online forum perform their identities” (“The Nerd Within” 353). A very useful finding of hers is that the nerd stereotype is gendered predominantly as male (“The Nerd Within” 362). She revisits this point in the latter article which analyses the nerd in film, news articles and on the internet. Even though there are female nerds to be found in popular culture, the stereotypical nerd is still male. This is supported by the fact that “feminine qualifiers usually accompany the designation of women as ‘nerds’, as in ‘female nerd’ or ‘nerdette’” (“Nerd nation” 262). In other words, as long as there is the need for a female qualifier, the male nerd is the norm.

Kendall found a correlation between people’s technophobia and negative nerd stereotypes. She hoped for people to “[e]xpos[e] and explor[e] that uneasiness” and eventually lessen the negativity of the nerd stereotype (“Nerd nation” 280). This did not come to be as she revealed in an interview in 2009: “‘Ten years ago, I thought the nerd stereotype would fade as more and more people started to use computers in their everyday lives,’ Kendall said. ‘I thought, ‘Since we’re all using computers, we’re all nerds.’ Well, that hasn’t been true’” (Ciciora). People’s uneasiness towards computers still exists and so does the negative image of the nerd. This also shows that solely the use of computers is not enough to label someone a nerd. Business people, for example, may be tethered to their computers and other technical devices but their job requires them to do so, whereas the nerd does so on its own accord simply because he enjoys it (Ciciora).

Kendall published another article in 2000 analysing nerd identity in an online Forum (“OH NO! I’M A NERD!”). One finding of this study is that although the term nerd is in principle pejorative, it “varies in meaning depending on the social context” (262). As a stereotype produced by an out-group, its meaning is negative but “as an

in-group term, it can convey affection or acceptance” (262). This holds true for the expressions ‘nigger’ or ‘bitch,’ for example. If someone takes such an initially negatively connotated stereotype and intentionally uses it to refer to themselves, they re-appropriate its meaning so that in time it would no longer have a negative effect in their society. Within her study, Kendall found that

[n]erdism in both men and women is held to decrease sexual attractiveness, but in men this is compensated by the relatively masculine values attached to intelligence and computer skills . . . This connection between nerdism and masculinity may be what makes a nerd identity so damaging to women’s potential and perceived sexual desirability. (265-66)

This is another factor that distinguishes male from female nerds. Women are less attractive when their representation is that of a nerd. Even if they are intelligent and skilled with computers, the fact that these characteristics are frequently associated with masculinity worsens their representation even more. They would have to compensate for their nerdiness in other specifically feminine ways in order to gain sexual attractiveness. I investigate this later on since all female nerds in this thesis are in a steady and physical relationship.

In 2011, Kendall wrote yet another article focusing on nerds and the nerd stereotype specifically, “‘White and Nerdy’: Computers, Race, and the Nerd Stereotype”. She analysed images of nerds and found that there are two essential elements to a nerd: a “short-sleeved white dress shirt worn with a tie,” whereas the thick-rimmed glasses, frequently called ‘nerd glasses,’ and pocket protectors full of pens are only optional (“White and Nerdy” 507). Moreover, Kendall identifies more criteria of a nerd’s stereotypical representation. Next to their affinity for computers, a nerd “lack[s] social and sartorial skills, [is] obsessed with trivia, and interested in fringe cultural activities” (“White and Nerdy” 521). It is unlikely that every nerd fulfils all these aspects, especially female nerds, who already break with the primary perception of nerds being male. Still, Kendall states that “women and men of color are excluded entirely from” the stereotype of the nerd (“White and Nerdy” 519). It is true that nerds tend to be white male middle class, but not exclusively. There are a few exceptions, for example, Steve Urkel from *Family Matters* (1989-1998) or Malcolm’s friend Stevie Kenarban from *Malcolm in the Middle* (2000-2006). Still, racial nerds are a rarity in popular culture.

Although Kendall’s description of the stereotypical male nerd says that nerds are typically male and white, it is used as a starting point to identify female nerds in this thesis as recently there have been female nerds in popular culture. However, as

my selection of U.S.-American sitcoms includes exclusively white female nerds, my focus will be on gender rather than race.¹

An important term within the nerd discussion is 'geek'. Frequently, these terms are used interchangeably but some critics have pointed to a slight difference in meaning.² There is a whole "cluster of terms located near nerd on the continuum includ[ing] geek, wonk, dweeb and spaz . . . among computer users, geek has different shades of meaning, including its use as a verb" (Kendall, "Nerd nation" 264). 'To geek out' "indicates a very intense focus on an interest, and sometimes it's an interest that not a lot of people share. It tends to indicate expertise and passion about something" (Ciciora). Nerds, too, can have fringe interests but when they do, it is not seen as expertise or passion but as a negatively distinguishing, nerdy, habit. Most importantly, the term nerd is negatively connotated, whereas geek is frequently associated with being chic. A suitable example is that "PCs [are] personified as nerdy and Macs as the apotheosis of geeky cool" with the only visible difference being their design (Ciciora). Kendall summarises the difference between nerd and geek like this: "'Geek' is something you can do and then leave behind, but 'nerd' is what you are" (Ciciora). Therefore, a geek could be seen as a milder and temporary alternative version of a nerd.

3 Methodology and Approach

As I analyse women's appearances, fashion studies is a useful approach to my analysis. It encompasses a wide range of different specialised theories but general fashion theory is the "inquiry into fundamental questions about fashion with the objectives of understanding, explaining and predicting fashion change" (Lillethun 77). The first and probably most important question fashion theory concerns itself with is "What is fashion?" (Lillethun 77). Fashion "is a form of dress or article of clothing that has or will become popular; bobbed hair was a fashion in the 1920s for women. *Fashion* is also a social process whereby an item of clothing or dress is adopted by many people [original emphasis]" (Reilly 12). This definition of fashion requires further explanation of the concepts of clothing and dress. The former is simply "a

¹ The only non-white nerd in the selected series is Raj Koothrappali from *TBBT*, an immigrant from India, who is not topic of this analysis because, first of all, he is male, and, second, he is in no relationship with the discussed female nerds.

² For a synonymous use of the terms geek and nerd see, for example, Bednarek, Willey and Subramaniam, or Zittlau.

product made out of a textile that is worn on the body,” for example, a shirt (Reilly 12). The latter is more extensive and “includes three elements: (1) any item worn on the body (e.g., clothing, accessories); (2) any modification to the body (e.g., tanning, dieting, tattooing, hair styles); and (3) anything appended to the body (e.g., handbags, crutches, dog leashes, fans)” (Reilly 12). This means that fashion goes beyond clothes and encompasses “hair, makeup, accessories, posture and other aspects of personal appearance” as well (Welters and Lillethun xx). Therefore, my analysis focuses on women’s appearances including these aspects of fashion. Useful concepts for my interpretation are taste and style. The former “is a matter of aesthetic liking and appreciating” and is frequently encountered in the discourse of good versus bad taste (Reilly 55). Taste is a subjective concept since there are no fixed rules to what is good taste but there are social conventions that help categorise taste. A dress code, for example, helps with the appropriate clothing for a certain occasion. If someone disregards such a dress code and wears something else, it is considered bad taste as the attire does not fit the occasion. Style is connected to taste insofar that the style one chooses is in accordance with their taste. It “is a combination of silhouette, construction, fabric and details that distinguishes an object from other objects in the same category” (Welters and Lillethun xix). In the case of two people wearing different t-shirts, one is fitted, blue and the other one is baggy, red with a print on the chest, both shirts are the same type of clothing but belong to a different style. Lastly, someone “conforming to current fashions” is fashionable (Welters and Lillethun xix).

Fashion studies is useful for this thesis because “all fashion and clothing perform . . . communication. This may be explained by saying that everything we wear on, or do to, our bodies and ourselves as clothing, fashion or any other form of adornment, represents the ideas, values and beliefs that we hold as individual members of various cultural groups” (Barnard 53). In that sense, communication functions as representation but this view is not without criticism as it is said to condense “all fashion phenomena to ‘texts’ or representations” (Barnard 54). In a real-life context, this is a valid objection but as I analyse scripted sitcoms, it is to be expected that all the characters’ clothes have been purposefully chosen for their representations. The choice of a specific fashion and style communicates and therefore represents certain beliefs, ideas and a sense of belonging to cultural groups. As that is the case, “[o]ur clothing and fashion stand for, or represent, our

cultural, sexual, national, class and other identities . . . [and] are, therefore, tools” (Barnard 79). Fashion is a tool to represent oneself. The choice of certain items of clothing or other dress, for example, wearing glasses instead of contact lenses, communicates beliefs and membership to certain groups. Starting with the late twentieth century, this representation “might reflect identity politics, subcultural or ethnic identity,” which is partly due to media advertisements on TV and the internet (Blanco 59). T-shirts played a huge part in this sartorial revolution as they “evolved into social statements and advertising tools, promoting ideas, brands and products” (Blanco 63). These social statements came to a high in the 1990s, when “[c]lothing reflected personal taste as lifestyle retailing became a powerful marketing tool” (Blanco 69). This continues today and gives importance to fashion as a tool for representing one’s identity.

Identity is essential in the context of someone’s representation because it “reflects a person’s location within social context . . . Appearance is part of identity: the individual presents himself or herself in social contexts and others perceive and assign meaning to his or her presentation . . . People develop a *self-image*, or internal representations of their identity [original emphasis]” (Lillethun 121). This is closely connected to subcultures. Subcultures are, inter alia, defined by fashion as a distinguishing feature. However, occasionally a unique subcultural style becomes adapted and widely accepted. When it “is valued or appreciated by others, it is adopted into the mainstream. So while you can have a specific group of people who are authentic punk and live the life of a punk, the punk style can be worn by others who are not necessarily true punks but like the look” (Reilly 86). This holds true for any subculture, nerds included. Only because someone’s appearance represents a stereotypical nerd, it does not mean that they would define themselves as such. There is a fashion that became popular in the early 2010s called “Nerd Chic” or “geek chic,” which was inspired by intellectuals, or rather nerds, although they had been seen as the opposite of chic. For this reason, only selected elements of a stereotypical nerd went into this trend such as

glasses (even fake ones for those who have perfect eyesight), a shirt buttoned all the way to the collar, sweater-vest or blue blazer, suspenders, high-water pants . . . and an accessory such as a bowtie, computer bag, or large vintage-style head phones around the neck . . . [N]erd chic does not mean copying the nerd aesthetic point for point; rather, the looks are toned down and only specific elements are fashionable. (Reilly 88)

Andrew Reilly provides four reasons for this phenomenon: the rise of Silicon Valley and its computer-skilled minds, films featuring a nerd hero, fashionable thinness and the irony of re-appropriating the antithesis of desirable (88). Additionally, in the mid-2000s, series like *30 Rock* and *TBBT* emerged and became popular, further promoting nerds and their fashion.

To analyse female nerds in *TBBT* and *30 Rock*, I have selected the episodes of their first appearance in order to see how the characters are initially constructed as nerds. In addition, I choose further episodes or scenes which depict these women as especially nerdy on the basis of Kendall's description of the stereotypical male nerd.

4 Historicizing the Female Nerd

Except for one, the consulted sources do not elaborate on how the nerd came into being or how this construct spread to the U.S. If at all, they try to explain how nerds became popular which has to do with an increased amount of media dealing with them in main roles and, of course, the advancement of technology going hand in hand with the rise of Silicon Valley (Reilly 88).

Before the term nerd was even coined, starting in England and spreading to the U.S., intellectual women were singled out, frowned upon and given the then negatively connotated name of 'bluestocking' in the mid-eighteenth century and 'New Woman' in the late nineteenth century (see Harcstark Myers, Ledger, and Lindsey). It does not matter what intelligent and most likely unconventional women have been called as they were at least verbally attacked throughout the ages.

According to *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, the term "nerd" could originate from the fictional animal of the same name from Dr. Seuss's picture book *If I ran the Zoo* (1950).³ A nerd outside this story is defined as "an unstylish, unattractive, or socially inept person; *esp* : one slavishly devoted to intellectual or academic pursuits [original emphasis]" ("nerd."). Dr. Seuss's nerd is depicted as a yellow humanoid creature with long white unkempt hair on top of its head, lower neck and sideburns. It has a small red nose and the skin around its eyes is red as well. Its main body is black, the hands are clasped in front of it and it features a grumpy look, see fig. 1. Although a fictional animal, parallels can be drawn between this description and that of the pejorative word used for socially awkward and weirdly dressed human

³ The *OED Online* offers four possible theories of origin but portrays Dr. Seuss's nerd as the most plausible one ("nerd, n.").

nerds. It looks like the animal wears a short-sleeved shirt and, with a bit of imagination, the red skin around its eyes could be seen as thick-rimmed glasses, which human nerds so frequently wear. The adjectives 'unstylish' and 'unattractive' describe Dr. Seuss's nerd, too, not so much because of what it wears as the black 'shirt' could be skin or fur and consequently biologically fixed, but because of the way this character keeps its hair. It appears to be long and uncared for and rather unattractive. As for its social competence, there is not much that is known about it since the nerd creature does not talk. It is portrayed standing with a red arrow-shaped sign pointing towards it reading "a NERD" (Dr. Seuss n.p.). The only indication towards its social competence is the scowl on its face and angry or annoyed look in its eyes. This is where the parallels end as there is no proof of the characters intelligence or interests. Visually, though, Dr. Seuss's nerd is rather similar to the stereotypical representation of human nerds, which is most likely the reason people started using the name of the fictional animal to refer to its unconventional, socially inept human counterpart.



Fig. 1. Dr. Seuss's nerd

The only consulted source trying to follow the nerd's traces is Jörg Zittlau. He claims that there have always been nerds going as far back as ancient Greece (12). Regarding the U.S., Zittlau states that there were hardly any outspoken or visible nerds during the McCarthy era due to its anti-intellectual politics (14). They had to lay low in order not to draw attention to themselves. This changed with the invention of the personal computer, which probably marks the nerds' still on-going heyday as the media uses the term nerd casually without any explanation and nerd-style items are

successfully sold in the fashion industry (Zittlau 14). As nerd examples of that time, Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Eric Schmidt and Mark Zuckerberg are mentioned from Microsoft, Apple, Google and Facebook, respectively (Zittlau 14). The spread from male to female nerds happened in the 1990s with movies featuring intelligent, computer-skilled women, for example, *The Net* (1995) with Sandra Bullock (Zittlau 27). Female nerds were and are not restricted to film. Zittlau mentions one woman he thinks of as a nerd, Marissa Mayer from Google (28).⁴ Interestingly, he only provided one successful woman in comparison to four men. This indicates a great imbalance between female and male nerds, which only now shrinks slightly with the popularity of the female nerd.

Even though the term nerd was used in a negative sense in the past and sometimes even today, its meaning seems to be changing towards a more positive connotation. This goes hand in hand with a paradigm shift of the concept of 'cool' which "has long pervaded the realms of fashion, advertisement and youth culture, . . . [and] now also seems to invade the world of hard science, as depicted in mainstream film and television formats from the United States" (Kohlenberger 12).⁵ It is perceived as 'cool' to be intelligent, even to be seen as a nerd, and it is not exclusive to men. Although both the concepts of New Women of the late nineteenth century as well as that of female nerds are seen as deviations from what 'normal' women should be like, it is different in that New Women were thought of as sexless, whereas female nerds are being sexualised.

On U.S.-American television, it is not only the female nerd that is underrepresented or at least not acknowledged but women in general. This is "combined with their overrepresentation in stereotypically feminine roles and functions" (Klecker 183). This results in a distorted view of U.S.-American social reality and, more seriously, "this underrepresentation of women reinforces the notion that (white, straight) men are by default human, and women are therefore a deviation from the norm" (Klecker 183). This is exactly what Kendall is saying about the default nerd; he is male, white and straight. Nevertheless, over the past decades, the "representation of women and gender relations in television has definitely improved . . . [and] women can now also inhabit roles and professions on-screen that were

⁴ By the time of publication, Mayer still worked for Google. She is popular in the technological world for being Google's first female engineer and later an executive until she became CEO at Yahoo in 2012 (Sutter).

⁵ For previous paradigm shifts and the origin of the term 'cool' see Haselstein.

previously unimaginable,” including female intellectuals (Klecker 184). It is questionable whether representations of female nerds on television can be seen as an improvement of the representation of women in general but at least they appear on screen and are not limited to the sitcom genre. There is a rising number of female nerds in U.S.-American television shows beyond the ones discussed here, primarily in crime shows, for example, Abby Sciuto, the goth forensic from *NCIS* or Penelope Garcia, the technical analyst from *Criminal Minds*, among others.

5 The Genre of the Sitcom

It is important that both chosen television series are situation comedies since this provides a good basis for comparison of characters from these shows. A situation comedy, as any other genre, has specific and identifiable features and rules. Amongst the most obvious are episode length of roughly 30 minutes and the humorous dialogue.⁶ Additional characteristics are “narrative and spatial stasis . . . episode-specific predicament, the stereotyped characterization, the perennially static setting and narrative with circular plot constellations” (Voigts-Virchow 72). The typical portrayal of overly stereotyped characters is essential in sitcoms for it creates comic characters. The nerd is one of these comic characters based on stereotypes, be they male or female. This genre is specifically helpful for my analysis because it induces an immediate categorisation of characters in the audience due to the extreme use of stereotypes.

TBBT fulfils most of these criteria except that the episodes are a bit shorter with about 20 minutes and narrative stasis does not apply to all episodes. There is story progression throughout the seasons although not much, for example, relationships are formed and dissolved, people move in together or get married. Still, the narrative is mostly static and circular as the plot of an episode is finished in the same. Typical for sitcoms, *TBBT* features humorous dialogues and spatial stasis, as there are few set locations, the most frequent being the characters’ apartments, workplaces and a comic book store. Moreover, the series makes heavy use of

⁶ *30 Rock*’s episode length is about 20 minutes but there are three episodes that are twice that length. Each of these episodes are actually two episodes in one which were aired in one piece but have different titles: S05E20 “100: Part 1” and S05E21 “100: Part 2” (the title refers to the 100th episode in the series), S06E06 “Hey, Baby, What’s Wrong?: Part 1” and S06E07 “Hey, Baby, What’s Wrong?: Part 2”, S07E12 “Hogcock!” and S07E13 “Last Lunch”.

stereotypes, for example, the beautiful blond dumb woman, smart rather unattractive scientists and so on. Overall, *TBBT* is a typical sitcom.

Everyone familiar with the series *30 Rock* knows that it does not quite fit into the usual sitcom genre and NBC, its broadcasting network, calls it a “classic comedy” (“*30 Rock*”). In academic discourse, researchers argue that there is more to *30 Rock*’s genre than it being just a sitcom. Katrin Horn wrote a lengthy article about this topic. First she agrees that the series belongs to the sitcom genre and states that some seasons had been broadcast on NBC on Thursday night under the title “Comedy Night Done Right” (153). Her opinion is that *30 Rock* “experiment[s] with the sitcom format as well as TV’s potential for self-reflexivity” (154). She calls it a “quality sitcom” and a sketch show as a TV genre (155). Her reasoning behind this is that *30 Rock* differentiates itself “from more traditional sitcoms by [its] metareferentiality and a media-awareness[,] . . . [its] often self-conscious commentary by its protagonists . . . [as well as a] connection to the live-tradition of TV comedy . . . found in earlier sitcoms and sketch shows, which broadens the opportunities for metareferentiality” (156). The majority of the show’s jokes rely on this metareferentiality but this is not everything that makes the show special. As mentioned above, a typical sitcom has an “episode-specific predicament” but *30 Rock* does not as it rejects “the sitcom’s traditionally episodic narrative structure” (Voigts-Virchow 72; Horn 157). The series makes use of overarching plots, for example, Liz’s wish to have children or Jack’s wife’s kidnapping. This allows for an “unusual amount of personal growth and change” of its protagonists, especially for Liz and Jack (Horn 166). There are four more intentional differences that distinguish *30 Rock* from other sitcoms. Firstly, it uses a

single-camera setup . . . to foreground its spatial flexibility and independence from the usual sitcom proscenium set as the show flaunts its numerous and diverse in- and outdoor sets, as well as a variety of shot distances, camera movements, positions, and zooms which make for a highly sophisticated, but also fragmented and fast visual experience, which reflects the show’s humor and narrative style. (Horn 161)

Secondly, there is no laugh track in the show, which normally indicates a joke or something else that is funny and the audience is supposed to laugh at. Since there is no laugh track in *30 Rock*, the audience is forced to decide for themselves what and who is funny, which opens the field to more than one interpretation and it “allows for a much higher joke-per-minute ratio”, which further underlines its fast pace (Horn 161). There is only one time the show employs a laugh track, which is in the last 30

seconds of the very last episode. This highlights *30 Rock*'s choice of not having one before and breaking with typical genre conventions of sitcoms (Horn 181). Thirdly, the series features many well-known people from TV as well as celebrities starring as themselves, most of all Tracy Morgan, who plays a character who is very like him, Tracy Jordan (Horn 171). Lastly, *30 Rock* makes it a habit to directly address the audience, which is the most obvious disregard for the traditional sitcom genre. This goes hand in hand with "the many parallels between Liz Lemon and Tina Fey and thus the . . . sketch-trope of neglecting to differentiate between character and actor" (Horn 171). The phenomenon of Tina Fey is further discussed in chapter 6.2.

This genre mix of a traditional sitcom and a sketch show leads to wider possibilities of metareferentiality, which the show uses to "often mock audiences' expectations of continuity and cliché character developments" (Horn 175). Were it any other sitcom, it could be expected that Liz and Jack would find together in the end and start a relationship. This is not the case, though. However, *30 Rock* continuously teases the audience in this regard. Once, on a vacation, Liz and Jack are supposed to sleep in the same bed. They stand next to the bed wearing their pyjamas and try to get in without touching but the old mattress pushes them into an embrace from which they jump apart. Liz then asks "Why didn't anything ever happen between us?" and they have a lengthy conversation about it before Jack leaves the room with a pillow and a blanket (S07E10 12:29 – 15:04). This metareferentiality partly stems from the sketch comedy genre, which is "referential, intertextual and quite simply 'about' other TV and media events, formats and clichés" (Horn 176). The series uses this to "include (parodies of) other TV genres as well as media formats to convey meaning and underscore metareferentiality" (Horn 176). *30 Rock* is metareferential in another sense as well. The series has an official Facebook page, which draws attention to something the audience might have missed while watching, sites on NBC.com, which provide additional information about side characters, and in reference to the show's finale, there is a real comment on YouTube by the fictional character Jack Donaghy (Horn 178-79). Taking all this into account, *30 Rock* may not be traditional but a sitcom nonetheless.

As mentioned above, characters in sitcoms stand out not only because they are stereotyped but also because they have "excessive amounts of spare time," which is called "time porn" (Voigts-Virchow 72). Both aspects are necessary because stereotyped characters elicit more humour than realistic ones and without leisure time

at their hands they would not be able to be as funny. Even *30 Rock*, which is mainly set at Liz's work place, gives its protagonist free time but also manages to take the humour to work. In traditional sitcoms, there are fixed gender roles: men work to earn money and support the family, while women take care of the home. This implies that "men exercised the power over the family, while women catered to supporting men's needs" (McIntosh 199). Over decades, these gender roles shifted and became fuzzier with more independent and working women in sitcoms (Kleckler 179). It is even the case that "female leads of popular soaps and sitcoms often maintain a demanding job and a complex emotional life without any apparent conflict between the two" (Cranny-Francis 224). Still, it is a frequent occurrence for women on popular TV to be "confined to their homes and somewhat reduced to the roles of mothers and caretakers" (Kleckler 187). All female characters in this analysis have a job, support themselves and do not depend on a man to provide for them. However, Bernadette and Liz struggle with their professional and private lives after all because they are or wish to be mothers.

6 Analysis of Female Nerds

This chapter focuses closely on the individual characters' appearances, including distinct personal features and their outfits in different situations describing their dress, posture and facial expression. The latter two aspects in combination with the women's speech provide insight into their behaviour as well. Consequently, this analysis encompasses visual and verbal material alike plus cinematographical aspects, such as camera work. The material is taken from scenes of the women's first appearances, in-between the show if necessary and from later seasons in order to provide enough material for a comparison of their dress and behaviour and to expose any possible changes in the characters. This chapter is divided into two subchapters, one for each series, starting with *TBBT*'s Bernadette followed by Amy and then *30 Rock*'s Liz. Prior to the character analyses, there is a short description of each show offering background knowledge on the series and its characters.

6.1 *The Big Bang Theory*

TBBT is not the first series by Chuck Lorre, which he created in collaboration with Bill Prady. Another popular creation of Lorre is *Two and a Half Men*. *TBBT* first aired in September 2007 and is still running, as its eleventh season premiered ten years later in September 2017 ("The Big Bang Theory"). Due to practical reasons, this thesis

deals with seasons 1 to 10. The show depicts the lives of four male scientists, Sheldon Cooper, Leonard Hofstadter, Howard Wolowitz and Raj Koothrappali. This group of friends grows with their beautiful next-door neighbour Penny and two female scientists, Bernadette and Amy.⁷ Eventually, all three women are in a relationship with one of the male scientists. Out of these characters, my focus lies on Bernadette and Amy as female nerds. Their nerd partners, Howard and Sheldon, are useful for a comparison of the representations of male and female nerds later on.

Angela Willey and Banu Subramaniam point out that “Penny’s growing fondness, affection for, and understand of the various nerds who increasingly make up her social world . . . also stages the growing normalization of nerdiness . . . for the audience” (21). This means, the longer the show runs, the more the audience gets used to nerds – male and female alike – and does not see them as abnormal anymore, especially when the cast consists mostly of nerds as is the case with *TBBT*. On the one hand, this is similar to *30 Rock* because there are seven seasons for the audience to become familiar with Liz and the audience’s fondness of Liz grows with Jack’s fondness of her. On the other hand, this show’s cast is more diverse, which means that Liz stands out more in contrast to them but this is not a problem as Liz is not as nerdy as *TBBT*’s characters to begin with.

6.1.1 Bernadette

Bernadette Rostenkowski enters *TBBT* in season 3 as a graduate student of Microbiology, working as a waitress on the side. By the end of season 10, she has finished her PhD, has a high-paying job and is married to engineer Howard Wolowitz, with whom she has a daughter. Her relationship with her husband is peculiar, on the one hand, because sometimes it is rather a mother-son relationship and, on the other hand, she inhabits the role of the provider. She is friends with Penny and Amy and together they participate in girls’ nights but occasionally also join the men in their nerdy evening occupations, such as playing pen and paper role-playing games.

Meeting Bernadette

Within *TBBT*, Bernadette’s character is introduced in S03E05, “The Creepy Candy Corollary” (2009), due to a pact Howard and Leonard made, that if either of the two had a “hot” girlfriend, he would ask said girlfriend to find a date for the other man

⁷ Penny is the only character without a surname.

among her female friends (02:11 – 02:19). Since Leonard and Penny are together, Howard invokes this pact. This is where Bernadette comes in. She is Penny's colleague at the Cheesecake Factory, where both women work as waitresses. Before she is shown on screen for the first time, Penny tells Howard that she is "adorable" and that she thinks "[he]'ll like her" (S03E05 10:30 – 10:32). This establishes a certain expectation in the audience of what to anticipate. 'Adorable' is an interesting choice to describe a woman. Penny did not say funny or beautiful but adorable, which is commonly used with children or pets and suggests that she does not take Bernadette seriously as a woman. This choice of word already hints at Bernadette's small stature and her supposed cuteness.

Bernadette first appears about half way into the episode although her name is not mentioned until four episodes later. After a clear cut, a medium shot from the hood of a car depicts Penny and Leonard in the front seats with him driving and Bernadette and Howard in the back seats of the car. All of them are facing the camera, so Bernadette's and Howard's bodies are mostly hidden behind the front seats (S03E05 12:25). After another cut, the camera is just outside Bernadette's side of the car facing inwards showing her and Howard. Both of them are facing the front of the car, so only Bernadette's profile is visible (12:28). When Howard talks to her, she faces him and the audience can only see the back of her head (12:32). As her face could already be seen before, this



Fig. 2. Bernadette's first appearance in S03E05

does not create suspense but is a simple technique to visually focus on the speaker. The following close shot shows most of the woman so far because the static camera is now outside Howard's side of the car angled towards the back seats and since Bernadette faces Howard to answer him, the audience gets a good view of her face (see fig. 2). Her face and upper half of her upper body seem to be her most important parts because not once in this episode is she shown in a full shot. This can only mean that her stature, height etc. are irrelevant for her introduction. The camera only draws attention to her face or rather her beauty, not her person as a whole.

Before they talk, they sit in awkward silence which does not really improve during their talk because Howard tries to make a joke about her field of study,

microbiology, which she does not find funny at all. She even asks him if he were sure that it was a joke and has a look of disgust on her face (13:00 – 13:01). Howard tries to save their evening by making conversation and starts asking her all kinds of questions in order to find something they both like. This way, the audience learns that Bernadette likes neither science fiction, role-playing games in the bedroom nor *Dungeons & Dragons*, nor magic (13:08 – 13:29). So far, they do not seem to be compatible at all since Bernadette does not share any of Howard's nerdy interests. What they do have in common is revealed later on, when the four of them have dinner together. Bernadette complains that her mother still lays out her clothes for her in the morning even though they do not live together (15:28 – 15:32). However, Bernadette does not disclose whether she then wears the clothes her mother chooses for her or not. It could be possible that Bernadette's mother is responsible for her clothing because it is modest – unless she goes on a girls' night out – but this could also simply be due to Bernadette's preference in clothing since her dress hardly changes throughout the show and she never again mentions her mother in connection with her clothes.

Bernadette is introduced as a quiet, disinterested woman without a name or any appealing qualities except her physical appearance. This only highlights her status as an unimportant side character in the beginning. This changes after few episodes when she returns to the show with a name and more personality.

Bernadette's Dress

In her introduction, she has shoulder-length curly blond hair with a fringe, red glasses and wears a black, grey and red flower-patterned shirt or dress with a red cardigan and a golden cross necklace (see fig. 2, S03E05 12:36). She is dressed casually elegant. Clothes are important for first impressions especially in sitcoms, where characters' clothes enforce their stereotypes. There is nothing unusual in Bernadette's dress that stands out against the rest of the core cast of the show. Her clothes are feminine and emphasize her contours. In everyday life, she wears light, natural-looking make-up and leaves her hair loose – sometimes it is styled to be wavy.

In season 10, she still wears mostly flower-patterned dresses with or without tights and the occasional cardigan. Her dress has not changed and still reflects her cuteness. Her cross necklace is first replaced by a heart-shaped one in S04E10,

however, occasionally she wears no necklace at all or very rarely the previous cross-shaped one.

In addition to Penny, who portrays the beautiful blond but mediocrally intelligent woman, Bernadette's sex appeal is emphasized as well throughout the show. Bernadette occasionally dresses up for a night out and changes into a completely different look than her everyday clothes. In S06E11, Penny, Bernadette and Amy, stage their own fashion show in order to make their men jealous by using their sexuality and attractiveness. The women do this because the men prefer a night without them. After playing dress up and presenting themselves to the men, they go drinking on a girls' night out. The fashion show scene takes place at Sheldon's and Leonard's apartment. A full shot from inside is angled towards the open door, which pans slightly to the right and further into the room as the door is opened more widely. Bernadette enters from the hallway and as soon as she is in the room, the camera pans to the right, follows her movement and zooms out, so she is fully visible. She is not completely in the centre of the shot but a bit to the right sharing the centre with Howard, who sits on a chair and is turned towards her. As she leaves the apartment the camera follows her again towards the door but then fixates on Amy as she enters (05:34 – 05:48). Not only is the camera following Bernadette but so do the eyes of every man in the room. She figuratively turns their heads and that of the audience since she is the focus of the shot and the audience as well as the men gaze at her. For this occasion, Bernadette wears "leopard-print pumps and a racktastic red dress" as Penny calls it (05:41 – 05:43). This short dress shows a lot more cleavage and skin than her usual clothing due to slits on its sides as well as back. She still wears her glasses and heart necklace. The fact that everyone's eyes follow Bernadette in her sexy outfit shows that nerds can be sexy as well and she still is one because she did not forgo her glasses. Even her normal sartorial appearance is sexy because her clothes are emphasizing her contours and showing cleavage. Bernadette has no clear distinction between a brainy and a feminine side.

Bernadette's Glasses

A permanent item of Bernadette's dress are her glasses. After ten seasons, she still wears the same or almost the same glasses. In her first appearance on the show, they look red, whereas in later episodes they are browner. This could be due to different lighting across the various episodes or her glasses having been changed to a similar model without addressing it. However, since they are so similar in form and

colour, if not the same altogether, this possible exchange is negligible. Her glasses are especially interesting because they are an essential item of the nerd chic fashion even though hers are not black as they so often are. I assume that adding colour to the glasses makes them more feminine and Bernadette for wearing them a more feminine nerd. It is certain that Bernadette's glasses are her identifying nerd feature as she wears them consistently with every outfit and the rest of her appearance is not particularly nerdy. Even on girls' nights, when she is dressed up to look sexy, she always wears her glasses. Although she wears them on these occasions, they do not diminish her sexiness as the nerd chic fashion works in her favour.

Interestingly, another pair of glasses is lying on her desk in her office (S10E02 07:46). Either this is a spare pair or Bernadette needs an extra one for reading, for example. It looks to be the same model she usually wears but the colour is orange. However, to my knowledge Bernadette never wears these glasses, not even later on in the same episode outside of work. This second pair might be just a prop.

Bernadette's Professional Appearance

Very seldom, Bernadette is shown in her office at the pharmaceutical company wearing a white lab coat, see for example S10E02. After a change of scenery, an establishing medium shot shows Bernadette's office with her in the centre of it, sitting behind her desk working on her laptop (07:46). She does not face the camera directly because it is placed at a slight angle towards the desk. Since she sits behind it, only her upper body can be seen. Regarding her clothes, this means that only her white lab coat is visible. Additionally, she wears her glasses, heart necklace and has a slightly different hair style because some of her hair is held back out of her face. Before season 10, the audience could mostly see her in her office via a laptop during a video conversation but even then she either wears her coat or has it draped over the back of her chair. These rare instances in which she wears this outfit are important because they portray a different side of Bernadette, namely the professional woman working in her science job. Her office is tidy and lacking any photos of loved ones, instead her degree and photos of cells are framed and put on the walls. There are small figurines, such as birds and a small bust, on her shelf and several flowers in the room but apart from that her office is full of working appliances and specialist books on biology. The figurines and flowers point to a feminine office.

Her appearance at work underlines her professionalism, intelligence and ambition to succeed at her job. Although she has a husband and is pregnant for the

second time in S10E02, she is still working and is actually upset that Penny spread the secret of her pregnancy at work because she does not want to be treated differently. Bernadette thinks that this will happen because she has always been treated differently. A full shot shows her and Amy in her office. Bernadette sits behind her desk and Amy on a chair in front of it, when the former says to the latter: “Look at me! Listen to me! I mean, the first thought when you see me isn’t ‘That’s a scientist.’ It’s ‘I wonder if her mommy knows where she is.’” (12:44 – 12:56). During her speech, Bernadette stands up and without her pumps walks to the side of her desk to lean on it, while the camera follows her movement, indicating the audience should focus on her. Bernadette says this because she is a petite woman – a fact which is made even more obvious in this scene because she does not wear her shoes which normally give her few more inches – and in combination with her shrill and squeaky voice, she might be right that people assume that she should not be working but still be in school. This conversation with Amy proves that it is important to her that she is seen as a serious scientist because she has worked hard for it and earned it. On the one hand, she worries about other people’s perception of her because she thinks that they do not see her as a scientist. On the other hand, she uses exactly this perception of her to her advantage and manipulates people to get what she wants, for example, privileges at work or an obedient husband. Interestingly, not someone from the outside but Bernadette herself believes that people do not see her as a scientist due to her appearance despite no one except herself saying so on the show.

Moreover, as long as she wears her lab coat, which has her name stitched onto it, it emphasizes her status as a scientist, which might be the reason for her to wear it closed over her body in her office while she is working. Not only does the coat emphasize her being a scientist but it also hides her feminine clothes and consequently some of her femininity. However, most of the time when she video-talks to her husband, she takes the coat off together with her scientist persona and becomes his caring wife. This suggests that Bernadette cannot combine her work and private life. She is either the scientist or the feminine wife. Although her appearance at work is hardly feminine, the little bird figures in her office could be seen as a compensation for that.

Not only in her private life but also in her work life, Bernadette is sexualised. In S08E07, she excitedly tells Penny and Amy that she has been asked to be featured in a magazine article about the “50 sexiest female scientists in California” (S08E07

00:35 – 00:37). This scene draws attention to the fact that female scientists might not always be taken seriously because they are women and frequently subjectified. Of course, they can be sexy, especially in contrast to Amy, but as she points out a female scientist's appearance should not be relevant, only her professional achievements. Amy includes a rhetorical question of "what kind of message that would send" (00:42 – 00:49). I believe that the show truly wants to make the audience aware of this issue, still it draws attention to Bernadette's appearance of a small, cute, blond woman with a huge bust size, and that she is initially happy to be in the article and "flaunt her sexuality" as Amy puts it (01:01). Bernadette is without a doubt an attractive woman and the show plays with this fact. Eventually, the article is cancelled due to Amy's intervention but it is highly likely that Bernadette would have been asked to leave her glasses on as this plays into the nerd chic fashion.

Bernadette's Social Behaviour

If her scientific expertise and on occasion intimidating voice is not enough to influence people, Bernadette falls back on her vicious streak. There are numerous instances, in which she shows aggressive behaviour and is mean to her peers. S08E10 is very enlightening in this respect. Penny tries to explain to her that although she is a good person, she is sometimes mean and sounds harsh. Bernadette, the centre of a close shot, claims to be completely oblivious to this, looks affronted and responds in a higher than usual voice: "What? I'm like the sweetest person I know. Look at me, I should be in a tree baking cookies" (08:36 – 08:43). Contrary to her self-perception, this is not true as later on in this episode, it is disclosed that her co-workers and even her boss are so afraid of her that they pay for her coffee instead of telling her that the company does no longer pay for it and they let her keep a private bathroom that was intended for the whole floor, among other things (15:37 – 16:00). Consequently, Bernadette realises her fault and promises to be more sensitive in the future but still manipulates her boss into providing a personal espresso machine for her office, so she will stop crying and she continues to negotiate on her bathroom (16:43 – 16:59). This shows that Bernadette knows how to manipulate people, which is not a trait shared by nerds as they are frequently the manipulated ones since they have difficulties understanding basic social interactions and are often bullied.

Bernadette's Nerdiness

In summary, Bernadette's everyday dress is consistently feminine throughout the series. Her glasses are the only distinguishing nerd item she consistently wears – even when dressed up. However, they are not black but colourful and smaller than typical nerd glasses, which gives them a feminine appearance. Apart from those, Bernadette never looks like the stereotypical male nerd but comes closest to it when she wears a white lab coat with her glasses at work. Even her social behaviour has no particularly nerdy touch to it but rather the opposite as she can be intimidating and manipulative instead of being the likely victim.

6.1.2 Amy

Amy Farrah Fowler is a neurobiologist in an on-and-off relationship with physicist Sheldon Cooper. Eventually, they move in together and are about to be engaged while both of them pursue their careers. Socially-awkward Amy starts out to be emotionless but eventually realises that she wants to be in a serious relationship with Sheldon, however, her work is always a priority.

Meeting Amy

Amy first appears on the show in S03E23. In this episode, Howard and Raj, two of the four men central in *TBBT*, set up a profile for Sheldon on an online-dating website, which finds a match for him, Amy. With regards to Sheldon's unique character and behaviour, this is proof for Raj that there are aliens on earth (12:08). To Howard's question of whether Sheldon's match is "an actual woman," Raj replies: "Yeah, look. Breasts and everything" and shows him something on his laptop, probably Amy's profile picture, which the audience cannot see (12:16 – 12:19). They do not know Amy yet, except maybe for some information from the website's profile, but they already judge her based on their knowledge of Sheldon and that the website finds them compatible. However, Howard shares that a person with breasts is not automatically a woman and gives the example of his uncle in a bathing suit (12:20 – 12:27). This whole conversation about Amy, the mysterious female being, functions to prepare her first appearance. Suspense is created in the audience because they know less about her than Raj and Howard. In contrast to Bernadette's positive pre-initiation, Amy's is negative because of her supposed but not yet proven similarity to Sheldon and because the men question her femaleness.

Eventually, Sheldon and Amy meet at a café. Raj and Howard take him there and while the three of them are talking, the camera captures Raj and Howard in a medium shot and a female voice can be heard. After the initial “Excuse me” and a cut, a medium shot shows, from right to left, Amy and Sheldon in the centre with Howard and Raj as spectators standing side-ways to the camera in the foreground. Sheldon stands at a 90 degree angle to Amy whose upper body faces the camera. Amy is presented to the audience while everyone else, including Sheldon, is an observer. He looks down at her, who is almost a head shorter than him, but Amy stares straight ahead and over his shoulder for a second before looking directly at him as she continues her speech: “I’m Amy Farrah Fowler. You’re Sheldon Cooper” (18:32 – 18:35). The men and the audience look at her, while she initially avoids direct eye contact.

Amy is not as conventionally beautiful as Bernadette and this is implicitly shown in her first appearance (see fig. 3). The camera shows Amy in full very soon to depict her unique sense of fashion and slightly corpulent body. Of course, the scenario is different. Amy meets the others in a café, where they are all standing, so it is plausible that the camera captures more of them because their whole bodies are visible. Still, Amy demands more attention with her directness. Another difference is that, on the one hand, the camera shows Amy and Sheldon together soon after they have met and, on the other hand, they are set apart



Fig. 3. Amy's first appearance in S03E23

from Sheldon's friends, whereas Bernadette is not visible closer to any of her companions. This implicitly draws attention to Amy's and Sheldon's compatibility.

There is almost a whole season between the introduction of Bernadette and Amy, which was probably intended to give the audience time to adapt and get to know the first new-comer before the second made her appearance. At first, her introduction to the show creates suspense because Amy is vaguely talked about and

there is a knowledge discrepancy between the audience and the characters. In contrast to Bernadette's introduction, this functions to elicit interest in Amy and to make the viewers think about who she is and how she will look like or behave. While Amy's character is a mystery until she actually appears on the show, Bernadette is characterised as adorable even before she can be seen. This fact gives Amy more importance and also foreshadows that something about her is worth the mystery. Moreover, while Bernadette is a nameless woman on the show for several episodes, the audience knows Amy's name before her appearance and then, it is the first thing she says. This suggests that Bernadette's identity is not as important as Amy's. She is a woman seemingly without interests on a date with Howard, whereas Amy immediately calls the attention of not only Sheldon but the audience as well with her straight-to-the-point introduction.

Amy's Dress

Amy has shoulder-length brown hair, which is held out of her face on one side by a bobby pin, and brown glasses. In her first appearance on the show, she wears a purple and black striped cardigan with a blue checked blouse underneath and a red shirt peeking out so that even though the top most buttons of her two outer layers are open, no cleavage can be seen (see fig. 3). From the waist down, she wears a beige skirt and dark brown tights but her shoes cannot be seen. Additionally, she has a black leather handbag slung over her shoulder and across her upper body, which she clutches tightly (S03E23 19:32). This first look at her clothes shows that she wears layered and mismatched clothing. On the one hand, this could point to her not caring about her visual appearance but on the other hand, one could say that she simply throws colours and styles together to form a distinct taste in which nothing fits but later on, the series repeatedly shows that this is not the case. Throughout the show, Amy's distinct dress of layered and mismatched clothing is consistent even though her life changes a little. By the end of season 10, she is no longer single but in a steady relationship with Sheldon, possibly soon-to-be engaged, and living with him. Still, in S10E23, she wears a flower patterned blouse with a light yellow sweater vest over it, a dark grey skirt and light grey tights (08:17). She never wears pants, only skirts and dresses with tights although the dresses are reserved for special occasions. The single visible change in her appearance is that her hair is slightly longer and reaches her breasts; she never wears it in a bun. This lack of a major

visual change is related to the sitcom genre and Amy's consistent stereotypical portrayal of a nerd, which relies on clothes among other things.

When asked to wear something comfortable, Amy has to go shopping first and then looks everything but comfortable although she wears a grey hooded zip sweatshirt, grey sweat pants and grey running shoes. The sweatshirt is closed all the way up to her throat and the normally loose swinging cords are tied into a bow, which further visualises her stiffness and lack of understanding of what being comfortable means. Even though she is told to wear something comfortable, which she undoubtedly does, Amy sits stiffly on a chair with her hands on top of her knees (S04E08 06:54). This shot depicts the stark contrast between Amy's sense of fashion and of what is comfortable and Bernadette's and Penny's. In contrast to them, Amy hardly shows any skin, only her fingers, face and neck can be seen, and does not seem relaxed at all. Her outfit, although undoubtedly comfortable, is more appropriate for a run outside in the cold than a girls' night, which is enforced by Penny and Bernadette staring at Amy. However, since *TBBT* is a sitcom and the characters' clothes are supposed to reflect their stereotypical personality, there is no visible sartorial norm they could adhere to. Looking at the women, Penny's wardrobe is on the very feminine and comfortable-with-her-body side of a spectrum, whereas Amy's is on the opposite side. Bernadette's outfits are situated in the middle and could probably be seen as some kind of female norm within the series. Therefore, even within *TBBT*, Amy's wardrobe is unusual and somewhat clumsy.

Amy's clothes can be described as modest, unfashionable – she frequently mixes striped and checked tops or two differently checked tops – and occasionally simply old-fashioned with flower patterns, which ties in with the nerd's lack of sartorial skills. Although these adjectives are subjective and 'old-fashioned' could easily be replaced by the positively connotated 'retro', the audience is encouraged to think of Amy's clothes as out of date. Among other things, this can be seen by her choice of night clothes. She alone prefers long nightgowns without a neckline, with flowery patterns and frills (see for example S06E10 15:20). In S06E11, the women put on their own fashion show. After Bernadette, it is Amy's turn on the improvised catwalk. She enters the men's apartment and the camera follows her path showing her in a full shot walking hurriedly in front of the men, who take a second to look at her because their gaze is still fixed on Bernadette's retreating form (05:47 – 05:50). Not only does it look as if Amy cannot walk in high heels but she also swings her arms

unnaturally. They are fully stretched up to her fingertips. Her social awkwardness appears to manifest in her body. Still, she seems to enjoy herself and looks confident despite her unnatural walk. Penny explicitly makes fun of Amy's old-fashioned clothing by describing them as: "showing all kinds of ankle in an outfit I'm assuming is from Forever 63" (05:52 – 05:58). The outfit eliciting such a comment is a pastel flower-patterned green dress that goes mid-calf with a small V-neck under an open green cardigan and beige pumps. These might not seem as extravagant clothes for a night out but they are for Amy. She 'only' wears two layers and is not buttoned-up in the sense that, firstly, her dress does not close around her neck and, secondly, her cardigan is even left open. Plus, as Penny pointed out, her ankles can be seen because she either wears no tights at all or skin-coloured ones and her dress ends directly under her knees, which is short for her. Another difference to Amy's usual clothes are the shoes. Normally, she wears flat, basic ones. This means that she temporarily changes her style of clothing in order to make her boyfriend jealous and regret his decision of not wanting to spend time with her. In her own way, she uses her body and dress to elicit these feelings in Sheldon. It might not work as she intended but at least Sheldon looks appreciatively at her ankles and then, when Penny makes the comment about "Forever 63", he shakes his head and turns his confused gaze to Penny (S06E11 05:59). He does not understand her comment because either he likes Amy's appearance or does not know the clothing store Forever 21. This scene discloses a lot about Amy because it is a completely different circumstance than the audience usually sees her in. Nevertheless, Amy surprises with her change of clothing and confidence to present herself in front of the men next to Bernadette and Penny, who wear seriously sexy clothes.

In S05E03, the show repeatedly draws attention to Amy wearing make-up although it is no novelty for her. She frequently wears natural looking lipsticks. Dressed in an ankle-length black skirt and a pink short-sleeved blouse with a huge flower ornament on its collar, Amy attends a wedding. She still wears her glasses and more than her usual make-up, which Penny helps her with. The conspicuous but still discreet make-up only consists of a bit of eye-shadow, rouge and lip stick but Amy describes herself as "a beautiful woman wearing whorish make-up" (13:14 – 13:17). Her idea of whorish make-up is highly subjective. It is true that this make-up is more than she normally wears but it fits the special occasion and is not considered 'whorish' by her friends. It is interesting that her opinion of cosmetics is highly

ambiguous. On the one hand, she likes it and initially even wanted Cleopatra eyes but on the other hand, she feels it is inappropriate to wear it but provides no explanation of why she thinks so strongly about wearing make-up herself. Apparently, her opinion on make-up changes because in S06E03, she is at Penny's and uses her friend's make-up, which entails dark eye shadow and bright red lipstick, to try out a new look. Amy looks at herself in a mirror and says: "Oh yeah. I'm a man-eater now" (08:29 – 08:34). She no longer thinks make-up whorish but is still of the opinion that it enhances her attractiveness greatly and she acts more confident and sexually aware. Moreover, within one season, she learned to apply this kind of make-up herself, which means that she has practised this and is not new to it. She appears to like the feeling it induces in her but within the episode her extravagant make-up is replaced with her usual, more discreet one from one scene to the next with no further explanation or comment on it. This has to be a mistake of the show because she still wears it at university but minutes later in the car home, she does not without apparent reason (13:48; 14:49). Her change of heart to try a new look could either be because of Penny's continued influence or because of Amy's relationship with Sheldon, which awakens her emotions and appeals to her femininity. In any case, this is a one-time occurrence because her visual appearance cannot change too much due to the genre.

Only a few episodes after she has been introduced in the show, Penny paints Amy's finger nails to which the latter says: "My nails have never looked so pretty before. Get it off" (S04E08 11:22 – 11:25). That early in the show, Amy is not comfortable with painted and pretty nails. This could point to a feminine side that she finds incompatible with her science identity. Maybe adding nail polish to that would be too much for her. About a season later, she is fascinated with her make-up and another season later, she happily wears and applies it herself simply for the reason that she likes it. Although Amy does not flaunt her femininity like Bernadette, it is still visible through her light make-up, long loose hair, skirts and the dresses she wears on girls' nights. On these occasions, Amy tries her best to look more feminine, wears dresses and shows a bit of skin but where Bernadette's outfit becomes sexy, Amy's only is old-fashioned. Although awkward in some ways, she seems comfortable with her gender but does not feel the need to draw even more attention to it with certain

clothes under normal circumstances. Both women

care about their appearance and embrace femininity and all its trappings. Bernadette is blonde and dresses with very low-cut tops that show off her ample cleavage. Her high-pitched voice is feminine, although decidedly shrill at times. Even the nerdiest, Amy, dresses poorly, the show repeatedly implies, not out of choice or disinterest, but because she doesn't know how to look "sexy." (Willey and Subramaniam 20)

On the one hand, it certainly looks like Amy does not know how to dress sexily, see their own fashion show, but on the other hand, when she wears nail polish or heavy make-up, she is uncomfortable with it and removes it immediately or soon after applying even though she likes it. Amy only takes small steps to embrace her femininity, while Bernadette is completely comfortable with hers.

Amy's Glasses

Amy's glasses look suspiciously like Bernadette's although the colour might be slightly different. This is hard to tell due to various lighting sources and angles. Interestingly, both female scientists wear similar thick-rimmed glasses, whereas only one of the male scientists, Leonard, wears glasses, and his are the stereotypically black thick-rimmed nerdy ones. According to Kendall, for male nerds, glasses are only optional ("White and Nerdy" 507). However, for female nerds, the show implies that they are necessary elements to visualise female nerd status. Of course, such a coincidence could happen in real life but is highly unlikely and since *TBBT* is a show and not reality, the fact that both scientist women have almost the same glasses has to be on purpose. Thick-rimmed glasses are a nerdy item and to give them to both intellectual women and not the beautiful rather dumb Penny is a clear statement to visualise their nerd status via their dress. Since the women's glasses are both smaller than Leonard's and colourful instead of black, they appear more feminine.

Amy's Professional Appearance

At work, Amy's visual appearance is altered. She works as a neurobiologist at a university laboratory where she wears a white lab coat closed over her normal clothes plus occasionally disposable gloves (see for example S04E10 05:38). Interestingly, Amy keeps her normal hair style, open with just one side of the front pulled back with a pin. As her work includes dissecting brains, it would probably be smart to pull her hair back or wear a protective hat, so that no hair could possibly fall onto her object of research but that is not the case. Either this is not relevant in her kind of work or her hair is left open on purpose to enforce her femaleness. Just like in

Bernadette's case, the lab coat stands for professionalism, intelligence and visually identifies Amy as a scientist but also hides her femininity to some extent.⁸ Her clothes cannot be seen underneath the coat but her loose hair and feminine glasses are still visible.

Not only at work in her laboratory, but also outside of work does Amy like to do social experiments on her friends with or sometimes even without their knowledge. This habit portrays her as even nerdier in comparison to Bernadette, who talks about science outside of work but is not interested in doing research as a hobby. One time, when Sheldon reveals that he has never been kissed and does not want to try it, Amy, who has offered herself up for experimentation, turns around to face Penny and gives her a quick peck on the mouth. It has to be said that there is alcohol involved but Amy appears to be reasonably sober. Penny immediately makes a connection between scientists and curiosity, saying that as Sheldon is a scientist, he should be more inquisitive (S04E21 09:17 – 10:02). Even without alcohol, Amy's love for experiments spreads outside her laboratory, for example, when she wants some of Leonard's blood to check his serotonin levels after he confronts his childhood bully, or when she intentionally spreads two different rumours about herself in order to see which one spreads faster (S05E11, S04E20). Amy fulfils Penny's idea of a scientist because she has a very inquisitive nature, which is present even without her lab coat.

Amy's Social Behaviour

Not only do Amy's clothes attract attention, but right from her first appearance, her behaviour does so as well. Similar to Sheldon, she has a special way of talking that includes two aspects. First, she uses unusually formal register, stilted sentences and academic vocabulary, even in informal situations, which makes her sound awkward. At the café, in her first conversation with Sheldon, for example, she says in reference to Sheldon "being blackmailed with a hidden dirty sock": "If that was slang, I'm unfamiliar with it. If it was literal, I share your aversion to soiled hosiery" (S03E23 18:46 – 18:56). Shortly thereafter she says: "Now, before this goes any further, you should know that all forms of physical contact up to and including coitus are off the table" and again frequently avoids looking into Sheldon's eyes (19:18 – 19:24).⁹ The

⁸ A lab coat can be contradictory as it can stand for intelligence but also for madness, for example in a mad scientist. Although Amy has her quirks, she can in no way be identified as a mad scientist.

⁹ This changes in the course of their relationship as she starts to feel physically attracted to Sheldon and wants to progress their relationship in this regard.

camera follows this conversation by focusing medium shots on whoever is talking, which puts the conversation partner with their back to the camera. After each line Amy says during her first appearance on the show, a laugh track can be heard highlighting it as funny. Amy's speech sounds as if she is reading a contract or reciting something she has learned by heart. The latter might not even be so far-fetched because Amy only dates once a year because of an agreement she has with her mother (18:59 – 19:01). This means that she only does so to satisfy her mother, not because she is actually looking for a partner. Therefore, she probably lacks real incentive and tells this one speech to every man she dates. Second, she shows no emotions while speaking. It not only sounds but also looks like she is reciting something instead of having an actual conversation with someone. Also, her Sheldon-like way of talking is humorous in itself. When she talks, it sounds stilted, almost robotic, which leads back to Raj's and Howard's conversation about Amy being an actual woman. The promise of no physical contact appeals to Sheldon and he offers to buy her a drink. Amy accepts by saying "Tepid water, please" adding a smile at the end, which seems forced or planned and vanishes again instantly (19:31). The following full shot follows Sheldon and Amy walking towards the counter while Raj and Howard stare after them, the latter with an open mouth (19:32 – 19:33). After a cut, another medium shot from behind the counter depicts Sheldon and Amy approaching the counter next to each other and putting their hands on it, Sheldon's in loose fists and Amy's spread flat. Both look expectantly behind the counter. In the background, Raj and Howard, still with an open mouth, continue to stare at them (19:34 – 19:35). The following medium shot focuses on the match-makers, who are speechless for a few seconds and stand in shocked silence until Howard says: "Good God, what have we done?" (19:35 – 19:42). Amy probably is and is not what they expected. On the one hand, they did expect that she would be different because the website paired her with Sheldon but, on the other hand, they did not realise the full extent of her being different. They are obviously shocked by her appearance and probably more so by her behaviour since they too dress differently than others, which normalises her clothes. Moreover, they realise that Amy seems to be a female version of Sheldon. In the early stages of Amy being on the show, her unusualness is enforced in every way possible but this changes in later episodes, which is compatible with the genre. At first, Amy's behaviour is greatly exaggerated in order to

establish her character but as the seasons pass and the audience becomes familiar with her character, it is toned down a little.

After only few episodes on *TBBT*, Amy invites herself to Penny's and Bernadette's girls' night, asks after the dress code, states that she has no comfortable clothes and, with a quick look at her watch, announces that she has to go shopping (S04E08 05:05 – 05:30). During this whole conversation, Amy stands stock still in front of Penny and shows no emotions on her face or in her voice, except that her pitch picks up once, when she says that she is a girl (05:10). This seems to happen unintentionally. She appears to be desperate for female friends and feels the need to state that she, too, is a woman. She probably knows that she is not like other women, especially not like Penny, and needs to remind both herself and the other women of the fact that they have something in common – their gender – which in her mind entitles her to participate in their evening. Amy seems unfamiliar or unpractised with social interaction that is not focused on science, which can also be seen in her next appearance. The next time she is on screen, a full shot establishes the scene. The women sit in Penny's apartment, from right to left, Bernadette and Penny – she is the centre of the shot – on a couch with wine glasses in their hands looking at Amy, who sits on a separate chair. Her posture is stiff and she hardly moves. She sits with her legs spread hip-wide, hands on her knees and a straight back, not using the back of the chair as support. This behaviour is typical of her and she does not show any social or other discomfort, though others certainly would if they sat like her. In addition, she is set further apart from the other women with her conversation topics. Amy says with a straight face and completely seriously: "So anyway, to make a long story short" after a cut, Amy is the focus of a close shot and continues "turns out I have an unusually firm cervix" (06:54 – 06:58). This revelation is followed by silence and a full shot showing an irritated Bernadette, who has her lips pressed together and soon looks to the floor, and an incredulous, open-mouthed Penny, who after a few seconds explains to Amy that "girl talk" does not equal talking solely about their "lady parts" (06:59 – 07:07). The camera captures Penny and Bernadette, who are both visibly uncomfortable with Amy's choice of topic. Penny's explanation sounds slightly condescending but Amy does not realise that as becomes evident in her reply "Shame because I have a real zinger about my tilted uterus" (07:09 – 07:12). Bernadette tries to steer the conversation to a safer topic, nails, but Amy gives girl talk another try: "A colleague of mine did her graduate thesis on the fungus that

grows on improperly sterilized manicure implements. Well, don't tell me that's not girl talk" (07:31 – 07:40). Amy is visibly confused and frowns. She simply cannot connect with other women at this point because they do not share the same ideas of what acceptable conversation topics are. Amy has no qualm to talk about her body in great detail, which makes other people uncomfortable.

A similar situation that highlights Amy's otherness occurs in S05E03. The group of friends have dinner together at Sheldon's and Leonard's place. Afterwards, everyone except Leonard leaves or at least it looks like it. A full shot shows the apartment's living area, where Leonard is cleaning up dinner leftovers and is on his way to the kitchen. He is half-way turned back towards the couch where Amy is still sitting reading a scientific journal (01:34). She seemingly has not moved from her spot – seemingly because somehow she had to get the journal. Leonard is surprised to find her there and asks if she is going to join Sheldon; she will not because she has "no interest in model trains, stores that sell them, nor their heart-breaking clientele" and continues reading (01:34 – 01:42). Leonard tries a second time to subtly make her leave by saying: "Oh, well, I have some work to do, so" to which Amy seriously replies: "I can't imagine that would disturb me. Carry on" (01:44 – 01:50). He is irritated at first but then bluntly asks her if she would not be more comfortable at home. A medium shot focuses on her as she visibly thinks about this: Her head is slightly tilted to the side, her lips are pressed together and pulled to the left, while her eyes look to the top right. In this position, she shakes her head, tells Leonard "no" and goes back to her reading (01:52 – 02:01). Amy makes him visibly uncomfortable because, on the one hand, Leonard does not want to outright ask her to leave, but on the other hand, he wants to work alone. He is in a dilemma without Amy realising that. When Leonard tells her that he will just start working then, Amy looks up from her journal and says in a harsh tone "Leonard, please. I don't need the running commentary" (02:05 – 02:08). She has taken over Leonard's living room and is rude to him, when she should be the one leaving or at least being thankful that she can stay there. Instead, she acts as if she belonged there and keeps sitting and reading on the couch with her legs close together and a straight back but this time she makes herself 'comfortable' and uses cushions to support her back. The following scene starts with a medium shot on Leonard working on his computer. The camera immediately zooms out and pans to the right to show Amy still sitting on his couch, like she did in S04E08 at Penny's, with her hands on her knees and staring in front

of her (S05E03 02:34 – 02:39). She looks content in her silence and stillness but Leonard is even more irritated by that behaviour. On the one hand, he is incapable of dealing with Amy and making her leave although she makes him uncomfortable. On the other hand, Amy cannot read Leonard's body language, intonation and is oblivious to his sarcasm. She overstays her welcome but towards the end of the scene, she is at least able to guess that Leonard is uncomfortable but he denies it. If he answered in the affirmative, Amy probably would go and learn something about human interactions but he does not, so Amy does not know that she acts rudely and irritatingly. This scene depicts two people who are not particularly good at social behaviour showing that the norm of social behaviour on the show is, firstly, stereotypically nerdy and, secondly, different than what we are used to.

This is not the only time Amy unintentionally disregards other people's feelings and they in turn do not draw attention to it. As Bernadette's maid of honour, Amy records wedding-related activity weeks before the big day and says on record, with Penny and Bernadette listening to her: "Let's check in with a beautiful, radiant young woman and her friend who's about to get married" (S05E22 06:48 – 06:53). Although it is no secret that Amy favours Penny over Bernadette, it is completely inappropriate for her to say that at all, especially to a bride. Again, Amy does not understand that she did something wrong and either ignores Penny's evil look or she does not realise that it is an evil look. Bernadette and Amy could not be more different in their actions. Whereas Bernadette knows how to act and intentionally uses her cuteness to take advantage of people, Amy does not know how to act around other people and initially offends her friends unintentionally.

TBBT has time and again highlighted Amy's unusual, Sheldon-like, behaviour, but in the course of the show she becomes more socially adept. Since her character has been established as other and socially awkward, there is no need for further exaggeration. For one, she does not talk about her sexual organs anymore. She frequently talks to Bernadette, Penny and the men about her or their work or anything that happens in their lives, such as Bernadette's previously mentioned article on sexy female scientists (see S08E07). These conversations are hardly awkward anymore plus Amy seems to have learned empathy to some extent. At another girls' night, Bernadette tells the other women that she did something at work that "will either make me [her] look like a loveable goof or a horrible monster damned to spend eternity in hell" (S07E19 01:42 – 01:51). The camera switches from a close shot of

Bernadette to a medium shot depicting Penny and Amy standing opposite her. Although Amy looks a bit worried, she immediately tries to comfort Bernadette: “Oh I’m sure it’s loveable” (01:52 – 01:54). Penny guesses the opposite which makes Amy turn her head towards her in disbelief (01:54 – 01:56). It turns out that Bernadette mistook a get-well card for a retirement card and everything she wrote on it is perfectly fine for the latter but sounds horribly mean and totally inappropriate for a get-well card. She continues and tells them exactly what she wrote, pausing after each line for their reactions. Penny’s is more vocal but even Amy cannot be quiet. At first, she is just shocked and her mouth drops slightly open, she visibly sighs and turns her head slowly from Penny to Bernadette with a frown on her face but then as Bernadette’s ‘writing’ becomes worse, she lets out a “Oh my gosh!” closes her eyes, tilts her head downwards and touches the back of it with her hand, wincing (01:58 – 02:38). Amy reacts completely ‘normal’ in this situation. First, she wants to comfort her friend but then she realises that what Bernadette did was horrible and reacts accordingly. She closes her eyes and turns her head away because it is too awful to face and she touches the back of her head because she is at a loss for words. Amy continues to comfort Bernadette because it was an unintentional mistake (02:55 – 02:57). She shows empathy but not for long. Next, Penny does not know whether to take an acting job she is offered, so Amy tells her “[m]aybe you’ll get hit by a car and die LOL, right?” (03:19 – 03:25). She smiles and thinks this is funny but the other women are shocked and disgusted by what she said, yet Amy keeps smiling. This was a reference to Bernadette’s predicament with the get-well card but only Amy thinks it is funny. The others think it an inappropriate joke. It is interesting that only a minute ago, Amy was insightful and caring but the next, she makes a horrible joke about her best friend dying, so Penny does not have to decide anything. This seeming improvement of Amy’s social skills is only due to the fact that she has already been established as awkward and there is no need of overly exaggerated scenes anymore for her to stand out but she still shows her socially inept behaviour at times.

Amy’s Nerdiness

Amy’s nerdiness is established by her dress, which consists of various layers of mismatched and old-fashioned clothes, light make-up and thick-rimmed glasses she always wears, and even more so by her behaviour. An important part of Amy’s nerdy appearance is her social awkwardness, which is reflected in her initially highbrow

way of talking as well as her unusual behaviour of showing only seemingly forced and stilted emotions. As the show continues and Amy has found friends, she adapts her behaviour and becomes more likeable and empathic to other people's feelings. This is due to her character already having been established as awkward by means of exaggerated humorous scenes, so the situations can become more diverse and less marked because her character is understood as awkward and unchanging. Her audiovisual appearance on the show sets her apart from the other characters, especially the women. Whereas Bernadette's appearance is not nerdy apart from her glasses and lab coat at work, Amy's is the more so with regards to her dress and especially her behaviour. This includes her professional appearance as well. Not only is her lab coat part of her nerdiness but also her hobby of conducting scientific experiments outside of work. The spectrum regarding the women's dress can be used again and adapted here. It goes from sexy, where Penny is situated, to nerdy, where Amy is located on the opposite side. Bernadette is in the middle as she is an example of how both, being sexy and nerdy, is possible in a woman. Although showing her feminine side, Amy is portrayed as exclusively nerdy, not sexy.

6.2 *30 Rock*

30 Rock is a finished series which aired from 2006 to 2013. It was created by Tina Fey, who also plays the protagonist, Elizabeth Lemon, mostly referred to as Liz ("30 Rock"). She is head writer of a sketch comedy show at NBC called *TGS with Tracy Jordan*, which is similar to *Saturday Night Live* (henceforth *SNL*). Seeing as Liz's job is not in science and therefore not particularly nerdy, there has to be something else that entails her nerdiness. Throughout the series, she struggles with an arrogant boss, eccentric stars and her dream of having a family. In the end, she marries and adopts two children.

Tina Fey is an important woman with regards to this thesis because she based *30 Rock*'s character Liz on her life. Early on in her career, Fey studied improvisation in Chicago, where she also started to perform improvisation and sketch comedy (Fey loc. 1001). In 1997, she moved to New York and accepted a job as a writer for *SNL* but in her nine years working at *SNL*, she also performed sketches and later on became head writer of the show (Fey loc. 1466). Probably her most famous and influential sketches are those from 2008 in which she portrays vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin, to whom she has an uncanny resemblance. These sketches are subject of a study analysing the so-called "Fey Effect", Tina Fey's influence on

the presidential election, which turns out to be unlikely but Fey's impersonation of Palin was unmatched (Baumgartner 102). During her career, Fey has won numerous awards including several Emmys and a Mark Twain Prize for American Humor (Patterson 234). For her entertaining work and social criticism alike, "Tina Fey has attained an important spot in U.S. culture and in the U.S. comedy television industry" (Patterson 234). Next to *30 Rock*, she created another comedy called *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* and wrote films, for example, *Mean Girls*, which she adapted as a musical for 2018 ("Tina Fey"). Moreover, Fey is an acclaimed feminist and was featured in a few issues of the feminist magazine *BUST*, in two of which she made the cover.¹⁰ This seems to be important to her because she included a photo of her first *BUST* cover in her book *Bossypants* and praises feminist Photoshop users because they do not change the shape of one's body "but they may take out some armpit stubble. Not because they're denying its existence, but because they understand that it's okay to make a photo look as if you were caught on your best day in the best light" (loc. 1945). Tina Fey is married to a composer, with whom she has previously collaborated on, and has two young daughters (Stoller "Interview").

For viewers familiar with *30 Rock*, many parallels can be seen between Tina Fey and her creation Liz Lemon. Both of them began their careers doing improvisation theatre before taking a job as a writer and eventually as head writer at NBC. "Fey's transition between these two NBC shows was almost seamlessly [*sic*] as she went from being the head writer of [a] real comedy sketch show . . . to play the role of a head writer of [a] fictional comic sketch show," which Liz – just like Fey – sometimes participates in (Patterson 239). Additionally, both of them are feminists and strive for gender equality although Fey claims to be "a poorly educated feminist" (Stoller "Interview"). This does not mean that she is oblivious to gender stereotypes in *30 Rock* nor that they were unintentional. Fey and her series have come under criticism for "creating in Liz Lemon a conventionally beautiful woman who we are supposed to think is smart but ugly, and in Jenna, a woman who is pretty but dumb" but she justifies this with being a comedian first (Stoller "Interview"). Jenna Maroney is Liz's friend and an actor on her show. This cliché of the beautiful dumb woman, for example, works well in comedy, as do all stereotypes. Another thing Fey and Liz have in common is that they both were nerds in their youth and are still associated

¹⁰ Tina Fey is *BUST*'s cover star in the spring 2004 edition and its one hundredth issue, August/September 2016 (Stoller "Cover Star").

with nerdiness to some extent; Liz more so than Fey. The latter writes in her book *Bossypants* that she stopped being a nerd when she started college because she got a new haircut (loc. 1375). Apparently, for Fey, changing her visual appearance was enough to no longer be perceived a nerd or for her to no longer feel like one. However, she did not escape this cliché entirely insofar that “her sexiness draws upon the white, feminine librarian chic habitus, and is sometimes attributed to her intellect” (Patterson 242). Fey agrees with this statement in *Bossypants* as she recounts how she made it on the *SNL* cast. She was already a writer for *SNL* when she did screen tests and rehearsals for *Weekend Update* but could not read the cue cards. For the first rehearsal, she wore new contact lenses but had trouble applying them, so she wore her glasses for the second one. Afterwards, one of *SNL*’s comedy writers told her to wear her glasses instead of contact lenses to which Fey comments in her book “[a]nd so, a commonplace librarian fetish was embraced for profit” (loc. 2415). Librarians are associated with knowledge and have a unique stereotypical appearance, frequently including glasses, which people find attractive. This fashion is known as nerd or geek chic. In 2004, Fey appeared on *BUST*’s cover page wearing a sexy black outfit – a short black dress with straps, a tie, fishnet tights and high heels – kneeling in front of an old typewriter next to the words “GEEK CHIC” in big letters (Rosales). Fey might not look like the stereotypical nerd anymore since she started college but she occasionally uses the geek chic fashion in order to appeal to a certain audience.

6.2.1 Liz

Meeting Liz

As the protagonist of this show, Liz Lemon appears in every episode, starting with the very first one. Within the first seconds of *30 Rock*’s pilot episode, the camera focuses on a woman, the audience soon finds out is Liz. The episode starts with an establishing shot angled upwards depicting the top of the Rockefeller building and playing a non-diegetic song that fades out when Liz speaks few seconds later. The camera then tilts down to show a street and pans to the right following a line of people in front of a hotdog stand (00:00 – 00:06). Third in line is Liz but it is not until a man in a suit tries to jump the line that she speaks up from behind the man in front of her and becomes the focus and centre of a close shot (00:12). The first time the audience can see Liz in full is a little later in a high angle full shot (00:24). She is the

centre standing next to the hotdog stand and other people surround her. She appears to be powerless against the queue-jumper which is only highlighted by the high angle shot as its frequent meaning is to “diminish the power of its subject” (Dix 25). At the same time, the full shot “allow[s] the spectator to make quite confident judgments about its [the character’s] identity” (Dix 24). Seeing as Liz is the centre of the shot, she is marked as important. This whole first scene establishes Liz as tough protagonist and a feminist, who fights for fairness, but not as a nerd.

The camera follows Liz to work while the song from before picks up again but this time with lyrics saying among other things: “Who’s that? Kicking it down the street causin’ a stir. Who’s that? I know that you’re wonderin’. That’s her” (00:41 – 00:51). This song is misleading the viewer. In that scene, it seems that Liz is ‘her’, so the song draws attention to the show being about Liz but after she vanishes behind closing elevator doors, a full shot shows a stage, where a man sings said song making it a synchronous diegetic one. Jenna comes onto the stage singing and revealing that she is the subject of the song and they have been recording a sketch for Liz’s show (01:05 – 01:13). Only after that is Liz properly introduced by a page giving a tour through the studio (01:32 – 01:34). The show takes its time to reveal the name of the protagonist and does so in an unusual way by confusing the audience with a song that is not about her. This sets the tone of the show revealing that it plays with identity and diegetic levels as Jenna is ‘her’ on the story level but Liz is ‘her’ on a metalevel.

The reason for introducing her like this is that this scene already conveys some of Liz’s important character traits from the very beginning, so the viewer has a good idea of what she is like. The confusion with the song adds to the humour of the show and opens up a dialogue between the different levels of the show. In contrast to *TBBT*, Liz, as the protagonist, is not just on the sidelines as a love interest to a man but central to the plot in every possible way.

Explicit References to Nerdiness

An interesting behaviour of Liz is that she uses the word ‘nerd’ as an expression for various purposes, sometimes with an additional ‘ah’ or ‘oh’ preceding it. In S04E18, she uses this expression three consecutive times, each for a different reason: as a happy exclamation when she sees a poster saying that “THE BUFFALO CHICKEN SHAKE IS BACK!”, as surprise or confusion when she sees all her co-workers in a bar, and as a sad exclamation when she realises that she has not been invited and

everyone is having fun without her (00:11 – 00:21). She also uses the term when she is annoyed, for example, when she forgets a dentist appointment, or as a general insult (S02E02 03:22). The latter happens, for instance, at a corporate retreat after Liz wins a contest. She flaunts her victory, does something like a happy dance and yells “Suck it, nerds” to the other contestants (S03E09 11:30 – 11:31). This frequent and seemingly arbitrary use of the term ‘nerd’ could indicate that Liz addresses herself that way. She sees something that makes her happy and says “Ah, nerd” to herself. This works for all instances except the insult. Here, it is clear that Liz does not categorise people in the stereotypical nerd group before she calls them that. At the corporate event, she calls business managers “nerds,” who clearly do not fall into that category. It appears to be a universal term for Liz, suitable for any occasion. It is her way of dealing with any kind of situation, be it surprising, sad, aggravating or any other kind of emotion. Liz seemingly achieves catharsis with this exclamation. I argue that ‘nerd’ was purposefully chosen so the audience associates Liz with nerds and is frequently reminded of this fact. This is especially the case when her ‘nerd’ expression functions as a swear word because it could have easily been substituted with another word. However, in the case of her happy or surprised ‘nerd(s)’ exclamation, it is more difficult to find a suitable alternative but it could have been a simple ‘Oh’. Consequently, her frequent use of the term ‘nerd’ is very telling and discloses that she thinks of herself as one as well as that it is her standard term to refer to other people. This has no equivalent in *TBBT*. Amy only uses the word once to refer to Penny of all people because Bernadette and she are partying while Penny studies (S08E05 14:21 – 14:27). Their usual roles appear to be reversed because of their actions and Amy is thrilled by it. The audience, of course, finds this situation funny as the visible nerd addresses the beautiful blond dumb woman as nerd. This functions similarly to Liz’s frequent exclamations as a reminder of who the real nerd is, namely Amy and to some extent Bernadette, too.

At work, Liz tries to enter a room where she believes to find her friend Jenna. She opens the door and sees an Asian man with black-rimmed glasses saying “Nerds only” while standing in front of a wall of LAN cables and holding a LAN cable in each hand (S05E11 01:53). This indicates that at least this IT worker does not see her as a nerd. However, Liz herself might think otherwise. After her show’s star, Tracey, publicly states that women are not and never will be funny, Liz is outraged, lifts her head and closed fist to the sky and screams “Nerd rage!” (S07E03 03:28 –

03:29). This outburst implies that she still thinks of herself as a nerd albeit the Asian man thinking otherwise. He does not know her though, which indicates that her dress does not categorise Liz as a nerd and suggests that there are other aspects that do so.

Liz's Dress

In her first appearance, she has mid-length brown hair tied into a ponytail, dark glasses – brown or black – and wears a blue top over a purple one with wide necklines underneath a jeans jacket. She wears flared jeans, sneakers and a black leather handbag over one shoulder (S01E01). Clothes are an important aspect of a first impression of someone but Liz's clothes appear casual and rather neutral. However, her new boss, Jack Donaghy, who wears a suit to work, is not impressed with her wardrobe and says that Liz is dressed as if they owned Kmart (04:14 – 04:19). He implicitly tells her that she is underdressed for work. It is true that Liz's outfit is nothing like a suit but it seems to be appropriate since all her colleagues wear casual clothes as well. Moreover, there is a difference in position between Liz and Jack, the NBC executive. Still, Jack's comment could influence the audience to share his opinion of her dress. As the show progresses, Liz frequently wears a blazer to work, which sets her apart from her team. This change might have been initiated by Jack's statement as early as episode one but especially since her promotion to his successor in S02E13, her outfit at work has become classier most of the time.

In the opening sequence of season 1, which starts with S01E02, Liz is the first of seven characters shown in a close shot. The characters are shown as moving black and white portraits for two seconds until they are superseded by the next one. Liz is shown from the waist up wearing a jeans blouse with a V-neck, shoulder-length hair and glasses, with her arms on her hips, full-out smiling (03:01). Throughout the show, Liz is always the first person introduced in the opening sequence, which highlights her importance. The opening sequence for seasons 2 to 7 does not change anything except some of the characters' portraits, which means, that it shows black-and-white Liz in a different outfit and altered position (see fig. 4; S02E01 02:44). Unlike in the previous title sequence, she wears a checked blouse underneath a dark V-neck sweater and her glasses. Her hair is wavy and a necklace with a round pendant can be seen around her neck. She seems to be sitting, leaning slightly forward as her shoulders are a bit hunched. Her head is marginally tilted sideways and she has a close-lipped smile on her face. Apparently, she tries to hold

in laughter but fails. There is no sound to it but she seems to be chuckling, moving her shoulders up and down and then really smiles showing her upper teeth (02:43 – 02:45). Between these two depictions of Liz, the second one is livelier because Liz is shown laughing, her hair is wavy, not straight, and her posture is more relaxed.

In S04E07, Jack suggests that for Liz's new talk show, she should not wear her glasses because she is not married and after a long pause dubiously says that her hair "is fine" (07:07 – 07:35). He makes Liz insecure and later on she comes to work without glasses and a different haircut. A medium



Fig. 4. Liz as in the opening sequence from season 2 to 7

shot shows a corridor at Liz's work. Jack is in the right foreground when Liz enters the shot in the background. As soon as she is fully visible, there is a cut and a medium shot is now focused on her and her new appearance (11:00 – 11:03). This new look is completely different from her previous one. Her hair is heavily styled, looks wild and her fringe is asymmetrical. This is probably due to the reason that she had a total of three haircuts because as Liz recounts it: "the first two made me look nuts" (11:06 – 11:08). The third one does not look like a real improvement though, as can be seen by Jack's stunned speechlessness. In the following episode, Liz's hair looks almost like before she received those unfortunate haircuts because it is not styled anymore, plus she wears her glasses again (S04E08 00:03). As a character, she experiments with her appearance but returns to her 'true' self. In typical sitcom manner, her new look is not permanent but the haircuts cannot be reversed as easily as putting her glasses back on.

Most of the time, Liz's wardrobe can be described as casual except when she is dressed up for a date (see S03E11) or a formal party (see S03E16). Then she wears elegant mid-calf dresses or shirts with a deep neckline, pumps, mostly no glasses and discreet make-up. However, under normal circumstances, Liz usually wears pants and no make-up, which indicates that she does not feel the need to highlight her femininity with sartorial or cosmetic aids.

Looking at the spectrum mentioned at Amy's analysis regarding her dress, where Penny is on the feminine side, Bernadette in the fashionable middle and Amy on the old-fashioned other side, Liz's dress is situated between the latter two but closer to Bernadette. During her adult life on the show, Liz has no extreme position on this continuum. In everyday life, she does not dress overly sexy or feminine but mostly casual and yet, in contrast to Amy, her clothes fit together. Moreover, she is not a beauty per se and not as conventionally beautiful as Bernadette but good-looking nevertheless. It is possible to create a spectrum within *30 Rock* showing the same result. On the one side is Liz's sexy, beautiful and dumb assistant, Cerie, on the other side is nerdy Frank, one of her writers, and Liz is situated in the middle. She does not hold an extreme position with her representation. Even when on a date, Liz's dress is never too sexy and she remains in an average position on this continuum.

Liz's Glasses

As far as the audience knows, Liz has always worn glasses but in her adult life, she is frequently shown with and without her glasses at work as well as at home. She appears to be only slightly short-sighted for she does not always use them and seems to do fine without them most of the time except in S04E07, in which she remarks that she cannot read the teleprompter without them. As mentioned in the previous section, Jack thinks that Liz should not wear glasses because she is not married and even goes so far as to suggest eye surgery to her. This can be interpreted as a statement that glasses are unattractive which would not matter if Liz were already married but since she is not, she should not wear them in order to be more attractive. Uncertain about her look, Liz agrees to have "off-brand eye surgery" which apparently does not last long because by the end of the episode she has trouble reading and puts her glasses back on (18:34 – 18:35, 19:44 – 19:48). Her initial appearance has been re-established and she wears her glasses again. She tries to break with the stereotype of nerds wearing glasses but fails as the eye surgery was only temporary. Of course, this is connected to the sitcom genre and its stasis. Characters are not supposed to change much because they portray fixed stereotypes. Apparently, although they enhance her nerdy appearance, Liz's glasses are not considered essential to portray her character's nerdiness like it is the case with Bernadette. It is worth noticing that Bernadette's, Amy's and Liz's glasses look fairly alike. They are small and rather dark but still colourful but Liz's are a bit

rounder. It seems that a small feminine shape and a colour other than black is essential in glasses of female nerds.

It is interesting that Liz does not wear glasses on dates because it is known that she does not wear contact lenses, so she purposefully chooses beauty over perfect sight which is in line with Jack's comment of her improving her appearance by not wearing glasses. However, in the nerd chic fashion, glasses are an accessory not to be neglected but this is apparently not to Liz's taste as she implicitly agrees with Jack at least to some point.

Liz's Social Behaviour

Not only is it helpful for the analysis to observe what Liz looks like but also how she acts and what she talks about as it is part of her appearance, too. At their first meeting, Jack takes an evaluating look at Liz and, according to Pete, Liz's co-worker and producer of *TGS with Tracy Jordan*, provides an accurate assessment of her character: "New York third-wave feminist, college-educated, single-and-pretending-to-be-happy-about-it, overscheduled, undersexed, you buy any magazine that says 'healthy body image' on the cover and every two years you take up knitting for a week." (S01E01 04:55 – 05:10). This provides a good overview of her behaviour. Liz is indeed overworked, which causes her to over-react sometimes, especially when someone at work takes her favourite sandwich (S02E14). However, it is not only being overworked that influences her thoughts and actions. She is impulsive and can become obsessive if she has put her mind to it, for example, the moment Liz has decided that she wants to adopt a child, she can hardly think of anything else. Once, she mistakes a man of short stature for a child. She covers up her mistake and they go out on a date but she cannot see him as an adult man and he rightfully calls her "baby crazy" (S03E07 14:43). Another time, Liz notices that the pregnant girl in the doughnut shop has adoption brochures, so she devises a plan to befriend the girl and convince her to give Liz her baby. Pete witnesses this and says that her eyes look insane and they do (S03E13 2:18). A medium shot shows both her and Pete, who is looking at her. Liz has both eyebrows raised really high so that her eyes look huge, and her smile is so big and forced that it looks more like a grimace showing all her teeth. Not all her questionable ideas are connected with her wish for a child, though. On one occasion, Liz is on her way home on the underground when she realises that she is still wearing an old woman's costume from the commercial sketch at work. She exploits the situation, talks nonsense and disturbs other passengers in order to get a

seat on the full train. She enjoys this so much that she keeps dressing up as an old woman and takes a gym bag full of sweaty clothes with her. The intense smell ensures her a seat and free seats around her on the underground (S06E08). These instances show a special side of Liz's character which surfaces throughout the show. This side of her does not consider other people and focuses solely on herself and her possible gain. Moreover, it shows that *30 Rock* relies on a woman's physical appearance in a different way than *TBBT*. *30 Rock* does not use Liz's sex-appeal for her to achieve her goals, instead the contrary is the case.

Frequently, Liz expresses her impulsive and obsessive behaviour. On a whim, she buys a wedding dress even though she does not plan to marry any time soon and is in no current relationship. It is reason enough for her that she thinks it is the perfect dress and it is on sale (S02E01). That on its own is unusual enough but in order to be able to buy it she insults a bride-to-be currently trying it on. A close shot shows Liz yelling at the other woman: "Don't buy that. That looks ugly on you. Yeah, you'll thank me . . . I'm not kidding, blondie. Get out of the dress" which is interrupted by a full shot of the bride and her mother looking horrified and angry (S02E01 13:55 – 14:28). Liz shows a mean streak, disregarding other people's feelings in order to get what she wants. Once she owns the dress, she wears it at work, claiming to make the statement that she can buy and wear a white dress without it being a wedding dress. However, the truth is that her co-workers catch her wearing the dress in her office and she does not want to back down and let them know that she is troubled over her recent break up. Later that day, Liz is shown sitting on the stage floor eating in her new dress and running shoes. She has a plate of food sitting on the dress on her lap and calls it a "four thousand dollar ham napkin" (S02E01 20:46 – 20:48). In the following episode, Liz uses her treadmill as a hanger for the wedding dress because she dripped ham fat on it, and therefore does not want to put it in her closet (S02E02 15:38). Later, when she fails to assemble a table, which results in two legs being shorter than the opposite ones, the camera shows a close-up of her hands as Liz takes the remaining assembly parts and rolls them up in her recently-bought wedding dress. This is followed by a close-up of the bundled-up dress being pushed underneath the two shorter table legs, so the table can stand evenly. Then, a full shot shows Liz standing behind her new table, touching it and sighing contentedly (S02E02 18:16 – 18:22). She has realised that she should not have bought the dress but instead of returning or preserving it for her future wedding, she handles it

indifferently and negligently as a dress but once she changes its purpose, she is happy again and free of the burden of a waiting wedding dress.

Although Liz has a slim figure, she loves to eat and can frequently be seen doing so. This ties in with a bad habit of hers, namely, she regularly talks while eating, which leads to her chewing with an open mouth and hardly understandable conversations (see for example S02E02, S02E08 or S02E14). Not only is this not a pleasant sight but she does not seem to care about her impression on others and no one ever mentions it to her. I cannot imagine that she does not know what it looks like when someone talks while having food in their mouth.

Similar to Bernadette, Liz shows social behaviour that is not expected in a nerd, such as being a bully instead of being the bullied. Her behaviour is weird at times but this does not infer nerdiness per se. However, she is still socially awkward to some extent, for example, when she is obsessed with having a child.

Despite all this, Liz is the most nerdy when she frequently makes popular cultural references about TV shows and films that, inter alia, fall into the superhero or science fiction category, especially *Star Wars* is prominent in her conversations. These topics are not reserved for her friends and occasionally lead to Liz not being able to connect to her date because they do not share the same interests. However, there are exceptions, too. In S05E15, Liz is at a bar when a man approaches her because he found her license. She is indifferent to his advances until he asks her: "So they make your droids wait outside, too?" (11:15 – 11:18). After this line, the camera focuses on Liz in a close shot. She is immediately engaged in this topic and says: "Seriously, why can't droids go into the cantina? I mean, Ponda Baba can try to shoot Luke" and he instantly ends her sentence with "but a protocol droid is somehow a problem" (11:18 – 11:25). Liz smiles at him and looks at his lips, then back up at his eyes (11:25 – 11:26). This out-of-the-blue conversation can only be followed by insiders who are knowledgeable about *Star Wars*. It seems one of the show's goals is to demonstrate Liz's nerdiness in a way that says that even though she has certain quirks, Liz can find someone that suits her but it is not that simple. By the end of the episode, Liz discovers that she has been set up by the writers and actors of her show as well as by Jack. The man at the bar was told about her interests and somehow persuaded to be with Liz (19:35 – 19:47). For a short time, the audience is led to believe that there is no hope for the protagonist's love life. It is true that her encounter with the man was set up, which would imply that because of who she is,

Liz cannot find a man who likes her and vice versa. However, her friends and colleagues want to help her regain her trust in life and that she will find someone someday. Liz is not angry at them, in fact she is moved by their pure intentions (20:08 – 20:23). This means that the message of this episode remains that even female nerds can find a partner, which the show eventually proves by its happy ending for Liz, who is happily married and has two adoptive kids. *30 Rock* continuously plays with Liz's nerd status and the audience's perception of it. In the beginning, the nerd, Liz, is single and struggling to stay in a healthy relationship but this changes and eventually she is happily married.

Liz has an ambiguous relationship to her nerdiness. On the one hand, she does the most non-nerdy thing in life and marries but on the other hand, she makes a nerdy statement of it and does so in a Princess Leia costume saying: "it's the only white dress I own" (S07E07 19:34 – 19:36). At the same time, she chooses conformity and non-conformity with the white dress because it is not a usual wedding dress – apparently she no longer owns the real wedding dress – but a costume of a *Star Wars* character. She even did her hair Leia-style and wears no glasses. No matter what she does, she always returns to her nerdy side.

Liz's popular cultural references also include video games. Useful for this analysis are her references to *The Sims* because they show her lack of real life experience and that she sometimes appears to live in another universe. When Jack is facing problems concerning his father, Liz tries to give him advice. A close shot over Jack's shoulder shows him unfocused in the right foreground and Liz standing up in front of him; the camera follows her movement focusing on her face. She says: "I don't have a lot of personal life experience but if I have learned anything from my Sims family, when a child doesn't see his father enough he starts to jump up and down. And then his mood level will drop until he pees himself" (S03E21 01:22 – 01:36). Halfway through this speech, non-diegetic incidental music is played. It is a quiet, slow song from a musical box sounding like a lullaby to underline Liz's seriousness and the 'gravity' of what she is saying, and given the look on her face, she is serious. There is a cut and the next close shot is over Liz's shoulder showing an utterly astonished and confused Jack, who has his head tilted to one side and his eyebrows raised (01:36). After Liz has left his office, he stares straight ahead and asks himself: "Why don't I have any other friends?" (01:41 – 01:43). This scene perfectly shows Liz's otherness. Faced with a real life problem, she falls back upon

video games. She feels more confident in an alternative reality and does not seem to realise that her advice is ridiculous and in no way helping Jack and she cannot or does not want to read Jack's facial expression. This leads to the assumption that Liz really does not have anything else to say regarding this topic. She cannot help Jack because she has no experience in this respect but she tries to be helpful and compares his life to that of a Sims child. In a conversation with another person with shared interests – or a nerd – this could be a funny remark but in a serious discussion, there is no place for this kind of advice, which Liz seems to be ignorant of.

Falling back on popular culture is Liz's equivalent to Bernadette's and Amy's conversations about science. Although their conversation topics are influenced by their jobs, the female scientists from *TBBT* have some common knowledge about popular culture, for example, they are familiar with films and pen and paper role-playing games, but they are not as engaged in it as Liz. Instead, they talk about science, specifically their work which is not an option for Liz because, as far as the audience is aware, she has no advanced knowledge about science. Both variants are stereotypically nerdy and it is interesting that female nerds in these shows have either one of them, whereas the male nerds in *TBBT* have both as can be seen in chapter 7.

Liz's Past and Future Selves

Important parts of *30 Rock* are flashbacks to Liz as a kid, her high school and college years and looks into the future from her point of view. The latter show how Liz sees herself or rather how she wants to be perceived by others. In her fantasy future, Liz has long blond wavy hair, no glasses, wears a white long dress and colourful make-up. She lives in a mansion, has several servants, a baby and is married to her imagined ideal man, astronaut Mike Dexter, who is mentioned more than once in the show as Liz's fantasy dream man (S04E07 00:39 – 01:11). The vision is introduced with a close-up of Liz which starts to ripple and cross-fades into a medium shot that follows Liz down the stairs of what she probably imagines to be her house (00:37 – 00:43). This alternative future is mostly white, for example, Liz's dress, her drink and most of the house, which intensifies the feeling of being in Liz's dream world. Interestingly, she does not look like herself at all but more like a Barbie doll without visible flaws. This unrealistic daydreaming functions as a stark contrast to Liz's real life. Although she loves her job, has friends and romantic relationships, she is

frequently stressed because of these aspects of her life. Her white future fantasy highlights this fact by portraying her idea of an ideal life, which is completely different from her real one. Next to this ideal future vision, Liz envisions two alternative realities for her life (see S05E12 and S05E18). These visualisations are worse what-if realities showing what would happen if her show got cancelled. Since this is not something she wants, it can be deduced that overall she is content with herself and everything that entails, except maybe for her bad eye sight since she frequently forgoes her glasses, even in some visions of alternative realities. This could mean that Liz does not want to be perceived as a nerd but if that truly were the case, she could find a way to endure contact lenses or get serious eye surgery. The fact that she does not implies that she is predominantly happy with her appearance and who she is. Barbie-Liz certainly does not fit her character and stays wishful thinking as is indicated by the camera's distorting ripple effect.

More interesting for the analysis of Liz's appearance are the flashbacks which show her as a child. The first time, this happens in S01E11. A close shot of Liz is quickly wiped to the right and replaced by a medium shot which depicts Liz as a probably 6 year old wearing a white long-sleeved turtle-neck under a green dress awkwardly shaking Santa Claus's hand instead of sitting on his lap (17:20 – 17:22). This wipe-technique further highlights the transition from the present to the past. On a timeline, the left always represents an earlier date, so with a wipe to the right, the timeline is moved in a way that shows a point in the past. In this flashback, Liz has a fringe and shoulder-length light-brown straight hair with a red hair band in it and red small-rimmed but huge glasses. In combination with the fringe, the glasses take up half of her still visible face. They look too big for her small face. Except for the glasses, there is nothing particularly nerdy about her appearance in contrast to another flashback from S05E09. This one is, too, introduced by a close shot of Liz, which is wiped to the right and replaced by a medium shot of a younger Liz – approximately two years older than in the previous flashback – standing next to children dressed up as elves and a sign pointing towards the North Pole (06:46 – 06:47). In other words, the scenario is the same as before: Liz faces a Santa Claus in a mall. This time though, her appearance is quite altered. Her hair is cut short in a mushroom-like hairstyle including a fringe and again she wears huge thin-rimmed glasses. As for her clothes, she is dressed in red high-waist jeans with a brown belt, a white turtle-neck underneath a red and white checked blouse with balloons on it

tucked into her pants. Her girly appearance has changed from the earlier flashback into a more boyish and nerdy one.¹¹ The clothes look too big for her, her haircut is unflattering and her front teeth are crooked. Additionally, in S05E09, Santa Claus even confuses young-Liz with a boy, which is not the only time this happens to her (07:02). This is certainly due to Liz's short hair as well as her not wearing a dress or a skirt, which disagrees with conventional gender stereotypes. In any case, this idea of young-Liz looking like a boy is spread intentionally because it enforces her nerd status. In S03E12, Liz talks about this as Jack states that she is a woman. She replies quickly as if she were defending herself or proving something: "Of course, I am. That doctor was a quack. I don't even know why my parents listened to him" (00:28 – 00:32). This implies that Liz's parents treated her like a boy and could be the reason for her looking like one in the previous flashback. Adult-Liz seems to be defensive and self-conscious when this topic is addressed because she does not waste time to verbally prove her femaleness. At least as an adult, her appearance is unquestionably what is considered female.

Several more flashbacks show Liz in high school, two of which are described here. Liz talks to Jack about her upcoming high school reunion and that she does not intend to go because she was "kind of a lonely nerd in high school" and Jack points out that she was chubbier back then by saying "if I remember correctly you were a good deal more" and accompanies this with blowing up his cheeks and spreading his hands and holding them out in front of his stomach to symbolise a wider circumference (S03E05 03:08 – 03:18). It is interesting that she does not outright say that she was a nerd but that she relativizes her statement by adding 'kind of'. She either does not want to fully admit to being a nerd in high school or she does not think that she was one. The medium shot of adult-Liz is replaced by a medium shot showing Liz's high school bully, a blond beautiful girl, and her clique. The camera follows her towards Liz, who stands in front of a telescope, which further highlights her nerdiness. Both girls face the camera with their bodies, the blond one standing behind Liz, giving her a contemptuous look and asking about her telescope. Liz clings to the mentioned object, stares in the camera and mutters something incomprehensible, then quickly puts on her headphones, which she has around her neck and that connect to a Walkman wedged in her armpit (03:23 – 03:30). High-

¹¹ Liz is not the only child nerd in popular culture; Lisa Simpson is another one.

school-Liz still has thin-rimmed huge glasses and short hair but this time the former are red and the latter is very curly. Her sense of fashion has not much improved since she was a child as she wears a light-pink shirt with unidentifiable colour patches on it, which looks like a pyjama. It looks like she does not care about fashion and simply wears what is convenient or comfortable. The sadness in her eyes and the fact that Liz does not really say anything to the other girl but only mutters to herself and then shuts herself off from the world by placing her headphones over her ears indicates that she was frequently made fun of and got used to it. She does not retaliate or even look at the other girl and just pretends that she is alone. Jack's comment about her weight is not comprehensible. Although high-school-Liz can only be seen from the elbows up and her shirt is loose, her face and hands are slim. This flashback gives no indication that Liz was chubby.

The fact that Liz did not care about fashion can also be seen in another high-school flashback in S07E03, which Liz recounts as a "walk of shame" (00:42). The flashback is a full shot viewing a classroom with several teenagers in it. Liz enters the room, smiling with her hands on her backpack straps, coming to a halt in the centre of the room and shot. All the while Liz is saying: "Yes, I'm still wearing the same clothes as yesterday. I stayed up all night" and after the first sentence, a medium shot is focused on Liz, showing only two of her colleagues looking at her (00:43 – 00:47). She has the same hair and glasses as describes above but wears a white short-sleeved loose shirt with a print on the front tucked into blue high-waist baggy pants, red sneakers and a blue backpack. Her dress is undoubtedly nerdy. Moreover, her outfit, especially her pants, set her apart from her peers. The other three girls in the room wear fitting jeans, whereas Liz's are too wide and the short sleeves of her t-shirt almost reach her elbows, so either it is too big or it is a men's shirt. Still, she does not look fat. It is just her too big clothes that might give the impression that she is. The other teenagers do not seem to be Liz's friends as they do not say anything to her but rather look derisively at her. Additionally, Liz wears a self-satisfied smile on her face and what she is saying sounds more like a boast of her achievement although at the same time it is not because she is proud of not having changed her clothes. High-school-Liz is looking and acting awkwardly as her social behaviour meets her sense of fashion. This is probably why adult-Liz calls this scene a walk of shame.

Her appearance does not change much after high school except that her curly hair grows out a bit. S02E14's flashback shows college-Liz. It starts with a close-up of her hands. In her right, she holds a little figurine. With her left hand, she writes something on a self-drawn map. The camera zooms out and tilts upwards, so Liz can be seen sitting behind a desk, looking enthusiastically at her map. She says: "And behind this trap door, more orks. That will really piss off Samir" (08:15 – 08:21). She wears the same glasses, a necklace with a large pendant and a colourfully striped turtle-neck sweater underneath a jeans tank top, dress or overall. This flashback shows that in college, Liz was still rather alone than with other people. She even plays the nerdy pen and paper role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* on her own. It could be that she is the game master and prepares the next adventure for her group but neither the scene nor the show give any indication about this. It is more likely that Liz was mostly on her own in college. Sometime in her mid- to late twenties, Liz's sense of fashion changes drastically. She regains her straight childhood hair, wears it down to her shoulders and styles it. She switches her huge glasses for smaller ones and starts to not wear them all the time as can be seen in three short flashbacks to 1996, 1997 and 2000 (S01E10 05:11 – 05:35). Her clothing changes to a more feminine style as she grows up and her nerd status is not as apparent as when she attended high school. Liz appears to be a dynamic nerd and at least regarding her dress, she seems to be growing out of her nerdiness.

The flashbacks show how Liz's character has developed and gained more depth in the series. As a child, Liz first looked like a conventional girl with huge glasses but not long after that, her appearance was more similar to that of a boy – her hair was short and she wore pants instead of a dress, the glasses remained. If a child wears gender neutral clothes and colours, it is difficult to determine their gender. The only visible distinction that can still be made is because of their hair, where long hair is typically female and short hair typically male. *30 Rock* plays with the perception of child-Liz's gender, switching back and forth between female and male but still portraying her as a nerd as the glasses, unfashionable clothes and social awkwardness remain. In high school, Liz is very socially awkward, wears nerdy gender-neutral clothes, and has nerdy hobbies but as a young adult her appearance changes. Starting at college, Liz again turns towards her femininity and tries to visually leave nerddom behind but her interests are still stereotypically nerdy, for example, playing pen and paper role-playing games. This change is only visible in

the various flashbacks spanning over the whole show. They depict a caterpillar-butterfly-like evolution Liz goes through on her discovery of her femininity. The only constant being the fact that she wears glasses although she does so less in her adult life even though she still needs them. Her dress, clothes and hair, become more fashionable and she seems to be more socially competent although sometimes still a little awkward. Her hobbies are still nerdy albeit many are situated in popular culture as well. Mainly, the flashbacks function to show Liz as a changeable character as she is able to visually appear less nerdy with time.

Liz's Nerdiness

What establishes Liz's nerdiness the most is her frequent use of the term 'nerd' as an exclamation of disbelief, surprise, anger or for addressing someone else, as well as her numerous popular cultural references to films, TV shows and video games.

Liz's appearance has changed quite a lot during her life so far but not so much during the time of the show, where her appearance is hardly nerdy except maybe her thick-rimmed glasses but she does not even wear them consistently. The flashbacks, however, provide an insightful look into her childhood and teenager years. As a child, she looks like a boy with short hair and huge glasses. Later on, in her high school and college years, her hair gets curly but her clothes stay mismatched and loosely fitting. At this point in her life, she can be identified as a nerd at first glance because of her unfashionable clothes, social awkwardness as well as her nerdy hobbies and she even admits to it later in her life. Her appearance changes in her late twenties when she grows out and straightens her hair or does not curl it any longer, and wears smaller, more feminine glasses. She keeps this more feminine dress throughout the show but her behaviour, especially her conversation topics, remind the viewers time and again that she is still a nerd.

7 Diversity of Female Nerds

As can be seen in the analysis, there is not one representation of the female nerd. Each female nerd is different and has its own representation but there are some aspects they share, such as glasses. Moreover, the female nerds in *TBBT* are mostly static characters. Their dress hardly changes and only Amy adapts and becomes more social and emotional over time or rather her character is less exaggerated in later episodes. Liz's character is more dynamic as she develops her goal in life and grows with the challenges of her job. *30 Rock* works with different techniques to

portray a female nerd, such as popular cultural references instead of an affinity for science. However, all three women have social flaws. Bernadette is mean and uses her cuteness to her advantage, Amy initially lacks empathy and social know-how, and Liz wants for manners and morale. All this points to a certain social incompetence but Liz evolves the most until her flaw is hardly visible in later episodes. *30 Rock* tries to break up the stereotype of the nerd and partially succeeds. Although Liz cannot forgo her glasses permanently, the flashbacks provide a stark contrast to Liz's current appearance, which is obviously less nerdy. In the following, I look at the women's male counterpart nerds and compare them to the women in order to get more insight into their nerdy representations and how they differ from those of the women.

Female vs. Male Nerds – Comparison and Contrast

Before I go into each comparison, there is a short paragraph introducing the male nerd and providing minimal background information.

In *TBBT*, Howard Wolowitz is the only one of his scientist friends without a doctoral degree and is often made fun of because of it. Still, he has a master's degree in space engineering and is a former astronaut working at Caltech University with his male friends. He is Jewish and lives with his mother until season 6. He thinks himself a womanizer but has no luck with women until he meets and eventually marries Bernadette.

His dress is remarkable in its uniqueness and always colourful. He has dark brown hair in a Beatles haircut, side burns and always wears a long-sleeved shirt with the topmost button left open but instead of showing skin, Howard wears a turtle-neck underneath. It is revealed in S01E13 that these are not real turtle-neck shirts but dickies, which are simply turtle-necks with a bit of cloth at their bottom, not real shirts. It is unclear why he wears them, maybe to hide his neck but it is a constant item of his dress. Moreover, he wears skinny jeans, sneakers, a wrist watch on his left arm as well as a belt with a huge belt buckle representing popular cultural items or science, such as a Nintendo Entertainment System controller. His nerdiness is visible in his belt buckles, dickies and his unfashionable haircut. In comparison with Bernadette's visual appearance, the only similarities are that they are both rather short and wear casual and mostly fashionable clothes. However, Howard is not dressed as fashionable as Bernadette because of his uniquely nerdy clothing items, the dickies and belt buckles. A remarkable difference is that Howard does not wear glasses. It seems that his character has enough other identifying nerd items and

traits so he does not need them. While Bernadette wears a lab coat at work and frequently dresses up for a girls' night, there is no equivalent in Howard's dress. He dresses up for special occasions like weddings but nothing else. This marks Bernadette's behaviour as decidedly feminine because she is more aware of her appearance and apparently cares more about it than Howard. Conforming with the sitcom genre, both their tastes in fashion do not change throughout the show and their dress remains the same.

Howard's first appearance serves perfectly to introduce his behaviour. He is witty, sarcastic and quick to make the audience laugh either because of his jokes or because of him and his misplaced confidence regarding women. He does not even know Penny nor how she looks but immediately thinks about having sex with her (S01E01). His desperate behaviour soon makes sense because he behaves detestably around women and rather scares them off instead of appealing to them. He does not know how to talk to women but still manages somehow to attract and marry Bernadette. He is not above admitting to being "just another lonely nerd living with his mother trying to find any scrap of happiness he can" and eliciting sympathy in Penny, so she will convince Bernadette to give him a second chance (S04E04 09:08 – 09:15). If it was not clear before when seeing his dress or behaviour, Howard leaves no doubt that he is in fact a socially awkward nerd. The pair's verbal appearance is insofar similar that both can be nice as well as mean. However, while Howard is jokingly mean on someone's expense, Bernadette appears to be serious and does not want anyone to get in her way but she has the advantage of looking and sounding cute, whereas Howard sounds off-putting especially when talking to women. This shows that Howard's nerdiness manifests also in his awkward social behaviour especially towards women, contrary to Bernadette, who appears intentionally mean. According to Willey and Subramaniam, in addition to his nerdiness, Howard's Jewishness is a "racial difference that codes [his] uncoolness in sexual undesirability and ineptitude" (26). This portrays him even more as the other and isolates him but it does not deter Bernadette because she says to Howard: "a girl doesn't go out with a man like you, with your looks, your fancy patter, and your tight hoochie pants, if she's not expecting him to eventually make the move" (S04E04 14:46 – 14:55). Although she knows of his behaviour towards women and ridicules his outfit, she is still interested in him.

In their relationship, Howard is definitely portrayed as the nerdier of the two. As a man he wants to provide for his wife which leads to quite a few fights because Bernadette is proud of the fact that she earns more money than Howard and frequently reminds him of it. When she buys him a Rolex, Howard is almost speechless and wants to know how much it cost. Bernadette replies: "Oh, you let me worry about the money. I just want my baby to have pretty things" (S04E24 14:23 – 14:30). She is visibly happy about the situation, whereas Howard's face features a disbelieving and almost painful expression. This is connected to the fact that all his friends and even his wife have a PhD degree, whereas he 'only' has a master's degree. His friends never miss an opportunity to remind him of it and make fun of him. Mainly, this is in jest except for Sheldon, who seriously thinks that Howard's education is worthless because he studies at MIT and he did not get a PhD. Although Howard does not regret this academic choice, he is frequently frustrated by his friends' jabs and especially by the fact that his wife earns more than him and likes to tell him so. This is not the only issue that emasculates him and portrays him rather as a child than a man. At the end of season 5, Howard becomes an astronaut, however, what was once his dream, now scares him but he cannot cancel the mission. He spends the first few episodes of season 6 in space and frequently video-talks to Bernadette. He is homesick to a degree that he becomes deranged and asks his wife to get his model rocket from his house, build a real one after the model and rescue him (S06E03 14:07 – 14:20). However, after he returns to his normal life in S06E04, he does not waste a second to boast of his mission as if he enjoyed it and would do it again in a heartbeat. It is a trait of his to appear self-confident and boasting of his great deeds but actually being scared and hiding behind others if that is a possibility. Next to Howard, Bernadette does not really have a chance to be nerdy as she has to care about him. She can only look nerdy with her glasses.

Sheldon Cooper has an above-average IQ and does not shy away from saying so. Despite or maybe because of his vast intellect, he lacks social conventions and often times has to guess people's intentions and facial expressions. He relies heavily on a fixed schedule and behaves similarly to someone with Asperger syndrome. He can be quite demanding but Amy, his girlfriend, does not seem to mind his quirks. Professionally, he works as a theoretical physicist at Caltech University.

Sheldon is a tall slim man with dark brown hair cut closely to his head. His unique taste of dress consists of pushed-up long sleeves under a short-sleeved

t-shirt with a pop-cultural or factual print on its front, and pants. Throughout the show, there is no significant change to his appearance at all. In the last episode of season 10, Sheldon still looks like he did in the very first episode of the show except that his clothes are more colourful and his hair is slightly longer but still kept close to his head (S10E24 00:25). It might not be overly unusual that an adult wears t-shirts with prints of superheroes or science jokes on them but within the show, Sheldon is the only one doing so, consequently this singles him out and lets him appear nerdier than the rest of the group and maybe even a little childish. Amy's and Sheldon's appearances are similar insofar that both their outfits contain layer upon layer of different clothing, which might be intended to function as a sartorial shield between them and others because both of them are unsure of how to act in social situations. Although where Amy's dress is old-fashioned, Sheldon's is rather fashionable except maybe his shirts with superhero prints, which immediately label him as a nerd. With few exceptions, Amy and Sheldon only dress up for really special occasions, such as weddings.

All characters in *TBBT* have their special quirks, Sheldon's become visible early on in the show as he has trouble understanding certain social conventions. Frequently used in a humorous way, he does not recognise nor understand sarcasm as well as rhetorical questions (for example S06E07). Monika Bednarek describes Sheldon like this: "His arrogance, obsessive-compulsive and Asperger-like behaviour distinguishes him from the other nerds in *The Big Bang Theory* and contributes to his being evaluated, even by the other 'nerds', as *batcrap crazy* [original emphasis]" (223). She does not question whether the men are nerds or not. She takes this at face value and this is what the show intends the audience to do. Moreover, she calls Sheldon the "main nerd" of the show (199). In another analysis of *TBBT*, Sheldon is called the "alpha nerd" (Willey and Subramaniam 28). This is undoubtedly due to his social incompetence, his high intellect and interest in popular culture, in all of which he surpasses his friends. Sheldon as well as his male friends speak Klingon fluently, an extremely difficult language constructed specifically for the *Star Trek* universe. This is probably the nerdiest interest possible. Regarding their behaviour, Amy and Sheldon are very alike in the beginning and a bit less so in later seasons. Both have a nearly emotionless way of speaking, use academic vocabulary as well as unusually formal register and are not familiar with basic social conventions. The former two aspects make up "an important feature of nerd authenticity" (Willey and Subramaniam 22). Interestingly, Amy is the only female nerd in this analysis who

shares this nerdy feature, which could be explained with the fact that, in *TBBT*, Sheldon is the show's "alpha nerd" and Amy his "female counterpart" (Willey and Subramaniam 28). Therefore, Amy needs to be nerdier than the other women because Sheldon is the nerdiest of the men and they need to fit together. In the show, their likeness is continually being enforced starting with their first appearances although almost three seasons lie between their introductions, they both clutch at their bag's strap, which highlights their uncertainty and uncomfortableness with the situation they find themselves in (S01E01 00:06; S03E23 19:08).

In later seasons, Amy's character is less exaggerated and especially in the tenth season, Amy's and Sheldon's relationship is so stable and serious that she takes it upon herself to instil some empathy and social conventions into her boyfriend. When Sheldon hurts his friends' feelings with an honest but inappropriate comment, Amy explains that what he did was wrong; this happens off-screen. What the audience sees, though, is Amy and Sheldon returning to their friends' apartment in the following scene of this story line. Sheldon enters the room first, looks back at Amy, who looks pointedly back at him, and Sheldon, whose gaze switches from the floor to his friends, back at Amy and to his friends again, apologises to them. All the while, Amy stands behind him and nods to his speech (S10E21 08:32 – 08:39). In contrast to Amy's first encounter with Sheldon, she has no longer trouble holding eye contact and even uses it as a force to make her boyfriend behave. Apparently, she left with Sheldon to lecture him about his behaviour. Curiously, she notices him misbehaving but not herself. Lecturing Sheldon was apparently not the only thing she did. Sheldon complains that she gave him a time-out and "made me [him] sit on the stairs and think about what I [he] did" (08:43 – 08:52). Amy resorts to measures usually used with children to engrain some common sense into Sheldon. Sheldon only complains about an unnecessary time-out not about the time-out itself, which means that he is not aware of the fact that his girlfriend treats him like a child. Moreover, the fact that he apologises indicates that her treatment was fruitful. This shows that in *TBBT*, it is more important for a woman to be social than a man and that it is the woman's responsibility to watch her partner's behaviour. Even within nerds, this sexist stereotype remains.

In *30 Rock*, Frank Rossitano works with Liz and is a writer of *TGS with Tracy Jordan*. He has a uniquely nerdy appearance and still lives with his mother but has to pay rent money. In contrast to the other selected male nerds, he is in no romantic

relationship with the selected woman on the show although in one episode he and Liz pretend to be for his mother.

Frank is of stout build, has brown shoulder-length curly hair, sideburns including a short beard stubble and wears huge black thick-rimmed glasses.¹² He is the only (male) nerd in this analysis who actually wears the typical nerd glasses. Although his audiovisual appearance is nerdy enough without them, *30 Rock* chose to include them as well. His clothes consist of jeans, a short-sleeved t-shirt, a black key chain around his neck and a coloured cap with a slogan on the front. Although a cap is a permanent addition to his dress, he never wears the same one twice. Each episode, he wears a different one with a new slogan on it, for example, in the opening sequence his cat says “NINJA EXPERT,” in S01E02 “DONE DEAL,” and in S01E03 “EXTRA SAUSAGE” (S01E02 03:08; 01:40; S01E03 00:22, respectively). These slogans are either popular cultural references or random statements. Instead of wearing a shirt with a slogan or image like Sheldon, or simply saying them like Liz, Frank wears them on his caps. In everyday life, Frank’s hair colour and style are similar to Liz’s but once his dress and behaviour changes so drastically that he becomes a second, sturdier version of Liz. In S04E07, Liz is busy with her own talk show, so she leaves Frank in charge of her show. Within 24 hours, he seemingly morphs into Liz. When he comes to work the next day, a medium shot shows the other writers already sitting at the big oval table watching the camera with disbelieving expressions. Frank’s back moves into the shot and after a cut, his new short-term appearance is revealed in a medium shot from the other side of the table (12:01). As another writer puts it: Frank “look[s] exactly like Liz” (12:05 – 12:07). The change being that he switched his glasses with smaller ones, wears a cardigan over his shirt and no cap but Frank does not realise his similarity to Liz as he tries to explain every new dress choice being due to some circumstance at work, such as reading glasses in order to be able to read the other writers’ work (12:08 – 12:12). His explanations connect Liz’s appearance to her job and make them appear unintentional.

Generally, this shows that in *TBBT*, both female and male nerds are “distinctly gendered in their visual representations. The men wear standard casual clothes, and each has a unique ‘style,’ almost uniform-like, that he replicates each episode. The

¹² Although Frank’s glasses are not the same throughout the show, their designs remain similar. They are always huge with black thick rims.

women are all decidedly girly” (Willey and Subramaniam 20). Uniform-like outfits can also be found with the women and technically, they all wear casual clothes. What makes their taste unique is how they combine certain articles of clothing. I would not call the women ‘girly’ but rather aware of their femininity. They wear mostly dresses or skirts, in the case of Bernadette and Amy respectively and keep their hair long and loose. *30 Rock* does not adhere to these stereotypical representations in the sense that Liz’s dress is decidedly less feminine in everyday life as well as when she is dressed up for a date as she can rarely be seen in skirts or dresses and hardly wears make-up. Her representation is not as gendered but other ways to portray her femininity are used in the show, for example, her persistent wish or rather obsession to have a child and especially the flashbacks showing her boyish. With their usage, it is clear that Liz is now feminine because as a child she looked like a smaller version of Howard except with glasses. Frank’s appearance, however, fits perfectly with the quote above. His dress is uniform-like as well.

Interestingly, *TBBT* and *30 Rock* do not feature the same kind of nerd. The former shows the life of science nerds, whereas the later shows popular cultural nerds. While Bernadette and Amy are scientists and hardly interested in their partners’ hobbies, Liz is the opposite. She has nothing to do with science but lives for popular culture. This means that each woman has only one of these nerdy aspects, while the men in *TBBT* have them both. Perhaps *TBBT* did not want to represent the women too nerdy in order for them to still ‘behave like one’. Regarding *30 Rock*, the story would not have worked with Liz or Frank as scientists. As compensation for the women only having one of these invisible nerd aspects, they all have glasses but Liz does not wear them all the time and even undergoes an unsuccessful eye surgery to be rid of this stigmatising item. Frank is the only male nerd in this analysis who wears glasses as well. Howard’s and Sheldon’s representation is nerdy enough without them.

Signs of Female Nerdiness

There is a whole range of signs of female nerdiness and not every female nerd has them all. Just like there are different kinds of people, there are also different kinds of nerds with varying degrees of nerdiness. Even in this small pool of nerds not two of them are the same.

Bernadette’s feminine glasses are her main sign of nerdiness. At work, her nerdy appearance is enhanced by her lab coat and the fact that she has a job in

science. Her degree in microbiology and her current job enable her to enjoy science conversation topics. Interestingly, her behaviour is not nerdy but rather the opposite. All this indicates that her nerdiness is a style to match her interest in science. Amy is the complete opposite. Her character features more signs of nerdiness, most obvious is her behaviour or rather her social awkwardness. Her speech is emotionless, of formal register and academic vocabulary and frequently about science. She does not know how to behave in simple situations and enjoys experimenting on her friends. Next to her behaviour, Amy has visual signs of nerdiness, too. The most obvious are her glasses, which are similar to Bernadette's, yet also her feminine but old-fashioned, layered and mismatched clothes draw attention to her nerdiness. Amy's nerdiness is definitely more than a style. She is a full-out trait nerd showing their typical social awkwardness and lack of sartorial skills. More specific, she can be categorised as a science nerd. Liz's nerdiness stems from something completely different: her popular cultural references and 'nerd(s)' exclamations. These are verbal signs enforcing her nerd status but there are also visual signs, for example, her behaviour. On the one hand, she is somewhat socially awkward and refers to video games when asked for advice but on the other hand, she can behave similarly to Bernadette's anti-nerd behaviour. Her dress does not provide many visual nerd signs as an adult, except her glasses she sometimes wears, but flashbacks to her early years show her looking and behaving like a child and teen nerd. Although her visual appearance changed, Liz's behaviour and especially her conversation topics and frequent "nerd" expressions function as a reminder that she still is a nerd. In contrast to Bernadette and Amy, Liz is not a science nerd but evolved from a child and teen nerd to a popular cultural nerd but she can still be categorised as a trait nerd. The women are either interested in science or popular culture but all three wear feminine glasses as a shared sign of nerdiness, indicating that fashion is an important aspect to establish a nerd but not the only one.

Returning to Kendall's theory of the nerd, the female nerds in this analysis wear neither essential nerd item but rather the optional glasses. It seems that a "short-sleeved white dress shirt worn with a tie" is too specific and the tie is conventionally a sartorial item for men ("White and Nerdy" 507). To compensate for this lack of typical nerd clothing, the women wear glasses, however, again not the typical nerd glasses but more feminine ones. Still, at least Amy can be said to share the nerd trait of lacking sartorial as well as social skills. Neither of the women have an

“affinity for computers” although they use them for work and out of the three women only Liz is “obsessed with trivia, and interested in fringe cultural activities” (“White and Nerdy” 521). While male nerds are supposed to have all or at least many of these traits, as can be seen with Howard, Sheldon and Frank, female nerds have a significantly smaller amount of nerdy traits. As the nerdiest of the three, Amy’s character combines more signs of nerdiness than the other women. The reason for female nerds to be less nerdy than male nerds could be due to the fact that female nerds in popular culture are relatively new and not yet established. It seems to be important that women appear at least somewhat attractive and less nerdy the more attractive they are, see Amy versus Bernadette. However, contrary to Kendall’s claim that “[n]erdism in . . . women is held to decrease sexual attractiveness”, all female nerds in this analysis find a partner, who finds them sexually attractive, and either are or are about to be married (“OH NO! I’M A NERD!” 265). Still, Bernadette is exempt from this statement because her nerdiness appears to be more like a style and she is conventionally attractive. Amy and Liz show that even though they are socially awkward, they can still be attractive to other people but maybe not to the audience in general. As the nerdiest, Amy seems to be attractive only for other nerds, whereas Liz is attractive in a more conventional way. In any case, sexual attractiveness has nothing to do with femininity as all three women, especially Bernadette and Amy, proudly display their femininity despite their nerdiness.

8 Conclusion

This analysis has shown that there is not one representation of the female nerd but many even in the same genre. Depending on the context, the women feature a variety of aspects that can be regarded as nerdy. Following the conventions of the genre, the characters in these sitcoms are heavily stereotyped and there is usually not much space for a fully developed character. Liz is the exception. Her character is more complex and dynamic than Bernadette’s or Amy’s, which might be due to it being based on a real person, namely Tina Fey. To some extent, stereotypes are needed in this genre to elicit humour but *30 Rock* does not solely rely on them and tries to go beyond. *30 Rock* is a less traditional sitcom than *TBBT*, and this fact in connection with the real-life nerd model might be responsible for a more complex female nerd protagonist.

In *TBBT*, Bernadette and Amy are decidedly feminine – wearing mostly dresses and skirts and keeping their hair loose. Their nerdiness does not ‘unsex’ them but there is a correlation between their degree of nerdiness and their general attractiveness. Next to her interest in science, Bernadette’s only identifying nerd feature are her glasses. Therefore, I argue that her nerdiness is a style to fit this interest instead of a character trait. She can be mean and manipulative at times which leads to socially awkward situations, but nerdiness is not its origin. She does not behave like a stereotypical nerd and is portrayed as a sexy woman, contrary to Amy, who is feminine but encompasses so many nerd characteristics that she is only attractive to few other nerds. In addition to her glasses, Amy has an unfashionable sense of dress and lacks social skills. Her character combines visual and verbal nerdiness and is represented as a true science nerd; her nerdiness is definitely not a style. Her explicit nerdiness is due to her being partnered with Sheldon, the alpha nerd of the series. Within the logic of the series, since Sheldon is nerdier than the rest of his male friends, Amy, as his companion, needs to be nerdier than the other women in order to match him. In *30 Rock*, Liz is the only female nerd and less feminine in her appearance. Moreover, although her representation includes one distinctly nerdy visual feature, namely glasses, it is her verbal representation that is littered with nerdiness. Her equivalent to *TBBT*’s women’s interest in science is popular culture. Liz frequently references films, TV shows and video games in everyday life situations and has the habit of using ‘nerd(s)’ as a universal expression for surprise, anger, happiness etc. Not to forget, *30 Rock*’s flashbacks show Liz as a kid, a teenager in high school and as an adolescent in college. In all these instances, her audiovisual appearance is that of a nerd – visually even more so than as an adult. Without a doubt, Liz’s nerdiness is a trait and she can be further categorised as a popular cultural nerd. Even as an adult, when she does not look like a nerd anymore but behaves like one, it is clear that it is not a style but rather a remnant of her completely nerdy early years, which she cannot escape. It appears to the audience that she tried to leave her nerdiness behind but only managed to disguise it somewhat. Liz is a nerd with a past, and this makes her character more complex and less stereotypical.

Overall, glasses appear to be a distinguishing visual nerd feature for female nerds in U.S.-American sitcoms although they look decidedly more feminine than the stereotypical black thick-rimmed glasses associated with male nerds. In contrast,

only one of the male counterpart nerds, Frank from *30 Rock*, wears stereotypical nerd glasses. The representations of the male nerds in *TBBT*, Howard and Sheldon, are both verbally and visually nerdier than those of the women, meaning that the men do not essentially need glasses to be perceived as nerds but the less nerdy women do.

Resulting from my analysis, I suggest that female nerds can be categorised due to their varying representations. First, there is a distinction between a trait nerd and a style nerd. While a style nerd might have a few visual nerdy aspects or interests, a trait nerd is additionally and especially marked by nerdy behaviour. A trait nerd can further be distinguished in distinct types, for example, a science nerd or a popular cultural nerd. I expect there to be many more categories depending on the subject genre and context.

Further research on the female nerd needs to be done within the sitcom genre but also in other genres and media. The nerd's popularity is rising and there are certainly many more varying representations available. Additional analyses might lead to the same result that women's nerdiness can be portrayed through visual appearance or behaviour and that sometimes it is rather a style than a trait. This diversity of women's representations is interesting because it reveals various roles women are portrayed in.

9 Works Cited

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Images

Fig. 1. Dr. Seuss's nerd; Dr. Seuss. *If I Ran the Zoo*. Random House, 1950, n. p.

Fig. 2. Bernadette's first appearance in S03E05; S03E05. "The Creepy Candy Corollary." *The Big Bang Theory*, written by Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady, directed by Mark Cendrowski, Chuck Lorre Productions and Warner Bros. Television, 2009, 12:35.

Fig. 3. Amy's first appearance in S03E23; S03E23. "The Lunar Excitation." *The Big Bang Theory*, written by Chuck Lorre et al., directed by Peter Chakos, Chuck Lorre Productions and Warner Bros. Television, 2010, 18:36.

Fig. 4. Liz as in the opening sequence from season 2 to 7; S02E01. "SeinfeldVision." *30 Rock*, written by Tina Fey, directed by Don Scardino, Broadway Video et al., 2007, 02:44.

10 Appendix

10.1 Abstract

This thesis looks at two U.S.-American sitcoms, *The Big Bang Theory* and *30 Rock*, in order to analyse the representations of female nerds. Within the last decade, nerd characters based on stereotypes including female nerds have become more common in popular culture. Using theories of stereotypes, representation and fashion studies, I argue that there is not one representation of the female nerd but many, which overlap to some extent, for example, Bernadette Rostenkowski-Wolowitz, Amy Farrah Fowler and Liz Lemon all wear glasses. This results in a possible categorisation of style nerds and trait nerds for some characters count as nerds because of their sartorial appearance, whereas others show nerdy behaviour as well.

10.2 Zusammenfassung

Diese Arbeit befasst sich mit zwei US-Amerikanischen Sitcoms, *The Big Bang Theory* und *30 Rock*, und analysiert die Darstellung von weiblichen Nerds in diesen. Nerd-Charaktere, die auf Stereotypen beruhen, sind im letzten Jahrzehnt vermehrt in der Populärkultur zu finden, auch der weibliche Nerd erfreut sich an steigender Beliebtheit. Mithilfe von Theorien über Stereotypen, Darstellung und Mode wird anhand von Bernadette Rostenkowski-Wolowitz, Amy Farrah Fowler und Liz Lemon gezeigt, dass es nicht eine universelle Darstellung des weiblichen Nerds gibt, sondern mehrere, die sich zum Teil auch überschneiden, zum Beispiel tragen alle eine Brille. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass eine Kategorisierung in Style-Nerds und Verhaltensnerds vorgeschlagen werden kann, denn manche Figuren sind Nerds hauptsächlich aufgrund ihres Aussehens, während andere Aussehen und Verhalten vereinen.