

'A place where everybody is a legendary hero... and a total dork': Representing the American nerd community as an antidote to loneliness in G. Willow Wilson's Ms. Marvel Comics (2014-2019)

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Abstract

Nerddom plays an important role in G. Willow Wilson's superhero comic books series 'Ms. Marvel': Its protagonist, Muslim Pakistani American teenager Kamala Khan is a comic loving, fanfiction writing, videogame playing nerd. The nerd community full of likeminded individuals provides her with a nurturing safe haven distracting her from the feelings of loneliness brought about by conflicts with her ambitious parents and by the Islamophobic bullying of her classmates. Reading this idealized representation of the American nerd community as a heterotopia of compensation in the Foucauldian sense, I argue that the diegetic nerds of 'Ms. Marvel' work to raise more awareness for the diversity of real-world nerd subculture by normalizing the presence of Muslim women of colour within it. Thus, 'Ms. Marvel's' reimagination of nerddom as an open, welcoming, and egalitarian space debunks traditional stereotypes of nerds as white, socially inept young men and simultaneously celebrates the potential of nerdy interests to encourage mutual understanding between people from diverse backgrounds, as my analysis of exemplary passages from the book series will show.

Keywords: comics; Ms. Marvel; nerddom; loneliness; popular culture; superhero

Introduction

In addition to its commercial success and critical acclaim, G. Willow Wilson's *Ms. Marvel* comic series (2014-2019) was favourably received by long-time comic book fans and new readers alike. At its centre is protagonist Kamala Khan, a Muslim Pakistani American teenager who also self-identifies as a nerd: She reads superhero comics, writes fanfiction and plays MMORPGs.ⁱ Kamala often experiences conflicts between her desire to meet her parents' ambitious expectations and her wish to be part of American mainstream society. A major source of conflict is Kamala's family's prioritization of her academic performance, whereas Kamala herself would rather spend more time engaging in (both online and offline) social activities. Misunderstood by her parents and confronted with the Islamophobic prejudices of her Anglo-American classmates, Kamala feels lonely. This condition becomes even worse after she adopts the superhero identity of Ms. Marvel which she must keep secret from both her family and her friends. Although Kamala at the beginning of the first issue feels like an outsider to mainstream American society because of her ethnicity and faith, she can always rely on her Turkish American friend Nakia Bahadir and her Italian American friend Bruno Carrelli.ⁱⁱ However, her new superhero identity creates a rift even within her tight-knit friend group (until she reveals that she is Ms. Marvel, first to Bruno and much later also to Nakia and her other friends). In contrast to the conflict-laden social spheres of Kamala's family and school life, the comics represent the nerd community as a nurturing safe haven that strengthens Kamala's confidence and ameliorates Kamala's loneliness by providing her with a sense of belonging. I argue that this representation of the (American) nerd community functions both as a way of creating more awareness for the actual diversity of nerd subculture and as a gesture of Utopian reaching – a reimagination of nerddom as an open, welcoming, and egalitarian space.

The term nerd is commonly understood as referring to individuals whose characteristic traits combine 'social awkwardness', 'obsessiveness' and 'knowledge of things having to do with technology' (Lane, 2018: 3). Although female versions of the nerd have been present in American popular culture since the late 1970s (cf. Lane, 2018: 6), nerddom 'still implies a certain level of traditional masculinity because technology is still a (primarily Caucasian) male-dominated field' (Neterer, 2018: 119). Marvel's Kamala Khan thus contributes to a normalization of the presence of Muslim American women of colour in (comics and videogame) fandom and as such can work to 'challenge dominant visual framings of Muslim women as oppressed victims or exotic others, to formulate a distinct cultural and religious identity, and to assert [...her] rightful place in the fabric of American life' (Peterson & Echchaibi, 2017: 155). This attempt at normalization forms a counterpoint to 'the large numbers of pejorative

representations of Muslims in [American] popular culture' (Arjana, 2017: 97) that are also prevalent in comic books (cf. Strömberg, 2011) and seems to be particularly timely considering how widespread islamophobia among the general American public still is (cf. Gottschalk, 2015: 508-509). Although the *Ms. Marvel* comic books acknowledge the existence of Islamophobia (as well as misogyny and racism), they locate it firmly outside of nerd subculture.

In Foucauldian terms, the nerd community as represented in *Ms. Marvel* might be understood as possessing heterotopic qualities. It constitutes a safe place for 'individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm' and thus might be considered a 'heterotopia of deviation' (Foucault, 1986: 25). In accordance with Foucault's fifth principle, this 'heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place' and in order to gain access, each individual is required to 'make certain gestures', in this case read certain comic books, play certain videogames, write and read fanfiction or similar actions that prove one's legitimacy (Ibid: 26). The Foucauldian concept of heterotopias enables me to better grasp the potential functions of the nerd community as represented in Wilson's *Ms. Marvel* by providing me with terminology to aptly describe its spatiality. This is particularly useful for analyzing the relationship between nerd subcultures and American mainstream society (as represented in the comics). Overall, the nerd community in *Ms. Marvel* is not completely idealized and the narrative acknowledges the existence of certain problems such as bullying – which are subsequently resolved through collaboration and solidarity between its members. This idea of nerddom as a protective space that offers room to work through social problems in ways that might not be possible in mainstream society resonates with Foucault's concept of the 'heterotopia of compensation' whose 'role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled' (Ibid: 27). This applies to the diegetic nerd community insofar as the *Ms. Marvel* comic books explicitly portray it as a space that is free of the misogyny and racism that plague mainstream society.

While most previous scholarship on Wilson's *Ms. Marvel* recognizes Kamala's nerdiness as part of her identity, its focus usually lies elsewhere, exploring issues of gender (Gibbons, 2017, Khoja-Moolji and Niccolini, 2015), race (Dagbovie-Mullins and Berlatsky, 2020) or religion (Peterson, 2020). One exception is Aaron Kashtan's book chapter on the representation of female comics fandom in *Ms. Marvel*. Reading Kamala as representative of an increasingly diverse comics fandom that contradicts older stereotypes of comic fans as 'teenaged to middle-aged, socially inept, white men', Kashtan contextualizes Kamala's performance of fandom within the history of representations of nerds in American

comics (Kashtan, 2020: 191). My article builds on his conclusion that ‘Kamala’s fandom is depicted in a way that normalizes both nontraditional fan practices and participation in fandom by people who do not match the standard comic book fan stereotype’ (Ibid: 201). I argue that the positive representation of Kamala’s nerdiness serves not just to celebrate a comics fan-base that continues to expand and now includes broader levels of the general population (such as people of colour, Muslim people and/or young women), but that the book series also intervenes in discourses surrounding fandom practices thereby countering stereotypes of lonely nerds with its own reimagination of the American nerd community as a space that is open and welcoming. The real-world impact of this representation of nerddom can already be seen with many fans starting their own creative projects in response to *Ms. Marvel* (for examples, see Peterson, 2020: 185-186). My article will combine close readings from the *Ms. Marvel* comic books with research on Muslims in nerd subculture from religious studies (Gittinger, 2018; Hammer & Safi, 2013; Peterson & Echchaibi, 2017) and media studies (Kashtan, 2020; Lane, 2018; Peterson, 2020) to illustrate how *Ms. Marvel* is both representing nerddom and participating in the discourses surrounding it. First, I will outline how far Kamala Khan is represented as lonely before I explain how her nerdiness functions as a tool to build social connections and overcome prejudices. Afterwards, another section will analyse Kamala’s fight against the sentient computer virus Doc.X in detail, to show how *Ms. Marvel* engages with issues of cyberbullying while simultaneously representing a diverse gamer community. A third section will examine how the comic uses videogame aesthetics and lingo to both emphasize the characterization of Kamala as a nerd and to appeal to nerdy readers by giving them a feeling of belonging through its references to videogame franchises.

‘Everybody else gets to be normal’: Kamala as an outsider

Right from the beginning of Wilson’s *Ms. Marvel*, Kamala’s nerdiness is shown to be an essential part of her personality: This starts with the title page of the first issue which features Kamala wearing a *Ms. Marvel* fan shirt that classifies her as a superhero comics fan and references the practice of wearing fan shirts to self-identify as a member of American nerd subculture.ⁱⁱⁱ As I have argued elsewhere, this cover page (more specifically, the books that Kamala is holding) depicts Kamala’s comics fandom alongside her Americanness and her Muslim faith as equally important parts of her identity (cf. Cicholewski, 2021: 28). This direct juxtaposition of a book that is representative of Kamala’s Americanness with one that represents her Muslim faith is insofar remarkable, as Americanness and Islam are often perceived as potentially incompatible identities by American mainstream society (cf. Hammer & Safi, 2013: 3). Kamala’s look on the front page can be read as indicative of the growing

trend (that is particularly visible on social media) of Muslim ‘women [who] incorporate hybrid styles to present themselves as complex individuals who are creative, fun, active, strong, and assertive without abandoning their faith or cultural backgrounds’ (Peterson & Echchaibi, 2017: 152). Thus, the book cover already hints at the protagonist’s efforts of reconciling those possibly conflicting parts of her personal life – implying that a failure to accomplish this might result in a personal crisis including feelings of loneliness.

A few pages later, Kamala is writing Marvel superhero fanfiction, much to the dismay of her mother who would prefer her to work on school projects. Throughout the whole series, the readers can see that Kamala’s room is decorated with superhero comic merchandise such as a Captain Marvel poster or a Hulk inspired cuddly toy which reinforces the impression that comics fandom is an important part of Kamala’s life. Another recurring theme in the first issue, apart from Kamala’s nerdiness, is her loneliness: Kamala feels misunderstood by her parents who do not support her passion for writing fanfiction and who do not allow her to attend a classmate’s party. Sitting in her room after arguing with her parents about the party, a voice-over tells readers how excluded and lonely Kamala feels: ‘Why am I the only one who gets **signed out of health class**? Why do I have to bring **pakor**as to school for lunch? Why am I stuck with the **weird holidays**? Everybody else gets to be normal. Why can’t I?’ (Wilson et al. 2016a: issue 1, emphasis in original). Frustrated with those (perceived) limitations that her ethno-religious identity as a Muslim Pakistani American girl entails, Kamala decides to sneak out of her parents’ house to go to the party that her parents disapprove of. Wearing a jacket with the characteristic *Ms. Marvel* lightning bolt at the front, Kamala finally arrives at the party, but her hopes of increasing her popularity are disappointed when her classmates bully her in Islamophobic and racist ways and trick her into drinking alcohol. At the party, Kamala is bullied because of her ethno-religious identity, while her nerdiness does not seem to influence her classmates’ reaction to her.

It is not uncommon for superhero comics to feature nerdy protagonists, however, when these characters experience bullying, it is often a direct result of their nerdiness, as is the case with Peter Parker alias Spider Man (a recurring theme in many of his incarnations) or Barry Allen alias Flash (in the eponymous *CW* TV series). This might also be connected to questions of gender, as nerdiness for Peter Parker and Barry Allen entails a failure to conform to traditional ideals of masculinity (e.g., Peter Parker’s lack of confidence and his prioritization of academic achievements or Barry Allen’s decision to literally run away from his bullies instead of fighting them). In contrast to that, traditional ideals of femininity are not as much at odds with what is commonly considered typical nerd behaviour;

particularly shyness, lack of confidence and showing their emotional attachment (regarding certain fandoms) is generally considered to be socially acceptable for girls and women.

After realizing that her classmates do not accept her because of her ethno-religious identity, Kamala leaves the party thinking: 'Who was I kidding? I can never be one of them, no matter how hard I try. I'll always be poor Kamala with the weird **food rules** and the **crazy family**' (*Ibid*, emphasis in original). The accompanying images convey Kamala's sense of isolation, as she is the only character shown on the following two pages. Due to her preoccupation with her lack of popularity among her classmates, Kamala at first does not notice that a mysterious mist has appeared. Shortly afterward, Kamala has a (mist-induced) vision of her favourite superheroes Captain Marvel, Captain America and Iron Man who reveal to her that she has superpowers that have just awakened. Here, the presence of the three superheroes in this pivotal moment of Kamala's life reaffirms the high importance of her comic fandom for her personal identity. The scene is depicted on a splash page whose iconography is reminiscent of religious [i.e., Christian] Renaissance art which seems to endow the event with somewhat messianic undertones.^{iv} When her vision of Captain Marvel asks Kamala 'Who do you **want** to be?', Kamala's answer is: 'I want to be beautiful and awesome and butt-kicking and **less** complicated. I want to be you' (*Ibid*, emphasis in original). Consequently, as soon as she has learned about her shapeshifting abilities, Kamala's first action is to modify her body to look like a white, conventionally attractive woman, rejecting the parts of herself that her classmates bullied her for and striving towards the conventional ideals of feminine beauty embodied by her favourite superhero Captain Marvel. This shape remains her superhero costume until mid-issue 4, when Kamala confides in her best friend and superhero-sidekick Bruno Carrelli that she does not feel comfortable in the revealing outfit. Encouraged by him, she subsequently designs her own costume consisting of an old burkini (with its hood removed) combined with a red dupatta – a shawl-like scarf popular on the Indian subcontinent – that flows behind her reminiscent of a superhero cape.^v With the support of Bruno, Kamala develops her own Ms. Marvel superhero persona as a person of colour who acts in accordance with her Muslim faith. Whereas her first costume led to Kamala being perceived as a bland copy of the previous Ms. Marvel, Kamala's new costume that honours her South Asian heritage and reveals her as a person of colour is much more enthusiastically received (though nobody on the diegetic level explicitly comments on the new Ms. Marvel being a Muslim and/or South Asian American). Becoming Ms. Marvel brings Kamala closer to her local community with the people of New Jersey embracing her as their own superhero, but simultaneously creates more distance between Kamala

and her family and friends, because she keeps her new identity a secret (at first).

‘Unique is not the same as alone’: Building connections through shared nerdy interests

In contrast to Kamala’s secret superhero identity that paradoxically causes her to feel simultaneously more connected to her Jersey City neighbourhood but also alienated from her family and friends, Kamala’s nerddom is represented as having an exclusively positive impact on her personal life. Taking Aaron Kashtan’s suggestion that ‘[Kamala] Khan uses geek identity as a means of transcending differences in other parameters of identity’ (Kashtan, 2020: 194) as a starting point, my article will expand on the social function of Kamala’s nerddom and illustrate how Kamala’s nerdy interests help her to connect to other characters. My analyses will first focus on Kamala’s best friend Bruno Carrelli, second on Kamala’s crush and later antagonist Kamran and third on Kamala’s future sister-in-law Tyesha Hillman. Those three examples show how Kamala’s nerdiness enables her to overcome her initial prejudices and to form close connections to the three characters in question. The fact that all three characters also belong to marginalized groups (Bruno is an impoverished Italian American, Kamran is a Muslim Pakistani American and Tyesha is a Muslim African American) further works to inscribe those minority groups into public discourses of nerddom.

Bruno is present in Kamala’s story from the first issue onward that introduces him as Kamala’s friend (and potential love interest). A flashback in a later issue reveals that Kamala and Bruno’s first meeting takes place while they are both in elementary school where – as Kashtan points out – ‘they bond over their shared love for Tween Mutant Samurai Turtles, that is, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles’ (Ibid: 194). A closer look at the panels in question reveals how young Kamala is reluctant to go to school at all, yelling ‘Nooo! This is so embarrassing! I wanna go home and watch Tween Mutant Samurai Turtles!’ (Wilson et al. 2016c: issue 10, emphasis in original). Thus, Kamala’s geeky interests at first seem to create a distance between her and other children. However, after Kamala’s parents notice Bruno – who is treated as an outsider because parental neglect has resulted in him having an unpleasant body odour and his impoverished background prevents him from participating in field trips – they feel sorry for him, so they offer to pay for his fees and pressurize Kamala to play with him. In the five panels that depict their first encounter, Kamala grudgingly approaches Bruno, averts her gaze, and remains short-spoken in the first two panels. In the third panel, she recognizes the logo of her favourite TV show on Bruno’s shirt and now not only directly looks at his face, but also moves closer to him. In the fourth panel, Bruno mirrors Kamala’s posture

by pointing at and inquiring after her bracelets. This conversation brings the two children closer together which is also reflected on the visual level through the final panel on the page that takes the form of a splash panel. Thus, Kamala's fandom has made it possible for her to connect to Bruno despite not sharing his experiences of poverty and parental neglect. Compared to how social inequality is perpetuated by Kamala's elementary school teachers who only allow students to participate in field trips if they can afford the fee, Bruno's and Kamala's interaction constitutes a counter-site and shows how such social divides can be overcome (at least on an individual level). After their first encounter, Bruno and Kamala become best friends. The flashback to their first meeting is incorporated into a storyline that has Bruno severely injured after an argument with Kamala, so that worry concerning Bruno's fate permeates the readers' perception of this sentimental childhood memory. Eventually, both Bruno and his friendship to Kamala recover because of their close emotional connection that is built on their common nerdy interests.

Similar to her initial meeting with Bruno, Kamala is not enthusiastic at first when her parents tell her that their friends Bushra and Irfan are coming to visit with their son Kamran. Remembering Kamran as 'that kid who used to pick his nose' when she saw him eleven years ago, Kamala tries to talk her parents into letting her go to the *Funtimes Arcade* instead of spending time with their visitors. Her parents, however, insist on Kamala joining them and Kamala eventually leaves the room pouting and announcing that she is 'not going to be nice to the nosepicker' (Wilson et al. 2016a: issue 13). Kamala's attitude towards Kamran shifts radically when she hears Kamran talking about the videogame *World of Warcraft*. This happens at the final panel of a page and the readers – just like Kamala – have only seen Kamran from behind so far. When the readers turn the page, they are just as surprised as Kamala to discover Kamran to be a conventionally attractive young man through a longshot picture of him filling half of the page. Kamala immediately starts to talk to Kamran about their common interest in videogames and – much to the dismay of her parents – falls in love with him. Kamala's father expresses his confusion when Kamala asks for his permission to visit a shop together with Kamran: 'One minute you **refuse** to be nice to our guests, the next you want to get chummy on Newark Avenue?' (Ibid, emphasis in original). In contrast to Kamala's parents, the readers are not surprised about Kamala's sudden change of opinion, since they already know how important Kamala's nerdy interests are to her. Kamran seems to reciprocate Kamala's feelings and they form a romantic relationship which is strengthened by Kamran revealing his own secret superpowers to Kamala. Kamala's astonished and overjoyed reaction to this is mediated on the visual level through her facial expression and on the textual level through a voice-over: 'All this time, I

thought I was **alone**... That I was the only nerdy Pakistani-American-Slash-Inhuman in the entire **universe**. And then, suddenly... I **wasn't**' (Wilson et al. 2016a: issue 14, emphasis in original). Although Kamala is also attracted to Kamran's physical appearance and his superpowers, the first trait of Kamran that aroused her interest is their shared love of videogames. Just like with Bruno, Kamala's passion for nerdy hobbies makes it possible for her to overcome her initial prejudices and form an emotional connection to another character. However, Kamala's relationship with Kamran turns out to be short-lived as he joins a group of superpowered villains and is eventually defeated by Kamala who remarks that 'he might look like a handsome prince but he's actually a total **buttwipe**' (Wilson et al. 2016a: issue 15, emphasis in original).

While Kamala's flirt with Kamran was not of a permanent nature, Kamala's first meeting with her brother Aamir's fiancée (and later wife) Tyesha Hillman – an African American convert to ultra-orthodox Islam – develops into a lasting friendship. Kamala's relationship with her older brother is fraught, because she rejects his adherence to strict religious practices, while he disapproves of Kamala's more liberal Muslim attitudes. When Aamir first asks Kamala to chaperone his meeting with Tyesha, she pouts and only agrees reluctantly, replying: 'Fine. Okay. I'll be a good *mahram* and chaperone your **non**-date with your **non**-girlfriend', later exclaiming: 'I cannot **believe** this' (Wilson et al. 2016b: issue 2, emphasis in original). However, when Kamala and Aamir finally encounter Tyesha, she is harassed by three Anglo-American security guards who target her because of her skin colour and her faith (she is wearing an abaya and a hijab). This first impression fosters a sense of solidarity in Kamala who has experienced racist and Islamophobic discrimination herself. Then Tyesha makes a reference to the classic science fiction book series *Dune*, which inspires Kamala to express her new-found affection for Tyesha by requesting her to marry Aamir (**ibid**). Kamala's sudden change of opinion is caused by her and Tyesha's common appreciation of science fiction. Kamala's fondness of her brother's fiancée even goes as far as Kamala defending Tyesha against her sceptical parents: 'Tyesha is **awesome**! She read all of **Dune** twice and hated the movie!' (Wilson et al. 2016b: issue 4, emphasis in original). This statement illustrates how Kamala's personal value scheme that is highly influenced by American nerd subculture shapes her social interactions. Tyesha becomes a recurring character in the comics and joins Kamala's group of friends for common activities and later allows Kamala to babysit her and Aamir's son Malik. Tyesha's rather unexpected own nerdiness also works to disrupt stereotypical ideas about both science fiction fans and orthodox Muslim women. In fact, Tyesha connects those two important aspects of her life by explaining that reading Frank Herbert's *Dune* inspired her to look more closely into Islam and eventually

to convert (**ibid**). The representation of both Tyesha and Kamala as Muslim women of colour who engage in nerd subculture intervenes in public discourses of nerddom and contradicts prevalent stereotypes of nerds as socially inept, young to middle-aged white men and as such starts to remedy the general 'lack of images of black girl nerds in American popular culture' (**Flowers, 2018: 185**). Additionally, the characterization of Kamala and Tyesha as Muslim female nerds works to dispel prejudices of 'Muslim women [...] as either covered and oppressed by Islam or uncovered and sexually liberated by Western secular culture' (**Peterson & Echchaibi, 2017: 145**): Tyesha voluntarily wears a hijab and abaya and is an independent, confident woman with a well-paid job that allows her to provide for her family. Although Kamala only covers her head when she is inside a mosque and indeed enjoys certain products of 'Western secular culture', she still feels a sense of belonging to her parents' South Asian heritage and uses her Muslim faith as a moral compass.

This section has shown that nerddom is an important part of Kamala's life that influences not only her choices of interior decoration and fashion, but also shapes her social interactions. As the three exemplary readings suggest, Kamala's nerdiness enables her to overcome her own prejudices and to form deep emotional bonds to other characters who do not share her personal experiences.

'Time to break out the Geek Fu': Nerds against cyberbullying

Kamala's gamer identity is on full display throughout the main storyline in the collected edition *Damage Per Second* (**Wilson et al. 2017**). A sentient computer virus called Doc.X that was created as a 'social experiment' by a developer of Kamala's favourite videogame *World of Warcraft* wreaks havoc among Kamala's group of friends (**Wilson et al. 2017: issue 16**). Mimicking the behaviour of internet users, the virus bullies, threatens and blackmails Kamala and her friends, eventually even outing Kamala's friend Zoe as a lesbian against her will. Thus, the comic addresses misogynist, racist and homophobic online bullying as a severe problem that contemporary teenagers are confronted with. Together with both her real-life friends and her videogame companions from the MMORPG *World of Warcraft*, Kamala sets out to defeat Doc.X. Although Kamala has never met her videogame teammates in real life, they do not hesitate to help her. Kamala appreciates their sense of solidarity: 'This is why I play. Say what you will about their emotional maturity, these guys all got on planes and trains and traveled halfway across the country – or at least across the river in Max's case – because a friend they'd never seen needed help' (**Wilson et al. 2017: issue 17**). In contrast to Kamala who does not conform to the stereotype of the white, male, socially inept nerd, her three fellow gamers are represented in a way that reaffirms this stereotype: Max is an

overweight, bespectacled, white male teenager living with his parents in Manhattan; among the other teammates who are only known by their gamer aliases, are 'Nemesis', a white male middle-aged country-bumpkin from Tennessee and 'Eswyn', a tall lean young white man with a punky hairstyle. When convincing them to help her, Kamala makes clear that she considers them just as important as her real-life friends: 'You guys are my **friends**. We've been saving each other's virtual lives since the game was in **beta testing**' (*Ibid*, emphasis in original). Upon learning that Ms. Marvel is a part of their videogame guild, the three gamers are pleasantly surprised and do not display any misogynist, racist or Islamophobic tendencies. Instead of showing resistance to the increasing diversification of gamer culture, their reaction is emblematic of an increased public acceptance of Muslim women in nerd subculture that is also discussed (with a focus on cosplay) in Gittinger (2018: 100-101).^{vi} Analogous to the results of the previous section, this sense of belonging across social dividing lines is brought about by their common passion for videogames. In this case, the relationships that Kamala has built in the online space of videogaming are so profound that they are directly transferable to the offline world. This representation can be read as the comic emphasizing the potential of online videogames as a way of connecting like-minded people which may result in the formation of real-world friendships. Thus, the book series once again represents nerdiness as a potential tool to overcome initial prejudices and form connections with people from different socio-cultural backgrounds. By working together with Kamala's real-life friends Bruno Carrelli and Michaela 'Mike' Gutierrez Miller, they eventually manage to reprogram Doc.X to spread kindness instead of hate. While this representation of the American nerd community is certainly idealized, it works to intervene in public discourses of what a gamer can look like thereby creating more awareness for the presence of women, people of colour and particularly women of colour within gamer culture. By representing three rather stereotypical white male gamers as unquestioningly accepting Kamala as one of their own, the comic reimagines nerddom as an open and egalitarian space where everybody with a passion for videogames is welcome regardless of their gender, ethnicity or faith. Coming back to Foucault's heterotopic theory, the nerd community as represented in *Ms. Marvel* might be read as a heterotopia of compensation which exposes social grievances (in this case, widespread Islamophobia, misogyny, and racism) and compensates for them (in this case, through the other nerds accepting Kamala unquestioningly).

'If life was an RPG': Videogame aesthetics in Ms. Marvel

Apart from its text-related references to nerddom, the *Ms. Marvel* comics also engage with videogame aesthetics on the visual level. This practice is particularly obvious in Wilson's final *Ms. Marvel* issue that features a

storyline in which Kamala travels through different videogame genres (Wilson et al. 2019: issue 38). At first, Kamala lands in an action role-playing game, easily recognizable through the presence of quests, info dumps by NPCs and a boss fight. However, the comic undermines the readers' expectations by having Kamala beat the level not by defeating the opponent 'Crystal Queen' (who is actually one of her real-life friends), but instead by showing empathy for her which causes the 'Crystal Queen' to transform back into her friend Zoe Zimmerman. Next, Kamala and Zoe arrive in an action-adventure with a high fantasy setting where they encounter a depressed minotaur who transforms back into their friend Bruno Carrelli after Kamala solves a riddle. Finally, Kamala, Bruno and Zoe enter a platforming game. There, Kamala beats the level by getting close to and eventually reuniting with her estranged friend Nakia Bahadir. In a final level, Kamala and her friends are confronted with visions of their younger selves and invited to ponder the question in how far they have changed during their lives which leads to them reaffirming the high value of their friendship. On the last page of the comic, narrator Kamala summarizes the lesson that she has learned through a voice-over: 'If I've learned one thing these past few years, it's that there's always another level to beat. But if you hold on to what's important... you won't have to beat it alone' (Ibid). I argue that this videogame-inspired storyline serves several purposes: first, it illustrates Kamala's gamer identity and thus resonates with readers who also play videogames as it creates a feeling of belonging. When understanding the references to certain videogame genres, informed readers feel as a part of a community and can get an additional amount of enjoyment out of the comic by appreciating those inside jokes. Second, as the videogame storyline brings previously estranged characters back together, the comic counters public discourses of videogames causing social isolation. Instead, Wilson's *Ms. Marvel* emphasizes the social aspects of gaming such as its potential of encouraging teamwork or bringing like-minded people together. In doing so, the books reaffirm the idea that playing videogames together can create tight-knit communities that bridge the gap between online and offline engagement. Whereas the previous section has shown how Kamala's online teammates turn into real-world friends, this section illustrates that this process can also work the other way around, with videogames helping Kamala to reconnect to her offline friends.

Conclusion

In Wilson's *Ms. Marvel*, an idealized representation of nerd subculture is contrasted with a depiction of the American general public as racist, Islamophobic and exclusionary. The counter-site of the nerd community thus functions as a heterotopia of compensation, that is, as a space that accommodates people who remain marginalized in mainstream society.

Through the characters of Kamala, Bruno, Tyesha and Kamran, the book series shows how common (nerdy) interests can help people to overcome their own bias and personal prejudices and form alliances that cross social dividing lines. These alliances also work to reduce the characters' feelings of loneliness that are a result of their respective outsider status in American society as whole. Hence, *Ms. Marvel* questions prevalent stereotypes of nerds as antisocial loners and replaces them with a vision of the nerd community as composed of compassionate and supportive individuals thereby emphasizing the protective quality of heterotopias.

Furthermore, *Ms. Marvel's* nerd community is represented as emphatically diverse through its inclusion of, among others, impoverished people (like Bruno), people of colour (like Kamran) and Muslim women of colour (like Tyesha and Kamala). This representation invites (particularly female) readers of colour to see themselves as part of a nerd community while simultaneously encouraging male white nerd readers to be more welcoming towards female fans and/or fans of colour. Throughout the whole book series, fandom is consistently shown as a positive form of community building. Casting a Muslim woman of colour like Kamala Khan in the role a valued member of nerd subculture intervenes in (the often still negative) stereotypical representations of both Muslim women and nerddom in American popular culture. Thus, Wilson's *Ms. Marvel* series can be considered as an example where 'popular culture and religion intersect in productive ways, breaking free of the discourse of victimization and exoticism and helping us understand the complex, multiple frames of reference that define American Muslims' everyday lives' (Peterson & Echchaibi 2017: 146). While I agree with Sophia Arjana who regards *Ms. Marvel* as signifying 'the beginning of a more positive trend in the portrayals of Muslims in America' (Arjana, 2017: 97), I would go even further and add that this comic book series also paves the way for more diverse representations of nerds and nerddom in general. The start of a TV series based on Wilson's comics in 2022 will probably reinforce this effect and show an even wider audience the desirability of a visibly diverse, supportive nerd community.

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Endnotes

ⁱ MMORPG stands for 'massive(ly) multiplayer online role-playing game: an internet-based computer game set in a virtual world, which can be played by many people at the same time, each of whom can interact with the others' (Collins English Dictionary).

ⁱⁱ Nakia and Bruno also experience exclusion from mainstream American society, Nakia because of her Muslim faith and Bruno because he is impoverished.

ⁱⁱⁱ For more information on Muslims in nerd subculture, see (Gittinger, 2018).

^{iv} For more details on my reading of this page, see (Cicholewski, 2021: 29-32).

^v For more information on the relevance of the new costume, see (Cicholewski, 2021: 33-35).

^{vi} For more information on anti-diversity movements in gaming, see (Massanari, 2020).