

## MARVEL'S TELLTALE SUPER-GIRLS IN THE *MARVEL RISING* FRANCHISE

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### RÉSUMÉ

Cet article a pour objectif d'analyser le discours de production initial entourant le lancement du nouveau titre *Marvel Rising*, et la façon dont cette franchise s'est construite afin d'attirer le public cible convoité des jeunes filles de 7 à 14 ans. Prenant part au mouvement de Marvel (aussi bien au niveau de ses publications que de ses adaptations) vers une plus grande diversité et mixité, les motifs diégétiques de *Marvel Rising* vont tantôt subvertir les axes narratifs genrés qui sont donnés à lire aux jeunes filles depuis plusieurs décennies, tantôt en conserver d'autres dans une stratégie de négociation permanente entre des marqueurs du récit devenus presque inévitables, et le besoin de les faire évoluer. Les dispositifs de production autour de *Marvel Rising* sont également pris en compte, puisque la franchise illustre de façon évidente la volonté qu'a Marvel de conquérir ici un nouveau marché de jeunes lectrices et spectatrices au travers de ce projet transmédia d'envergure, pensé autour des nouveaux modes de consommation des jeunes filles.

**MOTS-CLÉS :** MARVEL RISING – COMIC BOOK – TRANSMEDIA – CONVERGENCE – PRODUCTION – JEUNE FILLE

### ABSTRACT

This article aims at analyzing the initial production discourse surrounding the launch of the new *Marvel Rising* brand, in order to show how this franchise was built to appeal to girls in the 7-14 demographic. As part of Marvel's momentum for better representation and diversity, the storylines showcased in *Marvel Rising* are interesting to analyze, seeing how they tend to subvert the usual gendered tropes that have been served to girls for the past decades while keeping some others intact, thus negotiating between unavoidable narrative beacons and the need for them to evolve. The production strategies around *Marvel Rising* are also kept in mind as the franchise clearly illustrates Marvel's very proactive approach to conquer new readers and viewers through this unprecedented transmedia venture, directed primarily at girls' new modes of consumption.

**KEYWORDS :** MARVEL RISING – COMICS – TRANSMEDIA – CONVERGENCE – PRODUCTION – GIRLHOOD

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*transmédia de l'auteure noire américaine et la ville qui l'a vu naître, vivre et mourir. Les enjeux de cette recherche se cristallisent autour des mécanismes que cette œuvre artistique politiquement chargée parvient à mettre en mouvement pour finalement s'adjoindre à l'histoire de tout un territoire et en amender certains aspects. Il a simultanément développé un intérêt envers l'impact des pratiques de l'industrie du divertissement ancrée à Los Angeles sur l'histoire de la ville californienne ainsi que sur son identité socio-culturelle. C'est selon ce prisme d'étude des stratégies de convergence transmédiatique et des systèmes de productions, représentations ou dénonciations dont elles sont les vecteurs qu'il s'attache à analyser notamment l'engouement envers les super-héros américains, des comics aux écrans. Il a publié des articles dans les revues ORDA, Conserveries Mémoires, ANGLES, TV/Séries ou encore IdeAs ainsi que dans plusieurs ouvrages collectifs. Il est actuellement PRCE à l'Université Rennes 2.*

“When a threat no one could have expected bears down on the Marvel Universe, this ragtag, untrained band of teens have no choice but to rise together and prove to the world that sometimes the difference between a “hero” and “misfit” is just in the name.”

This official logline for the feature-length animated film *Marvel Rising: Secret Warriors* was unveiled in early December 2017 as Cort Lane (Marvel Senior Vice-President Animation & Family Entertainment) and Sana Amanat (Marvel Vice-President of Content & Character Development) announced Marvel’s “new multiplatform animation franchise featuring the next generation superheroes” *Marvel Rising* (Hipes, 2017). While no specific gender is specified or mentioned within these few lines, this “untrained band of teens” is predominantly female with strong young women written as leads for this new team. This description of *Marvel Rising* does not depart from the core marketing strategy of the publishing house as it highlights characters rather than superpowered beings, one of the most noteworthy differences with its biggest competition, DC Comics.

Beginning in the late 1930s the comic book format and its superheroes first captivated mostly young male readers, but as the comic book industry developed extensively over the 1940s, it tried to appeal to young women as well. Whether it was with the help of new superheroines (Wonder Woman, Blonde Phantom, Golden Girl, Madame Strange, Miss Fury, Black Cat, etc.), or with the launch of new comic book titles (*Young Romance*, *Young Love*, etc.), or even with the establishment of the teen humor comics genre (of which Archie Comics has been the undisputed leader), the comic book industry intended to diversify its readership from very early on. But after the gradual loss of popular interest that the medium has known from the mid-1970s until the late 1990s, the comic book industry focused on its first marketing target and its readership became predominantly male.

Very few large-scale comic book market studies are made available to the public as they are usually used by the publication house as insiders’ information to impel new strategies. But in October 2017, a panel at the New York Comic Con hosted by Kristen McLean presented the results of an NPD Bookscan demographic study about comic books and graphic novels buyers,

based on a sample of 72, 000 consumers. The results in term of gender were quite clear: 63 % of comics and graphic novels are purchased by men, 37 % by women; and in terms of genre, superhero buyers are more heavily male (78 %); while manga buyers are more evenly divided (56 % male and 44 % female) (Alverson, 2017).

Even if there is no argument that women are more and more visible and active in comic book culture in its now many different forms (comics books, films and series adaptations, videogames, amusement parks, collectibles and merchandising, etc.), the readership of the genre remains mostly masculine, as shown by the NPD Bookscan market study. *Marvel Rising*, however, in its unabashed transmedia strategies and carefully chosen story-arcs and tropes, might very well be Marvel's biggest offensive to date in order to change this paradigm. This paper thus aims to analyze the production discourse surrounding *Marvel Rising* and more specifically how it articulated its own perception of its targeted young female audience through transmedia convergence<sup>1</sup> but also through the narrative motifs showcased by the franchise.

### **DELINEATING MARVEL'S GIRL CULTURE: BETWEEN TRANSMEDIA AND ASSEMBLAGE**

Setting provisional boundaries and limitations to what girl culture is supposed to encompass always proves to be a risky venture, as is the case for delimiting any type of cultural group, gendered or not. When culture is invoked, female adolescents are usually envisioned as mass consumers first, and thought about in marketing terms rather than in relation to actual cultural content. Among others, we can cite Natalie Coulter's monograph *Tweening the Girl: The Crystallization of the Tween Market* (2011) or Mary Celeste

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<sup>1</sup> According to Henry Jenkins, convergence "is both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process. Corporate convergence coexists with grassroots convergence. Media companies are learning how to accelerate the flow of media content across delivery channels to expand revenue opportunities, broaden markets, and reinforce viewer commitments. Consumers are learning how to use these different media technologies to bring the flow of media more fully under their control and to interact with other consumers. The promises of this new media environment raise expectations of a freer flow of ideas and content. Inspired by those ideals, consumers are fighting for the right to participate more fully in their culture. Sometimes, corporate and grassroots convergence reinforce each other, creating closer, more rewarding relations between media producers and consumers." *Convergence Culture*, 2006, p. 18.

Kearney's *Mediated Girlhoods: New Explorations of Girls' Media Culture* (2011) and *Mediated Girlhoods: New Explorations of Girls' Media Culture Volume 2* (2018) which all show how girls are now repeatedly apprehended, by the vast majority of the cultural producers scrutinized in these studies, as mass consumers first. Because I am focusing in this paper on a specific brand and its cultural products intended for a particular demographic, the terms girls and female adolescents will hint at the target audience that *Marvel Rising* is trying to reach out to. In her seminal *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory* (2002), Catherine Driscoll discusses about what girl culture came to be known for, and argues that girl culture and the girl market are sometimes thought of as being one and the same, two different notions that revolve however around a similar concept, that of the assemblage:

Thinking about the girl market as identification rather than demographic positions girl consumers as an assemblage of cultural positions and normative lines. The girl market mediates identity and power through popular cultural codes and generic conventions for becoming a woman and belonging to different cultures. [...] The girl market is not organized by an ideal girl or by one set of parameters for ideal girlness, but has different shifting boundaries for the embodied assemblage of different girls and girl markets. In a process of assemblage what attaches to a meaning, or cultural production, can and will also detach from it. [...] Feminine adolescence and girlhood are thus produced through a range of consumptions upon the collage surface of girls as a group identity. In consumption of girl culture, girls are recorded as producing and desiring themselves at the edge of such group identities: not simply a peer marketplace but a multiplicitous production of interest in themselves. (Driscoll, 284-7)

Even if the formulation of multiple “interests in themselves” could be perceived as being a bit tactless as it might suggest exceedingly egocentric tendencies and shallowness of girls being strictly interested in themselves, what Driscoll highlights throughout her monograph is that, no matter the different forms it might take, girl culture cannot convey a monolithic ideal of girlhood. Instead, girl culture intends to explore girlhood through a wide variety of cultural contents, surveying the many facets of what makes them tick, and thus not limiting girls to the alleged norms or canons they should follow blindly, but rather pushing through non-normative interests and discourses.

An idea of the girl market is used to sell participation in girlhood. The commodities marketed to the new (global) girl consumers [...] include the idea and the means of feminine adolescence. But rather than being equivalent to the girl market, girl culture names the circulation of ways to articulate identities as girls. Girl culture does not denote advertising, sales, or commercial discourse on who buys what popular cultural products, because these do not delimit circulating representations of girls or necessarily identify any social group as girls. (Driscoll, 268)

Girl culture is not a notion that is designed to encompass a cultural product destined to be consumed by young women in order to motivate right and wrong ways to be a girl. Girl culture is rather an ensemble of cultural objects that female adolescents relate to and engage with, whether the said cultural object was intended to reach this demographic or not. Each young woman decides what girl culture is to her, and agency is indeed key. But creators are now using focus or test groups to anticipate girls' agency in deciding what narrative will echo their experience and expectations, and the production strategies behind *Marvel Rising* could prove to be a case in point. Given the standpoint selected in this study, the terms 'girl' and 'girlhood' will refer to the targeted audience of the *Marvel Rising* franchise, one that can be delineated more precisely given the analytical tools provided by the different demographics defined by the ratings of kids-oriented networks. While kids (boys and girls) constitute a first demographic group (2-11 or 6-11), tweens (boys and girls also) constitute a second group for people aged 9-14. Because of *Marvel Rising's* clear intention to appeal to a tween audience demographic, 'girls' will here refer to young females aged 9 to 14.

As of late, much attention has been given to the comic book format with the continuing popularity of superhero films, most notably through the Marvel Cinematic Universe now more commonly dubbed MCU. With this growing attention came more acute scrutiny about how women were represented in the genre in terms of narrative but also creative positions within the industry. Different books such as *Superheroes and Identities* (Gibson, 2015) or *Gender and the Superhero Narrative* (Goodrum, 2018) analyze these concerns in depth and Mel Gibson's articles "Who does she think she is? Female comic-book characters, second-wave feminism, and feminist film theory" (Gibson,

2015) or ““Yeah, I think there is still hope”: Youth, ethnicity, faith, feminism, and fandom in *Ms. Marvel*” (Goodrum, 2018) provide closer investigations as well as optimism on female representation in the genre. While few examples of cultural objects intersect between Catherine Driscoll’s *Girls* and the realm of American comic books, (mostly due to the publication year of *Girls*) it is worth noting that some others do coincide<sup>2</sup>. Manga has been discussed alongside comic books in many analyses about female representations in the medium, with many shojo narratives being referred to and identified by Driscoll as being an integral part of girl culture. *Sailor Moon* (1992) is probably the most well-known example, but other Japanese anime series have also paved the way for the rise of female-led comic book titles such as *Cat’s Eyes* (1983), *Cardcaptor Sakura* (1998) but also the 1998 beloved American cartoon *The Powerpuff Girls* as well as the superheroesque French and Canadian cartoon *Totally Spies!* or the female-led sequel to Nickelodeon’s *Avatar* with the 2012 *The Legend of Korra*.

Female-led animated programs are thus nothing new and Marvel as well as the rest of the comic book industry has only followed in those footsteps. The first comic book-inspired female-led animated program was launched in 2000 with the short-lived *Gotham Girls*, a web series broadcast on the Warner Brothers website. A more successful DC comics web series was launched in 2015, *DC Superhero Girls*. The animated series was broadcast for 5 seasons and 112 ten-minutes-long episodes on the Warner Brothers YouTube channel before being rebooted as a classic animated series that premiered on the Cartoon Network in January 2019. While the target audience of these programs is clearly directed towards girls, the rhetoric surrounding Marvel’s attempt to appeal to the same demographic has been a lot more cryptic. Indeed, *Marvel Rising* has been advertised as being part of the ongoing endeavor to offer better female representation in superhero narratives, but without any sort of emphasis on gender, preferring instead to offer a better representation of diversity. Notions of womanhood or girlhood are erased, focusing rather on characterization freed from any sort of gendered appeal.

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<sup>2</sup> It is also worth mentioning that Driscoll later analyzed superheroine narrative in her 2007 article “Super-Heroine: Women as Martial Artists in Early Twenty-First Century Cinema.”

Launched in April 2018, *Marvel Rising #0* was a free digital comic book which started the whole subsequent franchise, and Sana Amanat, as Vice-President for content and character development, speaks directly to the readers on the comics' second page:

The Marvel universe is a rich treasure chest of characters born across Marvel's incredible 80-year history. From Captain America to Captain Marvel, from Iron Man to Ironheart, this is an ever-expanding universe full of powerful heroes that also reflects the world we live in. (Grayson, 2)

In this first part of her address, Amanat carefully chose Captain America and Iron Man, the two central characters of the MCU, thus inducing transmediality from the very start. She is here referring to Marvel's roster of comic book superheroes and she could have easily picked other long-standing characters such as Namor or Nova, but the egalitarian parallel created by the two Captains and Irons of each duo serves the primary purpose of *Marvel Rising*. Choosing to associate a female character to each of these two iconic superheroes (namely Captain Marvel a.k.a. Carol Danvers and Ironheart/Riri Williams), is however a very clever way to introduce equal gender representation as a reflection of "the world we live in" without mentioning it directly.

Yet despite that expansion, our stories remain timeless. They've been shared across the globe and across generations, linking fans with the enduring idea that ordinary people can do extraordinary things. It's that shared experience of the Marvel story that has allowed us to exist for this long, whether your first marvel experience was through a comic book, a bedtime story, a movie or a cartoon, we believe our stories stay with audiences throughout their lives. (Grayson, 2)

Further relying on the cross-media nature of comic book characters, Amanat enumerates where superhero narratives are now encountered: from the original comic book medium to the latest films or animated series. Gender neutrality is also reaffirmed in this short paragraph through the use of the terms "fans", "generations", "people" or "audiences". Amanat thus emphasizes that comic book superheroes and superheroines are not intended to appeal to men or women but to men and women.

*Marvel Rising* is a celebration of this timelessness, as our stories pass from one generation to the next, so does the love for our heroes. From the classic to the newly imagined, the passion for all of them is the same. If you've been reading comics over the last few years, you'll know characters like Ms. Marvel, Squirrel Girl, America Chavez, Spider-Gwen and more have assembled a bevy of new fans while captivating our perennial fans. Each of these heroes is unique and distinct – just like the readers they've brought in – and they remind us that no matter what you look like, you have the capability to be powerful, too. (Grayson, 2)

The gender neutrality rhetoric goes on, calling the *Marvel Rising* roster of characters as heroes instead of superheroes or superheroines, even though the ones that are mentioned in this paragraph are all female: Ms. Marvel (Kamala Khan), Squirrel Girl (Doreen Green), America Chavez and Spider-Gwen (Gwen Stacy). The conscious choice to soften power in order to favor characterization could be perceived as a hint towards the more feminine readership intended for this title. The absence of the super- prefix allows to focus on a character who is powerful by nature and who is not defined nor attractive because of its superpowers but because of who s.he is. The emphasis on appearance, “no matter what you look like”, could also be linked directly to more gendered concerns directed more specifically towards girls, who are often perceived as being more worried about appearance than boys are, thus appealing to more feminine issues without identifying them as such. The allure and identification process these new characters are intended to provide is clearly stated by Amanat who compares the uniqueness and distinctiveness of these new heroes to that of the new “readers they've brought in.”

We are taking the heroes from *Marvel Rising* to new heights in an animated feature later in 2018, as well as a full program of content sweeping across the company. But first we're going back to our roots and telling a *Marvel Rising* story in comics: the first place you met these lovable heroes. So, in the tradition of expanding the Marvel universe, we're excited to introduce *Marvel Rising* – the next generation of Marvel heroes for the next generation of Marvel fans! (Grayson, 2)

As she closes this short introduction, Amanat evokes how the franchising process will unfold. Following this debut in the historical comic book format, *Marvel Rising* will continue in an upcoming animated feature and

more “content sweeping across the company” and on various platforms as well. Still, no gender marker is perceptible in these last few lines either, and this editorial decision to remove all gendered nouns and pronouns from this introductory text is probably *Marvel Rising*'s biggest tour de force. On the one hand, it does not ostracize the comic book medium's mostly male readership and invites them to engage with the storyline as they usually do with the rest of the titles they might be reading; and on the other hand, it does not brand *Marvel Rising* as a girl-only marketed product with all the clichés and flaws it might conjure up. This gender neutrality in the marketing department could also be perceived as particularly valorizing for both boys and girls as it challenges the codes, and thus relies heavily on each user's agency: it is up to them to decide whether they want to interact with this cultural object or not, freed from any type of gendered marketing determinism. It thus sets up *Marvel Rising* as able to tackle themes and storylines that are not limited by gendered considerations, but is it enough to address diversity while departing from the stereotypes that are sometimes scattered across girl culture narratives?

### **REBRANDING A WELL-KNOWN DYNAMIC DUO**

Upon the release of the first comic book of the franchise in April 2018, it was obvious that *Marvel Rising* would revolve around two core characters: Doreen Green a.k.a. Squirrel Girl and Kamala Khan better known as Ms. Marvel. It also became apparent early on that the main story-arc developed would consist in the creation of a new team of superheroes, younger superheroes, that would mimic the dynamics of the now world-renowned Avengers, thus matching together existing characters from the extensive roster of Marvel superheroes. In an attempt to build the team organically, the first *Marvel Rising* comic book storylines explore the budding friendship of Doreen and Kamala, from their very first encounter and realization about their respective alter-egos to their first crime fighting adventures as a dynamic duo of superheroines.

The editorial decision to form this alliance is yet not entirely based on characterization and purely narratorial decisions. These two characters have been at the heart of Marvel's decision to widen their readership demographic, and more particularly to attract younger women to the medium of comic

books. While Ms. Marvel is not a new brand or name in Marvel's catalog, Kamala Khan who is now taking on the mantle, is. First appearing in 1977, Ms. Marvel was a moniker used by Carol Danvers for decades until she decided to step away from this superheroine identity to assume that of Captain Marvel in July 2012. It was after this event, during the summer of 2013, that we first met Kamala Khan, a young Muslim Pakistani American girl and carrier of the inhuman gene which gave her superpowers after being exposed to the Terrigen mist. Kamala is a polymorph inhuman who can control her size and can "embiggen" at will all or some parts of her body such as her legs to travel faster or her fists to fight her enemies.

Self-professed as Captain Marvel's biggest fan, Kamala decides that she also wants to become a superheroine like her idol, and what better superhero name to take than the one Carol Danvers used to have in order to follow in her footsteps. Politically speaking, the first Muslim superheroine made the headlines when it was decided that the new Ms. Marvel would have her own comic book title starting in early 2014, but critical as well as public acclaim made of Kamala an immediate success, with Sana Amanat as editor of the title.





Main covers for *Ms. Marvel* Vol.3 #7 (Oct. 2014), Vol.3 #17 (Oct. 2015), Vol.4 #5 (May 2016), Vol.4 #17 (June 2017).

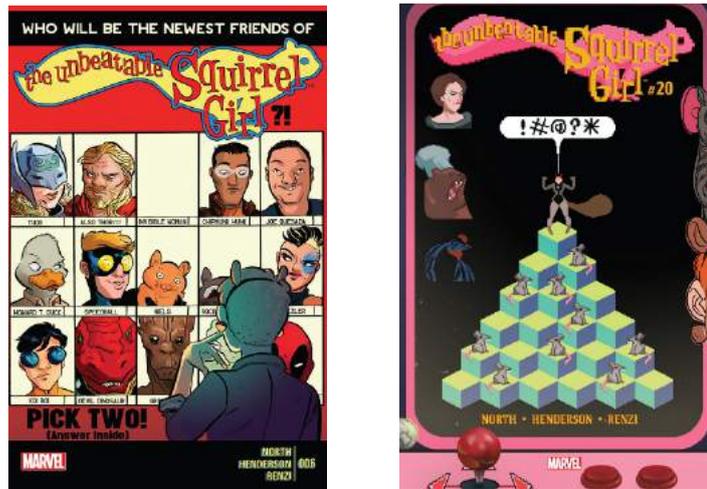
Upon looking at some of *Ms. Marvel's* covers, some tropes become apparent. Kamala is the new kid in the group and behaves like a fan of many of these superheroes, the selfie with Wolverine is one example and the apparent attachment to Captain Marvel as well. In the latest volume of the title however, the visual tropes on the title's main covers are taking another direction from what could have been perceived as a fangirl approach. Kamala gradually becomes her own superheroine with many different facets to herself as expressed through the *Ms. Marvel* vol. 4 #5 cover. Finally, Kamala is more often depicted on the cover as battling against several enemies (mostly *male* enemies) against whom she can hold her ground, covers that are sometimes imbued with humor or caricature-like aesthetic to hint at the realm of videogames. Because Kamala is very fond of video games, this theme also appears regularly in the comics, an inclusion that clearly parallels the more visible and stronger investment of women in the field of videogames and e-sports. Because Kamala Khan is a brand-new character specifically written and drawn to become the new Ms. Marvel, the eponymous comic book cannot truly be considered as a rebranding of the character. This is not some younger versions of Carol Danvers being brought from the past or Carol Danvers letting go of her newly-acquired Captain Marvel status to return to her former moniker. Here, a sort of legacy appears with Kamala taking up the name for herself and making it mean what she intends to represent as a

superheroine. This ability of the genre to have different characters portraying the same superhero<sup>3</sup> can still be seen as an editorial pirouette that allows comic books publishers to reinvent some characters at will, but it is not a rebranding per se, not like the one that Squirrel Girl has undergone.

Doreen Green's Squirrel Girl, on the other hand, is a different story since the character was created by Will Murray and Steve Ditko back in 1991 in *Marvel Super-Heroes* vol. 2 #8. First imagined as completely covered in fur, the character was always cheeky and fun, but could sometimes also be depicted in a scarier almost demonic kind of way, as when she appeared on the cover of the *Great Lakes Avengers*, terrorizing the likes of Batroc the Leaper or defeating Wolverine in a 1 on 1 combat in *New Avengers* Vol. 2 #15 (Aug. 2011). Sometimes used as a metafictional punchline by Deadpool, Squirrel Girl's appearances were very sporadic over 20 years, but things changed when Marvel decided to launch *The Unbeatable Squirrel Girl* in late 2014.



<sup>3</sup> Captain America is a good example of that strategy with about 10 different people assuming the role of the superhero since the title's publication in 1941.



Main Covers for *G.L.A.* Vol.1 #3 (Aug. 2005) and *The Unbeatable Squirrel Girl* Vol. 1 #1 (March 2015), Vol. 1 #6 (Aug. 2015), Vol.2 #20 (July 2017).

With Ryan North and Erica Henderson at the helm, the comic book title clearly came as a follow-up after *Ms. Marvel*'s success in early 2014. The design evolved and Doreen is no longer covered in fur with a softer rounded face and a cuter acolyte, Tippy-Toe. Just like Kamala, Doreen admires the rest of Marvel's superheroes and pictures herself as heralded by the Avengers on the cover debut of the title. Similar tropes are explored in *The Unbeatable Squirrel Girl* but in a more humorous and sometimes metafictional way than in *Ms. Marvel*. On the cover of *The Unbeatable Squirrel Girl* #6, the artists intended to play with the genre's sometimes confusing storylines with the 2 different Thors (the original Thor and Jane Foster as the new Thor), but it also broke the fourth wall with a reference to the industry itself with Joe Quesada, one of Marvel's star editor-in-chiefs, appearing on the top-right corner. A second-year computer science student, Doreen is obsessed with videogames, a theme that appears frequently in the pages of the comic book and a common interest shared by Kamala.

As part of this reimagining of the character, Marvel decided to publish two young adult novels. The first one *The Unbeatable Squirrel Girl: Squirrel Meets World* was published in February 2017, and the second one *The Unbeatable Squirrel Girl: 2 Fuzzy, 2 Furious* was published in March 2018. Pop culture referentiality and Easter eggs have become the norm in comic book films and series adaptations, and this practice has now translated to comic book format itself where more and more pop culture references are integrated here and

there. Mostly used in titles who intend to break the fourth wall (*Deadpool*, *Howard the Duck*, *Lobo*, etc.), *The Unbeatable Squirrel Girl* also uses these references extensively and it became obvious in the two titles of the superheroine's young adult novels with first a reference to the 1990s sitcom *Boy Meets World* (ABC, 1993-2000) while the second one is clearly referring to the *Fast and Furious* franchise. After the success of the Squirrel Girl first novel, Marvel decided to publish *Ms. Marvel: Fists of Fury* in October 2017, thus bringing the two titles closer together in a marketing move to appeal to the readership of a genre known for its stronger female demographic with popular young adult sagas such as *Twilight*, *Divergent*, *Beautiful Creatures* or *Hunger Games*. Unlike Kamala's arrival in the Marvel catalog, Doreen had to undergo some adjustments to fit the narrative purpose the title was expected to serve, offering laughs and grit in a comic book title that was also met with much critical and popular accolades, even winning the 2017 Eisner award for "Best Publication for Teens." Kamala's publication journey thus reflects how Marvel Publications was able to create a character that would appeal in new and meaningful ways to a new female readership, while Doreen's reboot in *The Unbeatable Squirrel Girl* shows how much of a departure needed to be made in order to create a title that would primarily be aiming for a girl readership.

### **RETHINKING THE (SUPER)HEROINE NARRATIVE**

The duo of Kamala and Doreen was carefully chosen as well as carefully adapted for the *Marvel Rising* franchise. Before launching the title, Cort Lane and his team met with "young fans<sup>4</sup>" in order to talk about the stories they would like to read about or watch, and these conversations influenced in turn the animation of *Marvel Rising*, particularly when coming to character designs: "One thing many girls were asking for was different body types. In animation, characters all sort of look the same, there are similar body types based on model sheets, but here every female character has a different body from the other characters. They were also very open to the ethnic and religious diversity of the cast" (Holub, 2018). The production was self-conscious about

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<sup>4</sup> Like so many other studios and networks, Marvel is secretive with the samples it consulted during the creation of the *Marvel Rising* franchise and nothing is known of the diversity of the focus group. But Cort Lane has been very upfront about the target audience of the franchise being girls so we can assume that the focus group was mostly composed of girls.

depicting women in a non-normative set of designs in order to break some of the rules that have been established in animation as well as comic books. The overall diversity of the cast also presents clear advantages as it is meant to appeal to many, highlighting multicultural narratives that will trigger intersectionality across gender lines. America Chavez can appeal to both young male and female Hispanics, and Kamala to both young male and female Muslims and/or of Middle-eastern descent. The superpowers of Ms. Marvel and Squirrel Girl also have a role to play in the *Marvel Rising* narrative:

The different body types also lend themselves to different ways of approaching heroism. Ms. Marvel does not, as Amanat says, have “pretty powers.” Instead, Kamala’s shapeshifting abilities often explode her body to ridiculous proportions, “embiggen-ing” her fists to punch bad guys or stretching her arms to traverse great distances. It’s a relatable dynamic for young fans who are themselves going through some big bodily changes, as are Kamala’s burgeoning friendships with other *Marvel Rising* superheroes like Squirrel Girl, a.k.a Doreen Green. (Holub)

The *Marvel Rising* superheroes are not meant to be considered as allegorical or to function as idealized representations of power. They are not repositories of any kind of “I wish I were her” identification process. Instead, these characters are meant to be relatable on an empathetic level. It is no longer about wanting to be them and experience their cool powers, but about wanting to get to know them and be their friends; to truly get hooked by the narratives that these characters go through and actually feel for them. Opting for this strategy and borrowing from serial narrative structures is also a good way to create a strong consumer relationship, a strategy that all comic book publishers have mastered since the 1940s. Once hooked, the reader/viewer wants to know more about the characters and what they are going through, events and emotions that the reader/viewer can relate to and identify with.



Main covers for *Marvel Rising: Alpha* (June 2018), *Marvel Rising: Squirrel Girl & Ms. Marvel* (July 2018) and *Marvel Rising: Ms. Marvel & Squirrel Girl* (Aug. 2018)

As a result, the *Marvel Rising* comics iconography differs slightly from *Ms. Marvel* and *The Unbeatable Squirrel Girl* titles, choosing to rely on a more cartoony aesthetic which is also influenced by shapes and colors traditionally associated with the Japanese anime style. Yet the same themes as in *Ms. Marvel* and *The Unbeatable Squirrel Girl* comics are also heavily featured on the *Marvel Rising* comic books covers, with friendship and videogames taking here the center stage. But the content of the *Marvel Rising* franchise as a whole also deserves closer scrutiny because the story-arcs and tropes put to the forefront

are sometimes more biased than the overall gender-neutral discourse presiding over it.

The fact that both Doreen and Kamala are particularly tech-savvy can be linked to the global effort trying to promote girls to pursue STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics) studies with organizations such as Go Science Girls or Girls Who STEM. Press articles and state-funded programs to incite young women to favor a STEM education program are now common<sup>5</sup>, and *Marvel Rising* is also making its contribution to the promotion of STEM, but without straying too far from the genre. Indeed, one of the most beloved characters of The CW Arrowverse, Felicity Smoake, is a computer genius who assists Green Arrow in his daily missions. Yet, technology is omnipresent throughout *Marvel Rising*, and phones are literally everywhere. A participative app is used to locate both superheroes and supervillains and ultimately, Kamala's phone proves to be a much-valued tool since it ends up saving her. And it is also used repeatedly to film superheroes in action and replay said-film when feeling down.

The animated feature film plays on deceiving appearances with Dante, an inhuman manipulating fire is first thought to be the villain of the story while the knight-in-shining-armor, Victor, is thought to be the girls' ally. In a fairy-tale reversal kind of twist, it is later revealed that Victor is the menace against whom the team will have to fight. Now a subsidiary of Disney, Marvel contributes with the *Marvel Rising* franchise to the change of image that the animation studio wants to pursue with feature films such as *Moana* (2016), *Frozen* (2013) or *Wreck-It-Ralph* (2012) and *Ralph 2.0* (2019), in which the princess is no longer a damsel in distress but a heroine in her own terms.

In *Marvel Rising*, each heroine gradually becomes a superheroine, each in their own terms and their own journey of self-discovery, integrating elements of what made these characters who they are in recent years of publications. For instance, in *Marvel Rising: Secret Warriors*, Kamala is still very

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<sup>5</sup> Milgrom-Elcott Talia (09/11/2018), "Girls, If You Want to Change the World, Try STEM", *Forbes*, URL: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/taliamilgromelcott/2018/09/11/girls-if-you-want-to-change-the-world-try-stem/> (Last accessed 09/08/2019)

The Unesco program to promote STEM education for girls and women. URL: <https://en.unesco.org/themes/education-and-gender-equality/stem> (Last accessed 09/08/2019)

much a fan of Captain Marvel whom she films with her smartphone as she is flying by, video that she watches on a loop when feeling down and doubtful. As the team expands around the duo to welcome new members<sup>6</sup>, so does the number of pets; first with Tippy-Toe, Doreen's squirrel acolyte, but also Lockjaw, a giant dog who can teleport people anywhere. This use of pets can be compared to *Monster High* (YouTube, 2010-2018) for example, a popular cartoon developed by Mattel in which each character has a distinctive pet.

Some other tropes are more gender neutral in *Marvel Rising* such as the use of nicknames (S.G. and Double M) and catchphrases. Squirrel Girl's "let's get nuts" can easily be compared to The Thing's "It's clobbering time" or Captain America's "Avengers assemble!" Kamala's storyline of finding one's voice and not be a constant fan can also be compared to many "be your own hero" storylines developed in many other animated series or feature films that are not directed at boys or girls specifically. The hardships of arguing with friends and family as inevitable steps of growing up however seems to be used to appeal more specifically to the target audience of the franchise. Here's what Cort Lane, Marvel's Senior Vice-President Animation & Family Entertainment had to say about it:

We understood that, for this audience, we would need to deliver on great action and adventure, on great character moments that are signature of all Marvel stories, but to make sure that we dig into the areas that are most appealing to girls: Themes of friendship and how they connect with each other, themes about fathers and daughters, all that stuff is especially relevant to the demo. So in terms of crafting the scripts, that's where we really adjusted things. And they're little things, too. (Trumbore, 2018)

*Marvel Rising* appears to be constantly walking a fine line, trying to appeal to girls but not overdoing it with tropes or aesthetic choices that might be deemed as things of the past. One perfect example of this ongoing dynamic is the *Marvel Rising* character America Chavez, a human-looking super-strong alien who was raised by two mothers, and who has a literal star power. Whenever America uses her strength, a star materializes itself out of thin air, something that could look very girly since whenever she throws a punch or

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<sup>6</sup> Including two men, Inferno a.k.a. Dante Pertuz, and Patriot a.k.a. Rayshaun Lucas, out of a team of 8 people.

does a superheroine landing, a star appears on screen. Yet, because the star itself is white and because America is a rather burly and surly character, the effect seems to soften her image without turning the character into a caricature. It should also be mentioned here that, when the character was created by Joe Casey and Nick Dragotta back in 2011, her superhero moniker was Miss America, a name she has never used in the *Marvel Rising* franchise. Considering how beauty pageants have been considered as overtly sexist, we could wonder if this decision to keep America's superheroine name from the franchise was directly related to this issue.



Screenshot from *Marvel Rising: Secret Warriors* in which America uses her star power

### **INNOVATIVE TRANSMEDIA FRANCHISING STRATEGIES**

Marvel is no stranger to transmedia narrative strategies since they have built several storytelling bridges over the past two decades or so, mostly through the success of the Marvel Cinematic Universe on the silver screen. While it can be argued that Marvel started its transmedia strategy long before the MCU, I contend that the firm's first cartoons of the 1980s and 1990s, as well as its earlier TV series such as *The Incredible Hulk* (CBS, 1977-1982) are a lot closer to cross-media than transmedia strategies. Matt Yockey's *Make Ours Marvel: Media Convergence and a Comics Universe* as well as Martin Flanagan's *The Marvel Studio Phenomenon: Inside a Transmedia Universe* have analyzed in great

details many of the strategies developed by the firm over the past few decades to expand shared storylines across different media platforms, and the *Marvel Rising* franchise could very well be the most accomplished transmedia Marvel venture to date. The first year or so of the *Marvel Rising* franchise saw the release of the following elements:

<b>Title</b>	<b>Release date</b>	<b>Format</b>
<i>Marvel Rising</i> #0	April 25, 2018	Comic book
<i>Marvel Rising Alpha</i>	June 13, 2018	Comic book
<i>Marvel Rising: Squirrel Girl / Ms. Marvel</i>	July 4, 2018	Comic book
<i>Marvel Rising: Ms. Marvel / Squirrel Girl</i>	August 1, 2018	Comic book
<i>Marvel Rising: Initiation</i>	August 13, 2018	Animated shorts (6)
<i>Marvel Rising Omega</i>	September 12, 2018	Comic book
<i>Marvel Rising: Secret Warriors</i>	September 30, 2018	Animated feature (80min)
<i>Marvel Rising: Chasing Ghosts</i>	January 16, 2019	Animated feature (22min)
<i>Marvel Rising: Ultimate Comics</i>	February 20 to March 27, 2019	Motion comics (6 issues)
<i>Marvel Rising</i> , Vol. 2, #1	March 27, 2019	Comic book
<i>Marvel Rising: Heart of Iron</i>	April 3, 2019	Animated feature (44min)
<i>Marvel Rising</i> , Vol. 2, #2	April 24, 2019	Comic book
<i>Marvel Rising</i> , Vol. 2, #3	May 29, 2019	Comic book
<i>Marvel Rising</i> , Vol. 2, #4	June 26, 2019	Comic book
<i>Marvel Rising</i> , Vol. 2, #5	July 24, 2019	Comic book
<i>Marvel Rising: Battle of the Bands</i>	TBA	Animated feature
<i>Marvel Rising: Operation Shuri</i>	TBA	Animated feature
<i>Marvel Rising: Playing with Fire</i>	TBA	Animated feature

The *Marvel Rising* franchise was thus launched in two main formats. First comic books which were then expanded into animation ventures with several animated shorts, motion comics and animated features. The animated films varied in length but they were all put online and accessible for free on the Marvel HQ channel on YouTube and simultaneously on the DisneyNOW app. While the franchise was launched on April 25 with the first four comic books describing how Doreen and Kamala first met, it could be argued that the other official launch for the franchise was on August 13 with the release of the six animated short films featuring Doreen and Kamala during their first superheroine team up. Over these animated shorts, Ms. Marvel and Squirrel

Girl investigate together on Ghost-Spider who has been wrongfully accused of the murder of her best friend, and the YouTube platform on which they are accessible allowed *Marvel Rising* to reach a lot more viewers and thus potential comic book readers at once. The comic books and the animated features are part of a transmedia narrative universe and fans need to switch platforms in order to follow the entire *Marvel Rising* storylines. This circulation between different formats within the same franchise is a perfect example of what Derek Johnson analyzed in *Media Franchising: Creative License and Collaboration in the Culture Industries*, as he examined the new ways in which franchising narratives could be explored as well as exploited:

The social networks of franchising were and continue to be sites of exchange across media platforms, entertainment industries, creative labor, and localized cultures in a global context. As a nexus for the collision of business, creativity, work, play, and cultural imagination, we can expect that this continued exchange will multiply both the resources with which to reproduce culture and cultural negotiation and struggle over that process of reproduction. (Johnson, 240)

What is interesting to see with the *Marvel Rising* franchise is the inevitable collision between a somewhat gender-neutral content, and marketing strategies that are at times a lot more biased, as it seems to be targeting girls more specifically. The overwhelming presence of the soundtrack in the animated feature film with several inspirational songs is an intentional marketing strategy from Marvel. Prior to the release of the first animated feature film *Marvel Rising: Secret Warriors*, the Marvel HQ channel promoted its imminent arrival with the release of the music video for “Born Ready” on August 27, 2018. Acting as the theme song for *Marvel Rising*, “Born Ready” is interpreted by Dove Cameron who is also the voice for Ghost-Spider. Such marketing strategies are now well-rounded, especially for Disney and the many theme songs associated with their animated feature films such as the now infamous *Frozen* “Let It Go.”

The casting of Dove Cameron as the voice of Ghost-Spider is also a real tour de force. Indeed, Cameron is known for playing the lead role in Disney channel's sitcom *Liv and Maddie* (2013-2017), thus appealing to a girl demographic, but she also appeared during the 5<sup>th</sup> season of *Marvel's Agents of*

*S.H.I.E.L.D.* (ABC, 2013-now) thus also appealing to the Marvel Cinematic Universe aficionados, an ideal cross-casting. Yet again, as Cort Lane explained, the actors chosen is also revealing of a cross-casting dynamics intended by Marvel:

We set the net a little wider here outside of traditional voice actors, which we often do with stunt casting. In this case, we were very conscious of our core target here in girls and finding actors who they especially connect to on Disney Channel or Freeform where that made sense. (Trumbore, 2018)

It should be noted here that many of the casting of actors and actresses lending their voice for *Marvel Rising* are either connected to Disney Channel or the Marvel Cinematic Universe (films of series)<sup>7</sup>. Another main character from *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* also appears in *Marvel Rising*. Daisy Johnson also known as Quake and portrayed in the TV series by Chloe Bennet lends her voice to her animated character, character who appears to be a little younger in the animated format. Interestingly enough, *Marvel Rising* also influenced the *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* TV series. In its 6<sup>th</sup> season, Daisy Johnson now has some purple strands of hair, something that is coming from the character's aesthetic in *Marvel Rising*, and Bennet's presence on the casting call sheet of the animated features reinforces that much more the transmedia dimension of the franchise. Many short videos featuring the voice actors and actresses have been released gradually on the Marvel HQ YouTube channel, and then later posted on the *Marvel Rising* Facebook, Instagram<sup>8</sup> and Twitter accounts, in which each actor explains who their titular character is and how they relate to them.

Thus it appears that Cort Lane was able to translate in real life a key appeal that the target audience felt towards the characters. Lane told Dave Trumbore in an interview that "That duality in terms of their real lives and

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<sup>7</sup> Ming-Na Wen who portrays Melinda May in *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (ABC, 2013-now) lends her voice to Hala the Accuser and Disney Channel's Sofia Wylie known for her role in *Andi Mack* (Disney Channel, 2017-2019) voices Riri Williams a.k.a. Ironheart. It should be noted that Dante Pertuz/Inferno is voiced by Tyler Posey, better known for the lead role of MTV's *Teen Wolf* (MTV, 2011-2017), and Victor Khol/Exile is voiced by Booboo Stewart better known for his roles in the *Twilight* saga (2008-2012) and in *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (2014) as Warpath.

<sup>8</sup> Many short extracts are regularly uploaded on the *Marvel Rising* Instagram account, but it is also updated with tutorial videos from comic book artists and animators to teach people how to draw the *Marvel Rising* characters.

their superhero lives is something that girls really connect with, as well.” (Trumbore, 2018) In treating the actors as the real-life alter-egos of their characters, Marvel is able to rely on a very similar attachment to the girls who engage with *Marvel Rising*. The personal dimension is formidably displayed in the multitude of content surrounding the comic books and animated shorts to strengthen the investment that readers and viewers can thus maintain with the characters and the franchise as a whole. Marvel thus incites constantly its viewers/readers to actively engage in interacting with the *Marvel Rising* content, with each other through social media or comment sections in such ways that it seems that participatory culture has reached its full potential<sup>9</sup>. An attentive ear (or eye) is constantly reviewing the audience’s critiques, reactions or suggestions in order to never stray too far from its expectations and desires, strengthening the bond between those who produce and those who consume. On the one hand, the producers are securing their targeted audience’s loyalty, and on the other, the engaging audience members seeing their ideas and opinions thus reflected in the *Marvel Rising* content are no longer mere consumers but truly become prosumers.

The six short motion comics videos released on the Marvel HQ YouTube channel between March 20 and March 27 are also significant in the franchising strategies of *Marvel Rising* as they are clearly intended to build an even clearer bridge between the animated features available on the channel, and the original comic book format, playing on the genre’s hybridization to cement the transmedia strategies in place<sup>10</sup>. Another aesthetic element could also be taken into account with the logo of the franchise which is quite reminiscent of the aesthetic developed around another female-led Marvel series: *Jessica Jones* (Netflix, 2015-2019). The paint

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<sup>9</sup> An extension of convergence, or rather one of its key components, participatory culture refers to the many ways in which people engage (mostly online and through social media) in collaboratively supported platforms offering film, book or even restaurant reviews but also knowledge cultures such as the development of wikis or collaborative websites about cooking and recipes, or arts and crafts advice. Within participatory culture, the producer and consumer often become one and the same, or to the very least, the consumer becomes proactive in influencing and shaping his/her own cultural content.

<sup>10</sup> Darren Wershler’s and Kalervo A. Sinervo’s article entitled “Marvel and the Form of Motion Comics” published in Matt Yockey’s *Make Ours Marvel* provides some very interesting perspectives on this usually overlooked form of comic book media.

brushes and the color palette for *Marvel Rising* is almost identical to what is displayed throughout the opening credit sequence of the Netflix series.



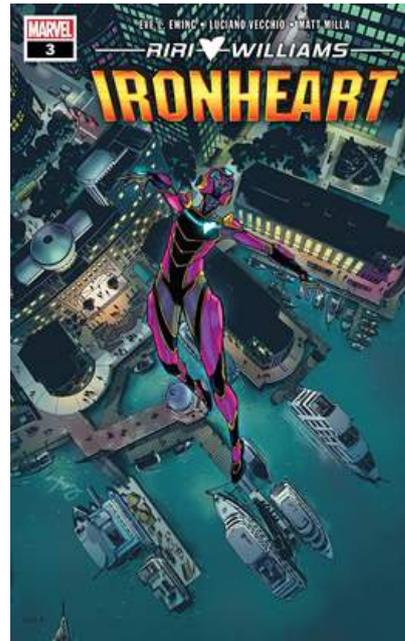
The *Marvel Rising : Secret Warrior* feature animated film title screen.



Screenshots from the opening credits of the series *Jessica Jones* (Netflix, 2015-2019)

We could almost decipher an aesthetic of girliness throughout these two Marvel titles, even if *Jessica Jones* was intended to reach out to female viewers of all ages. A similar aesthetic tweaking is also perceptible in the latest installments of Riri Williams a.k.a. Ironheart. Created by Brian Michael

Bendis, Mike Deodato and Eve Ewing, Riri first appeared in *Invincible Iron Man* Vol. 2 #7 in May 2016 and has appeared on a regular basis wearing her own red and gold Iron Man-inspired armor. During the first meetings to delineate which characters would enter the roster of the *Marvel Rising* franchise in late 2017, Ironheart was included from very early on, even though the character only appeared in her animated feature in April 2019. What is interesting to note here is that Riri Williams has her own comic book title which started in January 2019, a title in which Ironheart is sporting a new armor that is no longer red and gold but dark grey, gold and pink, with a chest-reactor on her left in the shape of a heart and a heart-shaped light on her helmet as well.



Main covers from *Invincible Iron Man* Vol. 4 #4 (April 2017), *Ironheart* Vol.1 #3 (March 2019) and the promotional poster for the animated feature *Marvel Rising: Heart of Iron* (March 2019).

The character thus went from a more canon Iron Man-looking armor which was fitting her shape to an overtly feminine armor which was, for many fans of the comics, overkill. These changes to the character's aesthetics might make her fit better with the overall *Marvel Rising* universe, but one could easily argue that through this change, Riri now appears younger, less mature as a superheroine but also less powerful and lethal than she did in her original

armor, thus impeding the gender-positive message that Marvel originally wanted to convey. This new armor however, fits perfectly within the *Marvel Rising* brand and one cannot help but wonder if those timely modifications to the character's design were not motivated by Ironheart's imminent inclusion to the franchise.

Finally, *Marvel Rising* utilized every aspect of franchising from the beginning as they were able to launch almost simultaneously a toy line for the brand. The release schedule could not have been more perfect as it gave Hasbro enough time after the late September release to begin production and commercialization of *Marvel Rising* dolls for Christmas. Available in stores and online, this toy line is clearly advertised as “dolls”, thus intended for girls, while the other Hasbro Marvel-inspired toy lines from films and animated series such as *The Avengers* are advertised as being “figures” or “action figures”, thus more boys-oriented. These details more grounded in marketing concerns could betray the type of girl culture that *Marvel Rising* is supposed to abide with, but content could counter-balance that idea. In the very first minutes of *Marvel Rising: Secret Warriors*, the franchise's first animated feature, we are invited into Kamala's bedroom as her “ammi<sup>11</sup>” is coming in to wake her up, pointing out that she should spend her time working instead of playing with some “Captain Crunchy toy.”



<sup>11</sup> It means “mom” in urdu, the official national language of Pakistan.

Screenshot from the opening scene of *Marvel Rising: Secret Warriors*.

What is interesting here is that Kamala jumps out of bed to take this “toy” from her mother’s hands and informs her that this is not a mere toy but a “limited edition collector’s statue, a.k.a. worth a lot of money.” Recreating Kamala’s display of Iron Man, Captain America and Captain Marvel is actually fairly easy:



These promotional images have been taken from Sideshow and Kotobukiya’s official website listing their past products.

These Iron Man and Captain America statues were produced by one of the world's biggest collectible manufacturers, Sideshow, while Captain Marvel's statue is part of the Bishoujo line of Kotobukiya, another world-renowned collectible manufacturer. There is no actual product-placement here but something more subliminal happening in that very short yet significant sequence. As discussed by Jean-Marc Lehu in *Branded Entertainment: Product Placement & Brand Strategy in the Entertainment Business* (2008), film openings and endings are particularly crucial for integrated advertisements as this portion of movies are the most favored for product placement, before the audience gets hooked by the story and no longer pays attention to the details of the environment. This is only 3 minutes into *Marvel Rising: Secret Warriors*, but instead of product placement, it could be argued that this short sequence consists in a sort of consumerist-behavior-placement. The collectible industry, which mostly revolves around collecting very expensive cold-cast resin statues of superheroes and superheroines, is vastly associated with men, and rightfully so with these collectibles adorning the so-called "man-caves". But *Marvel Rising* suggests here that it should not be strictly reserved for men but for any and every fan of the genre as argued by John Fiske in his essay "The Cultural Economy of Fandom" (1992) and more generally by Jean Baudrillard in *The System of Objects* (1968). Girls can be nerd collectors too which, in turns, implies a massive expansion of the collectibles' consumers basis given the price value for each object<sup>12</sup>.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

As argued by Tim Hanley in his 2019 article "Women in Comics, By The Numbers: Summer and Fall 2018," things are getting better regarding the proportion of female creators in the biggest comic book publishing houses, but they are far from being well-balanced. Even if there is no direct correlation

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<sup>12</sup> Interesting to note here that in July 2018, Sideshow's YouTube channel started a new weekly program called "Sideshow Live" hosted by Susan Strange, an Asian-American woman who interviews (the largely male) artists who are involved in the production of these statues and art pieces. She is also the one doing the unboxing videos, made to showcase the final products for advertising purposes. This might seem rather inconsequential but it is not. Through this visible inclusion of women in what is perceived as a predominantly male-oriented hobby, the manufacturer states that women now also have their place in that collectible culture.

between the number of female creatives and the percentage of female consumers of said narrative object, the coincidence appears to point in that direction, as the medium is gaining in female readers alongside the rising number of female creatives. In addition to that, a summer 2018 survey conducted by RealTime research over a sample of around 9,000 American adults showed that women are better and more assiduous readers than men, the exact opposite compared to comic book readership.

Hence using the *Marvel Rising* brand to attract girls to the comic book medium seems to be a clever calculus on Marvel's part. The manga-inspired lines and color palettes of the comics and anime-inspired animation in the *Marvel Rising* feature films are also there to allude to a genre in which female readership is more evenly divided. Creating a reading habitus with comic books for young women could thus prove to be a profitable strategy as it would enable Marvel to establish and perennialize the superhero genre in its original comic book format across gender lines through a gender-neutral empowering marketing discourse which would promote, however, more female-oriented storylines.

Because these stories are broadcast on platforms such as YouTube, they also trigger participatory culture and new paths of user engagement that are encouraged by Marvel itself, through various partnerships and events. One such event occurred in August 2018 with the non-profit group of Young Storytellers during which children aged 11 to 13, partnered with Disney mentors, were tasked to write small scripts featuring their favorite *Marvel Rising* characters. Seven scripts were selected<sup>13</sup> to have their own animated shorts voiced and uploaded on the Marvel HQ YouTube channel, in a collaboration that could not illustrate better Henry Jenkins' convergence culture theory. As predicted by Jenkins in *Convergence Culture* (2006), old and new media collided in this endeavor to create something in which the consumers were also the producers of cultural content.

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<sup>13</sup> Those seven short scripts were all penned by girls and entitled "The Missing Friends" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aAGU39U8b7Y> (last accessed 09/08/2019), "Lockjaw's New Friend", "America's Backstory", "Special Friendship", "Stretch, Fire and Shield", "Lockjaw's Pool Party" and "The Girl Who Couldn't Be Normal" thus hitting all the tropes of friendship, cute pets and girlhood.

The *Marvel Rising* brand, in its many different forms, triggers consumer agency through transmedia storytelling, awakening the key demographic of the girl market to actively engage with the genre for a more diverse comic book culture. *Marvel Rising* is made to spark into action the “prosumer” side of its targeted audience as it relies specifically on these newly formed habits of media consumption across different platforms.

If anything, these telltale supergirls are quite revealing of transmedia franchising strategies aiming at both a renewal and expansion of Marvel's viewership and readership for the decades to come. Apprehending this new Marvel franchise can, however, be perceived on two different levels. On the one hand, through this newfound diversity, more faithful and realistic representations of women in comic books are finally accessible for girls, with superheroines that are more and more present in the pages of the medium and depicted in more endearing terms. On the other, the reasons behind these subject-centered narratives are motivated to ensure a stronger and perennial buyers base, and the comic book-related transmedia narratives that are flooding girl culture lately is a reminder of that.



Main covers for *Marvel Rising* Vol. 2 #2 (June 2019), Vol.2 #3 (July 2019) and Vol.2 #4 (Aug. 2019)

The latest *Marvel Rising* comic book releases, which revolved around Arthurian legends with the “Heroes of the Round Table” storyline, rely, however, on one the most girl-oriented popular tropes, those of the fairy tale. Yet in the second volume penultimate issue (*Marvel Rising* Vol.2 #4), it is revealed that the evil plan of the sorceress Morgan le Fay is to unleash a trash monster in the streets of New York, and the worst part is that this monster is composed of non-recyclables. As depicted on the comic book cover, the whole

crew turns into a super-ecologist band of heroes, thus addressing the issue that is uniting young people worldwide: ecology and climate change (whose media savvy leader is a 16-year-old Swedish girl, Greta Thunberg). It thus seems that the franchise is able to avoid the pitfalls of reproducing the fairy tale genre's debatable outcomes for its superheroines by diverting its original themes and dealing instead with issues that do not discriminate across the gender spectrum. Even more so, the integration of more politically charged themes such as the environment, *Marvel Rising* could also appeal to the 14+ demographic, expanding further up its reach. The team's foes will however need to be charted carefully because, to date, the *Marvel Rising* heroes have fought against more female supervillains than male ones, resulting in a heavier girl-against-girl action, one that could eventually hinder the objectives of the franchise.

Nonetheless, a better representation of diversity in comic book culture today is undeniable and it needs to be acknowledged that Marvel publications and animation have continuously worked in that direction. But one cannot be oblivious to the overall transmedia apparatus and the economic reasons for which it was put into motion. Should the comic book industry become less popular and enter a recession phase similar to the one it knew in the 1990s, securing a faithful female readership could help maintain the publishing house afloat. While some commentators of the comic book industry seem to believe that it is on the brink of collapse, the majority seem to think that it is the sales model of the medium that needs to adapt itself to a different market<sup>14</sup>. Marvel Comics started to diversify its distribution system, securing a deal with Scholastic Distribution on top of the one they have with the industry's unavoidable distributor, Diamond Comic.

The comic industry sales figures have always remained partial as they are calculated only through the numbers communicated by Diamond Comic Distributor of the volumes sold to the different retailers, and strictly limited to North America. No data for worldwide distribution nor digital comics are

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<sup>14</sup> Thomas Bacon article entitled "Are Marvel and DC Comics Really Close to Failing?" offers a detailed survey of the current situation of the industry. <https://screenrant.com/marvel-dc-comics-sales-failing/> (Last accessed 09/08/2019)

precisely known, but they can be estimated for digital comics according to the best sellers list on the Comixology website. As reminded by John Galati in “What Do Comics Sales Numbers Mean?”, while the numbers remain cryptic at best, they are still valuable sources of information for the state of the comic book industry as a whole. No numbers are known for the titles distributed by Scholastic, among which are numerous Marvel's Legacy heroes such as *Ms. Marvel*, *Spider-Gwen*, *The Unbeatable Squirrel Girl* and the *Marvel Rising* comics, but it is no secret that the female-led titles are among the best sellers of Marvel on digital services. As of today, we cannot assume that *Marvel Rising* encountered a similar success, but the free distribution of *Marvel Rising* #0 on digital platforms in April 2018 seems to have secured a space for the title to exist in the crowded comic book landscape. If any indication, the fact that a second volume of five issues was released between March and July 2019 seems to indicate that the title was successful enough during its first run.

Now it remains to be seen if the overall printed and digital sales will call for a third volume to happen, or if the *Marvel Rising* franchise will become more animated-oriented in the coming months. But the two sides which motivated the creation of *Marvel Rising*, one more capitalistic, and the other more political, are not necessarily antithetic. One does not overpower the other, and the merits of this diverse cast of characters and their empowering storylines should not be belittled by the economic model underlying them. Yet one must not be oblivious to the fact that Marvel and Disney have been one and the same since 2009, and that unlike DC animation which has garnered a lot of critical appraisals for its animated ventures over the past decade, Marvel somehow remained in the backseat on that market, preferring to develop its usual Marvel-themed cartoons on Disney XD. While Marvel Animation appears to still be invested in its *Marvel Rising* franchise, relying on Disney's experience and expertise to develop this unprecedented transmedia venture, we can also see how the animation studio is trying to expand on a girls' demographic with upcoming projects such as the *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur* cartoon, adapted from the very popular and critically acclaimed comic book title of the same name<sup>15</sup>. Announced in July 2019, the cartoon

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<sup>15</sup> McMillan Graeme (24/08/2019), “Marvel's ‘Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur’ Cartoon Headed to Disney Channel”, *The Hollywood Reporter*, URL:

will be released on the Disney Channel in 2020 with Jeffrey M. Howard and Kate Kondell<sup>16</sup> serving as co-producers and story editors, a duo that highlights both the cartoon's Disney-rooted savoir-faire as well as its demographics ambition. It thus appears as if Marvel Animation is now capitalizing on a convergence-savvy youth culture, harnessing its predisposition for cultural engagement across media platforms in order to create prosumer commitments with the Marvel brand from an early age and across gender lines.

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<sup>16</sup> Jeffrey M. Howard has been credited as a writer for Disney's *Tinker Bell* (2008), *Tinker Bell and the Great Fairy Rescue* (2010) *Planes* (2013) and *Planes 2* (2014) as well as Disney Channel's cartoon series *Elena of Avalor* (2019). Kate Kondell has been credited as a writer for Reese Witherspoon's *Legally Blonde 2* (2003) and as a script writer for Disney's *Tinker Bell and the Pirate Fairy* (2014) and *Tinker Bell and the Legend of the NeverBeast* (2014).

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