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"Holy Agency, Batgirl!": Evaluating Young Adult Superheroines' Agency in Gotham Academy and Ms. Marvel

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Gotham Academy and *Ms. Marvel*
Catherine Clark

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Abstract

This study utilizes textual analysis to understand the representation of two female protagonists', Kamala Khan and Olive Silverlock, agency within the first volume of *Ms. Marvel* and *Gotham Academy*. Crossing comic worlds, this study seeks to determine whether or not these representations align with any waves of feminism, or continue postfeminist dialogue within media. Panel by panel, word by word, expression by expression, this researcher notes, categorizes, and analyzes these protagonists' words marked as text, behaviors performed, and expressions shown through artistic representation on the page.

Situated on a cross-roads between postfeminism and the potential fourth wave of feminism, this study applies the Holistic Agency Spectrum Scale, constructed by Clark and Henderson (2016), to measure Kamala Khan's and Olive Silverlock's individual, social, and authoritative agency.

As female representation within comics continues to rise, it is important to accurately determine whether these representations are a true step forward or merely a reiteration of the past.

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Introduction

Both *Gotham Academy* and *Ms. Marvel* are relatively new young adult comics that have impacted the comic book world differently. While *Gotham Academy* has introduced a whole new set of characters to Gotham City, *Ms. Marvel* has breathed new life into a beloved superheroine. However, these two comic series are both part of a movement within the comic industry to produce more female-centered stories.

The Past

At the beginning of the 2000s, Marvel and DC made a change. Focusing on an untapped market within the comic world, these two creative powerhouses decided to create their own young adult comics. While Marvel targeted these readers through the Tsunami imprint in 2003 that melded manga themes into American comics, DC created the Minx imprint in 2007 to build off of the success of *Persepolis* and gain female teenage readers. Both of these imprints sought to expand readership in hopes of reaching a female audience. DC presented Minx as an alternative to Manga. Removed from the superhero universe, these graphic novels presented teenage female protagonists with their own stories and their own issues (Gustines, 2006; DC to launch, 2006). Female comic fans rejoiced at this new prospect, but many still worried about the stereotypical and sexualized name of the imprint—"Minx"—while others hoped more female creators would be involved (DC to launch, 2006). On the other hand, Marvel hoped to compete with Manga and target both male and female teenage readers, by utilizing Manga's themes and mirroring its diverse genres (Weiland, 2003). Unfortunately, both of these imprints were canceled and many of the titles within them discarded. Tsunami was canceled after a mixed-bag of results; some titles were hits, such as *Runaways,* while others were complete flops—*Venom.* DC canceled the Minx imprint in fall 2008, disappointing many of the authors and the fans (Khouri, 2008, Sept.

24; Khouri, 2008, Sept. 29). Unlike Marvel, DC blamed the inability to get Minx novels in the YA section of bookstores for the cancellation. Others within the company declared that the female target market simply did not have the capacity and possibly did not even exist (Khouri, 2008, Sept. 24).

Young adult novels have shown exponential sales growth in recent years and are increasingly popular among all ages (Carpenter, 2011). Many librarians label YA as a diverse category of books, rather than a genre, and an ever-growing market for publishers. Readers of all types and ages make up YA audiences because these books often offer a unique voice and perspective on identity (Tschetter, 2016). Although past imprints have failed, Marvel and DC have both made increasing moves into the YA world. In May 2015, DC published *Lois Lane: Fallout,* a young adult novel that centers on teenage Lois Lane and her big move to Metropolis (Fallout (Lois Lane #1)). In August, DC introduced the sequel to *Fallout,* while Marvel jumped on the bandwagon in October and announced the creation of a Captain Marvel novel and the sequel to *Black Widow: Forever Red,* published October 2015 (Anders, 2015; Grauso, 2015). Both comic book publishers are using these novels to capture the other side of female YA readers, who won't ever pick up a comic, but who could love these stories with strong female protagonists just the same.

The Present

Currently, comic book readership is on the rise. More and more people are getting hooked on comics through recent blockbuster hits and new diverse titles. While artistically stunning, comics have often been deemed "lesser" than prose, but as comics have soared in popularity and graphic novels have slowly gained more and more critical acclaim, comics have moved center stage.

With this new popularity, comics have grown in diversity in readership and in representation. A Comic Retailer Survey in 2015 marked—for the second year in a row—that "women ages 17-30 appeared to be the fastest-growing segment of the comic market" with the addition of "kids ages 6-17 (both boys and girls)" (O'Leary, 2014). An increase in the diversity of comic readers has spurred more diversity within comics, bringing in new characters with a variety of backgrounds, races, genders, and sexual orientations (O'Leary, 2015; Asselin, 2015). For example, Marvel's overall sales waned in 2014, while *Ms. Marvel*—a book that introduces diverse characters, appeals to female audiences, and is labeled as a young adult comic— continued to sell particularly well.

Ms. Marvel

Ms. Marvel was first released in February 2014; the first volume of the series—which includes the first five issues and an extra short story—was released August 2014. Written by G. Willow Wilson, a Muslim-American herself, and illustrated by Adrian Alphona and Jake Wyatt, *Ms. Marvel* has been praised for its inclusiveness, originality, and connection to today's world (Riesman, 2014). The characters are not the only difference between *Ms. Marvel* and other comics by this publisher. The artwork is also considered to be outside of "house style." Groundbreaking, *Ms. Marvel* revamps a legendary superheroine through the portrayal of a Muslim-American young woman, who isn't sexualized or objectified. Even before its release, *Ms. Marvel* received media coverage simply for the fact that this comic would feature Marvel's first Muslim character with her own title (Hennon, 2014). Upon release, this title immediately flew off the shelves, gaining commercial and critical acclaim. When creating the comic, Wilson drew in classic superhero tropes, in order to "tell an unexpected story in a familiar way" (Swiderski, 2015). Her goal was to try and reflect marginalized people in comic books and to

ultimately reflect what society is thinking and feeling right now. Wilson points to the "diversification of society as a whole," which has created an audience "hungry for [these kinds of] narratives," as her inspiration for the creation of Kamala Khan. Above all, Wilson sees *Ms. Marvel* as a step forward in comics and a way comics can make people's stories relevant to everyone (Swiderski, 2015). Because of its diverse representation and the increase of female readers, *Ms. Marvel* has garnered a diverse, loyal fanbase, which can be seen throughout social media (Ali, 2015, Feb.).

After being on the market for two years, *Ms. Marvel* continues to win numerous awards. In 2015, *Ms. Marvel* Volume One was rated among the 2015 Great Graphic Novels for Teens Top Ten from the Young Adult Library Services Association (Young Adult Library Services Association, 2015). That same year, *Ms. Marvel* was nominated for five Eisner Awards, including "Writer" and "New Series," and won a Hugo Award for "Best Graphic Story" (Clark, 2015; Wheeler, 2015). In 2016, *Ms. Marvel* won the Dwayne McDuffie Award for Diversity in Comics and an award for "Best Series" at the Angoulême International Comics Festival (Marvel, 2016; Shiach, 2016, Feb. 22; Shiach, 2016, Feb. 1).

Gotham Academy

Unlike *Ms. Marvel, Gotham Academy* has not won any awards, but continues to be highly rated by critics (Lake, 2014; Pepose, 2014). Fresh, new, bright, and different than DC's typical line-up, *Gotham Academy* arrived on the scene in October 2014 and has been characterized as a teen drama set in Gotham. Becky Cloonan pitched this young adult comic, focused on teenagers who are growing up in Gotham and their experiences in the Batverse, while on the phone with Mark Doyle—the Batman Group Editor (Beedle, 2015; Reed, 2015). Immediately, Cloonan brought on Brenden Fletcher as a writer and Karl Kerschl as lead artist for the title. Sharing

similar influences, particularly Manga, the trio built *Gotham Academy* organically from the ground up and already has a set long-term goal for this project (Beedle, 2015). *Gotham Academy* is the first book written by Cloonan, who usually works as an artist. By introducing new characters to Gotham, Cloonan, Fletcher, and Kerschl have been given more leeway and freedom to do as they please. Without any previous history to follow, the team has been able to create a new "legacy" for these characters (Beedle, 2015). Although the series follows the adventures of a group of students at the prestigious Gotham Academy, the focus of the series is Olive Silverlock. Serving as foils to Olive, her friends are essential characters, who help her throughout the story. However, the overall plot revolves around Olive and her relationship to Gotham (Reed, 2015).

Labeled a Young Adult comic, *Gotham Academy* re-ignited DC's movement to appeal to an all-ages audience, but especially teenage readers (Vollmer, 2015). In this way, *Gotham Academy* actually fills a spot as an "all-ages comic" within DC's The New 52 lineup, while also serving as an introduction to Gotham for new readers (Pantozzi, 2014). *Gotham Academy* continues to be praised for its innovative, outside-of-house artwork and its diverse characters (Pantozzi, 2014; Sims, 2014).

Literature Review

Agency

At its core, agency is the ability to act or not to act. One will always be acting, doing things, or making things happen; or one will "be acted upon," "the object of events," "constrained and controlled" (Weibe, 12, 2002). To possess agency, one must showcase intentionality, rationality, and power (Weibe, 2002; Giddens, 1984; Barker, 2003). Intentionality, the first base of agency, requires that one makes purposive acts, in other words, acting with a specific goal in mind (Giddens, 1984; Weibe, 2002). If one acts unintentionally, then one lacks agency. In contrast to this, Cleaver (223, 2007) works to show that agency is "deeply relational, and constituted by routine practice as well as purposive action." Gallagher (2012) and Ataria (2013) support Cleaver's (2007) idea that agency is purposive even when the action is routine.

In addition to intentionality, one must possess rationality in order to have agency. This second requirement centers on reflexive action. Using rational thought and acting reflexively, individuals can reflect on their actions, state why they acted in such a way, and "monitor the consequences of their actions" (Giddens, 1984; Weibe 13, 2002). In this way, people are cognizant of the effects of their actions and can act upon that understanding. One's rationality is further influenced by certain structures—such as one's cosmology or moral world views—that shape how one sees the world rationally and allow individuals to negotiate and deploy these beliefs as tools in different circumstances (Cleaver, 2007). Aligning with Bourdieu (1977), Gallagher (2012) expands the boundary of intentionality and rationality by arguing that even habitual movements can be considered actions because the actor has a deep subconscious realization and intent to act.

The final requirement is power. Without power, one simply cannot act. Power gives one the ability to "intervene in the world, or to refrain from such intervention" (Giddens 14, 1984). The amount of power one possesses is determined by social structures that enable certain people to act in circumstances and prevent others from acting (Weibe, 2002; Giddens, 1984). Bourdieu (1977; 1984) would link one's amount of power to one's amount of cultural capital. Without the ability to change one's surroundings or influence others' actions, one lacks agency. In short, one has agency when one can "make a difference," whether through influencing others or directly impacting the world. Although every person possesses agency, pre-existing social structures continue to control agency by enabling and constraining one's ability to act (Giddens, 1984).

Barker (2003) also emphasizes that agency can never exist outside of structure because a person is never able to commit an act that was inspired, initiated, or completed outside of cultural structures. Throughout life, one is always influenced by, created within, and exists inside of social forces (Barker, 2003). Backing Bourdieu, Barker (2003) further identifies agency as "culturally generated" and states that it arises from a differing distribution of social resources, which means that certain people in specific situations will possess more agency because of cultural and social structures (236).

The Waves of Feminism

Many scholars have used "waves" of feminism to differentiate between the generations and goals of feminists. Clearly "marking" the birth of one group of feminists and their ultimate end, the waves appear to limit feminism to specific eras. However, this idea of generationality remains contentious amongst feminist scholars and feminists. Garrison (2010) argues that rather than defined periods with beginning and end points, the waves should be seen as historical

markers with each number representing the order from which the wave arose. In this way, multiple generations can and do contribute to each wave of feminism.

Beginning in the late 19th century and continuing on into the early 20thcentury, the first wave of feminism focused on gaining women equal access and opportunity, including but not limited to the right to vote, the right to be voted for, and to reforms within property ownership and marriage (Xinari, 2010; Kroløkke, 2006; Kulcsár, 2011). During this time, the image of the "new woman" arose. The opposite of the "angel of the home," the "new woman" yearned to escape the traditional, middle class life and harness her potential, finding fulfillment physically and sexually (Xinari, 2010). These women still embodied the "White, middle-class femininity" of their time, but they acted outside of these boundaries by participating in traditionally unfeminine and socialist activities, such as picketing and public persuasion (Kroløkke, 2006). During this same time, a number of factions arose within the movement, such as a socialist/Marxist feminism within labor unions, "difference first wave feminism" which emphasized women's "innate moral superiority," and "equity feminism" which disregarded biological differences (Kroløkke, 2006, 5-6). After gaining the right to vote, many of the original feminist goals were seemingly met. Patriarchy certainly had not vanished, but rather, had reconfigured itself.

Thus in the 1960s and 1970s, the second wave of feminism arose. During this era, women fought for equality in the workplace and for reproductive rights (Xinari, 2010; Kroløkke, 2006; Kulcsár, 2011). Many of the goals of the second wave have still not been achieved, such as equal pay, equal representation of women in the workforce, and full autonomy over reproductive sexuality (Kulcsár, 2011). Unlike the first, the second wave became more popular among young women who turned the personal into the political (Xinari, 2010). Feminists of this wave fought

against "patriarchy in all its forms with the issues of class, race, and sexuality being high on the feminist agenda" (Xinari 8, 2010). For these feminists, patriarchy was, and is, an inherent part of bourgeois society and "sexual difference" was "more fundamental than class and race differences" (Kr:løkke 9, 2006). Most importantly, this wave edified the different branches of the movement with each branch focusing on a different aspect of being a woman. For instance, Black feminists looked toward race, while White feminists focused on issues such as employment, pay, and expectations on the homefront. The second wave's lesson for feminists was that every woman experiences patriarchal oppression differently.

Having grown up with the privileges gained by the previous waves, the women of the third wave in the 1990s self-identified as "capable, strong, and assertive social agents" (Kr:løkke 15, 2006). Within this wave, feminists reclaimed the word "girl" and appropriated a variety of derogatory terms, such as "bitch" and "slut" (Kr:løkke, 15-16, 2006). Learning from the mistakes of the second wave, third wave feminists sought to be all inclusive, by developing "a feminist theory and politics that honor[ed] contradictory experiences and deconstruct[ed] categorical thinking" (Kr:løkke, 16, 2006). Genz and Brabon (2009, 159) emphasize that the third wave focuses on the conflicting selves within people and searches for a way to utilize these internal and external multiples as a form of power. Like Genz, Baumgardner (2011) states that feminists used personal and individual experiences to reveal the truth within society. In contrast to the second wave, the third wave saw the "movement" aspect of feminism to be located within oneself so that every action a woman makes is a movement in itself (Baumgardner, 2011). Furthermore, third wave feminism started to tackle the complicated nature of gender, and began to show "empathy for or interest in men's experience of, for instance, sexual assault or abortion," while still focusing on the women's movement (Baumgardner, 2011).

These women embraced the lipstick and heels that their mothers cast aside, but like in the first and second waves, more branches developed with feminism turning into not one but many movements. Kroløkke (2006) argues that the feminists of the third wave respect yet criticize the actions of the previous waves, in order to "bridge the contradictions that they experience in their own lives" (16). In contrast, Munford (2014) claims that members of the third wave participate in a form of "matricide," where they seek to clearly differentiate between themselves, the daughters, and the women of the second wave, their mothers. This "matricide" can be seen through the third wavers' celebration of girl culture and within their scholarship (Munford, 2014).

Postfeminism

Acting as an antithesis to the third wave, a discourse developed within media in the 1980s that not only sought to distance itself from feminism in general, but also, positioned feminism as a thing of the past (Genz, 2009). The term, postfeminism, was first used in an article from *The New York Times,* in which writer, Susan Bolotin, spoke with a number of young women about their views on feminism (Bolotin, 1982). At its core, postfeminism seeks to disseminate an array of assumptions (Tasker & Negra, 2007). The main proponents of this movement—including media and young women who say "I'm not feminist, but..."—argue that feminism has achieved all of its goals and society has finally entered into an era where feminism is no longer necessary. Postfeminism perpetuates this assumption by using the discourse of freedom of choice (McRobbie, 2007). Through this discourse, postfeminists enforce the notion that feminism is "aged" and useless for young women. This belief is furthered by popular culture, all media forms, and politics through the image of the "new professional woman," who has economic independence but still possesses patriarchal values (Kulcsár, 2011).

Within media, postfeminism both celebrates women's independence (economic and social) and enforces strict requirements for "femininity," in which women must "maintain a youthful appearance and attitude" late into life (Tasker & Negra, 2, 2007). According to McRobbie (2007), postfeminism reinforces femininity through "female individualization," where women must be continually self-reflexive. With the freedom to choose, women now must strictly control all of their choices, their bodies, and their lives. Monitoring constantly, women and girls now must be the person who makes the "right choices" (McRobbie, 2007). Through this emphasis of choice and independence, postfeminism accepts certain feminist principles, but rejects the necessary political action to create change (McRobbie, 2007; Calkin, 657; Genz, 2009). McRobbie (2007) identifies a "double entanglement" inside postfeminism, where it ties together "neoconservative values in relation to gender, sexuality, and family life…with processes of liberalization in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual, and kinship relations" (McRobbie, 29, 2007).

While postfeminism incorporates some aspects of feminism, it commodifies feminism in a way that reinforces the image of the "empowered consumer." Highly visible, girls and women have increasingly become "public faces of global development" but only for the economic potential that exists within them (Calkin, 654, 2015). Building off of McRobbie, Calkin (2015) argues that companies use "postfeminist spectatorship" in order to "construct relations between the self (empowered Western woman) and the distant other (disempowered 'Third World Girl')" (658). The postfeminist spectator can be seen in the discussion of gender inequality, but also, in the lack of political strategy to fix said problem, in the breakdown of solidarity where the other needs "to be saved," and in the replacement of morality for profit (Calkin, 2015). Through this

approach, media and companies can target the feminist in us all, while distancing the very feminist necessity to act.

The movement of postfeminism has seeped into the realms of everyday life, where the very idea of postfeminism has transformed from a mere thought into a pervasive culture. Thus, postfeminist can be seen in "chick lit" and popular films, television, magazines and fashion (McRobbie, 2007; Calkin, 2015). Within chick lit, the message of Girl Power seems to offer agency and female empowerment through a confident display of femininity and individuality. Girl Power, like female friendship films, can be misleading at times, for it has been appropriated by postfeminists as a depoliticized fashion statement rather than a feminist, alternative subculture (Genz, 2009).

Ho (2011) identifies the need to fill the unachievable goal of "having it all" as the cause of the popularity of chick lit. In this way, Ho states that chick lit is a product of feminism and postfeminism. Postfeminism, especially, promises women that they can "have it all," but hinders them from ever achieving this goal because of the continuation of the gender status quo (Ho, 2011). In this way, female friendship films and chick lit continue the media representation of women as proposed by postfeminist society, where the female protagonist both embraces feminist themes, rejects others, and follows the norms of femininity. Within these new media spheres, McRobbie (2007) argues that women learn a new form of femininity created by postfeminism and reinforced through the "language of personal choice" (38).

Fourth Wave of Feminism

As discussed above, most feminist scholars see feminism as one long movement over history; throughout this movement, different viewpoints and dominant discourses of the time have risen amongst privileged voices and have been marked as specific "waves." Fourth wave

feminism represents a rising discourse amongst a new group of feminists. While some feminist scholars and feminists argue that a fourth wave has not begun, others declare its existence.

Several scholars contend the newest wave of feminism has surged up against the modern postfeminist culture. Baumgardner (2011) argues that the third wave officially ended in 2010, but also states that the fourth wave of feminism arose in 2008, during the Democratic primaries. On the other hand, Cochrane (2013) locates the start of this new wave in the year 2013.

Fourth wave feminists are typically identified as millennials, who grew up with the postfeminist media, the backlash to the second wave, and the aftermath of 9/11 (Baumgardner, 2011; Cochrane, 2013; Blevins, In press). In this context, postfeminist society told these young feminists that equality had been achieved and feminism was dead, but their lived experiences did not match up to these promises (Cochrane, 2013). Building off of the third wave, fourth wave feminism continues to focus on intersectionality (Cochrane, 2013; Blevins, In press). Intersectionality, originally defined by Crenshaw (1989), notes that multiple forms/systems of oppression—gender, race, class, sexuality, etc.—combine to oppress people differently. Acknowledging these structures, fourth wave feminists use them to bring forth the voices of marginalized people and to shape "a framework for recognising how class, race, age, ability, sexuality, gender, and other issues combine to affect women's experience of discrimination" (Cochrane, 2013). This inclusion can be seen in a variety of the fourth wave's current projects. Members of the fourth wave have created trans health initiatives, after-abortion support hotlines, reproductive health services, and body positivity campaigns. They have called for equal pay, an end to rape culture, civil rights movements, and better representation in media (Baumgardner, 2011; Cochrane, 2013).

Unlike the third wave and defying postfeminism, fourth wave feminism seeks to make the personal political again, by protesting, marching, and petitioning (Cochrane, 2013). Blevins (In press) argues that the main separation between the third and fourth wave is the "reincorporation of consciousness-raising groups" primarily in social media (26). Furthermore, Blevins (In press) identifies the fourth wave's shift toward digital activism.

Having grown up in the digital age, fourth wave feminists feel comfortable with the Internet, technology, and all their possible uses. Using social media and the Internet, fourth wave feminists have replaced zines and songs with Twitter campaigns, Tumblrs, and blogs (Baumgardner, 2011). Within these online, activist spaces, women make up the majority of users (Munro, 2015; Blevins, In press; Zeisler, 2013). Fourth wave feminists raise societal and cultural consciousness about and fight back against misogyny and sexism through an online call-out culture that utilizes the differing social media platforms and technologies to share experiences, discuss issues, and advocate for change (Munro, 2015). One example can be seen in recent comments against unfair school dress codes. In this case, young women and girls have taken to social media and the Internet to post, share, and discuss their outrage over sexist dress codes.

Previous waves of feminism, have been criticized for belonging only to upper-middle class, White women. Zeisler (2013) argues that the digital world opens up access and opportunities for those of different socioeconomic statuses and from different geographical locations. At the same time, these digital spaces enable all voices to have an equal chance of being heard above the noise of the dominant media, and allows for people who would not normally march to use the tools for activism (Zeisler, 2013). Blevins (In press) supports Zeisler's claims, and goes farther by adding that African-American and Hispanic teens are using the

Internet more frequently than White teens. Because of this, the fourth wave may "avoid over-reliance on the narratives of upper-middle class White women" (Blevins, 28, In press).

But even with these benefits, the Internet and the digital spaces within it are not fully equal. Both Zeisler (2013) and Blevins (In press) address multiple limitations to this digital world. Firstly, many people still do not have full access to these spaces. They may lack Internet access or be limited "because they go online from libraries or other public institutions that have numerous filters or blocks" (Zeisler, 181, 2013). Blevins (In press) also points to economic limitations and geographic locations. Overall, a person can neither participate in nor benefit from digital activism, if one lacks access (Blevins, In press). Secondly, Zeisler (2013) states that the mainstream media still holds control over the public "perception of the online world [which] is one that is heavily White, heavily young and invariably male" (182). A final limitation is the continual bashing of feminism and a lack of visibility, which forces the fourth wave to constantly defend itself. In the fall of 2014, Gamergate, originally a vitriolic hashtag campaign, started within the video gaming community. Responding to feminist, female gamers' criticism of video game culture, supporters of Gamergate used rape and death threats to, in their words, "fight against political correctness" and "unethical journalism."

Although these limitations seem daunting, fourth wave feminists are using the Internet to spread awareness, call for action, and broadcast marginalized voices. Together, these fourth wave feminists, both young women and young men, are participating in a new consciousness-raising group to bring change to the world (Blevins, In press).

Female Representation in Comics

Many studies have analyzed superheroines' representation in comics. These articles have examined the physical appearance of women, the amount of power they possess, and their

characteristics. In relation to superheroines' powers, Behm-Morawitz and Pennell (2013) state

that "[a]lthough superheroines' powers are not always weaker than superheroes, they often are

depicted as having less control over them, needing [the] help of the male heroes/mentors to guide

them and their abilities" (81). Above all, researchers have concluded that the modern female

superheroe represents a sexual ideal (Brown, 2011). Instead of focusing on the heroine's tale,

these comics turn to sex. Brown (2011) states that "to point out that all modern comic book

women are extremely fetishized is almost redundant," (174). Brown (2011) goes further to point

out, that visually, superheroes represent the ideal body, but the male superhero's "rippling

muscles" serve as "ideals of identification for the mostly male readership," while women are

converted into sex objects (174). Even with all this supposed power—the ability to fly, to lift

cars, to deflect bullets—female superheroes and women, more generally, in comics remain

second-class to their male peers.

Although women continue to be outnumbered by their male colleagues both in comics

and in the comic industry, more "tough women" have slowly been appearing in comics.

However, these "tough women" continue to be sexualized and objectified (Inness, 1999). In her

book, *Tough girls,* Inness (1999) argues that "bad girl" comics have become the norm, where

"tough women continue to be difficult to find in more recent comic books, which contain many

supposedly tough women who actually are little more than overly endowed caricatures" (145).

Throughout comics' history, female characters have been portrayed as lesser than their

male counterparts. In fact, superheroines "appear to occupy a place that is not fully visible. These

characters exist, but they are easily forgotten, killed off or otherwise marginalized" (Neumann,

294). One such character Sue Storm—Invisible Girl—from *The Fantastic Four* arose within

second wave of feminism. One of the first superheroines in comics, Sue Storm (Invisible Girl) is

considered powerful, while at the same she lacks actual agency and power within most of the series (D'Amore, 2008). D'Amore (2008) argues that Invisible Girl, while stuck in the patriarchal world of the 1960s, also "grapple[s] with some of the early issues of feminism," specifically achieving recognition "for their potential strengths" (4-5). In this way, D'Amore (2008) emphasizes how comics, themselves, represent a specific moment in history and a way "to measure the impact…of social change on a general population" (7). These female characters, especially superheroines, are more likely to be violently killed, mutilated, and/or depowered than their male peers (Simone, 1999; Cochran, 2007; Brown, 2011). This trend within comics— termed "Women in Refrigerators"—was first identified by comic writer and fan, Gail Simone, in 1999. Referring to a specific 1994 *Green Lantern* story arc, Women in Refrigerators recalls the scene in which the Green Lantern discovers his girlfriend stuffed in his refrigerator after she had been strangled (Cochran, 2007). At its core, Women in Refrigerators showcases female fans' discontent with "the industry's sexism" and the creators "apparent disdain shown…toward their female audience" (Cochran, 2007). In this way, Simone (1999) gave voice to the concerns of female fans and creators everywhere through her list of fallen superheroines, sparking widespread debate and criticism. Some critics pointed to male superheroes' serious injuries and deaths, as an argument against this sexism. In response, Bartol coined the term "Dead Men Defrosting."

Central to the Women in Refrigerators' argument, Dead Men Defrosting refers to the fact that male superheroes receive preferable treatment and possess the power to return from any situation, including death. Dead Men Defrosting begins with the hero facing a "situation or condition [he] must overcome" (Bartol). Female heroes also are introduced with some challenge. Unique to the character, this challenge represents the obstacle that the character must overcome

to become a "hero." While male superheroes may be seriously injured, they "usually come back even better than before, either power-wise or in terms of character development/relevancy" (Bartol). On the chance they do die, they die heroically, go down fighting in a touching death, or resurrect; someone is always waiting to pick up the mantel and fight again (Cochran, 2007; Bartol). Female superheroes, on the other hand, do not get the respect of falling in battle; instead, they are killed "off-screen" or "'found on the kitchen table already carved up'" (Cochran, 2007).

Women and Comics Today

Although throughout comic history women have been poorly represented and the majority continue to disappoint feminists and female readers everywhere, a shift in comics has begun within the past few years. More and more comic series are being led by female protagonists (Ashley, 2015). A rare example of a true "tough woman"—neither objectified nor sexualized—can be seen in Agent 355 from DC's *Y: The Last Man*. Agent 355 possesses agency without fulfilling the sexualized "bad girl" stereotype so often found in today's comics (Mafe, 2015). At the same time, she fulfills the hero role, while also being a positive representation of Black women, usually not found in comics. Recently, both Marvel and DC have begun debuting new titles to focus on female protagonists or all-female superhero teams. Marvel is introducing *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur* and DC is releasing *Prez,* both aimed at young adult readers. A recent and groundbreaking title, *Ms. Marvel* introduced the world to Kamala Khan, a Palestinian-American, Muslim teenager in New York City. Kent (2015) points to *Ms. Marvel* as "somewhat of a beacon for intersectionality and minority representation, with the potential to become [a] powerful feminist text" (523). Even with these feminist aspects within *Ms. Marvel,* mainstream media promoted the she's "'just like us' discourse" (Kent, 524, 2015). Mainstream reactions call for a relatability aspect to the character and enforce a "perceived necessity" that a media product

about an other, or an outsider, should be "adaptable for consumption by audiences who do not belong to the marginalized group," ultimately casting aside the feminist aspects of *Ms. Marvel* (Kent, 254, 2015).

At the same time, women are gaining more power within the industry, by becoming creators and directors of content (Ashley, 2015). Indie comics are also getting more involved. One example is Boom! Studios, whose Boom! Box imprint has "become one of the best places to find comics geared toward women, consistently releasing books featuring female creators telling stories about captivating female characters" (Sava, 2015). Sava (2015) points at Boom! Studios as one of the leading comic publications that publishes the work of female writers and artists. According to Sava (2015), Marvel, DC, Image, IDW Publishing, and Dark Horse already release a number of titles with female lead characters, but still are dominated by male creators. Women have different interests, she argues, and because of this, more female creators means more diversity in female-led comics (Sava, 2015). At the same time, fans of comics are continuously calling for change in the comic industry and have encouraged female characters and creators through digital activism and consciousness-raising. On one Tumblr, fans post images from different comic series over the years that emphasizes: "This is what women in superhero comics should be" (dcwomenkickingass, n.d).[i]

Methods

Overview

RQ1: How do the lead female protagonists of *Gotham Academy* and *Ms. Marvel,* Olive Silverlock and Kamala Khan, portray agency?

RQ2: In which wave or waves of feminism, if any, do these characters' representations align based on agency?

Employing textual analysis, this study investigates the language, behavior, and portrayals of the lead female protagonists of *Gotham Academy* (Olive Silverlock) and *Ms. Marvel* (Kamala Khan) for the first volume of each series.[ii] Each first volume tells the origin story of the protagonists and serves as the first narrative arc of the series. Oftentimes, readers are intimidated by the sheer number of runs for famous superheroes or comic characters; looking to enter the comic world, readers usually start from the first issue or the hero's origin story. Furthermore, Kamala's and Olive's stories are very different, but these first issues provide a point of comparison. Olive and Kamala, like all new characters, must build their identities from the ground up. Although *Ms. Marvel* and *Gotham Academy* are relatively different in terms of characters, style, and setting, both series were created and are written by women, target young adult readers, were released in 2014, and arose within a pre-established fictional world. Lastly, both of these series have been praised for their artistic style and teenage female protagonists, who must come to terms with their identities within a super-world.

Protagonists

Kamala Khan. Kamala Khan is a sixteen-year-old, Muslim, Pakistani-American, living in Jersey City, New Jersey. Stuck between two worlds, Kamala struggles to feel accepted and complete in her identity. Although she respects her heritage and her religion, she feels different. A huge fan of comics and superheroes, she writes Avengers fanfiction and self-identifies as a nerd. One night after sneaking out to a party, Kamala begins to walk home—disappointed,

embarrassed, and upset—and is suddenly enshrouded by a mysterious mist (later, we discover that the strange mist was actually Terrigen Mist released by the inhuman Black Bolt) (Marvel Terrigen Mist; Marvel Terrigenesis). Inside the mist, Kamala has a vision of Captain Marvel, Iron Man, and Captain America. Captain Marvel grants Kamala her powers. Completing her Terrigenesis, Kamala fully transforms into an inhuman and gains the following powers: polymorphing, accelerated healing, bioluminescence, and appearance alteration (Marvel Kamala Khan (Earth-616)). Throughout the rest of the volume, Kamala struggles to balance her new found superheroine identity—Ms. Marvel—with her family's expectations and rules.

Olive Silverlock. A sophomore at Gotham Academy on the Wayne Scholarship, Olive Silverlock has had a weird summer. After suffering some unknown traumatic experience, Olive cannot remember a good portion of her summer and has fallen into a state of depression. She has actively been avoiding her friends and boyfriend (ex-boyfriend?); feels excessive guilt for her behavior; and lacks interest in school and her hobbies. Usually smart, focused, and driven, Olive now feels alone, sad, and unsure of herself and her place at Gotham Academy. Overcome with apathy and anger, Olive feels like she has lost herself. Her mother, Sybil Silverlock, is in Arkham Asylum. With no one to turn to, Olive harbors an intense hatred for Batman for some mysterious reason. There is a ghost haunting the school, a cult running about, and Maps, Olive's ex-boyfriend's little sister, following her around. Strange things keep happening, and Olive—although depressed and unsure—is determined to figure them out.

Agency

Through textual analysis, this study will discuss these female protagonists' agency across comic worlds and within them by looking for themes that emerge in the narratives. This study

then uses the findings to determine if their representations fall within any of the waves of feminism.

For this study, agency will be defined as having the ability to act on one's own will or choice; to have control over oneself, one's powers and own being; and lastly, to act independently through speech or action. Building off of Barker's (2003) categorization of agency, this definition of agency relies on the amount of power one possesses within the group, within society, and within herself. Within the study, three categories of agency emerged in both narratives: acts independently, social connections, and superpowers.

This study uses the Holistic Agency Spectrum Scale defined and applied in a previous study by Clark and Henderson (2016), in which a protagonist's agency is placed on a zero to ten scale of individual, social, and authoritative agency. In this way, the protagonists' amount and kind of agency can be qualified as a range based off of their perceived rationale (or cognitive ability), their social influence, and their superpower.

Examples of comic characters that fall along the respective sides of the scale are as follows:

Sybil Silverlock, DC, falls in zero social agency, while Purple Man, Marvel, would have a ten in social agency. Marvel's Winter Soldier possessed zero individual agency, after he was brainwashed and turned into a Soviet killing machine, while DC's The Joker showcases a ten for individual agency. Turning finally to authoritative agency, Molly Hayes in Marvel's *Runaways* (2003) had a zero for authoritative agency, while Batman, DC, represents a ten.

Acts independently: Acting without permission, individual agents use their internal power to put their ideas into motion and express their will (showcasing individual agency). When in a group setting, characters may suggest an idea; if this idea is accepted and acted upon,

social agency can be seen. But if an individual's idea is rejected, ignored, or overruled, agency is lessened or nonexistent.

Social connections: Actors' social structures actively shape their levels of agency. Family, religion, race, gender, and culture—all work to constrain or enable an individual to act.

Superpowers: Within comic books, characters often express their authoritative and individual agency by using or refraining from using their superpowers. Character's powers manifest themselves differently and develop throughout time, changing in extent, strength, and ability. Younger characters who are just coming into their powers, like Kamala Khan and Olive Silverlock, must discover their own powers and learn how to use them.

Feminism

This study will further identify fourth wave feminism as "you do you" feminism that seeks to empower others through the acceptance of all. In contrast, postfeminism will be identified as the current feminism articulated through mainstream media and culture. Postfeminism falsely declares that feminism is dead, equality has been achieved, and women are liberated, while requiring all women to follow a set definition of femininity and to constantly work on "becoming."

Discussion

Existing in two entirely different worlds, Kamala and Olive's agency reflects the structures—social, cultural, religious—around them. The structures of their worlds directly affect the type of agency shown by these superheroines and the ways in which they showcase their agency. Looking first at Kamala, Jersey City reflects real life. Kamala's world is much like our own; it is full of complex relationships and marked by typical American society and culture, but with one remarkable difference: the Avengers. Full of superheroes and villains, Kamala's world has a foundation of clear order, but also complex connected dimensions and worlds and outside-of-the-law authority figures. Kamala deals with recognizable structures within Jersey City as well in the form of school, family, religion, race, and gender.

Like Jersey City, Olive's world—Gotham City—is a bustling, urban environment, but her world lacks a clear social order. Gotham City is a dysfunctional social environment, in which crime runs rampant, corruption controls city officials, and chaos is the only constant. While both cities have issues with crime and masked crusaders, Jersey City's crime is contained for the most part, while Gotham City is actively shaped by evil-doers. Although Gotham is a chaotic whirlwind of crime and destruction, Olive is rather isolated from the mayhem of Gotham, behind the high walls of Gotham Academy. Here, Olive has time to be more proactive, and thus, showcases more agency than typical in a constant fight for survival, where one is merely reactive. These contrasting worlds influence Olive's and Kamala's levels of agency in different ways, but also, shape their interactions with others and themselves.

A central theme within these two volumes is the question of identity. Like many young adult *Bildungsromans*, these comics position their protagonists within an environment in which their identity is in question. While Kamala works to espouse the two halves of her identity—

American and Pakistani—Olive struggles to determine who she is after a summer accident. These two quests for identity take center stage within their respective journeys. At times, these questions enable their agency, while other times they restrict it. Central to this understanding of identity is the idea of faith and faithlessness.

Acts Independently

Within *Ms. Marvel* and *Gotham Academy,* faith and faithlessness shape the main female protagonists' developing identities and choices within each story arc. For the purposes of this study, faith is believing in something outside of oneself, a greater power than oneself, or even simply, believing in oneself and one's abilities. Faithlessness, on the other hand, is a lack of belief, whether in a greater power, in others, or in oneself; faithlessness is marked by a lack of hope. In both instances, this belief or lack of belief encourages specific actions and actively influence one's reasoning. In other words, faith and faithlessness both act within agency as a push or pull, as a catalyst to act or a restrictive barrier. From the first panel of *Ms. Marvel,* Kamala Khan's faith is obvious. Although she questions her place within society, Kamala is strong and sure within her faith. Concerning identity construction, Kamala builds from faith and determines what she can be and who she is. Above all, Kamala's faith spurs her to act independently. For example in chapter two, Kamala witnesses Zoe Zimmer, the school's popular girl, fall into a lake. Having recently gained her powers, Kamala assesses the situation and wonders if she should act. In this moment, she remembers what her father told her about an ayah, or verse, from the Quran that talks about saving one person. Remembering this advice, Kamala jumps into action and saves Zoe. The entire time, she thinks over her father's advice and the ayah, and through faith, determines her identity and justifies her heroics. For the rest of the

volume, Kamala's faith in herself and in Islam compels her to keep acting as Ms. Marvel and saving Jersey City.

In contrast, Olive lacks faith and builds her identity from all she has forgotten since her lost summer. Having literally displaced her identity in a memory, Olive has lost all faith in others and herself. Olive's faithlessness enables her to act without hesitation and without remorse. Reflecting Gotham's lack of morality, Olive acts on her own, rarely consulting others and typically in an impulsive or instinctual fashion. Although this type of action may seem to lack agency, Olive showcases a range of agency within different moments. Even when her actions spur from emotion, Olive showcases high levels of rationale and forethought. For instance in chapter one, Olive rescues Maps after the bell tower collapses by repelling down the side of the tower. In this moment, Olive acts instinctually, quickly, and effectively; the planning required to perform this rescue mission is evident. Also in chapter one, Olive extracts revenge on Colton Rivera, who bullied her earlier in the chapter. Walking away from a conversation with Maps, Olive purposefully knocks over Colton's backpack of fireworks just as a teacher passes by. Afterwards, Olive expresses guilt, but her depression, brought about by her strange summer and the possible death of her mother, has taken away her identity and causes her to act outside of herself. She no longer cares about the consequences, and for that, she has gained a sort of freedom. At the end of the volume, Olive embraces her lack of morality and even tells herself to keep a hard heart.

In chapter four, Olive spies Millie Jane's "ghost" outside of her window. She first tries to open the window, but cannot because it is stuck. Instead, she quickly uses a flashlight to smash open the window and catches the "ghost." Angry and determined, Olive acts almost instinctually in order to apprehend the fake ghost. But even here, rational exists and a quick-thought process is

exhibited. Typically, emotion is thought to override one's rational thought, but in this case, Olive uses her emotions as a form of rationality. Unlike Kamala who uses her faith as a guiding force, Olive decides how to respond or act through how she feels. The one thing that Olive does have faith in is her mother and her mother's innocence. After starting an uncontrollable fire, Sybil, Olive's mother, was locked away in Arkham Asylum by Batman in order to protect Gotham. She believes with all her being that Batman is completely responsible for her mother's downfall and her actions/reactions to Batman reflect this belief.

Makes Suggestions—followed or not. Typically within comics, female characters and superheroines are limited in their contribution to the group. However in both *Ms. Marvel* and *Gotham Academy,* superheroines are the main protagonists. Because of this, Kamala and Olive are already at an advantage; they shape their story and are often the only ones making decisions. For this reason, both are less likely to have ideas rejected, yet they still interact with authority figures and friends who have greater social influence, and therefore, greater social agency.

As a teenager living in an observant religious household, Kamala has her ideas rejected by her parents, particularly her father, in regards to her social life. But even after having her idea of going to a party rejected in chapter one, Kamala sneaks out anyway. After gaining her powers, Kamala stops asking permission from her parents and just acts. In this way, she experiences a shift in her agency. She gains more freedom to act on her own. For the rest of volume one, Kamala's actions mostly revolve around her making decisions to fight for what's right, to use her powers, to determine her identity, and to hide her double life from friends and family. For instance throughout this arc, Kamala lies to her mother multiple times about her heroic excursions. In chapter three, even though she doubts herself, Kamala jumps into action to save

Bruno and stop a robbery at the Circle Q, his place of employment. In other words, Kamala is an extremely independent individual who does not let anything get in the way of what she wants.

Olive, on the other hand, is more likely to have an idea rejected by others. At multiple points throughout the volume, people actively exert power over Olive. Working with a "Detective Squad," Olive is part of a team of Gotham Academy students who do not always collaborate before determining the best course of action. Because of this, Olive has ideas rejected multiple times. There are three clear moments in which Olive is overruled by another. In chapter three, Colton tells Olive that she's going to help him break into the Headmaster's office to steal his confiscated fireworks back. When Olive says "no," Colton interrupts her and overrules her objection. Also in chapter three, Olive suggests leaving North Hall, but the group forcefully pulls her into the hall against her will to continue their investigation. Lastly, in chapter four, Olive suggests that they tell Prof. Macpherson about the incident with the strange hand in North Hall, but Pomeline rejects the idea out of fear of being expelled. Still unsure of her identity and struggling with depression, Olive rarely fights back against rejected ideas and instead merely goes along with the plan. Because of this, Olive's social agency and individual agency suffers; she experiences a drop in individual agency because she does not try to rebel against others, but she also showcases less social agency because others overrule her ideas or force her to do things that she does not want to do.

Social Connections

As mentioned, social structures constrict and enable one to show agency and to act independently or productively. Social agency relies on the amount of influence or power one possesses within a relationship or social setting. The more influence one has over a group, the more agency one possesses. The more power a person has to get their ideas accepted and acted

upon, the more social agency he or she shows. Kamala is surrounded by authority figures—parents, teachers, police officers—and has a number of positive personal relationships that guide her journey throughout the novel. When Kamala dons her Ms. Marvel costume, she often feels conflicted about her superhero identity because she's lying to her parents and sneaking out, but wants to tell them about the good work she is doing and make them proud. Media often portray Muslim women and girls as oppressed objects of Western pity with little-to-no agency within social relationships (Alsultany, 2013). Kamala has a typical relationship with her family; as a teenager, she finds her family's arguments annoying, her parents' rules stifling, and her cultural traditions ostracizing. Kamala often acts outside of the boundaries set by authority figures; her powers have granted her an even greater ability to reject her family's rules. Although Kamala has the individual agency to act independently and to help others, her social agency shrinks every time she acts outside of the boundaries set by her parents or the authority figures in her life. Noticing Kamala's strange behavior, her family shows great concern over her well-being throughout the volume and beg Kamala to tell them what is happening. Kamala shares basic information—"There's just a lot of stuff going on in my life right now, and I can't talk about it. Not yet. Not until I've figured it out on my own" (1.2) —but omits the real details. Because of this, her family begins to distrust Kamala and she continues to be grounded and scolded repeatedly. Without her parents' trust, Kamala loses social agency; to them, her ideas turn into lies, and her family suspects her of falling to peer pressure.

Looking at friendships, Kamala has two best friends, Nakia and Bruno. As a Mulsim American, Nakia relates to Kamala's struggles with identity and serves as a guide and advisor throughout the volume, but like with her parents, Kamala hides her superhero identity from Nakia and this secret strains their relationship. On the other hand, Bruno is Kamala's ally. He

protects her when others bully her and stands up for her. In chapter one when Kamala sneaks out to the party, Bruno confronts Josh, a jock, who tricks Kamala into trying an alcoholic drink which violates her religious faith. Bruno further encourages Kamala to be herself and to embrace her identity, even if people are expecting a White, blonde Ms. Marvel. Acting as her sidekick, he helps Kamala create her costume and is the only one within Kamala's social circle who knows that she is Ms. Marvel. Throughout the volume, Bruno supports Kamala in every situation and respects her beliefs and choices. Even though Kamala struggles to maintain her family's trust, and even though her social agency continues to dwindle due to their lack of trust in her, she still possesses a safety net made from the love of her family and friends. Olive, on the other hand, does not.

Olive's history is glossed over in the first volume and readers develop a very basic understanding of her family. Olive's mother, Sybil Silverlock, is locked away in Arkham Asylum. Throughout the volume, it is hinted that Sybil has no recollection of her daughter. In chapter six, Croc, the lizard man from the Asylum, tells Olive about her mother and the love she would show for Olive on her "good days." But the Asylum collapsed the previous summer—the same summer, Olive walked into the fire in North Hall—and at the end of the volume, readers remain unsure if Olive's mother survived the collapse of Arkham. Olive buries her feelings about her mother and rarely speaks of her. In chapter six, Olive has a moment of self-realization, while standing on the roof of her dorm. She has a flashback of the time when her mother accidentally set fire to their apartment: Olive: *"There was a time I would have run away. But I'm not scared anymore. I've changed. And I'll keep changing. Through it all, I have to remember who I am. And not give in to hope that maybe…Just maybe…"* Sybil: "Oh, Olive. I'm so, so sorry. I never

meant to…" (1.6). This example illuminates Olive's understanding of her family, her identity, and her future.

Because of her mother's containment, Olive has no relationship with her mother and no real authority figure to answer to throughout the volume. Even Olive's teachers are painted as distant figures who do not really control anything the students do. Therefore, Olive is free to act how she pleases without many or any repercussions. Because of this freedom, Olive has the potential for unlimited agency, although she rarely takes advantage of this power.

The only parental figure in Olive's life is Batman. Batman is the overarching authority figure in Olive's life and in Gotham. He also sent her mother to Arkham Asylum in an attempt to protect Gotham and Olive from her uncontrollable powers. He controls Gotham, and created the scholarship that Olive relies on to go to Gotham Academy (although she does not know that last bit). Blaming Batman for her mother's imprisonment, Olive hates and fears him, and shows disgust for anything Batman-related. Throughout the volume, Batman indirectly affects Olive's agency. Although he never harmed Olive, she experiences inexplicable fear and rage when he is around or even just mentioned. For example, Olive is terrified of bats. In chapter one after she rescues Maps, the two hang from the rope on the Bell Tower. A colony of bats flies out from the Bell Tower, causing Olive to flail her arms in terror. Due to this, Olive loses her grip on the rope and causes both Maps and herself to fall. In other chapters, Olive freezes, overcome by fear, when faced with bats or Batman-like reminders. In chapter three, Olive physically cannot enter North Hall because she has flashbacks of a Batman-like figure in the burning building from the summer. Her fear and hatred builds up throughout the arc until finally her hatred sparks action. While walking back to North Hall in chapter five, Olive spots a Batman-like figure in the sky. Overcome with anger, Olive takes her crossbow and fires at the figure, who plummets from the

sky. The figure turns out to be Tristan, the student with the Langstrom Virus, not Batman. In other words, Olive loses agency because of Batman. Her experiences with him—although indirect—have resonated with her so intensely that any reminder of him evokes two responses: utter motionlessness or unquenchable rage. In this way, Batman prevents Olive from acting. She loses her agency both social—because he is the ultimate authority figure—and individual—she cannot act in a way that exhibits agency, a way that hints at reflexivity and power.

Inside her peer groups, Olive possesses greater agency. When interacting alone with Maps, Olive's ex-boyfriend's little sister, Olive rarely has her ideas rejected. Here, another shift in agency occurs. Olive maintains higher social agency with Maps because of her age and the respect that Maps has for Olive. Oftentimes, Olive takes on the "big sister" or "mother" role with Maps. She nurtures her and advises and warns her throughout their investigation. Like Olive, women in comics traditionally gain power through the "mother" role, which lacks male characters and limits their actions into predetermined gender roles.

Superpowers

Within comics, female superheroes typically do not have full control of or possess a complete understanding of their powers (Behm-Morawitz & Pennell, 2013). Unlike their male counterparts who know immediately and instinctually how to use their powers, superheroines are left weaker, more vulnerable, and less in control. Young heroes, especially young female heroes, showcase an even lower level of control and understanding due to their newness.

Kamala Khan is an inhuman affected by Terrigenesis—the process by which the exposure to Terrigen Mist activates one's inhuman genes. In this way, Kamala's powers are innate and simply had to be "awakened." Shrouded in the Terrigen Mist, Kamala experiences a quasi-religious vision of Captain Marvel, Iron Man, and Captain America. Within this vision,

Kamala experiences a deep desire to be "normal," specifically exactly like Carol Danvers, aka Captain Marvel. In this moment, she is granted her powers by Captain Marvel, who, much like a deity, warns Kamala of the unexpected. At first, Kamala lacks any understanding or control over her powers. Transformed into a blonde replica of Ms. Marvel, Kamala feels trapped in another woman's body and does not understand how to switch back into her regular form. Early in her transformation, in the few instances where her powers actually work, Kamala lacks intentionality, and because of this, lacks agency. For example in chapter two, Kamala shrinks upon hearing Zoe Zimmer's voice. In chapter three, Kamala even loses control over her powers while at school. When she gets them under control, she still showcases a lack of authoritative agency because she cannot will herself to transform into Taylor Swift. At the same time, she has minimal confidence in her ability to use or control her powers. In chapter two, Kamala sneaks back into her house, while still in the form of Ms. Marvel. Her brother, Aamir, overhears a tumbling in Kamala's room and investigates; afraid, Kamala wills herself to revert to her true form, but does not realize that it worked or how it worked. She marvels at her abilities, while showcasing a lack of understanding.

As the volume continues, Kamala uses her schooling to further understand her powers. She uses Newton's Laws to understand her growing and shrinking, and trains, through timed running drills and hide-and-seek with Bruno, to fully develop her powers. Through experience in battle, she gathers a better understanding of how to use her powers effectively. In chapter five, she learns that shrinking is just as effective, if not more effective, as growing. Even when Kamala gains an understanding of her powers and can use them without issues, she still does not know that she is inhuman, the name of her powers, or her weakness (electromagnetic pulses), leaving herself vulnerable to attack. Acting as Ms. Marvel, Kamala breaks away from the social

connections she has and establishes a new social hierarchy—she has become one of those outside-the-law authority figures, but she also must answer to the Avengers. In this way, she gains authoritative agency; she is now part of the law and can deal out justice, but her lack of full knowledge over her powers leaves her vulnerable to attack. For this reason, she does not possess complete agency over herself or others.

Olive Silverlock is a firestarter and has the power of investigation. Looking first at her powers of investigation, Olive successfully navigates the mystery surrounding her summer accident, the supposed haunting of North Hall, and the story of Millie Jane. Innately possessing an ability to investigate, Olive uses her gift without complication, limitation, or confusion. In chapter two, Olive is able to connect the hidden crypt with the map in Millie Jane's diary. Using her keen observation skills, Olive recognizes patterns within the Academy and follows the clues instinctually. In chapter four, she infers from the information gathered from an interrogation that the keystone with the strange symbol can be pressed and opens up secret tunnels. Throughout the volume, Olive continues to piece together hidden meanings and clues before others. She solves problems as they arise and is completely attuned to her environment. In this way, Olive has complete control and complete understanding of her investigation skills, and thus, she possesses complete agency in these situations.

Turning to her less conventional powers, Olive's firestarter gift is anything but. Firestarters possess the ability to start fires with their minds. Unaware of her firestarting abilities, though, Olive has no knowledge of her superpowers and lacks a basic understanding of the power itself. Above all, she has no control over her powers. The first volume of *Gotham Academy* cryptically refers to Olive's mother's own abilities to start uncontrollable, fiery accidents and foreshadows Olive's own possible demise. In chapter six, Croc compliments Olive

and says that she has "a little yer ma in you. You got her fire." He then offers help if she turns out like Sybil—violent, dangerous, and anti-Batman. Olive's powers make multiple appearances within the volume, but are shrouded in mystery. In chapter five, Tristan, an exchange student with the Langstrom Virus, explains Olive's accident in the summer, in which she walked—in a trance—into the burning North Hall. Once Olive was inside, flames grew exponentially—"All **hell** broke loose" (1.5). Olive is saved by Tristan, but has no recollection of what *exactly* happened in North Hall.

Olive's abilities are fully revealed in chapter six, when Croc and Batman fight in North Hall. Standing by furiously, Olive watches as Batman punches Croc in the face. Even more incensed by Batman, she stares at Colton's fireworks and lights them subconsciously. In this moment, it appears that Olive has control over her powers. But in actuality, she lacks complete agency. She acted out of anger without rationale or thought, and once the fireworks were lit, Olive has no control over the flames she started. The fire grows and Olive is almost crushed by the crumbling roof. Her firestarter power highlights her lack of agency, partially because she cannot ever fully control it and also because it arises out of extreme emotional responses. This "gift" has been passed down for generations within Olive's family and has had violent effects. Her mother is the ultimate example of this, and potentially, parallels Olive's own fate if she continues down this path. Although Olive possesses complete agency within her powers of investigation, her firestarter superpowers threaten to completely destroy her, and for this reason alone, Olive has no agency whatsoever related to her superpowers.

Feminism

This study is situated on the boundaries between a postfeminist society and the fourth wave of feminism because media continues to promote postfeminist ideals, while a new wave of

feminism offers a dissenting voice. For the purposes of this study, fourth wave feminism is comprised of young millennial (ages 25 to 19) and post-millennial (ages 18 to 15) generations of all genders. Utilizing social media and the Internet, fourth wave feminists participate in digital activism in order to give a voice to all people, achieve equality for all, and initiate political change.

First off, *Ms. Marvel* and *Gotham Academy* utilize aspects of the third wave to tell the story of Kamala and Olive. As mentioned in the literature review, third wave feminism focuses on the individual. In the third wave, an individual's actions are considered a movement in themselves, and individual's experiences reveal the truth in the world. Both of these comics emphasize the individual over the group. Through Kamala and Olive, these stories utilize distinct differences within their respective worlds to tell distinct truths.

Looking first at Kamala*, Ms. Marvel* reflects the pressures of "becoming" imposed by postfeminism and the uniformed beauty also pushed onto young women. In particular, Kamala feels pressured to be like Zoe Zimmer—blonde, peppy, and popular—and like Captain Marvel— blonde, fierce, and beautiful. At the same time, Kamala's family enforces specific ideas of femininity; they want her to be a specific type of "Muslim girl," successful, married to a good Pakistani boy, and have lots of babies ("You and Baba want me to be a perfect little Muslim girl -- straight A's, med school, no boys, no booze, then some handpicked rich husband from *Karachi* and a billion babies." (1.6)). Kamala struggles to find herself within these conflicting identities and to break free from the norms of femininity, imposed by her friends, family, society, and superpowers. This battle between two identities is a key discussion within fourth wave feminist digital spaces, in which young feminists use social media to discuss their struggle. Kamala's story reflects this struggle. Furthermore, postfeminist media often portrays a female

protagonist, who embraces the new femininity, rejects some feminist principles, and embraces others. In *Ms. Marvel,* Kamala recognizes the femininity proposed by society, rejects this femininity, and chooses her own unique identity instead.

Through Kamala Khan, this comic discusses intersectionality and showcases strong examples of allies through Bruno; both of these aspects reflect key ideas within fourth wave feminism. In key moments, Kamala calls out misogynist beliefs held by her parents and unfair divisions within her church. In chapter one, Kamala confronts her father about not letting her attend a party, "Bruno's a **boy.** If I was a boy, you'd let me go to the party." Later in chapter one, Kamala asks why the young women have to sit behind a partition at the Mosque. These two moments reveal Kamala's feminist attitudes. She still respects both her faith and her parents, but she recognizes the injustices within her world. *Ms. Marvel* also subtlety discusses internalized bias and racism by revealing the characters' own biases. For example, Zoe Zimmer's first appearance is marked by an insensitive question to Nakia posed as a concern ("Your headscarf is so **pretty,** Kiki. I love that color. But I mean…nobody **pressured** you to start wearing it, right? Your father or somebody? Nobody's going to like **honor kill** you?" (1.1)), and she later belittles Kamala, by using her culture as an insult ("Ugh, Kamala -- no offense, but you smell like curry. I'm gonna stand somewhere else." (1.1)). Through Zoe Zimmer, *Ms. Marvel* emphasizes Kamala's struggles as a young woman of color and of Islam, and showcases a specific intersectionality that Zoe, as a White woman will not experience.

Also relating to the fourth wave, Kamala turns the personal political again, by creating consciousness-raising groups. Although Kamala does not use social media or digital spaces to initiate change, she uses her Ms. Marvel identity to initiate change within herself, thus merging the third and fourth wave. She not only embraces her own identity formed from her own

experiences, but also she leverages personal experiences to create a movement, by becoming a superheroine who has power and inflicts justice. Through this, Kamala changes the perception of superheroes within Jersey City and within real life. Furthermore, Kamala Khan herself is a realistic character set within an unusual world; strong, independent, smart, and nerdy, Kamala reflects "real" young women found around the world.

Unlike *Ms. Marvel, Gotham Academy* does not reflect feminism as strongly or as overtly. Part of the reason for this is because Gotham, as a city and a fictional world, does not parallel the real world as clearly as the Jersey City of *Ms. Marvel.* In Gotham, racism and religion seem to be nonexistent, but sexism runs rampant. Basically ruling over Gotham, Batman is the male ideal. Wealthy, intelligent, and White, Batman controls the city and determines who is good and who is bad. He has the power to take away other's agency or grant them extreme privileges. Although Gotham may not seem to mirror the real world as well as Jersey City, Batman serves as a force akin to patriarchy. An almost omnipresent force, Batman controls the city and affects the lives of Gotham's citizens even when he is not present. If these is anything that Olive Silverlock believes in, it is the power of Batman.

Within *Gotham Academy,* Batman alone limits Olive's agency through past memories, emotional trauma, and fear. In this way, *Gotham Academy* ties in postfeminist themes, in which equality appears to have been achieved for all—Olive has full social agency to choose what she pleases and appears to be completely equal to her male counterparts in power and strength—but, she remains stuck within the extreme limitations of her body. Olive's firestarter powers may well get her locked away behind the bars of Arkham because Batman sees fit. Although Olive renounces Batman (and in a way patriarchy), she accepts her fate at the end of the volume. In chapter six, Olive vows to maintain "a hard heart" and even accepts that she may become her

mother. In this way, it appears that Olive acquiesces to the oppressing forces that surround her and surrenders to Batman (and patriarchy). For this reason, *Gotham Academy* emphasizes the apathy Olive feels after being restricted by the structures of patriarchy.

At the same time, *Gotham Academy* utilizes specific aspects found in feminism. Reflecting the third wave, Olive is inwardly focused on herself and her own quest for understanding and acceptance. Although Olive relies on others at the end of the first volume and establishes a sort of friend group that later reflects allies in feminism, she does not trust her friends and separates herself from others whenever possible. Her friends build her up throughout the volume and help her to slowly come back to her true identity. For this reason, *Gotham Academy* showcases aspects of fourth wave friendships and alliances.

Gotham Academy does not necessarily provide a negative representation of women or a degrading story. Instead, Olive, as a character, reflects an apathetic response to patriarchy and oppression. She sees the issues around her, tries to rebel, but in the end remains stuck within the structures of society, and thus is limited in her agency. Although *Gotham Academy* reflects postfeminist ideas, this comic resides beyond postfeminism because it tells the story of a complex and interesting young woman, who works with others to uncover the secrets around her. Overall, Olive represents a realistic, multifaceted women, who is limited by men and the realities of her genes and the world in which she lives.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Ms. Marvel* and *Gotham Academy* represent a step forward in the comic world, especially for young women. Focusing on the main female protagonists, Kamala Khan and Olive Silverlock, this study analyzed their representation of agency in the first volume of their respective series. After conducting a textual analysis, this researcher found that both Kamala and Olive experience shifts in agency throughout the volumes. Through Terrigenesis, Kamala gains her superpowers and more individual agency. Although her masquerading causes her social agency to decline rapidly, Kamala maintains high levels of individual agency and gains more authoritative agency, while disguised as Ms. Marvel. Olive Silverlock, on the other hand, experiences great shifts in her agency throughout the volume. Following no moral compass, Olive acts impulsively and instinctually and showcases great individual agency through her quick thinking and independent action. Answering to no authority figure, Olive appears to possess great amounts of social agency, but Batman limits Olive's agency. As for authoritative agency, Olive has next to none. Her investigative abilities give her great individual agency and authoritative agency, but her firestarter powers decrease her authoritative agency greatly, leaving her with basically none. Below, the Holistic Agency Spectrum Scale (Clark & Henderson, 2016) showcases the overall quantitative levels for Kamala and Olive's agency throughout volume one of each series.

Holistic Agency Spectrum Scale	Kamala Khan	Olive Silverlock
Individual Agency	8	9
Social Agency	1	4
Authoritative Agency	5	1
Total	14	14

The table above shows Kamala Khan and Olive Silverlock's levels of agency on the Holistic Agency Spectrum Scale. Looking first at Kamala, she has an eight in individual agency because she acts without being limited, but her faith still keeps her from acting without concern. Kamala's social agency falls to a one because her family has lost all trust in her, while she falls into the middle range (a five) of authoritative agency because not everyone will listen to her and her powers have not been perfected. This gives Kamala a 14 for her overall agency. Olive, on the other hand, has a nine in individual agency because she has no concerns for repercussions and acts how she pleases. Turning next to social agency, Olive has a four because although she has nearly unlimited social freedom, Batman greatly limits Olive's ability to act. Finally, Olive maintains a one in authoritative agency because she will never have complete control over her powers or Gotham. This leaves Olive with a total score of 14.

Kamala and Olive have equal levels of overall agency. This equality emphasizes how to people can possess the same amount of agency, but in different situations and settings, one or the other may have greater agency. From moment to moment, an individual's agency changes. Olive may possess great levels of individual agency, but add Batman to the mix and her social agency takes a hit. Kamala may maintain medium levels of authoritative agency over others, but again, her social agency is greatly limited. In this way, the two showcase great differences in their specific types of agency, but in the end, they have the same overall amount, at least in volume one.

Looking next at feminism, this study determined that *Ms. Marvel* embraces more aspects of the fourth and third wave than *Gotham Academy,* which perpetuates hidden postfeminist themes through the depiction of Batman and Olive's lack of agency. Even with these limitations,

these two comics indicate a step forward in terms of an increase in diverse female representation within comics. *Ms. Marvel* and *Gotham Academy* show comics are changing, but not completely. Much work needs to be done before female representation will meet the needs of readers.

As for future research, these protagonists have continued to grow and develop throughout their respective series. New challenges continue to arise; new puzzle pieces to the jigsaw that is their identities continue to fit together. Slowly, these young superheroines are gaining strength and agency, yet they continue to be limited externally and internally. Future research should continue to look into representation within comics, but not only for female characters. Comparisons studies are needed to determine male characters' levels of agency; LGBTQA characters and characters of color should also be examined. For so long, academia has focused solely on the struggle of women within comics, but other people continue to be misrepresented and brushed aside within comics and media. The time has come to analyze their representation, their power, and their agency. Indie comics, which are usually thought of as more diverse, accepting, and ground-breaking, should also be examined compared to their big name counterparts.

Female representation is still not where it could be in comics. More work needs to be done, and more themes need to be explored to fully understand representation within comics. Young adult comics seem to exist outside of postfeminist media for the most part and give a platform for writers and artists to work outside of the box. Like young adult novels, these comics seek to empower young women through differing representations and stories. Comic books, or graphic novels, reflect the world in which we live; they embody our beliefs, our understandings, and our traditions. Through comic book characters, readers further learn and internalize cultural practices, gender roles, and overall, historical beliefs. By creating comics that reflect real people,

comic books and graphic novels cannot only become more relevant, but also more accurate. Women in comics should reflect women in real life just as men in comics should reflect their flesh counterparts, in terms of physicality, ability, and agency. Agency exists on a spectrum and no two people have the same level of agency in the exact same moment; it grows, twists, bends, and breaks. Comics should and can reflect this movement. Comic fans are not asking for all comics to showcase the "strong" woman trope, but simply to treat its characters equality, to introduce more diverse and realistic characters, and to embrace the differences within our own complex world.

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[i] The Tumblr showcases images of past positive portrayals and discusses what future portrayals should entail. The Tumblr can be found at this link: http://thismomentsforwomenincomics.tumblr.com/

[ii] The first volume of *Gotham Academy* contains the first six issues and is a total of 160 pages. The first volume of *Ms. Marvel* contains the first five issues and material from the first issue of "All-New Marvel Now! Point One" for a total of 120 pages.