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‘I read comics from a feministic point of view’:

## Conceptualizing the transmedia ethos of the Captain

### Marvel Fan Community

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## Abstract

The contemporary media industries may be thinking transmedially so to engage their audiences across multiple platforms, but it is not enough to assume that the creation of a coherent brand, narrative or storyworld is enough to explain the specificities and the reasons for why audiences choose (or choose not) to engage in transmedia activities. This article argues for the need to analyse the behaviours and motivations of a media-crossing audience according to a more fluid, ephemeral and value-laden *transmedia ethos*.

Specifically, this article uses Captain Marvel – alongside a wide-scale online survey made up of over 200 of the character's fans – as a case study for examining the politics of transmediality, demonstrating how the migration of the Captain Marvel fan base across multiple platforms and iterations of the character is based not on the lure of interconnected storytelling or world building, but is rather built up of a much more layered transmedia ethos based on feminism, alternativism and a digi-gratis economy.

## Keywords

transmedia storytelling

fan cultures

comic books

Marvel

Captain Marvel

## Introduction: Do fans really *do* transmedia storytelling?

When asked which superhero products they choose to consume, one self-confessed

Captain Marvel fan recently remarked:

I have watched all of the recent Marvel movies in theatres, as well as watched most of the TV shows. I am familiar with many of the older versions of Captain Marvel in terms of television, animation and cinema, of course. I have read Marvel comics since a child, and although recently I have acquired a much more diverse and wider diet of comics, I do follow a number of contemporary titles, especially mini-series, wherever they might go.

A comment such as this one encapsulates the way in which fictional stories now ‘play out seamlessly across platforms from film to television, from videogames to websites or comic books’ (Kushner 2008). The proliferation of content across multiple media is now so commonplace that the contemporary cultural industries – be it the entertainment industries, the advertising industry or consumer sectors – are now thinking in terms of transmediality so to more effectively engage their audiences across multiple media.

Transmediality is ‘the spread of narrative information across multiple media texts’ (Booth 2015: 69), which at the present moment, at least, is underpinned by digital or industrial convergences. Media industries and their technologies, practices and systems of operation have become more aligned and networked in recent decades, providing a clear model for extending stories across multiple media. As Henry Jenkins famously argued, such convergences make ‘the flow of content across media inevitable’ (2003). But given how convergence is only an umbrella term for making sense of the proliferation of interconnected screens now dominating media culture, there is much room to understand the ways in which audiences migrate across media. The innate interconnectivity of

today's convergent media culture has led to a range of scholarship seeking to theorize and conceptualize the ways in which media comes to spread across multiple platforms, with ideas of the storyworld (Jenkins 2006; Evans 2011) and the brand regularly discussed. Notably, both of these conceptions imply a unification of diverse media texts that seemingly explains why audiences cross media.

For Jenkins, telling a story across media works precisely to make 'distinctive contributions to our understanding of the storyworld' (2006: 334), itself a fictional space that is 'sufficiently detailed to enable many different stories to emerge but coherent enough so that each story feels like it fits with the others' (2006: 335). But how exactly do we know that a story feels like it fits with the others? Brand can be important here, with the 'conveying of certain qualities to the consumer [that] acts as a guarantee of the origin of the product' (Johnson 2011: 3), perhaps explaining how audiences are guided across media. Within a media brand, for example, there might be a range of media paratexts, which Gray (2010: 6) identifies as the likes of DVDs, promos, narrative extensions and online materials that 'create texts, manage them, and fill them with many of the meanings that we associate with them'. As Freeman argues elsewhere, 'the folding in of paratextual apparatus into the diegetic storyworld of a media text is itself key to all transmedia storytelling' (2016: 32) – as in when a paratextual social media page created to promote a film publishes snippets of story details that enhance audiences' understanding of the film. But is that to assume that the blending of branded paratexts within a storyworld is sufficient to transmediality?

Indeed, amidst the influx of storyworlds and brands across media platforms that have flourished with the rise of media convergence, it is not enough to assume that the

creation of a single and coherent brand or storyworld is enough to explain the specificities and reasons for why audiences choose (or choose not) to cross multiple media. Hassler-Forest (2016: 3) even argues that there is a fundamental contradiction between industrial notions of a transmedia storyworld, which tend to emphasize ‘straightforward assembly’ and ‘creative production’, and fan culture perspectives, which highlight expansiveness and the creative deferment of narrative closure. Further to this, do all audiences really engage in transmedia activities? Are brands in and of themselves powerful enough to encourage fans to follow fictions across an array of texts? And is the creation of an interconnected storyworld capable of igniting sustained loyalty from all corners of a given fan base? If not, then when *do* fans opt to follow storyworlds across media, under what circumstances and for what reasons?

This article moves beyond characterizing behaviours of transmedia audiences simply according to industrially defined concepts like storytelling, world building, brand or even character. Rather, we argue for the need to analyse the behaviours and motivations of a media-crossing audience according to a much more fluid, ephemeral and value-laden *transmedia ethos*. At a time when the media industries are producing so much content, across so many platforms, each with so many varying extensions, perhaps it is now time to rethink critical assumptions that it is simply a storyworld, a brand or even a character that is being followed across media, and instead to analyse the more specific rationales for why audiences follow particular content across media. Indeed, the article points to the different factions of fandom that make up a fictional character’s audience, showing how the different yet very specific ethos that make up those factions dictate how and why people choose to navigate across multiple media.

Moving towards a fan studies perspectives, the article builds on Hills' (2015) idea that transmedia fandoms operate as unique 'communities of practice' and Booth's (2015: 69) argument that 'board games can transmediate pathos better than they can transmediate narrative', this article uses Captain Marvel – alongside a wide-scale online survey made up of over 200 of the character's fans – as a case study for examining what a 'transmedia ethos' might look like. The survey aimed to capture individual responses regarding the specific components of a range of Captain Marvel texts and products that encouraged migration across media. We argue that, in the case of Captain Marvel and her fandom, at least, audiences do not follow the iterations of the character based on plot, brand or storyworld. Instead, transmedia activity was based on values, which can be broadly grouped under three themes: those linked to aesthetic changes, particularly regarding the character's costume redesign; narrative choices made by the authorship of Kelly Sue DeConnick; and the positioning of the title as a form of alternative feminist activism within a patriarchal comics industry.

Though not exclusively so, we focus on the transmedia activity of the female fan. By doing so, we aim to enrich understandings of the particularities that underpin why an audience may opt to migrate between multiple media texts and paratexts by characterizing the precise representations, product types and philosophies at the levels of character, brand and storyworld that are named as important to why fans of Captain Marvel choose to consume the character's texts and paratexts across platforms. To do so, we study the role of individual authorship, gender politics and cultural hierarchies in relation to transmediality, demonstrating how the migration of fans across multiple iterations of Captain Marvel is today typified not according to the perceived lure of

interconnected storytelling, brand ownership or world building, but rather is built up of a more layered ethos based on feminism, alternativism and a digi-gratis economy.

## Captain Marvel: A brief history

Captain Marvel – aka Carol Danvers – has existed within the Marvel Universe since her first appearance in the 1960s and has intermittently been published in both self-titled solo publications as well as appearing in core team titles such as *The Avengers*, animated Marvel cartoons, and more recently across merchandise and fan-created works. However, despite this longevity in the Marvel Universe, due to constant fluctuations in her backstory, costume and aliases she remained a second-tier hero. Even the self-confessed Captain Marvel fans we surveyed tended to be only familiar with some of these; as one noted, the dilemma Captain Marvel faced was that without stable characteristics, ‘in a room full of superheroes, can you tell who it is?’

It is precisely the character’s inconspicuousness, at least within the realm of a general audience steeped in a mass-market influx of superheroes, which makes her such an interesting case. With a character that has rarely stayed the same over time, deprived of a stable storyworld, a consistent brand image and fluent story arcs, just what is it that keeps audiences engaged in the character across time and across media?

We use this section to establish the three principles of the character’s ‘ethos’ that underpin why fans of Captain Marvel choose to engage with the character across multiple media – those principles characterized as feminism, alternativism and digi-gratis economy. Each of these three principles will be analysed throughout the article in relation to different aspects of Captain Marvel’s brand, storyworld and paratexts, where we assess



in turn what these three ethos characteristics look like, which media they manifest in and how the fans articulate their liking for them. Importantly, while we recognize that interpretations of a character such as Captain Marvel are constantly renegotiated and may not be understood in the same way by all members of the fan community, in this case certain themes, ideals and values based around feminism, an alternativism to mainstream comics' culture and a digi-gratis economy were stressed repeatedly. And all three of these ethos principles are encapsulated by one of Captain Marvel's most popular comic book writers – Kelly Sue DeConnick. In embodying and foregrounding these themes of feminism, alternativism and digi-gratis economy herself, DeConnick epitomizes the ethos that is itself crucial to understanding how and why many of the Captain Marvel fan community choose to migrate across media.

When Carol Danvers was relaunched in a solo title in 2012 under the helm of writer Kelly Sue DeConnick, whose work within the comics' industry to date had consisted predominantly of female superhero one-shots for the Women of Marvel Initiative, many readers perceived the new publication as that which may finally create a coherent, likable character around which to base their fandom, for as one fan comments: 'Kelly Sue made a real person to admire'. The publication saw Danvers update her superhero mantle from Ms Marvel to Captain, and featured a costume redesign that moved away from the tendency to fetishize the body of the female superhero. Unlike her previous black body suit with exaggerated cleavage and thigh-high black latex boots, the design was based instead on an air force uniform, which solidified a connection between Danvers and one part of her past narrative, her military career. These character revisions came with the appointment of DeConnick as author, which followed a lengthy period in

which Marvel had no female-led solo titles and no regular publications headed by female writers. As will be demonstrated later in this article, DeConnick would set out a *feminist ethos* built up of beliefs and values around which a Captain Marvel fan community congregated. Fans felt that DeConnick was responsible for not only the aforementioned aesthetic changes, but also that the writer was ‘instrumental in *creating* the character and community’.

Indeed, Danvers’ appearances in the 1970s drew inspiration from writer and political activist Gloria Steinem, and when DeConnick’s relaunch was announced there were press images released depicting Captain Marvel striking the iconic ‘Rosie the Riveter’ pose, which worked to tie the character back to discourses of feminism and female empowerment. Interviews with DeConnick further emphasized this point, regularly noting how she had been influenced by a documentary she had watched on the work of the Women Air Service Pilots of Second World War. On her personal, Tumblr DeConnick later posted about ‘aviation history, feminism, the space program, [and] comics’ (Digital Baubles 2013). In other words, DeConnick thereby played a key role through her use of social media platforms – even when not directly speaking about Captain Marvel – in how fans of the character constructed the set of values and the feminist ethos surrounding Captain Marvel paratextually, as will be examined shortly.

Furthermore, it was DeConnick’s paratextual positioning of the *Captain Marvel* comic book as somehow ‘Other’ to more mainstream Marvel comics that established an *alternative ethos* to which fans adhered when approaching the wider Marvel Universe. DeConnick asked fans to partake in a ‘flight plan’ to launch the title, which consisted of a pre-order form for *Captain Marvel* alongside instructions and an explanation of the comic

industry distribution process (2012). The plan explained how it fell to small, individual comic retailers rather than publishers to take on the financial risk of new, niche titles as they were required to pre-order their stock in advance with no returns on unsold comics. Retailers could only order limited copies of *Captain Marvel* as the title fell outside the mainstream ensemble titles and starred a second-tier superhero rather than one of the more ubiquitous and profitable characters such as Spider-Man, The Incredible Hulk or Captain America. As such, not only was *Captain Marvel* positioned as an alternative title to the mainstream Marvel publications, but DeConnick herself was also positioned as an ‘Other’ to Marvel. In turn, fans who dubbed themselves the Carol Corps came to distinguish DeConnick as somehow separate from Marvel, perceiving her instead as ‘one of us’.

DeConnick’s participation through social media platforms such as Tumblr, then, may have allowed her to permeate the boundary between author and audience to become an ‘inhabitant of fan culture’ herself (Stein 2015: 139). However, whilst DeConnick’s activity ‘may seem to dissolve the power differentials between official and unofficial producers’ (Stein 2015: 139), in reality such activity works to reinforce which forms of transmedia participation are acceptable. Comics fandom is traditionally enacted through collecting trivia, merchandise and comics themselves (Stevens and Bell 2012). However, DeConnick’s use of fannish space – where she also reblogs and curates fan art, fan-made craft, photographs and merchandise – works to acknowledge and legitimize the creation and circulation of fan-made extensions as an alternative way in which fandom can be enacted. DeConnick, that is to say, can be understood to be encouraging fans to participate within what Booth (2010: 24–25) calls a *digi-gratis economy* – that is, a mash-

up of the market economy, that is the mode of consuming products in exchange for money and what Hellekson calls the gift economy, that is where fan-produced works are circulated freely between the fan community with no expected monetary remuneration for their labour (2009: 118).

Of course, usually these kinds of gift economy exchange take place outside of official commercial spaces and away from the eyes of content creators and copyright holders. But in this case, DeConnick's overt support of fan works has legitimized this type of fan behaviour and crosses us into the digi-gratis economy that is part market, part gift economy and as such a framework of values has been constructed around the fan community, notably that of reciprocity, of inclusiveness, and with the expectation that participation comes with low-entry barriers. As will also be further demonstrated later on in this article, such proclamations of a digi-gratis economy by DeConnick goes on to exemplify how many of these Captain Marvel fans chose to then approach – or dismiss – transmedia extensions that did not share this complex digi-gratis ethos, such as those that were perceived to be overtly commercially orientated. In a way that signals a return to auteurism, at least in the eyes of the fans, the ethos embodied by Kelly Sue DeConnick as author was one source of continued engagement across texts and additional paratexts. As one fan clearly articulated when asked to explain which Captain Marvel stories and/or products they chose to engage with over time: 'I stuck with the character until Kelly Sue DeConnick left, and the universe rebooted'.

## **I. The feminist ethos**

Staying with the character on account of DeConnick's authorship was about far more than loyalty to a particular comics writer, however; it was also about engagement with a feminist ethos for the Captain Marvel character that would itself later expand across multiple media platforms. In this section, however, we first focus on how this feminist ethos is constructed in and across particular comics, exploring this question through the lens of brand. We demonstrate how the adherence of fans to this feminist ethos has gone on to inform the ways in which these fans choose to engage – or actively chose not to engage – with further Captain Marvel titles within the Marvel Universe brand. Siegert et al. (2015: 1) understand a media brand 'as a construct carrying all of the connotations of the audience', spanning emotional and stylistic significations. Yet while branding is thus about constructing and maintaining symbolic dimensions that establish a clear and coherent brand identity, we show how the Captain Marvel brand is not powerful enough in and of itself to encourage audiences to follow the character across all titles. Instead, the fans we surveyed for this article identified with only *parts* of the brand, following the character across comics only if the symbolic significations communicated a strong feminist ethos, one not muddied by the larger Marvel brand.

Such feminist significations are important, for in mainstream US comic books, female bodies have routinely been fetishized and exaggerated (Stuller 2012: 237). Female superheroes, moreover, have most often been relegated to a passive role in the narrative by being positioned as the victim, either through use of overt sexist violence that emphasizes their physical vulnerability (Stabile 2009: 89) or through their own inability to control their powers. These powers are markedly different from those of a male superhero, too, as they are often linked with rather traditional conceptualizations of

feminine power, sexuality and masquerade (Brown 2015). These representations are also still evident in cinematic adaptations of female superheroes, leading Brown to argue that so far the superhero genre has ‘offered very few live-action superheroines not defined by their gender or openly defined by their sexuality’ (2015: 56). Although Kirkpatrick and Scott recently acknowledged an industry-wide effort to increase the number of female-led comic titles on the market (2015), when *Captain Marvel* was relaunched in 2012, this was not the case. In fact, the inaugural issue of *Captain Marvel* followed a period in which Marvel had no female-led publications on its roster.

These longstanding issues surrounding the treatment of female superheroes must be kept in mind in order to contextualize how and why DeConnick and *Captain Marvel* fans construct a feminist ethos around the character; much of the paratextual material relied on presenting the character as something different to what had come before. As indicated earlier in this article, the way in which these feminist values were ascribed to parts of the *Captain Marvel* brand was linked to, firstly, aesthetic changes such as the character’s costume; secondly, narrative choices made by DeConnick; and thirdly, the title’s distribution that foregrounded a form of feminist activism.

Let us begin by discussing the first of these – the character’s costume redesign. Prior to the first issue of the *Captain Marvel* comic in 2012, promotional images of the character’s costume redesign constituted a huge part of the marketing campaign, and it was the circulation of these images that worked to construct the framework of feminist values that fans ascribed to the character. Comic scholars have theorized the superhero’s costume as both a masquerade between dual identities – that is, of the superhero and their civilian life (Bukatman 1994) – and a pivotal component of the ‘becoming’ in the hero’s

journey (South 2005: 95), which ‘externalizes his [or her] biography’ (Chambliss and Svitavsky 2008: 21). So whilst costumes may evolve over time as they adapt to new audience expectations of fashion and sociocultural changes (Brownie and Graydon 2015), they are inherently tied to a hero’s identity. Costumes must negotiate a balance between revision and retaining visual markers from prior incarnations (Brownie and Graydon 2015); for example, the Batman costume has evolved since its inaugural appearance in 1939, though the iconic cowl, winged cape and dark colour palette have all remained a constant over time (Brooker 2015). Artist McKelvie, who is responsible for Captain Marvel’s redesign, spoke about the process:

We wanted to provide a link to her past while also striking out with something new. So you’ve got the basic layout of the first Ms. Marvel/Captain Marvel colors, but flipped, the sash from the Warbird look, then the stripes, gloves/boots and collar taking inspiration from her Air Force life.

(Ching 2012)

Evidently, McKelvie is aware of the need to retain visual markers, and yet Captain Marvel’s iconography is nowhere near as defined as a character such as Batman and is not necessarily recognizable to all comic readers. But according to many of the fans we surveyed (78 per cent, in fact), this radical overhaul in her appearance was met with open arms. For these fans, satisfaction with the redesign was less to do with its ability to remain loyal to Danvers’ character history and more to do with the values that the new costume came to represent. As one surveyed fan stated, ‘What grabbed my interest is the redesign which has really appealed to me, I realised that there might actually be some interesting feminist storytelling going on in DeConnick’s comics which I ought to take a look at’. Thus, whilst the old costume – complete with latex bodysuit,

exaggerated cleavage and thigh-high boots – epitomized the way in which mainstream comics have tended to fetishize the female body, the new costume instead emphasized the character's career as an air force pilot, her autonomy or independence; it was full length and practical, and her short, spiky hair was covered with a helmet.

This feminist overhaul to the character's brand image perhaps explains why only a small percentage of the Captain Marvel fan base we surveyed opted to follow her across additional media platforms when such feminist ideals were not upheld. For instance, only seven per cent of the fans we spoke to were familiar with the television series *The Avengers: Earth's Mightiest Heroes* (2010–2013). Here, Danvers became a regular character in 2012, and the series aired concurrently alongside the publication of DeConnick's title. Importantly, however, on said series, Danvers was seen wearing an older, more outdated iteration of her uniform reminiscent of her 1970s beginnings. The discrepancy between the character depicted in *The Avengers: Earth's Mightiest Heroes* and the more feminist-leaning one encountered in DeConnick's comic meant that most fans chose not to see the television series as essential viewing. Or as one fan, who *had* seen the television series, noted: 'I didn't even realise it was meant to be the same character, I didn't realise it was Carol Danvers until I read it on Wikipedia'. Comments such as this exemplify how, despite claiming to be avid Captain Marvel fans, many of our surveyed fan base had constructed their sense of fandom around a very particular version of the character – one that communicated a strong feminist brand ethos via the symbolic signification of a redesigned costume. This redesigned costume, due to its departure from the overtly sexualized superheroines from the past, became a visual embodiment of the feminist ethos fans associated with the character, leading one fan to comment:



[I'm] really thankful for the makeover she got, both in terms of character (DeConnick) and costume (McKelvie). So glad to be able to read stories about a fully-realised, multidimensional character wearing clothes that I wasn't ashamed to be seen reading in public.

If nothing else, the overt correlation between fans' migration and engagement with material and that material's adherence to a select vision of the character linked to DeConnick's work highlights the continued importance of individual authorship, even amidst the webs of large-scale corporate production cultures that characterize Marvel Comics. This authorial importance was confirmed by the previous fan, who noted in our survey that it was not simply the change in Captain Marvel's physical appearance that discouraged them from migrating across media, but that media migration was in fact contingent upon DeConnick's centralized narrative trajectory for the character.

Suzanne Scott, for instance, argues that industry-wide treatment of female characters has tended to result in their identities being 'routinely "spun off" from male superhero franchises [...] [and] inevitably render[ing] their own inner character and biography as secondary to the originating male superhero's identity' (2015: 154). For Scott, such 'spinning-off' of female characters relegates them to positions of passivity within their own narratives, either as victims or as mere plot devices used to further the male superhero's journey. Such relegation is evident in Danvers' tumultuous past: She initially gained her powers from the first Captain Marvel – Mar-Vell – which led to her adopting the alias Ms. Marvel in lieu of this connection; hence her identity hinged on her male counterpart. In her first solo title, Danvers was not even aware of her own dual identity as a superhero, whilst in several subsequent narratives she once again forgot her own identity, thus reinforcing her instability as a coherent character in the minds of fans.

Other unsavoury plots positioned Danvers firmly in a position of passivity, such as one where Danvers was mind-controlled, raped and impregnated by an alien, and which then went on to romanticize the relationship with her rapist.

However, as only 26 per cent of female fans we surveyed were familiar with Danvers when she was still using the Ms. Marvel mantle, for the vast majority of this fan base, it seems, Captain Marvel's history and identity are defined primarily by DeConnick's comics rather than nearly 40 years of often contradictory Marvel canon. DeConnick agreed that the previous iterations of Captain Marvel had been inconsistent and stated that her version 'transcends her history' (Hudson 2012). Prior to the title's initial publication, DeConnick stated that the Women Air Force Pilots of Second World War heavily influenced the story (Beard 2012), and the initial arc of DeConnick's run was tied to ideas of legacy. Certain aspects of Captain Marvel's history take centre stage – her military roots, in particular – whilst making no reference to others, especially those that appear to contradict values of female empowerment that both DeConnick and fans have ascribed to the character, such as the aforementioned rape narrative. DeConnick has been key to influencing the collective memory of Captain Marvel fans in terms of what remains authentic to the brand and what is forgotten. DeConnick may not have changed any narratives, but she has omitted them, meaning that for some Captain Marvel fans these past events do not factor into their conception of the brand identity, preventing the potential to engage with additional stories and iterations of the character if the symbolic significations of feminism become distorted.

Or to put it another way, there is a disconnect in terms of the flow of fans between older comics and DeConnick's texts, and a hierarchy of interpretations where

DeConnick's run and any texts that adhere to both the canon laid out by it and to its perceived feminist ethos are privileged above others. Moreover, as well as placing clear limitations on fans' willingness or motivation to migrate to the character's back catalogue, DeConnick is also responsible in some ways for being a kind of public figurehead for the fandom. Even before the *Captain Marvel* title was released in 2012, fans dubbed themselves the 'Carol Corps', and DeConnick quickly adopted the name, interacting with these fans through a range of social media platforms and encouraging the formation of a Captain Marvel community through what she herself dubbed her 'flight plan', which itself concerned a pre-ordering form that positioned the launch of the comic title as a collaborative, feminist effort between DeConnick and the fans.

DeConnick used the flight plan to position her request for fans to pre-order the title as a subversive tool to challenge the comic industry's patriarchal structure, which at the time propagated the notion that neither female protagonists and female creatives nor female fans could produce and consume consistently profitable titles (Taylor-Ashfield 2016). The *Captain Marvel* title launch thus became a collaborative effort between DeConnick and the fans, representing a form of feminist activism that even Captain Marvel striking the iconic Rosie the Riveter pose would approve of, and which in turn echoed values that fans associated with Captain Marvel's brand identity.

Relatedly, being a Captain Marvel fan was equally defined by those surveyed by the purchasing of Captain Marvel merchandise, with some fans characterizing their consumption habits as a dual relation between comics and non-media products branded with the superheroine. 'I have a T-shirt, and I bought her action figure', one fan declared in response to the question of what other Captain Marvel products they had bought.

Indeed, on average one in four of the fans we surveyed had previously bought items of Captain Marvel clothing, toys and/or jewellery. These fans wished to create a brand identity around their passion that spread as far as their own image, but not as far as media texts or stories not seen to embody the ethos of that brand identity.

Altogether, decisions made by the Carol Corps community regarding whether to engage with further Marvel material were informed by feminist considerations, be it in terms of costume changes, more central narrative roles or DeConnick's public critiquing of the gender disparity within Marvel Comics itself. As one surveyed fan noted: 'I usually only read comics that are well written from a feminist point of view, like Captain Marvel is'. Another fan explained that she wanted titles with 'women of various ages, sexualities and interests interacting with each other', thus suggesting that a desire for more diversity within comics is at the forefront of fans' minds. In very important ways, the Carol Corps movement can be understood as a form of fan activism, one that transposed the feminist ethos of DeConnick's Captain Marvel onto and across other iterations of the character, even if those other iterations also embody an 'alternative' ethos. Indeed, DeConnick's aforementioned request for fans to pre-order the *Captain Marvel* title led to the positioning of DeConnick and her work as 'Other' compared to the mainstream comics titles within the Marvel roster, setting the groundwork for the alternative ethos that we will examine subsequently.

## **II.** The alternative ethos

We have thus far focused on the ways in which the feminist ethos of Captain Marvel is constructed in and across particular comics, exploring this question through the lens of

brand. But now we move on to exploring how an equally essential alternative ethos dictates how and why this fan base opts to navigate across multiple media platforms, examining fans' transmedial behaviour through the lens of storyworld. For Jenkins, telling a story across multiple media platforms works precisely to make 'distinctive contributions to our understanding of the storyworld' (2006: 334), itself defined as a fictional space that is 'sufficiently detailed to enable many different stories to emerge but coherent enough so that each story feels like it fits with the others' (2006: 335). But how exactly do audiences know that different media texts all fit together? And even if they do, is it really plot-based, interconnected world building that invites fans to follow stories across media? Jenkins argues that the transmedial integration of media platforms and their narrative structures – a structure exemplified by the Marvel Universe – can potentially lead to a 'utopic' media culture whereby producers and all corners of a fan base participate equally in the building of a storyworld (2014: 260). Yet the case of Captain Marvel paints an altogether more complex picture, one where this almost utopian notion of a storyworld that captures the attention of its audiences and directs those audiences across multiple titles and additional media is challenged. Importantly, there is the sense that the majority of the female Captain Marvel fans surveyed for this article do not follow the narratively interconnected titles that typify the transmedia Marvel Universe. Instead, we will demonstrate how many fans of the character base their transmedia activity – deciding to navigate across multiple comic titles and other media platforms such as television – on an 'alternative' ethos. That is to say, these fans construct meaning for Captain Marvel not based on any 'official' or 'core' comics, but rather on highly selective strands of consumption, thus tapping into ideas of subcultural

communities versus popular culture. In short, this section details what this ‘alternative’ ethos looks like as a storyworld, and how the fans articulate it.

Since its inception, Marvel has relied on strategies of transmedia storytelling to create a vast interconnected fictional universe (Gotto 2014; Flanagan et al. 2016). Johnson notes that throughout the 1960s and 1970s Marvel heavily embraced the commercial imperatives of transmediality, working towards the creation of a multi-platform ‘participatory world that encouraged loyal readership and multiplied consumption’ (2013: 73–74). Marvel’s storyworld is constructed across an array of interrelated comics and additional media such as films and games, between which characters can move freely and audiences participate, initially ‘across textual structures within the same medium’, but later across other media (Jenkins 2014: 253).

However, although the superhero genre is heralded as one of the forerunners of transmediality (Gotto 2014; Freeman 2016), comic books have a very long history of unequal participation, both within the storyworld (Stuller 2012) and within the perception and marginalization of particularly female fandom (Scott 2012), as was discussed earlier. Much of the existing scholarship on comic book audiences posits that the majority of readers are male – estimated to be as high as 90 per cent (Brown 2015; Tankel and Murphy cited in Scott 2012). Pustz (2000) indicates that female readers, by comparison, tend to buy ‘alternative’ titles from independent publishers rather than mainstream superhero comics. But what characterizes this ‘alternative’ ethos, at least with regards to Captain Marvel, and how does it manifest across media?

Crucially, and despite the wide-scale success of their cinematic counterparts, comic books still remain a predominantly subcultural medium, with a far more limited

reach (Grisanti 2014). It is therefore highly possible that a good proportion of movie-going audiences may never flow between the two media platforms. Stevens and Bell found that comic book fans considered those who only consume the film or television versions not to be ‘authentic’ fans (2012: 775), which points to the way that fans, like industry, can partake in a hierarchical privileging of certain media over others.

In fact, tracing the direction in which the fans surveyed for this article move across the array of Captain Marvel texts available, be them comics, television series, etc., highlights just how particular those fans can be. DeConnick’s *Captain Marvel* comic run remained a predominantly self-contained narrative, apart from a notable crossover event in *Avengers: The Enemy Within* in 2013. Some fans expressed a keen interest in *Captain Marvel* remaining a self-contained title, with one claiming: ‘I read all the first volume of the comics and then I got lost somewhere during a crossover in space’. Other fans were even more emphatic on this point, with one noting that ‘I read all of Carol Danvers, but not much else’. When asked which other Marvel characters they engaged with besides Captain Marvel, another fan declared: ‘None at all’.

Such resistance to moving across the Marvel Universe, at least in the sense based on interconnecting plot lines of a storyworld, is in spite of Marvel’s attempts to integrate the character into wider transmedia narratives. During the same period as the *Avengers: The Enemy Within*, Captain Marvel also rejoined the core Avengers team in *The Avengers: Avengers World* and appeared in several issues following *Guardians of the Galaxy* #15. *The Avengers* is one of the core titles within the Marvel roster, and whilst many of the male participants we surveyed listed it within the titles they read, only eight per cent of female fans did the same. Instead, many of these female fans listed titles

including *Hawkeye* (2012), *Young Avengers* (2013) and *Spider-Woman* (2014). Crucially, all of these titles can be conceived as ‘low-stake access’ (Scott 2013: 6) in the sense that they are for the most part not impacted by events in the core titles and have limited narrative or character crossovers. Not all of these titles feature Captain Marvel (besides a few cameo appearances), but they do all function in a similar way to her solo titles in that they are accessible to new audiences and shy away from complex, interconnected world building. In other words, the alternative ethos that characterizes the attitudes of many Captain Marvel fans and their consumer behaviours is exemplified by self-contained narratives and stories that exist outside of the vast world-building crossovers and long-form storytelling that has long defined the Marvel storyworld. Based on the fans that we surveyed, in fact, only 7% were said to be interested in following Captain Marvel in the core *Avengers* comic. And on television, only 8% were interested in the *Avengers* cartoons, while just 7% had watched Captain Marvel’s animated appearances in the *X-Men* cartoon.

Interestingly, though, and despite this apparent resistance to more mainstream media appearances on television, nearly 60 per cent of the surveyed fans said that they were looking forward to the character’s upcoming blockbuster movie (scheduled for release in 2019), with one fan declaring: ‘I hope that as a result of the movie she becomes more popular in the mainstream’. And yet a desire to engage with so-called alternative Marvel titles, existing – to paraphrase Hebdige (2005: 355) – like a ‘noisy’ Marvel subculture alongside the ‘sound’ of the core Marvel titles, one that acts like ‘a kind of temporary blockage in the system of representation’, is what best epitomizes the transmedia motivations of this article’s Captain Marvel fan base.



Indeed, if the transmedia motivations of this fandom are best encapsulated by the idea of subculture – that is, a marginalized community based on self-actualization that in turn informs their social and cultural identity – then in what particular stories does this alternative ethos manifest, and what does it look like in terms of the storyworld?

Throughout our survey, a number of titles were referenced time and time again as key emblems of the alternative ethos we describe. The first title was *A-Force* (2015), a comic that features Marvel's first all-female team of Avengers. This comic began as part of an alternative storyworld that provided a structure through which Marvel could diversify their storyworld into alternate factions. So-called second-tier titles including the likes of *A-Force*, *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur* (2015) and *Angela: Queen of Hel* (2015) all held similar values in the eyes of fans. *A-Force*, in particular, was seen to be opening up a new dialogue about gender and diversity in comics, being sexually and ethnically diverse and driven by character with a strong focus on interpersonal relationships that seemed to counter the more dominant masculine ideologies of most Marvel comics. The alternative ethos that encapsulates the attitudes of many Captain Marvel fans means that when navigating the Marvel Universe, they do not end up at the big core titles, even when invited to do so via the inclusion of Captain Marvel.

A title that did, however, readily encourage many fans to follow the character beyond her solo comic and into the wider Marvel storyworld was *The Ultimates*, a thirteen-issue series published between 2012 and 2014. Written by Mark Millar and featuring many of the male Avengers characters, *The Ultimates* is not especially feminist, but it does embody a sense of alternativism important to many of the Captain Marvel fans

we surveyed. In an interview, Millar outlined the main difference between *The Ultimates* and *The Avengers*:

The idea behind *The Avengers* is that the Marvel Universe's biggest players all get together and fight all the biggest super-villains they can't defeat individually, whereas *Ultimates* is an exploration of what happens when a bunch of ordinary people are turned into super-soldiers and being groomed to fight the real-life war on terror.

Following the main *Captain Marvel* title, *The Ultimates* was by far the most popular extension title for the Captain Marvel fans we spoke to, with many fans citing its 'wonderful team', 'progressive expansion of the character' and 'thoughtful' depictions as key reasons why. In other words, it is not merely a character-driven, feminist ethos that works to guide certain Captain Marvel fans across multiple titles and additional media. In addition to this, it is an alternative storyworld, crafted of realism and topicality in ways that stands apart from the fantasy and spectacle of the core Marvel storyworld, which ignites strong migratory activity.

### **III.** The digi-gratis ethos

However, realist narratives based on topical themes are not the end of the story. The tendency of many fans to follow a sense of cultural alternativism, one brimming with feminist values, is also articulated as a highly complex form of anti-commercialism – albeit one that still adheres to the market logic of consuming Marvel products. In this section, we return to the previously defined digi-gratis economy – a mash-up between market and gift economies – to demonstrate how fans' highly selective rationales for following only feminist and alternative iterations of the Captain Marvel character and storyworld has led to a fraught relationship with the Marvel corporation that changes how

they approach the creation and consumption of paratextual items, such as fan art. Booth firmly establishes that the multiple ways in which merchandise such as toys, clothes and board games can now interact with media texts ‘problematizes the very notion of a clear-cut “textuality” in the new media environment’ (2010: 4). For Booth, transmediality means that such items are now ‘reflecting this multimedia experience’ (2010: 2), arguing that ‘paratexts are textual in and of themselves’ (2010: 3). But we will now show how the Captain Marvel fans we surveyed choose to engage with only *particular* paratextual items, notably those that allowed fans to clearly communicate their position within the digi-gratis economy that thrives within the digital landscape.

The market economy of media industries has frequently interpreted the ideal form of fan participation as ‘continuous consumption’ and financial support of media texts and paratexts (Scott 2012: 43), which for Marvel would be enacted by fans through collecting merchandise, comics, DVDs and so on. However, such a market economy on the one hand poses a barrier to entry for newer fans when faced with Marvel’s vast complex and interconnected back catalogue. More importantly, in the case of Captain Marvel, a market economy – a commodity-based practice that would encourage the consumption of all texts and paratexts featuring the character, across all media – opposes the very particular media-crossing motivations of this fan base. Whilst fans trusted DeConnick as a figurehead of the comic, so-called corporate Marvel, on the other hand – and by extension the transmedia and paratextual materials that fans deemed to be linked to this corporate side of the company – were not given the same courtesy. For example, fans we surveyed repeatedly pointed to *The Avengers* and *Star Wars* – both Disney properties – as

examples where solo female protagonists (Black Widow and Rey, respectively) were omitted entirely from merchandise ranges.

This is not to say, however, that the fans we spoke to shunned the notion of enacting their fandom through more traditional market economies altogether. When asked what Captain Marvel products they wanted most in the future, 44 per cent of female fans stated more physical and official merchandise. But when pressed to clarify what was meant by ‘official merchandise’, many of these fans admitted that their consumption would likely be limited to action figures because as one fan argued: ‘I believe that women are dying for a selection of Captain Marvel shirts and clothes as ubiquitous as Captain America. It’s not fair’. Yet despite almost no Captain Marvel wearables being produced by Marvel at the time, 26 per cent of surveyed respondents already owned some kind of clothing or jewellery purchased from sites such as Etsy and Welovefine, which provide fan-made pieces or clothing with licensed fan art. Just as fans had been creating and circulating transformative works online before DeConnick’s official text was available to them – fulfilling a demand between themselves – fans now created, shared and sold fan-made merchandise with one another in order to continue to supply the market for the character. For as one fan stated: ‘I have lots of Captain Marvel stuff such as posters and buttons from Etsy because other than the comics there isn’t much official merchandise out there’. Importantly, these kinds of fan-made crafts, fictions and art, purchased outside of official Marvel channels, exemplifies Booth’s digi-gratis economy – ‘not quite a gift economy, and not quite a market economy’ (2010: 25).

Indeed, regarding this in-between status of fans’ paratextual behaviours, it is noteworthy that the Captain Marvel fans who are producing such fan-made crafts and

merchandise and selling them online are of course entering economic transactions for their works, which has them encroaching on Marvel's own commodity territory. In this sense, fans participating in this way are no longer circulating their works within the traditionally conceived gift economy as such, nor are they simply engaging with particular texts that fulfil their required character ethos. Instead, these fans are carving out a space that parallels the gift economy structure – itself adhering to the alternative values ascribed by the fan community – while establishing a different kind of market economy based on the creation of entirely new texts and paratexts, ones that are controlled by fans and also fulfil necessary feminist qualities of the character's ethos. For instance, one fan stated that she only bought from 'secondary sellers who actually have female character merchandise', directly linking this form of participation back to Marvel's so-called failure to meet demand for diversity, as was indicated earlier.

But if fans' paratextual activities do not manifest as a simple gift economy alternative to a corporate market economy – but rather as a digi-gratis mash-up of the two – then what is it that brings this fraught relationship together? Once again, and to bring this article full-circle, the answer to this question is Kelly Sue DeConnick. DeConnick as a figurehead for the earlier discussed Carol Corps fan community used this platform to encourage the consumption of particular Captain Marvel paratexts that embody the digi-gratis economy and to reinforce her stance in making comics more accessible for those who had been previously excluded from the mainstream comic fan community. As she stated on her Tumblr: 'You want in? Hi! Here's your badge. Welcome to the club. Yes, it's really that simple. Anyone who tells you different is lying' (Digital Baubles 2015). Many fans seized upon this open rhetoric, making comments such as: 'It matters a lot that

you just have to profess being in the #CarolCorps. That's huge, given the history of gatekeeping in comics'. Similarly: 'I love how welcoming the #CarolCorps community is. It is such a contrast to the stereotypical trivia-laden gatekeeping in male comics fandom'. Entirely reflective of the digi-gratis economy, DeConnick had of course encouraged fans to participate financially with Captain Marvel via her aforementioned flight plan pre-order forms, but she was also using 'fannish' platforms such as Tumblr and Pinterest to circulate less commercial forms such as fan art, crafts and cosplay of Danvers. This digi-gratis economy meant that prior to any official texts even being published, DeConnick – positioned by many surveyed fans as the auteur of this fandom – was acknowledging transformative works as not only a valid way to participate within the paratextual fan community, but also legitimizing this freely circulating material as equally valuable transmedia extensions of Captain Marvel's storyworld. DeConnick even participated herself, selling T-shirts through WeLoveFine and donating her profits to The Girls Leadership Institute, a charity whose goal to 'help to give a voice to the heroines of tomorrow' aligns closely with the feminist values of the Captain Marvel community.

Whilst the digi-gratis economy outlined above indicates a messy relationship between the Captain Marvel fandom and the array of texts and paratexts available to that fandom, what is important to stress is the clear-minded ways in which fans were influenced by the *values* associated with this particular digi-gratis economy. In short, reciprocity, community – not to mention an open, accessible dialogue between creator and consumer – all directly informed which texts and paratexts fans chose to engage with. Above all else, the Captain Marvel fans surveyed for this article stressed that an important relationship of reciprocity between fans is still largely absent, suggesting that

the fan practice of paratextuality and transmediality more broadly is based on the sharing of an ethos – philosophising, not just following, stories across platforms.

## Conclusion

In a media landscape marked by the often opposing forces of media consolidation and audience fragmentation, Captain Marvel – a character with a longstanding second-tier cultural status that is nevertheless forged within a larger Marvel corporate behemoth – typifies the challenges currently faced by global transmedia giants. Marvel invokes a tradition of multi-platform branded characters, serial narratives and world building – all of which are ideally suited to the industrial mechanics of transmedia storytelling. And yet this article suggests that, at least in some fan communities, audiences choose *not* to understand practices of fictional world building, interconnected storytelling or media branding as the basis of their continued engagement across multiple media.

Instead, we have indicated in this article that the rationales and motivations underpinning the media-migrating behaviours of the Captain Marvel fan base revolve around imprints of feminism, an alternativism to mainstream comics' cultures, and a complex digi-gratis economy, with fans following values, themes and philosophies (rather than stories) across texts and paratexts. As such, it might well be important to begin theorizing different conceptual models for how we study the ways that fans traverse media platforms in the age of convergence culture. Based on the evidence of this article, the concept of story is still applicable to understandings of transmediality, but with Captain Marvel, at least, typically only in relation to the stories that embody the deeper values of feminism, alternativism and a digi-gratis economy. Otherwise the

concept of *transmedia ethos* is indeed more useful in terms of describing the ways in which the fans surveyed for this article navigate the storyworld of Captain Marvel.

While we acknowledge that our arguments are in no way representative of the entire Captain Marvel fan base globally, and certainly not any defined behavioural group of contemporary media fans generally, this apparent lack of generalizability is precisely the point: The article has showcased how within a faction of a fandom that make up just one fictional character's audience, there are different yet specific ethos components that inform how and why people opt to navigate across multiple media. In other words, understanding the particularities of how a group of audiences choose to migrate across texts and paratexts needs further research, rethinking what it might mean in other contexts and in relation to other examples for transmediality to not be conceived as the building of worlds but rather as the building of world philosophies.

If a large corporation such as Marvel seeks to engage with all demographics of its audience across multiple media, then a far more progressive understanding of the unexpected ways by which certain audiences are opting to traverse media is required. On the other hand, the case of Captain Marvel and its fan community points to a time where more old-fashioned auteurist conceptions of authorship are privileged. There is an argument to be made here that particular online platforms and initiatives described throughout this article, such as #CarolCorps and DeConnick's 'flight plan', succeeded in providing spaces for previously side-lined voices to engage in the Captain Marvel transmedia community only via the fannish activism and the discursive privileging of Kelly Sue DeConnick as the single site of authorship. As one fan puts it: 'Not only was Captain Marvel given room to grow as a character and establish her own identity under



Kelly Sue DeConnick, but also the role she has since adopted is one of a strong leader and a positive role model'. Nevertheless, the fans' following of philosophies as well as plots – all within a consumer framework directly between mainstream comics culture and alternative culture, and between market economies and gift economies – raises important questions concerning how large global media conglomerates can go about imposing and sustaining a sense of authorship under such circumstances.

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