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## "Could this comic book really end Islamophobia?": Initial press coverage of Ms. Marvel #1 as commodity activism

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# Ms. Marvel as Commodity Activism

By JD Boucher, Communication Studies Undergraduate

## Abstract

This poster provides an overview at the initial press coverage of the Marvel comic book Ms. Marvel #1 which features an Islamic superheroine located in New Jersey. The comic was released in 2013 and was upheld as a progressive move in comics. The author interrogates the rhetoric used by various media sources to establish the comic as a form of commodity activism and how this media coverage achieves this effect through the use of assimilationist and neoliberal rhetoric. The author finds that popular media coverage of the comic establishes the social problem of Islamophobia and lack of diverse representation in comics, provides a product solution in the form of Ms. Marvel #1, then allows consumers to participate in a constructed socially aware identity on social media through the “IamMsMarvel” hashtag. This paper adds to existing literature on commodity activism, and how it can be constructed without an explicit branding of such by the company creating the commodity.

## Commodity Activism

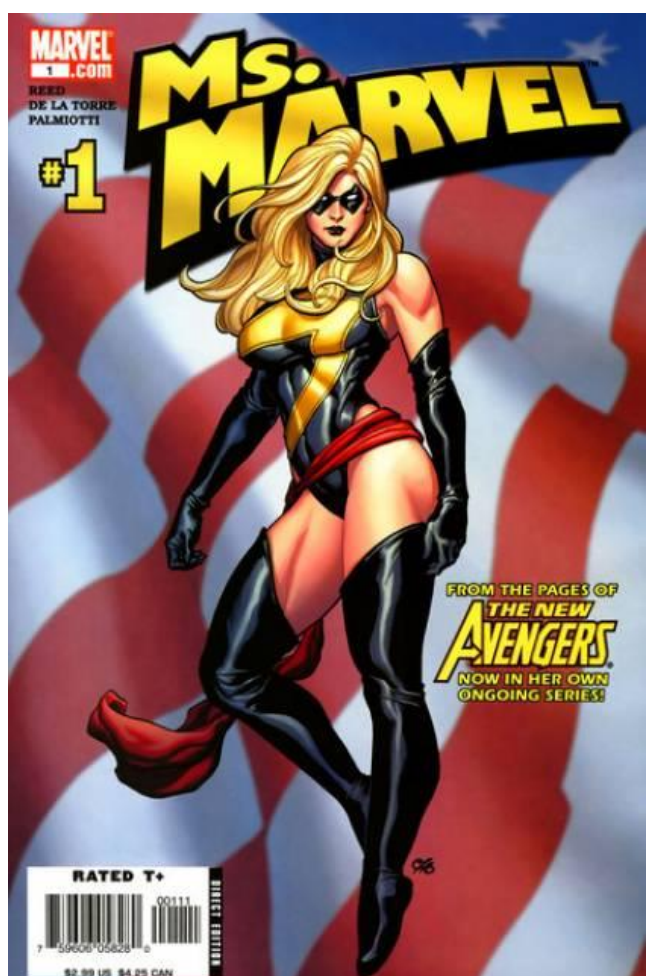
Commodity activism is selling a product in order to support a cause, whether political or social. This is also known as cause related marketing, the process of tying a brand with a certain social cause via donations or support as a dramatic way to build brand reputation.

Ms. Marvel is a distinct break from the portrayal of Muslim women and female superheroes. Ms. Marvel is a young, powerful Muslim woman with a practical costume. Typically superheroines have revealing outfits and serve supporting roles in male-led comics, while women who practice Islam are stereotypically portrayed as oppressed in mainstream media.



## NEWS COVERAGE

### The Slighted Superheroine!



- New York Times brought up a “Quest for Diversity in comics”, and how superheroes are typically white men
- Washington Post talked about how superheroines are typically scantily-clad and typically targeted towards males.

- Even Fox News interviewed one comic book store owner who said representation in comics is a must.

## The Marvel Solution

Ms. Marvel was covered as a product that would fight stereotypes.

- The Guardian stated that Ms. Marvel could act as a counter to Islamophobia in show business, while an article by the Mic was titled “Could This Comic be the end of Islamophobia?”
- “Marvel’s work is a watershed moment in breaking down fear and ignorance... With the use [of] comics let us hope that a real dialogue of civilizations is starting between the west and Muslims.” -From the Daily Beast (a subsidiary of Newsweek)

## The Marvel Gaffe

- This trivializes the real effects of islamophobia, which is cultural system put in place over years that won’t be dismantled because of a single comic book
- By promoting this product as the cure to islamophobia, it excludes other, non-product ways to work against it.

## LATE EDITION

### Marvel Backpedals!

- Marvel says Ms. Marvel creation was “very organic, there was no agenda” removing themselves from any political outcomes.
- Marvel says Ms. Marvel is “Pakistani-American but just like every other teenage girl”
- Marvel assures readers that Ms. Marvel is Muslim, but not *really* Muslim, so they shouldn’t feel uncomfortable.
- Marvel limits the politics of Ms. Marvel’s religion to appeal to a larger audience.



## Conclusion

Ms. Marvel #1 went to a 7th printing, a feat only repeated by 15 other comics.

Marvel limited the potential social and political outcomes that could’ve come with Ms. Marvel #1, but still profited off of the commodity activism rhetoric surrounding it.