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## **Reimagining gender in Webtoon – queer utopianism in H-P Lehkonen’s *Immortal Nerd* and its reader-response**

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### **Introduction**

Queer comics, or comics depicting LGBTQ+ experiences, have become a vibrant phenomenon in contemporary comics covering various genres from autobiographies to speculative fiction, and ranging from print form to digital comics (Halsall and Warren 2022:7). For many digitally published queer comics, it is typical to imagine idealised spaces or societies devoid of heteronormativity’s restrictions (Young 2022:329). These comics can be regarded to represent utopian thought, or utopianism, since they imagine societies free from the constraints, norms, and codes of the present society and present visions of a better world (see Sargisson 1996:50). By exploring alternative states of being to those presently existing, they can help us to stretch and expand our understanding of the possible (Sargisson 1996:52). In this chapter, I analyse a queer, English-language webcomic, H-P Lehkonen’s *Immortal Nerd* (2015–2017), that was published on Webtoon, an online and transnational comic platform that enables social interaction between the users. I argue that comics have the potential to practise queer utopianism and that the social interaction on Webtoon can be regarded as an online instance of micro activism, a form of influencing that usually takes place in everyday spaces and happens in small, understated moments (see Cooper 2016:78). I will first introduce my understanding of queer utopianism and the method for my analysis before moving on to the analysis of the reader-responses.

### **Queer comics and utopianism**

According to Lin Young (2022:314), queer webcomics often place the queer experience as the default and refuse labelling the characters from the perspective of heteronormativity. Queerness is thus “omnipresent while simultaneously being undefined and unremarked upon” (Young 2022:317). Instead of describing the problems of the heteronormative system, the comics imagine “normalized worlds either unaffected or actively resistant to heteronormative control, wherein Queerness may be depicted and explored without being necessarily oriented around or defined with regard to political oppression and its resistance” (Young 2022:314). As Young notes, these webcomics base their worldbuilding on queer utopian thinking that, according to José Esteban Muñoz (2009:35, 122), consists of the ability and desire to imagine spaces outside of the restrictions and oppression of heteronormativity, and new realities and futurities that queer people feel are worth striving for. Since queer refers to the rejection and erasure of normativity and dichotomies, it has been suggested that a new and different mode of thinking about gender and sexuality be envisioned (Sobolczyk 2015:2). Thus, queer utopianism requires openness of thinking, ability to imagine, and willingness to question heteronormative norms, assumptions, and expectations.

Queer utopianism is central in the worldbuilding of *Immortal Nerd*, a futuristic slice of life comic, that combines elements of genres such as science fiction, romance, superhero, action, and even ecotriller with the depictions of everyday life. The plot revolves around the protagonist, a young person called Nokia, who travels from their home, a space station, to planet Earth to begin their university studies. Despite its futuristic setting, the comic introduces many topics and themes typical for YA fiction. The story shows Nokia's struggles as a student, making new friends, and adapting to their new living environment, foreign habits, and customs. The comic does not represent a perfect future: although the story is set in the far future, in the 4000s, people are still greedy, selfish, and mistreat the environment. From the perspective of gender, however, the depicted world seems like a queer utopia.

The utopian potential of *Immortal Nerd* resides in how it normalises diversity by portraying a society where neither gender nor any other socially constructed category, such as sexuality, race, ethnicity, ability, or age, creates hierarchies of oppression and privilege. Often diversity is represented in queer comics by introducing a vast and diverse cast of characters (Young 2022:316). The strategy applies also to Lehkonen's comics, which usually include, for example, nonbinary, transgender, agender, and ethnically diverse characters with intersectional identities (see also Vuorinne and Kauranen 2022). Regarding sexual identities, the norm of heterosexuality as a natural or 'right' identity does not exist in the comic's world, and the dominant ideal of a heteronormativity is destabilised by normalising aromantic, same-sex, and polygamous relationships. The comic's world is in stark contrast to today's society, where queer people remain at risk of being marginalised, victimised, and discriminated against.

Queer comics are claimed to have the potential to subvert social discourses, norms, and rules (Joy et al. 2021:886) and to expand people's imagination by shaping, informing, and influencing how people see their bodies, desires, and attachments (Halsall, Warren and Fawaz 2022:89). By representing queer experience, hope, and joy, queer comics are claimed to act as a tool for positive resistance (Young 2023:329). These claims are in line with feminist comics research that regards comics as tools for social change that can, for example, challenge and disrupt preconceived ideas and beliefs, tackle taboo subjects, represent injustices that we recognise from the actual world, and provide empowering examples (Munt and Richards 2020; Nordenstam and Wallin Victorin 2019; Beers Fägersten et al. 2021; Romu 2021; Romu 2022). On Webtoon, queer comics and their representations of gender are discussed and negotiated by the readers collectively, which makes the platform suitable for online micro activism, a method of opinion changing that consists of small, everyday activities and interventions (Cooper 2016:78) — such as commenting a webcomic or other readers' comments.

### **Webtoon as a place for collective meaning-making**

*Immortal Nerd* consists of 113 episodes, and in the comments section below each episode, readers can express their reading experiences, opinions, thoughts, and reactions. They can interact with each other (horizontal communication) and with the author (vertical communication; see Shin 2016:106). As previous research shows, readers of webtoons

participate in collective reading and meaning-making by expressing their emotions and sharing their ideas, opinions, values, and life experiences (Shin 2016; Jeon 2021). As part of this activity, readers have, for example, negotiated and renegotiated gender and sexual norms. In Kyoung Wan Cathy Shin's (2016) research, readers used the comment section to discuss the protagonist's gender identity and share their knowledge about LGBTQ+ minorities. Many readers not only learned more about minorities but also enhanced critical self-reflection about their own internalised norms and prejudices (Shin 2016:113–114). However, the comment section was also a place for a conceptual and political struggle since some readers refused to negotiate and expressed judgmental attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people (Shin 2016:116–117). Nevertheless, Webtoon's discussion sections are proven to be places of social learning where readers reflect upon the comic's representations, share their own experiences and thoughts, and participate in critical discussions about societal matters (Jeon 2021).

While previous research on webtoons has analysed reader-to-reader interaction (Shin 2016, Jeon 2021), little attention has been paid to the interaction between the readers and text, i.e., how the readers interpret the verbal and visual elements of comics and use them for understanding, conceptualising, and imagining gender. My reader-response analysis aims to understand how the readers of *Immortal Nerd* interpret representations of gender to produce meanings, and how these meanings connect to their concepts, ideas, and assumptions about gender. As a method, I used thematic analysis which is suitable for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun and Clarke 2006:79). Reflexive thematic analysis was chosen because it enables the construction of themes from the data based on the researcher's interests and theoretical orientations (Terry and Hayfield 2021:4), in this case the notion of queer utopianism as transformative thinking, and thus requires the researcher to acknowledge their role in the knowledge production (Braun and Clarke 2019:594). I began collecting data by gathering all the comments regarding gender, sexuality, and future from all 113 episodes. A total of 1,222 comments (published November 13, 2015–September 3, 2019) was included. After that, I limited the data set based on my interest in utopian thought and focused on the subset of comments reflecting the readers' opinions and thoughts of the storyworld as a possible future scenario. Keywords such as 'future' and other time-related words and tenses were used to identify those comments. As a result, the data consisted of 85 comments made by 69 users. By focusing on a smaller data set, my aim was to provide a more detailed and nuanced account of the topic of queer utopianism, not of everything the readers of *Immortal Nerd* discussed about gender and sexuality. As reflexive thematic analysis aims to understand shared meanings (Braun and Clarke 2019:593), I used feminist theories (e.g. Butler 1999) to understand what kinds of expectations and conceptions about gender lay beneath the surface level of the comments.

Internet and reader-response research always requires careful consideration of ethical questions, and the researcher must minimise harm to other people (Franzke et al. 2020). The commentators in the comment section of webtoons use pseudonyms, and their profiles are not visible to others. To minimise the potential harm to the discussants, I assigned codes for the readers' user IDs (R1–R20). The comments are reproduced here as verbatim reflecting original grammar and orthography, but some are shortened for the sake of clarity. The

analysis that follows consists of three key themes I generated from the dataset, 1) gender as a bodily performance, 2) gender as a changing construct, and 3) utopian/dystopian future.

### **Gender as a bodily performance**

Comics, as a highly visual medium, usually requires the visualisation of the characters' bodies, and the history of visualising gender differences is as long as the history of the medium itself. The artistic choices of representing gender connect to larger cultural and social conventions, norms, and expectations, such as gender roles and ideals of femininity and masculinity. The assumptions about gender are, on the one hand, reflected, and on the other hand, produced in the representations and imageries of bodies, including comics (El Refaie 2012:72). According to literary scholar Marion Gymnich, readers tend to “project their own (culture-specific and historically variable) knowledge, including assumptions related to the category gender, onto fictional characters” (Gymnich 2010:510). In this view, readers try to fit fictional characters into a real-world frame of a gender system that, in the Western culture, has been dominantly binary and normative (Gymnich 2010:510) — although queer ways of reading are also possible and historically practised (see e.g, Halsall, Warren and Fawaz 2022:90).

Many of the characters in *Immortal Nerd*, including the protagonist, are represented by combining features that are considered either masculine or feminine in the binary system. Moreover, their gender is not explicitly verbally stated or identified in the comic. This ambiguity caused confusion and puzzlement among the readers who felt they could not with certainty read the gender of the bodies they saw. In the comment section of episode 22, Lehkonen (2016) clarified the protagonist to be “nonbinary amab” (assigned male at birth). Nevertheless, the readers continued to guess the protagonist's gender throughout the episodes and tried to fit them into the gender binary. Many readers expressed confusion and even frustration, as R1 stated: “I think in that future... the gender is confusing. The father has long curly hair just like a girl and Nokia looks like some gangster kind of girl or maybe she/he is a boy. Welp. I dunno.” As the comment illustrates, the readers based their interpretation of gender on the visualisation of the characters' bodies, including the body shape (especially the size of the breasts), body hair, clothing, and makeup. The readers' attempts to identify the genders of the characters recall the idea of performativity (Butler 1999:xv, 179), where gender is thought to be produced and generated in repetitive practices, through the gendered stylisation of the body. In this process — that is affected and sustained by the gender binary — certain signs, acts, and practices are interpreted as belonging to either domains of masculine or feminine. Furthermore, these signs are thought of as manifestations of a gendered essence, male or female.

The readers' comments about the characters' genders reflect both descriptive and normative views on gender. Firstly, many comments revolved around considerations of what makes gender intelligible. Secondly, many expressed their views on which expressions of gender are acceptable. In discussing, identifying, and negotiating the protagonist's gender, body hair was repeatedly interpreted as a gendered visual marker. For some, the visualisation of leg hair, as depicted in Figure 1, was a sign of the protagonist being a man, for others it was a sign of

them being a lazy and unattractive woman. R2 expressed a strong affective response toward body hair but also reflected on the character's gender based on other visual clues:

Jesus! How can someone not shave?! Ok, her/his right but eww! xD And I also think she could be a transgender. But maybe in the future of this story universe, clothes and style means nothing and she is a he. OR, she just doesn't shave (ew), who knows?

In Western visual culture, women's body hair is nearly invisible or absent, and the female body is constructed through the cultural and gendered norm of hair removal (Lesnik-Oberstein 2007:2). When using body hair as a visual clue of the protagonist's gender the readers simultaneously expressed their views of gendered beauty norms. While some expressed disgust, others tried to normalise and naturalise women's body hair or defended everyone's right to personal choice. For example, R3 appreciates the protagonist's boldness but ends up misgendering them: "It's cool that Nokia is confident and doesn't shave her legs. I'm sure in the future that nobody will care if girls didn't shave."

Fig. 1. © H-P Lehkonen, *Immortal Nerd*, Webtoon, 2015–2017, ep. 1.

In addition to hair, clothing was an important visual sign of gender for the readers. In the first episode, the protagonist is introduced as wearing purple, laced lingerie which many readers interpreted as a sign of them being a woman (see Figure 1). However, this visual detail together with leg hair caused perplexity. Other characters dress ambiguously as well. While some readers were frustrated with clothing not used for marking gender differences, others were pleased: "I like it the way it is. male and female are free to dress the way they want. skirts or pants. short or long hair." (R4). Whereas many comments reflect the internalisation of beauty and gender norms as naturalised and fixed, others reflect the understanding of them as historical and thus open for change. R5 replied to another reader who was disgusted by the protagonist's body hair by using futurity as a synonym for open-mindedness: "You're clearly not living in the 4000's lol what's so bad about it, what if the future trend is to be natural?" For some, the androgynous gender representation and the lack of visible gender differences even indicated equality between genders and the end of gender hierarchy, as R6 expressed: "I love how everyone looks nether male or female! The world has finally learned that they are equals!!!"

Ambiguous gender representations have been suggested to be potentially conducive to undermining the readers' traditional and binary ideas of gender (Gymnich 2010:516). Comics as drawn art entail possibilities for new, radical, and queer ways of representing gender since artists may choose what to visualise and how. As *Immortal Nerd* exemplifies, comics can combine different gender-connoted signs or avoid them altogether to create ambiguous gender representations resisting binaries (see also Beckmann 2021:134–135). Additionally, all formal aspects of comic art, including images, words, colours, styles, layouts, and panels

can contribute to the exploring, critiquing, and subverting of gender norms (Joy et al. 2021:886). Many readers of *Immortal Nerd* insisted on using the binary gender model and its norms to interpret the characters. However, the ambiguous gender representation also prompted some to negotiate not only gender-connoted signs but also the concept of gender itself.

### **Gender as a changing construct**

The readers of webtoons come from all over the world with different backgrounds and knowledge about gender (see Shin 2016:110–111; Jeon 2021:657). Many readers of *Immortal Nerd* expressed bewilderment or even frustration about the comic's gender representation since it differed from their usual perceptions and conceptions. In some comments, gender was equated with sex, or the biological and anatomical aspect of gender, while others made a distinction between these two — and in some cases tried to educate others on the matter, as we shall see in a later comment. This kind of horizontal communication is potentially transformative since readers may gain new knowledge and self-reflexively begin to reconsider their internalised conceptions (Shin 2016:119); and I regard this as an instance of micro activism.

The interpretation and negotiation of the characters' genders were based on the readers' abilities to read both visual and verbal information. The names of the characters are gender-neutral and the nonbinary protagonist Nokia<sup>1</sup> is referred to by using the gender-neutral pronoun they/them in the introductory text of the comic, captions, and speech balloons. In the comment section, the negotiation of the proper pronoun was ongoing, since many were unfamiliar with gender-neutral pronouns, and some refused to use them for grammatical or ideological reasons. Readers paid similar linguistic attention to the pronouns and nouns used for other characters. Since many of the characters were visually androgynous, readers seemed to crave other cues to identify their gender. Some shared their knowledge of the gender-neutral pronouns being used for nonbinary people but, overall, the readers struggled with the pronouns. One explanation for the confusion might be the media representation of nonbinary people which, at the time of the publication, was still scarce. For many readers, the comic may have been the first encounter with nonbinary representation.

Because the story takes place in the far future of the 4000s, many readers approached the question of gender speculatively. As a genre, science fiction “reflects contemporary realities back to us through the lens of a particular type of imagination, one associated with the future [...] with the important idea that life does not remain static; what we know today may be entirely different tomorrow” (Pearson et al. 2008:3, emphasis added). Firstly, the readers conceptualised the future via the idea that the progression of time signifies the progression of the gender system. In this view, gender and gender binary were seen as constructs predestined to evolve and change as time goes by. As R7 writes, “it wouldn't make sense for views on gender to remain constant forever.” The difference between the present world and the speculative future is articulated by R8 who responds to those who are confused about the representation of gender:

As you might have noticed, the story of this webtoon takes place in distant future and this is how the author envisions that future. Just because the concept of “gender≠sex” is hardly accepted today, it doesn't mean it can't be a general thing in thousand years.

While ambiguous gender representations may test conventional ideas of gender, for many, the incompatibility between the representation and internalised conceptualisation of gender prevented them from enjoying the story. R9 comments on this tension by stating that gender ambiguity is an essential part of the story and its world:

a lot of people I've seen in the comments are complaining about there being too many genderless characters, but the gender of the characters doesn't really matter at all in this story, they're just people who happen to be non-binary, not like they're pushing some agenda. Who cares if they're a girl or a boy or neither, this is the 40th century, I can assume that it's not anything huge in this universe. If you don't like it, that's fair, but that's just how the story is.

For some readers, the ambiguity puzzle was solved by letting go of the urge to identify and categorise:

Maybe they transitioned from being a girl to a guy? Or something totally different. Honestly I don't even know anymore. And I just don't question it. Gender isn't an important thing needed to enjoy this great webtoon. It seems in their world, gender isn't a big deal and that's kinda nice. No more stereotypes and stuff, yeah? (R10)

As the comment demonstrates, gender was understood as a social construct bringing about hierarchies, expectations, norms, and roles that can be harmful and limiting — but can also be disposed of.

Secondly, the future was considered an unknown territory where anything could be possible. Over several comments, R11 educated others about the genre conventions of science fiction:

Like I keep saying... Typically in sci-fi stories or really any story taking place in the future, gender is sort of an obsolete term. Gendered pronouns are avoided, for one example. So for what it's worth, the characters probably don't have a gender, or not in the way we think about it.

In this view, nonbinary gender was interpreted almost as a thought experiment, whereas some others countered by sharing their knowledge of nonbinary people:

i mean, nonbinary genders exist nowadays but most people don't know about them/don't think they're real, so maybe in this future setting being outside of

the binary is commonplace. gender could be seen as more fluid by the general population, or even nonexistent. (R12).

Fig. 2. © H-P Lehkonen, *Immortal Nerd*, Webtoon, 2015–2017, ep. 96.

Another important verbal element for the readers was diegetic text embedded in the images. Through attentive reading, they noticed that spaces in our world that are usually gendered (e.g., changing rooms), were not gendered in the fictional world. Instead, they were categorised by the distinction between human and non-human. Also, in an episode where a character gives birth, the readers paid attention to a detail that could be spotted in the background of a panel, as can be seen in Figure 2. The celebratory balloon does not announce the baby as a representative of their sex (which was not even revealed) but as a new-born human: “it’s a HUMAN wow” (IN, ep. 96). R13 saw the detail as significant and shared their appreciation with others by indicating the difference between the present practices and the speculative future: “In an era when you don’t assume the gender just from seeing the genital parts of the newborn, but let them grow to tell you themselves... Nicely thought.” These detailed texts and the transhuman aspect of the storyworld prompted the readers to consider the relevance of the gender binary for nonhumans and bring up the distinction between sex and gender.

### **Utopian/dystopian future**

Several readers reacted to the depicted future by considering it either positive and desirable or negative and undesirable. Utopia and dystopia are often considered opposites, in which the first one “encapsulates the hope of what might be” and the latter one “represents the fear of what the future may hold if we do not act to avert catastrophe” (Levitas 1990:165). For those who regarded the depicted future positively, important issues were acceptance, respect, diversity, and open-mindedness. As R14 puts it: “at first I wasn’t into this comic but oh my dog it has my heart now! i wish the world was this cool about gender and sexuality now. no explaining just acceptance. It’s all so pure and kind!”

Utopian texts can be tools for social imagination since, on the one hand, they can encourage the readers to reflect on the problems of the current society, and, on the other, point a direction for a better society (Eskelinen et al. 2020:7,12). In this sense, utopian texts are about hope: they not only show a desirable alternative but also hint about the path towards it. This connection between the present and the future and utopianism as a forward-looking and hopeful mode of thinking is also apparent in another comment:

“I can’t believe this comic is about to end ;-; I love it down to its core! Not only the complex social issues it covers, but the extreme acceptance that exists in this amazing world you’ve written. I hope it will become real someday.”  
(R15)

Those who deemed the future bleak, saw the representation of gender as apocalyptic, disgusting, incomprehensible, and not realistic. The contrasting reactions illustrate how, for

some, the depicted utopian society may seem dystopian, not as something to strive for but rather something to avoid, as expressed by R16: “ugh i hope in the future this gender bs isnt real. im glad this is fiction.” In this case, gender representations in the comic differed radically from the readers’ views of how the world ought to be. Whereas some were relieved that the comic was only fiction (as opposed to real), some expressed their worry that today’s identity politics would lead to gender diversity and fluid conceptions of gender: “I feel as if this is a world that was taken over by tumblr, feminazis, and special snowflakes because everybody be so delicate and I’m not 100% on anybody’s gender” (R17). The depicted world was deemed frightful and against their ideology or regarded as something incomprehensible according to their conceptions of gender. As in Shin’s (2016:116–117) research, some readers of *Immortal Nerd* refused to negotiate and used offensive language in their comments.

In contrast, diversity was regarded positively by others. The future was anticipated to be more accepting than today’s society, a place free from gender-based norms and stereotypes, categorising, and prejudices. A reader who situated themselves as part of queer community wrote in a relieved tone:

Lol normally I avoid the comment section but reading how confused cis people are by all of the trans happening in this comic is hilarious. Like for me reading all of this feels super relaxing because this is how the world should be, full of *trans and gender non-conforming folx just living and being awesome like we do usually* but you know, without all the bigotry.” (R18; emphasis added)

In Muñoz’s (2009:97) view on queer utopia, utopian thinking is propelled by desire and want for change. Queer utopia is always beyond the present, something to push towards. The readers who welcomed the depicted future of *Immortal Nerd* hoped next generations would see a world as accepting and diverse as in the comic: “I really hope my greatgrandkids get to see a future like this.” (R19). On the other hand, many also speculated on the possibility of seeing the loosening of gender norms already during our lifetime: “it would be amaaaaazing! and it would be even more Amazing if it happens while we’re still alive <3 ♡♡♡” (R20).

Although the comic introduces the events taking place in the distant future, in the year of 4062, the question of time is not as simple. The second to last episode reveals that the future calendar is flexible and that years can be skipped over if the “Earth time council” decides so. The ambiguous representation of time enhances the vital aspect of hope in queer utopias by hinting that change may be just around the corner.

### **Conclusion: hope**

Amid global turbulence and the ongoing trend of dystopian fiction, there is a place and a need for utopian texts, utopianism, and hope. Muñoz (2009:97) claims that “minoritarian subjects are cast hopeless in a world without utopia”, and I agree that utopias and hope go hand in hand. Utopianism in queer comics functions as a strategy to create safe spaces, communities, worlds, and stories that shift the focus away from heteronormative perspective and the

essentialist conceptions of gender. Already the normalisation of queer experiences can be transformative in queer comics (see Young 2022). In online communities, queer comics can be transformative also for readers unfamiliar with such experiences by inviting them to challenge their understanding and thinking of gender, as I demonstrated in my analysis. The social aspect of Webtoon enables the readers to learn not only from the comic itself but also from each other. My analysis indicates that readers are attentive to visual and verbal cues for representing gender and eagerly express their observations, ideas, and assumptions in the comment section where meanings about gender are then socially negotiated. Topics discussed by the readers included gendered beauty norms, conception of gender, nonbinary people, gender-neutral pronouns, and values such as acceptance, respect, diversity, and open-mindedness — topics that are essential for contemporary feminisms. From this perspective, online comic platforms, such as Webtoon, can be regarded as fertile grounds for social learning and micro activism that may have positive ripple effects in society.

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> The protagonist’s name refers to the globally known Finnish telecommunications corporation Nokia but also to a small town in Finland that is known for companies manufacturing tyres and footwear. Old Nokia phones had a reputation of being indestructible, so the protagonist’s name is a witty reference to their immortality.

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