"The florals": Female fans over 50 in the Sherlock fandom

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[0.1] Abstract—This article uses e-mail interviews with nine female fans to explore what it means to be a fan over the age of 50 of the popular BBC drama Sherlock (2010–). The research aims to better understand the role of fandom in later life, in particular how the participants in this study negotiate their perceptions of their subjective age in relation to being a fan in this part of their life course. This study combines theory on cultural gerontology with fan studies and mediatization theory in order to understand the dynamics and processes that guide fans’ negotiations of subjective age as well as the role of fan practices and the affordances of social media in these processes. I argue that fandom, as a manifestation of a mediatized culture, augments the relevance of subjective age and informs the way in which participants in middle and later life perceive and negotiate their own subjective age specifically in relation to fandom as youth culture, women’s passion, and creativity.

[0.2] Keywords—Aging; Benedict Cumberbatch; Fan studies; Gerontology; Mediatization; Sherlock Holmes; Subjective age


[0.3] Growing older is mainly an ordeal of the imagination—a moral disease, a social pathology—intrinsic to which is the fact that it afflicts women much more than men.

—Susan Sontag, "The Double Standard of Aging" (1972)

1. Introduction

[1.1] Sontag's (1972) observation suggests that growing old has a special set of implications for women and that growing old is much more than a biological process. It is also a sociocultural process that shapes our everyday lives as well as our norms and ideals tied to aging. This study analyzes the intersection between two spaces—subjective age (Montepare 2009; Ward 2010) and fandom (Hills 2002; Sandvoss 2005)—in nine women over the age of 50 who are fans of BBC’s Sherlock (2010–). I argue that fandom, as a part of a mediatized culture (Hjarvard 2009, 2013; Hepp 2013; Lundby 2009), augments a space in which subjective age is negotiated in a particular way through social media and fan practices.

[1.2] The BBC TV series Sherlock stars Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman in the leading roles of the famous detective Sherlock Holmes and his trusted right-hand man, Dr. John Watson, in a modern interpretation of Arthur Conan Doyle’s classic detective stories. The show’s fan base has a prevalent place on social media such as Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, and a number of dedicated forums. Sherlock fans follow the minutiae of filming new episodes (under the hashtag #setlock), discuss the narrative in
great detail, create ancillary texts and artwork, interact with cast and crew, plan meetups, and follow the main actors’ every move. While some fan phenomena draw primarily teenage audiences, the Sherlock fandom seems to represent a wide range of age groups. This might be because of the age of the original Arthur Conan Doyle stories, meaning that even older adults will have grown up with the stories in both their literary forms and earlier adaptations for film and television. We might also speculate that the appeal of lead actor Benedict Cumberbatch and his cerebral approach to the role as Sherlock helps draw in more mature audiences. Harrington, Bielby, and Bardo (2011) highlight some of the major socio-demographic changes for recent generations and how these changes may be understood in relation to "their potential impact on fandom" (568). They reflect that with the advent of a dominant media culture over the past half century or more, we now encounter older generations who have been a part of media-based fandoms for the majority of their lives. They grew up with mass media and the rise of celebrity culture as we know it today. As an active member of the Sherlock fandom, I was struck by the spread in age groups among fellow fans, and this led to the current study.

[1.3] This article brings together studies on subjective age (Montepare 2009; Kotter-Grühn and Hess 2012; Ward 2010; Kleinspehn-Ammerlahn, Kotter-Grühn, and Smith 2008), cultural gerontology (Gillear and Higgs 2000), mediatization theory (Lundby 2009; Hjarvard 2009; Hepp 2013), and fan studies (Sandvoss 2005; Harrington and Bielby 2010; Harrington, Bielby, and Bardo 2011). I wish to argue that social media play a role in the way in which fans negotiate and understand their subjective age. Whelehan and Gwynne (2014) argue that contemporary media culture’s means of dealing with aging is often prescriptive:

[1.4] Whether negative and predictable or hopelessly positive, depictions of aging manage to seem prescriptive: the no-longer-young (anyone over 45) dress too young or too old, have given up on a "healthy sex life or are still sexually active and acting disgracefully." The only measurement used to gauge aging is lack of youth, and the only way to deal with it is to "defy" it and remain provisionally, improbably young. (4)

[1.5] I argue that this is still a predominant mode of understanding aging in fandom. People over a certain age are considered too old to participate in what is often, particularly in popular media, considered predominantly a youth culture. Furthermore, I wish to argue that this prescriptive approach is being changed from within fandom by fans themselves. There nevertheless remains a broad understanding of anything from middle age and up as too old for fandom. This was emphasized in a 2014 interview with Sherlock actor Benedict Cumberbatch. Interviewer Aaron Hicklin (2014) sets the scene as follows: "Cumberbatch curses gently under his breath: 'Oh lord, here we go, here we go.' He indicates two middle-aged women in flowery dresses sitting at a table across the room. 'The florals over there,' he says, eyes averted. 'They're giving a bit of a head-turning—it's begun.'"

[1.6] In the interview, the two florals later walk up to Cumberbatch to ask for his autograph, which he politely declines. When the interview came out, it generated a reaction on Twitter from both younger and older fans who found the comment insensitive and hoped that Cumberbatch had been misquoted. Other fans joked about "the florals" as a label, and some fans joked that the fan community should coordinate its presence at Benedict Cumberbatch’s performance of Hamlet at the Barbican in 2015 so that the entire audience would be wearing floral dresses. To my knowledge, this ambition was not realized. Over the following months, Benedict Cumberbatch’s then-fiancée, Sophie Hunter, was seen wearing floral dresses at red carpet events, with the result that the derogatory sentiment that could initially be read into his outburst softened. Maybe being a floral was not so bad after all.

[1.7] Many older fans do still partly subscribe to the prescriptive approach to aging in fandom. Little remarks in their Twitter bios such as "Too old to be here, too old not to care" or "refining grumpy old bag skills" point to an awareness that fan culture is believed to belong to a particular life course and that they are somehow infringing on this as outsiders. Montepare (2009, 42) discusses the issue of subjective age in relation to behavioral development: "Although we know a great deal about some aspects of
subjective age (such as its patterns and correlates), our understanding about why individuals perceive their age the way they do and why it changes or differs across the lifespan is more limited. My aim is to offer one perspective on how fandom, here exemplified by *Sherlock* fandom, impacts participants' perceptions and guides their negotiations regarding their own subjective age through their passion and devotion to a media text.

2. Theory: Processes of mediatization and subjective age in fandom

[2.1] This article takes its point of departure from a cross-disciplinary theoretical outset that combines mediatization theory (Hjarvard 2009), fan studies (Harrington and Bielby 2010; Harrington, Bielby, and Bardo 2011; Sandvoss 2005; Hills 2002), and cultural gerontology (Gilleard and Higgs 2000), with a particular focus on subjective age. This cross-disciplinary approach allows us to understand the complex parameters that shape how fans make sense of their age, their fan commitment, and their fan practices after the age of 50. I focus in particular on how the fans in this study negotiate subjective age in relation to: (1) fandom as a youth culture, (2) their passion for the television series *Sherlock*, and (3) the creative outlet available through their participation in fandom.

[2.2] Mediatization theory (Lundby 2009; Hjarvard 2009, 2013; Hepp 2013) has gained ground in media studies research over the past decade as a theoretical frame that attempts to grasp media’s role in sociocultural transformations in a variety of sociocultural contexts from religion to politics. Mediatization is both a historical process that captures media’s increasing authority in and saturation of our society, but we can also understand and analyze how processes of mediatization occur on micro and meta levels in specific empirical contexts. In this article, I include mediatization theory because it offers a framework for understanding how fandom, as a cultural space that to a high degree takes place on online social media, becomes a vehicle for transformations of the application and use of subjective age for the participants.

[2.3] Thus far, mediatization theory has not sought to grasp mediatization processes in relation to aging, but an upcoming volume of *Nordicom Review* deals with growing old in an age of mediatization (forthcoming 2017). Hjarvard (2009) discusses transformations of social character in relation to mediatization. He argues that media promotes a soft individualism, indicating that the formation of social character in highly modernized societies is guided by weak social ties enabled by social media networks. This is particularly interesting in relation to fandoms in which social ties are often instigated and developed on social media such as Twitter and Tumblr. While many fans would object to the notion of their online friendships as weak, Hjarvard’s thoughts on the changes in social character brought about by changes in the media landscape are a relevant entry point into this discussion. Hjarvard discusses “how mediatization processes affect the relationship between the individual and society, with a particular emphasis on how media enable, structure and change the ways in which individuals acquire normative orientation and enter into social relations with each other” (Hjarvard 2009, 160). In the present article, I focus on this process in relation to the question of age, with particular emphasis on how participants acquire normative orientation when negotiating subjective age in relation to other fans and their nonfandom surroundings.

[2.4] Harrington and Bielby (2014) argue that the marketing of certain popular culture texts targets subjective age rather than chronological age and that we may understand this tendency as part of the process of restructuring the life course. Their discussion of age and media consumption includes thoughts on tribal marketing: “Tribal marketing focuses on affinity groups that emerge through shared passion” (Harrington, Bielby, and Bardo 2011, 573). This marketing toward affinity groups rather than age-based cohorts reflects tendencies in consumption that are particularly relevant to fandom, in which a wide range of consumers and media users engage in media and popular culture with shared habits and patterns of consumption (see also Maffesoli 1996). On a related note, some fans do in fact describe their fan community as a tribe, underpinning the point of Harrington, Bielby, and Bardo (2011). One 56-year-old fan from Germany reflects, "I felt like, I finally had found my people, my tribe:) I always hated
seeing something good with friends and not being able to discuss it afterwards because they were already back in their everyday lives, so to see that amount of thought, analysis, ideas, creative, enthusiasm spent on this show—it was a revelation."

[2.5] This market tendency to place less emphasis on generational indicators and more on other parameters of belonging across generations manifests itself in the social structures of fandom. Cultural gerontologists Gilleard and Higgs (2000) discuss the rise and fall of various (media) brands and technologies, such as the VHS or the home computer, and how the technologies enter into processes of self-care and anti-aging. They discuss media's role in fashion and self-expression and argue that the spread and influence of different media technologies is becoming "a cultural pursuit where age is largely irrelevant" (Gilleard and Higgs 2000, 67). They argue: "These commodified technologies of the self have enabled more and more people—women more than men, although as in many areas of personal care the gender gap is narrowing—to actively resist being defined by their appearance as 'old and grey'" (Gilleard and Higgs 2000, 69). We may regard this as a consequence of a largely mediated culture. The media, on a broader historical scale in a Western context, is part of a process in which individuals can "actively resist" defining themselves by their chronological age. This tendency, I argue, has become much more prevalent over the past two decades with the advent of social media. On Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, and online discussion sites, age becomes irrelevant.

[2.6] Mediatization is a dual process that reflects the juxtaposition of broader societal changes on the one hand and media-centric transformations on the other. Mediatization processes are furthermore context and culture specific. At the intersection of fandom and aging, Harrington, Bielby, and Bardo (2011) sum up the dynamics as follows (without relating them to mediatization processes): "We argue that population aging and restructuring of the life course, on the one hand, and the changing role of media and media fandom in people's lives, on the other hand, are dual processes that inform and shape one another" (Harrington, Bielby, and Bardo 2011, 571). This article aims to shed light on this duality through interviews with active fans and to discuss how these processes inform participating fans' negotiations of subjective age.

3. Subjective age and the affordances of online fan culture

[3.1] Several studies within gerontology (Kleinspehn-Ammerlahn, Kotter-Grühn, and Smith 2008; Kotter-Grühn and Hess 2012) have shown that as people age, they tend to feel younger and self-identify as younger. This tendency is part of what is labeled subjective age. These studies connect subjective age to feelings of well-being and concepts such as successful aging. So it is unsurprising that fans over the age of 50 may have a younger subjective age. I am interested in how the fans in this study relate their subjective age to their fan involvement, the aim being to gain a deeper understanding of the processes of negotiating self-perceptions of age and aging in the context of social media and fan participation. My argument is that the cultural environment of fandom and the affordances (Gibson 1979; Petersen 2014) of social media heighten a process in which aging fans use younger subjective age to legitimize their participation on the one hand and use older subjective (and perhaps chronological) age to position themselves within the fan community as other on the other hand. These personal negotiations are connected to the role that fandom plays in participants' lives and its potential for personal growth and development. Studies by Harrington, Bielby, and Bardo (2011) have looked into fandom and the life course. These studies argue that fan practices are to a certain extent structured in relation to age. It is thus relevant to analyze how these age-related structures unfold within this specific group of Sherlock fans.

[3.2] In order to analyze fans' negotiations of subjective age, it is important to call attention to the meaning of subjective age in the context of cultural gerontology. Kotter-Grühn and Hess (2012) define subjective age as "a multidimensional construct assessing facets, such as felt age, perceived age, or desired age" (563). In this sense, we may understand subjective age as a complex process that the fans in this study negotiate on the basis of a range of factors. Furthermore, Montepare (2009) points out that
subjective age is anchored both externally and internally: "Subjective age derives from a process of anchoring and adjusting personal age perceptions in light of distal reference points (i.e., internal representations of developmental models) and proximal reference points (i.e., historic, physical, normative, and interpersonal age markers) that guide the age younger and older individuals across the lifespan perceive themselves to be" (Montepare 2009, 42).

[3.3] For this study, I am interested in analyzing the processes in fandom participation that might inform these markers. What are the historical, physical, normative, and interpersonal markers that fans use, for example, to adjust their self-perceptions of subjective age, and how is this process informed by fans' media use and online identities? Montepare (2009) points out how subjective age, particularly in terms of aging adults identifying as younger, is more complex and multifaceted than a case of elders simply resisting identification as old. Subjective age instead relates to particular reference points and age markers. For adults over the age of 50, this has specific implications when participating in fandom on social media. Montepare does not consider the role of media, but I suggest that media and media use are relevant not only as reference points or age markers but also that they shape how these reference points and age markers enter into these fans' multifaceted negotiations.

[3.4] We thus require an understanding of how media use and media saturation aids in perceptions of participants' own age. Mediatization theory offers insight into this. Hjarvard (2013; Petersen 2014) use Gibson's (1979) concept of affordances as a central concept for understanding mediatization processes. Affordance is a concept from perception psychology that attempts to grasp the imagined and applied uses of objects and nonobjects. Social media have certain affordances, but the ways in which audiences adapt these affordances are complex and are rooted in personal needs and expectations. Fandom in itself is a transformative space. Fandom transforms texts and narratives, but I suggest that these transformations also extend to the people who engage in fandom. Sandvoss (2005) argues for an understanding of fandom as "an extension of self" and that conscious and unconscious processes of self-reflection on the part of fans cause them to perceive the fan object as part of their selves and conversely themselves as part of the external object. I suggest that this also relates to our self-understanding of subjective age. Or rather, for a member of a fandom, the process of negotiating subjective age occurs relative to the norms, ideals, and practices that shape fandom life. This can happen precisely because fandom has authority in participants' lives and because it is closely tied to their understanding of their own identities. Being a fan means doing life in a certain way. It means being passionate. It means being playful. It means being creative and engaged. It means obsession and flailing. All of these perceived affordances of fandom are tied to norms, ideals, and practices, and these are again tied to self-reflections about age and their associated appropriateness. I argue that fandom, as a mediatized cultural practice, is transformative and thus has the potential to shape understandings of subjective age for its participants.

4. Method: Asynchronous e-mail interviews

[4.1] This study is the result of nine asynchronous, in-depth interviews conducted via e-mail (Meho 2006; Ratislavčá and Ratislav, 2014) with female fans aged 53–59. E-mail interviews are asynchronous in nature because they do not require interviewer and interviewee to be online and present at the same time. I chose this method because I was interested in fans within this age group and their use of social media, so it made sense to both find and interview them using digital media.

[4.2] The recruitment request for participants was shared on my personal fandom (Sherlock) Twitter account and Tumblr. A few participants were in my own personal network and joined to help me out with this study while others saw my call through our shared network. It is interesting to note that even after years in the same fandom, I did not know the ages of these participants until they direct messaged me to volunteer their participation. The participants in this study come from Canada (1), the United States (1), the United Kingdom (3), Germany (2), the Netherlands (1), and New Zealand (1). The geographical spread was not intentional, but it emphasizes the need for a method that uses media technology, as
face-to-face interviews would not have been possible (Ratislavaová and Ratislav 2014). Furthermore, I chose this because it was a good way to meet fans on their own turf, behind the screen and in text. The hope was that this would make them more comfortable sharing their thoughts and experiences. Ratislavaová and Ratislav point out how "some participants also simply prefer to express themselves in writing rather than having to improvise when speaking. So are better able to describe their feelings and express themselves better in writing" (2014, 454). This is even more likely to be the case for fans who are familiar with expressing themselves on Twitter, in Tumblr posts, and so on. Some participants mentioned being introverts and preferring online banter to physical meetups but also how getting to know other people online meant being more confident in participating at fan events. At the end of the interviews, several participants reported that they were sorry to see the interview come to an end. They had enjoyed reflecting on their own fan practice and felt that they had gained deeper insight to themselves. One participant came to a conference presentation of this study, and we were able to discuss the findings after the session.

[4.3] The data collection process began with seven introductory questions for all of the participants. The number of follow-up e-mails varied from one to five, depending on the conversations that I had with each participant and their openness in sharing their thoughts on their lives as fans. Follow-up e-mails included two to four questions per e-mail. As a result, these interviews sometimes took on very different expressions because while some fans engaged heavily in the more political aspects of being a fan, others delved into their personal engagement with fandom, and others again focused more on the connection between fandom and their creative lives. Meho (2006) points out that one of the benefits of e-mail interviews is that it allows several interviews to be conducted at the same time. This meant that I was able to get the interviews started as interviewees e-mailed me with their interest in participating, and it also meant that I had several participants’ answers before replying with follow-up questions. This added to the richness of the replies I received although it also made it increasingly complex to remember who had given a certain reply because all interviews took place simultaneously.

[4.4] One of the limitations of e-mail interviews is that, as Meho (2006) points out, the interviewer "will not be able to read facial expressions and body language, make eye contact, or hear voice tones of the participants" (Meho 2006, 1289). There is no chance to observe the visual and nonverbal cues that are present in conversation. But while this can certainly be a limitation, the e-mail interview also has the potential to offer more insight into personal information. All participants are guaranteed anonymity, so while I know their names and private e-mail addresses, they are listed in this study as "fan," followed by their age and their country. Anonymity is important for many fans because they may be avid readers or writers of fan fiction and do not feel like sharing this with their colleagues, friends, and families. The themes that structure the analysis in this article were the dominant themes in the interviews, although other themes emerged. Especially some of the interviews delved into discussions about fanfiction and sexuality in later life, but for space reasons and because I find that this topic deserves an in-depth analysis on its own, I only touch upon sexuality briefly here in relation to fans’ passion. Certainly, there is still much more to study when it comes to mature and older fans.

5. Analysis: Female Sherlock fans over 50

[5.1] The e-mail interviews centered on participants’ histories with fandom, their current experiences and practices as fans, and their understandings of their own age in relation to these histories and practices. In this article, I focus on three categories that emerged from the material: fandom as youth culture, fandom and passion, and fandom and creativity. The aim is to gain insight into how aging is negotiated within these categories and discuss how these negotiations occur through processes of mediatization. Mediatization places media as central to transformative processes, and I argue that it is relevant for this analysis because the participants themselves place fandom and their media use as central to their lives. The fans in this study knew that they were chosen to participate on the basis of their age. I had specifically requested fans over 50. Age thus became a natural theme in our
conversations, and even if a question did not directly prompt reflections on age, some participants offered it anyway. As such, these interviews are clearly shaped by the theme of the study, and the issue of aging is not necessarily as prevalent in fans’ daily self-reflections about their personal identity as fans. Here, I am interested in how subjective and chronological age is negotiated in relation to fan practices and media use and the markers that fans attach to these negotiations.

[5.2] Hjarvard's reflections on the relationship between mediatization and what he labels "soft individualism" are relevant in that they capture changes in social character resulting from the increasing authority of media in our society. For example, Hjarvard (2009, 160) argues how "strong social ties toward family, school, and workplace experience increased competition from weaker social ties enabled through media network." In fandom, this is most certainly the case. One fan expresses how she has her mobile phone with her at all times, and her constant presence online has been observed by her husband, who does not have a mobile phone: "It’s only sitting here writing this that makes me think about how that must feel for him" (fan, 54, United Kingdom), she reflects. I argue that the particular affordances of fan practices and online participation shape the way in which these participants reflect upon their own subjective age and change the parameters that inform these reflections.

[5.3] The participants are divided into two almost equal-sized groups: those who have been lifelong fans and gradually moved their fandom activities online as digital media has become more accessible and those who only became participating members in a fandom late in life because it suddenly became visible to them with the presence of social media. One participant reflects upon her image of fans before she joined the Sherlock fandom online in her midfifties: "The image I had of 'fans' from the media was of screaming girls at Beatles or Elvis concerts and that didn’t appeal to me at all. Now I wonder if the media wasn’t already in the business of making fun of fans who were usually portrayed as female and hysterical" (fan, 59, United Kingdom).

[5.4] Even before engaging in fandom, through media portrayals, this fan understood fandom as an activity related to age. She could not identify with this age-specific representation, and it initially kept her away. Now that she is inside fandom, her experiences are different in that she is now able to negotiate a space for participation that reflects her subjective age. She separates herself and her personal fan experience from that of screaming girls behaving hystERICALLY. This is a tendency that dominates the interviews. Participants actively remove themselves from the image of screaming girls. One fan says, "Recently BD [Benedict Cumberbatch] did an event where people could pay to have their photo taken with him. He did it with great grace and charm and everyone had a lovely moment—I would like to have done that but the prospect of a dotty old bag of 53 turning up amongst a queue of young fans doesn’t feel right to me!" (fan, 54, United Kingdom).

[5.5] Another fan tells a story about standing on a red carpet for a movie premier and hoping to catch a glimpse of Cumberbatch. In the end, she not only got to see him, but he came up to her and signed a picture for her. She expresses how she initially felt a little out of place because of a few young screaming girls, but when she looks at YouTube videos of the event (in which the moment is captured) she does not feel all that out of place. For these fans, age becomes a barrier in parts of their fandom, specifically the parts in which their chronological age becomes apparent. We can argue that this reflects a self-understanding of their own age as older than fellow fans, and in the context of fandom the general tendency of people to identify as younger is not that simple.

[5.6] For one fan, being a fan (a concept that she tied to being a geek) addresses how this practice for her involves inherent openness: "Geek culture to me signifies both intelligence and a willingness to be 'other'" (fan, 53, the Netherlands). We may connect this willingness to be other to the question of age and argue that being a fifty-something fan includes a willingness to be an other in a group that consists of others in a broader societal context. We may also understand this age-defined otherness as a result of societal norms toward aging fans. Harrington, Bielty, and Bardo (2011) point out:
[5.7] For example, older fans are held accountable to age norms in ways that younger fans are not (e.g. they are expected to "grow out of" their fandom)...and cognitive changes reshape not only fans' pleasure (e.g. the ability to recognize once-cherished song lyrics or TV characters) but the very ability to access fan texts and communities given increasingly complex media technologies and changes in cognition over time. (570)

[5.8] In the interviews, I found that being online and up to date with both the daily humdrum of fandom and the media technology that provides access is central to the meaning that the interviewees ascribe to their fan participation. We may speculate that fandom in this sense provides a space for feeling younger for this age group through fandom's adaptability to new digital platforms and the use of memes, GIFs, and so on as part of fans' communicative practices (Petersen 2014).

[5.9] In other areas, these fans are more eager to assign a younger perceived age to themselves or, perhaps more accurately, they understand the emotions attached to physical attraction as not being age specific. Montepare (2009, 43) points out how there are both transient and more stable variations in subjective age, and we may argue that physical attraction or sexual desire is a relatively stable variation that informs subjective age. The attraction that these fans feel toward Benedict Cumberbatch in particular is something that comes up in almost all of the interviews and is undoubtedly a central pleasure of fandom for all ages. It is also something that exists in a certain way within a fandom because talking about a physical attraction toward an actor with others changes those feelings. This occurs because the fan community negotiates what is considered the star's attractive features, and these discussions become part of a practice that is much more about sociability than the initial attraction. As such, physical attraction becomes a space for negotiating subjective age.

[5.10] Interviewer: I'm interested in this point you make about on the one hand having that physical attraction to your idol (i.e., Benedict Cumberbatch) and on the other hand having a more maternal/sisterly approach to your affection toward him.

Fan: Both emotions find room at the same time. I don't know how old you are but I am sure there are things you won't feel any differently about...than you did when you were 18. (fan, 54, United Kingdom)

[5.11] This fan expresses a duality of emotions toward Benedict Cumberbatch: on the one hand, feelings of protectiveness and almost motherly affection and on the other hand, a pure physical attraction. Most other fans exclusively express feelings of physical attraction. Several of them tie these emotions to age with a similar sentiment: physical attraction does not change with age. I understand these statements from several fans as an indication that their subjective age to a large degree corresponds with their chronological age in the context that they feel that this is an accepted strategy for engaging in fandom. The normative structure that guides the fan community makes space for sexual and physical expressions toward the actors and characters in a way that includes all age groups. This, of course, also happens because the objects of their attraction, Cumberbatch and Freeman, are both in their forties.

[5.12] Montepare (2009, 46) points out that "subjective age is an interesting personal construct in its own right." In the case of these fans, subjective age is constructed in specific ways in relation to the fan practices in which they engage. Participating in fandom involves a dual process in relation to negotiating subjective age for this group of mature fans. Riesman says of the role of media that "the mass media can foster autonomy as well as adjustment, independence from the peer-group as well as conformity to it" (Riesman [1961] 2001). Age, then, becomes an anchor with which participants can make adjustments as autonomous participants relative to their peer group while at the same time conforming to norms and ideals related to age in different ways. This duality become increasingly visible in the context of passion as it is expressed through fandom.
6. Women and fandom as passion in middle age and later life

[6.1] Fandom is my hobby, my passion. It's how I relax and also how I excite myself.
—Fan, 57, United Kingdom

[6.2] This sentiment is prevalent throughout the interviews. Fandom is closely tied to being passionate, being enthusiastic, being excited. It is a space for feeling better and happier. I am interested in how these fans negotiate the passion that they experience through their devotion to the *Sherlock* series in relation to their perceptions about age. Being a fan of *Sherlock* wittingly or unwillingly becomes both a feminist and anti-agist endeavor because insisting on being passionate about a TV series and its actors as a 50-year-old is sometimes met with skepticism and wonder. One fan in particular is very clear about her feminist standpoint with regards to her own fan practice and the way in which passionate women are often regarded in a societal context: "Ageism is the cause, but also the idea that being fanaticaly obsessed with a subject equals being a loser is also in the mix. I have asked male friends over the age of 50 if they get the same treatment in their fandoms (football, Marvel, Doctor Who) and they report that they don't" (fan, 57, United Kingdom).

[6.3] Scodari (2014) analyzes a group of fans often identified as Twi-mums: middle-aged women who were fans of the popular book and movie series by Stephenie Meyer, the Twilight Saga. Scodari points out how age and gender "coalesce to generate a double standard that constructs midlife women as 'ever the hill' and men of similar vintage as 'in their prime'" (Scodari 2014). This is the double standard that Sontag (1972) also identifies, and it is perhaps particularly prevalent when it comes to being passionate in relation to popular culture texts. "I feel quite alone in my love of Sherlock as my family are not interested to the degree that I am. I have however stood my ground when criticised, because I believe women and their interests are often considered frivolous by family members...who take no time to understand why I find Sherlock so compelling" (fan, 56, New Zealand).

[6.4] Within fandom, however, these fans meet others who share their level of passion, and so fans must often defend their level of engagement to their nonfandom surroundings because that kind of engagement is connected to a younger age group. In these cases, identifying as feeling younger can be a helpful strategy. Other fans detect an ambiguity in the reactions that they get from friends and family. "And I've noticed that the few people in my life who know about it [her fandom] seem to almost envy my passion and obsession because it really is something we tend to give up when we leave our teens. But so what? Men have their silly sports obsessions all their lives, why can't I have mine?" (fan, 53, Canada).
This fan expresses a sentiment echoed by many in this study: an insistence on being passionate regardless of chronological age. In contrast to the youthfulness from which these fans distanced themselves in the previous section, being passionate is seen as a youthfulness that is loaded with positivity.

[6.5] Ward (2010) identifies three factors associated with subjective age: personal growth, generativity, and social integration. He argues that these factors are correlated: "In combination...these patterns suggest that persons who are more successful in fulfilling developmental challenges, especially for personal growth, *feel* younger but have older idea. age." One fan (59, United Kingdom) describes returning to fandom after a 40-year break when she discovered that fans are now active online. She started rewatching the original show of which she was a fan (*Man from L.N.C.L.E.*, 1964–68), and she elaborates on how she began re-watching it with a friend: "We re-watched several times and then discussed the fact that for each of us the reaction was as though no time had passed, the attraction was just as intense. Further that the reaction was absolutely of a sexual nature, not merely a schoolgirl romantic one. As mature women we could identify what we had not been aware of as pre-adolescent girls" (fan, 59, United Kingdom). Here chronological age or time passing is present on two levels. First, fandom is a set of emotions, an enthusiasm and passion that pulls the interviewee back to how it felt to be a young girl. I understand the comment about how "no time has passed" as a reflection upon how
the level of excitement feels the same way it did when the participant was younger. Second, the participant then reflects that as an adult in her late fifties, she is now fully aware that part of the excitement has to do with sexual attraction. One the one hand, being a fan in your fifties is a way of bringing a set of emotions (passion, enthusiasm, etc.) from earlier in life into one’s adult life, but on the other hand, she actively attempts to separate herself from the age she was in the past and instead embraces her current life stage. Below, I will return to the point regarding how fandom is closely tied to a creative life for many of the participants, but I will here simply observe that fandom is used as a place for personal growth, and this juxtaposition between feeling younger but embracing an older ideal age seems to be a central tendency. Harrington, Bielby, and Bardo (2011) study changes in affect over time and argue that the process of aging involves increasing attention toward positive affective experiences: "While we tend to think of fandom’s role in identity construction in the context of adolescence or adolescent-to-adult transitions, the very process of growing older presents unique challenges to the self and thus transform fandom over time" (577). Thus, the transition between middle age and old age also offers a space for identity constructions in a fan setting. It is interesting to note that none of the participants sees themselves as ceasing to be fans in the future. Instead, several of them mention having more time to participate online once they retire. Others see their physical health as the only potential future limitation for participation. "I am actually able to retire from my job in the next few months. And I haven’t told anyone this, but my fan-life is actually a factor in deciding when to do it" (fan, 53, Canada). This fan went to see the premiere of The Imitation Game (starring Benedict Cumberbatch) at the film festival in Toronto in 2014, and, as she explains, the next time she goes to meet Benedict, she will not need to worry about getting up early for work the next day. Her current life stage allows her to devote more time and attention to the aspects of her life about which she is passionate and that bring her feelings of well-being.

7. Creative play for Sherlock fans over 50

[7.1] Several of the participants are engaged in what Fiske (1992) labels textual productivity by writing fan fiction or meta-analysis, drawing fan art, and so on. David Riesman ([1961] 2001) emphasizes how modern societies modify what he labels the era of inner direction, so that pleasure is a sideshow while work is the main show. "To some degree play is marked off from work, linguistically and by special costuming and ceremonial. To some degree work and play are blended, for instances handicraft art applied to articles of daily use or in ceremonies that accompany a socially or economically useful activity (Riesman [1961] 2001, 116). This blend is visible in fan culture in which, for example, fan art and fan fiction are well-established practices (Sandvoss 2005; Hills 2002). For these fans, being a fan is very much about the playfulness and the pleasure that they get from creating. For some of the fans in this study, being creative within a specific social framework is valued as important for constructing their own identities. Sandvoss (2005) describes how fan objects and the fan’s sense of self merge and how this tendency is strengthened through textual productivity. "In all these cases fandom becomes an integral part and extension of the fan’s self, rather than a mere textual possession" (101). Being creative in a fandom, then, becomes another tool with which to negotiate subjective age.

[7.2] Throughout the interviews, I was struck by the level of productivity in this group of interviewees. One fan tells me how becoming a Sherlock fan opened the floodgates to her productivity and creativity after years of not writing: "I finished the first Sherlock book, immediately started the 2nd, but I actually wrote the 3rd even before the 2nd one was done. Now I’m on the 4th one" (fan, 56, United States). Fandom is closely entwined with creative expression for these fans, and following Sandvoss’s observations, their creative identity and fan identity blend and become impossible to separate. One fan had her drawing of Benedict Cumberbatch published on the Guardian’s Web site as part of a collection of fan drawings of the actor. She does not spend as much time drawing as an adult as she did when she was younger but reflects on the experience: "Still it was fun and took me back to when I was a student and had all the time in the world to sit and draw celebrities" (fan, 53, Canada). Again, creativity and passion are believed to belong in our youth, and bringing them back into one’s life in middle age or later
is, in a way, a means of reconnecting with something youthful. However, creativity is also connected to feelings of well-being and happiness, which in turn shape the construction of subjective age.

[7.3] Another fan not only connects creativity to her own childhood but also places fandom as a marker for preserving a tradition of individual storytelling: "It seems to me a technological saving of the creative tradition of oral story-telling (even though most it is written, it shares that aspect where each story-teller stamps the material with their own style and even changes it considerably) just as the in-person tradition was nearly dead due to radio, television, films and other diversions of the internet" (fan, 59, United Kingdom). I understand her statements as a way of ascribing to creativity in fandom the value of personal growth as well as inserting this creativity and the role of social media into a broader historical context laden with positivity and meaningfulness. This refers back to one of Ward's (2010) factors associated with subjective age, namely social integration. Ward (2010, 170) argues for the influence of positive developmental assessments: "Thus, older felt age can be expected to be more positively (or less negatively) related to well-being if developmental assessments are more positive." One fan expresses what being creative in fandom means to her: "I found I could tackle even my more professional tasks with more fluency simply because of the practice of working outside of its severe limitations. It gives me a respite from the pressures of professional concerns and the joy of creativity. My brain feels happier. I feel proud of what I create and see development in my skills" (fan, 59, United Kingdom). Perhaps we may understand creating art, fan fiction, metatexts, and other kinds of contributions to an online fan community as one way in which fandom supports positive developmental assessments (personal growth, accomplishment, and meaning in life and social integration) and thereby creates a more positive evaluation of felt age for the participants.

8. Conclusion

[8.1] I realize I'm much older than some other fans out there, but it doesn't really seem to be an issue when you're online. Age doesn't really matter.

—Fan, 53, Canada

[8.2] Since fandoms are built on a shared passion and devotion toward an object, other demographic signifiers seem to matter less. Furthermore, the nature of social media and the ability to create an online identity that is one-step removed from one's physical self means that people communicate and develop friendships based on shared interests or shared sense of humor rather than age markers. More interestingly, the nature of fandom and the affordances of social media in conjunction with societal tendencies in the development of social character augment the importance of subjective aging.

[8.3] For fans over 50, subjective age is negotiated through specific patterns and with specific markers, which have implications for the fans' self-understandings of their own experienced age. Gillear and Higgs (2009) argue that:

[8.4] Despite being embedded within the general cultural shift toward indeterminacy and flux such age-resisting practices do not eliminate the spectral presence of age. But "age" as a social category no longer occupies the simple foundationalist position it once did. Age exists but it is harder and harder to define what exactly it is and to whom the applies/should be applied. (69)

[8.5] Berger, Berger, and Kellner (1973, 73) discuss the consciousness of the modern individual: "Not only does there seem to be a great objective capacity for transformation of identity in later life, but there is also a subjective awareness and even readiness for such transformations. This observation allows us to consider the notion of a changing subjective self as a process shaped by the readiness to change in modern individuals along with the changing affordances of social media and the structured practices of fandom. Mediatization processes are not linear and thus cannot be understood as media effects.
(Hjarvard 2013). Mediatization is instead a multifaceted, long-term process that both encompasses media's increasing authority and role in our daily lives and attempts to grasp other societal conditions as indicative of transformative processes.

[8.6] Subjective age is constructed through a myriad of markers and factors within a fan context, ranging from the affordances of social media to the norms and structures within a fan community to the norms of age-appropriate behavior in a broader cultural context to internal markers such as experienced passion or desire. The fans in this study negotiate their subjective age with all of these layers as information markers. The notion of subjective age is sometimes tied to the concept of successful aging (Kleinspehn-Ammerlahn, Kotter-Grühn, and Smith 2008; Kotter-Grühn and Hess 2012). The correlation between chronological age and (younger) subjective age seems to indicate levels of well-being and age adjustment throughout the life span. Certain aspects of fandom—such as the practice of contributing creatively to a community and the opportunity to engage freely in discussion about physical desires and attractions as well as the technological aspects of being at the forefront of popular media culture—are markers that guide fans toward a younger subjective age as well as toward an older but positive felt age. Other aspects, such as outsiders' judgment and norms concerning passion may guide them toward feeling too old (a negative older subjective age), and the fans in this study are constantly negotiating these layers in their participatory practice.

[8.7] This study captures the views of a group of fans in their fifties. As this generation of fans enters into a new life stage, when their children leave home and the fans reach retirement age, it will be interesting to return to this group and see what markers guide their subjective age and how fandom and social media play a role in this part of the life course.

9. Works cited


