

Bachelor Thesis

# Telling The True Story

*Queerbaiting, representation, and fan resistance in the BBC Sherlock fandom*

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August 18, 2017

## Synopsis

In this thesis, I follow an online community on Tumblr revolving around a self-proclaimed conspiracy theory called TJLC. This group is part of the broader community of fans of the BBC TV show *Sherlock*, and is focused on ‘The Johnlock Conspiracy’: the belief that the two main characters of the show, John and Sherlock, are bisexual and gay, respectively, and will ultimately end up as a romantic couple, which would make *Sherlock* a mainstream TV show with explicit and positive LGBTQIA+ representation. This visibility is especially important to LGBTQIA+ individuals within the TJLC community, who want to see their identities more often and more accurately represented on television. The fact that the creators of *Sherlock*, as well as several of the actors in the show, are either part of the LGBTQIA+ community themselves or known supporters, works to further strengthen TJLC’ers’ trust in the inevitable unfolding of the story into a romantic plot.

The fact that the TJLC community is based on a conspiracy theory not only makes it a remarkable example of fan culture, but has also led to many close readings of the show and its characters – from the textual level to symbolism to the musical score – on a level that can often be seen as close to academic. These pieces of so-called ‘meta’ have led to many predictions about the direction of the show, such as the strong belief that ‘Johnlock’ would become real in season four of the series. After this season aired in January 2017 and the predictions of TJLC’ers didn’t come true, most of them showed strong negative emotions, such as accusing the creators of the show of queerbaiting.

Within this research, I analyse TJLC-related Tumblr posts that revolve around LGBTQIA+ identity linked to, and representation of LGBTQIA+ identity, in *Sherlock*. My focus is on the relation between the creators and this particular group of fans, and their different opinions on the true narrative of the show, which leads to a struggle over representation. Since TJLC’ers’ opinions of the creators often undergo drastic changes in the period surrounding the release of season four, I aim to get an understanding of their relationship with the creators by analysing the ways in which LGBTQIA+ TJLC’ers identify both with and against these creators.

Furthermore, by applying already existing literature on fandom, queerbaiting, and fan-producer relationships, such as Nordin (2015) and Collier (2015), I aim to place this case study within the broader context of identity politics and LGBTQIA+ representation in the public sphere, as well as the function that popular culture and fan culture in particular can have in this place.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 *The Johnlock Conspiracy*

On December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2016, the YouTube channel for the BBC's TV show *Sherlock* uploaded a second trailer for the upcoming fourth series of the show. The trailer, while only forty-seven seconds long, generated a lot of reactions from fans; to this day, the video has been watched over two million times, has gotten almost thirty-five thousand 'thumbs up' (signs of approval) as opposed to only 180 'thumbs down', and currently counts 6245 reactions (Sherlock, 2016; last checked on August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017). Even more interesting, however, are the reactions of fans within the so-called Johnlock conspiracy, or TJLC community. To them, this short trailer was not merely an exciting sneak-peak into the new material that would soon follow; rather, it provided outright confirmation of their greatest wish and theory surrounding BBC's *Sherlock*: that main characters John Watson and Sherlock Holmes would end up in a romantic relationship, thereby making *Sherlock* a mainstream TV show with explicit and positive LGBTQIA+<sup>1</sup> representation.

This self-proclaimed conspiracy theory is known as TJLC or 'The Johnlock Conspiracy', in which 'Johnlock' is John and Sherlock's so-called 'ship-name'<sup>2</sup>. It is practiced by a particular niche within the *Sherlock* fandom<sup>3</sup> – mostly visible on social media website Tumblr – where members gather and discuss evidence for Johnlock, as well as analyse and predict other important parts of the narrative, such as the role of main villain James "Jim" Moriarty, as well as theories surrounding John's wife, Mary. The detailed way in which the close readings of the show and its characters are performed – from the textual level to symbolism to the musical score – as well as the scope of the research, make TJLC a study that can often be seen as close to academic work – and, indeed, several of the scenes that academics have written about in reference to queer subtext in *Sherlock*, turn out to be the same parts of the show that TJLC'ers highlight.

A notable example of research within the TJLC community could be found in the form of a series of YouTube videos, created by someone who is now considered a prominent

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<sup>1</sup> LGBTQIA+ is an umbrella term used to refer to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (sometime: questioning), intersex, and asexual communities as a whole. The '+' is added to include all other sexualities, sexes, and genders that are not included in this acronym (UCDavis, 2017; LGBTQIA+ info, n.d.). For more extensive discussion, see for instance UCDavis (2017).

<sup>2</sup>A 'ship name' or 'shipping name' is the name given to characters that fans support as a couple, and is often a contraction of the names of these characters (Nordin, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> "The fans of a particular person, team, fictional series, etc., regarded collectively as a community or subculture" (English Oxford Dictionaries, 2017).

member of the TJLC community, called *TJLC explained*. This series, which was unfortunately erased a few months after the airing of season four, consisted in the end of forty-eight videos, varying in length between seven and a half minutes and almost two hours, and focused on topics such as *Sherlock is Gay*, *Romantic Tropes and Narratives*, and *Soundtrack & Score* (see appendices 1- 5). Not only *Sherlock* itself was extensively discussed, however; other versions of Sherlock Holmes – works that (possibly) influenced the series, such as *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* by Billy Wilder – and interviews with the writers of the *Sherlock* series, Steve Moffat and Mark Gatiss, were taken into account as well (see appendices 6-9). A second important example can be found in the form of a 177-page long essay written by another prominent member of the TJLC community, titled *M-theory: Mycroft, Moriarty, and Magnussen's shared motifs, James Bond's "M", Mary and Janine, and the big gay long game*. This article, which is described as a “Meta analysis of series 1, 2, and 3”, provides a reading of *Sherlock* in which Sherlock’s brother Mycroft, John’s wife Mary, as well as some other characters, are all connected to main villain Moriarty, and in which *Sherlock* is a romance with John and Sherlock as ‘endgame’. These conclusions are reached through extensive analysis of text, subtext, musical score, and blog posts that can be found through the official *Sherlock* website<sup>4</sup>, and is backed up with screenshots and YouTube videos.

Together with many other analyses and discussions about *Sherlock*, these pieces of so-called ‘meta’<sup>5</sup> have led to many predictions about the direction of the show, such as the strong belief that Johnlock would become real in season four of the series, and that this would lead to visible LGBTQIA+ representation in the form of a kiss (see appendix 10). This visibility is especially important to those TJLC’ers belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community, who want to see themselves more often and more accurately represented on television (see appendix 11). The trust in the inevitable unfolding of the story into a romantic plot is further strengthened by the fact that the creators of *Sherlock*, as well as many of the actors, are either part of the LGBTQIA+ community themselves or known supporters (see image 3). Most notable is Mark

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<sup>4</sup> Sherlock, John, and Molly Hooper’s blogs can be found on <http://www.thescienceofdeduction.co.uk/>, <http://www.johnwatsonblog.co.uk/>, and <http://www.mollyhooper.co.uk/>, respectively. Molly Hooper is one of Sherlock’s work-related acquaintances, and is shown to have a crush on him in season 1, episode 1 (Moffat, Vertue & McGuigan, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> “The term Meta (short for metanalysis) means the discussion of a topic (mostly canon or the fandom society and its demographic) usually in form of an essay written by one or more individuals. Usually, the meta comes in the form of a loosely academic structure, offering proof or evidence of its claims through reference to the primary text and by supporting evidence in the form of screencaps, pictures or charts” (Supernatural Wiki, last viewed on August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2017).

Gatiss, one of the co-writers, who identifies as gay and serves as a role model for many LGBTQIA+ TJLC'ers.<sup>6</sup>

On December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2016, a few weeks before season four would start airing, a lot of TJLC'ers saw their belief confirmed by the newly uploaded trailer. In this video, we are shown several shots from all three episodes of season four, accompanied by voice-over dialogue from several different characters (Sherlock, 2016). At the end of the trailer, two of these pieces follow each other, strung together as if part of one and the same narrative. “What’s the very worst thing you can do,” asks Culverton Smith, villain of episode two, “to your very best friends?” (Sherlock, 2016). After a short pause, in which we are shown several shots in quick succession, he answers his own question: “Tell them your darkest secret.” The screen fades to black, and the next thing we see is Sherlock, with his brother Mycroft and John standing behind him, saying directly into the camera: “I love you.” There’s another fade to black moment before the *Sherlock* logo appears, indicating the end of the trailer (Sherlock, 2016).

It is especially here, at the end of the trailer, that the pieces of monologue – which turned out to be from episode two and episode three, respectively (Moffat, Vertue & Hurran, 2016; Gatiss et al., 2016) – are strung together as if they are part of one and the same narrative, leaving fans to interpret that 1) Sherlock is in love with someone; and at least hinting at the fact that 2) Sherlock being in love could be a secret. For TJLC'ers, who already had their hopes set upon Johnlock happening in season four, this trailer was confirmation; trailer analyses, fan edits, fan art in which the scene got re-interpreted as a Johnlock moment, and several short video fragments of TJLC'ers crying in happiness got posted to Tumblr shortly after the trailer was uploaded (for examples, see appendices 12-14).

When season four actually aired in January 2017, however, it became apparent that the Johnlock dream was not meant to be: the two lines of dialogue from the trailer turned out not only to stem from two different episodes, but also have nothing to do with each other whatsoever; the “I love you” -line was not a real love confession, and furthermore not even linked to John; and the hug that John and Sherlock shared after an emotional conversation in episode two – which led to even more happiness and faith amongst TJLC'ers – never turned into anything more. Episode three ends with John and Sherlock back into their original positions, as friends and partners in crime-solving, without anything explicitly romantic having happened between them (Moffat, Vertue & Hurran, 2016; Gatiss et al., 2016). After

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<sup>6</sup> I discuss this more extensively in the “Methods and Data” section.

the predictions of TJLC'ers didn't come true, most of them showed strong negative emotions, such as disappointment and sadness, but also anger at the creators of the show, whom they accused of 'queerbaiting': a phenomenon in which creators, especially of TV shows and films, create LGBTQIA+ subtext, without ever following through on this subtext.

In this digital ethnography, I look at TJLC-related Tumblr posts that revolve around LGBTQIA+ identity linked to *Sherlock*, as well as representation of LGBTQIA+ identity in the show. My focus is on the struggle over representation that takes place between this particular niche of the fandom and the creators of the show, who have different opinions on the topic of representation in *Sherlock*. The relation between these fans and the creators has multiple sides, and TJLC'ers' opinions have sometimes drastically changed in the period pre-season four and post-season four. The strong emotional response from the TJLC community, especially from those fans who identify as LGBTQIA+, as well as the investment put into analysing the series, indicates that there's something more going on than just fans enjoying a television series. I therefore aim to get an understanding of the relationship between the fans and creators before season four as well as after season four, by looking at the ways in which LGBTQIA+ TJLC'ers identify with and against the creators. By applying already existing literature on topics of fandom and identity politics, such as Nordin (2015) and Collier (2015), as well as further exploring the phenomenon of queerbaiting, I place this case study into the broader context of visibility and representation of LGBTQIA+ politics in the public sphere, as well as the function that popular culture and fan culture in particular can have in this place.

## **2. BBC's *Sherlock***

*Sherlock* is a series produced under British television network BBC, co-written by Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffatt and produced by Sue Vertue, with Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman playing main characters Sherlock Holmes and John Watson, respectively (BBC, 2017).

Initially, a 55-minute pilot version of the first episode, *A Study in Pink*, was launched, but it was decided that this episode would not be broadcasted. Instead, the BBC requested a 90-minute long reshoot, along with two more episodes of the same length (Heritage, 2010). The first official episode, also titled *A Study in Pink*, as well as episodes two and three – *The Blind Banker* and *The Great Game* – were aired during three successive weeks in July and August 2010 (BBC, 2010). Since then, four seasons have been aired, as well as a mini-episode placed between seasons two (2012) and three (2014) and a 90-minute special, which directly

follows the plot line from season three (BBC, 2013; Gatiss, Moffat, Vertue & Mackinnon, 2016). This special, which is called *The Abominable Bride* and is set mostly in Victorian London, was also aired as a film in selected theatres (Sweney, 2016). Most recently, the long-awaited season four started airing on Sunday, January 1<sup>st</sup> 2017, and took up one of the Sunday night time slots for three consequent weeks (Jones, 2016).

## **2.1 Reception**

Since its release in 2010, the series has grown increasingly popular, and has received praise from both the public and critics. Season two had an average of more than eight million viewers, while series three had almost twelve million people watching every week, making it the most watched drama series in the UK since 2001 (Marszal, 2012; Winning, 2014). The special also managed to gain the attention of 11,6 million viewers (BBC One, 2016). Ratings dropped with season four, but the BBC revealed that there's still been an average of ten million viewers per episode (BBC Press Office, 2017). These viewers have been predominantly positive about the series, which can for example be seen on American aggregator website *Rotten Tomatoes*. According to the website's 'tomatometer', which consists of the percentage of approved critics who have given the season or its episodes a positive review, season one even scores 100%, with seasons two and three coming close – 93% and 96%, respectively. It's only with the special *The Abominable Bride* that ratings started to drop to 71%, with an all-time low of 64% for season four. As a whole, however, this still leaves the show with an average score of 84%, with 81% of the viewers liking it (measured by the percentage of users who have rated the show 3.5 stars or higher) (Rotten Tomatoes, n.d).

*Sherlock*'s popularity can be measured not only by these numbers, but also when looking at events that are accessible to fans, such as the premiere of its second season at the British Film Institute (BFI) in December 2011 (Porter, 2012). Fans from all around the world came to the event, and even though it was sold out – faster than any BFI event before had – fans without tickets waited in line for hours in the hope that some tickets might be returned.

Furthermore, *Sherlock* has been nominated for 135 awards and has won eighty-one of them, including nine wins at the prestigious Emmy Awards, where *The Abominable Bride* won "Outstanding Television Movie" in 2016, and a nomination for the Golden Globe Awards (IMDb, n.d.).



## ***2.2 Sherlock Holmes and its adaptations***

BBC's *Sherlock*, named after its main character, is one of the many adaptations of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's popular series about Sherlock Holmes, who, since his birth over a century ago, has become "a significant character in British Literature and a cultural icon" (Porter, 2012, p.5). While already being published in 1887 as magazine serials in *Beeton's Christmas Annual*, the stories about the detective and his right-hand man, Doctor John Watson, gained real popularity four years later, when regular publications in *Strand Magazine* began: "The stories were an instant sensation, with eager readers lining up at the newsstands for each new issue of the magazine" (Porter, 2012; Stashower, 2013, p. xi). In fact, the series and its main character became so popular that, after letting Holmes die in *The Reichenbach Fall* in December of 1893, Conan Doyle – who at that moment had had enough of writing about Holmes and did not intend for him to return at all – decided to bring back his beloved character, and new stories were published from 1901 to 1927. By the time of Conan Doyle's death in 1930, he had published fifty-six short stories and four longer tales, which are known as "The Canon" (Stashower, 2013; Porter, 2012).

The tales about Sherlock Holmes are detective stories, mostly told through the point of view of Doctor John Watson, an army doctor who has recently returned to London after being injured during his time serving in the Second Anglo-Afghan War and is looking for a place to live. An old friend introduces him to Sherlock Holmes, who is looking for someone to share his rent with. Holmes turns out to be able to "make startling deductions at a glance" by paying close attention to details – a skill which he himself calls "the science of deduction" – and uses his knowledge to solve cases for all kinds of clients, including the police force in London, Scotland Yard. Together with this self-proclaimed "consulting detective", Watson experiences many adventures, which he writes down and are presented to the readers as "The Reminiscences of John. H. Watson, M.D., Late of the Army Medical Department" (Doyle, 2013, p. 3).

Since Conan Doyle's death, the stories have lost nothing of their popularity. They have never gone out of print, with several new editions appearing even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and have since been translated into at least sixty languages (Porter, 2012). Furthermore, there have been numerous Sherlock Holmes adaptations, including "board, console and computer games, graphic novels, cookbooks, novels, plays, music, and movies", and in 2012, Sherlock Holmes was awarded a Guinness World Record for "most portrayed literary human character in film & TV", having been depicted on screen 254 times by over seventy-five actors (Farghaly, 2015; Guinness World Records News, 2012).

An element that characterizes Gatiss and Moffatt's interpretation of the stories is the fact that their version, as opposed to the original and many of its adaptations, is not set in the Victorian era, but rather in 21<sup>st</sup>- century London. The familiar elements are still there – Sherlock Holmes' razor-sharp mind, Doctor Watson's military as well as medical skills, and, of course, the cases – but these are now used in an era with mobile phones, internet connections, and London cabs. Not only the world has changed, however; the setting also influences interpersonal relations. Women appear in the police force as well as in the morgue, Mrs Hudson insists she is “not your housekeeper”, and ‘Watson and Holmes’ have become ‘John and Sherlock’ (Moffat, Vertue & McGuigan, 2010). Moreover, BBC's *Sherlock* also offers fans extra content surrounding the show, such as Sherlock's, John's and Molly's blogs, which can be found through the official website. The blog posts, as well as the comments from characters from the show that can be found beneath them, tie in with the events from the show, and provide fans with more information, as well as offer them a bit of mystery, since it's not always clear who is leaving comments<sup>7</sup>. These pieces of information, that exist outside of the show but are closely tied to the events in it, invite fans to take part in the mystery solving, instead of being merely passive consumers – a notion that TJLC'ers, such as the earlier mentioned writer of ‘M-theory’, have enthusiastically embraced.

### **3. Theoretical background**

#### ***3.1 Previous research on BBC's Sherlock***

As mentioned before, *Sherlock* is not only a popular show, but also part of a long line of works based on the original novels by Arthur Conan Doyle. Like its earlier adaptations, *Sherlock* is the subject of several academic studies, which not only focus on the relation between this work and the Sherlock Holmes canon (the original material), but also touch upon various topics that I discuss in this research as well, such as the relation between Holmes and Watson (or, in the case of BBC's *Sherlock*, Sherlock and John), and the phenomenon of queerbaiting, to which I will return in the next section.

Several examples of earlier research can be found in *Gender and the Modern Sherlock Holmes: Essays on Film and Television Adaptions Since 2009* (Farghaly, 2015), which consists of academic articles written by different researchers, focused on various recent Sherlock Holmes adaptations: two films directed by Guy Ritchie (*Sherlock Holmes* (2009) and

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<sup>7</sup> See Sherlock, John, and Molly's respective blogs at <http://www.thescienceofdeduction.co.uk/>, <http://www.johnwatsonblog.co.uk/>, and <http://www.mollyhooper.co.uk/>.

*Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011); the CBS television series *Elementary* (2012-present); and BBC's *Sherlock* (2010-present). In the introduction, editor Nadine Farghaly addresses the relationship between John and Sherlock in the BBC show, and the involvement of fans with this, by stating that *Sherlock*:

(...) has attracted attention because of its sexual undertones. The relationship between John and Sherlock has never been as blatantly homosexual as it is here (...). Although never really proven in the show itself, the relationship is more than subtext; it has become canon<sup>8</sup> for *Sherlock*. (...) It is no surprise that fans everywhere happily jumped on the bandwagon and started shipping like never before in the Sherlock Holmes universe. (Farghaly, 2015, p. 4)

It is no surprise, then, that several of the essays in *Gender and the Modern Sherlock Holmes* touch upon the subject of Sherlock's sexuality and the relationship between him and John Watson. In *I am Sherlocked: Adapting Victorian Gender and Sexuality in "A Scandal in Belgravia"*, Lindsay Katzir (2015) compares the interplay of sexual difference and gender performance in an episode of BBC's *Sherlock* titled *A Scandal in Belgravia* (season two, episode one) with Arthur Conan Doyle's *Bohemia*, on which the episode is based. She argues that, while the original works portray ambiguity when it comes to gender and sexuality, Moffat (who wrote the script for *A Scandal in Belgravia*) reinforces heteronormativity and places the female character in the story – Irene Adler – in a hetero- and gender normative system. This is for instance illustrated by the fact that the original Irene Adler beats Sherlock at his game, while Moffat's Irene ultimately has to be saved by the detective. Despite this conventional gender dynamic, however, Katzir argues that the episode portrays both characters as queer, (although Irene's self-identification as a lesbian is undermined by the fact that this is not further explored in the series, and instead stays an innuendo). She backs up her argument by quoting other academic sources, as well as by analysing several scenes from *Sherlock*, in which there are hints or remarks about the nature of John and Sherlock's relationship – scenes which are also often used by the TJLC community to make their point (see appendix 3). Katzir concludes that, while *A Scandal in Belgravia* seems to include gender and sexual ambiguity, these are never fully realised; instead, they are merely used to "distract

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<sup>8</sup> Here, 'canon' refers to the setting and characters as they appear in the source material – as opposed to 'fanon', which is used to describe the interpretations of the setting and characters created by the fan community in a particular fandom, often shared by various fan re-imaginings (for more extensive discussion, see Nordin (2015)).

from conventional hetero-romance” (p.114). In the end, masculine rationality – in the form of Sherlock and placed in opposition to ‘feminine emotion’ (Irene’s feelings for Sherlock) – and heterosexual romance are enforced (Katzir, 2015).

Another series of essays on recent Sherlock Holmes adaptations can be found in *Sherlock Holmes for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Essays on New Adaptions* (Porter, 2012). It includes academic writings on several different topics, such as *The Americanization of Sherlock Holmes*, *(Re/De)Constructing the detective as Hero*, and *The Watson Effect: Civilizing the Sociopath*. Here, I will focus on the article most relevant to my own research topic: Carlen Lavigne’s study *The Noble Bachelor and the Crooked Man: Subtext and Sexuality in the BBC’s Sherlock* (Lavigne, 2012).

Like Katzir, Lavigne provides several examples of the interaction between Sherlock and John that lead academics and fans alike to interpret their relationship as something else than platonic, such as the exchanging of “frequent meaningful glances”, conversations between the two men hinting at the topic, and the open questioning of the nature of their relationship by various characters in the show (Lavigne, 2012). At the same time, Lavigne argues, the series denies this idea through the constant remarks from John stating that he is *not* gay, as well as through Sherlock’s declared asexuality [which, I’d like to add, is not a valid argument against a potential romance; John could be bisexual (a popular theory among TJLC’ers) or pansexual, whereas asexuality – which is not explicitly stated in the series – does not necessarily prevent someone from wanting to form a romantic relationship]. Furthermore, the creators of the series are aware of fan involvement surrounding the potential relationships – for example expressed through writing fan fiction (fan-authored works about the characters) – but, according to Lavigne, dismiss the idea of anything other than a platonic relation between John and Sherlock by reading them as straight and asexual, respectively, and convey that in a case where Sherlock would have a significant other, the most obvious choice would be for it to be a heterosexual relationship (Lavigne, 2012). John and Sherlock can therefore be placed in a tradition in Western popular culture that is called the “buddy cop” pairing: “a closely bonded platonic relationship between two men who share professional and domestic intimacy, who form two halves of one powerhouse whole, but whose frequent looks and physical proximity must constantly struggle against their own romantic implications” (p. 17). The ‘solution’ to this problem is the earlier described denial of homosexuality, sometimes even through homophobic humour (although in the case of *Sherlock*, it’s more John’s uncomfortableness with being perceived as ‘gay’). Because of the focus on male

relationships, *Sherlock*, like other buddy cop shows, has few important female characters, and like Katzir, Lavigne briefly criticizes the portrayal of women in the series.

Although any romance between Sherlock and John is not taken seriously, either within the narrative of the show or when it comes to the discourse surrounding the show, and instead stays “the joke that will not die” throughout the whole series, Lavigne argues that at the same time, Sherlock’s orientation remains ambiguous. Furthermore, the coding of the series’ main villain, Moriarty, can be seen as fluid when it comes to gender and sexuality, since he contacts Sherlock by letting men as well as women relate his messages to the detective, and first appears to him as a gay man, only to later reveal this as an alias and state that he was “playing gay”.

Lavigne sums up this eternal paradox within the BBC’s *Sherlock* by describing it as follows: “the series brings its queer<sup>9</sup> subtexts to the surface only to disavow them (...) At the same time, however, *Sherlock* demonstrates a playful willingness to highlight and explore its own ‘bromance’<sup>10</sup> tropes, creating a persistent, open tease of queer possibilities” (Lavigne, 2012, p.13). Although Lavigne herself does not mention the term, this “open tease of queer possibilities” that is at the same time constantly denied both within the text of the show and within the discourse surrounding it, is perceived by many fans as so-called ‘queerbaiting’ – a topic which I will return to in the next section.

Moreover, Lavigne also pays attention to the fact that reading the relationship between Sherlock and John – or Holmes and Watson, more often – is not a new development. She mentions, for example, gay erotic works like the novel *The Sexual Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* and the pornographic film *The American Adventures of Surelick Holmes*, which are from 1971 and 1975, respectively (Lavigne, 2012). More recently, two films directed by Guy Ritchie, *Sherlock Holmes* (2009) and its sequel *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011), also include elements that play with the “bromance” between the two main characters, and the film gained controversy when Robert Downey, Jr., who plays Holmes in the film series, stated that Holmes and Watson were “two men who happen to be roommates who wrestle a lot and share a bed” (Lavigne, 2012, p.13). Another study on this particular portrayal of Holmes and Watson, titled “*Bromance is so passé*”: *Robert Downey, Jr.’s Queer Paratexts*, can also be found in *Sherlock Holmes for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Porter, 2012), and the earlier mentioned

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<sup>9</sup> In this case, ‘queer’ refers to an umbrella term that is used to describe sexual and gender minorities who are not heterosexual and/or cisgender (don’t identify as either man or woman and therefore fall outside of the gender binary) (LGBTQIA+ Info, n.d.).

<sup>10</sup> A ‘bromance’ is “a close, friendly, but not sexual relationship between two men” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2017).

collection *Gender and the Modern Sherlock Holmes* follows in this tradition by including Hannah Mueller's article *A Questionable Bromance: Queer Subtext, Fan Service and the Dangers of Queerbaiting in Guy Ritchie's Sherlock Holmes and A Game of Shadows* (Farghaly, 2015). BBC's *Sherlock*, therefore, is not the only Holmes adaption to inspire conversations about sexuality, subtext, and queerbaiting.

All of these texts have been written before the fourth season of *Sherlock* had aired at the beginning of 2017. In my research, however, I focus on the expectations of and reactions to the latest season among TJLC'ers, which are especially interesting, because the general consensus within this community was that Johnlock would become canon in season four. In doing so, I also aim to extend the topic of this thesis beyond online fan culture, by exploring what the activities within a group such as the TJLC community tell us about the current ideas surrounding LGBTQIA+ representation in the public sphere, and how they can influence it.

### ***3.2 Queerbaiting***

An element that plays an important role within the TJLC community, is the phenomenon of queerbaiting. While a significant amount of conversations on this phenomenon can be found online, for example on websites such as Twitter and Tumblr, Nordin (2015) points out that there has been little academic research on the topic. The term has been coined through fan discussions and LGBTQIA+ activism, but isn't recognised by official dictionaries, leaving it with definitions that vary from person to person. Some of these can be found, however, through alternative, user-generated lexicons, of which Nordin discusses two: *Wikipedia* and *Urban Dictionary*. Since these lexicons are updated regularly, and might therefore be different now than they were in 2015, I have chosen to check the definitions on these websites myself. The *Wikipedia* article starts by stating that:

Queer baiting (...) is a term coined for a relatively recent socio-cultural phenomenon that affects LGBT+ (umbrella term: queer) fans of media, particularly audio-visual media like television series and films (but also other media like books, podcasts, radio shows, etc.). (Wikipedia, 2017)

It continues by providing the reader with the following definition: "The term refers to what happens when people in the media (usually television/movies) add homoerotic tension between two characters to attract more liberal and queer viewers with the indication of them

not ever getting together for real in the show/book/movie”, followed up by an explanation of how this plays out:

The term is used to describe a tactic where a queer relationship or character is hinted at to attract/appeal to the queer market, and then is denied, either modifying the character’s behaviour (making them enter an opposite gender relationship), playing it off as a joke (sometimes a recurring joke or trope), or denying the assumptions (in interviews, panels and such) without modifying the character’s behaviour. (Wikipedia, 2017)

*Urban Dictionary* currently offers four definitions, of which the first one – the top definition, determined by the number of ‘thumbs up’ (a sign of approval) from users – is quite different from the explanations offered by *Wikipedia*: “When a politician, pundit, or other public figure brings up the completely irrelevant detail about a person’s sexuality, true or untrue, as a way of subtly channelling homophobia to attack them” (Urban Dictionary, 2017). This corresponds with another, older way of applying the term, which was used by Lawrence Goldyn in 1981 to describe “the verbal abuse and homophobic and discriminating rhetoric that was used in these cases to justify the punishments” (Nordin, 2015, p.4). While this definition differs from what is meant with the term within online fandom, it illustrates, as Nordin points out, the negative, homophobic connotation of the word; queerbaiting, in all its definitions, refers to negative, unwanted behaviour.

A second definition, also described by Nordin, was uploaded on *Urban Dictionary* in 2013 and turns out to be the same as one of the definitions that can be found on *Wikipedia*: “When people in the media (usually television/movies) add homoerotic tension between two characters to attract more liberal and queer viewers with the indication of them not ever getting together for real in the show/book/movie” (Urban Dictionary, 2017). More recently, at the end of 2016, a definition very much alike was added: “When an author/director/etc. gives hints, and clever twists to paint a character as possibly being queer, to satisfy queer audiences, but never outright says they are so they can keep their heterosexual audience” (Urban Dictionary, 2017). At the beginning of 2017, the website gained a fourth explanation of queerbaiting, which I will return to in the next section.

Interestingly, the top definition, uploaded in 2008, has received more approval than disapproval from users – 2272 thumbs up vs 176 thumbs down – while the opposite is true for the other definitions; the one uploaded in 2013 has 534 thumbs up and 2137 thumbs down,

while the definition added in 2016 has gained the approval of 61 users and has been disapproved of by 72 of them (Urban Dictionary, 2017). As Nordin points out, however, it can be questioned if the agreement has to do with the definition, or if it's a comment on the phenomenon itself (Nordin, 2015).

While the top definition refers to the older idea of what queerbaiting entails, academic descriptions of the term correspond more with the latter two. Nordin quotes Fathallah (2014), who states that queerbaiting is “a strategy by which writers and networks attempt to gain the attention of queer viewers via hints, jokes, gestures, and symbolism suggesting a queer relationship between two characters, and then emphatically denying and laughing off the possibility” (p.2). Another description is given by Joseph Brennan, who defines it as “a fan-conceived term that describes a tactic whereby media producers suggest homoerotic subtext between characters in popular television that is never intended to be actualised on screen”, adding that it “has decidedly negative connotations and has attained a degree of currency in the popular sphere, the pervasiveness of which makes scholarly consideration important” (Brennan, n.d.).

Although there are, as we have seen, different definitions as to what exactly entails queerbaiting, in this research it will refer to the meaning that is used by fans, as well as by academics in the context of online fandom: a practice in which a work of fiction (deliberately) hints at a queer identity and/or relationship, without actually confirming this identity and/or relationship, and sometimes even outright denying it, which is viewed as negative and (potentially) harmful to LGBTQIA+ consumers.<sup>11</sup>

### 3.2.1 *Queerbaiting & television*

Looking at several of the definitions described above, it can be concluded that queerbaiting is a phenomenon that mostly occurs – or at least is most often perceived – within films and television series. One of the sources for this statement is the earlier mentioned Wikipedia article, which states that queerbaiting occurs particularly in audio-visual media. Indeed, when the article continues its explanation by giving examples of series that have been accused of queerbaiting, the list consists of *Supernatural*, *Sherlock*, *House*, *Teen Wolf*, and *Merlin* – all of which are television shows (Wikipedia, 2017). Similarly, when looking at the different definitions on *Urban Dictionary*, it turns out that both the second and third definition provide an example of queerbaiting that has to do with TV-show *Supernatural*, and the latter

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<sup>11</sup> For a more extensive study on queerbaiting, see Nordin (2015).



also has *Sherlock* included, by way of a fictional conversation on the topic: “ ‘Hey did you watch the new Supernatural episode last night’ ‘Nah all the queer baiting in it makes me want to bash my head in. I quit watching Sherlock for that reason too.’ ” (Urban Dictionary, 2017).

Furthermore, several of these TV-shows come up in academic discussion concerning queerbaiting as well: *Merlin*, another BBC show, is discussed by Joseph Brennan (2016) in his article *Queerbaiting: The ‘playful’ possibilities of homoeroticism*; Deshler (2017), who researches queer representation in television series *The 100*, mentions both *Sherlock* and *Rizolli & Isles* in the context of queerbaiting; *The 100* and *Rizolli & Isles* are also at the centre of Eve Ng’s research (2017). Nordin (2015) notes that, while there is discussion amongst fans about queerbaiting within books, films, and the music industry as well, most of the focus is on perceived queerbaiting in American and British television shows like *House M.D.*, *Supernatural*, and *Merlin*, and more recently *Sherlock*, *Rizolli & Isles*, *Teen Wolf*, *Once Upon A Time*, and *Vikings*, of which Nordin has been following discussions surrounding the latter two. Both *Sherlock* and *Supernatural* are also extensively discussed in Collier’s (2015) research *The love that refuses to speak its name*, which I will return to shortly. The number of (recent) academic works on this topic, as well as the fact that not only *Sherlock* but many other TV shows as well are being accused of queerbaiting, indicate that we’re dealing with a phenomenon that is becoming increasingly important within the field of fan studies and identity studies.

### 3.2.2 Queerbaiting & BBC’s Sherlock

Next to the three definitions given on *Urban Dictionary* that I’ve described earlier – two of which mention *Sherlock* in combination with queerbaiting – there has been a fourth definition added as of January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2017. This description, uploaded shortly after the release of *Sherlock* season four, is explicitly focussed on the relation between the TV show and this phenomenon, and describes queerbaiting as follows:

A term used by those who fantasise obsessively over the fictional characters Sherlock and John from the BBC show, writing and reading erotic homosexual fanfiction and fan art, and threatening to commit suicide if the fictional characters don't end up having sex by a certain episode. Often the term is used by teenagers who can't cope with their emotions, their newfound sexuality, and becoming a sane and responsible adult.

Also likely to enter a relationship and threaten to kill themselves if the other half leaves them.

See also: manipulative piece of shit.

Moftiss<sup>12</sup> are queerbaiting. How dare they? I don't care if Mark Gatiss is homosexual, he's still homophobic and it's all his fault I need therapy for a suicide attempt. (Urban Dictionary, 2017)

Considering the date on which this definition was uploaded, soon after the last episode of *Sherlock* season four aired, it can be concluded that it is meant as a negative comment on the ways in which TJLC'ers, or at least fans who wanted John and Sherlock to be together, accuse the creators of the show of queerbaiting, and the ways in which they reacted to the fact that Johnlock didn't happen. Although the tone of the post makes it clear that the writer holds no high esteem for these fans, it also shows that there is apparently a close and well-known relation between (accusations of) queerbaiting and (part of) the *Sherlock* fandom – at least enough for this user, who is presumably an outsider to the TJLC community, to have a strong opinion on the matter, and dedicate a definition to it.

Whereas this writer seems to deny the existence of queerbaiting in relation to *Sherlock*, several academics have other opinions on the subject. Lavigne (2012) describes the paradox that is constantly present within *Sherlock*: “It often seems as though *Sherlock* acknowledges the inevitability of its own homosexual subtext only to deny, even slightly mock, such readings” (p. 16). While Lavigne, as previously stated, does not use the term ‘queerbaiting’, this paradox is what leads many fans and academics to focus on questions of subtext and queerbaiting when studying the show. Kozak (2016), for example, similarly states that “Queerbaiting in *Sherlock* creates a discrepancy that occurs when the show’s writers, Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss, dismiss the potential for queer relationships while simultaneously permeating the series with metafictional references to homoeroticism” (para. 2). She illustrates this by providing several examples from the show, such as “affectionate moments of physical contact” between its two main characters (para.2). Furthermore, Kozak detects two characters in the series that stand for two types of Sherlock fans, in the form of forensic Anderson and fangirl Laura, who discuss the way in which Sherlock could have faked his own death at the end of season two. Anderson stands model for the traditional fan,

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<sup>12</sup> ‘Moftiss’ is used by *Sherlock* fans, including the TJLC community, to collectively refer to Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat, the creators of the show (YourDictionary, n.d.).

who values accuracy and is committed to the source material. Sherlock Holmes fans have been partaking in what is known as “the Sherlockian game” for decennia: a practice in which they closely examine the original stories by Arthur Conan Doyle for inconsistencies. Laura, on the other hand, imagines that Sherlock was actually on the side of Moriarty – who was responsible for his ‘death’ – because the two are in a relationship. This idea, which can be seen as a reference to fan communities who produce fan work that is not consistent with the source material, is immediately rejected by Anderson, who deems the idea implausible. Incorporating this interaction into the series, however, shows how *Sherlock* teases fans with the possibilities of queerness, while at the same time denying them. Kozak furthermore provides a motivation for the Sherlock fans that fall into the same category as Laura, by stating that they “seek to rewrite the original stories to validate queerness in the heteronormative realms of popular television and literature that perpetually deny the potential for queer relationships” (2016, para. 3).

An extensive study on queerbaiting within *Sherlock* can be found in Collier’s article *The love that refuses to speak its name: examining queerbaiting and fan-producer interactions in fan cultures* (2015). Collier claims that the creators of the show practice queerbaiting, and starts her argument by stating that: “[the] writers code *Sherlock* with a homoerotic subtext in ways that appeal to fan sensibilities even as producers’ antagonistic communications with fans overtly deny the show’s queer potential” (p.69). In order to support the first part of this statement, Collier provides several examples of ways in which “queer readings are enabled” (p.70). She begins by discussing how the possibility of a romance between Sherlock and John is brought forward by the writers of the series themselves, and discusses multiple conversations and events in *Sherlock* to back up her statement. Like Katzir (2015) and Lavigne (2012), Collier notes that the other characters in the series constantly assume that the two men are romantically involved, and states that John and Sherlock’s actions and behaviours “also point to their strong feelings for each other” (p.72). Sherlock, for instance, appears jealous of both male and female rivals for John’s affection, only lets himself be vulnerable around John, and is shown to be “humanised” by the other man. Furthermore, when Sherlock has been shot in season three episode three, *His Last Vow*, viewers follow his internal monologue, in which it becomes clear that John ranks even above Sherlock’s family in the detective’s mind, and that he is convinced that “Watson is the one who will be impacted the most by [his] passing” (p.74). John, in turn, displays a strong loyalty towards Sherlock from early on in the series, and although he is given a fixed heterosexual identity by the writers – he is shown to go on multiple dates with women, constantly denies being gay and in

a relationship with Sherlock, and ends up marrying a woman – he is also shown to run from a date in order to help the detective on a case, thereby choosing Sherlock over his female interest. Thus, as Collier states, “[f]or many fans (...) Watson’s protests are directly contradicted by his actions that always bring him back to Holmes” (p.80).

Similar observations are made by TJLC’ers, who analyse these conversations and sub-textual elements and present them as evidence for their reading of the text. For instance, in a *TJLC Explained* video titled *If It’s Not Gay, Then Why?*, several of the above-mentioned actions and conversations are discussed, and the question is posed as to why these scenes would be written into the series if John and Sherlock are not eventually meant to end up as a couple (see appendix 15). Collier, however, is less optimistic: she argues that the creators not only allow “audience members who respond to the subtext of intimacy presented to hope for representation, while simultaneously refusing to commit to those possibilities in text”, but that they do this while being aware of the homoerotic subtext in the show. For instance, Moffat and Gatiss have stated that their version of the Sherlock Holmes stories is a homage to Billy Wilder’s *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*, in which Sherlock Holmes can be read as a gay man. Next to this fact, which has also been discussed by TJLC’ers (see appendix 7), Collier argues that the creators, being self-professed fans, are aware of fan activities, such as shipping. Furthermore, they encourage fan discussion through transmedia engagement, for instance by providing fans with Sherlock and John’s blogs, as well as with behind-the-scenes-specials. In doing so, however, they focus on affirmational fans – fans who go along with the version of the text that the creators present and stay within the boundaries they set – “while ignoring the transformative<sup>13</sup> work that fans bring to reinterpreting Holmes’ interpersonal relationships and sexuality” (p. 82).

On top of this, Collier claims that the creators have built an antagonistic relationship with their fans. In the case of Steven Moffat, this relationship is the result of his refusal to discuss sexuality, and his tendency to silence fans who open discussion on this topic; he is “dismissive of fan readings, and interpretations that find a queer subtext, and ignores any fans who disagree” (p.90). As a result, Moffat is seen as an unreliable narrator by fans, who attempt to solve the puzzles that he often incorporates in his plots, and have noticed that he has lied about these plots before, for instance in interviews. The idea is strengthened by the fact that Moffat himself has declared that he lies “repeatedly and continually,” saying that “[i]t’s by far the best way of communicating” (p.91).

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<sup>13</sup> Here, ‘transformative’ refers to “fans who twist and reimagine the source material” (Collier, 2015, p.25).

Mark Gatiss, the other creator of *Sherlock*, has a different approach to the issue. According to him, people often think that popular TV shows need to take a stance on issues such as LGBTQIA+ representation. However, Moffat and Gatiss, as the latter states, don't have "an agenda of making Sherlock and Dr Watson an openly gay couple" (Collier, 2016, p.83). He explains that the fact that the other characters in *Sherlock* constantly make assumptions about the relationship between John and Sherlock is a nod to *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*, "but it is a joke. Not to belittle the idea that they could be [gay] but in our version, they are not" (p.83). Collier pays special attention to Gatiss' use of the word 'agenda', which, she argues, makes it clear that he is aware of the fact that queer representation would be a political statement. To Gatiss, she states, this means that adding queer characters in a popular TV show is "flying a flag", and not a legitimate story decision. However, Collier continues:

(...) this explicit distancing is itself political, a conservative move that boxes sexuality and confines it to identity politics that have a time and place that have no place in the narrative unless it's a plot point. Incidental characters can be gay, jokes can be made to demonstrate 'progress', but a queer identity for a main character would have different, 'political' issues that apparently don't fit in *Sherlock*. (Collier, 2015, p.83-84)

Collier also points to the fact that Gatiss explicitly admits to queer identity in *Sherlock* being played as a joke – a presentation which, as she states earlier in her article, "turns the idea of a queer identity and sexuality into a joke itself" (p.80).

Despite this denial of a romantic relationship between John and Sherlock, there are still Johnlock fans who hold on to their interpretations of the show. Collier shortly discusses the TJLC community, whose members believe that Moffat and Gatiss have repeatedly lied about this relationship, and have been planning a romance between Sherlock and John from the beginning. They back up this idea with "a staggering amount of documentation", such as a research on LGB (Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual) portrayal that was commissioned by the BBC at the same time that the *Sherlock* pilot was being made into the official first episode, as well as earlier projects by Gatiss and Moffat, where they point out that Moffat has written several other versions of Holmes and Watson, including a lesbian couple in *Doctor Who*, and that Gatiss is known for revealing his characters to be queer halfway through his works, in order to avoid it being labelled as an LGBTQIA+ genre piece (p.93). Thus, Collier says, "[these] fans are not only responding to the homoerotic subtext of the show, but also the work of the

producers, both within and outside of *Sherlock*” (p.92). Furthermore, their rejection of the explicit denial of a queer identity ties in with Collier’s vision that the explicit denial of fan perspectives and wishes, such as Moffat displays, leads to an antagonistic relationship between fans and producers, which makes it impossible for fans to participate as affirmative fans. Instead, groups such as the TJLC community question and resist producer authority, and maintain their own readings of the show, despite the boundaries set by the creators (the affirmational space). In fact, Collier states, the distrust and antagonism seem to encourage *Sherlock* fans to occupy transformational spaces. Collier therefore ascribes power not only to the producers, but also to the fans:

Although to some extent, TJLC empowers producer authority, as fans wait patiently to be ‘proven right’, and have their vision endorsed by Moffat, I believe that as long as they are directly resisting creator statements and calling for explicit queer acknowledgement, they inhabit a subversive space. (Collier, 2015, p.94)

By resisting the authority of the creators in favour of their own, queer interpretation of the text, as well as by raising the issue of LGBTQIA+ representation, fans “inhabit a subversive space”, and are thus in a position to speak up against queerbaiting.

#### **4. Methods & data**

With this research project, I aim to get an understanding of and create a proper description of a specific group of people, namely a group of Sherlock Holmes fans who are invested in the idea of a romantic relationship between Sherlock Holmes and John Watson in BBC’s *Sherlock*. Within this group, I have chosen to study those TJLC’ers that identify as LGBTQIA+, since issues of queer representation and queerbaiting are more directly linked to their identities than to the identities of non-LGBTQIA+ Sherlock fans. In order to make my research more complete, I also use the occasional source from the latter group, but my focus is on the LGBTQIA+ part of the TJLC community. Furthermore, this data consists of posts that deal with queerbaiting in connection to *Sherlock*, since this phenomenon plays an important role within TJLC, as well as posts focused on identity issues connected to the relationship between the creators of *Sherlock* and LGBTQIA+ TJLC’ers. For the latter, I compare posts created shortly before season four aired, with posts that were uploaded

afterwards, in order to take the strong reactions of some TJLC'ers post-season four into account, as well as their changing opinions about the creators.

Since this group mostly operates on the Internet – TJLC'ers might be visible on conventions, for instance, but their primary way of exchanging information is digital – I will study their behaviour online, with a focus on their activities on Tumblr, seeing as this is where most ideas are interchanged between them<sup>14</sup>. Tumblr is a microblogging platform, where anyone with an account can create posts and supply them with hashtags, words that describe the post and are used to search for other, similar posts (Nordin, 2015). Users can follow each other, without it being necessary to follow back, and already existing posts can be shared with one's followers by re-blogging (re-broadcasting) them. Furthermore, Tumblr supports multimedia posts, meaning that posts can exist of text as well as photos, audio-fragments, and videos (Chang, Tang, Inagaki & Liu, 2014).

In addition to Tumblr posts, I make use of sources that are referenced within these posts, such as interviews with the creators and actors of *Sherlock*. Therefore, I have chosen digital ethnography as my research method.

#### ***4.1 Ethnography***

Ethnography refers to “a qualitative research approach in which the researcher provides a detailed and systematic description of a social phenomenon or the way of life of some social unit, i.e. a group or culture” (Frenk, 2016, p.2). The aim is to understand not only what people are doing, but also how they are doing it. In order to do this, researchers make use of a method called ‘observant participant’: they immerse themselves into the group they’re studying, and thereby become part of it, while also maintaining their more neutral position as researchers (Matthews & Ross, 2010, p.134-135). By becoming part of the phenomenon they’re studying, they gain an insiders’ or emic perspective (as opposed to an external, etic perspective), which is a stance that is typical for ethnography (Page et al, 2014, p.108). This is what I aim for in my own research project as well: I attempt to understand the LGBTQIA+ fans within the TJLC community, and document their ideas, by following them and studying them from within their online community.

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<sup>14</sup> Conversations can also be found, for instance, in YouTube comments, but the meta-analysis posts characteristic of this community are primarily exchanged on Tumblr.

## 4.2 Digital ethnography

Although ethnography was initially developed as a way of studying other cultures – for example, indigenous cultures far away from the researcher’s own living space – as a research method, it can also be applied to online groups or cultures (Page et al, 2014; Boyd, 2008). There are, however, a few differences between traditional and digital ethnography, which bring with it some issues that need to be taken into account.

One of these differences has to do with ‘the field’ that the researcher looks at – in other words, the research context (Matthews & Ross, 2010). The case study that is central to most ethnographic practice originally had a specific physical location as its field; for example, when one studies a group of refugees, ‘the field’ would most likely consist of the refugee centre that they’re staying at. The Internet, on the other hand, consists of intangible spaces, and boundaries between these spaces are often unclear, which leaves the researcher with the task of creating those boundaries and to make decisions about what to include in the data and what not (P.K. Varis, personal communication, October 14, 2016). In doing so, it is important to not only pay attention to space – for instance, a certain hashtag, or a specific platform, or a hashtag, meme or group across several different spaces – but to also look at time as a boundary marker. Some phenomena or groups, and this counts for TJLC as well, have been around for years, and have therefore produced enormous amounts of data. In order to keep the research doable, it’s important that the researcher chooses both a time frame (e.g. a year, a month) and a starting point for their research, as well as provide an explanation for this choice (P.K. Varis, personal communication, October 14, 2016).

A second point of importance is that the research should be responsive, “meaning it should be possible for the researcher to adapt their project (...) This way, if something unexpected happens – for example, a hashtag that was mostly present on Twitter suddenly moves to Tumblr – it is possible to adapt the research and follow the new course that the phenomenon has taken” (Frenk, 2016, p.3). For my own research, however, this won’t be a problem, since I’m working with data that I collected before I started on this thesis. I’ve been following the TJLC community from October 2016 until March 2017, and will therefore focus on data produced shortly before and after *Sherlock* season four.

Furthermore, the issue of privacy needs to be taken into account. Unlike with traditional, offline ethnography, where the researcher is visibly (and often physically) present when conducting the research and has (direct) contact with the research participants, a group of people that is studied online is not always aware of the fact that they are being observed (P.K. Varis, personal communication, October 14, 2016). This raises the question of whether

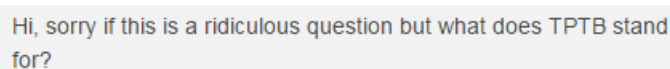


or not to ask for permission. Within TJLC, the participants post their ideas on a public platform – Tumblr – and in some cases even post pictures of themselves on their accounts, or appear in YouTube videos related to TJLC. This might be seen as indirect permission to use this information – after all, what they are doing is public. On the other hand, however, people have different ideas about privacy, and in some cases they aren't aware of how visible their information is (P.K. Varis, personal communication, October 14, 2016). The solution, it seems, would be simply asking for permission, but experience shows that people don't always reply to such requests. Furthermore, there is always the risk that people start behaving differently once they know they are being studied, which can cause problems especially when one is researching an ongoing phenomenon, such as in my case. I have therefore chosen not to ask my research participants for permission. However, since I want to respect their privacy, especially since my project concerns sensitive topics such as sexuality, no (user)names will be presented here. This should not pose any problems, since my research is focused on TJLC as a community, and not on individual members of this group. For the same reasons, I have also chosen not to provide links to the data I use; if necessary, these can be personally retrieved through me.

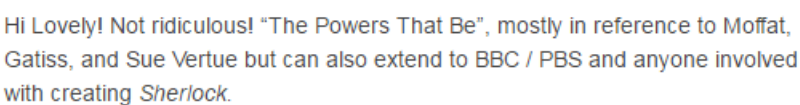
### ***4.3 Data description***

#### *4.3.1 “The Powers That Be”: Identification and role models (pre-season four)*

One important aspect within the TJLC community is the relationship between the fans and the creators. When looking at some of the Tumblr posts in this group that were posted before season four, it becomes clear that at this point, the strong belief in Johnlock stems not only from the extensive analyses that have been made of the perceived subtext in the show, but also from a strong belief in the creators of the show. As happens with many things in the TJLC community, there is an acronym for the creators: they are often referred to as TPTB, meaning ‘The Powers That Be’ (Image 1).



Hi, sorry if this is a ridiculous question but what does TPTB stand for?



Hi Lovely! Not ridiculous! “The Powers That Be”, mostly in reference to Moffat, Gatiss, and Sue Vertue but can also extend to BBC / PBS and anyone involved with creating *Sherlock*.

Image 1: The Powers That Be

As the post above explains, not only writers Moffat and Gatiss – who are often collectively referred to as ‘Moftiss’ – are included, but also producer Sue Vertue, broadcasters BBC and PBS, the actors, set designer and the creators of the musical score. Information that comes from these sources, such as interviews, official announcements, and social media posts, is analysed and interpreted by TJLC’ers, in the hope of finding more clues about both the overall plot of the series, as well as the romantic storyline that they perceive (see also *TJLC Explained* material in the appendices). Together with analyses of the series itself, such as subtext, symbolism and the musical score, these are taken into account in the fans’ understanding and prediction of the story. The following post provides an example of this:

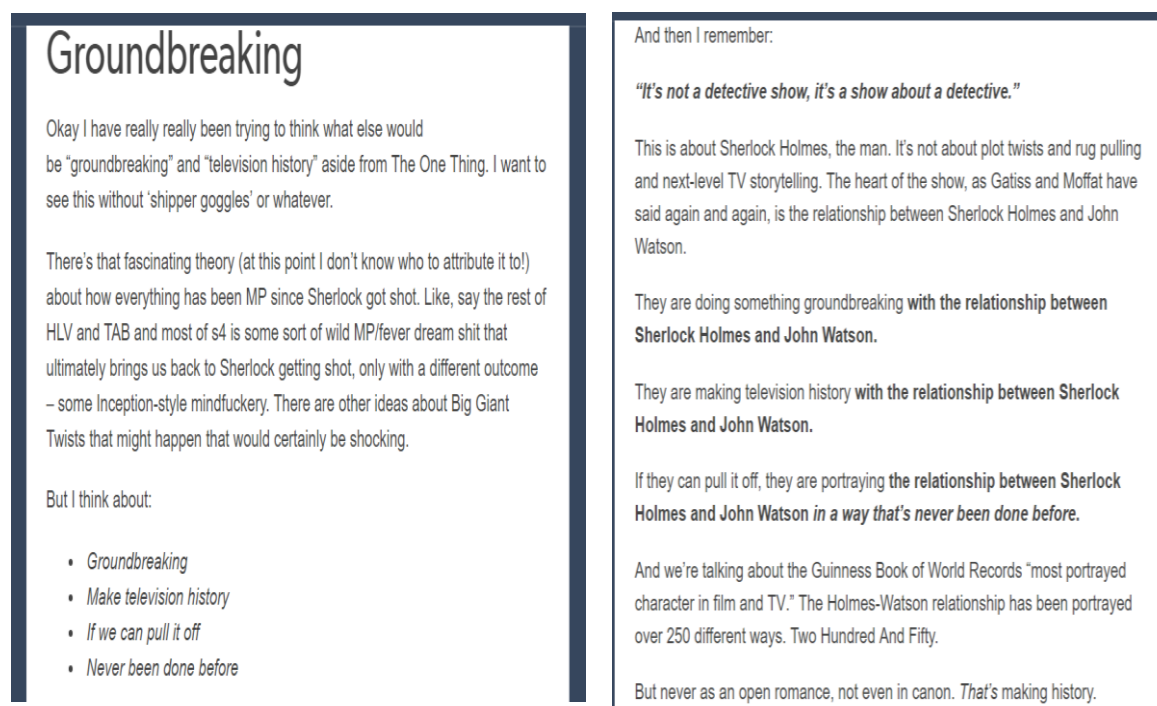


Figure 2: “Groundbreaking”

The writer of the post attempts to look at the situation in an objective way, without letting their personal hopes get in the way (“without ‘shipper goggles’”). They refer to several things that have been said by either the creators or the actors of the show: that season four will be ground-breaking; that, if they can pull it off, it will make television history, because it contains something that has never been done before (Tygiel, 2016, 1:24). The writer admits that these statements could be about plot twists, such as everything “having been MP since Sherlock got shot” (MP stands for Mind Palace, a trick Sherlock uses where he plays out scenarios in his head in order to solve cases. Here, it refers to a popular theory that after

Sherlock got shot in season three episode three, everything has been happening only in his head (see appendix 16), instead of being about The One Thing – in other words, about John and Sherlock getting together. Then, however, they remember the description of the show by Gatiss and Moffat: “It’s not a detective show, it’s a show about a detective” (figure 2). This statement is then used to argue why the other quotes, taken from the creators and actors, are indeed about John and Sherlock ending up in a romantic relationship. Finally, the writer backs this up with numbers from the Guinness Book of World Records and referring to other Sherlock Holmes adaptations, as well as the canon version.

The strong belief in ‘Johnlock as endgame’ is further strengthened by a more personal belief in the creators of the show, fuelled by facts from their personal lives:

Sherlock’s love; start to see it. Others leave the reviews we’ve all read about how “this isn’t like Sherlock”–“Why does it look like they’re about to kiss?”

Because they are. Gatiss and Andrew Scott are gay; Benedict’s portrayed gay characters multiple times with sensitivity and depth. Martin’s played a gay man before and kissed men onscreen. Moffat’s written two detective couples before, one explicitly a Holmes/Watson pair, who are queer and in love. They wouldn’t bait an audience. They wouldn’t make love between their leads a joke; they’d make it a mystery, a revelation, a tale within the tale. They promised terror and romance and adventure this coming season. “The story of two men and their frankly ridiculous adventures” is what the audience came for, but the bigger story Sherlock promised at the wedding is approaching its climax now.

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Figure 3: Personal lives of the creators and actors

Several of the people working on *Sherlock* are either members of the LGBTQIA+ community, such as Mark Gatiss and Andrew Scott, who plays the role of evil genius James “Jim” Moriarty, or supportive of the community and not opposed to playing a non-straight character, like Benedict Cumberbatch, who portrays Sherlock Holmes, and the John Watson of the BBC series, Martin Freeman (figure 3). Furthermore, Steven Moffat has already written a queer couple based on Holmes and Watson before, in an episode of *Doctor Who* (Collier, 2015, p.93). These facts play an important role in the belief in TJLC, because for TJLC’ers, not getting a Johnlock ending means being queerbaited, and as this Tumblr user puts it, people within and supporting the LGBTQIA+ community “wouldn’t bait an audience. They wouldn’t make love between their leads a joke” (figure 3). A similar argument is made within the following text post, which was uploaded between the leak of episode three of season four and

the actual broadcasting of this episode on television. The aim of the post is to keep people optimistic about TJLC, and works on the assumption that the leaked episode is a fake:

### *A brief reminder...*

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For those feeling down and in need of a pick me up. I present to you a list of reasons with TJLC is alive and well-

- 1. Mark and Steven hate queer-baiting. They HATE it. Why else would they have talked for 10 minutes about how important it is to have queer representation? Why else would they stress the importance of portraying characters like the 'gay baddie' the 'grumpy bisexual' and the 'camp gay?' It has to be done delicately, Moffat said. I trust he will not disappoint us. And of course, don't forget the survey done by BBC on representation just before the show's creation.

Figure 4: A brief reminder...(part 1)

The same line of argument is followed here as in the post I discussed above (figure 3). Moffat (Steven) and Gatiss (Mark) have no reason for queerbaiting; *Sherlock* not being a queer romance is queerbaiting, because of the subtext in the show; therefore, TJLC is happening (figure 4). This is, again, supported by what the creators have said before. The writer refers to an Q&A session with Moffat and Gatiss, in which they spoke about the importance of queer representation on television, and in which Gatiss said it is important to portray gay characters without needing to redeem them, so that you can have a 'gay baddie', a 'grumpy bisexual' and a 'camp gay' (Nerd HQ, 2016, 1:12). TJLC'ers were quick to make a connection to the series, in which several allusions are made that main villain James Moriarty might be gay, or at least queer (Lavigne, 2012), and applied the latter two descriptions to John and Sherlock, respectively. Another reference has to do with a survey on representation that the BBC held shortly before they greenlit *Sherlock*, the results of which showed that viewers wanted more representation of different sexualities on television (Collier, 2015).

The post then continues with some other arguments, including the following:

4. The creators all believe, whole heartedly, that this show will be groundbreaking. They believe they are fixing a story that has been told wrong for ages. They believe they are doing something that has never been done before. What has been done before? Mary's death. The child's death. Moriarty's return. The third Holmes sibling. Mycroft's death. Sherlock and Irene. It's all been done before, but what story remains untold? I think you know the answer.

Figure 5: A brief reminder...(part 2)

Again, the same things that have been said by the actors and creators are repeated and used as arguments – “ground-breaking”, “never been done before”. The message ends with another much-quoted line from Benedict Cumberbatch, who has said in an interview about season four that “love conquers all”. This TJLC’er repeats his words in order to keep their fellow TJLC’ers’ hope alive: “Stay strong, and remember: love conquers all” (Flicks And The City, 2016, 12:23).

This trust in the creators and actors of *Sherlock* not only leads to a strong belief in Johnlock, but also makes several TJLC’ers identify with the creators. Especially Mark Gatiss, being an openly gay man, is often looked up to, and sometimes even referenced as ‘gay dad’. For instance, when the creator of *TJLC Explained* work together with another prominent member of the community to create a series of videos called *TJLC Advent*, the two call themselves ‘The Gators Twins’ in the description of one of the videos. When a commenter on YouTube asks them if they are actually twins, they reply that they have “sprung from the forehead of Mark Gators (Gatiss) himself”.<sup>15</sup> By naming themselves after Gatiss and implying a (made-up) kinship with him, these TJLC’ers show their appreciation of and identification with this particular *Sherlock*-writer.

#### 4.3.2 “They Lie”: TJLC’s trust in the creators (pre-season four)

The strong trust in ‘The Powers That Be’, combined with the extensive analyses of the subtext within the series, has led to an often complete faith in the idea that Johnlock will eventually happen. The actors and creators of *Sherlock*, on the other hand, are aware of the fans that hope for a romance between the lead characters of the show, and have denied this possibility multiple times in interviews and on social media. This does nothing to deter the TJLC’ers, however, but has instead led to an important notion within their theory: that the creators and actors lie continuously about the show – *especially* about Johnlock. The importance of this topic can for instance be seen when looking at the *TJLC Explained* videos. After a first video introducing the conspiracy theory, the second video, titled *The Creators Lie...A Lot*, was entirely dedicated to this topic (see appendix 9). The description of the video starts as follows:

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<sup>15</sup> I have deliberately left out the source material here because of privacy issues; it can be retrieved through me personally.

Gepubliceerd op 13 feb. 2016

Hello everyone and welcome back to another episode of TJLC Explained. One of the most frequent arguments made against Johnlock, even by people who /want/ to believe, is that the creators and actors have said it isn't going to happen. But they lie. A lot. This video walks through why you shouldn't worry the next time someone involved with Sherlock makes a comment that appears to contradict Johnlock.

TJLC stands for The Johnlock Conspiracy or the belief that the writers of BBC Sherlock have intended for John and Sherlock to end up in a relationship together since the start.

Figure 6: Description of *The Creators Lie...A Lot*

As this description explains, one of the most common arguments to deny the existence of Johnlock is the fact that the creators and actors continuously tell people that it's not going to happen (figure 6). The TJLC community, however, finds several counter-arguments as to why this is not the logical conclusion, and provides reasons explaining why the creators and actors are lying – reasons which, in the case of this video, are backed up by references to several interviews with Moffat, Martin Freeman (who plays the role of John Watson), and Mark Gatiss. One of the reasons given by TJLC'ers is the fact that there seem to be contradicting statements coming from the creators and actors. While they deny that John and Sherlock are, or will ever be, in love, they have also described *Sherlock* in ways that suggest otherwise. For instance, in an early interview with Martin Freeman, taken after season one of the series had aired, he states that *Sherlock* has “the gayest story in the history of television”:

It's about the relationship between the two men and how it develops and how it changes (...) It is about the things that wind each other up and the things that they genuinely love about one another as well. We all certainly saw it as a love story. These two people do love and kind of need each other in a slightly dysfunctional way, but it is a relationship that works. They get results. (Walker, 2011, para. 3)

While the quotation above can also be read as a close, platonic relationship between the two characters, the fact that Freeman speaks about “the *gayest* story” appears to suggest a relationship of a different nature – something that has not escaped TJLC'ers' attention (figure 24). Apart from examples such as this interview, their belief is further strengthened by the fact that the creators have openly admitted that they lie about the series:

“Interesting though, isn’t it, ‘cause we both now have a reputation - which is not really true - about how we are enjoying doing this. The truth is that the only way to keep a secret is to make everybody distrust everything.”

- Steven Moffat, Writers' Chat S4 feature [x]

Figure 7: The only way to keep a secret...

Statements made by ‘The Powers That Be’, such as the one above (figure 7), are quoted and interpreted by TJLC’ers (like this Tumblr user and the creator of the *TJLC Explained* videos) as an explanation for the seemingly paradoxical things that have been said concerning the relationship between Sherlock and John. By declaring that “the only way to keep a secret is to make everybody distrust everything” (figure 7), Moffat confirms the idea that “the creators lie...a lot”.

What inevitably follows this argument, then, is the question *why* the creators would lie about Johnlock, especially considering the fact that they are either supporters of LGBTQIA+ representation, or part of this community themselves, as we’ve established earlier (see figure 3). This issue is raised in the following post:

I was talking to my mom today about tjlc and she told me she didn't understand why did the gay relationship have to be the "rug pull". Why couldn't have they made it explicit from the very beginning that Johnlock was their goal? Why all these secrets, these theories, to prove something that was so natural, organic and obvious, even to a straight casual as her. She told me we deserved more than be hidden by a conspiracy and used as shock value. And I actually didn't know what to tell her.

 Anonymous

Figure 8: Johnlock as ‘rug pull’

Here, an anonymous Tumblr user asks another user why it's necessary for the creators to treat Johnlock like any other plot twist – it has been revealed at this point that there will be a 'rug pull' in season four, which TJLC'ers hope or assume will be John and Sherlock getting together – while being a LGBTQIA+ person is something completely natural, and should be treated as such (figure 8). The response they get, reflects the general consensus within the TJLC community on this topic:

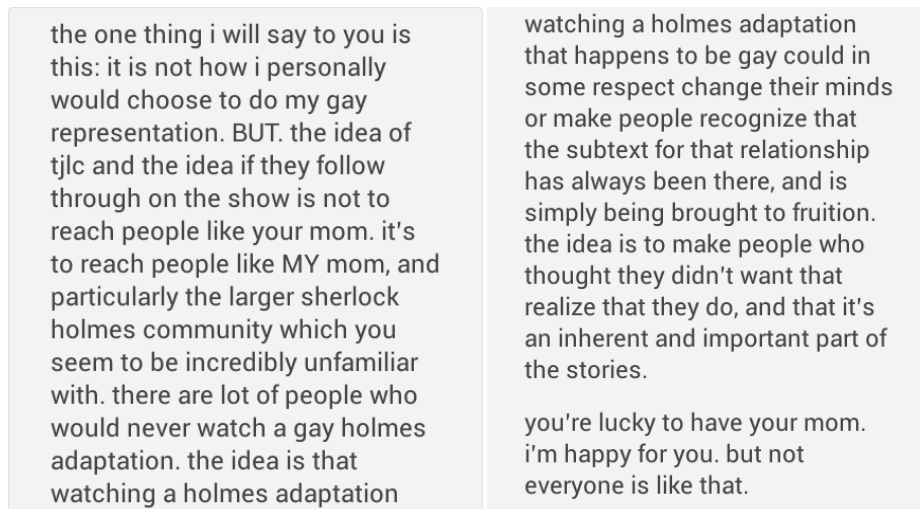


Figure 9: 'Straightbaiting' as part of the bigger plan (reply to figure 8)

TJLC'ers hope that, by not outright telling the audience from the get-go that the main characters are queer, viewers who might not normally be open to a gay relationship will get to learn the characters and the story before their prejudices can prevent them from it, and eventually realize that it's a natural progression in the story, "that the subtext for that relationship has always been there, and is simply brought to fruition", and to accept "that it's an inherent and important part of the stories" (figure 9). This way of getting non-LGBTQIA+ supporters to watch *Sherlock* is not preferable but, as part of the bigger plan, 'straightbaiting' is necessary.

Closer to season four, there are also fans who recognize the possibility that Johnlock might not happen after all. This does not mean, however, that they don't believe in the narrative that they have analysed anymore:



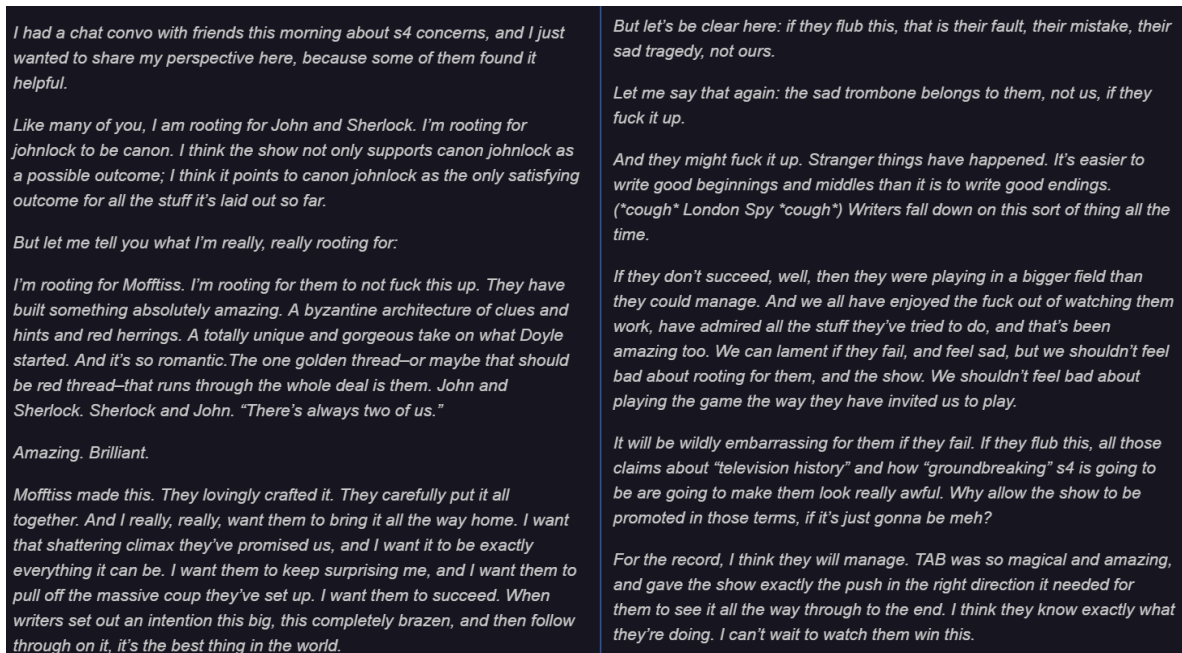


Figure 10: Rooting for Mofftiss

This Tumblr user, while still holding on to their belief in TJLC, also realizes that the predictions of the community might not come true. However, they see this as “Mofftiss” (Moffat and Gatiss) not living up to the expectations they have created, and failing to deliver the story that they themselves have set in motion – a narrative that contains a “byzantine architecture of clues and hints and red herrings” (figure 10). If the worst comes to the worst, and this narrative doesn't pay off, “the sad trombone” belongs to the creators, and not to the fans, who are not to blame for “playing the game” they were invited to play. After all, the show “points to canon johnlock as the only satisfying outcome for all the stuff that it’s laid out so far” (figure 10). This sentiment is backed up by another TJLC’er, who replies to the post with the following words:

“We shouldn't feel bad about playing the game the way they have invited us to play”

PRAISE BE. Antis say they'll laugh at us if it's not canon, that we imagined it all, that we just wanted fanservice... well, I regret to inform them that Mofftiss absolutely wrote, and have released, a Johnlock romance. If they don't bring it to fruition, that's a shame for them. (all this said, I have no doubt in TJLC whatsoever but I just really love your defense here!)

Figure 11: “A Johnlock romance” (reply to figure 10)

Not only does this user agree with the previous user’s argument, they also state that this means that TJLC’ers cannot be written off as ‘just wanting fanservice’ – as the ‘antis’ (a

group of Sherlock fans who are against the TJLC community and their Johnlock reading of the show) claim – or being delusional and having imagined all of the subtext; Johnlock is part of the narrative, even if it doesn't actually become explicit in the series (figure 11).

4.3.3 *“It’s not a game anymore”*: *Clue, The Lost Special, and letters of complaint (series four)*

Although the possibility of the creators not following through on Johnlock is recognized, expectations are still high for the two characters getting together in season four. After episode two, *The Lying Detective*, has been broadcasted, many TJLC’ers see their theories confirmed by the last scene of the episode, in which John and Sherlock have a heart-to-heart about the death of John’s wife Mary, as well as love in general, and wherein John states that romance would complete Sherlock as a human being:

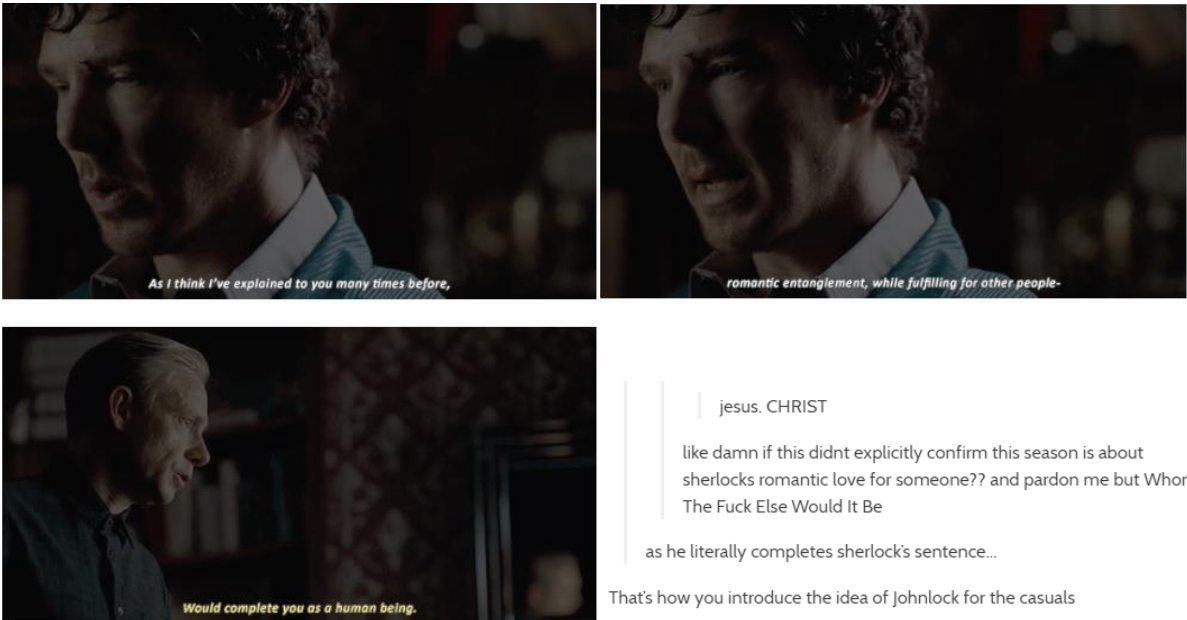


Figure 12: Romantic entanglement

The TJLC’ers who respond to this post, all interpret this piece of dialogue as part of the romantic narrative between John and Sherlock. The second commentor especially sees it as confirmation for the fact that season four is centered around Sherlock’s “romantic love for someone” – an idea that already seemed confirmed by the “I love you”-line in the trailer, as well as a Twitter post from an official BBC account which states that Sherlock is back and in love, “but who with?” (figure 12; appendix 17). Other potential love interests for Sherlock, Irene Adler and Molly Hooper, don’t seem likely candidates at this point. While Irene is brought up in the conversation, Sherlock refutes the idea that they are romantically involved,

and he and Molly have only shared the screen twice so far, of which neither interaction can be seen as romantic (Gatiss, Vertue & Talalay, 2017; Moffat, Vertue & Hurran, 2017; appendix 18). This leads TJLC'ers to the conclusion that it must be John whom Sherlock is interested in; after all, who else could it be? (figure 12).

Moreover, there is another part of the conversation that has caught the attention of the TJLC community. While talking about romantic relationships and John's regrets in his relationship with Mary, John tells Sherlock that it's important to pursue his romantic interest, to "do something while there's still a chance. Because that chance doesn't last forever. Trust me, Sherlock, it's gone before you know it. Before you know it" (Moffat, Vertue & Hurran, 2017). While this conversation is centered around the fact that Sherlock is in touch with Irene but apparently not pursuing a relationship with her, TJLC'ers see this as a cover for the 'real' conversation that is taking place: the one about John and Sherlock. This gets for instance backed up by the fact that this episode ends on a cliffhanger in which John is held at gunpoint:

look as a writer can I just say when Character A tells Character B to make a move on whoever they love before it's too late and in the very next scene Character A is presumably mortally wounded, that...Means Something

Figure 13: It Means Something

The writer of this post points out that what happens at the end of *The Lying Detective* is a specific type of scene that can be found within other narratives as well, in which one character (in this case, John) tells the other character (Sherlock) that they should confess their feelings to the person they're in love with before it's too late, only for the first character's life to be in danger not long after this conversation. Inserting this kind of dialogue into the narrative of *Sherlock* before letting John (presumably) get shot, therefore "Means Something": namely, that Sherlock has feelings for John, and that he should confess them soon, before he misses his chance (figure 13).

At this point, the end of the scene is just the icing on the cake: after their conversation, Sherlock comforts a crying John by pulling him into a hug (Moffat, Vertue & Hurran, 2017). This is the first time the two characters have interacted in such an intimate way, and the moment fits right into the build-up of their romantic relationship that TJLC'ers have predicted for season four. At this point, there is an almost unwavering belief that this love story will come to fruition in episode three (appendix 19). Many screenshots the scene circulate on

Tumblr (appendix 20-21), and several TJLC'ers, such as the one who created the *TJLC Explained* YouTube series, upload videos of themselves in which they express their happiness – sometimes through tears – at Johnlock finally becoming canon<sup>16</sup>.

Everything seems to be set into play for the big finale in episode three, *The Final Problem*, which will be broadcasted on television on Sunday, January 15th. However, on Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>, a Russian-language version of the episode is leaked, and not much later, a version of the original English episode can also be found online (Bradley, 2017; appendix 22). Several TJLC'ers, unable to wait for the official launch, watch the leaked version – only to react with confusion. Not only do they find the episode to be of significantly lesser quality than the rest of the TV show – one TJLC'er describes it as “ridiculous and low budget” – it also seems different in tone than any other *Sherlock* episode: “it’s like a 60s Bond movie had a baby with *Saw/It/The Silence of the Lambs*” [famous horror movies – Frenk], another fan states (appendix 22-23). Other complaints have to do with the music, special effects, and the way the characters are written (figure 15). Further confusion exists surrounding “The “Garridebs Moment”, which is an important moment within the Sherlock Holmes canon, as the following post illustrates:

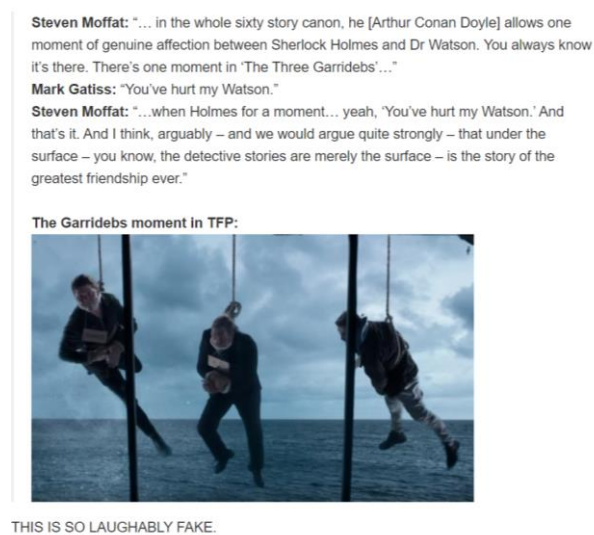


Figure 14: The Garridebs moment in *The Final Problem*

As Moffat states in this interview quote, there is only one moment within the original Sherlock Holmes stories in which “genuine affection between Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson” is shown, and this moment takes place in a story called *The Three Garridebs* (figure

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<sup>16</sup> For privacy reasons, I have left out these sources – if necessary, they can be personally retrieved through me.

14). Furthermore, Moffat says that he and Gatiss argue “quite strongly” that underneath the cases “is the story of the greatest friendship ever”, a friendship which we get a glimpse of during that one moment. Following this line of thinking, TJLC’ers expect there to be a ‘Three Garridebs Moment’ within one of the episodes of season four, in which John (Dr Watson) will be in danger, and Sherlock will finally show his true emotions towards him (appendix 24). Instead, however, viewers get the scene which is displayed above: three brothers, with the last name Garrideb, are taken hostage by the main villain of the episode, and it’s up to Sherlock to save them (Gatiss et al., 2017). The scene doesn’t stand out, but is merely part of a broader narrative, and has nothing to do whatsoever with the relationship between John and Sherlock – a fact that elicits outraged reactions from fans (appendix 25).

The TJLC community is confused. Not only do none of their theories, which seemed to be confirmed by episode two, come true; the episode, regardless of Johnlock, does not seem to be part of the show that they have been watching and loving so far. A new theory is formed, encouraged by the fact that, instead of keeping the leak silent, the creators acknowledge the event by asking fans not to watch the episode, which TJLC’ers find suspicious (see also appendices 22, 23 & 26):

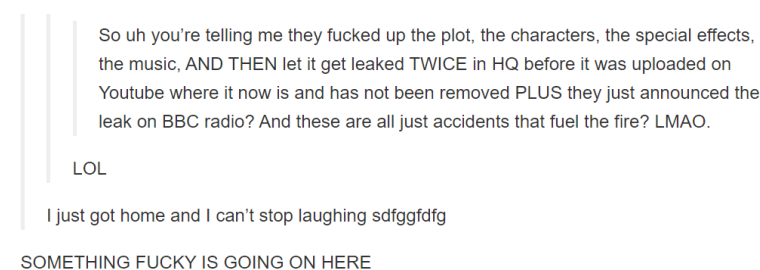


Figure 15: Something fucky

According to these TJLC’ers, something strange (“something fucky”) is going on here; by giving the leak this amount of public attention, and apparently not doing much to remove the illegal versions, it almost seems like The Powers That Be *want* fans to watch it.

Earlier that week, on Thursday, there has been a pre-screening of *The Final Problem*, and in combination with the leaked episode and its contents, as well as other ‘clues’, TJLC’ers construct a new theory. They compare the events that are happening to the film *Clue*, which has a tagline that says “It’s not just a game anymore” – something that TJLC’ers are quick to link to *Sherlock* season four, which has been promoted with the almost similar tagline “It’s not a game anymore” (Sherlock, 2016; appendix 27). More importantly, however, *Clue* is

famous for having multiple endings, which leads to the theory that *The Final Problem* will have multiple endings as well (appendix 28):

GUYS!

In the Clue Movie, there were three endings: Ending A, B and C, where C was the REAL ending.

- 1) BFI SCREENING today
- 2) Screening in Cardiff on Thursday
- 3) Worldwide Premiere on BBC One/PBS Masterpiece on Sunday

So the BFI screening today was our Ending A, tomorrow's showing in Cardiff is our Ending B, and the premiere on Sunday is our Ending C.

THREE DIFFERENT VIEWINGS, THREE DIFFERENT ENDINGS, WITH THE ONE SHOWN ON BBC ONE/PBS BEING THE REAL ENDING.

Figure 16: Three different endings

As this post shows, the idea is that the the pre-screenings – and therefore the leaked episode – have false endings, and that the TV broadcasting on Sunday (on BBC One/PBS) is the episode with the real ending (figure 16). This would also explain why *The Final Problem* was screened days in advance to the TV release, while the previous episode's press screening was scheduled merely two hours prior to its broadcasting on television, in order to avoid spoilers (appendix 22). The theory is further backed up by the fact that each 'ending' in *Clue* includes a freeze frame, an element that is also used in the ending of the finale of *Sherlock* season four, despite the fact that the producers have never done this before in the series (appendix 29). Moreover, in a behind-the-scenes-video uploaded on the *BBC* YouTube channel (BBC, 2016), Mark Gatiss remarks that he realised, while filming, that there were too many openings, and that “[there] may now be too many endings. Who knows?” (Appendix 30). This quote is used by TJLC'ers as further support to their claim that there will be three different endings.

When *The Final Problem* eventually airs on television, and it turns out to be exactly the same episode as the leaked version that many TJLC'ers have already seen, including its ending, reactions vary wildly. A part of the community still holds onto their faith in Johnlock and the creators, by supporting a theory that is partly similar to that of the three different endings: the idea that there is a secret fourth episode. This theory, which is built upon the same confusion that arose after the leak, is even directly addressed in a conversation with Steven Moffat:

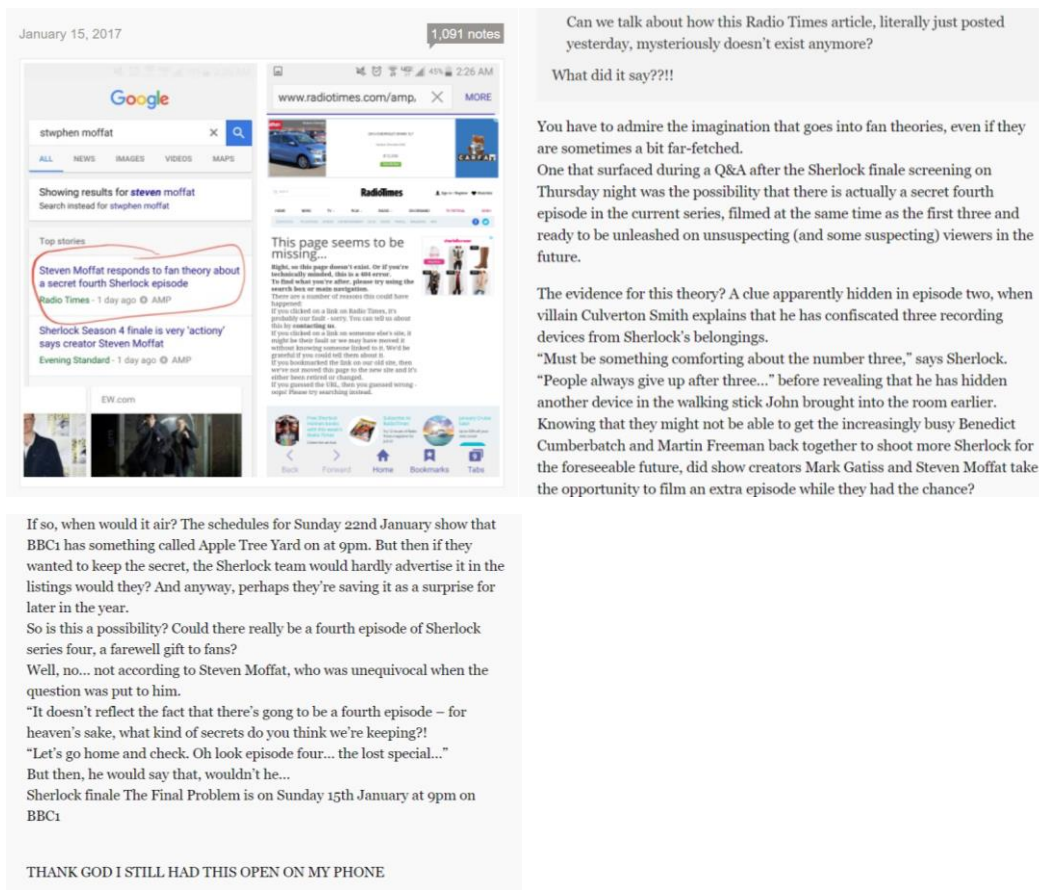


Figure 17: The secret fourth episode

As figure 17 shows, the idea of a secret fourth episode is, next to the reasons I described above, also based on a line from season four episode two, in which Sherlock, after three of his recording devices are confiscated, says that "People always give up after three..." and reveals a fourth one. The article quoted in the post above explains as well when this secret episode would be aired: a week later, where there is now a time slot reserved for a new show called *Apple Tree Yard*. The entire idea of a fourth episode has been denied by Moffat – but, as the writer of the *Radio Times* article states, "he would say that, wouldn't he..." (figure 17). This statement provides yet another example of the belief that the creators of *Sherlock*, in this case Steven Moffat, lie, and shows that people outside of the *Sherlock* fan community are also aware of this fact. On top of this, the TJLC community finds another reason to keep believing in the fourth episode, which has to do with Moffat's remark about "the lost special" (figure 18).

## The Lost Special

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

"The Lost Special" is a short story by Arthur Conan Doyle first published as part of the *Round the Fire* series in *The Strand Magazine* of August 1898. It is implied to be a Sherlock Holmes story, though his name is not used. The story's narrative mode is third person, subjective, though the narrator is not identified.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Lost\\_Special](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Lost_Special)

At the BFI screening for Sunday's finale, co-creator Steven Moffat was asked about the rumour. And he swiftly denied it. Here's how responded:

"It doesn't reflect the fact that there's gong to be a fourth episode – for heaven's sake, what kind of secrets do you think we're keeping?! Let's go home and check. Oh look episode four... the lost special..."

Well, there you are then, nothing to see here... Except. Hang on a minute. Did Moffat intentionally reference a Conan Doyle detective story called 'The Lost Special' when he said that? Wouldn't it be a very Mofftiss thing to do to reinterpret a piece of the Sherlock Holmes creator's work in an unexpected way?

Figure 18: The Lost Special

'The lost special' that Moffat names, apparently to deny the existense of a fourth episode, can be interpreted to refer to a short story written by Arthur Conan Doyle, the writer of the original *Sherlock Holmes* stories. Although the character's name is not used, it is "implied to be a Sherlock Holmes story" (figure 18). Part of the TJLC community therefore interpret Moffat's choice of words as an intentional move on his part, further strengthening their faith in an extra episode. Additionally, their theory seems to be confirmed by the creators in another way as well. After each episode of season four, a video was uploaded on the official *Sherlock* YouTube channel, titled *Sherlock Reacts* (Sherlock, 2017). In these videos, the events that happened within the episodes, as well as fans' reactions to the them, are discussed, and in the video focused on *The Final Problem*, the secret fourth episode is explicitly mentioned (figure 19).



Figure 19: *Sherlock Reacts: The Final Problem*



Instead of outright denying the fan-theory, or not mentioning it at all, the creators explicitly address the idea with this video, by replying to a fan’s comment on it, and even suggest that it might be true, by having the host of the video act in a certain way (“lying portrayed in a comical way”) (figure 19).

Other fans, however, have lost their faith in the show and its creators, and react with confusion, anger, and grief. The same confusion that existed when the third episode leaked, comes back even stronger now that the episode broadcasted on television turns out to be the same as the leaked episode (figure 20).

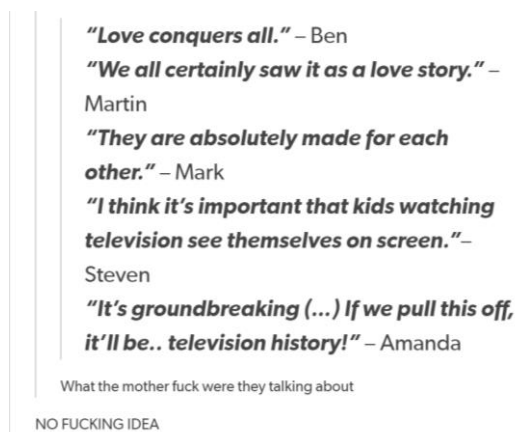


Figure 20: Quotes by the creators and actors of *Sherlock*

These TJLC’ers look back at things that the creators and actors of *Sherlock* have said about season four (Ben and Amanda), LGBTQIA+ representation (Steven), and John and Sherlock’s relationship (Martin and Mark), and wonder what they were talking about, since TJLC’ers don’t see these sentiments represented in the series. Several of them also point out that their confusion and dissatisfaction is not only about Johnlock; they just don’t think it’s a good episode in general (appendix 31).

Many reactions also show the more personal emotional response that TJLC’ers have after season four. Several of them express their feelings by changing their blog description on Tumblr to sentences such as “You can’t imagine how I hate this”, “I once was in love with a show called Sherlock, but it broke my heart. I’m learning to expect better” and “I can’t believe they did that to us” (appendix 33). This last statement directly refers to the creators, who are, now that it’s clear for part of the community that Johnlock isn’t going to happen, being accused of queerbaiting their audience (figure 21).

this show has been lovingly crafted with care and joy by at LEAST three gay men in major positions (mark gatiss, andrew scott, and joe lidster) , commissioned enthusiastically and given a significantly larger budget by a gay man (ben stephenson), and involves dozens more people who openly support lgbt rights/causes/charities and who may be lgbt themselves. WHY would ALL of these people decide that they want to collaborate to create the single most extreme and cruel example of queerbaiting EVER???? WHY WOULD THEY EVER DO THAT WTF

Figure 21: Confusion about being queerbaited by the *Sherlock* producers

As this post shows, TJLC'ers can hardly believe what has happened; to them, everything in the series pointed towards a Johnlock ending, and not getting that ending means that they have been queerbaited all along – by creators who are either in the LGBTQIA+ community or known supporters of LGBTQIA+ rights (figure 21). This emotional impact of being queerbaited is not only shown by personal reactions, but also by the fact that some members of the TJLC community find it necessary to reblog a post with suicide prevention hotlines (appendix 34).

As a result of feeling queerbaited, several TJLC'ers, who at first identified themselves with the creators and had an almost unwavering faith in them, start to criticise 'The Powers That Be', and express their anger towards them. One example can be found in the following post of a TJLC'er, who now describes the creators not as fellow LGBTQIA+ people or allies, but rather as "cruel, arrogant men" who never deserved TJLC'ers' "love or (...) faith" (figure 22).

We made something beautiful. We saw the world for something better than it was. I don't regret that. I don't regret you. I'm proud of you, and of us.

I'm sorry we squandered so much on cruel, arrogant men who never deserved our love or our faith. I'm sorry.

Figure 22: "Cruel, arrogant men"

Another way in which TJLC'ers express their critique, is by going back to interviews with the creators that were seen as confirmation for Johnlock, and re-interpret them – this time with the idea of being queerbaited in the back of their minds.

remember that mark gatiss quote that went something like "the day we have a detective show about a guy who solves crimes for an hour, then goes home where his husband is waiting for him, is the day we've achieved something".  
MARK MY GUY YOU LITERALLY HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO DO THIS EXACTLY AND YOU JUST DIDN'T?

Figure 23: Going back to a quote by Mark Gatiss

The writer of this post, for instance, refers to something Mark Gatiss has said about LGBTQIA+ representation, and points out that with *Sherlock*, he had the opportunity to bring about exactly (“literally”) such representation, in the form of a male detective (Sherlock) coming home to his his husband (John). This person wonders, in capital letters for emphasis, why Gatiss would pass up this opportunity (figure 23). A similar observation is made in the following post, where the writer recalls a quote by Martin Freeman, which I have discussed earlier, that seemed to point towards Johnlock as endgame (figure 24).

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@ martin do you remember that time you said sherlock was the gayest show on tv and that you see it as a love story. do you remember. i do

Figure 24: Going back to a quote by Martin Freeman

Not only statements that were interpreted in favour of a romance between John and Sherlock are discussed, but also the ones that were negative about Johnlock, but which until now have been either ignored, or interpreted as the creators not wanting to spoil the surprise, on the assumption that the creators lie (figure 25).



Figure 25: Tweets by Ian Hallard and Amanda Abbington

Back in 2013, Ian Hallard (Mark Gatiss’ husband) has posted on Twitter that he understands that “some people like to fantasise about Sherlock & John as a couple”, but expresses confusion about the fact that these people think this “will actually happen”. Amanda Abbington, the actress who plays John’s wife Mary, responds in agreement, stating that she thinks “it’s funny how worked up people get”, and wondering if friendship isn’t “interesting to watch” (figure 25). Looking at them shortly after season four, TJLC’ers reinterpret these statements, now that they know they are true expressions of Hallard and Abbington’s opinions and not ways to ‘keep the secret’ of Johnlock as endgame, and show angry reactions. The original poster sarcastically calls Amanda’s tweets “lovely quality responses” (figure 25), and in a reaction to this post, another TJLC’er states that they find Hallard’s tweet “incredibly offensive” and that the “no one seriously thinks” gets them every time (appendix 35).

Furthermore, there are also reactions that are not only concerned with queerbaiting, but also express ideas about the relationship between the fans, in this case TJLC’ers, and the creators. The creator of the *TJLC Explained* videos, for instance, touches upon the role that power plays when it comes to representation, by stating the following:

Like you know how satire is supposed to mock those in power not those without it it feels so much like that this is not a fun joke they’re just reiterating the messages we get from literally everywhere else sorry I can’t see the fun or the intelligence in that

Figure 26: Power and representation

In this post, the writers states that “satire is supposed to mock those in power not those without it”, implying that the creators make fun of minorities by queerbaiting, while they

should use their influence to do the opposite. Instead, however, the creators provide their audience with “the same messages we get from literally everywhere else”, by choosing not to represent the LGBTQIA+ community in the form of a homosexual relationship, but reinforcing heterosexuality instead (figure 26). Other criticism is focused more on the fact that fans, once more, do not get taken seriously by the creators, as the following post explains:

i think most of us are there honestly, that's another tragedy of this whole thing, that we thought fandom culture was finally going to get taken seriously because we made a real scholarly effort to predict something and succeeded. that's fucked up, obviously, because fandom should be taken seriously anyway. but yeah, that's a huge loss and it hurts me a lot.

Figure 27: Taking fandom culture seriously

This TJLC'er highlights another part of the disappointment within the community, namely the fact that, although they made “a real scholarly effort to predict something”, the lack of a romantic relationship between John and Sherlock makes their theories invalid, and therefore, fandom culture is once again seen as unimportant, even though it “should be taken seriously anyway” (figure 27).

Despite being disappointed, angry and sad, and feeling like they are not taken seriously, several fans in the TJLC community don't give up on their own ideas, and take action against the queerbaiting that they perceive in the series. For instance, some of them send letters of complaint to the BBC, explaining their disappointment with the series, as well as providing reasons for why they see it as queerbaiting. The reply they get, however, firmly states that

Through four series and thirteen episodes, Sherlock and John have never shown any romantic or sexual interest in each other. Furthermore, whenever the creators of ‘Sherlock’ have been asked by fans if the relationship might develop in that direction, they have always made it clear that it would not (...). The BBC does not accept the allegations levelled at ‘Sherlock’ and its writers. (appendix 36)

Although the letter also promises to register fans' disappointment, the message couldn't be clearer: TJLC'ers were wrong to expect a romantic relationship between Sherlock and John, and any claims that this relationship is present or promised in the series, are not accepted by the BBC (appendix 36). The hope for LGBTQIA+ representation that TJLC'ers had before season four aired, and the way these hopes are now crushed because of the events in *Sherlock*,

as well as the message that is sent their way by the creators through for instance these letters, can be summed up by the following post:

*"Some day the true story may be told."*—Sherlock Holmes in Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Adventure of the Retired Colourman".

I thought today was going to be that day.

Figure 28: Some day the true story may be told

This TJLC'er quotes a line from one of the original *Sherlock Holmes* stories, written by Arthur Conan Doyle, which states that "Some day the true story may be told" (figure 28). Their reply, uploaded directly after season four episode three aired, is that they "thought today was going to be that day". These words are accompanied by a picture in which someone, presumably the writer of this post, is dressed up as Sherlock Holmes, while holding a rainbow flag.<sup>17</sup> This flag – as a symbol for the LGBTQIA+ community – makes it clear that for this person, as for many TJLC'ers, the 'true story' that they long to see, entails a romance between Sherlock and John, and therefore LGBTQIA+ representation.

Although the post contains hope for the future as well, since "some day" can still come, several people in the TJLC community decide that they no longer just want to wait for another chance. As a result of being queerbaited, and feeling like they are not taken seriously by the creators – both as fans and as LGBTQIA+ people – some TJLC'ers resist the creators' interpretation of their show, by arguing that their version of events – their way of telling the story – is just as valid as Moffat and Gatiss'.

i want to remind everyone that in literary analysis and film analysis, any analysis is valid as long as it uses all the information given

i want to remind everyone that content creator(s) sometimes don't fully understand what they created. for example, jk rowling does not seem to realize she made draco malfoy inherently good in the end

i want to remind everyone that media, but especially art, is given value and meaning by the consumers. it can mean different things to different people and in fact that's what i find most valuable about media. the best art does not give everyone the same emotions and thoughts.

so WE WERE RIGHT. we did not see stuff that wasn't there just because the stuff we found wasn't what the creators thought they were putting in.

Agreed

Hello,

English major here! I'd just like to add, there's this theory called the Reader Response Theory that essentially states that a text is incomplete until it is read. What the reader's think, as long as it is valid and arguable, is the truth that completes the text regardless of what the writer intends. Like, there are thirty different theories that explain "The Turn of the Screw", and each equally valid.

This show belongs to us. We are not wrong.

Figure 29: Any analysis is valid

<sup>17</sup> For privacy reasons, I have chosen not to show this picture – as always, sources can be personally retrieved from me.

For instance, the writer of the first post shown above claims that “any analysis is valid as long as it uses all the information given”, and argues that sometimes, content creators “don’t fully understand what they created”, concluding that therefore, TJLC’ers are right in their Johnlock reading, and that the things they see in the series are there, but that these are just not the same things that the creators think they have brought into their work (figure 29). Another TJLC’er backs up this claim by explaining the Reader Response Theory, according to which a text is incomplete until it is read: “What the readers think, as long as it is valid and arguable, is the truth that completes the text regardless of what the writer intends”. Thus, TJLC’ers are not wrong in their readings of the show (figure 29).

Finally, some TJLC’ers go even further, by aspiring to make their own *Sherlock Holmes* adaption, this time with LGBTQIA+ representation, or share their ideas of rewriting *The Final Problem* (appendix 37-38). These people don’t want to wait for representation anymore; instead, they are intent on telling their own version of the relationship between John and Sherlock – the one that, according to them, tells the ‘true story’.

## **5. Data analysis & discussion**

The TJLC community can be understood as an example of contemporary fan culture. Nordin (2015) explains Jenkin’s theory (2006), in which he describes how people in online fandom share information, use each other’s knowledge, and analyse and question information. Furthermore, they hold debates amongst themselves and challenge each other into “finding more evidence and stronger arguments” (Jenkins, 2006, p.115). These are all traits that can be found within the TJLC community as well: members of this group build their collective theory by sharing information on online platforms such as Tumblr and YouTube; analyse various sources, such as the TV show itself, but also interviews with the creators and other relevant source material; and react to each other’s insights by using available meta-analyses and expanding upon them or correcting them. Nordin argues that such a collective effort also works to offer support and a feeling of security – something that can be seen in the way in which TJLC’ers tell each other to keep the faith in Johnlock during the events of season four, as well as the fact that they spread Suicide Prevention Hotline telephone numbers afterwards, and urge their fellow fans to stay safe.

Emotional support is especially important when it comes to fandoms that deal with queerbaiting, such as TJLC, because this phenomenon can be harmful when it comes to

LGBTQIA+ viewers. Nordin quotes Pratt (2012), who explains that it's important for people to see their identities – whether related to skin tone, gender, age, or other identity aspects – represented in mainstream media, because this helps them feel visible. When queer people only see heterosexual couples depicted, since these are seen as the norm within the dominant culture that they live in, and their own sexual identities are concealed, “invisibility becomes central to their oppression” (Pratt, 2012, pp. 138-139). This struggle about identity and visibility is exactly what we see happening when it comes to queerbaiting and the discourse surrounding it. According to Nordin, queerbaiting walks the line of visibility and invisibility: on the one hand, it can be argued that the hints within the narrative provide a kind of representation, because fans can read the text like that; on the other hand, the representation is denied and can therefore be said to not take place at all (Nordin, 2015). The latter is the kind of attitude that TJLC'ers, especially those belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community, have. While some of them argue that their reading of the text is just as valid as the way in which the creators interpret their own narrative, this doesn't take away the feeling of being queerbaited. In fact, it seems to only make it worse, since the subtext is present, but the writers won't admit to it. For TJLC'ers, merely hinting at a gay romance is therefore not enough; as Pratt's theory states, they want their own, queer identities to be visible within mainstream media.

The question that arises, then, is if these fans who accuse TV shows of queerbaiting, have the power and resources to affect those TV shows. According to Nordin, the debate surrounding queerbaiting raises awareness, and attempts are being made to directly affect TV shows as well, for instance by boycotting the show, reporting it, or in the form of fans expressing their frustration. There are, however, a few complications here. Some fans argue that it's only possible to accuse a TV show of queerbaiting after it has ended; before that time, it's impossible to say for certain that the queer content, which the creators have hinted at, won't be realised within the show. This is problematic, since queerbaiting is a critique against the content of a show, and this content can only be affected as long as the show is still running, for example by affecting viewer numbers (through boycott) or by sending pleas directly to the creators. Afterwards, people can still give their critiques, but this won't do anything to change what happened in the show. Nordin also discusses Andrejevic (2008), who has a more negative stance on the issue. He states that by collecting information about the show, fans become invested in the creation of the show, which results in them not only being fans of the product (the TV show), but of the production as well. However, Andrejevic argues, as long as fans keep watching the show, “there is no real reason for producers to listen to what



they have to say. They might understand the text better, but they do not affect it” (Nordin, 2015, p. 58).

Within the TJLC community, the discussion on queerbaiting takes place in a different way than how Nordin describes it. This has mostly to do with the fact that, at least pre-season four, TJLC’ers have an almost unwavering faith in ‘The Powers That Be’, especially in Sherlock-writers Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss. By looking at several different facts – the BBC’s report on queer representation, the support for the LGBTQIA+ community given by the creators and actors of the show, the fact that Gatiss himself identifies as gay – and placing these on top of the evidence for Johnlock that they find in the subtext of the show, TJLC’ers have come to the conclusion that their theory is the only logical solution to the story that is told within *Sherlock*. If Johnlock does not happen in the show, it would be queerbaiting; the creators have no reason to queerbait their audience, but rather every reason not to; therefore, Johnlock as endgame is the only possible solution. Even though afterwards, members of the TJLC community recognise that the signs of queerbaiting have been there all along – which they show by, for instance, going back to old interviews and quotes from the creators and actors, and reviewing them in a new light – initially, all denials of Johnlock coming from official sources are seen as part of a bigger plan for representation, and the common assumption is that “The creators lie... a lot” (appendix 9).

Collier (2015) explains this tendency to accuse the creators of lying by focusing on Steven Moffat, who, she argues, has built an antagonistic relationship with his fans. By openly admitting that he lies “repeatedly and constantly” – something which TJLC’ers have pointed out too – as well as refusing to discuss topics such as LGBTQIA+ identity and representation, he has made himself an unreliable narrator in the eyes of his fans. According to Collier, this leads to resistance of the producer-authorized narrative and producerly authority. Moreover, the confusion and the subsequent distrust are fuelled by other factors as well, such as the transmedia engagement that the creators have embraced (for instance by creating behind-the-scenes specials, as well as John and Sherlock’s blogs), which encourages fan discussion. Although, as Collier argues, the creators mean for fans to ‘play the game’ in an affirmative way, by staying within the boundaries of the narrative Moffat and Gatiss have created, TJLC’ers interpret these sources according to their own version of the story, which they thought was in accordance with the writers’ ideas, but ultimately turned out to be a subversive reading.

While I agree with Collier’s statement that the confusing messages that the creators of *Sherlock* send towards their fans lead to them inhabiting a subversive space, I would also like

to argue that for TJLC'ers, it is not an antagonistic relationship, but rather the strong belief in and identification with Moffat and Gatiss that leads them to hold onto their Johnlock reading. Despite Moffat's history with silencing LGBTQIA+ voices, more recently, in 2016, he did talk openly about representation during a Q&A session (Nerd HQ, 2016) – an event which TJLC'ers have often used to show Moffat's dedication to LGBTQIA+ representation. Statements like these can therefore be understood as an essential part of the phenomenon of queerbaiting when it comes to *Sherlock*, since they provide fans with more reasons to hope for representation – this time not in the form of the subtext of the show, but by letting LGBTQIA+ individuals know that their voices are being heard – only for the creators to refuse to actually follow through on the allusions to queer representation that they make.

The strong faith in the creators of the show means that the realisation that Johnlock isn't going to become canon, comes as even more of a shock for the TJLC community. For several members, it feels like a personal betrayal; they are devastated by the idea of being queerbaited by people who they thought of as allies. In fact, their belief is so strong that at first, several fans find it easier to believe in a secret fourth episode, than to accept that their reading of the show was never in line with the ideas of Moffat and Gatiss. Other fans, however, give up hope, and instead start taking action against queerbaiting, by criticizing the writers and even by sending formal letters of complaint to the BBC. As Nordin (2015) points out, however, it is impossible to change the content of a show when it's already finished, and since season four might very well be the last season of *Sherlock*, it can be argued that TJLC'ers are too late with their complaints. Collier (2015), on the other hand, is quite positive about the ways in which this community can affect the show. She states that, although TJLC'ers empower producer authority by waiting patiently to be “proven right”, they also hold the power to make changes:

[A]s long as they are directly resisting creator statements and calling for explicit queer acknowledgement, they inhabit a subversive space. TJLC, with their careful documentation on creator habits and BBC institutional reports, have turned the real world production of *Sherlock* into a text to be analysed (Collier, 2015, p. 94)

By analysing the “real world production” of *Sherlock*, such as the behaviour of the creators, TJLC'ers bring forward the issue of queerbaiting, and might therefore create more awareness of LGBTQIA+ representation. Moreover, after the events surrounding season four, several TJLC'ers express that they no longer want to “wait to be proven right”. They show awareness

of the uneven power balance between the producers and themselves, something that Collier (2015) also pays attention to. According to her, Moffat and Gatiss are well aware of the subtext within their show, and are familiar with what happens in the *Sherlock* fandom as well, which for example becomes clear in season three, where several fandom jokes and speculations are addressed, such as the idea of Sherlock and Moriarty being romantically involved (see also Kozak, 2016). Collier explains this by stating that the creators “downplay their knowledge and experience with fan culture in order to preserve their authority as producers” (Collier, 2015, p. 86). TJLC’ers who reach out to the creators after season four feel this gap when they find that their opinions don’t get taken seriously, for instance when the letters of complaint sent to broadcaster BBC not only are replied to with a general answer, but also completely deny the existence of any subtext within the show – much like the creators themselves do. Not only queerbaiting, but also fandom itself, despite TJLC’ers’ almost academic approach and hours of research, is not being taken seriously. In the end, this leads to a different kind of resistance: some TJLC’ers, not trusting others to represent them anymore, instead state that they’ll create a gay romance between John and Sherlock themselves, so that one day, ‘the true story may be told’.

## **6. Conclusion**

As we have seen, the events within the TJLC community are closely related to issues of identity. TJLC’ers’ strong belief in Johnlock as endgame was intrinsically linked with their trust in the show’s creators, which enabled them to interpret the repeated denial of the subtext in *Sherlock* as part of the game. Even when all evidence pointed towards a case of queerbaiting, they chose to have faith in the text and its creators, and came up with theories that can be seen as far-fetched, but made more sense for TJLC’ers than being queerbaited by members and supporters of the LGBTQIA+ community. These theories were partly sustained by the contact between fans and producers via new media, through which the producers sent out confusing and sometimes contradicting information; a practice which can be considered to be at least part of the process of queerbaiting. Feelings of frustration and disappointment were not only created by the constant denial of the existence of a homoerotic subtext, despite all the evidence that pointed towards it, but also by the fact that fans felt personally betrayed, since they looked up to and identified with the creators – specifically Mark Gatiss – who they saw as allies.

While fans have some power to counteract queerbaiting practices, such as creating awareness by filling in complaints and discussing the issue online, as long as people keep watching the show, the creators don't feel the need to change its content. Although some fan theories are mentioned, and the creators talk about representation, the core of the issue isn't seriously discussed, but rather shoved aside by stating that the subtext 'has never been there'. It can be argued, as some fans do, that all readings of a text are equally valid, and therefore, TJLC'ers' version of the show is just as true as the way in which the creators are choosing to interpret their text. By choosing another way to tell the story of John and Sherlock, TJLC'ers have created an whole new narrative, almost entirely of their own, in order to get the representation that they so desperately want, but don't get in mainstream television. Still, these fan re-imaginings do not suffice, since LGBTQIA+ individuals want to see their identities visualised in mainstream media, in order to get them to be accepted as normal by the broader public. It's not just that they are invisible within these media; most of their frustration stems from the fact that they get drawn into a story with the promise of representation, only to find that, once again, the creators of the series don't follow through with their allusions to a queer relationship. Moreover, when these fans raise their voices to speak up for their own identity, their claims are denied by the creators, pushed to the side as being 'merely fans' imaginations'. Even though fans have some power, by being able to raise awareness and having the option of creating their own stories, as long as the issue is not taken seriously by people with positions of authority, the queerbaiting issue isn't likely to be solved.

In the past few years, however, there has been an increasing interest in the phenomenon among academics, caused by the fact that queerbaiting is not something that only happens in the *Sherlock* fandom, but is also discussed in fan communities linked to various other television shows. Emotional, personal reactions from these fans make it clear that this issue is bigger than someone's 'ship not becoming canon', but that instead, it points to a broader field of identity politics, representation, and matters of visibility and invisibility, making queerbaiting an important research topic.

Within my own research, I have limited myself to a specific part of one fandom that has to deal with queerbaiting, and within this niche, I have focused on the relations between TJLC'ers and the creators of the show. To better understand the issue of queerbaiting, and eventually solve it, more research will need to be conducted, for instance by studying the relation between TJLC'ers and other *Sherlock* fans who don't believe in Johnlock, or by comparing different fandoms with each other, such as Collier (2015) has done. Moreover, I would recommend further research on the creators of shows that have been accused of

queerbaiting, in order to find out more about the other side of the story. It is only when the problem gets analysed and discussed within its broader context, that we can start taking steps in the direction of more accurate and visible LGBTQIA+ representation.

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## Appendices



TJLC Explained: [Episode 12]  
Numbers in Sherlock

21.142 weergaven  
• 9 maanden geleden

Appendix 1: With seven and a half minutes of screen time, *TJLC Explained: [Episode 12] Numbers in Sherlock* is the shortest episode of the series.



TJLC Explained: [Episode 47]  
John's Romantic Journey

23.893 weergaven • 3 weken geleden

Appendix 2: Episode 47, titled *John's Romantic Arc*, is with its almost two hour-length the longest video of the series.



TJLC Explained: [Episode 22]  
Sherlock is Gay

101.646 weergaven  
• 6 maanden geleden

CC

Appendix 3: In *TJLC Explained: [Episode 22] Sherlock is Gay*, it is argued, for instance by analysing scenes from the series, that Sherlock is written as a gay character.



TJLC Explained: [Episode 30]  
Romantic Tropes and Narratives

26.251 weergaven  
• 4 maanden geleden



Appendix 4: *TJLC Explained: [Episode 30] Romantic Tropes and Narratives.*



TJLC Explained [Episode 26]  
Soundtrack & Score

19.919 weergaven  
• 5 maanden geleden



Appendix 5: *TJLC Explained [Episode 26] Soundtrack & Score.*



TJLC Explained: [Episode 28]  
Adapting the Stories (it's been...

17.522 weergaven  
• 5 maanden geleden



Appendix 6: *TJLC Explained: [Episode 28] Adapting the Stories...* Here, 'The Canon' refers to the original works of Sherlock Holmes, written by Arthur Conan Doyle (Stashower, 2013).



TJLC Explained: [Episode 42] The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes  
20.383 weergaven • 1 maand geleden

Appendix 7: In *TJLC Explained: [Episode 42] The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*, this earlier Sherlock Holmes adaption is compared with Moffat and Gatiss' adaption. The video was mostly focused on explaining the subtext in *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* (1970) hinting at Sherlock Holmes being a gay man, backed up by the fact that director Billy Wilder later admitted that he wished he'd followed through on his idea to make Holmes a homosexual (Wood, 2000, para. 18).



The Best Answer  
17.047 weergaven  
• 5 maanden geleden

Appendix 8: *The Best Answer*; an example of a video uploaded on the *TJLC Explained* channel that was focused on (part of) an interview with the creators of the series (from left to right: Steven Moffat, Mark Gatiss, and producer Sue Vertue).



TJLC Explained: [Episode 2] The Creators Lie... A Lot  
36.505 weergaven  
• 11 maanden geleden  
CC

Appendix 9: *TJLC Explained: [Episode 2] The Creators Lie...A lot* is another example of a video in which interviews with both creators and actors of the show were discussed (on the thumbnail: Martin Freeman, who plays the role of John Watson).

So for a while now I've been seeing a lot of posts going around about why the Johnlock Confirmation and/or Kiss isn't going to happen till Season 5. That the casuals would be too shocked and unprepared for a kiss in Season 4 or that John and Sherlock need to work out all their misunderstandings and build a healthy relationship together before finally kissing, and this... please understand, I'm not angry at anyone for believing this. Trust me, I know. I understand the instinct to be cautious or afraid. We so rarely get anything good in media that it feels like in order to get something as precious and simple as a kiss we need to endure a couple more years of angst while we wait for the casuals to catch up.

But let's be honest: if any casual by now hasn't caught onto the subtext of this show, literally nothing less than a full mouth-on-mouth kiss is going to get it into their heads that Sherlock and John are a couple. In terms of the narrative, leaving the kiss to the very end just doesn't work well. To have a Garridebs finale moment but without any Johnlock Confirmation would make s4 a literal repeat of s3. Think about it: having a main character shot or dangerously injured in the last episode while also revealing a new villain and possibly killing them off at the end? See what I mean? Without the addition of a new milestone and drastic shift in their relationship, it runs the risk of being a repeat. And frankly I don't think this show can support two more seasons of *even more* romantic misunderstanding between the two boys. Telling the audience explicitly that this is the main couple and their happy relationship is the end goal of the show will make s5 even angrier because then the two are now committed to each other not just as friends but as lovers. Instead of pushing themselves away because they think they aren't loved, they KNOW they are and will spend s5 working on that relationship while fighting outside forces.

Appendix 10: "Johnlock is Going to be Canon in S4 and Here's why". The term 'casuals' refers to fans who aren't as heavily invested in the series as TJLC'ers, and often don't support a Johnlock reading.



TJLC Explained: [Episode 25] Why  
TJLC Matters  
18.257 weergaven  
• 6 maanden geleden

Appendix 11: In *TJLC Explained: [Episode 25] Why TJLC Matters*, it is explained why TJLC is important when it comes to LGBTQIA+ representation.

LIKE THE FACT THAT THIS IS THE CLIMAX OF THE TRAILER?  
SHERLOCK SAYING "I LOVE YOU"? THE FACT THAT THIS IS  
THE BIG MOMENT

THE FACT THAT THIS IS GONNA BE A HUGE MOMENT IN  
THEIR HUGE SEASON IS MAKING IT ALL SO BLATANT THAT  
THIS ENTIRE SERIES WAS A BATTLE FOR SHERLOCKS  
HEART AND THIS IS THE REAL STORY

THE NARRATION AND THE FOLLOWING OF A CLIP OF JOHN  
IN A WELL BEFORE IT IS LIKE, THIS IS *BLATANT* THE BIG  
SECRET LIKE WHAT OTHER SECRETS DOES SHERLOCK  
REALLY HAVE WHO ELSE DOES SHERLOCK LOVE LIKE THIS  
WHAT THE FUCK WHAT THE FUCK WHAT THE FUCK

Appendix 12: Reaction from a TJLC'er after watching the second season four trailer. They mention scenes from the trailer which, in their opinion, provide evidence for Johnlock becoming canon in this season: the narration of the trailer, Sherlock saying "I love you" at the end of the video, and the fact that before this scene, there is a shot of John in danger (alone in a well) – all of which seem to point towards a romantic storyline, for which Sherlock and John seem the most logical candidates.



I Love you.

Appendix 13: A fan re-imagining of the last scene shown in the second trailer of *Sherlock* season four, in which Sherlock's "I love you" is meant for John (Text reads: [John]: "Wh...what did y...you just say?" [Sherlock]: "You heard me the first time, John." [Bottom left corner]: I love you).





Appendix 14: A fan-made edit, posted on the day that the second trailer for *Sherlock* season four was uploaded on YouTube. Images and text from this trailer (on the right) are connected to a scene from season three episode three, *His Last Vow* (on the left) (Moffat, Vertue & Hurran, 2014).



TJLC Explained: [Episode 31] If It's Not Gay, Then Why?  
 41.212 weergaven  
 • 4 maanden geleden  
 CC

Appendix 15: *TJLC Explained: [Episode 31] If It's Not Gay, Then Why?* In this video, several scenes from the series are analysed, in order to show that Johnlock is the only logical conclusion for *Sherlock*.

For the uninitiated, “Extended Mind Palace” is the theory that everything that takes place after Sherlock gets shot is in his Mind Palace; he enters it when that happens and does not come out of it again, all the way through TAB.

Appendix 16: ‘EMP-theory’ explained. As stated before, Sherlock’s ‘Mind Palace’ refers to him playing out scenarios in his head in order to solve cases. ‘TAB’ is the acronym used for *The Abominable Bride*, the special that takes places between series three and four of *Sherlock*.



Appendix 17: Twitter post uploaded on the BBC iPlayer account, reposted on Tumblr. Text underneath (“YOU KNOW WHO”) added by a TJLC’er.

things that are a fact:

- the bbc tweeted that sherlock is in love, “but who with?”
- sherlock just refuted the idea that he and irene are romantically involved
- the woman sherlock spent a night with was apparently his sister so that absolutely wasn’t romantic (unless this show is about to get REAL weird)
- video mary, in a video intended for sherlock’s eyes referred to john as “the man we both love”
- thusfar molly and sherlock have interacted on screen twice, two (2) times, one time she told him that john never wanted to see him again, the other time she checked him for drugs and then told him he was gonna die, neither situation is romantic whatsoever

literally who else COULD IT BE

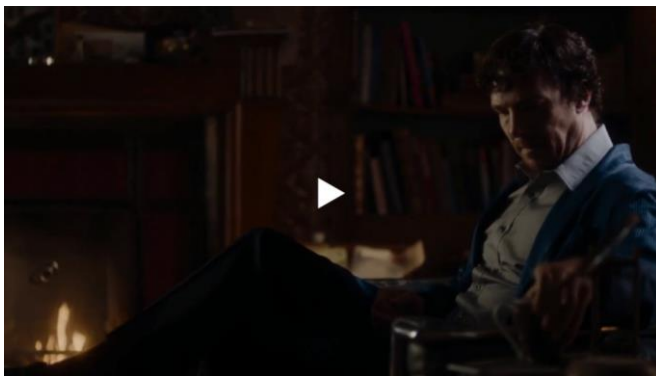
Appendix 18: Reasons why Johnlock is inevitable after season four, episode two (*The Lying Detective*).

here's the thing in that moment i just want to say it out here. like. sherlock was absolutely on the verge of telling john he's gay and in love with him, but he could TELL that wasn't actually the moment. he was thinking it, you can see it on his face, hear it in his voice, but that moment was actually about john, and it had to be. sherlock had to hold it back just a little longer, and put the hat back on, because john needed the time to fully put mary behind him.

it's okay. it's good. that hat is coming off, the moment is coming

"I love you." Next episode.

Appendix 19: Posted after season four episode two, *The Lying Detective*. The original poster explains the conversation and consequent hug as a moment in which Sherlock couldn't yet confess his feelings to John, because the latter was still mourning his wife, but they declare that this "moment is coming" ('the hat' has become a symbol within the TJLC community for Sherlock being closeted). Another TJLC'er responds with the reminder that the "I love you" (from the trailer) is coming in the next episode, once more interpreting this confession to be about John.



it is what it is  
high quality hell for everyone  
the hand on his neck literally light me ablaze  
Good Morning  
REBLOG THIS IT SHOULD BE 95 PERCENT OF MY DASH

Appendix 20: The scene in which Sherlock comforts and hugs John, uploaded on Tumblr. With "the hand on his neck", this TJLC'er refers to the moment which can be seen in appendix 21. Enthusiasm about the scene can also be found in for instance the last comment, which states that this scene should be "95 percent" of the commenter's dash ('dash' refers to the homepage of your Tumblr account, where new posts from the blogs you follow, appear).



Appendix 21: A specific moment during ‘the hug’, which TJLC’ers view as especially intimate.

Way... Way too much stuff happened this week for me to explain properly but essentially: for some fucking reason they screened the season finale 3 days in advance for the BFI (even though the previous episode's press screening was scheduled 2 hrs prior to the tv air time to avoid spoilers), obviously spoilers got out immediately but none of the TPTB reacted... Fast forward to tomorrow, the entire episode with the Russian dubbing leaks in HQ, THEY ANNOUNCE IT LEAKED ON BOTH THE SHOW'S FB PROFILE AND TWITTER TO MILLIONS ON FOLLOWERS WITH A FUCKENING HASHTAG, obviously everyone in the comments notices the reverse psychology and watches the leak... It's been

almost 20 hrs now and you can still find it online??? It's either the most stunning display of incompetence in the world or it's completely intentional in the meta-est way possible. Trust me on this but it really does feel like they're faking the show's death? If you skim through the leak, you'll see what I'm talking about - it's the most cliché thing in the world, none of the usual frantic cuts, the OST is completely flat/reused, there's only like 4 locations, no on-screen deductions, the sfx is bad, it's like a 60s Bond movie had a baby with Saw/It/The Silence of the Lambs... Also the tagline of the season is the same as for the film Clue, which famously had 3 different endings  
Gay or Trash: Boss Level

Appendix 22: Explaining the leak, the pre-screening, and the confusion over the contents of season four, episode three.

I don't get how people feel worse than yesterday like here are the facts:

- there is a widespread leak of a ridiculous and low-budget episode
- tptb have brought as much attention as possible to this fact (I mean fucking hashtags????) and have not had the episode taken down
- the episode we get tomorrow is supposed to be an amazing, groundbreaking reveal, and they would not go out of their way to spoil half the damn world if this version were real

Appendix 23: Reasons for the confusion surrounding season three episode four, *The Final Problem*. As stated, ‘tptb’ refers to ‘The Powers That Be’ (the creators).

master-post. Basically, as that post explains with canon quotes, the canon "Adventure of the Three Garridebs" story has widely been speculated as being a moment of revelation for John in the show, where Sherlock's feelings for him become explicitly clear and undeniable.

I thought it was topical to answer this today as we have confirmation [here](#) that Moffat and Gatiss are co-writing the third and last episode of Series 4... now, many have predicted that the 'Garridebs' moment will act as the cliffhanger between Series 4 and 5... prepare for glorious pain! ;) <3

Appendix 24: Explanation of the importance of the 'Three Garridebs Moment', which TJLC'ers expect to be a love confession from Sherlock to John, and to act as a cliffhanger between series four and five.

and they really did that? to the 3 garridebs? they rly did that.

this cannot be real. I HATE TO DO THIS BUT IF THEY WERE REAL SHERLOCK HOLMES FANBOYS THEY WOULDN'T HAVE DONE THIS, SPECIFICALLY, EVEN IF THEY DIDN'T INTEND FOR CANON JOHNLOCK - WHY WOULD YOU MAKE A MOCKERY OF THE CANON SCENE WHERE THEY REVEAL TO EACH OTHER HOW MUCH THEY CARE ABOUT EACH OTHER? if you TRULY LOVE THEM, AS CHARACTERS, WHY WOULD YOU TAKE THAT AWAY FROM THEM? EVEN IF YOU LOOK AT IT FROM A NON-JOHNLOCK PERSPECTIVE... AND SEE THEM AS THE BEST CHUMS OF ALL TIME... WHY WOULD YOU DO THAT

Appendix 25: Anger about the 'Three Garridebs Moment'.



Appendix 26: This user has placed a Twitter-post by Sue Vertue (the producer of *Sherlock*), in which she asks fans not to share the link to the leaked episode, next to another Tweet, in which a grandfather shares his concerns that someone will kidnap his grandson, only to provide readers with this grandson's home address. By doing this, this user wants to indicate that if the creators of *Sherlock* wouldn't want people to watch the leaked episode, they wouldn't provide their fans with the information at all.

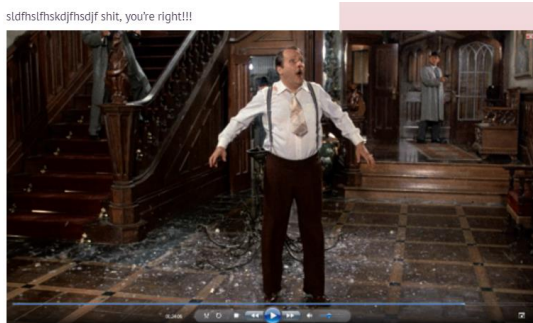


Appendix 27: The film *Clue* with its tagline, “It’s not just a game anymore”.

I must be the last person in this fandom to realize this but holy shit. They literally used the same tagline for season 4. **They straight-up stole the tagline of a movie famous for its alternate endings.**

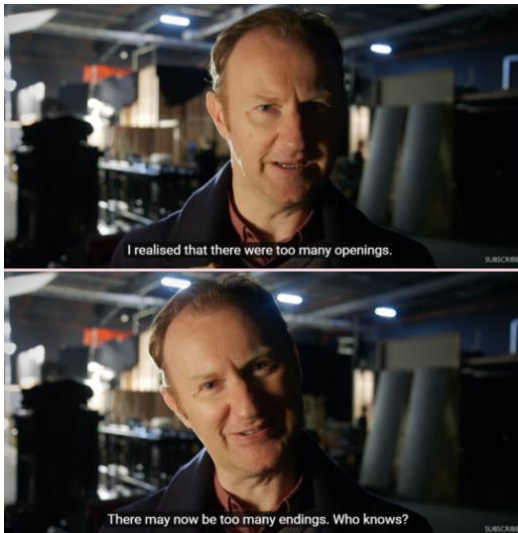
Appendix 28: This TJLC'er links the tagline from *Sherlock* season four to the tagline of *Clue*, highlighting the fact that the latter is “famous for its alternate endings”.

*In Clue, they end with a freeze frame after every "ending".*



Like, has an episode of sherlock ended on a freeze-frame, ever?  
I KNEW THAT LOOKED FAMILIAR HOLY FUCK

Appendix 29: Freeze frame endings in both *Clue* and *Sherlock*



Appendix 30: Mark Gatiss in a behind-the-scenes-video (BBC, 2016).

Jesus, this isn't just about Johnlock for us, can't people see that? The Final Problem literally made no sense. Nothing in this series did. Having a flowing, reasonable narrative like every other season but still no canon Johnlock would've made sense in the end. I wouldn't have liked that, but at least the show would've been quality. But instead we got Mary as a plot device, Molly Hooper humiliated, a psycho sister who acts like Jigsaw, bleeding portraits, John beating the shit out of Sherlock, 12 broken Thatcher busts, continuity errors, cameramen in shots, Mycroft doing legwork, actors floating in and out between cuts, characters surviving grenade explosions, Sherlock ignoring John chained in a well, those chains miraculously disappearing, Sherlock having no memory of two other children in his life, slow-motion bullets, an Umbrella-Sword-Gun, and a low-budget final episode. You cannot argue that this isn't true. You may have

final episode. You cannot argue that this isn't true. You may have liked the series, but that doesn't change the fact all these unrealistic things happened. I am way beyond confused. There was obviously always a possibility of no Johnlock, that's why we called ourselves a conspiracy – you think we didn't know we were the underdogs in that fight? Anyone messaging me or reblogging my posts to say "You just didn't like series 4 because there's no Johnlock" or "You're the only people out there who don't like TFP" can pull their heads out of their asses at any time and see this series was so incredibly different than anything we've seen them do so far, making it obvious why so many people don't like it. This was an award-winning show. You think that's going to continue? Because as it stands with these three episodes there's no way this is going to live up to its name, and the absence of Johnlock has nothing to do with it.

#sherlock #bbc sherlock #johnlock #tjlc #the final problem #fp  
5,107 notes Jan 16th, 2017

Appendix 31: Two different TJLC'ers explain their frustrations with *The Final Problem* and how these do not only revolve around Johnlock becoming canon or not.

<p><b>You can't imagine how I hate this.</b></p>	<p><b>I can't believe they did that to us.</b></p>
<p>I once was in love with a show called BBC Sherlock, but it broke my heart. I'm learning to expect better.</p>	

Appendix 33: Three examples of changes in blog description on Tumblr that reflect TJLC'ers emotions after season four.

It is incredibly unfortunate that I feel the need to reblog this for everyone tonight. Please stay safe, I am here for anyone who needs to talk.

2695

JAN 16, 2017

## Appendix 34: Message added by a TJLC'er, to a post with Suicide Prevention Hotlines.

The 'no one seriously thinks' gets me every time... I have no words for how incredibly offending I find his tweet.  
>\_\_<

## Appendix 35: A TJLC'er's reaction to Hallard and Abbington's tweets (figure 26).

Dear Ms...

Thank you for contacting us about 'Sherlock'.

The BBC and Hartswood Films have received feedback from some viewers who were disappointed there was not a romantic resolution to the relationship between Sherlock and John in the finale of the latest series of 'Sherlock'.

We are aware that the majority of this feedback uses the same text posted on websites and circulated on social media.

**Through four series and thirteen episodes, Sherlock and John have never shown any romantic or sexual interest in each other. Furthermore, whenever the creators of 'Sherlock' have been asked by fans if the relationship might develop in that direction, they have always made it clear that it would not.**

Sherlock's writers, cast and producers have long been firm and vocal supporters of LGBT rights.

**The BBC does not accept the allegations levelled at 'Sherlock' or its writers**, and we wholeheartedly support the creative freedom of the writers to develop the story as they see fit.

We remain extremely proud of 'Sherlock' and of our relationship with Hartswood Films who helped make this award-winning, worldwide smash hit series become what it is.

We will of course register your disappointment.

Thank you again for contacting us.

Kind Regards

BBC Complaints Team

[www.bbc.co.uk/complaints](http://www.bbc.co.uk/complaints)

NB This is sent from an outgoing account only which is not monitored. You cannot reply to this email address but if necessary please contact us via our webform quoting any case number we provided.

---

Fuck you @bbcone!

Fuck you @ Hartswood!

Fuck you @ Steven Moffat & Mark Gatiss!

JAN. 27 2017  
#SHERLOCK #BBC #QUEERBATTING #SORRY #IF THIS HAS ALREADY BEEN AROUND #I WASN'T ON TUMBLR THE LAST TWO DAYS  
1,175 NOTES

## Appendix 36: Response by the BBC Complaints Team to a letter of complaint about *Sherlock*.



I, an aspiring TV director, have decided to write an alternative tfp script. It was supposed to be a personal wish fulfillment so I didn't plan to upload anywhere, but if there are people interested I might post it on AO3.

Appendix 37: Part of a post by a TJLC'er, who intends to make an alternative version of *The Final Problem*, in which several plot points will be resolved, and John and Sherlock end up in a romantic relationship. AO3 refers to a website for transformative works, on which several works of *Sherlock* fan fiction can be found ([www.archiveofourown.net](http://www.archiveofourown.net)).

something i do know for certain: i WILL  
see Sherlock Holmes kiss John Watson  
in MY LIFETIME even if i have to do it  
my damn self

Appendix 38: This TJLC'er makes it clear that, if others won't give them a canon Johnlock kiss, they will write create one themselves.