



Stab It, Strangle It¹: Media Representations of Knitters, and Subversions of the Stereotype to Reflect Inclusion and Diversity

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Abstract

Subversion is at the heart of my knitting practice but how can the stereotypical image of the knitter, the kindly white-haired, white-skinned grandmother who knits out of love, be successfully subverted to change public perceptions of knitting? What will it take to challenge and ultimately change the stereotype? This article examines contemporary media representations of knitting and knitters from the UK, USA and Australia, revealing how deep-rooted the stereotype is. The media representations explore issues around activism, mental health, race, gender, age and sexuality as portrayed through acts of knitting. From the environmental

activists known as *Knitting Nannas*, to artist Jameisha Prescod's, self-portrait, *Untangling*, of her knitting to manage her mental health during England's national lockdown, and gold medalist diver and campaigner for LGBT+ rights, Tom Daley, knitting poolside during the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics in an attempt to relax and steady his nerves. It explores how the stereotypical view of knitters and knitting affects the way that it is received and valued, and challenges the supposedly "warm and friendly" nature of knitting, presenting the lack of diversity and representation that currently exists in the knitting community.

Keywords: knitting; subversion; stereotype; diversity; media representation

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Stab It, Strangle It¹: Media Representations of Knitters, and Subversions of the Stereotype to Reflect Inclusion and Diversity

Introduction

I write this article from the perspective of an experienced and skilled professional knitting practitioner; an artist born, educated, working, teaching, and living in the UK. My work is concerned with the exploration, and use of knitting, as a medium for self-expression within the territory of fine art and craft. I challenge the preconceptions that surround the medium, demonstrating the communication, conceptual and structural possibilities that knitting offers beyond the expected outcomes of design. Through my work I explore pertinent contemporary issues of feminism, motherhood and the human condition, questioning conformity and notions of normality. I find knitting to be a powerful medium for self-expression and communication because of the cultural preconceptions that surround it. I often employ subversion in my work as a tool to bring an audience to a subject matter that they might otherwise ignore or avoid. Here subversion meaning that the audience don't get what they are expecting. It was subversion that drew me to knitting. I did not realize this at the time. I was unfamiliar with the term but I was attracted to things that were different to, or a play on, the established or the norm (see [Figure 1](#)). In the context of this article Blackstock's (1964) widely referenced definition of

subversion, "as an attempt to transform the established social order and its structures of power, authority, and hierarchy when the values and principles of a system in place are deliberately contradicted or reversed," is useful.

This article refers to case studies and media representation of knitting and knitting practitioners based in the UK, USA and Australia in order to discuss two questions:

How can the stereotypical image of the knitter, the kindly white-haired, white-skinned grandmother who knits out of love, be successfully subverted to change public perceptions of knitting? And, What will it take to challenge and ultimately change the stereotype?

The research and subsequent media analysis methodology was triggered by the serendipitous viewing of a number of knitting related articles, given high coverage in the popular press and newsletters from the creative organizations that I subscribe to, such as the Crafts Council (UK), during the period 2020–2021. A period when the UK, and most of the rest of the world, was coping with restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, coinciding with the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics (delayed until Summer 2021 because of the



Figure 1
Freddie Robins *Subversive Knitter*, 2021. Photo credit: Ben Coode-Adams.

pandemic) and the continuing rise of support and coverage of the Black Lives Matter movement exposing the racism that exists in all areas of life. These articles piqued my interest, at times causing me irritation, frustration and discomfort. They were the catalyst for further research, tracking down primary sources, linking to previous media reports and articles that I had collected over the years, and public comments published in forums related to the found media articles. I have linked this material together, in the same way that I would link stitches together as I knit, row upon row, to produce the current picture, a contemporary “intarsia,” of knitting and knitters as presented to the general population through the popular press and social media.

I acknowledge that, “knitting has a deliciously rich history of political subversion in fiction and life” (Hermanson 2012). A significant body of extant work exists within academic literature, research outputs and practice from the field of knitting, exploring both the use of knitting to subvert stereotypes and the use of knitting as a tool for subversion. In the UK, USA and Australia there are a considerable number of knitting practitioners working and publishing in this arena, both within and outside of academia. In the UK designer Kandy Diamond’s

brand, *Knit and Destroy*, references her desire to destroy the stereotypical image through the products that she knits. In Australia there is the artist and academic, Kate Just. On her website she writes that she uses knitting as an “engaging sculptural medium, a poetic and political tool.” Her work “questions histories of female and queer representation through the lens of subjective experience.” Kate took up knitting after the death of her brother. Taught by her mother “in a moment of grief.” Casey Jenkins with their 2013 durational performance work, *Casting Off My Womb*, spent 28 days knitting from balls of wool, which they had inserted into their vagina. The work explores the tension between an individual’s desires and potential, and the wider expectation regarding what they should do with their body based on perceived gender. In the USA the artist and designer Liz Collins has undertaken fifteen different iterations of her *Knitting Nation* performance (2005–2016). On her website it states that the performances “functioned as a commentary on how humans interact with machines, global manufacturing, trade and labor, brand iconography, and fashion.” Commenting on Collins’ statement that her practice is “firmly rooted in knit construction as a craft,” Roberts (2011, 254) writes, “craft becomes an

agent to resist stereotypes and to challenge the constructed systems of visual and material culture.”

The exhibition, *Radical Lace & Subversive Knitting*, at the Museum of Arts & Design (MAD), New York (2007) featured my work alongside that of Collins and other “subversive” knitters, including Lisa Anne Auerbach (represented through Sabrina Gschwandtner’s interactive public knitting installation) and Cat Mazza. In an interview for *Metalsmith* (2004), David Revere McFadden, Chief Curator at MAD (1997–2013), “articulated the stereotype of craft as “the bimbo of the art world.””

“Subversion is at the Heart”

I was fifteen when I got my copy of *Wild Knitting* (Read, Jeffs, and Garton (1979) 1980) shown in Figure 2. It contained knitting patterns for replicas of ordinary items such as a packet of cigarettes and lighter, lipstick, cacti in pots and extraordinary items to wear such a scarf in the form of an armadillo, ties in the form of a pen nib, cactus or tin of sardines and the crown jewels, sash and tiara. These patterns and objects have been copied, and marketed, many times over since the original publication.

Subversive knitting books, such as *Wild Knitting*, are now so commonplace they can hardly be considered

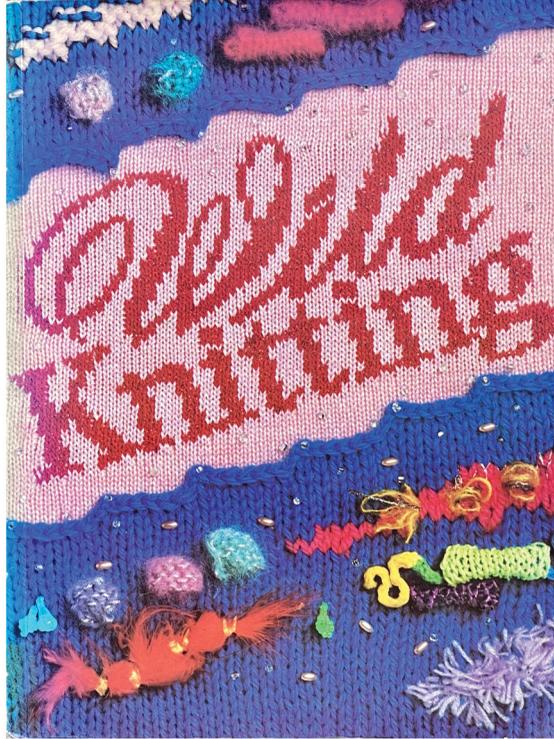


Figure 2

The author's original copy of *Wild Knitting*. Photo credit: Ben Coode-Adams. Cover reproduced courtesy of Octopus Publishing Group.

subversive, with titles such as, *Protest Knits: Got needles? Get Knitting* (Wamer 2017), *Knit Your Own Kama Sutra: Twelve Playful Projects for Naughty Knitters* (Von Purl 2015), *WTF Knits. Weird adventures in wool* (Grillo and Sweet 2014) and *Doomsday Knits: Projects for the Apocalypse and After* (Tinsley 2013). Another book in this subversive genre is *Knit Your Own Britain* (Holt and Bailey 2013), which in turn is being subverted by the British artist Lorna Hamilton-Brown. "Noting that there are no black figures" Hamilton-Brown has started knitting a *Black Heads* series to draw attention to the black Britain's that she would have featured in the book. She is knitting her

Britain. To date Hamilton-Brown has knitted the heads of grime artist, Stormzy, and comedian, Munya Chawawa. Hamilton-Brown writes on her website, "The list (of knitted figures) started me thinking about which characters would I knit, as representation really matters. Black people do knit and they want to knit characters that look like them." Subversion is at the heart of Hamilton-Brown's textile practice, "I love to subvert people's associations and preconceptions of knitting and crochet, to engage audiences with challenging issues." In her video, *Knitting Ain't Wack*, selected for the Crafts Council's 2017 *Real to Reel* Film Festival, she plays a version of herself, Lorna HB, shown in

Figure 3, who is a knitting rapping MC, with the aim of breaking down stereotypes associated with who knits.

"Knitted by Nanas," Subverted by Nannas

Turney ((2009) 2013, 41) writes, "... it is important to note that just as women are not a homogeneous group, nor is knitting or indeed knitters; knitting is not made by the same people for the same purposes at the same time." However as a society Britain just cannot seem to get beyond the stereotypical image of the knitter as a benign, elderly, white-haired, white-skinned grandmother, knitting as an altruistic act. The



Figure 3

Still from video, *Knitting Ain't Wack*, Lorna Hamilton-Brown, 2017. Photo credit: Chris Hamilton-Brown (www.passion4.co.uk)

international food and beverage company, Nestlé, profited from this popular image of the knitter for ten years, at the same time reinforcing the stereotype, in the highly successfully advertising campaign for their breakfast cereal *Shreddies*, *Knitted by Nanans*. The campaign was developed by the global creative agency McCann in 2007 and voted the seventh most popular TV advertisement in the year that it was launched as reported in a *Guardian* article on December 11, 2007. In this comic series of advertisements, and social media spin-offs, we were told, “until now it has not been widely known that *Shreddies* are in fact knitted by Nanans” with shots of a factory full of elderly, white-haired, white-skinned women knitting *Shreddies*. In the 3 minute

promotional film, *The Chronicles of Nana, Episode Two, Ready! Steady! Knit!* (2007), we see the *Nanas* at their training camp, their trainer tells us that the secret to becoming a *Shreddies Nana* is, “passion, commitment, love, care and of course knitting expertise.” The cereal packaging was even changed to include a photograph on the inner flaps of the *Nana* who had supposedly knitted the *Shreddies* for that specific box with the message, “Eat up everyone, we’ll knit more.” The box also featured a photograph of a velvet armchair and cushion with the words, “Check equipment for cosiness” and a sign reading, “Level of knitting expertise required—50 years of knitting experience.” The 2010, £1 m integrated advertising and social media

campaign to help recruit a new *Nana* to be the face of the brand did nothing to challenge the stereotype. It wasn’t until 2015, when the campaign developed the *Shreddies Good News Channel* TV advertisement, that the stereotype was broken with the introduction of a black knitter, Nana Dot, who delivered the weather.

A powerful subversion of the stereotype comes in the form of a group of environmental activists known as *Knitting Nannas*, shown in Figure 4. The *Knitting Nannas* are based in Australia with *Nanna Loops* (their term for “self disorganized” groups) in the USA and UK. The group are subverting the benign aspect of the knitting stereotype, whilst also challenging the “misconception that political activists and protesters are



Figure 4
Knitting Nannas, 2022. Photo credit: Gwilym Summers.

young, unwashed and unemployed or unemployable.” As well as subverting the stereotype of knitters and grandmothers the *Knitting Nannas* are cleverly employing the traits associated with knitting to validate their actions. After three of the group were charged following the CSG (coal-seam gas) protest in NSW, Nine, the Australian news and current events website (18th January 2016) reported the *Knitting Nannas* co-founder, Clare Twomey, saying “the act of knitting was intended to show the group’s sense of maternal nurturing.” She also expressed the inclusivity of the *Knitting Nannas*, despite the

expectation of what gender or age a *Nanna* might be, people of all ages were welcome to join the group. When the group was first formed in 2012 they used the satirical acronym *KNAG*, standing for Knitting Nannas Against Gas. Nagging is a term often negatively associated with older women but nagging is exactly what the *Nannas* do through their persistent campaigning. On their website they state,

Knitting Nannas is an international disorganisation where people come together to ensure that our land, air and water are preserved for our children and grandchildren. We sit,

knit, plot, have a yarn and a cuppa, and bear witness to the war against the greedy, short-sighted corporations that are trying to rape our land and divide our communities.

One of the original *Nannas*, Liz Stops (2014, 10) writes, “The name ... was purposefully devised. “Knitting” and “Nannas” are words that immediately conjure a nostalgic image of older women exuding trust and love.” Their “Nanna-ness” is a form of strategic or tactical essentialism that communicates their identity and purpose with great clarity. Collectively, they refer to themselves as a “determination” of *Nannas*.



Figure 5

Jameisha Prescod, *Untangling*, 2021. Reproduced by kind permission of the artist.

Like Hamilton-Brown the *Knitting Nannas* have also used rap to get their message across to a broader audience. The *Nanna Wrap* film (2015) features nine of the *Nannas* wearing their customary yellow and black whilst rapping against fracking. A single *Nanna* pushing her wheeled walking aid leads the group, many of whom are using walking sticks, into the opening shot. The refrain of their rap is, “You can’t eat coal and you can’t drink gas, so you can take your drilling rig and shove it”

A “Secret Weapon” in Managing Mental Health

The increase in awareness of our need to care for our mental health and the limitations placed upon us due to the Covid-19 pandemic have

seen a diversity of knitters represented in the media. A powerful contemporary representation of a knitter and their knitting won the *Wellcome Photography Prize 2021* (in the Managing Mental Health, single image category), shown in [Figure 5](#). Jameisha Prescod is a young black Caribbean film maker, artist, journalist and chronic illness advocate based in London. Her evocative self-portrait, *Untangling*, shows her knitting to manage her mental health during England’s national lockdown. The photograph shows Prescod knitting amid the chaos of her lockdown bedroom from which she was working full-time, eating, sleeping, having virtual catch-ups with friends and crying. The isolation of lockdown exacerbated

Prescod’s depression. On the Wellcome website she said that her nan had taught her to knit when she was eight or nine but she hadn’t knitted for a while before the pandemic. “Knitting is a very repetitive action, and I think there can be something meditative in repetitive action. It helped take my mind off something while being productive.”

Another atypical contemporary representation can be found in the young, white British gold medalist diver and campaigner for LGBT+ rights, Tom Daley. During the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics, delayed until Summer 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, we saw him knitting poolside, shown in [Figure 6](#). This sparked a wave of fan reactions and memes throughout social media.



Figure 6

Tom Daley knitting poolside during the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics. Photo credit: Clive Rose/Getty Images.

The Independent newspaper asked (2nd August 2021), “Why is Tom Daley knitting at the Tokyo Olympics?” Daley’s response was, “There are loads of things I’m doing to keep myself going, like yoga and visualisation, but I’ve also taken up knitting, which could be my secret weapon.” Daley did not set out to subvert the stereotype but this has been an outcome of his very public act of knitting and the huge amount of media exposure that he has received. Daley originally took up knitting in March 2020 on the suggestion of his husband, screenwriter Dustin Lance Black, who had witnessed

people knitting on set to pass the time, and the encouragement of his coach, who wanted Daley to find ways to sit and relax. Daley admits to being obsessed with knitting and is now selling his own range of chunky wool, knitting and crochet kits, and knitted and printed items, “Made with love by Tom Daley,” on his website where he writes, “Let me introduce you to my baby, Made With Love! Whether you’re looking for something to calm the mind or are searching for a new hobby, knitting offers something for everyone!” Throughout the website he reiterates his love of knitting with statements

such as “Let’s fall in love with knitting” and “I’m on a mission to spread the love” Daley’s knitting business venture is proving extremely popular, at the time of writing his website was running a banner message reading, “Your support has been incredible, we are currently experiencing a huge volume of orders. Please bear with us as we work through these.”

Not a “Natural or Normal” Activity for Men

In her new introduction to *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (2010, xi–xxii)

Parker wrote, “Thanks to the Women’s Liberation Movement, there is a greater flexibility in what is considered natural or normal behaviour for men and women,” however this “flexibility” does not mean acceptance. Whilst fans applauded his knitting there were also negative and homophobic reactions prompted by the large amount of media coverage that he received.

In response to the feature in *The Independent* (2nd August 2021) the following comments were posted on the online commenting forum. “528,000 sad people follow this, er... man.” Here I presume that the “follow” refers to Daley’s Instagram account. At the time of writing, five months after this comment was posted, @tomdaley had 3.4 M followers and Daley’s knitting brand @madewithlovebytomdaley 1.4 M followers. And “Trying to pretend he is normal.” The second comment is intriguing as it implies that we view knitting as a normal activity for a man to undertake in public whereas most of the comments around Daley knitting, whether positive or negative, found him knitting publically an extraordinary sight.

When the *BBC* shared the news of Daley knitting during the Olympics on Facebook comments evidenced continuing stereotypical views on knitting. “Must be a Waldorf kid, or teacher... hahaha as teachers will knit in meetings and lectures all day long.” (A “Waldorf kid” refers to someone who received a Waldorf Education, developed by the Austrian philosopher, social reformer, and visionary, Rudolf Steiner). And “Girls past time.”

Recognizing that Daley is a challenge to social, gender and cultural stereotypes, *SheThePeople*, the Indian digital media website that focuses on

women related news and entertainment ended their report, “Tom Daley Trolled For Knitting. Why Does He Make You Uncomfortable?” (2 August 2021), with the statement “Why should we give way to hatred when we can encourage Daley for breaking age-old stereotypes?”

The Scottish Newspaper, *The Herald*, ran the headline “Reaction to Tom Daley’s Olympic Knitting is Sexist” (10th August 2021). Journalist, Catriona Stewart, expressed her frustration at the fact that “a past time routinely done by women is suddenly interesting and reinvigorated because a man’s doing it” adding “we went through this in 2013 when Ryan Gosling mentioned that he likes to knit.” She acknowledged that “Knitting still has an image problem, hooked on the fact it’s seen as a hobby done by women. Not just women, old women and housewives—the worst, most easily dismissed kind.” She ends, “of course it’s a boon that Tom Daley is an ambassador for knitting, but not because he’s a man—because he’s good at it and he shows it can be fun as well as useful and meditative.” Although Daley is subverting knitting stereotypes Stewart felt that our interest in him knitting was in fact reinforcing gender stereotypes. “Being interested in a subject because a man’s doing it but we think of it as a women’s work is just reinforcing stale gender stereotypes, and haven’t we all had enough of that?”

On 25th December 2021 Daley presented the Channel 4 alternative Christmas message, addressing the nation with a message of inclusion. In his heartfelt address, Daley applauds the athletes that have opened up

about their struggles this year who have encouraged him to talk more openly about his mental health. He speaks of homophobia in sport, particularly football, and criticizes sporting bodies for “sportswashing” by holding events in countries where homosexuality is illegal. Throughout the 4:46 minute film Daley is seen knitting in a circle alongside six ethnically diverse knitters, male and female, socially distanced and masked due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The fact that they are knitting is not mentioned, but the reference to his knitting during the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics, and how he found it helpful in managing his own mental health is clear. The use of knitting and its associations with care reinforces the message but also softens the otherwise, hard-hitting and deeply critical statements being made.

Prescod and Daley both present a visible challenge to the stereotype. Like Daley, Prescod did not take up knitting as a subversive act, or to intentionally challenge the stereotype, but this is the result of the public exposure of their acts of knitting. They have diverse individual profiles but one thing that they do have in common, beyond their desire to knit, is that they were both drawn to it as a way to improve their mental health. The understanding that knitting is beneficial to well-being and the management of mental health is not new (Corkhill 2014; Corkhill et al. 2014; Lydon 1998; Manning 2004; Matthews 2020; Murphy 2002), but the public exposure of it is, particularly when it comes from a “national treasure” and the exposure is in front of over 3 billion people. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) website states that independent research, conducted on their behalf,

reported that the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics reached a global audience of 3.05 billion people.

“Reckoning with Racism”

The popular stereotype is also playing a role in issues of racism, lack of diversity and representation of POC (people of color) in the world of knitting and fiber. The online fiber community had been discussing these issues of exclusion for many years but by 2019 the volume and persistence of the voices combined with the use of Instagram became impossible to ignore. The stereotypical image of knitting being a benign activity has led to shock, and often denial, that exclusion and racism could exist in a world full of material softness. But why would the knitting community be less racist than any other community? The debate became heated as Jaya Saxena reported on the American news and opinion website, *Vox*, (25th February 2019). In her article, “The knitting community is reckoning with racism,” she reported on the fiber artists of color who are taking to Instagram to call out instances of prejudice and to try to shape a more inclusive future. In BBC Radio 4’s, *The Purity Spiral* (2nd February 2020) Gavin Hayes discovered bitter rows over diversity and racism within the world of Instagram knitting when he met with Nathan Taylor, @sockmatician Instagram knitting star with currently 18.4 k followers, who unwittingly triggered a race row after attempting to reach out to people of color using the hashtag #Diversknitty. In the supporting text for the radio programme the stereotypical image of knitting is referenced, “You might think online

knitting would be an innocuous cosy community formed around a shared love of craft and a good yarn.”

UK based knitwear designers and artists have also written on these issues, dispelling the myth that black people don’t knit and exploring racism, representation and inclusion in the knitting world (Hamilton-Brown 2018; Sloan 2018, 2019). On her website KNITSONIK (Felicity Ford AKA Felix) writes, “racism so clearly exists in spaces many of us previously considered to be comforting and friendly.” Yet again the stereotypical image of knitting and knitters clouds reality, distracting us from critical issues that need to be addressed.

Artists and designers have also made, and worn, knitted works making material the racism and lack of representation experienced by POC in the craft community. Sophia Cai, a curator, writer and knitter based in Melbourne, Australia, uses the medium of knitting to address issues of cultural appropriation, exoticism, and emotional labor. She is an advocate for change and action within the fiber community regarding diversity and anti-racism. When Cai took part in the Diversity and Inclusion Panel at the *Edinburgh Yarn Festival 2019* she wore a pink hand knitted jumper with the words CONFRONT & AFFRONT written across the front in bright yellow crochet i-cord. Although Cai is an avid knitter time was tight and three friends knitted this jumper as “a gesture of love and solidarity” for her appearance on the panel. Cai writes about the experience of wearing the jumper for *Pom Pom* magazine blog, “Most people understand the “confront” but it’s the “affront” they do not like.”

When I put on the sweater for the first time, it made me feel empowered yet also vulnerable. Though knit for me to wear at a specific event, I never felt like the sweater belonged to me. Wearing it was a way to express my connection with others, particularly BIPOC makers, who I had seen take on the additional emotional burden of being anti-racism educators in the knitting community. It was a heavy weight to carry.

Hamilton-Brown’s work, *WE MEK* (2018), shown in Figure 7, is a machine knitted and embroidered magazine cover full of symbolism, references and ideas related to racism and lack of representation in the crafting community. For example, “We mek” is patois for we make, reclaiming language and “Saymi Name” is a reference to the fact that names need to be pronounced correctly. The figure knitting is based on Angela Davis, the African American activist, philosopher and educator. Here Davis is seen knitting a complex piece of intarsia, the technique used to knit *WE MEK*, referencing the fact that black knitters are competent and need to be represented as such. Dr. Karen Patel commissioned the artwork as part of the Craft Expertise Project. Patel worked in collaboration with Crafts Council UK to explore inequalities and diversity in the UK professional craft sector. It was shown in the exhibition *We Gather* at the Crafts Council Gallery, London (17th November 2020–5th February 2021). *We Gather* featured five female artists of Black and Asian heritage, their work sharing a commitment to craft, its cultural value and social justice. Ironically Hamilton-Brown is one of the “real” knitters behind the *Knitting Nanas*. Earlier in her career she was commissioned to



Figure 7
WE MEK Magazine, 2021, knitting and embroidery, 610 x 610 mm.
Photo credit: Chris Hamilton-Brown (www.passion4.co.uk)

design and knit a cereal box sized cosy for a *Knitting Nana* to appear to knit for the 2008 launch of Nestlé's *Coco Caramel Shreddies*.

“Knitting Isn’t Just for Grandmas Anymore”

But what happened to the “white granny,” or even just “granny,” our stereotypical knitter? How has she fared through the debates around racism, lack of representation and diversity, ageism, homophobia and sexism in reporting? The stereotype was used repeatedly and derogatorily in an article in the American online newspaper, *34th Street* (5th December 2020), “Knitting Isn’t Just for Grandmas Anymore: How the quintessential “old lady hobby” became a quarantine coping mechanism for young adults” contained many supposedly amusing but in reality ageist statements such as, “Before quarantine, you might have thought

that knitting and crochet were hobbies reserved for old ladies with seven cats.” And “once COVID–19 related lockdowns started to be announced around the world, suddenly everyone was living the grandma life. Stuck at home with nothing to keep us busy ...” Ending with “Maybe you can even ask your grandma to teach you her ways—if she can figure out how to work Zoom, that is.” Even Daley used it in reference to his knitting obsession when he admitted to *The Daily Mail* (12th October 2020) that his husband joked that being with him was like being “wed to a grandmother.”

Thankfully the association between knitting and grannies (nanas, nannas) has found some disfavor. In 2003 when *Innocent Drinks* started putting little knitted and crocheted hats on their smoothie drink bottles to raise money for the charity, Age UK, they used the words, “nice old

grannies ... are knitting us mini bobble hats ...,” patronizing the elderly and reiterating the stereotype. On their website they now use the words, “These woolly masterpieces are knitted and crocheted by thousands of legendary volunteers.” Replacing the patronizing term “nice old grannies” with “legendary volunteers” signifies that the activity of knitting for charity is appropriate and open to all genders and age groups.

On 22nd November 2021 an article in the business section of the BBC News website entitled “How pandemic burnout sparked the revival of a granny hobby” was retitled “How pandemic burnout sparked the revival of knitting” the day after an article in *The Guardian* by journalist Alex Clark (21st November 2021), “We claim to be a land of hobbyists. But really we’re going slightly mad,” conveyed her infuriation at the stereotypical attitude taken toward knitting in the

titling of the *BBC* article. “A headline on the BBC’s website has my hackles rising before I get to the first sentence.” Crafts Council UK also picked up on this and mentioned it in their weekly e-newsletter *Crafts Council/Stories* (26th November 2021). When I emailed the journalist, Katie Silver, responsible for the initial article, regarding the change of title she replied,

Yes the article title was changed. We reporters don’t typically write our headlines—that’s left to a headline or front page editor who make the decision based on what they think is going to attract readers. The title was devised by an editorial team but when the piece went live there was some criticism that to describe it as a “granny hobby” was sexist and ageist. The team then chose to change the headline based on this.

However the use of the term “granny” in the initial headline did do exactly what the editorial team hoped it would, it attracted readers, albeit irritating them at the same time. In Alex Clark’s response article she admits that the title meant that she was, “primed to particularly enjoy it; who wants to read something they don’t expect to infuriate them in an age of antagonism?”

“Sew Bros” Taking up Knitting

An article in *The Guardian* (10th April 2021) about men, “sew bros,” who took up knitting during the Covid-19 pandemic, featuring a diverse group of male knitters from around the globe, carried the headline, “It was seen as an elderly white lady thing to do; meet the new generation of male knitters.” As opposed to being a headline to “attract readers ... devised

by an editorial team” this is a quotation from one of the knitters, Vincent Williams, based in Lithonia, Georgia, USA, who runs the online shop, *Visuvio’s Crafts*, selling hand knitted and crocheted items and patterns plus offering classes, *Maker Mood* music playlists and skill sharing. Williams goes on to say, “It was frustrating not to see representation of myself as a black man.” Another knitter, Vincent Green-Hite, also based in the USA but in Portland, Oregon said that when he crochets in public,

the only thing they ask about is my sexuality. Which is such a weird thing to be asking in public. I’m straight, and I’d be proud to say I was straight or gay. I just don’t know what it has to do with crocheting.

In *The Guardian* article (9 January 2022), “‘Tom Daley effect’ spurs men to take up knitting amid home crafting boom,” Juliet Bernard, The *UK Hand Knitting Association’s* (UKHKA) spokesperson confirmed that more men were taking up knitting, “The sight of Daley winning medals without dropping a stitch has encouraged more men to get involved.” A quarter of the people using the UKHKA site, which supports independent wool shops, were now men, up from about 10% before the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics. The UKHKA reported that, “about 1 million people have taken up knitting since the start of the pandemic. The figure based on last year’s Craft Intelligence report, means the country now has around 7 million knitters.” Edward Griffiths, Chief Executive of *Lovecrafts*, a website dedicated to textile and papercrafts, reported that “sales of knitting and crochet kits on the site were 225% up on 2019.” He stated that “knitting’s

traditional heartland was among women in their 40s or 50s, Daley was attracting younger customers as well as a male audience.”

The Guardian article (9 January 2022) presents another challenge to the stereotype in revealing that knitting is predominantly undertaken by women in their 40s or 50s, possibly grannies but not in the way that the stereotype portrays them.

Concluding Thoughts

The challenge to the stereotype is being made. By some knitting practitioners, such as Sophie Cai, this is an explicit challenge and with others, such as Tom Daley, it comes simply through them not being what society’s mental picture of a knitter is. Both have a positive effect toward change as research has shown that increased exposure to counter-stereotypical images can help to overcome spontaneous stereotypes (Finnegan, Oakhill, and Garnham 2015). As Hamilton-Brown states “representation really matters.” The last two articles discussed (*The Guardian* 10th April 2021 and 9th January 2022), confirm what Turney ((2009) 2013, 41) writes, “... as more men pick up needles and start to knit, gender boundaries and stereotypes continue to be readdressed and challenged.” However as gender identity broadens away from the binary categorizations of female and male, and the adoption of gender neutrality increases, this statement becomes redundant. To successfully break down stereotypes knitters have to be seen and represented as individuals, as opposed to a homogenous group most commonly defined by age, race and gender. As Turney ((2009) 2013, 41) also writes “... just as women are not a homogeneous group, nor is

knitting or indeed knitters.” We need to ensure that exposure is given to the wide range of individuals who can, and do, knit. The media needs to stop relying on the out-dated and socially excluding stereotype as lazy shorthand in attention grabbing headlines. However as the journalist Alex Clark said in response to the BBC News website article (22nd November 2021), “How pandemic burnout sparked the revival of a granny hobby,” “who wants to read something they don’t expect to infuriate them in an age of antagonism?” The persistent association between knitting and elderly women needs to be addressed, not all elderly women knit, or want to be associated with the tired stereotype. The Center for Aging Better has launched a free online age-positive library of images, which depict older people in non-stereotypical ways to tackle negative stereotypes of later life. It does not contain any images of knitting.

As this article evidences we are beginning to see small erosions of the out-dated stereotype and socially perpetrated exclusions. However the media still hold, and present us with, two opposing views, where they consider that knitting is simultaneously “a granny hobby” and “done by cool young things.” This holding of simultaneous opposing views can be seen in negative views on immigration, where immigrants are seen to steal all the jobs whilst simultaneously being lazy and relying on state benefits. In reference to this paradox, an article published on the Foundation for Economic Education (FEE) website (1st December 2018) uses a term, coined by the researcher and academic, Jon Murphy. Murphy referred to this as Schrödinger’s Immigrant². The media

continues to present us with Schrödinger’s knitter.

Notes

1. “Stab it, Strangle it” refers to the gruesome rhyme for learning the knit stitch, “Stab it, Strangle it, Scoop out the guts, Toss it off the cliff.”
2. The Austrian physicist, Edwin Schrödinger, imagined a cat in a closed box with a deadly poison. Eventually the poison would kill the cat but no one knows whether that has happened until the box is opened. Until this time, the cat is equally likely to be alive and dead, and is treated as if it is both at the same time.

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