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# All kids out of the pool!: brand identity, television animations, and adult audience of Cartoon Network's Adult Swim

Hye Jin Lee  
*University of Iowa*

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ALL KIDS OUT OF THE POOL!: BRAND IDENTITY, TELEVISION ANIMATIONS,  
AND ADULT AUDIENCE OF CARTOON NETWORK'S ADULT SWIM

by  
Hye Jin Lee

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Doctor of  
Philosophy degree in Mass Communications  
in the Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

May 2013

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Meenakshi Gigi Durham

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines Adult Swim, Cartoon Network's late-night programming block, which has developed into one of the most popular entertainment brands for adults. Expressing and shaping adult sensibilities of the time Adult Swim has been able to become the most popular cable network for (male) adults 18 to 34 years old. Launched in 2001, Adult Swim emerged at a moment in the U.S. when technological developments were changing the television landscape and the meaning of adulthood was fervently being discussed in the media as assumptions and realities of adult life continued to be in conflict. The goal of this dissertation is to understand the contemporary society and media culture as well as the defining characteristics and tensions of contemporary adulthood, adult taste, and adult culture by investigating Adult Swim's rise to a popular entertainment brand among young adults. Through a contextualized critical analysis of selected Adult Swim television texts, representation of Adult Swim in the mainstream press, and Adult Swim fans' online discussions in Adult Swim's official message boards this dissertation interrogates what branding/programming strategies it uses to appeal to its "adult" viewers, how it constructs and understands its "adult" viewers, and how it establishes its brand identity.

With its low-budget, Do-It-Yourself (DIY) style of cartoon and live comedy series that are full of ironic, pop culture references and absurd, surreal humor, Adult Swim has established a unique sensibility that resonates with many young adults and built itself as a "different" and "creative" network brand. However, this dissertation demonstrates that Adult Swim's "unconventional," "edgy" brand identity relies on its male-centric programming strategies that either render women invisible or make use of

blatantly sexist jokes for its “adult” appeal. In addition, this dissertation explains that despite featuring many queer characters Adult Swim appropriates queer identity and politics to advance itself as a “subversive,” “non-mainstream” and “different” network (a brand identity that greatly appeals to young adults) rather than to subvert heteronormativity and promote LGBT rights. Furthermore, this dissertation interrogates how Adult Swim uses interactive media to invite its viewers to participate in shaping and maintaining its brand identity as a network that “listens to” its viewers and to form sensibility and feelings of conand to construct o form an affective relationship with the Adult Swim brand and to establish itself as a brand that “listens to” and understands the sensibility, affect, and feelings of contemporary young adults who comprise the Adult Swim audience.

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Graduate College  
The University of Iowa  
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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PH.D. THESIS

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This is to certify that the Ph.D. thesis of

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has been approved by the Examining Committee  
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To my parents and young adults who live in everyday uncertainties



“Some day you will be old enough to start reading fairy tales again.”

C. S. Lewis

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines Adult Swim, Cartoon Network's late-night programming block, which has developed into one of the most popular entertainment brands for adults. Expressing and shaping adult sensibilities of the time Adult Swim has been able to become the most popular cable network for (male) adults 18 to 34 years old. Launched in 2001, Adult Swim emerged at a moment in the U.S. when technological developments were changing the television landscape and the meaning of adulthood was fervently being discussed in the media as assumptions and realities of adult life continued to be in conflict. The goal of this dissertation is to understand the contemporary society and media culture as well as the defining characteristics and tensions of contemporary adulthood, adult taste, and adult culture by investigating Adult Swim's rise to a popular entertainment brand among young adults. Through a contextualized critical analysis of selected Adult Swim television texts, representation of Adult Swim in the mainstream press, and Adult Swim fans' online discussions in Adult Swim's official message boards this dissertation interrogates what branding/programming strategies it uses to appeal to its "adult" viewers, how it constructs and understands its "adult" viewers, and how it establishes its brand identity.

With its low-budget, Do-It-Yourself (DIY) style of cartoon and live comedy series that are full of ironic, pop culture references and absurd, surreal humor, Adult Swim has established a unique sensibility that resonates with many young adults and built itself as a "different" and "creative" network brand. However, this dissertation demonstrates that Adult Swim's "unconventional," "edgy" brand identity relies on its male-centric programming strategies that either render women invisible or make use of blatantly sexist jokes for its "adult" appeal. In addition, this dissertation explains that despite featuring many queer

characters Adult Swim appropriates queer identity and politics to advance itself as a “subversive,” “non-mainstream” and “different” network (a brand identity that greatly appeals to young adults) rather than to subvert heteronormativity and promote LGBT rights. Furthermore, this dissertation interrogates how Adult Swim uses interactive media to invite its viewers to participate in shaping and maintaining its brand identity as a network that “listens to” its viewers and to build an affective relationship with the Adult Swim brand.

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## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS ADULT SWIM?

Adult Swim, the late night programming block on Cartoon Network, is a cornerstone of late night programming, which is one of the most profitable places in television. Featuring cartoons (original productions, syndicated programs, and Japanese animations) and live action comedy shows, Adult Swim originally began as Cartoon Network's experiment with its late night programming block. Hoping to attract young adults who happened to be up late at night, Adult Swim filled its program schedule with cartoons, a genre that has been associated with children's entertainment for a long period of time. These cartoons, however, were not the types that kids could watch as they were full of subversive adult humor and ironic, pop-culture references. This programming strategy has provoked discussions on what "adult" means when it comes to content, style, and form not just for the individual Adult Swim shows but for the Adult Swim program as a whole (Ross, 2008). Created specifically to appeal to young male viewers, Adult Swim's presence extends beyond television to multiple platforms, which allow Adult Swim fans to enjoy the full Adult Swim brand experience. The subversive and absurd content of Adult Swim shows, the complexities in the reception of Adult Swim as a program, and Adult Swim's presence beyond television all signify and reflect the emergence of a new adult entertainment brand, which calls for interrogation in the new media environment.

Adult Swim emerged at an interesting moment in the history of both television and the U.S. culture. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century when Adult Swim first launched, television was being redefined as it was transitioning into the post-network, post-broadcasting era in which television viewers not only had greater channel options but also the ability to pick



the time and the platform to watch television and to talk back to TV by providing instant feedback to the television producers on their program's official website or other channels, such as Television Without Pity (TWoP). Adult Swim also emerged at a moment when the meaning of adulthood was being fervently discussed in the media and public discourse as many young adults were failing to follow the traditional adult lifestyle (of getting married, having a steady job, having children, leaving the parent(s)'s house, etc.) as the U.S. was undergoing various socio-economic and cultural transformations from events such as the dot com bubble burst and September 11, which triggered massive layoffs, corporate restructuring, casualization of labor, and so on, and heightened personal stress, anxiety, and uncertainties of the future. Publications of numerous articles that analyze the meaning of being a "grown-up" or an "adult" or that interrogate today's "immature," "futureless," and "ageless" adulthood since the late 1990s reflects the public anxiety and concern surrounding the shifting adult identity and how this new adulthood has become a hot cultural topic in the U.S.

As a product of an intricate interconnection of various sociocultural, industrial, and technological factors, Adult Swim, which features a rotating lineup of cartoons and live comedy shows that specifically target young adult audience incessantly attempts to subvert the boundary between "childish" and adult culture through its juvenile, obscene, irreverent, profane, and often violent messages, smart and witty humor, and parodies of the kid culture and trash television of the 1970s and 1980s referenced with "ironic nostalgia" (Lloyd, 2007). The popularity of this boundary defying programming block not only raises questions about Adult Swim's position in the television landscape of the

post-network era but also about how Adult Swim constructs and conceptualizes its adult audiences, their tastes, and sensibilities.

By interrogating the circuit of Adult Swim in contemporary culture this study attempts to understand the socio-cultural, industrial, and technological forces that enabled the creation of Adult Swim and its popular reception as an adult programming. This study is particularly interested in understanding how Adult Swim constructs the meaning of “adult” in its title and defines its “adult” viewers and how adult viewers of Adult Swim understand the meaning of “adult” and define their “adult” identity. In the process, this study attempts to examine and reevaluate the general assumptions about adulthood, the realities of contemporary adult life, the arbitrariness of the boundary between adult and child culture and taste, and how the media and cultural industries create, maintain and/or destroy the boundary between the two. Furthermore, this study demonstrates how Adult Swim aligns its “adult” sensibility with its viewers and encourages them to form an affective relationship with the Adult Swim brand through its website with various interactive features such as the online message boards and bump builder. Before I investigate the emergence of new adulthood and the problems with the current “adulthood in crisis” discourse a brief historical background on the emergence of Adult Swim is in order to understand the cultural meaning of its popular reception.

### **Background of Adult Swim**

On September 2, 2001, the night before the Labor Day Holiday, Cartoon Network aired an episode of *Home Movies*, an animated half-hour series that features a precocious third grader who makes movies out of his chaotic everyday life. This was the beginning of Adult Swim, Cartoon Network’s new block of animated programming specifically

aimed at adults between 18 and 34. Adult Swim originally began as a three-hour programming block and aired only on Sunday and Thursday nights from 11 p.m. to 2 a.m. (ET/PT).<sup>1</sup> The original programming had six series in its lineup including *The Brak Show*, *Harvey Birdman: Attorney at Law*, *Aqua Teen Hunger Force (ATHF)*, *Sealab 2021*—all original programs that were developed and produced at Cartoon Network’s Atlanta production studio, which later comes to be known as Williams Street—*Cowboy Bebop*, a critically acclaimed Japanese animation, in addition to *Home Movies*.

Due to the substantial ratings success with its target demographic of adults between 18-34, Adult Swim was able to expand its two-day, three-hour schedule to a five-day schedule (running from Sunday through Thursday) after acquiring Fox’s cancelled shows, *Futurama* and *Family Guy* in 2003. The ratings for Adult Swim increased every year since the programming first debuted with the ratings among adults between 18-34 growing 25% and the delivery going up 49% to 249,000 viewers in 2002 (Oei, 2002). In addition to Adult Swim’s original productions, the purchase of *Mission Hill* and *The Oblongs*, both animated series that originally aired on The WB, and the addition of Japanese animation, *Inuyasha*, allowed Adult Swim to grow into an “across-the-schedule” franchise as originally planned (Oei, 2002). Adult Swim continued to be successful with its target demographics as the ratings increased 62% and the delivery grew 81% in 2004 from its previous year (Oei, 2004). The continuous success led Cartoon Network to announce Adult Swim’s further expansion as an extra night was added to the programming schedule. So on April 17, 2004, Adult Swim aired on Saturday night for the first time.

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<sup>1</sup> Thursday nights aired repeats of the Sunday night programming.

<sup>2</sup> It has been noted by media companies that young men prefer cable television over broadcast networks. A 2002 research conducted by Frank Luntz of Luntz Research

In February 2005, Turner Broadcasting, the parent company of Cartoon Network, announced that because Adult Swim and Cartoon Network have different target demographics the two would be separated for the Nielsen Ratings purposes, although Cartoon Network had already been reporting Adult Swim's information as a separate entity (ICV2.com, 2005). Since becoming a separate network Adult Swim has been ranked number one in ratings in the late night programming on basic cable among adults 18-34, leading the trend of late-night television, in which more young male viewers were gradually migrating to cable television from the broadcast networks, threatening the ratings of David Letterman's *The Late Show* and Jay Leno's *The Tonight Show* (Glassman, 2005).<sup>2</sup> Spinning off Adult Swim into a separate network from Cartoon Network was a wise business move for Turner Broadcasting as this allowed Adult Swim to further solidify itself as an adult oriented programming. Ever since becoming an individually rated network, Adult Swim has stayed as the number one rated network among men 18-34.

Adult Swim's popularity among young adults became more highlighted when Nielsen began to include TV viewership by college students living on campus as part of its ratings in January 2007 (Story, 2007). This new ratings system was expected to increase the ratings for cable networks that target younger viewers. Adult Swim, which is one of the networks that have high student viewership, broke its own basic cable records among young adult and male viewers in its February ratings, extending its streak as the

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<sup>2</sup> It has been noted by media companies that young men prefer cable television over broadcast networks. A 2002 research conducted by Frank Luntz of Luntz Research Companies report that "an overwhelming 72 percent (of men 21-34) favor programs on cable or satellite above the broadcast networks," (Larson, 2003, n.p.) making cable to become "the home of lad TV" (Cross, 2008, p. 206).

top rated cable channel among men aged 18-24 to 23 months (Lafayette, 2007; Rich, 2007). With the continuous surge in ratings among its target demographic Turner Broadcasting expanded the Adult Swim programming block to seven nights per week—Monday to Saturday, 11 p.m. to 6 a.m. (ET/PT) and Sundays, 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. (ET/PT)—in July 2007.

Beginning in January 2009, Adult Swim began to air every night at 10 p.m., eventually extending its reach to prime time (Newsarama.com, 2008). Although Adult Swim saw its delivery of males 18-24 decline by 6 percent and 18-34 by 5 percent after the implementation of its new schedule that begins at 10 p.m., the network became the top rated cable network among its core demographics for the fifth consecutive year in 2009. In February 2010, *Mediaweek* reported Turner Broadcasting's decision to further expand the Adult Swim lineup deeper into the highly competitive second hour of prime time by pushing its starting time to 9 p.m. beginning in January 2011 (Crupi, 2010). Stu Snyder, president and COO of Turner Animation, Young Adults & Kids Media, explained that the further incursion into television's most competitive time slot is not only "a reflection on the success of Adult Swim as a brand" but also an indication of Cartoon Network's determination to further develop the Adult Swim brand and expand its audience (Crupi, 2010, p. 4).

The additional programming hour was considered to be a success as Adult Swim saw its total day delivery for the first week of 2011 to have gained double-digits across all key young adult demographics compared to the same period in 2010 (Gorman, 2011a). In December 2011, Adult Swim was ranked as number one basic cable channel for total day delivery of adults across all adult and male demographics of 18-34, 18-49,

and 18-24, with an increase of 5 percent, 3 percent, and 6 percent from the previous year respectively (Gorman 2011a). With its new schedule with the 9 p.m. starting time Adult Swim attracted more viewers and continued to be a ratings success, but it also had to face challenges by putting its teeth deeper into prime time as the network now had to balance the content restrictions that come with being aired in the earlier hour (and to appeal to a broader range of advertisers and viewers) with its signature lunacy and crudeness that characterize the Adult Swim brand (Crupi, 2010)<sup>3</sup>. Mike Lazzo, the senior executive vice president of Adult Swim (who is also one of the core developers of the Adult Swim programming block), said in an interview with *Daily Variety* in 2005 that one of the reasons Adult Swim has been able to be successful is because of its freedom of creativity that was guaranteed based on the premise that no one was watching what Adult Swim was doing with its late night time slot (Idelson, 2005). Adult Swim's growing ratings and wider reception created concerns about the program becoming mainstream and thus alienating the longtime and core Adult Swim audience base (Fennessey, 2011).

The quirky characters, absurd sense of humor, and surreal plots that dominate the Adult Swim shows (particularly the Adult Swim original productions) not only appealed to a specific audience—young male adults—but also were invaluable for Adult Swim to establish itself as an edgy, cool brand. As Adult Swim entered deeper into prime time

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<sup>3</sup> A special report by the Parents Television Council (PTC) came out in August 2011 that raised concerns over children's exposure to explicit adult-themed animated programs that are inappropriate for teens and children. According to the report, with adult-themed shows airing earlier in the evening when children are likely to be the viewing audience teens between 12-17 are watching adult-themed animations more than ever. Based on its findings, PTC, using a traditional school based grading, gave both Cartoon Network and Adult Swim an "F" for airing inappropriate contents for children. Meanwhile, Disney and Nickelodeon, which were also under PTC's scrutiny, received an "A" (Parents Television Council, 2011).

more people (not just the target audience but also teens and children as well) were invited to watch the program. With television schedule being “the locus of power in television, the mechanism whereby demographic speculations are turned into a viewing experience” (Ellis, 2000, p. 26) Adult Swim could no longer stay the same with its new programming schedule. Although the existence of prime time in the post-network era continues to be a debatable topic<sup>4</sup>, the cultural and industrial expectation of prime time programs remains to be commercial viability by appealing to the widest range of audience with restrictions in subversive messages and content. The conventions of prime time programming that require following the rigid rules of program length, formula, topic of discussion, and solutions to problems contribute to the reification of the dominant cultural ideology, which Gitlin (1979) refers to as “prime time ideology.” As Adult Swim attempts to win over the “mainstream” crowd there is no guarantee that the network can escape the institutionalized shackles that confine and limit its subversiveness, quirkiness, and absurdity.

Adult Swim was created with a specific purpose to attract the adult audience (a message that was repeatedly sent out to viewers through its early “all kids out of the pool” bumps and promos). Despite this effort, some have questioned the “adult-orientation” of Adult Swim since many of the shows were rated TV-PG or TV-14 (with the exception of *Cowboy Bebop*, which had a TV-14-LV rating—caution for strong language and violence) (Miller, n.d.). Even some of the creators and writers of the Adult Swim shows brought up this point, such as Dino Stamatopoulos, the creator of *Moral*

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<sup>4</sup> Diane Mermigas (2006), industry writer and editor at MediaPost, asked whether prime time is a misnomer in this new “anytime” era when more viewers are given control to watch content at their chosen time due to technological developments.

*Orel* and *Mary Shelley's Frankenhole*, who stated that the term, "Adult Swim," might be a bit of a misnomer as it is uncertain how many viewers are actually adults (Complex, 2010). Regardless, the content of Adult Swim has grown more "mature" over the years as more Adult Swim shows began to receive a TV-MA rating (mature audiences only, which generally means unsuitable for those below 17) such as *Robot Chicken*, *Superjail*, and *The Boondocks* to name just a few.

For Cartoon Network to create Adult Swim to specifically target the adult audience made perfect sense as it became very clear that many adults actually enjoy watching cartoons. Mike Lazzo stated that cartoons on Cartoon Network attract a huge number of adult viewers as the network's early ratings pointed out how more than one third of its audience is 13 or older (McFarland, 2003). Of course, as Jason Mittell (2004) explains Cartoon Network was created as a channel to specifically target a "taste culture" or "psychographic" consisting of cartoon fans, regardless of age (p. 92) so it was not surprising that the network attracted many adults who enjoy watching cartoons. But because the majority of the viewers of Cartoon Network are kids the network had to make sure its shows did not include questionable contents. The creation of Adult Swim, then, was to cater to adult cartoon fans who craved more sophisticated and mature contents. In addition, with various limitations in advertising to kids at night it made great business sense for Cartoon Network to use the late night timeslot to attract adult viewers, particularly the lucrative young male viewers. After all, that was Nickelodeon's programming strategy with its Nick-at-Nite programming block, which allowed the network to attract adult viewers by successfully expanding the children's network into home for classic television (Higgins, 2005). As Nick-at-Nite allowed Nickelodeon to



recontextualize old reruns (Spigel, 1995), Adult Swim enabled Cartoon Network to recontextualize classic cartoons and challenge the assumption that cartoons and animations are children-only entertainment.

The strategy to separate Adult Swim from Cartoon Network has been effective in attracting the hard to find young male viewers and “breaking down some traditional mindset of what cartoon is” according to Mark Lazarus, president of Turner Broadcasting System’s entertainment group (Higgins, 2005, p. 6). However, despite being one of the most popular television networks and brands not much scholarly attention has been paid to Adult Swim, which celebrated its 10th anniversary in 2011<sup>5</sup>. This may be due to Adult Swim being “an amorphous entity” (Ross, 2008, p. 101) as it is not a single show but a programming block with constantly shifting lineup of shows and schedules. Also, the variety in the program types that comprise the Adult Swim programming—Williams Street original productions, cartoons produced by third-party studios, syndicated reruns (whether cartoons or live-action comedies), animes, and so on—complicates the task of studying Adult Swim. If defining Adult Swim as an object of study is challenging so is trying to understand its viewers and fans who have different preferences for shows, genres, and understanding of/expectation for Adult Swim. But what makes Adult Swim really challenging to study is that it requires an analysis beyond the context of television since Adult Swim is no longer simply a *television* programming block or a network but a lifestyle brand.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ron Russo’s *Adult Swim and Comedy* remains as the only text that examines Adult Swim shows at this point.

<sup>6</sup> Defining Adult Swim is a challenging task as its identity has continuously shifted since it first launched in 2001. Adult Swim initially began as Cartoon Network’s late night programming block but grew into a separate and distinct network in 2005 despite sharing

### **The Multiplicity of Adult Swim: Lifestyle Brand in the Convergence Culture**

I argue that Adult Swim needs to be studied as a brand rather than a television program because of various reasons. First, not every Adult Swim fans experience Adult Swim as a television program as some fans watch Adult Swim shows through different channels other than television. Before Adult Swim joined the “TV Everywhere” initiative and launched “Adult Swim Gold” in August 2, 2011, many of the full episodes of the Adult Swim shows streamed on the Adult Swim website and its mobile apps (particularly the iOS video app) for free (although the episodes were made available in a rotation basis), allowing fans (even those who do not have cable/satellite subscriptions) to watch and enjoy Adult Swim in an alternative way.<sup>7</sup> In addition, Adult Swim fans are able to

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the same channel space with Cartoon Network. But as Adult Swim began to venture into digital businesses with the launch of its official website, Adult Swim branded online/mobile games and a satirical website, Thing X, and partnered with various music and fashion labels, it solidified itself as an entertainment brand that goes beyond a television network or a programming block. Because I believe the meaning or identity of Adult Swim is constructed through various contents across television, website, online/mobile games, and consumer products I understand Adult Swim to be a brand rather than a simple programming block or a network. However, when I intend to talk about Adult Swim as a programming block (particularly in its early years before it separated from Cartoon Network) or a network I describe it as such. I raise the issue of difficulty in defining Adult Swim’s identity again in chapter 7 when I explain how fans who have different understanding of Adult Swim express different expectations for Adult Swim programs (particularly in regard to genres).

<sup>7</sup> By offering full episodes for free the Adult Swim website played an important role in the growth of the Adult Swim audience, particularly by reaching out to those who cannot watch Adult Swim when it airs on television (whether because they do not have subscriptions to cable/satellite or cannot stay up late at night). When the Adult Swim iOS app was released in February 2011 it received a favorable reception by many fans because it offered free access to many full episodes of the Adult Swim shows (just like its official website). However, on August 2, 2011, Adult Swim quietly launched “Adult Swim Gold,” which limited free access to its full episodes to users/fans who have subscription to Adult Swim/Cartoon Network’s partnering cable/satellite services. With the “Adult Swim Gold” feature many of the episodes that used to stream on the website/app for free could only be viewed by the cable/satellite authenticated users. This move was part of Adult Swim’s participation in the “TV Everywhere” initiative, a plan

watch their favorite shows through DVDs or download them through iTunes thanks to the deal that was made between Apple and Cartoon Network in 2006.

Second, Adult Swim is no longer just a television experience as viewers' activity now extends to interaction with the Adult Swim website and other multi-media platforms, which allow a greater encompassing Adult Swim experience. Of course, Adult Swim is not the only network that has an official website (and now mobile apps) or uses interactive technology to form an online "community" to establish, extend, and/or reformulate relationships with viewers, particularly as more media producers have come to realize the revenue potential of fans/viewers' emotional investment with their favorite television shows/networks (Jones, 2009). Interactive websites have become a very popular platform in creating viewer participation as television networks hope they will increase viewers' interest in the brand and foster great brand loyalty (Jones, 2009). Watching television now means full immersion in a branded world of multi-media contents and interactive technologies, which especially rings true in children's television, as Banet-Weiser (2009) shows in her study of the Nickelodeon channel. Through the use of various multimedia technologies Adult Swim encourages viewers to not only intensify their relationship with the programming but also to further extend and normalize the Adult Swim brand culture. And by marketing Adult Swim as a lifestyle rather than simply a television programming it has been able to become a successful multiplatform brand today.

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devised by content providers (Time Warner, the parent company of Cartoon Network and Adult Swim, being one of the major players) and telecommunication companies to circumvent further cord cutting. Many Adult Swim fans (particularly those who claimed not to have a cable/satellite subscription and watch Adult Swim only on the website) expressed anger when they learned that they no longer had free access or only had limited access to full episodes of their favorite shows to watch.

Third, Adult Swim's entry into the world of fashion and music also indicates how it should be understood as more than just a television program or a network. For instance, in fall 2008, Adult Swim made a deal with Etnies, a sneaker/lifestyle brand, to collaborate in featuring sneakers with Adult Swim inspired characters (etnies.com, 2008). These two brands were able to collaborate because they both shared an "irreverent" and "risky" brand image, appealing to fun and cool seeking young (male) adults. With the design of Jacob Escobedo, an Adult Swim artist and a Creative Director, the Adult Swim-etnies collaboration produced and sold its first two limited-edition styles of sneakers to the public in fall 2008 (etnies.com, 2008). Meanwhile, Adult Swim's incursion into the music world came earlier when it teamed up with an indie music label, Stones Throw, and produced and released its first collaborative project, *Chrome Children* (a CD and a DVD set), in October 2006. Of course, before *Chrome Children* Adult Swim had a taste in the music world with the release of *The Mouth and the Mask*, a collaborative project between two eccentric hip hop artists, Danger Mouse, who became famous with his *The Grey Album*—a mashup of Jay Z's *The Black Album* and The Beatles' *The White Album*, and MF Doom, who is well known for wearing a metal mask when rapping. Being big fans of Adult Swim (particularly Danger Mouse who has actually participated in the production of sound effects for some of the Adult Swim shows) these artists created the album using music samples from Adult Swim's various television shows. In response Adult Swim actively promoted their album before it was released to the public in October 2005. Collaborating with various indie record labels such as Ghostly International, the indie juggernaut that takes "a lifestyle approach to the music label" (Fichtner, 2008, n.p.), Adult Swim has continuously produced albums such as *Definitive Swim*, *Ghostly Swim*,

*African Swim*, *Metal Swim*, and the *Adult Swim Singles Program* series (that began in 2010), which are mostly available on the Adult Swim website for free download.

Furthermore, to reach a wider crowd and attract fans beyond television, Adult Swim has created various off-screen events including comedy and music tours. This kind of event-based marketing has become a common practice among multinational corporations that attempt to extend the point of access of their brands (Lury, 2004). When individuals access brands not simply by purchasing products but by associating with brand-related special events they are transformed to “collectives such as fans, lifestyles, or communities” (Lury, 2004, p. 34).

Adult Swim’s first nationwide tour began in 2007 when it opened a 12-campus hip-hop tour and a 12-campus heavy metal tour. Open to the public for free (the tickets were distributed on [www.adultswimpresents.com](http://www.adultswimpresents.com)) Adult Swim’s national tours have been successful throughout the years that its tours, particularly those on college campuses, continue to this day.<sup>8</sup> In addition, Adult Swim has created live comedy shows, such as *Robot Chicken on Tour* and *Aqua Teen Hunger Force on Live* based on its popular television shows and participated in hosting numerous parties at the Comic-Con Internationals to reach to its fans beyond television. All of these off-screen activities make it necessary to study Adult Swim as more than just a television program if we want to do a systematic study on Adult Swim.

Although studying Adult Swim may be a daunting task Adult Swim provides various interesting (and important) cases for study as it expresses particular adult sensibilities that are indicative of the shifts in the meaning of “adulthood,” “adult

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<sup>8</sup> In 2012 Adult Swim hosted “carnival tours” on 10 college campuses including one at the University of Iowa.

identity,” and “adult taste” as well as the media landscape in contemporary America. When Adult Swim was in its developmental stage in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century television was being reinvented with the proliferation of channels, introduction of TiVo and various time-shifting technologies, and the increasing use of the Internet for content distribution and circulation. The proliferation of cable channels have particularly changed the direction of television (mostly in terms of content) as it made television programs to focus more on the specific niche audiences rather than to appeal to the mass audience (Lotz, 2007). Television programs were “no longer simply broadcasts, but were constitutive of a network’s brand and the basis for viewers’ investment in specific forms of televisual association and membership” (Ouellette & Hay, 2008, p. 29). Being designed as an outlet in “edgy,” “subversive” cartoons that specifically appeal to young adults, Adult Swim has been able to collect adult cartoon fans who not only enjoy watching cartoons but do not consider watching cartoons to be an “abnormal” or “weird” adult activity as members of the Adult Swim brand community.

Of course Adult Swim greatly owes its existence to the popularity of *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, *Beavis and Butt-Head*, *King of the Hill*, *Futurama*, *South Park*, and many other prime time animations of the 1990s which challenged the notion that cartoons are kid’s genre with their adult-oriented themes. As Hilton-Morrow and McMahan (2003) point out the resurgence of prime time animations led by Fox Channel have not only revised the notion that cartoons are children’s genre but also allowed more adult-oriented animations to be produced, paving way for the creation of Adult Swim. By providing a lineup of adult-oriented cartoons that exclude the core audience of children late at night, Adult Swim has been able to further break down the general assumption

about cartoons as children's entertainment and solidify adults (particularly young adults) as its core audience at night (Mittell, 2004). Also, through the Adult Swim official website, which plays an important role in creating synergy for the brand, Adult Swim has been able to further its effort in shifting the understanding of cartoons as kid's entertainment to adult entertainment (Sandler, 2003). The Adult Swim website is not merely a site of marketing where various Adult Swim related merchandises are promoted and sold (such as DVDs of various Adult Swim shows or plush toys of Adult Swim's popular characters) but also a site of participation and engagement where viewers regularly come back for more Adult Swim experience (Ross, 2008).

The notion that television is not just an activity of "viewing" but also "using"—which Dan Harries (2002) refers to as "viewsing"—is a characteristic of what Amanda Lotz (2007) calls, the post-network era, in which television viewing has not only become more individualized and convenient as viewers have more control over when and where to watch television but also more participatory due to the unimagined integration of television with interactive technologies. For media producers the best way to transform ordinary viewers into loyal fans (who put more emotional investment into their favorite shows, which has great economic value) is to provide space for viewer participation (Jenkins, 2006).

As an attempt to build a committed "brand community" Adult Swim has created and actively appropriated the discussion forums on the Adult Swim website where fans can share opinions and ideas with each other and strengthen their Adult Swim fandom through communal activities. The Adult Swim discussion forums is a space where viewers can actively talk about and ask questions about specific Adult Swim shows,

Adult Swim in general, Adult Swim online games, and other Adult Swim features, or simply to engage in “babbling” (discussions on the tops NOT directly related to Adult Swim such as life, love, philosophy, food, psoriasis, and stuff like that), “incoherent babbling” (incoherent discussions of socks, fire, dirt, artisan cheeses and things made of plastic or the equivalent where postings must lack reason and thoughtfulness), or “rants” (tirades of angry people)—activities which Adult Swim labels as the “Noise” community on its discussion boards. What has really allowed Adult Swim viewers to become full-fledged members of the Adult Swim community is the network’s emphasis on how the viewers’ voices are being heard and how much Adult Swim pays attention to what its fans have to say (Ross, 2008). A feature that exemplifies Adult Swim as a network that cares about its fans’ views is the bumps, which display the supposed intimate relationship between Adult Swim producers and viewers. Bumps, which are interstitials that appear regularly in-between program segments when Adult Swim airs are generally made out of comments that viewers post on the Adult Swim website (in the “bumps” community), comments from those who work at Adult Swim (Williams Street, to be more accurate) in response to fan comments/questions or whatever is in their mind, or bumps that fans have created and submitted through the Adult Swim “bump building” feature. It is this “tele-participation” enabled by the interactive features of the Adult Swim website (such as the bump building and discussion forums) that allows viewers, even the unhappy ones, to maintain connection between with the Adult Swim brand (Ross, 2008).

The characteristics of the convergence between the old media (television where viewing occurs) and the new media (television where doing happens), collective intelligence (where viewers share information and ideas with others based on their



common interest and passion), and participatory culture (where viewers not only consume media but also engage in producing it) that are used in the operation of Adult Swim are what Jenkins (2007) explains as core elements of the convergence culture. Convergence culture, which is a technological, cultural, and industrial phenomenon<sup>9</sup> has not only changed the way we consume media but also how the media is produced (Jenkins, 2007). To have a better understanding of Adult Swim as a popular cultural phenomenon then, it is important that in addition to examining the individual shows that consist the Adult Swim program we also scrutinize the industrial, cultural, and socio-economic contexts in which the Adult Swim texts emerged and became popular.

### **Emergence of New Adults and the Discourse of Adulthood in Crisis**

The birth of Adult Swim came at a particular moment in American culture when general understanding of what it means to be an “adult” was being questioned and challenged by cultural critics from both sides of the political spectrum.<sup>10</sup> America entered the new millennium with the dot-com bubble burst and was heading towards recession after nearly a decade of economic growth and prosperity—although the unequal distribution of wealth made it hard for many to actually feel that prosperity (Martin, 2003). Those who were searching for jobs after graduating college or high school could not find any (and the fact that 9/11 happened a year after the dot-com bubble burst exacerbated the employment situation in the U.S.) compelling many young adults to

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<sup>9</sup> Jenkins (2006) cautions that we should not understand convergence culture as a mere technological achievement, a trap that many media scholars fall into.

<sup>10</sup> The social censure against adults’ attraction to “childish” culture and youthful lifestyle is stronger among the conservatives than the liberals as “radical feminism, the New Left, and the sexual revolution” are mostly blamed for the traditional adulthood being under attack (Noxon, 2006). Liberals who critique the juvenile culture (and “immature” adults) tend to do so within the framework of critical analyses of consumer culture.

become “boomerang kids” by moving back home to live with their parents. The 2003 U.S. Census American Housing Survey reported that nearly 16 million families in the U.S. had at least one child over the age of 18 living at home, which is a 14 percent increase from the 1985 data (Noxon, 2006). Despite the higher price of conventional adulthood due to the volatile job market, astronomical debt accrued through increased tuition, and the unstable housing market many young adults have been blamed for failing to become proper “adults” because of their individual traits: self-indulgence, hedonistic lifestyle, social apathy, and political indifference. Worse, based on the long-held (conservative traditionalist) worldview of “every-man-for-himself” that understands adulthood to be achieved through financial independence (Noxon, 2006, p. 174), cultural anxieties over “adulthood in crisis” or “the death of the grown-up” rampantly circulated through the media and in wider public discourse. The rhetoric of “adulthood in crisis” has generally led to negative perception about changes in adult life, picturing young adults merely as indulgent, futureless, and starved for instant gratification without many discussions about these changes within the bigger economic and cultural context (Crawford, 2006).<sup>11</sup> Categorized as “adultescents,” “Peter Panners,” “rejuvenators,” “boomerangers,” and “kidults”—terms that are all used pejoratively to connote “slacking,” “immaturity” and “irresponsibility”—these young adults have been conceived to be dominated by infantile ethos that shapes adults into human beings who are obsessively self-absorbed, individualistic, and lacking social concerns for civic participation.

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<sup>11</sup> In fact, Noxon (2006) points out that juveniles—a term which Noxon uses to describe people who “cultivate tastes and mind-sets traditionally associated with those younger than themselves” (p. 4)—engage in kiddie culture for childlike comforts it brings, partly in response to the time of uncertainty, risk, and anxiety that was brought by events such as the terrorist attacks of 2001, the stock market crash, and war overseas.

The fact that two mainstream magazines, *Time* and *New York Magazine*, published a cover story on the cultural phenomenon of “kidults” (adults who act and live like teens) in 2005 and 2006 respectively indicates how the current state of adulthood continues to be a major social concern.<sup>12</sup> After the publication of *Time*’s cover story titled “Twixter Generation: Young Adults Who Won’t Grow Up” a whirlwind of debates on the topic followed with many conservative critics using “reckless pleasure” and “overindulgence”—“a conservative rallying cry” as Noxon (2006, p. 159) puts it—as culprits for the twixter—which stands for young adults in “betwixt and between” (Grossman, 2005)—phenomenon.

Even before *Time*’s and *New York Magazine*’s cover stories on the twixter or the “grup” (a contraction of “grown-up”) phenomenon the new adulthood was discussed by various cultural critics and commentators.<sup>13</sup> Frank Pittman in his self-help book, *Grow Up!: How Taking Responsibility Can Make You a Happy Adult*, (1998) explained how today’s irresponsible adults who confuse happiness with self-indulgence can be seen as the main cause of the collapse of Western civilization. Robert Samuleson (2003) claimed that as we live in the age of “agelessness” where people are increasingly refusing to act their age today’s adults are getting advanced as kids and adolescence has become a perpetuity (meanwhile, today’s kids are growing up faster and acting like adults).

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<sup>12</sup> Contemporary adulthood is an ongoing hot topic of public and media discourse. In 2010 *The New York Times Magazine* published an in-depth article, “What is it about 20-Somethings?” to discuss the arrested development of contemporary young adults (Henig, 2010). Meanwhile, Pew Research published its report on the Boomerang Generation and the increasing trend of young adults living with their parents in 2012 (Parker, 2012).

<sup>13</sup> The point that I try to make here is not that tensions between the realities and assumptions of adulthood have never existed before but that the sense of ambivalence towards “adulthood” has become more visible with technological and socioeconomic shifts in contemporary society.

Similarly, Joseph Epstein (2004) argued that if youth was once viewed as a transitory state that was necessary for one to pass through childhood to adulthood it has now become “an aspiration, a vaunted condition in which, if one can only arrange it, to settle in perpetuity” (n.p.). Epstein (2004) lamented that actual grown-ups are becoming more anomalous today<sup>14</sup> and blames popular culture, television shows such as *Seinfeld* and *Friends*, and contemporary entertainment dominated by animations and comic books for this perpetuation of adolescence.

Meanwhile, Benjamin Barber (2007) blamed today’s infantilization of culture on hypercommercialism and understands it as a result of the demands of consumer capitalism in a global market economy. According to Barber (2007), consumer capitalism has encouraged adults to hold onto, if not follow, the tastes and habits of children so more consumer goods and services can be sold globally. Danesi (2003), on a similar note, argued how today’s culture is becoming juvenilized with teen tastes becoming the representative taste because of the demands of the economic system. In the “juvenilized” culture images of youth is naturally accepted as the norm because of the ceaseless bombardment of those images to individuals and society. As teenage lifestyle routines are redirected to the social mainstream, cultural products that are created based on teen tastes form an illusion that they will provide a ‘fountain of youth’ for adults (Danesi, 2003). All adults need to do in order to stay young and hip is to drink from that fountain of youth by constantly purchasing merchandising goods based on teen tastes. Furthermore, “juvenilized” culture, which guarantees obsolescence and a quick turnover in tastes

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<sup>14</sup> Ironically, Epstein describes Alan Greenspan, the man who played a complicit role in bringing the global financial crisis with his delusional faith in the American financial system, as one of the symbols of a mature adult.

creates an incessant craving for new consumer products and entertainment (Danesi, 2003). Thus, new objects of consumption are produced not in order to fulfill the needs and wants of people but to “simulate” desires for individuals. Barthes (1983) calls this symptomatology of a perpetual craving for novelty where “newness” itself has a ‘purchase value’ or becomes the reason to buy, *neomania*. According to the arguments of both Danesi and Barber, infantilization/juvenilization of culture has prohibited today’s adults from maturing into healthy, responsible citizens and relegated them into lifelong consumers with “imaginary needs.” In other words, “the fate of capitalism and the fate of citizens no longer converge” (Barber, 2007, p. 19).

One of the main arguments that cultural critics make when discussing the infantilization of today’s adults and adult behavior is how youth-oriented (and kid-targeted) popular culture and entertainment foster infantilism among adults who consume and enjoy those type of entertainment. Cultural observers who use this framework to censure infantilization of adult culture regard adults who indulge in “childish” popular culture or playful activities to be “nothing less than poster children for a culture in crisis” (Noxon, 2006, p. 90). In regard to the popularity of the *Harry Potter* series, which was written mainly for teens and children but was widely read among adults, Philip Hensher (2000) voiced concern about the infantilization of adult culture as more adult readers have come to accept the *Harry Potter* series as a literary classic. Diane West (2007), further pointed out how today’s adults are enjoying too much kid-oriented entertainment and argues that the “death” of adulthood is marked by such trends: more adults between the ages of 18 and 49 are watching Cartoon Network than CNN, one-third of the 56 million Americans watching Nickelodeon’s *SpongeBob SquarePants* each month in 2002

were adults between the ages of 18 and 49, and the average age of the video gamer increased from 18 in 1990 to 30 today.

As more adults consume and enjoy media entertainment and express greater interest in the so-called kid-oriented culture more social concerns over the infantilization of culture and crisis of adulthood and democratic citizenship get raised as well. This practice of adults engaging in youth oriented cultural practices and consuming entertainment that seem age and socially inappropriate is called reading down (Kearney, 2007). Reading down, which is often understood to indicate immaturity and lack of sophistication and intelligence, has a negative social connotation, especially when it happens on a wide social scale because of the socially constructed common assumption that individual's taste matures with age and therefore adults find pleasure in well-crafted, mature, and intellectually rigorous cultural texts (Kearney, 2007). Although many adults consume "youthful" entertainment their excessive engagement with such pleasure is deemed to be not only socially problematic, but perverse, and in need of correction as it challenges the boundary between adult/adult culture and children/children culture (Kearney, 2007). Considering media and entertainment play a dominant role in providing us materials for identity and socialization and people do take up their attitudes, style, and behavior after images mediated through the media (Kellner, 1995), it is not surprising that various critics have raised concerns about whether today's youth (or young) oriented media and entertainment will risk infantilizing contemporary adulthood. The argument by the social critics is that when adults consume infantilized cultural products that only provide pure escapism and have little meaning in everyday life (although they fail to explain what products provide little meaning in everyday life and who gets to make that

decision) perpetual childishness is inserted in adulthood. Through the constant feed of infantilized cultural products adults do not live a second childhood but remain as perpetual children who have the tastes of the young, which is antithetical to adult citizenship which is based on maturity, responsibility, and wisdom (Barber, 2007; Danesi, 2003; West, 2007).

### **Adulthood in Crisis or Manhood in Crisis?**

One important point about the cultural panic surrounding today's infantile adulthood is that many of the criticisms of the infantile adulthood are connected to criticisms of infantile manhood, a result of a new social order which has supposedly changed the social status of men. Although most of the cultural critics who voiced their concerns on the arrested development of today's adults target both male and female adults in their critiques this "failure in growing up" discourse applies greater to male adults than female adults. For instance, the ones that decorate the cover for both *Time's* and *New York Magazine's* cover stories on the failure of adults growing up are male adults (in the *New York Magazine's* case nine men who are posed similarly wearing hoodies and jeans decorate the cover) even though their cover stories are about both male and female adults (although to a lesser degree with the latter). Even Christopher Noxon (2006) who argues rejuvenile to be a gender-neutral phenomenon notes "there appears to be more male than female rejuveniles" (p. 5). In addition, the easy translation of the discourse on the crisis of adulthood into crisis of manhood is exemplified by the publications of works that focus on today's immature male adulthood (and why there is a crisis of adulthood) such as Michael Kimmel's (2008) *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men*, Gary Cross's (2008) *Men to Boys: The Making of Modern*

*Immaturity*, and Kay S. Hymowitz's (2011) *Manning Up: How the Rise of Women Has Turned Men into Boys*.

The reason female adults are largely left out in the discussion of contemporary juvenile adulthood may be attributed to the way American culture has historically constructed the meaning of adulthood. As Lee (2001) points out, adulthood has always been discussed in terms of a person's financial independence. If a person is capable to be a breadwinner of the family then that person is considered to be "responsible" and thus, an adult. Because women have generally been left out of the public sphere and therefore hardly been thought of as breadwinners—although there is a racist and classist bias in this notion as the idea that women stayed in the domestic sphere largely applied to white middle-class women—or the idea that women can join the workforce and earn money hasn't solidified until the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century (even then, if women were the main breadwinner of the family they were portrayed as less feminine and as the "male" figure of the family), women were easily excluded from being discussed as adults even if she was a mother or a wife (Lee, 2001). Thus, regardless of their position, age, or marital status, women have been perceived in the same way as children who also do not earn money or do not have financial independence. This explains why "dependent," "immature" or "infantile" female adults have been considered to be less of a threat (or even non-threatening) to society than their male counterparts who possess similar characteristics. In fact, as the subtitle of Kay Hymowitz's book demonstrates women's increased entry and success in the workplace have been widely blamed as the very reason why today's men fail to grow up. Furthermore, conservative cultural critics such as Hymowitz and George Will place women's entrance into the labor market and the



increased social and financial status that comes with it (although women's wage and position in the workplace still lags behind men's in general) as one of the main culprits of "adulthood in crisis,"—which actually is a guise for "manhood in crisis"—creating good excuses to attack the achievements of the feminist movements and enforce traditional and conservative values upon women. In this sense, the rhetoric of "crisis in adulthood" can be interpreted "as a hegemonic function of patriarchal power" (Jackson, Stevenson, & Brooks, 2001, p. 45).

Associating the failure of "growing up" with "manning up" has, to a certain degree, succeeded in placing male adults as the victim of the new social order in the public mind<sup>15</sup> while covering up how "infantile manhood" can be "male dominance in disguise." Kimmel (2008) points out the infantile/immature male can be understood as a social position of privilege<sup>16</sup> and asks why a man would ever want to grow up when he can enjoy life by getting away from various adult social responsibilities, especially when adulthood is associated with boredom. Kimmel's question, then, implies the male privilege of prolonging childhood. Meanwhile, Cross (2008) argues the perpetuation of adolescent boyhood privileges popular culture that appeal to boy-men. Because the boy-men culture comes across as "irreverent," "alternative," and "fun," the profit-seeking culture industries understand boy-men culture to be cool and thus attempt to produce products that cater to the boy-men desires. After all, with "coolness" being "the central ideology of consumer capitalism" (Heath & Potter, 2004, p. 188) that drives the modern

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<sup>15</sup> Hymowitz (2011) claims that women who are looking for a mature male "adult" as a life partner are also victims of this new social order in which men cannot grow up because of women's success.

<sup>16</sup> While Kimmel (2008) argues "infantile manhood" to be a white middle class male privilege Cross (2008) claims this phenomenon to extend across class and race.

economy it is not strange for the culture industries to seek out the next “cool” thing. It appears that the boy-men culture is the next “cool” thing for now as today’s popular culture, which both shape and reflect our social values, largely focuses on and embraces the puerility and immaturity of many adult men (Cross, 2008).

Although “adult” in Adult Swim appears to be a gender-neutral term, Adult Swim’s programming and marketing strategies signify how the term “adult” is used with the exclusion of the female adult (although this does not hinder many female viewers to be fans of or enjoy watching Adult Swim). The primary target audience of Adult Swim is after all young men between ages 18-34 (and the network tends to boast its high ratings to the advertisers by highlighting its large acceptance and appeal to men between the age of 18-49)—a category that is considered to be a premium demographic. To target more young males to watch its programs Adult Swim has recruited college representatives, who are mostly, if not all, male, in 30 plus universities across the nation whose role is to promote Adult Swim by throwing Adult Swim themed parties and giving away freebies (such as key chains or posters with Adult Swim characters), generate buzz for Adult Swim’s new programs, and recruit more viewers to the Adult Swim brand (Nobles, 2004). Adult Swim’s lack of attention to female viewers (by simply regarding them as secondary audience) hints how Adult Swim defines the meaning of “adult” in its title and constructs its brand identity as an “adult” entertainment brand.

### **Goals of This Study**

To have a better understanding of what it means to be an adult today it is important that we resist easily buying into the condemning arguments of the infantilization of contemporary adulthood, especially in regard to entertainment and

media consumption. This also means we should move away from the problematic assumption that all media texts and forms are consumed only by consumers of the particular age that they were created for (Kearny, 2007) or that the boundary between adult and kid culture is and has always been natural rather than socially and culturally constructed. As Crawford (2006) succinctly points out we need to refrain from stereotyping today's adults as "adultesents" or "kidults" based on their entertainment preferences and lifestyle as it denigrates "the authority and individuality" of particular adults which has a real "material impact on how we understand ourselves and others" (p. 13). We need to acknowledge that although life-stage status is generally associated with chronological, biological age, such modes of identity are not only social constructions but lack essential, fixed meanings, which make various identity categories ("adulthood", "adolescence," "childhood," and so on) unstable and contingent on different social, political, and economic needs (Kearny, 2007). After all, the standards of traditional adulthood that were established to encourage "adult" virtues such as "regularity, stability, and steadfastness" (Noxon, 2006) might have been worthy to pursue in the industrial era but they no longer are general characteristics required in the post-industrial era which encourages "flexibility, individuality, and informality."

When a certain culture sells well and becomes popular it means that it is resonating "with the popular will" (Duncombe, 2007, p. 40). Entertainment culture that is popular (whether it is a cartoon network, a video game, or the *Harry Potter* series) is an expression of some "popular will" (Duncombe, 2007) that can be harnessed for progressive transformations. To understand the meaning of today's adulthood, adult tastes, and adult values as best as we can we must also examine the social, cultural and

economic conditions in which the new adulthood emerged, an important element that is missing in the mainstream media's criticism of today's adults and their increasing engagement with what is considered to be "non-adult" culture. Instead of dismissing the popularity of Adult Swim as a symptom (as well as) a cause of the infantilization of today's adulthood we need to interrogate the meaning of its popularity among adults (particularly young male adults) in the contemporary context and what that popularity says about our culture. In other words, we should examine Adult Swim as a symptomatic text that tells us about the cultural moments or "symptoms" of the larger culture within which Adult Swim emerged (Dubrofsky, 2011; Walters, 1995).

The goal of this study is not to make broad, general assertions about what Adult Swim is but to understand Adult Swim as a cultural product of a particular historical moment in which its production and (popular) reception is a result of a number of interrelated tendencies and changes in both television industry and the U.S. culture. This approach to studying Adult Swim can help us understand how "the media are imbricated within their contexts of production and reception and how media work to constitute our vision of the world" (Mittell, 2004, p. 23). The goal of this study then is to explore the interrelated industrial, technological, and cultural forces that enabled the creation and popular reception of Adult Swim, which continuously challenges the conventional notion of proper adult culture (as well as "adulthood") and disrupts the boundary between adolescent and adult sensibility (through humor, style, forms, narratives, etc.). Also, by examining how Adult Swim envisions and builds relationships with its adult viewers this study attempts to raise questions about the conventional definition and understanding of adulthood/adult tastes and redefine it in a way that better fits or reflects the conditions of

contemporary U.S. society. Some of the broad questions that will be explored here to achieve the overall goals are: How does Adult Swim construct and address or interpellate its adult viewers and how does its conception of its viewers relate or contradict to the specific cultural assumptions of adulthood/adult culture? How do Adult Swim viewers relate to the Adult Swim brand and how do their expectations for Adult Swim and Adult Swim's "adult" sensibility shape or challenge their own understanding and practices of "adulthood?" How is Adult Swim's understanding of adulthood articulated in its programming and branding strategies? What is Adult Swim's brand image and how has it played a role in the way the network is received within the industry and by its audience? How do these articulations engage the social, economic, and cultural conditions in which Adult Swim emerged?

Television cartoons have traditionally been a "marginal genre" because of their confinement to Saturday mornings or programs that specifically target the kid viewers (Mittell, 2004, p. 27). This idea that cartoons are only for children gradually became challenged with the appearance of cartoons in prime time and late night schedules. The rescheduling of cartoons to prime time or late night has political implications as it subverts the conventional notion that cartoons are a children's genre and makes room for the genre to be redefined into a legitimate form of entertainment for adults (Mittell, 2004). Then, what factors contributed to cartoons' appearance on prime time and late night programming? What was the industrial reasoning behind the decision to feature cartoons at unconventional hours?

This dissertation begins by examining the industrial conditions that enabled cartoons to be included as part of prime time and late night programming. In chapter 2, I

place Adult Swim's creation into a broader historical context of the media industry by providing a historical trajectory of the U.S. television industry that shifted significantly with the changes in the telecommunication policies and the national and global economies. The passing of the Telecommunications Act that favor deregulation and privatization in 1996 brought various massive mergers between media and entertainment companies including the Time Warner and Turner Broadcasting. With the vertical integration of media conglomeration came the rise of cable television and niche programming that targets and caters to a specific niche audience who becomes a distinctive marker in the creation of a unique brand identity. It is within this media environment that Adult Swim was born and developed into a television and entertainment brand. In chapter 3, I investigate the privileging of the (young) male audience by the advertisers and the television industry and the dominance of male-oriented programming. This chapter also discusses the importance of establishing a "different" brand for television networks by creating a unique, identifiable aesthetics and identity through unconventional and edgy programming that relies on postmodern strategies of irony, pastiche, parody, and satire that have transgressive characteristics and intertextual mechanisms that require viewers to actively participate in the creation of meaning. In addition, this chapter outlines how the development of digital technology has enabled television programs to extend beyond the tube, enriching fans' textual experiences and solidifying their brand identity and how the convergence of television and the interactive digital media has encouraged fans to build a stronger brand loyalty and develop an affective relationship with the television brand. Chapter 4 traces the history of the cartoon genre in the U.S. and the industrial practices and conditions that enabled the genre's

transformations (and its cultural meanings) within the U.S. context. In addition, this chapter explains how Adult Swim has been able to redefine cartoons into an adult genre by driving away the children audience through various scheduling and industrial practices. Furthermore, I explore how and why Adult Swim used cartoons to build its identity as an “adult-oriented” entertainment brand in this chapter.

In chapter 5 I explain the importance of the “contextual” study of Adult Swim and provide the justification of using D’Acci’s “circuit of media study” in my study as it provides a framework to study the production, reception, and the text of Adult Swim as well as its (and each sites’) sociohistorical contexts. Chapters 6 and 7 constitute the analysis of this dissertation. In chapter 6 I examine the characteristics of the Adult Swim brand identity, how it constructs its distinctive brand identity, how it defines the meaning of “adult,” and how it constructs its “adult” audience through its programming strategies. Finally, in chapter 7 I explore how Adult Swim uses its interactive digital media to encourage its viewers to participate in building and maintaining the Adult Swim brand and how Adult Swim fans form a special relationship with Adult Swim through this participation. Furthermore, I investigate how Adult Swim fans understand Adult Swim as an “adult” network and how they understand themselves as (adult) Adult Swim fans.

## CHAPTER 2. THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE MEDIA INDUSTRY AND ADULT SWIM

Just like any television form that is industrially and culturally produced the birth of Adult Swim is a result of a series of intertwined factors. First, various industrial conditions that shaped television, cable, and Internet industries since the 1980s onwards have supplied a framework of ideas that informed the development of Adult Swim about what television programming for adults viewers should be like. By the time Adult Swim launched in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the U.S. television industry had completely moved away from the network era in which only three television networks dominate and settled into the multi-channel era where the expanded offerings of cable have paved way for niche television programming to thrive. In fact, the history of Adult Swim reflects the moment of a U.S. television industry in transition from the multi-channel era—from the mid 1980s to the mid 2000s—to the post-network era that was ushered in with various technological developments and generational shifts in viewers (Lotz, 2007). Because television and its form is a human construct and responds to the social and cultural conditions within which human choices and decisions are made<sup>1</sup>, we need to pay close attention to the particular set of cultural conditions that provided the context for the birth and popular acceptance of Adult Swim (Fiske & Hartley, 2005). Thus, as Rabinovitz (1989) argues, television programming must be studied as a “dynamic cultural institution whose industrial-economic organization and textual discourses are tied to and bound by social relations of the historical moment being investigated” (p. 100).

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Streeter (1996) argues that television is a human construct, a product of collective human actions based on people’s desires, ideas, hope, and conviction.



Secondly, understanding how a late-night program with a lineup of silly, weird cartoons that specifically target adults—the coveted 18-34 male demographic—was born and has become popular requires an explanation both within the industrial context and within other sociocultural contexts that call for an examination of popular cultural trends and discourses. In addition, rather than understanding the development of Adult Swim as a “discrete” phenomenon, this examination needs to be done within the historical trajectory of the U.S. television programming. After all, Adult Swim would not have seen the light of day if television animations that are created for the mature audience, such as Fox’s *The Simpsons*, MTV’s *Beavis and Butt-Head*, and Comedy Central’s *South Park* that came before the creation of Adult Swim had not been successful. The success of the flurry of adult oriented television animations of the 1990s demonstrates the transgenerational appeal of the cartoon genre, challenging the long held assumption of cartoons to be just for children’s entertainment. Per Rabinovitz’s (1989) observation that animation’s future in the U.S. is “likely to be tied to its cultural position within TV” (p. 111), the revival and popularity of prime time animations reflects a shift in the cultural position of the cartoon genre today.

The shifting perception about television animations can also be understood as a reflection of the continuing cultural trend of indistinct boundaries between adulthood and childhood. When Adult Swim first entered the television scene in 2001, the discourse of “adulthood in crisis”—a discourse with a long history in the U.S. in many different guises—was gathering steam, leading to numerous publications by cultural critics both on the left and the right discussing the issue. In the 1990s the discourse on “adulthood in crisis” was focused on the “disaffected Generation X” who became the “first in American history to

be worse off than their parents, doomed to a series of McJobs and free only in virtual reality” (Cloud, 1998, p. xii). The discourse of “adulthood in crisis” continued to apply to its successor, Generation Y (also known as the Generation Millennium), in the new century but with a twist. Instead of focusing on the biting realities of the young adults, the stories focused on the triumph of youth culture and how today’s young adults actively refuse to mature and grow up. Whether the crisis of adulthood was due to structural problems facilitated by the entrenched neoliberal policies that made it difficult for young adults to find permanent jobs, earn money, pay off debt, buy houses—the very activities that have generally been associated with being an adult—or due to the heightened selfishness, individuality, and irresponsibility of adults who refuse to mature and grow up as a result, the common conundrum surrounding adulthood has been what it means to be an adult in contemporary society when old model of adulthood no longer could apply (Sternbergh, 2006).

So the questions of how Adult Swim emerged, how it became a popular brand, and what its popular reception among adults today say about the current moment we live in need to be examined within the interconnected industrial and sociocultural contexts. To get a better grasp of what Adult Swim tells us about contemporary culture and society we need to engage in a “diagnostic critique” which allows for understanding “the defining characteristics, novelties, and conflicts of the contemporary era” (Kellner, 2003, p. 27). This approach helps us to avoid presupposing one particular factor as the determining characteristic of Adult Swim while enriching our understanding of this “more-than-television” brand and the culture within which it is being produced, circulated, and consumed. With an understanding that various forces work together in the

development and the popular reception of a television program, this chapter will begin with a broad historical picture of the U.S. media industry in which Adult Swim emerged as a television network and became a successful (adult) brand.

### **The 1996 Telecommunications Act and Media Conglomeration**

In 1996, the U.S. Congress, which has passed very little legislation in regard to broadcasting policy, passed the Telecommunications Act to maintain a “regulated free-market competition in the converging media industries” (Mullen, 2008, p. 185). This act was the first major piece of telecommunications legislation since the Communications Act of 1934 (Hesmondhalgh, 2007). In the 1980s during the Reagan administration, Mark Fowler, the chairman of FCC (who is also famous for his “television as a toaster with pictures” comment), spearheaded the deregulatory movement in the U.S. telecommunications policy. This move, enabled by the passing of the Telecommunications Act, changed the U.S. regulatory environment in a way that made it more intolerable for the government to control broadcast television and other telecommunications than it did for the previous fifty plus years (Banet-Weiser, 2007). The passing of the Telecommunications Act only intensified the deregulation movement, which emphasized the rules of the market and encouraged competition. Because of this market-based ideology of the Telecommunications Act, McMurria (2007) argues that the neo-liberal consensus was further solidified after the passage of the Act. The deregulatory Act brought a massive wave of takeovers as various media companies began to pursue purchasing “conglomerated studios and networks to create new kinds of corporate entities” (Lotz, 2007, p. 87).

Media conglomeration, which refers to the ownership of different media channels by the same corporation, coincided with media companies' strategic move of using product differentiation as a way to capture profitable niche audiences and a shifting technological environment that brought great development of digital cable and satellite television leading to diverse choices for consumers who are able to pay for it (Hesmondhalgh, 2006). The advocates of market liberalization that brought about media conglomeration argued for deregulation on the basis of increased rationality and diversification of ideas and products. However, contrary to these advocates' arguments, conglomeration allowed media companies to consolidate their holdings and incorporate what would normally be segregated market activities as a way to "re-create economies of scale" (Caldwell, 2008, p. 272), leading to reduced competition in the field, which limits the diversity of thoughts, ideas, and products.

As Caldwell (2004) points out, the vertical integration of conglomeration causes media companies to include "the diverse pantheon of tastes and perspectives *within* components or 'tiers' of the very same conglomerate" rather than to disperse "taste niches and community viewpoints across competing channels" (p. 68). What this leads to is a homogenization of the media brand that lacks diversity of thought. In other words, the diversity of media outlets that the media conglomerates have produced with their resources "does not necessarily indicate an increasing diversity in the viewpoints or content that those outlets carry" (Press & Williams, 2010, p. 200). Caldwell (2008) explains that when media conglomeration integrates separate entities including production companies and studios, broadcast networks, station groups, cable systems, and so on into a single brand "both corporate and employee identities are constructed,

managed, and solidified in management practice” to create an internal branding that is consistent with the external branding (p. 273). This creates an insular workplace where diverse thoughts and personnel become a rarity since they become threats to maintaining a consistent brand image (Caldwell, 2008).

Through mergers and partnerships media conglomerates focus mainly on controlling the channels of content distribution rather than improving the creative process in order to maximize profitability (Curtin, 1996). Constructing and seeking out niche audiences throughout the many distribution circuits of the large entertainment conglomerates are important activities as niche products “can be very profitable if marketed through the appropriate channels” (Curtin, 1996, p. 193). The significance of media conglomeration is highlighted through the industrial practices of repurposing original texts and reallocating programming among networks (Lotz, 2007). With the transition to the multi-channel era came the fragmentation of the audience, which made it important for networks to possess multiple revenue streams to remain competitive (Lotz, 2007). The distribution practices of repurposing and reallocation allow networks to save substantial cost in production and generate new revenues as well as to devote greater advertising space in promoting their own programs (Lotz, 2007). So in 2002, the old WB network was reported to have accepted more ads from its parent company, AOL Time Warner, than from any other advertisers (Gray, 2010a).

Caldwell (2004) also points out that the importance of controlling distribution channels made media conglomerates to change another important component of American television: syndication—also called repurposing or content migration. Syndication in the multi-channel/post-network era demonstrates that the initial air-date

which played a significant role during the network era of the 1960s and 1970s is not as important as the syndication rights (Caldwell, 2004). The proliferation of distribution in cable channels and the Internet makes it possible for all television shows to have an “ancillary afterlife” (Caldwell, 2004, p. 47).<sup>2</sup> Caldwell (2004) points out that the possibility of “ancillary afterlife” of content brought four significant changes in the discursive business practices of media corporations: first, more program owners and networks began to decide which shows to create and develop based on the potential of the show’s or series’ “shelf life.” Second, studios and companies began to remaster everything in their archives (which they refer to as “legacy”) for the new ancillary purposes. Third, if the networks were limited in their ownership of syndicated shows because of the FCC’s financial-syndication (fin-syn) rules<sup>3</sup> in the 1970s, the relaxation of the rules transformed the networks’ status into the “gatekeepers of broadcast” that have increasing decision power and control over syndication rights of programs. Fourth, the possibility of content migration and program repurposing became the central benchmark values for networks’ decision-making and business practices (Caldwell, 2004). Similarly, Klein (2000) points out that repurposing, as a form of a brand extension, no longer is an

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<sup>2</sup> The reason media companies distribute television contents through various media channels may be because of consumer demands, television industry’s realization of amortization or promotional opportunities by doing so, or the television industry’s effort to protect television contents from file-sharing by offering “legally sanctioned means of online access to TV” (Newman, 2012, p. 475).

<sup>3</sup> Fin-syn (an acronym of financial interest and syndication) rules were introduced in the early 1970s to distribute the networks’ power and to protect production companies and independent producers from financial risks that came with deficit financing. The goals of the rules were to prohibit networks from directly owning television programs and having a financial interest in the syndicated programming it aired and to limit the number of hours of programming per week that the networks could produce (Lotz, 2007). Fin-syn rules lasted until the mid 1990s and were completely eliminated by 1995 with the market deregulation at its full force.

adjunct to the core product or main attraction but rather forms “the foundation upon which entire corporate structures are being built” (p. 148). The fact that the industry now talks about “content” rather than “programs” and that “repurposing of content” and “migrating content” to various platforms have become the industry gospel demonstrates how repurposing has become central in industrial practices (Caldwell, 2004).<sup>4</sup> As Caldwell (2004) explains, whereas the term, program, seems to implicate a business logic of the network era when programs were produced as periodical series for network broadcasting, the term, content, lifts the burden of setting a predetermined number of production for programs and instead suggests that “programs are quantities to be drawn, quartered, deliverable on cable, shippable internationally, and streamable on the Net” (p. 49).

### **The Time Warner Conglomerate and the Birth of Cartoon Network**

The shifts in telecommunication policies and the national and global economies since the 1980s have brought great changes in business practices and structural reorganization in the media and entertainment industries. As competition among big corporations became fiercer and the rates of productivity began to fall major organizations decided to reorganize their operations by adopting more flexible strategies with the support of state policies that favor deregulation and/or privatization (Curtin, 1996). This decentralized environment invited “tsunami of corporate mergers” (Hilmes, 2003, p. 66), which allowed Time Warner to build itself up as a media empire.

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<sup>4</sup> Will Brooker (2001) calls the distribution of primary text across multiple platforms, especially onto the (premier, dedicated, or official) internet sites, which leads to an invitation for the audience to participate and thus have an immersive, extended experience with the text, an “overflow.”

In the deregulatory environment of the 1980s Time Inc. merged with Warner Communications in 1989. Then after the Act passed in 1996 Time Warner finalized its merger with Turner Broadcasting, which allowed the former to add several popular cable networks, including CNN, TNT, and Cartoon Network, to its lineup (Mullen, 2008). By acquiring a great number of local cable channels through its merger with Turner Broadcasting, Time Warner, one of the largest cable Multi System Operators (MSOs), was able to not only generate advertising revenues from the new programs but also to gain leverage over other cable programmers by threatening to privilege the networks it owns by giving them more advantageous cable channel slots (Auletta, 2004; Mullen, 2008). The merger, worth roughly around \$7.5 billion, enabled Time Warner to become the world's largest communication company (Landler, 1995).

One of the largest attributes to Turner Broadcasting's success as well as to Time Warner's interest in acquiring Turner Broadcasting has been Ted Turner's huge collection of content, "particularly the older movies and sports events, and his personal commitment to making it available" (Mullen, 2008, p. 154). From his library collection of classic movies Turner founded Turner Classic movies (TCM) in 1994. In addition, right before merging with Time-Warner Turner had just purchased Hanna-Barbera Productions and its library—the production company famous for animations such as *The Flintstones* and *The Jetsons*, which also happen to be two earliest prime time animations for adults-for Cartoon Network, which he founded in 1992 (Larson, 2003; Mullen, 2008). Turner executives hoped that the old Hanna-Barbera cartoons would appeal to both children and their "nostalgic baby-boomer parents" who had grown up watching them (Peters, 2004, p. 29). Hanna-Barbera animations greatly contributed to attracting



investments for the production of Cartoon Network's original contents, which mainly targeted children but were also enjoyed by adults because of their witty dialogues, such as *Dexter's Laboratory*, *Johnny Bravo*, and the girl-power themed, *The Powerpuff Girls*; it also became a powerful arsenal for the Adult Swim programming (Larson, 2003; Peters, 2004).

Even with the entire backlog of Hanna-Barbera cartoons, it became imperative for Cartoon Network to produce its own original shows to fill up its schedule. Because the network did not earn enough ad revenues it needed to find a way to create new programs with a cheap budget. The solution came when Mark Lazzo took the old animation cels from the 1960s Hanna-Barbera cartoon, *Space Ghost*, digitally lifted and pasted the characters to a new background, and added witty and satirical original dialogues (Peters, 2004). This is how *Space Ghost Coast to Coast (SGC2C)*, the show that would play a significant role in establishing the sensibility and the brand image of Adult Swim, was created. With its classic cartoons and original shows, Cartoon Network gained great popularity with its record-setting ratings and delivery growth; in August 2002, it reached 80.2 million U.S. homes and 145 countries around the world (Sandler, 2003). Furthermore, Cartoon Network became one of the highest rated ad-supported cable networks, "remaining in the top five for total day ratings seven years running and frequently appearing in the top three for prime time ratings" (Sandler, 2003, p. 97).

It was clear that the Cartoon Network cartoons were different from the conventional Saturday morning fares and have "the same dual appeal for today's kids and their parents that *Rocky and Bullwinkle*" had (Sandler, 2003, p. 98). Cartoon Network had a cartoon block called *Cartoon Cartoon* that targeted children as its primary audience and

*Toonami*, a multiple-hour anime block featuring various Japanese animations such as *Dragon Ball Z* and *Gundam Wing* that played in the after school hours to cater to “tweens” (9-12 year-olds) (Sandler, 2003). With the prospect of broadcasting programs on a 24-hour-a-day schedule, Cartoon Network needed a new type of animated programming that could reach new kinds of audiences—mainly the non-children and non-working adults who were up late at night (Booker, 2006). In 2001, Jim Samples, the general manager at Cartoon Network, approached Lazzo and told him he could do anything he wanted with the most challenging time slot, Sundays between 11p.m. and 2a.m., as long as it did not cost the network a lot of money (Peters, 2004). With the techniques he and his team developed when creating *SGC2C* and the development of the new computer animation software that allowed cheap and fast production (flashimation), Lazzo’s team created original shows such as *Sealab 2021* and *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* (Peters, 2004). The fact that they could produce the cartoons and their promos for a cheap price gave Lazzo’s team a sense of pride and encouraged them to make risky choices to keep the prices down. Lazzo’s “they’ll either watch or not” attitude and disregard for the advertisers allowed the creators involved in the Adult Swim project to experiment with their shows, eventually drawing in the coveted, “I don’t give a fuck” kids demographic to the program (Peters, 2004, p. 30). Adult Swim quickly became the talk of the industry and the program governed by the postmodern ethos of satire and non-sequitur sensibility soon became a popular brand.

### **Audience Economics: The Rise of Cable and Niche Programming**

Philip Napoli (2003) points out an obvious, but often ignored or taken-for-granted, characteristic of the media industry: that it offers “simultaneously two distinct but

interrelated products to two distinct sets of consumers” (p. 2). The first of course is the content (to the audience) and the second is the audience (to the advertisers). Considering that the success of networks and cable providers rely on capturing and selling the audience attention to advertisers it is impossible to ignore the impact of the adjustments in audience measurement, which tend to be regarded as a “secondary and insignificant business” in reconfiguring and transforming the television industry (Lotz, 2007, p. 193). Audience measurement understands audience as an economic product<sup>5</sup> and this economic view of the audience plays a significant role in determining the development of media industries and technologies that affect the availability of media content and forms to the audience (Napoli, 2003).

Jon Gertner’s (2005) piece in *The New York Times Magazine* demonstrates the influence of media measurement (and the changes that occur with it) on media content and availability. The television industry has always relied on Nielsen Media Research for its audience data,<sup>6</sup> which has provided “an economic framework of the U.S. commercial television industry” (Lotz, 2007, p. 193) or “the basic mechanism which rationalizes the television industry (Pekurny, 1982, p. 33). When Nielsen makes a change in its measurement method it creates profound ripple effects on the entire television industry as was evidenced when Nielsen introduced a new electronic television meter in New York in 2004. The measurement technology led the local Fox Television’s ratings for some of

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<sup>5</sup> Instead of understanding the audience as “individual or aggregate consumers and interpreters of media products,” audience as an economic product understands audience as “a product market with unique characteristics and significant points of interaction with media industries” (Napoli, 2003, p. 6).

<sup>6</sup> Audience measurement services (Nielsen for television, Arbitron for radio, etc.) enjoy monopoly in the U.S. because the media industry wants to avoid confusion and heavy costs that come from different audience data. How audience measurement services became a monopoly industry is well documented by Napoli (2003).

its shows to drop (which indicates that its potential revenue can plummet), indicating that the measured audience and the actual audience do not necessarily correspond (Gertner, 2005). Because Nielsen ratings determine the flow of the advertising dollars, Nielsen data not only affect the form and content of the television shows (what gets renewed, what gets created, what gets trashed, etc.), the value of the stars and media personalities, the value of the networks, but also the values of the segments of the media audience. Thus, Gertner (2005) points out, when the audience measurement changes it not only changes America's culture business or cultural consumption but also the entire culture.

Cable networks have turned out to be the greatest beneficiaries of Nielsen's introduction of the new audience measurement technology. Napoli (2003) points out that cable television started to be acknowledged as a "legitimate advertising medium" only when Nielsen introduced the People Meter<sup>7</sup>, which was able to measure the cable audience more accurately and reliably (also, Barnes & Thomson, 1994). Romano (2002) concurs that for a young cable network to gain legitimacy (both as a network and as an advertising option) it is important that it becomes part of the Nielsen ratings. Furthermore, because of Nielsen's introduction of a new technology that is supposedly able to more accurately and reliably measure the increasingly narrow demographic, cable television has not only been able to provide more demographically specific programming or specialized networks (such as CNN or ESPN) but also satisfy the advertisers' demand for

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<sup>7</sup> The ability of People Meter, which has played a significant role in the rise of cable television, to meet the requirements of the new media environment is now being questioned as it has limitations in effectively measuring "out-of-home viewing, viewing via multiple technologies, and viewing of digitally compressed signals" (Napoli, 2003, p. 144; Menneer & Syfret, 1994). Thus, Hulks and Santini (1994) call the People Meter, "an outdated model built around a mid-90s view of the nuclear family gathered around the television set," which does not reflect how television is being used today (p. 276).

highly specific demographic data (Napoli, 2003). The audience measurement techniques and technologies that are able to provide more detailed demographic information, then, encouraged more networks to create programming that could attract and appeal to narrow audience demographics, and thus made an enormous impact on the content decisions.<sup>8</sup>

It has become a common characteristic of the audience marketplace for advertisers to place “different values on different members of the media audience” (Napoli, 2003, p. 96). The value of the audience is mostly determined by the three most basic demographic factors –age, gender, and income—which are presumed to be correlated with the product-purchasing and media-consumption patterns of the audience (Napoli, 2003).<sup>9</sup> Because younger audiences are considered to be more impressionable (more easily influenced by the commercials they see on television) and tend to spend most of their earnings on consumer goods than older demographics who tend to be savers and already have established strong brand loyalties (Turow, 1997; McAllister, 2005),

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<sup>8</sup> My intention is not to claim that the audience measurement techniques used by Nielsen are able to provide an accurate ratings number but to explain how the notion that the new measurement can provide a more detailed demographic information of the viewers shape television programming decisions.

<sup>9</sup> Because the audience measurement system cannot directly link the individual audience members’ media consuming habits with their product purchasing behaviors, demographics function as the proxy that advertisers and consumers use for audience valuation (Napoli, 2003). But as Andrejevic (2007, 2009a) argues this attempt to link audience’s media consumption habits with product-purchasing behaviors is being attempted through the interactive, digital technologies, which constantly monitor consumers. The proliferation of social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, in which the users willingly provide detailed information about themselves, has been greatly useful for marketers whose aim is target marketing (and customized content based on the users’ provided information plays a significant role in this target marketing). To understand how television networks are developing technologies that correlate television viewing habits with consumer behaviors see Andrejevic (2009a).

advertisers place more value on the younger audiences.<sup>10</sup> In addition to the potential of product purchasing, audience value is determined by what Napoli (2003) calls the “scarcity” factor of the demographic. The audience marketplace has a unique characteristic of privileging the demographic that consumes less media (the demographic that tends to be elusive to advertisers) that the more difficult the demographic group is to reach the greater value that segment of the demographic has to the advertisers (Ahrens, 2002). Thus, content developers attempt to create media products that particularly appeal to the elusive demographic, which increases the chances for low-volume media consumers “to find highly satisfying content in those rare instances when they do consume media” (Napoli, 2003, p. 133). Just like the advertisers’ preference for younger demographic over the older demographic based on the presumption that the younger demographic has lower level of media consumption, and thus, are harder to reach, men are often valued more than women<sup>11</sup> as a demographic group to advertisers because of the

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<sup>10</sup> This notion that old demographics are savers and younger demographics are spenders is not without challenges and needs to be revised in the current era where the boomer generation (those who no longer are in the coveted 18-49 demographic) is considered to be the richest and largest generation of the time (Gillon, 2004). Although the perception about the Baby Boomers as “the richest generation” may not necessarily be true with more Boomers reportedly delaying retirement because of the economic downturn, the fact that the Boomers were part of the 1960s youth subculture and that consumer culture actively plays with and produces commodities that fulfill Boomers’ desire to buy back youth (as reflected by the booming “grey marketing”) makes it difficult to simply understand this older demographic to be economically passive. In fact, categorizing the older generation in this way highlights ageism that is at the center of the marketing myth.

<sup>11</sup> There are two sides to this argument, which complicates the idea of advertisers’ preference for male demographic over female demographic, especially in the new television landscape with niche programming that caters to tastes of various demographics. Amanda Lotz’s (2007) study on the rise of female-centric programming and networks during the multi-channel era in the mid 1990s shows a shifting notion on the value of female audiences, which is related to changes in gender role and women’s status. Despite the increased programming and networks specifically geared towards women, male viewers continue to be valued more as the difference in price tags between

presumption that women consume more media than men, despite the fact that women tend to be the main decision maker of household purchasing (Napoli, 2003).<sup>12</sup>

The high value that advertisers place on the young (18-34) male demographic influences the programming decisions of media producers. In order to generate greater revenues, media organizations will try to create content that can appeal to the audience segments that the advertisers most value, which is the 18-34 male demographic (Napoli, 2003). This is the reason why so many cable channels attempting to appeal to the young male demographic emerged with programming that was sports related or contained subversive jokes or sexually risqué contents, as exemplified by MTV's *Jackass*, Comedy Central's *The Man Show*, and the creation of Spike TV, the first television network for men (Reinholz, 2000).

Having a certain preference for their target demographics, advertisers try to make sure that they are capturing their preferred audience's attention. Thus, advertisers choose to make deals with television programs that have "relatively stable and predictable patterns in audience availability" (Napoli, 2003, p. 44). Advertisers are able to reduce their predictive error with programs that have more certain audience size and types

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the two demographics indicates. For instance, Fox's *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy* which attract many male viewers through their subversive humor (the ratings for each show were 7.3 million and 7.8 million in total viewers in 2011) can charge advertisers more than \$250,000 for a 30-second spot, whereas ABC's *Grey's Anatomy*, which garners an average of 12 million viewers got paid around \$220,000 for a 30-second commercial in 2011 (Guthrie & Rose, 2011). This example shows that programs that are designed for young men continue to be the real moneymakers.

<sup>12</sup> Napoli (2003) uses the economic framework to explain the preference of male demographic over female demographic in the media industry. Considering that the preference is based on advertisers' and media content providers' presumption of gendered media consumption (that women watch television more than men and so on) the audience economic model is a very ideological framework. I explain more specifically later in this chapter how gender ideology plays a role in television industry's favoring of male demographic over female demographic.

(which is why advertisers prefer niche audience over mass audience, which is harder to predict)<sup>13</sup> (Napoli, 2003). In fact, advertisers would pay a premium to networks that can predict their audience size more closely to the actual size (Fournier & Martin, 1983; Napoli, 2003). Considering that categories of the program type (genres, characters, storylines, etc.) are significant factors that can be used to predict audience ratings (type and size), television producers try to create programs that reflect the tastes and values of their targeted audience (Napoli, 2003).<sup>14</sup> As television programmers line up their schedules with shows that reflect the viewing habits and tastes of its audience (and shows in the schedule lineup tend to be similar to one another so as to maintain programming consistency and to hold the attention of the preferred audience) a particular programming character or image gets established. Based on how decisions on media contents are made it is not an overstatement to say how the network constructs or envisions its audience determines how the network or programming gets branded.

### **The Adult Swim Brand: Branding Through the Audience**

The way a television channel constructs its audience plays an important role in building and maintaining its brand image. How the network envisions its viewers is deeply intertwined with the network's development of its brand identity, which informs what the viewers expect from the network's programs (Lotz, 2006). This is especially

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<sup>13</sup> It is important to note that among cable subscribers about 50% of all program consumption matched the audience's program type preferences (Napoli, 2003). With more content options being available to audiences with the increase of television channels, audiences will increasingly choose to watch the program type that fits their tastes rather than taking advantage of diverse available options (Napoli, 2003; Sunstein, 2009, Youn, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> Demographically, younger audiences have viewing behaviors that are easier to predict than the older, fickle demographics. This may explain why Fox, which tends to capture the youngest audience, has lowest prediction error whereas CBS, the network that tends to have the oldest audience, has the highest forecasting error (Napoli, 2003).



true in today's media environment where appealing to the mass has less economic and televisual value. The cable channels that have seen the most significant growth since the 1990s were the ones with distinctive brand identities such as Court TV and Lifetime, which target a specific niche audience (Curtin & Shattuc, 2009). To appeal to the "right" type of audience and to stand out from the clutter of competitors, cable networks make programming decisions that can function as a distinctive marker for both the channel and the audiences. Thus, Adult Swim's decisions to line up its programming block with absurd shows (both animated and non-animated) that deploy the postmodern tropes of satire, irony, and parody and to use animations, a genre that is generally considered to be used for children's programming, indicate how the network is branding itself and how it constructs and appeals to its audience.

The development of digital media technologies have significantly changed what we expect about the media audiences and media content (Turow, 1997, 2006; Webster & Phalen, 1997). One fundamental change in the post-network environment is that the notion of the "mass audience" is quickly disappearing as networks and cable channels compete for audience share by marketing to different segments of the population (Press & Williams, 2010). As the context of television shifts from the "era of scarcity" to the "era of plenty" due to the development of digital media technologies (Ellis, 2000), an increased competition for viewers has led the industry to reconceptualize the notion of the audience. What has resulted in the process is the increased value of the niche audience that is divided along the lines of gender, age, race, income and so on.<sup>15</sup> Thus,

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<sup>15</sup> Because Nielsen Media Research does not measure audiences based on their sexuality, this category is not a criterion that is used to divide the audience (Sender, 2007).

the U.S. television audience now should be understood as a collection of niche audiences rather than as a mass audience (Lotz, 2007).

Turow (1997) points out that the industrial changes that brought about audience fragmentation across media channels can be explained in two ways: first, the development of technologies has led the inevitable process of audience polarization and fragmentation as the audience with new control technologies has more flexibility in their choice of time and place to watch their favorite shows, diminishing the notion that viewers watch the same content during a particular given period. With viewers being able to develop their “self-determined programming schedules” television’s role as an “initiator of water-cooler conversation” has been gradually obliterated (Lotz, 2007, p. 5). Second, rather than being the cause, media fragmentation actually is a response to the audience fragmentation that has emerged from various social movements in the 1970s which developed a greater consciousness of differing cultural identities. With the proliferation of television channels being considered as a reflection of diverse tastes and different identities, “diversity in channel choices was optimistically conflated with cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity per se” (Caldwell, 2004, p. 66). However, the niching of American TV should not be simply understood as a reflection of the broadening of different tastes or acceptance of more diverse experience. Rather the fragmentation of the audience is more about “dividing the audience into subgroups based only in part on tastes,” which is “a much more complex system of marketing based on social economic class, education, race, and gender” (Curtin & Shattuc, 2008, p. 142-143).

Meanwhile, Curtin (1996) argues that the fragmentation of the audience and the reorganization of the culture industries that have put greater emphasis on niche marketing

can be explained as a result of the changes in the national and global economies since the 1970s. The characteristics of the network television era (mass audience, mass marketing, mass production, etc.) should be seen more as a “symptomatic expression of a social order built upon a historically specific form of capitalism”—Fordism—than as products of popular consensus (Curtin, 1996, p. 185). In other words, the television industry’s focus on the mass audience (family, the workplace, etc.) during the network era was not because the mass audience is inherently constructed within a national framework but because it was “compatible with the economic, political, institutional, and legal relations that favored national mass markets” (Curtin, 1996, p. 196). In the post-network era, the deregulation and privatization of the neo-Fordist order have brought great technological developments and more intense competition in the culture industries that render the mass audience less viable. Thus, the decisions that niche marketers make to focus on targeting particular groups rather than the mass audience should be seen as complying to the neo-Fordist order of economy in which the system of flexible accumulation (flexible marketing and distribution) places more significance on the fragmented audience (Curtin, 1996).

With the fragmentation of the audience, television has been transformed into a narrowcast medium, which has changed the way programming is designed. Instead of having to create programs that are least objectionable to the entire population (which is important to attract as many “eyeballs” as possible), television networks have increasingly developed programming that can satisfy specific target audience. In the beginning this niche targeting was done at a very general level with networks such as CNN (news junkies), ESPN (sports fans), and MTV (the youth culture) initiating

“signature” or “name brand” cable programming (Lotz, 2007). This trend, however, became only heightened since the 1990s with the birth of specialty channels that are defined by genres (food, home improvement, sports, soap opera, and so on) such as Food Network, and HGTV, with the networks aiming to construct clearer product differentiation (Mullen, 2008). There is more pressure in today’s multichannel television era “to appeal to an attractive, well-defined, consumer market and, consequently, [there is] more attention to demographics” (Ketchum, 2007, p. 161). These concerns play a significant role in network’s programming choices and the way a network constructs its brand identity (Ketchum, 2007). According to Lotz (2006), in the era of proliferating cable channels, networks that have clear brand identification reap greater rewards. In a competitive television environment, networks need to maximize “differences” and “distinctions” if they want to develop “unique identities and “brand” loyalty” (Press and Williams, 2010, p. 18). Thus, creating a clear network brand to attract specific audience has become very important for the network to survive in the new media environment.

A network brand “refers to the identity associated with the network, often related to the type of person likely to “consume” it” (Lotz, 2006, p. 38). But the concept also implies the type of person that the advertisers would like to see their products consumed. Thus, establishing a brand is important for cable networks as they can attract certain audiences to their programming while allowing advertisers to deliver appropriate advertising messages for their goods and services (Lotz, 2006). For this system to work most efficiently, programmers need to attract audiences with “specific characteristics that networks can sell to advertisers” (Lotz, 2006, p. 38). Cable channels that fail to have

distinctive identities and audiences tend to suffer in comparison to those that have clear brand identities and audiences (Curtin & Shattuc, 2008).

The rise of the network brand is a reflection of the major shift in the balance between targeting and mass marketing in the U.S. media as Joseph Turow (1997) points out. Mass marketing, which does not take people's different background or lifestyles into consideration has been supplanted by targeting, which involves the "intentional pursuit of specific segments of society, groups, and even individuals" (Turrow, 1997, p. 4) and aims to reach different groups with customized messages by tying in certain products to their lifestyles. MTV and Nickelodeon are two cable channels that are frequently cited as pioneers of cutting edge networks that nurture brand loyalty by targeting niche audiences based on their lifestyle. Turrow (1997) points out that these channels are distinctive not because their programs are unique but because their programs are specially packaged in a way to "attract the right audience at a price that will draw advertisers" (p. 5). And in order to create a purer and homogenous community and thus make it more efficient for the advertisers, these programs are constructed in a way to exclude those who do not match their desired audience profile (Turow, 1997). This is the reason Press and Williams (2010) argue that although this targeting practice based on "differing cultural identities" along the line of race, ethnicity, age, and so on, might have created greater diversity in programming content and genres, it has also greatly fragmented the audience.

As the commercial logic of the cable market rewards networks with greater niche appeal and clearer brand identity it is not surprising that Adult Swim focuses more on targeting a specific demographic of the young male adult viewers while explicitly excluding children (at least on the surface) and less explicitly women and older adults as

their target audience (Lotz, 2006). The target viewer that programmers have in mind is of course only a construction, as Ien Ang (1991) demonstrates, with audiences existing only as the numbers that the ratings services conjured up, massaged, and deployed rather than as an entity that can be objectively observed (Curtin & Shattuc, 2008). But as Hartley (2002) points out even if the audience is a construction “not all constructions are equal” (p. 60). Advertising agencies see different values in niches so channels such as MTV, which cater to generations X and Y can charge a premium for their advertising whereas channels that cater to Latino and African American demographic would be able to sell their advertisements at a discount (Curtin & Shattuc, 2008). Considering that audience construction (which reflects television programmers’ and executives’ idea of who their viewers should be) plays a significant role in programming decisions and network’s brand identity (Lotz, 2006), understanding how Adult Swim constructs its audience can help us to get a better sense of the characteristics of the Adult Swim brand. This will be explored in depth in the next chapter.

### **CHAPTER 3. CREATING THE ADULT SWIM BRAND: A COOL, UNIQUE PROGRAM THAT CONNECTS WITH THE FANS**

Whether it is the marketing strategies or the characteristics of the programming itself a strong male bias is shown in Adult Swim. Ross (2008) points out that Adult Swim (as well as Adult Swim's official website) reveals "a narrative about the young male audience" (p. 73) that appeals to that demographic. Stacey Shepatin, Senior Vice President of Hill Holiday, a national broadcast buying practice, explained that Adult Swim has "that kind of unique, young-male humor that is very creative," which is the reason the network is very popular among male viewers and why it regularly beats ESPN and Comedy Central (two networks that are particularly popular among male viewers) (Ryan, 2005, n.p.). The network's attempt to capture the attention of the young male adult demographic is not surprising considering how that demographic is the one that the media industry has been trying to lure since the mid-1990s once it noticed that that group of viewers were watching less broadcast television (Ross, 2008). In fact, ever since the beginning of commercial broadcasting in the U.S., the male demographic has always been the primary group that the networks and advertisers targeted. According to Meehan (2002), with advertisers placing a greater demand for the male demographic than the female demographic the networks responded to that demand through their programming and scheduling practices, relegating women as a secondary audience in the process. Women became the primary target audience when "men were presumed unavailable or when a rival network monopolized the male audience" (Meehan, 2002, p. 113). Although the television industry began to actively pursue the working women's market (this market, however, was generally limited to the white middle class women) in the late 1970s and 1980s due to the rise of women's entrance into the labor market and commercial

networks' gradual loss in their share of the prime time audience to cable television, the industry continued to view female viewers as secondary. This is a point that D'Acci (1994) makes as she explains how the scheduling of female oriented shows such as *Cagney and Lacey* against programs that mainly attract the male viewers such as *Monday Night Football* is an indication of television industry's practice of gender-programming and relegation of female viewers as secondary.

Meehan (2002) further explains how the advertisers' biases and focus on male viewers have had an impact on network programming. Because of the national advertisers' willingness to pay more for the male viewers, the networks attempted to create shows that they thought men would prefer to watch. With the networks' assumption that men want to watch shows with male protagonists who are police officers, private detectives, or special agents who lead dangerous and adventurous lives, networks built their primetime programs with shows featuring male-oriented genres. But with advertisers' focus on younger male audiences in the mid-1960s networks began to narrow their focus on the male demographic of 18-34 year old (Meehan, 2002). The privileging of the male viewers between 18-34 only intensified in the 1980s with the rise of cable television as the advertisers, the television industry and the ratings monopolist assumed that men between 18-34 were mainly the ones who subscribe to cable. Furthermore, the fragmentation of the audience generally led to privileging youth, as the advertisers hoped to attract those who are most likely to purchase their products (McAllister, 2005; Napoli, 2003). To the advertisers (and the television networks), then, young men in the 18-34 age bracket are the valuable "quality" viewers (and to marketers, the "sweet spot").



The meaning of “quality” has been defined quite differently between the television critics and the television industry (Santo, 2008). Whereas the former has used the term to describe the high productive values, authorial innovation, and creativity of a limited number of programs the latter has “conflated “quality” programming with “quality” demographics, essentially anointing any program capable of capturing the desired 18-49 year old male demographic as “quality” programming” (Santo, 2008, p. 31). These anomalies have led to shifts in TV programming decisions. Under the assumption that the distinctive “edginess” and creativity of quality programming generally attract the quality audience composed of the sophisticated, upscale, and young demographic, national advertisers and television industry began to embrace the “subcultural forum” of television (Lotz, 2007, p. 181). Advertisers became more supportive of unconventional programming content and willing to explore alternative methods in reaching different audiences to the point of disrupting the hegemonic television programming with the establishment of new norms (Lotz, 2007). The success of the productions of FX’s *The Shield* and HBO’s *The Sopranos* exemplify how cable channels’ narrowcasting with shows that have complex stories, more socially relevant topics and potentially objectionable content can reach a more rarefied “quality audience” (Curtin & Shattuc, 2008). Furthermore, the rise of niche operators like Fox Network and MTV, which tailored their programming to a young, urban audience, demonstrates how edgy and irreverent programming that rejects universal values can succeed by appealing to a narrowly defined (but more valuable) groups of viewers (Curtin, 1996).

Sender (2007) points out that narrowcasting, which places more privilege in targeting small select groups over a general audience, is an ideal strategy of cable TV.

This is because cable networks raise revenues from both the cable distributors that pay for the programming content and the advertisers that buy advertising space from the networks. This dual source of revenue allows cable networks to afford targeting smaller niche audiences than the broadcast networks that still have to respond to the demand of the mass appeal (Sender, 2007). But although cable channels can afford to appeal to just a particular segmentation of the population they still need to find a way to retain large enough audiences to grab the advertisers' attention (Sender, 2007). Lotz (2007) also points out the importance of balancing between the niche and the mass for television programs as the right balance can provide networks an opportunity to pick up the non-targeted, unintended audiences along the way. This practice of targeting two specific audiences—the intended, niche, and the unintended, mass—with the same show is referred to as “dualcasting” (Sender, 2007) while viewers who watch the niche content that was not created specifically for them are called “cultural interlopers” (Lotz, 2007, p. 41)<sup>1</sup>. A good example of dualcasting is Bravo's practice of targeting both gays and women between 18-49 with its hit show, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. The “convergence of generation”<sup>2</sup> strategy used by Nickelodeon's and the WB's television shows (such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Dawson's Creek*) to attract both (the primary) child/teen viewers and (the secondary) adult viewers is another good example of dualcasting (Banet-Weiser, 2007; Kearney, 2007). Dualcasting, a tactic the networks have come to

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<sup>1</sup> Even in the age of niche programming, media professionals continue to think it makes the most economic sense to cast the widest net as possible (as long as this does not sacrifice the program's appeal to young viewers). Thus, they attempt to create entertainment products that operate on multiple levels, or what is frequently referred to as “bi-modal” in the industry (Noxon, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> This is a term that Marsha Kinder (1995) uses to discuss how the media product is being marketed to different generations through a “transgenerational address,” which blurs the identity categories of (infantilized) adults and (precocious) kids.

frequently use, is a way to garner large enough audiences and gain sufficient publicity to make the networks appear successful (Sender, 2007).

Although its audience is comprised primarily of young white males, Adult Swim also uses dualcasting to attract its secondary female viewers.<sup>3</sup> In fact, female viewership of Adult Swim is gradually increasing (although men continue to be the main viewers). In 2004 there was an 88 percent increase in female viewership compared to 24 percent increase in the viewership of total adults of 18-34 (icv2.com, 2004). Mike Lazzo acknowledged how female viewers could be beneficial to Adult Swim overall as he stated, “We would see more a bump in ratings if we could attract more women” (cited in Keveney, 2006). As an attempt to attract more young female viewers the network has tried to include more female-oriented shows such as *Lucy*, *The Daughter of the Devil*, which was in the Adult Swim lineup in 2007 (its pilot aired on October 30, 2005) (Keveney, 2006). Also, as one way to attract the desired audience demographic is to hire the very people from that segment (Lauzen & Dozier 2002) Adult Swim has recently hired more (albeit only a small number) female writers for some of its shows. For instance, for its third season *Superjail*, an animated series known for its psychedelic randomness and violence that takes place in a jail located on a volcano, hired Janine DiTullio as the head writer. DiTullio, who is a comedy writer, voice actress, and stand-up comic was not really a new comer to Adult Swim as she played the voice of Paula Small in *Home Movies* (she replaced Paula Poundstone when Poundstone had to leave the show after being arrested for child abuse) and had written scripts for some of the episodes for *Metalocalypse* with Brendon Small, the show’s creator (who also happens to be the

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<sup>3</sup> As Adult Swim now begins during the prime time hours its secondary viewers or (the strategically) audience may be children and younger teen viewers.

creator of *Home Movies*). In addition, *Robot Chicken*, which is one of the most popular Adult Swim shows, has for the first time hired female writers, Jessica Gao and Rachel Bloom (a female comedian best known for her music video, “Fuck Me, Ray Bradbury,” which was nominated for a Hugo Science Fiction Award in 2010) for Season 6 in 2012. Despite these efforts female presence in Adult Swim continues to be very minimal, particularly in the creative side of the Adult Swim production (writers, creators, producers, etc.), which all contribute to Adult Swim’s continuous skew toward male viewers.<sup>4</sup> Regardless of this circumstance Adult Swim continues to attract more female viewers with the network earning 28% delivery gains among young female demographics of 18-34 and 18-49 in 2011 (Gorman, 2011b), which helps the network to build up its brand as a popular network for *young adults*.

### **Female Viewers of Male-Oriented Television Programs**

Explaining why female viewers enjoy watching Adult Swim shows, which interpellate its core audience as young male<sup>5</sup> is a complicated task. As many feminist media scholars’ works demonstrate, the individual pleasures of media consumption, especially of girls and women always come with great ambivalence and contradiction (Banet-Weiser, 2007; Driscoll, 2002; Hains, 2012; Negra, 2008). Female viewers who

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<sup>4</sup> *Lucy, The Daughter of Devil* did not make it beyond the first season. Its final episode aired on November 11, 2007, approximately three months after the first episode of Season One aired.

<sup>5</sup> Although female viewership of Adult Swim continues to grow the gap between male and female viewers remains significant. The fact that men are the main target demographic of the Adult Swim program is reflected on its ratings note which provides a separate ratings information for the male demographic in addition to the adult demographic (for instance, adults 18-24, men 18-34). Ratings information for the male demographic is generally reported for networks that specifically or mainly target male audience (i.e., Spike TV, TruTV). Furthermore, the fact that Adult Swim actively participates in venues that can be openly hostile to femininity such as comic cons (Scott, 2010, cited in Johnson, 2011) hints who Adult Swim envisions as its core audience.

laugh at jokes with sexist and misogynistic undertones in some of the Adult Swim shows with the male viewers could easily be perceived as being complicit to the hegemonic gender system especially since they have (independently and voluntarily) chosen to consume the male-identified programs (particularly in the era of cable television where networks that cater to women's taste and wants are supposedly on the rise). But to simply denounce these female fans who enjoy the male-oriented Adult Swim as being complicit to the male hegemonic order or to regard them as being "guyified" (or a "bro") by entering (and enjoying) the raunchy "Adult Swim" Guyland full of crude sex jokes (Kimmel, 2008) is problematic.

There may be some female viewers who find the outlandishly misogynistic characters (such as Carl Brutanandilawski of *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*, Captain Murphy of *Sealab 2021*, or Robert Freeman of *The Boondocks* to name just a few) funny and enjoy the sexist (and racist) jokes in the Adult Swim shows. These female fans could be perceived as what Ariel Levy (2005) refers to as "female chauvinist pigs" or what Angela McRobbie (2007a) would call the "phallic girls." The "female chauvinist pigs" or "phallic girls" are those who "emulate male behavior," prefer to hang out with "the boys," and willingly go to places that are hostile to females/femininity (such as strip clubs) to prove to guys that they are anything but uptight, feminist, or victims of the culture of hegemonic masculinity (Levy, 2005; McRobbie, 2007a, p. 733). By understanding gender equality to have been achieved (that feminism is passé and thus rendered useless) these women "get" the irony-ridden sexist jokes and thus not only make the jokes acceptable but also reaffirm and reconsolidate male privilege (McRobbie, 2004). As these female fans actively conform to the norms of consumer culture, which "continues to be

structured by institutionalized politics of gender asymmetry and continuing male dominance” (Banet-Weiser, 2007, p. 109) the effort to challenge male privileges and masculine culture becomes more difficult.

But to understand female fans of Adult Swim simply as “phallic girls” is not only one-dimensional but also erroneous as it ignores the complexity (and contradictions) of female pleasure in the media culture that prioritizes male pleasures. Furthermore, this misunderstanding reinforces gender essentialism that is at the core of both the industry logic that operates in the construction of target audience and the popular discourses on the pleasure and taste of individual media consumption. In her analysis of the girl culture Catherine Driscoll (2002) explains how there are always “unresolvable tensions” between agency and conformity in the female media consumption. She points out that “the opposition between pleasure in consumption figured as conformity and pleasure against the grain of such conformity does not provide a useful model for considering girl culture, where resistance is often just another form of conformity and conformity may be compatible with other resistances” (Driscoll, 2002, p. 269). Driscoll, thus, challenges those who equate female pleasure in the consumption of male-centric cultural products with conformity.

If Driscoll points out the complexity of the female pleasure in (male-identified) media consumption other scholars challenge the operation of gender essentialism in the cultural industries’ construction of target audiences for their products—that men/boys and women/girls are “fundamentally and *essentially* different and thus desire different products and respond to different advertising appeals” (Banet-Weiser, 2007, p. 110). Women can and often find pleasure and even empowerment from male-identified

television programs that use normative gender script which privileges masculinity (Brunsdon, D'Acci, & Spigel, 1997). In his study of the female fans of *Star Trek* Jenkins (1992) demonstrates how a television show that uses a genre (science fiction) that is traditionally gendered as masculine (or have a masculine appeal) could widely appeal to women who alternatively read and appropriate the text to construct new meanings.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, by pointing out the wide female appeal of World Wide Wrestling (WWE)—women take up 30 percent-40 percent of viewership—Sam Ford (2008) points out how gender (and age) often fails to work as a demographic criterion in the industry's construction of the target audience. The recent popularity of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, a show that was created for six-seven year old girls and airs on Hub TV, a pay cable channel, among guys in their teens, twenties, thirties, and forties (who call themselves “bronies,” a hybrid term of bro and ponies) is another indication of how gender (and age) is much more “complicated than the language of “target audience” allows for” (Banet-Weiser, 2007, p. 107).

If gender essentialism that underpins the understanding of individual desire and pleasure in media consumption needs to be problematized so does the gender essentialism that operates in the cultural understanding of genres, particularly cartoons/animations in

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<sup>6</sup> Understanding science fiction as a male-oriented genre may have been one of the most erroneous assumptions made by the media industry. This industrial assumption has led Sci-fi channel (now Syfy) to create its image as a “boy channel” catering to the (male) science fiction geek (Beale, 2001). Bonnie Hammer, the Sci Fi Channel President, acknowledged that it was a mistake for the network to neglect many of the female viewers who are fans of the genre. Since then the network has been revamped by incorporating more original programs to cater to the wide female following which has led the network to have more mainstream appeal (without discouraging its original male hard core followers) (Beale, 2001). This incidence demonstrates how a genre is frequently arbitrarily gendered and how the industry's economic logic is deeply rooted in its conventional and stereotypical gender views.

this case. American cartoons have a long history of emphasizing adult humor by explicitly appropriating the female body and sexuality as exemplified by the Betty Boop character, with her sexualized and fetishized body (big head with small torso but ample hips and thighs). Even when cartoons became associated as children's entertainment as they "exiled" to Saturday mornings (Mittell, 2003) and toy companies began to actively create their own brand based cartoon shows, the genre was generally used to appeal to boys more than girls because of the television industry's conventional assumption that girls mature faster and would watch less cartoons when they reach a certain age unlike boys who will stick around for a much longer time (Seiter & Mayer, 2004).

Another piece of conventional wisdom that has played a significant role in the industry's decision to make cartoons to cater more to boys than girls is that girls will watch what boys watch but not the other way around (Banet-Weiser, 2007; Hains, 2012; Hendershot, 1998; Seiter & Mayer, 2004; Seiter, 1995). The myth of "boys don't watch shows with girl leads" has been the dominant industry logic that has led male leads to dominate television cartoons. This institutionalized sexism that is prevalent in children's television was exposed in Bill Carter's (1991) *New York Times*' front page article with the headline, "Children's TV, Where Boys Are King," which explained how the industry executives privilege boys' viewing interests for the competitive market share (Hains, 2012). Even with the rise of the consumer-oriented "girl power" movement in the 1990s that has provided the cultural and economic conditions for more shows with female leads to be created (such as Nickelodeon's *Clarissa Explains it All* and Cartoon Network's *The Powerpuff Girls*, which have actually dispelled the myth that boys do not watch shows with girl leads (Banet-Weiser, 2007)) Hains (2012) points out that the industry executives



made sure to make these shows inclusive of boys by keeping “boy viewers in mind from the start” (p. 91).

The majority of the female fans of Adult Swim grew up watching cartoons that catered to boy/male viewers’ tastes and interests and thus have learned how to negotiate their identity when watching those shows. Heather Hendershot (1998) points out how this industry logic that encourages girls to be receptive of the boy-centric shows is evocative of Laura Mulvey’s (1988) problematization of the patriarchal society that encourages women (from childhood onwards) to adopt trans-sex identification as a habit to the point of it becoming “*Second Nature*” (emphasis in original, p. 72). Similarly, Kearney (1998) points out how it is imperative for contemporary women to “embody simultaneously both genders” if they want to make it in the patriarchal society full of male-dominated activities (p. 72). Thus, despite the problems of the rigid view of sexual difference in the feminine cartoon shows that the television industry has created for girls (such as *My Little Pony* or *Strawberry Shortcake*) when it began to understand and experiment with girls as a separate market, Ellen Seiter (1995) argues that these shows need to be viewed as valuable as they were created specifically for girls for once. Even the “girly” or “feminine” products can have progressive and positive effects as they do not require girls to “cross over, to take on an ambiguous identification with a group of male characters” (Seiter, 1995, p. 158). Kearney (2010), however, problematizes this “nonallowance for children’s cross-gender identification” (p. 5) as she sees great potential for female empowerment and possibility for various definitions and cultural understanding of femininity (and masculinity) to be generated from girls’ ability to cross over gender identifications.

Determining whether the increasing female viewership of Adult Swim which continuously interpellates its audience as (young) male (although it acknowledges the presence of others who do not fit its target demographic) is a sign of progress/subversion or regression/conformity is not an easy (or even possible) task as female consumption of media products is full of contradictions and ambivalences. Some scholars understand female viewers' reworking of the masculine "authoritative" texts in feminine terms to be resistive, empowering, and liberating as it envisions an egalitarian romantic relationship and challenges conventional understanding of femininity and masculinity (Brown, 1994; Jenkins, 1992). Meanwhile, other scholars argue that the female pleasure in male-oriented texts is not necessarily rooted in the female desire to challenge patriarchy or to problematize the representations of women in the text but rather can reinforce heteronormativity (Scodari, 2003; Scodari & Felder, 2000). When Adult Swim interpellates its core audience as young male and constructs its program to appeal to that demographic how can we explain the increasing popularity of Adult Swim among women? When Adult Swim female fans enjoy the male-identified humor and engage in the juvenile Adult Swim sensibility that is often of the boyish variety, are they conforming to the hegemonic masculine culture or are they subversively reworking the meanings of the Adult Swim program? Rather than understanding female pleasure in male-oriented texts as simply oppositional or complicit it seems important to make "difficult discriminations...as to whether resistance, oppositional reading, or pleasure in a given experience is progressive or reactionary, emancipatory or destructive" (Kellner, 1997, n.p.). With Kellner's suggestion in mind this study will interrogate the complex pleasure in the female viewers' consumption of Adult Swim shows and how Adult

Swim's construction of its target audience as young male adults influence the development of Adult Swim as a brand.

### **Adult Swim's Cool Factor**

The success of Adult Swim encouraged other networks to replicate Adult Swim's success by creating their own version of mature-themed animation program for adults (Peters, 2004). For example, Comedy Central came up with *Kid Notorious*, an animated series based on the life of Robert Evans, a Hollywood producer, in 2003. Spike TV, meanwhile, came up with its own animation block consisted of *Stripperella*, a Pamela Anderson based (and voiced) animation about a secret agent who lives a double life as a stripper and *Gary the Rat*, a show about a rodent lawyer (Peters, 2004). These attempts by Comedy Central and Spike TV miserably failed with none of the shows mentioned above lasting longer than a year.<sup>7</sup> These imitators failed because although their cartoons were adult-oriented they did not have a different, unique, and identifiable personality that is imperative in building a powerful brand like Adult Swim (Peters, 2004).

In the ever-growing clutter of programming and the increasingly competitive multichannel market, branding plays a significant role in cultivating the notion of "difference" from others (Caldwell, 2008). A successful brand has a widely and easily recognizable image, a personality that is easily distinguished from its competitors, an image that is consistent, and a guaranteed quality (Caldwell, 2008). What the failure of the Adult Swim knock-offs demonstrate is not only the importance of constructing an identifiable (and agreeable) brand image to differentiate itself from others but also the firmly established status of Adult Swim as a brand.

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<sup>7</sup> The fact that *Kid Notorious* has been part of the U.K. version of Adult Swim demonstrates Adult Swim's influence on the show.

Various economic and cultural developments within the contemporary media landscape contributed to the cultivation of the distinct Adult Swim brand identity. Today we live in a brand culture where a brand image matters more than an actual product and corporations sell lifestyle or experience rather than a thing (Banet-Weiser, 2007). This is why Klein (2000) argues that the real work for the culture industry today is not manufacturing but marketing. In today's brand culture marketing of brands as a lifestyle or a particular experience has gained significant economic values. To become a successful global media conglomerates such as Time Warner it is imperative to attract "both narrowly specific audiences and advertisers concerned with reaching those same specific audiences" than the broadest audiences (Banet-Weiser, 2007, p. 236). For the audience to make sense of the brand and to become a member of the brand community it is important that the brand channel speaks to the audience with a similar sensibility.

The significance of "coolness" in building up a successful brand (and big corporations' obsession with hunting and maintaining the "cool" brand image) is well documented by people like Malcolm Gladwell (1997), Alyssa Quart (2004), and Douglas Rushkoff (2001).<sup>8</sup> It is well known how the marketers capitalize on the lifestyle culture of "cool" and co-opt subversive and alternative ideologies as strategies to market their messages and products to young people. Because cool is one of the major driving force in the modern economy and the "central ideology of consumer capitalism" (Heath & Potter, 2004, p. 188), the trend of marketing "coolness" has been a major factor in the development of brand culture. Branding is not just about adding value to a product but is

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<sup>8</sup> Rushkoff's documentary, *The Merchants of Cool*, was created as one of the episodes for the PBS *Frontline* series. The documentary focuses on examining how marketers seek and create "cool" to sell products to teenagers in America.

also about creating an identity for the product/service with a particular set of meanings and values only that product/service can associate with (Heath & Potter, 2004). The ultimate goal of branding is to allow consumers to feel and experience the added values of the brands they purchase and because many consumers strive to be cool the cultural ideas and iconography from street style and youth culture—which both exude the sense of rebellious non-conformity—have been co-opted by many brand-producing companies (Klein, 2000). Thus, as Heath and Potter (2005) point out, the values of counterculturalism which have become important elements of “coolness” have been “intensely entrepreneurial” from the very beginning, reflecting “the most authentic spirit of capitalism” (p. 5).

Multimedia corporations are no exceptions when it comes to “capitalizing on the lifestyle culture of “cool” and incorporating what historically have been subversive and anti-establishment ideologies” as their core marketing strategies (Banet-Weiser, 2007, p. 70). Banet-Weiser (2007) explains that in a highly competitive media environment, all niche networks strive to define themselves in a way that is different, or even superior to, their competitors. This branding strategy in constructing a “cool” image through the irreverent and outsider persona also contributed in building up Adult Swim as a popular brand. The fact that the program aired late at night when nobody was really watching added to its cool factor as this programming schedule created a sense of “exclusivity” to those who happened to be watching. This sense of “exclusivity” allowed Adult Swim to develop a cult following among young adults and to position itself in opposition to the mainstream, although it was a product of one of the biggest global media conglomerates, Time Warner. But by marketing itself as a product created “by those on the fringes of the

studio system, occupying marginal creative real estate with minimum supervision” (Peters, 2004, p. 28) Adult Swim has been able to construct and maintain an “alternative subjectivity” despite its membership with a big media conglomerate and high ratings. Thus, in addition to its late night-time schedule, Adult Swim’s low budget production—which created a unique cheap-looking aesthetic, unconventional and innovative form and style, and wittier and smarter dialogues (Peters, 2004)—and minimum interference from the corporate executives (as long as the production budget remained cheap and the network earned revenues there was no reason to interfere) contributed to cultivating a successful Adult Swim brand.

As a way to create a consistent brand image media corporations pay special attention to express a “holistic identity” to their viewers and consumers (Caldwell, 2008, p. 245). The holistic identity of the brand can be expressed, first, by constructing the entire programming within a coherent system of meaning, a method similar to what Raymond Williams (1975) called flow. When all of the sequences of the programming—ads, programs, channel promos, and the televisual style that dominates the programming—are put together as a seamless system, viewers can get a sense of “a single flow of images and feelings” (Williams, 1975, p. 84), which helps to establish the brand identity and personality of the niche channel.<sup>9</sup> In the case of Nickelodeon, both ads and programming on the channel play a significant role in establishing Nickelodeon’s brand identity as the

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<sup>9</sup> Using a concept of “stacking” William Uricchio (2004) argues that Williams’s notion of flow might have been maximized in its most literal sense in the new televisual landscape where various programs are available. As a programming strategy to capture viewers’ attention and encourage continued viewing, programmers are “stacking series of the same or similar genre to minimize disruptions” (Uricchio, 2004, p. 173). Uricchio (2004) continues that stacking has becoming “the channel identity strategy of many cable outlets” including Cartoon Network (p. 173).

ads air in Nickelodeon use the same rhetoric and feel of the channel to create a flow between the programming and the ads (Banet-Weiser, 2007). And in the era of media convergence where television program's brand identity can be extended beyond the tube a coherent brand personality should be on the web as well so the viewers/consumers could enjoy the full experience of the program without feeling interrupted. Gillan (2011) calls this practice of television texts overflowing to websites and other media platforms, a "Must-Click TV," which imbricates storytelling and promotion and plays an important role in extending the brand in the new media environment.

### **Cool Branding Through Paratexts: Moving Beyond the Tube**

Adult Swim's use of its official website demonstrates how a network's brand can extend beyond the tube in the transmedia environment via web contents that align the sensibility of the television program. Jonathan Gray (2010) explains how our understanding of a brand or a textual meaning is determined not only by the original text itself but also from its peripheries. Borrowing from the work of Gerard Genette, a French literary theorist, Gray (2010) calls the add-ons or secondary texts that are both distinct from and part of the original text, "paratexts."<sup>10</sup> Paratexts include advertisements, video games (particularly the alternate reality games), podcasts, reviews in popular and trade press, program website, or ancillary merchandises, and they assist in creating further

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<sup>10</sup> Gray (2006) borrows the term, paratext, from Gerard Genette (1997) who coined the term to refer "to those elements of or surrounding a text whose sole aim is to inflect particular readings of that text" (cited in Gray, 2006, p. 36). Genette divides paratext into two: peritexts and epitexts. Peritexts refer to the paratexts that are "materially appended to the text" (such as the cover art or preface of a book) whereas epitexts refer to the paratexts that are beyond the text (such as trailers, spoilers, posters, and so on) (Gray, 2006). In the transmedia environment flooded with synergy, cross-promotions, and multi-platform marketing, epitexts try to control the original text's meaning and "acclimatize us to texts in certain ways" (Gray, 2006, p. 36).

layers of meaning or framing the discussion of the original text (Gray, 2010a). When paratexts fail to smoothly integrate the characteristics of the original text they can be criticized for being mere marketing tools only to hurt the overall brand image (Gray, 2010a). However, when the paratext neatly represents the characteristics of the original text and adds further textuality to the program it not only firmly establishes the brand image but also enriches it (Gray, 2010a).

Second, by internalizing the characteristics of the brand media corporations can express a holistic identity of the brand. Banet-Weiser (2007) explains that Nickelodeon, which promotes itself as a brand of youth, rebellion, anti-establishment, and fun integrates these characteristics into the very fabric of the company through the design of its offices. Nickelodeon's corporate offices are designed in a way to exude a sense of anti-corporate and anti-hierarchy. Furthermore, with the presence of various toys and games and the use of bright colors in the corporate offices Nickelodeon offices "look more like a kid's clubhouse than a media powerhouse" (Banet-Weiser, 2007, p. 81). Naomi Klein (2000) also describes how Microsoft's corporate offices are designed to mimic college campuses to capture and express the company's youthful energy and investment in innovation, an image that is necessary for technology-related companies. The description of Williams Street, the production studio responsible for the Adult Swim programming also highlights the youthful and anti-establishment atmosphere of the workplace. Heckert (2005) describes Williams Street as "a magical place, really, full of toys and games and walls painted in bright colors and storyboards scribbled with crazy drawings and free snacks and posters of old shows, and new show pitches taped to the walls and foosball tables and writing pads emblazoned with talking milkshakes and angry



Jersey neighbors, a place filled with the loud racket or echoing laughter, a place where strange cartoons are concocted and made and then dispensed late at night inside the shiny wrappings of cable TV, during the *Adult Swim* watching hour” (p. 136). Peters’ (2004) description of Williams Street is very similar to Heckert’s as he calls the production studio a “real-life Wonka World for people who like cartoons instead of candy” (p. 27) since the place looks more like a basement than a corporate office with ping pong and foosball tables taking place in the hallways and life-sized robots placed in the back entrance. Both Heckert’s and Peters’ descriptions of Williams Street, then, portray the Adult Swim workplace as a toy factory that is run by adults whose job is to be creative and come up with ideas that can appeal to its targeted young (cartoon loving) adult demographic. This “youthful” working environment, lifestyle, and attitudes of the workers at Williams Street all play a significant role in the creation of the content, style, and form of the Adult Swim program.

Of course this humane (“youthful,” “non-hierarchical,” “informal) workplace environment (or the humanization of the working process) does not guarantee a “just” workplace where workers get reasonable remuneration for their works and services. This is the point that Andrew Ross (2003) makes as he demonstrates the potential of exploitation in the new media sector that imports bohemian culture in the office (such as having a casual dress code, endorsement of hedonism and party culture in the workplace). Ross (2003) explains that many new media companies actively create a workplace that can easily be transformed into a fun (hangout) place by bringing in foosball tables, jukeboxes, and mini snack bars. This “fun” working environment can de-differentiate work-time and play-time leading workers to engage in compulsory socializing or

“obligatory community in the workplace,” which is not necessarily “humane” (Ross in Canabou, 2001, n.p.). Also, this working environment not only expresses the corporate ethos of fun-loving and anti-establishment which can be packaged into the company’s brand image of cool and hip but also encourages workers to take a playful approach to work which can catalyze youthful and creative ideas that can improve the overall quality and productivity of work (Ross, 2003). This extraction of new ideas, fun and youthful lifestyles, and experiences from the enthusiastic and imaginative minds of the workers (and creating a working environment in which the workers can freely and actively produce great ideas) fits the operation of cognitive capitalism where the workers’ minds transform into “the “machine” of production, generating profits for owners, who have purchased, with a wage, its thinking power” (Dyer-Witthford & de Peuter, 2008, p. 37).

Third, the holistic identity of a brand is also expressed through the media corporations’ hiring practices that correspond to the corporation’s understanding of its brand and audience. A good example is ESPN’s hiring of its employees. ESPN, which brands itself as a fellow sports fan rather than as a sports network applies this brand image when hiring its employees by making all of the job applicants to take an oral litmus test that gauges the applicant’s “love, enthusiasm, and knowledge of sports in general” (Caldwell, 2008, p. 246). Referred to as the “employee-demographic engineering methods” ESPN carefully manages and solidifies its brand by engineering its workforce to reflect the image of its brand and its target audience (Caldwell, 2008).

ESPN is not the only company that uses the “employee-demographic engineering method” to control and manage its brand image. The gaming industry is notorious for its “employee-demographic engineering method” by recruiting “from the culture it has

created: a culture of male adolescents, fascinated with technology, familiar with game design not just by constant play but by the editing capacities that allow players to design and share their own levels of games” (Kline, Dyer-Witheford, & De Peuter, 2003, p. 200). This hiring practice used by many digital game developing companies has contributed to perpetuating the notion that the game-playing subject is male and maintaining the image of the game industry as masculine, innovative, and interactive (an industry that “listens to” and places value in consumers’ opinions and feedback). Furthermore, by hiring many player-consumers as employees, the game industry effectively blurs the boundary between labor and leisure allowing game production to be “represented as a continuum of endless fun” and the image of working in the gaming industry to be hip and “ultra-cool” (Kline, Dyer-Witheford, & De Peuter, 2003, p. 197). Andrew Ross (2003) calls this hip and ultra-cool workplace where such things as hierarchy or formality do not exist (your dress to play is your dress to work) a “humane workplace,” which is the type of workplace for many new media and technology companies (including the game companies). Ross (2003), however, cautions that the humane workplace is not the same as a “just workplace” which provides fair compensation for work and labor. In fact, by creating a working environment that encourages the employees to work non-stop, humane workplaces tend to have exploitative characteristics. Stories of labor exploitation in the so-called hip and cool workplaces abound with “EA: The Human Story” being one of the most popular tales. The EA Story began when a blog post by an anonymous user appeared on LiveJournal on November 10, 2004.<sup>11</sup> Claiming to be the partner of an

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<sup>11</sup> In 2006, the anonymous blogger was revealed to be Erin Hoffman, fiancée of Leander Hasty, an employee of EA at the time. Hoffman’s post led to three class action lawsuits against Electronic Arts with Hasty named as the main plaintiff on behalf of the engineers

employee at EA (Electronic Arts), one of the leading game software developing companies, the EA spouse criticized the poor labor practices of EA and argued how the continuous crunch time (with no compensation for overtime) was making her loved one coming home late at night “complaining of a headache that will not go away and a chronically upset stomach” (“EA: The Human Story,” 2004, n. p.). Episodes such as the EA Story have exposed the ugly face behind the myth of the “liberating” workplace of new media and technology companies. Naomi Klein (2000) also documents how companies that construct its brand image as cool maintains that image by hiring young workers who assure corporate executives to bring hip, young, and alternative cultures to the companies and thus transform them as cool. Klein (2000) further explains that hidden beneath the corporate motivation of hiring young workers to maintain its young and cool image is the unfair labor and compensation practices that are “justified on the grounds that young workers are just passing through” (p. 238).

Making a conclusive statement on Adult Swim’s workplace within the “just” versus “humane” workplace framework as suggested by Andrew Ross would require an extensive fieldwork, which is beyond the scope of this study (after all, Ross’s fieldwork, which took place in two new media companies in New York’s Silicon Alley, took more than a year). However, the general descriptions of Williams Street in the popular and trade press provide us some hints about Adult Swim’s workplace environment. On the outset Adult Swim has all the characteristics that fits the humane workplace model: fun, creative, and non-hierarchical working environment. In Williams Street the writers are encouraged to constantly mingle with others and to frequently exchange ideas. Adult

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and programmers at EA. The plaintiffs won the lawsuit and EA was asked to pay \$14.9 million for unpaid overtime in 2007.

Swim's workplace environment then seems to fit the description of the humane workplace as explained by Andrew Ross (2003). But the reason writers at Williams Street are encouraged to mingle with other writers (of different series) is because of Mike Lazzo's preference for intermingling and collaboration among workers, leading to a staunch enforcement of "creative communism" at Adult Swim (Wolk, 2004).

Furthermore, it is important to note that those at Williams Street are not union members but work on a contract basis, which means they may work hard (it is not uncommon for the creatives, especially those who work in animations/cartoons to have long working hours) but not necessarily reap the benefits from the revenues Adult Swim generates mostly from the materials on its website or DVDs. Thus, when the WGA (Writers Guild of America) went on strike in 2007-2008, greatly affecting the television industry with delayed production and broadcast schedule Adult Swim was hardly affected at all. In fact, Adult Swim expressed the strike's irrelevance to the network when it aired a bump answering to a viewer's comment about the strike on October 28, 2007. The viewer's comment read: "Dear Adult Swim, I am very concerned about the upcoming Writer's [sic] Guild of America strike. How does a WGA strike affect Adult Swim? [Signed] Unspeakably Violent." Adult Swim answered: "Guild strike? Hey do you have any cheat codes for Warcraft? Seriously. We need them for wizarding." It is not clear what the employee benefits are at Adult Swim but the fact that Williams Street is not unionized and hires workers on a contract basis indicates its precarious working conditions, fitting the characteristics of what Ross (2003) suggested as an unjust workplace.

### **Adult Swim's Edge: Postmodern Strategies of Parody, Satire, and Savvy Humor**

In addition to expressing a coherent and holistic brand identity Adult Swim pays great attention to establish itself as “the renegade, the cool network, the outsider” that is different from others (Banet-Weiser, 2007, p. 250). One strategy for achieving this goal is through hiring practices, as mentioned above. Another is through “edge” programming. “Edge” programming clearly demarcates the boundary between its intended and unintended audiences by purposely excluding some tastes and sensibilities (Lotz, 2007). This programming strategy is particularly effective in the new media environment which favors niche programming as advertisers have come to embrace programs that are targeted to narrow and specific audiences, and thus, more unconventional programming (Lotz, 2007). By producing “edge” programs the network are able to increase its niche status and to distinguish itself from others in a cluttered and highly competitive programming field (Lotz, 2007).

Many “edge” or “unconventional” programs adopt the postmodern strategies of irony and pastiche, which are frequently used in the contemporary television landscape to critique and (supposedly) subvert the mainstream and dominant social conditions (Banet-Weiser, 2007). In regard to many networks’ use of postmodern irony as part of their branding strategy, Caldwell (2008) points out that irony and pastiche “have become a part of every institutional and promotional self-reference” (p. 248). Klein (2000) argues that irony is a preferred strategy by marketers of “cool” branding who are experts in working with “pre-planned knowing smirks, someone else’s couch commentary, and even a running simulation of the viewer’s thought patterns” (p. 78-79). Irony is a popular form used by the culture industries because it is a “have your cake and eat it too” strategy

which has an appearance of social critique but also at the same time does not really disrupt the status quo which allows the practitioners to deeply engage with it without feeling threatened (Kline, Dyer-Witheford, & de Peuter, 2003). In other words, irony has the quality of what Angela McRobbie (2007b) calls a “double-entanglement” in which both conservative (maintenance of the status quo) and liberal (social critique) values co-exist.

Parody and satire are then “potent weapons for those negotiating their identities in relationship to postwar popular and political culture, those who...didn’t buy into the suburban ranch house dream but still wanted to enjoy the comforts and pleasure of postwar consumer culture” (Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009, p. 20). The language of irony and camp that popular culture adopts may add a critical social commentary but its subversive appearance can be used more to sell products to the consumers than to subvert the mainstream ideology (Banet-Weiser, 2007). Just as the bohemian values and ethos of the 1960s and 70s counterculture later became the dominant system in the U.S. and another commodity to be sold in the market, irony and parody, two dominant tropes within the contemporary television landscape, have been commodified and relegated to a (irreverent) style now regularly employed as a marketing strategy (Heath & Potter, 2004; Banet-Weiser, 2007).

In addition to commercial cooptation of parody and satire, their role in breeding cultural cynicism, creating mistrust of the state, and the unintended consequences when they misfire are some of the other concerns that surround the use of parody and satire.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> According to Fredric Jameson (1990), parody is dead in the postmodern era that we now live in that all we have left is an uncritical pastiche. Jonathan Gray (2006) also distinguishes parody, pastiche, and satire by arguing that if parody attempts to subvert the

Concerns about the possibility of satires plunging us “into a sea of doubt and indeterminacy” (Griffin, 1994, p. 65) or disengaging us from challenging authoritative social hierarchies and orders have been raised by some critics who fear that the prevalence of parody and satire in our culture can create cynical disengagement and disinterest in news readership/viewership. These concerns were raised most fervently when reports came out that many young people rely on late-night talk shows such as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* rather than television news or newspapers for news and information in 2004. For instance, Michael Kalin (2006) of *The Boston Globe* wrote that Stewart’s show, which has a “holier than art thou” attitude caters to viewers who have a similar attitude and would never “choose to enter the political fray full of ‘buffoons and idiots’” (n.p.).

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norm or conventions by playing straightly against the normative forms of the original, satire “bypasses concerns of form and aims straight at content, whereas pastiche alludes to form and/or content, but with no critical comment on either” (p. 47). Because Gray (2006) agrees with Jameson that a distinction between pastiche and parody must be made he opts to shed the “adjectival shackles of ‘postmodern’ slung around” the talks about parody to focus on “parody’s potency and on its teeth” (p. 5). Meanwhile, unlike Jameson (1990), Hutcheon (2002) understands postmodern cultural works to have effective political power in critiquing the postmodern world that we live in (without buying into the problems of the postmodern conditions that we live in, such as the domination of the logic of capitalism, culture of simulacra, environmental issues, etc.) by questioning the “naturalization” of natural (such as gender and sex), the boundary between fiction and (objective) history, and all accepted beliefs and ideologies (the “grand” narratives). Whereas Jameson (and Gray) distinguishes the use of parody and pastiche (and according to Jameson, parody cannot exist in today’s postmodern culture), Hutcheon (2002) understands pastiche, intertextuality, appropriation, irony, quotation, etc. to all be part of parody as they all work to politicize representation by highlighting how all interpretation or understanding of a text is ideological. Extending Hutcheon’s stance I refer to parody, satire, irony, pastiche, and absurdity as a “postmodern” style without undermining the potential powerful effects that “postmodern” may have by asking uncomfortable (but necessary) questions and subverting the norm. Furthermore, these terms are frequently described as postmodern tropes or styles by many media scholars, including those who argue for their potential in subverting the norm. I also keep the adjective “postmodern” alive because the dark, absurd humor of Adult Swim shows and the young adult viewers who enjoy Adult Swim are generally described as postmodern.



Hutcheon (1985), meanwhile, points out that as much as parody can be provocative and revolutionary it has a normative and conservative side, which brings and reinforces homogeneity and hierarchy. The ambiguity of satire can lead to a misfiring of its message as was shown in Vidmar and Rokeach's (1974) study of the popular 1970s primetime series, *All in the Family*. According to this study audience members who have conservative political views identified with the parodied bigot character, Archie Bunker, and considered his bigotry and political views as legitimate (Vidmar & Rokeach, 1974).

Babbie Haggins (2009), in her examination of the (racial) crossover appeal of Dave Chappelle's comedy, points out how the precarious boundary between critique and confirmation in satires can reinforce racial stereotypes rather than critique them. This has also been the concern that was raised with the Uncle Ruckus character in *The Boondocks* that airs on Adult Swim. Created by Aaron McGruder *The Boondocks*, which works as a political satire, provides biting commentaries about racial issues, hip-hop culture, identity politics, and so on as it follows the Freeman family (Robert "Granddad" Freeman, Huey Freeman, and Riley Freeman). One of the main characters in the series is Uncle Ruckus, who McGruder calls "the world's most self-hating black man" (McGrath, 2004, n.p.).

Uncle Ruckus's self-hatred and intolerance for blacks is so ridiculous that the viewers can all easily agree to "laugh at" him and understand him as a target of satire. However, as McGruder stated in an interview not everyone understands *The Boondocks* as a satire and misinterprets McGruder's intention with Uncle Ruckus: "The people who don't get Uncle Ruckus and say, "That's racist, I will never watch that," don't see him as a commentary on right-wing ideology or racism or self-hate or anything. They just say, "Oh. Racism. Bad." It's the same thing with people who go, "That guy's making fun of

black people. I like that. I also don't like black people." They're not getting it either" (Cooper, 2013, n.p.).

In contrast to these critics' denunciation of irony or parody for encouraging cynicism and disengagement with political participation Amber Day argues that irony is becoming "the new marker of sincerity" (cited in Jones, 2010, p. 247). Jones (2010) also cautions that we should not make an automatic assumption that "criticism plus laughter equals cynical nihilism" as the main purpose of satire is to bring positive changes rather than negativity (p. 237). Even if irony breeds cynicism it should not be a concern since cynicism is an expression of "moral protest against hypocrisy and cant in politics and excess and thoughtless self-indulgence in the conduct of life" (Crichtly, 2009, n. p.). Furthermore, cynicism is not always negative but can rather be proactive with ironic humor functioning as a "defense mechanism" against those who wield power and withhold truth (Sloterdijk, 1987). Expanding Sloterdijk's point, Jones (2010) explains that satire and political humor have become "the means for "relief in hard times"" (p. 237) which allow us to express our disillusionment with the social hierarchies and to attack the pretensions of the social elite.

By exposing the artificiality of the social norm and shedding new light on societal values that rarely get questioned in other forms, satires can provide an alternative language, which people can use to engage in a public dialogue (Tinic, 2009). In fact, satire has become an important "discourse of inquiry, a rhetoric of challenge that seeks through the asking of an unanswered question to clarify the underlying morality of a situation" (Baym, 2010, p. 110) in today's culture thanks to the popularity of satirical entertainment shows including *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, *The Colbert Report*,

*Real Time with Bill Maher*, *The Onion* (parody newspaper), various parody sketches in *Saturday Night Live*, and adult animations that make frequent cultural references and allusions such as *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy*. According to Gray et al. (2009), humor, parody, and satire in these entertainment forms have transgressive characteristics as they open space for “critique and reflection” (p. 11) that are lacking in many societies. Far from being non-serious or apolitical, humor in satirical entertainment has the ability to seriously engage in power and politics by inviting the audience to join in the process of scrutiny through playing, examining, testing, and questioning politics rather than to remain as passive consumers of information or receivers of “truth” from the authoritative sources (Gray et al., 2009).

The subversive and rebellious characteristics of irony and parody make them a popular form of programming especially with the young demographic. The fact that irony and parody are generally delivered in a raucous and disorderly tone makes their use in today’s popular culture uncomfortable for the older generation, which contributes to their youth appeal (Test, 1991) and thus make them perfect vehicles to be used in “edge” programming that tries to demarcate boundaries between preferred and undesired audiences.<sup>13</sup> Also, the fact that the understanding of the ironic/parodic/satirical messages requires media/popular culture savvy (or high level of media literacy) on the part of the

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<sup>13</sup> All undesired audiences of “edge” programming are potential secondary audiences. However, Joseph Turow’s (2006, 2012) studies indicate that not all secondary audiences are desired by television networks. With the rise of target marketing and market segmentation along the lines of income, age, gender, race and so on media firms have endeavored to exclude demographics who do not fit their desired lifestyle. Thus, in the highly competitive media environment cable companies have created “signature” materials that both drew the “right” people and signaled the “wrong” people that they ought to go away” so their community can be “more pure, thereby more efficient for advertisers” (Turow, 2012, p. 5).

audience as they tend to allude to existing cultural forms and texts—not only a sign of “coolness” in today’s culture but also an attribute that is generally characterized of the youth demographic—makes this postmodern style of discourse attractive to the young demographic. Political and social satires such as *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, *Saturday Night Live (SNL)*, and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* have proven to be popular especially among the young generation and because of this reason Jones (2010) argues that satire may be the new generational language.

The great youth appeal of parodies and satires have made many cable television channels including Comedy Central and Nickelodeon to choose postmodern strategies of irony and parody in their programming as a brand marker, although the use of irony/parody may repel the mass audience (especially the older generation, supposedly) (Gray et al., 2009). The fact that in the post-network era networks can economically survive with just a small audience share has allowed the cable channels to focus on appealing to a smaller, specific demographic (Gray et al., 2009). Fox’s decision to air *The Simpsons* when the network was at its infancy and the show’s eventual popularity and contribution to establishing Fox as the fourth network is a good indication of how satire’s niche appeal “can create popular appeal in post-network economic models” (Gray et al., 2009, p. 14). The translation of niche appeal to popular appeal seems more prominent in cable television where cable networks can be more experimental with their shows due to less stringent content regulations and the need for smaller audience size to be economically viable.

Thus, it is not surprising that Adult Swim’s programming lineup is full of satiric/parodic shows, which work together to establish and strengthen Adult Swim as a

brand. Furthermore, with animation's ability to place characters in situations that would not be possible in real life (Ott, 2007) the genre becomes a perfect vehicle for exaggeration and absurdity, which are important characteristics of Adult Swim shows.<sup>14</sup> In a similar fashion, Gray (2006) points out that animation's greater distance from reality (and the use of greater level of exaggeration) allows viewers to take a few steps back while allowing the writers to take a few steps forward with ideas and jokes.<sup>15</sup> Thus, Wells (1998) argues that animation provides "greater opportunity for filmmakers to be more imaginative and less conservative" and even to be transgressive (quoted in Gray, 2006, p. 68). Tueth (2003) also points out that the animation genre can be effective when pushing the boundaries to portray subversive views. Animation's ability to increase its use of literalization and exaggeration makes the genre not only a perfect vehicle for parody but also allows it to give parody "more options to formulate critique" (Dhaenens & Van Bauwel, 2012, p. 126). The flexible form of animation allows creators to move beyond the physical boundaries of human representation and thus provides "a social critique of the "reality" of material life" (Banet-Weiser, 2007, p. 183). Even in the practice of exaggerated stereotyping, which is referred to as hyperstereotyping, the goal is not to mock the social minorities who are represented in a stereotypical manner but to highlight

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<sup>14</sup> In regard to how satires work in animations, Ott (2007) says, "If an animated show wants to comment on a personality in the news, it simply draws a new character that resembles and sounds like that person. If an animated series wishes to comment on a news event or cultural trend, it can easily invent a parallel situation for its primary characters" (p. 69). Animation, then, has a great ability to appropriate the codes, forms, characters, and conventions of the existing cultural texts and media landscape, making it a perfect genre for social satires and self-reflexive programming.

<sup>15</sup> Gray (2006), however, also points out that people's preconceptions and cultural assumptions about animations (as a non-serious and childish genre) can weaken the potency of animated parodies. The idea that "'it's only a cartoon'" may encourage viewers to take animated parody's commentaries less seriously (Gray, 2006, p. 68).

and critique the process of stereotyping itself (Gray, 2006). In most cases hyperstereotyping in animations reveals how easily minorities are labeled as “others” due to the hegemony of white heteronormativity (Dhaenens & Van Bauwel, 2012).

Despite the subversive power of humor in satires and parodies it does not always guarantee political actions or wider social and cultural transformations. In fact, as Palmer (1987) points out, the very basis of humor is ambivalence as it contains characteristics that are “subversive and conservative, offensive and inoffensive, serious and ridiculous” (p. 182). Humor in Adult Swim shows particularly displays ambivalence as it is used not only to comment upon and ridicule various aspects of American culture (racism, sexism, heteronormativity, conservatism, etc.) but also to be complicitous of the very values it tries to attack (patriarchy, commercialism, white supremacy, etc.). For example, as much as the jokes in *The Boondocks*, which is often hailed as a smart provocative satire can make the viewers to critically examine various aspects of the American culture such as racial matters or homophobia of the hip-hop culture (particularly through the portrayal of Gangstacious) they can also come across as homophobic (as in the characterization of Winston Jerome, a character created to lampoon Tyler Perry and his drag performances) and misogynistic (as the way women are characterized in the show, particularly in the “Guess Hoe’s Coming To Dinner” episode).<sup>16</sup> In *The Boondocks*, female characters are notably absent as the show “works within a largely masculinist formation” (Whaley, 2012, p. 192). When black women do appear on the show they are generally portrayed as

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<sup>16</sup> The way female characters are portrayed in *The Boondocks* is problematic as it “borders on the line of misogyny” (Ball, 2012, n.p.). However, this point gets less attention by both the mainstream press and the media scholars who focus mostly on highlighting the show’s potential for providing an alternative “disruptive politics” (Gournelos, 2009) or social commentary and community engagement (Santo, 2009).

“loud, fat, ratchet single moms, prostitutes or video vixens” (Ball, 2012, n.p.), hardly “appearing as historical actors or innovators” in promoting Black cultural politics (Whaley, 2012, p. 192). This ambivalent humor then reflects the “paradoxical postmodernism of complicity and critique, of reflexivity and historicity, that at once inscribes and subverts the conventions and ideologies of the dominant cultural and social forces of the twentieth century western world” (Hutcheon, 2002, p. 11-12).

In his study of MTV’s popular animation show, *Beavis and Butt-Head*, Kellner (1995) explains how this animation program made parodic allusions to popular culture in almost every episode and became “purely a product of media culture, with its characters, style, and content almost solely derived from previous TV shows” (p. 145). Through parodic allusions to existing cultural conventions *Beavis and Butt-Head* appealed to viewers who considered themselves to be “hip” but also rewarded them for their media literacy, or their vast popular culture knowledge (Ott, 2007). Parodic texts offer viewers great pleasure in recognizing the hidden references and in-jokes, which is “a potent strategy that works in conjunction with the invisible quotation marks to “enlist” audiences by addressing them as—and rewarding them for—being culturally conversant and in the know” (Knox, 2006, p. 75).

Because satire is mainly about critiquing the “arrogance and hypocrisies of those in power” (Jones, 2010, p. 87) and is “a tactic of resistance for those who sit outside the circles of power” (Tinic, 2009, p. 168) against the dominant power it becomes a mechanism of division and cohesion of people based on their social place and experience. The appeal of satires for both the channel and the audience today can be attributed to two things: its dialogic characteristics and the development of digital technologies in the

transmedia culture. Rather than operating discretely these two attributes complement each other in strengthening the appeal and popularity of the satiric programming especially among the young audience. Considering that the playful tactics of parody and satire are chosen by many networks that aspire to reach the “digital natives,” the youth generation who grew up in a world of participatory media culture, these rhetorical practices should not be dismissed as trivial (Jenkins, 2009). With satirical entertainment having a greater youth appeal and that many cable television channels have embraced this form of entertainment to construct their brand images (Jones, 2010) an in-depth examination of how the postmodern trope of irony, parody, and satire has been used in Adult Swim to construct its brand image and its audience is warranted.

### **Intertextuality, Paratextuality, and Media Convergence**

In explaining the dialogic work of literatures, Mikhail Bakhtin (1986) argues that texts are perpetually engaged in discussions with one another. Rather than being created in a vacuum, a meaning of a word/text is created only when “it has encountered and come into contact with another,” or when it engages “in a kind of dialogue” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 7). Based on Bakhtin’s notion of a “dialogic” text Baym (2010) argues that satire “represents a search for truth through the process of dialogical interaction” (p. 110).<sup>17</sup> The dialogic nature of satires and parodies requires viewers to have a high level of sophistication to be able to decode and understand the message (Jones, 2010). For a satire/parody to work it needs “the complicity of an audience of cultural insiders who are privy to the codes needed to “get the joke”” (Tinic, 2009, p. 168). As satire/parody “demands a heightened state of awareness and mental participation in its audience”

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<sup>17</sup> Day (2011) also makes a similar argument by pointing out the dialogic characteristic of parody, which invites multiple voices to engage with one another in the text.



(Jones, 2010, p. 15)—as well as their knowledge—the audience of satires/parodies tend to be active and critical readers rather than passive receivers of the text. This phenomenology of making sense of texts in relation to other texts is called “intertextuality,” and it is the driving force behind the workings of parody/satire (Gray, 2005).

The notion of intertextuality is based on the idea that our understanding of the text is based on what we already know and that “any text that we read can potentially live on forever to haunt future texts” (Gray, 2005, p. 224). Because texts come alive only through their interaction with other texts Julia Kristeva (1980) argues that we should focus on discussing intertextuality—“the intersection of textual surfaces” (p. 65)—rather than textuality. Among various genres parodies/satires heavily rely on the intertextual mechanism as their savvy, self-referential, ironic sense of humor that the young audience generally enjoy is based on pre-existing cultural conventions. In order to get the parodic/satiric messages one needs to have an understanding of the operation of the particular text or genre that the parody is attacking. This is the reason Gray (2005) argues that parody is a media literacy educator. With their reliance on prevailing cultural conventions, parodies/satires not only reward viewers who have a vast amount of knowledge and understanding of the media culture but also “reposition them as cultural elites,” (Ott, 2007, p. 96) the very type of viewers who are extremely valued in the current post-network era.

Intertextuality is about how we make sense of texts based on our past textual experiences, literacy, and knowledge. The mechanism of intertextuality makes us create meanings of the text in relation to other texts. Meanwhile, paratexts, which are frequently

referred to as “peripherals” or “ancillary products” also play a role in the meaning-making process of a text. Gray (2010) points out that if intertextuality plays “a determinative role in textual reception” then paratexts tend to “conjure up and summon intertexts” (p. 141). As a form of intertextuality, paratexts can “control the menu of intertexts that audiences will consult or employ when watching or thinking about a text” (Gray, 2010a, p. 141). Every text then is constituted through intertextuality and paratextuality as they “regularly bleed into and rely upon each other” (Gray, 2010a, p. 118). Because paratexts play a significant role in constructing and expanding the meaning of a text Gray (2010a) cautions against simply dismissing them as a marketing tool or peripheral “add-ons” to the original text. “Peripherals” may not only mean more than the original text (peripherals can be the center) to some people but often they can “play a constitutive role in the production, development, and expansion of the text” (Gray, 2010a, p. 175), especially when the value of content repurposing and reallocation is increasing as more television networks make decisions based on their potential (Caldwell, 2004). When we fail to see the textual role of paratexts then we “misunderstand their aesthetic, economic, and socio-cultural roles” (Gray, 2010a, p. 208) and its significant role in enriching the entertainment experience.

Both intertextuality and paratextuality have greater entertainment value in today’s transmedia environment where texts can be delivered through multiple channels due to the development of digital technology. When the definition of textual boundaries is “inextricably linked with their media delivery” (Sandvoss, 2007, p. 29) the multiple channels through which a text is delivered and expanded creates a richer textuality which can lead to developing greater level of “fandom, affective play, and identification” (Gray,

2008, p. 89). With the development of digital technology various platforms where interpretive or fan communities can gather to exchange information and opinions were created, enriching fans' textual experiences. Furthermore, the availability of cheap and easy-to-use digital technologies has enabled many more users to engage in the production process by creating their own texts based on the original texts (whether it is fanzines, fan blogs, or mash-up videos), blurring the boundary between creator/producer and reader/consumer.<sup>18</sup>

Digital media technologies have also influenced the form and style of today's popular media content. Day (2011) points out that there seems to be a synergistic relationship between new media technologies and the emergent style of irony, satire, and parody. The development of digital technologies has made the production, distribution, and reception of the satirical forms of programming more accessible, contributing to their widespread popularity. With easy access to video footages and cheaper and better editing software it has become possible for satirists to easily repurpose the existing footage to question and critique their object(s) of scrutiny (Day, 2011). Also, the Internet has enabled satirical/parodic video footages to disseminate faster and wider, contributing to their increasing popularity. After all, encountering parody videos or satiric humor via email inboxes, Facebook updates, or YouTube clips has become more of an everyday routine for many people today. Also, the digital technologies, especially the Internet,

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<sup>18</sup> Because of the great number of user generated contents (UGCs) that enriched the web culture and the rise of YouTube *Time* named "You" as the Person of the Year in 2006. *Time* explained their choice of "You" by stating: "It's about the many wresting power from the few and helping one another for nothing and how that will not only change the world, but also change the way the world changes" (Grossman, 2006, n.p.). But as scholars such as Andrejevic (2009b) and van Dijck (2009) demonstrate there is limitations to the empowerment of the interactive media in wresting power from the few and changing the way the world changes.

have created various platforms where readers/fans can actively participate in adding new meanings to the text through their minute-by-minute online commentaries and even creative works.

Reaching smaller and more like-minded audiences, television has come to operate as a *subcultural forum*, which reproduces a similar experience for those who share particular cultural affinities or tastes (Lotz, 2007). What is important in this narrowcast environment is that the contents need to appear beyond television. Lotz (2007) explains that when cable networks that generate revenues from advertisements produce shows that only a small number of fragmented audiences get to see then these shows need to move beyond the television platform to reach a wider breadth of audience to be considered as hits. Furthermore, continues Lotz (2007), “when television operates as a subcultural forum, it is often integrated with the use of other media that similarly reflect subcultural tastes and sensibilities,” allowing viewers to “incorporate a television network or set of programs into a broader set of media, reproducing particular silos of specific worldviews” (p. 43).

The term that explains this practice of integrating television with other media texts to further establish the brand is convergence. Convergence generally refers to “the new textual practices, branding and marketing strategies, industrial arrangements, technological synergies, and audience behaviors enabled and propelled by the emergence of digital media” (Kackman et al., 2010, p. 1). As television texts overflow into multiple platforms and become available in various ways convergence “destabilize the notion of television as a discrete object” (Kackman et al., 2010, p. 1). With the shrunken audience size in the niche channel era, media convergence has “proven to be an effective means for

broadcasters to reach more eyeballs while better customizing their outreach to targeted audiences (especially the sought-after 18-34-year-olds)” (Kavka, 2010, p. 78). The rise of “transmedia franchise,” reflects how television shows are able to easily extend across multiple media platforms due to the development of digital technologies (Jenkins, 2006). As “every important story gets told, every brand gets sold, and every consumer gets courted across multiple media platforms” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 3) media convergence allows the audience to build a special relationship with the network (Lotz, 2006). Since it is the intensity level of the viewer’s engagement with the program that is more important than the overall audience size in the new media environment configuring television programs into a transmedia experience has become a new priority for many television networks.

Although computers (and the Internet) have become ubiquitous tools for both leisure and work today the use of computers to watch and interact with television has a youth orientation/appeal as the younger generation—the “digital natives” who were born during or after the emergence of various digital technologies that they are adept at using (Prensky, 2001a, 2001b)—feels more comfortable with the integration of the old (television) and the new (the Internet) media and has developed new norms of using television (Lotz, 2007). Burgess and Green (2009) point out that youth and new technologies are frequently conflated as they both are associated with “ideas about shifts in capitalism and the organization of social structures such as class, wealth distribution, and consumption practices” (p. 17) and are perceived as key factors in disrupting the existing social order. Because young people are perceived to be competent new media users, networks that try to attract the “young” audience have come to actively create and

appropriate their own websites to transform viewers into “loyal” fans and firmly establish themselves as a “youthful” brand.

Meanwhile, Jenkins (2006) explains how convergence is a gendered phenomenon as those who are participatory media users are “disproportionately white, male, middle class, and college educated” (p. 23). This understanding of convergence, however, is based on online activities of only one particular segment of the demographic and is subject to various challenges, especially from feminist media scholars. To understand convergence as a masculine phenomenon not only ignores the prevalent form of female online participation that tends to be very different from male online activities but also disregards the wider structural conditions that determine individual’s everyday life and online experiences. For instance, Nick Couldry (2011) problematizes Jenkins’ understanding of convergence for disregarding the socio-economic and cultural forces that not only stratify technological access, use, and skills in the current digital media environment (“digital divide” still exists along the line of gender, class, race, and so on) but also the “broader stratifying factors which shape the spheres of action of different types of people in contemporary societies” (p. 492). The participatory audiences who Jenkins refers to are those characterized as media consumers of high intensity. Engaging in a high-intensity media consumption requires the audience to be able to afford more leisure time which excludes those who need to take multiple jobs to make ends meet or those who have heavy family obligations and responsibilities.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> As Arlie Hochschild’s studies in *The Second Shift* (1989) and *The Time Bind* (1997) indicate despite more women working outside the home the domestic chores remain mainly as woman’s burden. Many working women take the second shift at home, which provides them less free time at home as the domestic space becomes an extension of workplace.

Driscoll and Gregg (2011) also critique Jenkins' understanding of participatory culture for focusing too much on participation from "an industrially determined mediascape" (p. 573), which ignores the dominant form of female participation. By understanding audience participation as an active and dedicative fan behavior from the industrial perspective the participants in Jenkins' account are mostly those who enter into voluntary relationships with commercial media products and produce "various forms of profit—for themselves as well as the corporations that own media products" (Driscoll & Gregg, 2011, p. 569). But as many studies on female active audience explain female fandom have traditionally taken on characteristics that are very different from male fandom and fandom in commercial culture. As demonstrated by the way fanfics were created and circulated female fans predominantly seek "communities that do not serve corporate interest" (Driscoll & Gregg, 2011, p. 576) by embracing gift cultures that are more social than economic (Hellekson, 2009).<sup>20</sup>

Finally, Jenkins' account of convergence culture lacks an understanding of how "gender scripts" are embedded in the construction and use of digital media that disproportionately encourages online participation by men more than women. Rommes (2002) argues behind the materialization of every technology are "technological scripts," which are "assumptions about the use context...which pre-structure the use of technology" and "attribute and delegate specific competences, actions, and responsibilities to their envisioned users" (p. 15). When these technological scripts reveal gendered patterns they become gender scripts, which Van Oost (2003) explains as "the representations an artifacts' designers have or construct of gender relations and gender identities—

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<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, male fans are more likely to produce and transform their fannish activities into for-profit projects (Busse, 2009).

representations that they inscribe into the materiality of that artifact” (p. 195). The theory of gender scripts demonstrates how technological artifacts are not gender neutral but acquire a gendered connotation, which guides the way they get used (Van Oost, 2003). Kearney (2010) argues how the gender scripts play a significant role in creating (culturally-sanctioned) technophobia among girls/women and fostering male-oriented media production and technology, echoing Cynthia Cockburn’s (1985) arguments about how femininity is perceived to be “incompatible with technological competence” (and how technical competence is associated with manliness) (p. 12). In the hegemonic masculine culture girls/women are discouraged to actively use technology (unless it is related to domestic chores such as cooking and cleaning or hyperfeminine activities such as dressing up) while boys/men are encouraged to freely play with various sorts of mechanical and electrical gadgets and learn technological skills in the process (Kearney, 2010).

Adult Swim’s website, like any other commercial media spaces, has been constructed with certain assumptions about its primary users. Considering that the its main target audience is young male adults and that its website functions as a platform to continuously circulate the Adult Swim content and its sensibility it is important to examine whether, and if so, what, gendered technological scripts are being used to attract that particular demographic. Considering that Adult Swim’s popularity and success as a young adult brand can be attributed to its website which caters to the viewers of the Internet generation who are encouraged to engage with the program at any time (disregarding the program’s on-air time) it is important to see how Adult Swim’s website



(adultswim.com) is used to further engage and activate the young adult audience and in the process firmly establish Adult Swim as a brand specifically for that demographic.

### **Building a Relationship: Affective Branding, Interactivity, and Mainstreaming Fandom**

On January 2001, one of the biggest mergers—and one of the biggest business blunders, as it turns out later—in the U.S. history occurred, ushering in the era of convergence between television and the Internet. The merger, of course, was between America Online (AOL) and Time Warner. This massive merger was an indication of Time Warner's belief that Internet would play a significant role in delivering entertainment content to consumers in the future. In fact, as Mullen (2008) points out, Time Warner was one of the most active companies that sought “online program delivery strategies and modes of funding” in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (p. 182). Time Warner hoped that its partnership with AOL would lead to the integration of cable television with the Internet content, allowing the company to promote its networks as “integrated media brands” (Mullen, 2008, p. 182). Although the AOL-Time Warner merger ended up in failure the idea to converge television and Internet contents to provide an integrated media experience continues to be an important business practice (not just for Time Warner but for all of the media conglomerates such as ABC-Disney, Viacom, and so on). With Time Warner as its parent company, Adult Swim has actively utilized its interactive website to invite its viewers to constantly connect themselves to the Adult Swim brand.

The integration of television and the Internet is one of the representative characteristics of the convergence culture in which the content of media flow across various platforms more than ever. Media convergence has significantly changed the way

we think about television. In particular, three trends are (re)configuring the medium of television in the era of media convergence: flexible microcasting, multiplexing, and interactivity and audience participation. Flexible microcasting refers to the combination of computer and television technologies with the effect of producing “enhanced viewer choice in the form of a stream of programming carefully tailored to the viewer’s preferences, tastes, and desires” (Parks, 2004, p. 135). Flexible microcasting allows viewers to customize the programming according to their individual taste, identity, preference, and desire and create a *personalized* television. Parks (2004) points out that organized around viewer’s social distinctions—gender, age, race, class, sexuality, lifestyle, and so on—flexible microcasting is one way the media industry can maximize its profit. Meanwhile, multiplexing refers to media’s “ability to offer simultaneous and ancillary digital streams,” whether they are data, image, or sound (Caldwell, 2004, p. 50). The goal of multiplexing is to keep the viewers engaged even after a series episode has aired. Caldwell (2004) outlines the online strategies that television producers use to achieve this goal: ““characterized” proliferations of the text; “narrativized” elaborations of the text; “backstory” textuality; “metacritical” textuality; technological augmentations; and merchandizing augmentations” (p. 51). Through these ancillary channels the audience becomes further engaged and activated and becomes a greater source of profit for the television producers.

Meanwhile, interactivity refers to the technological structure that is designed “to be more responsive to consumer feedback” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 133). Whether it is good, bad, or indifferent, any form of interactivity is considered to be economically valuable to the media producers and has been “a defining goal of broadcast television since its

inception in the 1940s” (Caldwell, 2004, p. 53). The growing perception that interactive engagement builds brand loyalty and the development of various technological means to embed interactivity in the media experience have encouraged many television studios and networks to offer more interactive experience to fans since the late 1990s and early 2000s (Caldwell, 2008). All three features—flexible microcasting, multiplexing, and interactivity/participation—have supposedly given viewers more flexibility in watching what, when, how, and where they want. But Lotz (2007) cautions that the increasing control viewers have over their television experience should not be interpreted as a power shift to the viewers. Convergence has no doubt expanded viewers’ programming choices and increased opportunities for fans to exchange meanings and participate in creating and expanding the meaning of the text but the production continues to be dominated by the commercial interests (Lotz, 2007).

One of the changes that developed from the interactive media technologies is that the viewers’/users’ everyday creativity no longer is perceived as trivial but rather has come to occupy a “central state in discussions of the media industries and their future in the context of digital culture” (Burgess & Green, 2009, p. 13). Because of the productivity of fan feedback online<sup>21</sup> media industries have come to pay more attention to the fan communities and to take their comments more into consideration when making various business decisions (Andrejevic, 2007; Burgess & Green, 2009). This is the reason why we have seen a great surge of television networks’ involvement in creating fan-

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<sup>21</sup> The recognition of user productivity coincides with the popularization of the term, “produsage” or “produser,” although the idea of proactive consumers who functions like producers have been around for more than three decades. In *The Third Wave* (1980), futurist Alvin Toffler coined the term, prosumer, to describe active consumers who provide feedback and comments to improve the quality of goods and services.

centered websites in recent years. As Brooker (2001) points out, by “effectively keeping fans in its own playgrounds,” fan-centered websites encourage regular viewers to engage in activities that would have formerly been labeled as “cult fan-nish.”

Before the media industry understood the productivity of fandom or fan activities online fans were generally despised and frequently pathologized (Bird, 2011). According to Jensen (1992), fans were characterized as those “obsessed with their objects, in love with celebrity figures, willing to die for the team” (p. 20) and their actions (referred to as “fandom”) were considered to be excessive and full of emotional display. Thus, fans were perceived to be dangerous figures that needed to be avoided. Protesting against negative perceptions about fans and fandom Jenkins (1988) argues that although fan activities may not bring revolutionary changes they can “be used effectively to build popular support for such change, to challenge the power of the culture industry to construct the common sense of a mass society, and to restore a much-needed excitement to the struggle against subordination” (p. 104). Grossberg (1992) also argues that fandom has the potential to bring changes as “optimism, invigoration, and passion” in fandom are prerequisite conditions in our struggles for change. These defenses for fandom by both Jenkins and Grossberg, of course, were made before the rise of the digital interactive media and media industry’s realization of the potential of productivity in fan activities and adjustments in its attitudes towards fans.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> This may be the reason why in the early years of research on fandom (pre-internet era) active audience or the fans were described as ‘guerrillas’ (Fiske, 1989), ‘rebellious children’ (Jenkins, 1988), or ‘poachers’ (de Certeau, 1984), which highlight the fans’ marginalized status and their will to fight against the dominant forces. Struggles between fans and the media industry continue today (especially in regard to copyright infringement issues) but interestingly with television industry’s incorporation of fan activities and mainstreaming of fandom through the use of interactive media (and thus,

The rise of digital interactive media, especially the Internet, moved the once despised fans into the center and transformed the perception about active fan practices (Bird, 2011). Fans have always found ways to collectively discuss, exchange information or speculation of their favorite shows, and practice various fan activities but the emergence of the Internet has come to play a significant role in the way fans receive and interact with their favorite TV shows. Internet has particularly played an important role in mainstreaming fan practices.<sup>23</sup> As Mittell (2006) points out, the distribution means of the Internet has allowed fan practices and participation to be more widely distributed, “making active audience behavior more of a mainstream practice” (p. 32). Similarly, Jenkins (2006) argues that with the new understanding of the value of fannish activities, television networks are now trying to colonize (and control) fan activities by offering extended and exclusive information and entertainment on their own “official” websites. By making their own websites available, networks now expect even the regular viewers to engage in practices that were once reserved for the most dedicated fans (Gillan, 2011). This mainstreaming of the “cult-ish” fan activity is referred to as “the ‘fanification’ of the audience” (Nikunen, 2007, p. 111).

If the Internet has allowed television networks to encourage viewers to engage in fan activities through the immersive web experience, it has also played a significant role in mainstreaming what are generally considered as cult texts. For instance, Hills (2004) concludes that WB’s popular teen show, *Dawson’s Creek*, was able to become a

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making fandom a more acceptable form of reception), fandom might have lost some of its “progressive” or “critical” edge.

<sup>23</sup> Pullen (2000) points out that by early 2000, “the web had mainstreamed fandom” (p. 56).

mainstream cult text<sup>24</sup> due to WB's official website and the immersive web experience it provided for regular viewers. In this sense, the processes of mainstreaming fandom and mainstreaming cult TV text are deeply intertwined. Ross (2008) argues that the reason we see greater number of cult TV shows or television shows that borrow from the strategies of cult TV (NBC's *Heroes* or ABC's *Lost* are just some of the examples) is because of cult TV's unique ability to invite viewers' "tele-participation" activities. Cult TV shows do not merely produce viewer enthusiasm (or encourage a deeper engagement with the text at the individual level). They also tap into viewers' desire to display their (pop cultural) competency and encourage them to actively interact with other viewers online to demonstrate their mastery of the show's "encyclopedic knowledge-base" (Ross, 2008, p. 43).

As the Internet encourages fans to further interact with television texts and normalizes what was once considered as "excessive," "cultish," or "subversive" practices it also incites viewers to have a sense of shared ownership of the text (Ross, 2008). This sense of ownership prompts fans to further invest their emotion into the text that the media industry can capitalize on. This emotional investment, brand loyalty, or "an effect of intimacy," is the driving force of what Jenkins (2006) refers to as "affective economics." Affective economics understands "the emotional underpinnings of consumer decision-making as a driving force behind viewing and purchasing decisions" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 62) and appears to empower viewers with their programming decisions as harnessing viewer loyalty is most important for media industry's economic gains.

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<sup>24</sup> Television industry's ability to oscillate between two opposing notions—mainstream and cult—does not seem to be a problematic contradiction but rather a source of greater control and power for the industry.

However, this form of “relationship marketing,” which requires marketers to constantly monitor and measure viewer desires, thoughts, and behaviors, also can manipulate and exploit viewers’ creative and productive labor (expressed in the form of fandom) (Andrejevic, 2007). Jenkins (2006) also states that there is an exploitative potential in affective marketing and the media industry’s commodification of the audience in its process of pursuing economic self-interest. But the way Jenkins understands the meaning of “exploitation” is different from Andrejevic’s (2007). For Jenkins exploitation means fans losing “control over their own culture” as their favorite product gets “mass produced and mass marketed” due to marketers’ aggressive target marketing. Meanwhile, Andrejevic’s understanding of exploitation implicates the potential interactive media have in taking advantage of audience’s (fans’/consumers’) active participation (participatory character of interactivity). Andrejevic’s (2011) explanation of sentiment analysis and ‘mood analysis’ that marketers deploy to read the popular chatter (what consumers or audiences are talking about or the trending topic of the moment) displays how marketers exploit consumers’ participation and their desire to be heard. When marketers listen to the voice of the consumers they do so “not so much to listen to the myriad voices of the members of what Jenkins refers to a ‘brand community’” but to gather information generated by consumers to improve their marketing campaigns (Andrejevic, 2011, p. 611).

If media producers were once hesitant or opposed to accepting fan engagement with their products now they are doing everything they can to create an environment where fans can feel like their engagement or participation is actually making a difference (Reinhard, 2009). Thus, television networks have created their own official websites to

directly co-opt fan actions after realizing the benefits of housing fan activities on their own websites (Reinhard, 2009). Fans' online activities are very beneficial for the networks and advertisers, particularly as they can be easily tracked and analyzed for the purpose of better target marketing (Andrejevic, 2007, 2011; van Dijck, 2009). In fact, van Dijck (2009) argues that from the media industry's perspective, the real value of users' online activities are not from the creative works they add to the website but rather the data they provide about themselves (or "metadata on the social behavior" of media consumption), which is considered to be highly valuable, although rarely accounted for (van Dijck, 2009, p. 49). Thus, Bird (2011) argues that when it comes to online fan participation, "surveillance and disciplinary functions of those controlling the online environment may be outweighing its liberating potential" (p. 508).

Through a mixture of scheduling practices, postmodern style of humor and aesthetics, and adoption of anime and cartoons (genres that have strong association with children's entertainment and therefore despised by critics and the general viewers) for its programming lineup, Adult Swim constructs its status as cult.<sup>25</sup> Despite cult's low cultural capital status (Bourdieu, 1984), Adult Swim has been able to transform its low cultural capital into a powerful economic capital with the use of its official website. Fans of cult TV shows or shows that are under- or not appreciated by the mainstream audience tend to search for ways to find and connect with other like-minded viewers to "explain the value....of their text's appeal to someone who will listen" (Ross, 2008, p. 74). The Internet provides that very pipeline for the like-minded fans who can share and

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<sup>25</sup> Adult Swim's cult status was greater in the early years of the network when the programming block began later at night and contained more animes, a genre that was perceived to have a great cult value in the U.S. in the early 1990s (Mittell, 2004).



reciprocate their knowledge, opinions, and affect to their great pleasure. Adult Swim utilizes its official website to its best for fan participation. Through the message boards Adult Swim encourages its viewers to ask questions and post comments that the network can use for various purposes. Most importantly, fans' active online participation helps Adult Swim to build itself as a network that "listens" to its viewer. By offering space for fans/viewers to share their creative works (fan arts), submit program or game pitches (when solicited), and to create and submit bumps Adult Swim attempts to build an emotive relationship with its fans. Thus, how Adult Swim uses its website to generate greater emotional connection with its fans/viewers and how those emotional investments translate into greater and more tangible financial results (which goes beyond fans' purchasing of Adult Swim products) need to be investigated.

The popularity and success of the Adult Swim brand can be attributed to various factors: its subversive and absurd humor, representation of itself and its fans as "cool" and "different" through "hip" and subversive programming and marketing strategies, and its open invitation for its viewers to playfully engage with the brand beyond the tube and the construction of an affective relationship with its viewers through various interactive online features. But one of the greatest appeals (and key to success) of Adult Swim has been its effort in transforming the meaning of the cartoon genre by broadening the genre's assumed target audience. Mittell (2004) points out that unlike the other kid-oriented cable networks such as The Disney Channel or Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network (the channel space that Adult Swim shares with) has constructed its target audience not as kids but as a "taste culture," or "'people who like cartoons" regardless of age" (p. 84). Adult Swim is an acknowledgement of cartoon's appeal to adults. By embracing adult

cartoon fans Adult Swim has been able to provide space for adults to enjoy their “animated taste without scorn” (Mittell, 2004, p. 86) and tap into the potential of these fans’ intense fan practices and consumption (which is the type of fans that the industry prefers).

What needs to be paid attention to, then, is how Adult Swim has been able to use and subvert cartoons, a genre that has a long history of being associated with children’s entertainment,<sup>26</sup> to appeal to an adult audience. By excluding children as its core audience Adult Swim has been able to transform the meaning of the genre and reveal the precarious boundary between adult and children’s culture. In addition, by appropriating a genre that has been denigrated as “low taste” due to its long association with children’s culture, specifically for adult viewers, Adult Swim problematizes the cultural beliefs that construct adult values and tastes in a certain way (as if there is a “true” or “real” adult value or taste) as well as the cultural assumptions of adulthood and adult culture in the process, especially at a moment when conventional rules of adulthood is being challenged. By redefining the cultural meaning of cartoons as a legitimate adult entertainment Adult Swim reveals the arbitrariness of the boundary between adult and children cultural taste and how a genre (and the cultural values attached to it) can change and evolve in different cultural, industrial, and economic contexts. By examining the industrial practices that shifted the meaning of cartoons, the cultural context in which this transformation has been made (which is full of contentions and conflicts), and the Adult Swim programming format the next chapter will explain how the cartoon/animation

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<sup>26</sup> It is important to note that before cartoons/animations became a televisual genre the early cinematic animation was frequently created for the adult audience especially for its ability to provide “cutting social commentary” (Banet-Weiser, 2007, p. 183).

genre became a perfect vehicle for Adult Swim to construct itself as a powerful brand in the era of media convergence.

#### CHAPTER 4. CARTOONS FOR ADULTS: ADULT SWIM'S RECONTEXTUALIZATION OF THE CARTOON GENRE

On August 16, 2011, Parents Television Council (PTC), a nonprofit, conservative watchdog group that focuses on keeping track of television programming and making sure networks continue to provide “family-friendly” contents, released its study on the negative effects popular animated shows on prime time were having on children, especially those who are 12-17. One of the networks that PTC included in its study was Adult Swim. Although PTC acknowledged that Adult Swim has a TV-MA (rated for mature audiences only, or those above 17) rating, it included Adult Swim as part of the study and harshly criticized the network for containing too many explicit *adult* materials. In 2004, when Paramount Pictures released *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie*, various conservative groups criticized the movie for containing too many adult and campy references that seemed inappropriate for children to watch. One Christian family website posted a long list of warnings about the movie such as the inclusion of repeated male nudity and “suggestion of sadomasochism in transvestitism” (“Nautical Nonsense,” 2005; Banet-Weiser, 2007). *SpongeBob* came under further attacks when James Dobson, the founder of the right-wing Christian organization, *Focus on the Family*, accused the cartoon for its “pro-gay” message and claimed that it was “manipulating and potentially brainwashing” children with its homosexual agenda at a black-tie event for Republican Congress members and conservative organizations to celebrate Bush’s second term (Kirkpatrick, 2005; Banet-Weiser, 2007). Finally, conservative critics such as Diana West and George F. Will have consistently suggested that cartoon watching adults, particularly adult men, are signs of growing immaturity and infantilism of the American culture.

Underlying the PTC report, the Christian organizations' attack on *SpongeBob*, and conservative critics' warning about adults retreating into immature, childish fantasies by watching cartoons, are cultural assumptions about the cartoon genre as an exclusive children's entertainment and that as a children's entertainment form it must be pure and clear of messages that contain or hint sex, sexuality, or politics. Of course as Griffin (2004) points out, despite the popular conception of cartoons as children's entertainment, the cartoon genre has "always had a history of queerness" with the use of metamorphosis and exaggerated visual style creating "a constant potential for queerness to be read by audience members" (p. 105). Nevertheless, the popular assumptions about the genre continue to prevent cartoons from being widely accepted as a legitimate adult entertainment and are falsely used to accuse adults who enjoy watching cartoons as immature, infantile, or having a poor cultural taste. Unfortunately, these assumptions ignore the historical origin of cartoons—that cartoons were initially created with the mass audience in mind—and the role industrial practices play in defining the cultural meaning and values of cartoons. Furthermore, these assumptions not only misunderstand the cartoon genre—that it is inherently a children's genre and therefore pure and innocent in style and content—but also problematically naturalizes the binary of adult/child values and tastes.

The popularity of children's cartoons such as *SpongeBob SquarePants* and *Ren & Stimpy* among adult viewers and the rise of prime time animations that cater to adults call long-held assumptions about cartoons as a children's genre into question. In order to understand how Adult Swim has been able to successfully create an adult-oriented programming by using a lineup of cartoons that have long been understood as a

children's genre and why the cartoon genre became a perfect tool in constructing Adult Swim's network identity it is important to examine the historical trajectory of the cartoon genre and how cartoons transformed from a mass entertainment to children's entertainment and then back to mass entertainment through various industrial and cultural practices. One important point to make here is that unlike prime time animations that have successfully redefined cartoons as a mass entertainment through their intergenerational appeal, Adult Swim cartoons have been created specifically for adults as the network has built much of its successful marketing campaign around the motto, "All Kids Out of the Pool." Also, unlike Nickelodeon's late night programming, *Nick at Nite*, which was created to attract the adult audience but was careful not to alienate Nickelodeon's core children demographic (Murray, 2004) the goal of Adult Swim is to make cartoons a legitimate form of adult entertainment by actively excluding non-adults. If the cartoon genre has successfully been established as a "kid-only" cultural category by "driving away the adult audience" more so than by targeting the child audience (Mittell, 2003, p. 50), then Adult Swim has been able to redefine cartoons as an adult genre by driving away the child audience through scheduling and other industrial practices and thus confounding the cultural assumption of cartoons as a children entertainment form. By deliberately excluding the children audience Adult Swim has not only been able to redefine the cultural meaning of cartoons but also transform "cartoons" into a subversive form of entertainment, which fits the network's "cool" brand image.

Adult Swim's appropriation of cartoons to create an adult entertainment brand, its success in generating a young adult following, and its role in redefining the cultural meaning of cartoons in the process, warrant an in-depth investigation. How was Adult

Swim able to transform cartoons into a popular “adult-only” entertainment when the notion of cartoons as a children’s entertainment continued to hold strong even when the cartoon genre has become mainstreamed with the rise of prime time animation in the 1990s? Many scholars point out that cartoons inherently have intergenerational appeal and contradict the popular myth of cartoons being enjoyed only (or mostly) by children (Banet-Weiser, 2007; Hendershot, 1998; Mittell, 2003, 2004). The reason cartoons appeal to adults may be due to the undeniable fact that they are created by adults—even those that are created specifically for children (Hendershot, 1998). The intergenerational appeal of cartoons has largely been attributed to cartoons’ double coding strategy which uses crude, unsophisticated visuals to target children while using witty dialogue to target adults (Mittell, 2003, 2004). But as Farley (2003) points out, this double-coding theory neglects the fact that adults can enjoy crude, unsophisticated visuals (as much as kids) and kids can enjoy witty dialogue (as much as adults).<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, double-coding theory ignores the possibility that cartoons that are created specifically for adults (such as the Adult Swim cartoons) can utilize visuals that are as gross and playful as children’s cartoons as exemplified by *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*,<sup>2</sup> *Squidbillies*, and so on.

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<sup>1</sup> Farley (2003) problematizes the double-coding theory in explaining cartoons’ transgenerational appeal because it ignores the contextual factors (adults may not enjoy cartoons as much as children because they are excluded as core viewers through scheduling and marketing practices whereas kids may enjoy cartoons more than adults because they do not have many alternatives to cartoons) and is based on the false binary of taste (that adults have intellectual and sophisticated taste whereas children as “uncritical” and “indiscriminate” viewers enjoy only simple visuals and noisy sounds). By constructing a firm line between adulthood and childhood (and adult taste and child taste) double-coding leaves no space for adults and children to enjoy cartoons for the same reasons and in a similar fashion.

<sup>2</sup> The title of the *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* (*ATHF*) changed to *Aqua Unit Patrol Squad 1* in 2011 and then again to *Aqua Something You Know Whatever* in 2012. Because *ATHF*

To understand the cultural meaning of the cartoon genre it is important to investigate cultural assumptions and values that underlie the cultural definition of cartoons. In this chapter I will examine the historical transformation of cartoons and the industrial practices and conditions that enabled the genre's transformations within the U.S. context. Then I will explore how and why Adult Swim used cartoons to build its identity as an "adult-entertainment" brand and how cartoons transformed into a "legitimate" (as well as "cool") adult entertainment. But first, I will explore how genres (as generic categories) shape our understanding of and build expectations for television programs.

### **Genre: A Cultural Category**

Genre theory in television studies is underdeveloped compared to that in the field of literary and film studies. In fact, many of television's genre studies simply borrow arguments from the literary and film genre studies without any understanding of how they can be inapplicable in the television context because of different industrial practices and cultural values attached to the media.<sup>3</sup> One of the most influential studies that explore

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is the most familiar (and the longest held) title I will continue to use *ATHF* rather than its updated titles throughout this dissertation.

<sup>3</sup> Unlike film genres which are decided before production (particularly as a film's genre is generally determined by who is at helm-the director) and have a rather fixed characteristic (once the genre is established the film rarely deviates from it. For example, even though Wes Craven's—a director well known for horror movies—*Scream* series incorporated comedic elements they are still classified as a horror genre), television genres tend to be more unstable and fluid because television programs are generally serialized and syndicated (when they become popular). As seasons progress many television shows go through character and plot changes, which can lead to genre-shifting. Syndication can also play a role in genre-shifting as a show that was originally broadcasted as a teen drama may become a soap genre when aired on a cable television channel that focuses on airing soap operas as was the case with *Beverly Hills 90210*. The genre shifting nature of television is the reason why it makes it meaningless to understand a television show's genre at its production stage (Mittell, 2004).



genre theory within the television context is Jane Feuer's (1992) essay in *Channels of Discourse*. Along the line of film genre theorists such as Steve Neale, Feuer (1992) argues that genres are not natural/neutral products but are "ideological constructs that provide and enforce a pre-reading" (p. 144). As reflections of the industry and audience expectations, TV genres are defined "by a consensus between the industry, TV Guide, and the viewing audience" (Feuer, 1992, p. 146). By examining a particular television genre, sitcoms, Feuer provides a large-scale characterization of sitcoms' historical meaning and argues how external factors (cultural and industrial changes) have shifted the genre's internal characteristics (textual form and content). Thus, if sitcoms in the 1970s were political (such as *All in the Family* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*) due to the cultural climate at that time (and the industry responding to that political culture) sitcoms in the 1980s became depoliticized in response to the rise of Reaganite conservatism. But Mittell (2004) points out that this broad-based historical account places too much emphasis on the genre's textual features in our understanding of the cultural meaning of a genre (by excluding external forces as part of genre's cultural meaning). Furthermore, this approach makes us fail to understand how "genres work at any specific moment" or how genres "operate culturally" (Mittell, 2004, p. 7). If we want to understand how genres operate culturally then what we need is a history of genres as categories, not a historical chart of generic texts (Mittell, 2004).

Mittell's (2003, 2004, 2008) works which examine genre as a cultural practice are very useful for investigating how our understanding of a genre is constructed through various industrial practices based on a broad array of cultural assumptions and the transformations of the cultural meaning of the cartoon genre in the U.S. Cartoons, like

any television genres, have undergone various transformations due to non-textual factors such as technological developments and changes in industrial practices that include scheduling and niche programming (with the rise of the Internet and cable television). It is highly possible for the cultural meanings and values attached to the cartoon genre to shift while its textual characteristics to remain the same. This is particularly true with the Adult Swim cartoons. As exemplified by *Home Movies*, *The Jetsons*, or *Futurama*<sup>4</sup> the cultural understanding of these cartoon shows can change with different scheduling practices or being placed in a different network that has a strong “for adult” identity even when the texts remain unchanged from their original form. A wide range of practices (industrial, cultural, economic), which are outside of the text itself works to define and foster meanings of a genre. Thus, it is important to research a genre as a cultural category, which requires an analysis of how “the broad array of ways institutions and people talk about and use genre categories” define, shift, and redefine the meaning of a particular genre category (Mittell, 2008, p. 12). Based on this analytic technique called “generic genealogy,” which understands the categorical definition of a genre to differ in different historical and cultural contexts (Mittell, 2004), I will trace the historical transformation of cartoons and highlight how the linkage between cartoon and children’s entertainment (and the cultural assumptions that come with this linkage) has dominated our cultural

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<sup>4</sup> *Home Movie* originally aired on United Paramount Network (UPN) in 1999-2000 but got cancelled after five episodes. The show got picked up by Cartoon Network and became the first program to be aired as part of the Adult Swim program in 2001. *The Jetsons* is one of Hanna-Barbera’s classic cartoons. Although originally created as a prime time animation in the 1960s (as an attempt to continue the prime time animation boom that *The Flintstones* has started) *The Jetsons* (like *The Flintstones*) came to be understood as a children’s cartoon because it was frequently aired as part of the Saturday morning cartoons after the prime time boom waned. *Futurama* was created by Matt Groening, *The Simpsons* creator, and originally aired on Fox as part of its attempt to recreate the prime time animation boom.

understanding of cartoons for a long period of time (even after the rise of prime time animations in the 1990s and the numerous adult-oriented cartoon productions since then). This linkage can be seen as what Roland Barthes (1972) refers to as “myth” in the sense that it de-historicizes the history of cartoons as well as naturalizes the notion of cartoons as a children’s genre. As I demonstrate how the definition of a genre (as well as the audience) is never neutral but hinges upon various economic, industrial, and social norms and values I hope to point out how evaluating cartoons based on particular assumptions can do great injustice to both the cartoon genre and those who enjoy watching cartoons (both adults and children).

### **Cartoons for the Mass Audience: Theatrical Animations to Television Cartoons**

During the Hollywood Golden Era in the 1930s and 1940s, cinematic animations enjoyed a high cultural status. Referred to as “full animation,” theatrical animations were considered to be entertainment for the mass audience although they were widely acknowledged to have a stronger appeal to children than adults. But “with their double entendres, references to contemporary politics, and parodies of adult-oriented genres,” animations were understood to have intergenerational appeal (Hendershot, 1998, p. 22). Because cartoons were not firmly labeled as “children’s” programming at the time, theatrical cartoons were not deemed dangerous and therefore worth censoring (Hendershot, 1998). Things began to change with the monumental Paramount Decision in 1948, which ended the film industry’s vertical integration and shrank opportunities for animations to be exhibited in movie theaters. As animations found television as their second home (albeit with significant adjustments) the cultural values and assumptions about animations began to shift in a way that made them less suitable or appealing for the

adult audience. However, as the prime time animation boom in the early 1960s (although very short as the prime time animation experiment ended by the mid 1960s) indicates, cartoons were not completely deemed as illegitimate entertainment for adults. This link between cartoons and children programming only solidified in the late 1960s with advertisers' greater interest in targeting children (and the growing children's market) and the creation of Saturday Morning Cartoons, which became the only programming schedule where cartoons could be found.

In order to understand how cartoons, that were created for the mass audience, came to be exclusively understood as "children's entertainment" it is important to point out two important factors: first, the Supreme Court's anti-trust decision on the Paramount Case and second, animations' move to television as a result of the case (Mittell, 2003, 2004; Hilton-Morrow & McMahan, 2003). The Paramount Case is the landmark Supreme Court decision, which ruled in favor of the government that accused Paramount and seven other major Hollywood studios for violating the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890 by taking total control over movie exhibition and distribution. Before the Paramount Decision big Hollywood studios owned their own theaters, which guaranteed exhibition of their products across the country through block-booking practices. In the 1930s and 40s animations were mostly created as short fillers that would play during intermission between films rather than as feature films or for the purpose to generate direct studio income. But as single-bookings took over as the general theatrical practice after the Paramount Decision these short animations had almost no opportunities to be shown on big screens. Big production companies such as MGM began to shut down their animation studios to stay economically viable. Even though many animation studios were shut

down for production, studio owners came to realize that their old libraries of animation shorts had great potential to generate profits on television as they could be repeatedly shown on the new medium (without having to produce new shows) (Erickson, 1995; Mittell, 2003, 2004). So cartoons gradually moved from theaters to television, a medium that was being distributed widely at the time. But with the move to television cartoons had to be adjusted to fit the characteristics, practices, and production conditions of this new medium. These adjustments led to various textual transformations of cartoons that strengthened the association of cartoons with children's entertainment (Mittell, 2003, 2004).

First, theatrical cartoons were shorts that lasted only six to seven minutes. In order to fit into the half-hour television programming schedule it was imperative for these cartoon shorts to be strung together, which "significantly changed the way audiences experienced the shorts" (Mittell, 2003, p. 36). If adult viewers enjoyed watching cartoons as short breaks from feature films, children enjoyed watching cartoons as cartoons. So when cartoons became features themselves on television, they drew in primarily, but not exclusively, children as viewers (Mittell, 2003; 2004). Second, if theatrical cartoons were often seen as "cutting social commentary" for adults as they provided a social critique of the world through their flexible form that is beyond the physical boundaries of realistic representation, the television medium significantly limited that ability. Unlike films, television caters to the widest population as possible and thus is averse to risk-taking in dealing with controversial topics in case it might offend the audiences and hurt the ratings (which is the bread and butter of commercial television) (Banet-Weiser, 2007). As cartoons moved onto television the censorious practices of the television industry—by

FCC and the network Standards departments which were created by the broadcasters as a way to self-regulate in order to curtail federal (FCC and congressional) intervention—significantly altered the characters and contents of various existing theatrical films. One outcome from television’s censorious practices was the transformation of cartoons as a “white-only genre of programming” with the elimination of references to black and/or non-white characters (Hendershot, 1998; Mittell, 2003, p. 37). This practice was done for two big purposes: first, to avoid accusations of racism in the character representations and second, to appease to viewers and sponsors who did not want to see any positive representation of blacks/non-whites (Hendershot, 1998; Mittell, 2003, 2004; MacDonald, 1983). And of course this censorious practice was performed with the underlying principle of protecting the children from controversial images and topics (Hendershot, 1998; Mittell, 2003, 2004). Characters of color reappeared in cartoons later on but by casually being included in a fantasy world without racism or discrimination (a la “post-racism” style) they functioned to fulfill what Hendershot (1998) refers to as “cartoon tokenism” (p. 105). Third, as cartoons moved to television it became imperative for the animation industry to revitalize cartoons by redefining the animation form. Having a “much-reduced economies for production” (smaller scale, reduced budget, etc.) television required a new aesthetic form for animation (Wells, 2003, p. 15; 2008). In response to this new necessity, “reduced” or “limited” animation was created.

Limited animation basically refers to “the reduction of animation to its most essentialist form: little animation, no complex choreography, repeated cycles of movement, a small repertoire of expressions and gestures, stress on dialogue, basic design, and simple graphic forms” (Wells, 2003, p. 17). Because of the less sophisticated

visuals than classic cinematic cartoons and the repetitive, unrealistic, and fast-paced visuals, limited animation on television further solidified the notion that cartoons were for children (Mittell, 2003). Although limited television animations have played a big role in strengthening the notion that cartoons belong in the children's cultural realm, it is important to point out that this "minimalist" aesthetic did not emerge as a conscious art-making decision by cartoonists to specifically cater to the children audience. Rather it was created as a solution to accommodate the financial constraints of cartoon production for television in the post-Paramount Decision (Wells, 2003, Mittell, 2003, 2004).<sup>5</sup> Unlike full animations that required a great number of drawings and realistic images, limited animations significantly reduced the number of drawings by minimizing the use of motions and therefore reduced production costs.<sup>6</sup> And as Mittell (2003, 2004) points out, although limited animations' visuals may be less realistic, unsophisticated, and repetitive than the classic "full" animation (in other words, less focus on "animation" itself) its focus on scripts, characters, and witty dialogue provided enough reason for adults to enjoy the genre as well. With "greater concentration upon scripts and vocal performance" limited animation in the television era offered animation styles that differed from Disney's and actually broadened the appeal of cartoons to many adults through intelligent and sophisticated dialogue and jokes (Wells, 2003, p. 17; Mittell, 2003, 2004). Because of the focus on dialogue while visuals took a back seat, Chuck Jones, famous for the *Tom and Jerry* shorts and *Looney Tunes* cartoons, pejoratively called television cartoons "illustrative radio" (Wells, 2003, 2008; Mittell, 2003, 2004).

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<sup>5</sup> This may be due to the fact that the children's market has not been developed yet which made the television industry less interested in the child viewers at the time.

<sup>6</sup> The "limited" in the label signifies both the reduced number of drawings per second and the limited number of moving parts (Furniss, 1998; Farley, 2003).

The origin of limited animation can be traced back to the works by the United Productions of America (UPA) studio, which is known for its *Mr. Magoo* series and the 1950 theatrical animation, *Gerald McBoing Boing*. UPA was created in 1943 by three former employees at the Walt Disney Studio, Steve Bosustow, Dave Hilberman, and Zack Schwartz, who wanted to move away from the strict realistic style of Disney animation. With its “pared-down visual style, emphasis on dialogue, sound-effects, and repeated motion” (Mittell, 2004, p. 68) UPA radicalized cartoons with new animation style, which many animation studios in the U.S. adopted later on. If UPA created a template for reduced animation for television (Wells, 2008), Hanna-Barbera successfully industrialized the limited animation production for mainstream broadcasting (Mittell, 2004). Hanna-Barbera was created by two former animator directors at MGM (Metro-Goldwyn –Mayer), William Hanna and Joe Barbera, in 1957.<sup>7</sup> When MGM decided to shut down its animation studio due to economic reasons (mostly in response to the Paramount Decision) Hanna and Barbera created their own animation studio to continue their career as cartoonists. Hanna-Barbera cartoons, like the UPA style cartoons, relied on minimum visuals, simple designs, and dialogues. Hanna-Barbera cartoons were budget-driven as the company had only one-twentieth of the budget that was used to create a six-minute *Tom and Jerry* short at the MGM studio (Wells, 2008). As “character and performance driven” with “witty scripts and amusing vocal deliveries” (Wells, 2008, p. 147) Hanna-Barbera cartoons revitalized the flailing animation industry by reconfiguring the US television animation with low budget and a new professional animation model that seemed suitable for television (Wells, 2003, 2008; Mittell, 2004).

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<sup>7</sup> The order of the company’s name was decided by a coin toss.



The limited animation practices at Hanna-Barbera, however, were also criticized for lowering the quality and value of animation through shoddy production (based on “fast and efficient” principles). To this criticism Joe Barbera responded, “the kids don’t give a darn if there is 4000 or 40,000 drawings, so long as the entertainment is there” (quote in Wells, 2008, p. 147). Thus, Hanna-Barbera cartoons (like many other limited animations at the time) were created with children as the primary audience in mind. Most of the cartoons found their place in the late afternoon television schedule, which allowed many children who came back from school to watch. Although the late afternoon schedule made cartoons more accessible to children it did not exclude adults (particularly those who grew up with theatrical shorts which were being recycled on television) from watching them. In fact, the emphasis on dialogue and voice (not sound) of limited animation mainstreamed by Hanna-Barbera showed how the cartoon genre could potentially attract more adult viewers. As Hanna-Barbera privileged dialogue, script, and characters in their cartoons they made their cartoon style fit “the model of theatrical performance in early television drama and situation comedy,” genres that attracted many “adult” viewers (Wells, 2003, p 23). Thus, it was no surprise that Hanna-Barbera modeled its first “adult-oriented” animation, *The Flintstones*, after a sitcom genre.<sup>8</sup>

*The Flintstones* was created after John Mitchell, vice president at Screen Gems, suggested that the duo should develop a cartoon that is specifically for adults (Hilton-Morrow & McMahan, 2003). Despite more cartoons being created to cater to children (and children were increasingly becoming the main audience of cartoons) at the time this was not an absurd suggestion, as it turned out that 65% of the Hanna-Barbera cartoon

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<sup>8</sup> More specifically, *The Flintstones* was modeled after (by spoofing) the Jackie Gleason family sitcom, *The Honeymooners*.

viewers were adults (Javna, 1985; Hilton-Morrow & McMahan, 2003). In addition to high number of adults viewing cartoons, the emergence of American Broadcasting Company (ABC) as the third network paved way for *The Flintstones* to become the first prime time animated sitcom. Created in 1943, ABC was trailing behind CBS and NBC in ratings as the fledgling network. As a way to build up its ratings and differentiate itself from the other networks, ABC developed a strategy to air novelty shows and counter-program to CBS's and NBC's western series and Disney programs (Hilton-Morrow & McMahan, 2003). So on September 30, 1960, ABC aired *The Flintstones* during prime time and began the "unprecedented programming experiment" (Brooker, 2006, p. 2). *The Flintstones* was a hit, even to ABC's surprise, as viewers embraced this animation that took the formula of a nuclear family sitcom. The success of *The Flintstones*, however, was largely attributed to its genre-mixing, which enabled the animation to "establish more cachet and legitimacy than cartoon shorts" (Mittell, 2004, p. 72). The use of the sitcom genre not only added greater "adult" appeal to the show but also allowed it to offer "an ironic critique of the foibles and assumptions of middle-America" and thus to make the show more subversive (Wells, 2008, p. 148).

The success of *The Flintstones* paved way for the prime time animation boom as seven animated series aired on the networks during prime time at one point during the 1961-62 season (*The Rocky & Bullwinkle Show*, *The Jetsons*, *The Alvin Show*, and so on).<sup>9</sup> The boom, however, quickly waned as too many productions of adult-oriented

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<sup>9</sup> ABC's success with *The Flintstones*, *The Rocky & Bullwinkle Show* (*Rocky and His Friends* and *The Bullwinkle Show*), and other prime time animations has led both NBC and CBS to venture into prime time animation themselves. For instance, when ABC ended airing *Rocky and His Friends* as part of its late-afternoon programming in 1961,

animations saturated the prime time programming. Unfortunately, as Mittell (2003, 2004) points out, the “innovation-imitation-saturation” formula that played a big role in wiping out cartoons from prime time was largely left out in the accounts of the prime time animation bust as the industry accepted the notion that adults are inherently disinterested in the cartoon genre. This assumption, in addition to cartoons’ massive move to Saturday Mornings beginning in 1967, shaped the cultural understanding of animation (as an illegitimate entertainment form for adults) for a long time until prime time animations made a comeback in the 1990s.

### **Cartoons are For Kids: Containing the Genre to Saturday Mornings**

By the mid-1960s the prime time animation experiment was over and cartoons were nowhere to be found on the network programming schedule except on Saturday mornings. During the prime time animation boom networks had invested heavily in producing new animated shows but with the demise of prime time animation they needed to find ways to capitalize on the materials they had as leftovers. The result of the search was Saturday Morning Cartoons, which came to define the cultural understanding of cartoons for a long period of time (Mittell, 2003, 2004).

The establishment of Saturday Morning Cartoons was possible because of various cultural and industrial factors. First, the networks were able to make the decision to use their leftover cartoons to target the child audience because of their assumption of children as “uncritical moppets” who would not mind watching endless repeats, recycled materials, and shows with low production value (Mittell, 2003, p. 47). With this assumption about the child audience, it made economic sense for the networks to

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NBC picked up the show and aired it (*The Bullwinkle Show*) as part of its Sunday evening programming.

specifically target children with their animation productions. Second, by the time prime time animation boom waned advertisers' interest in the children's market significantly grew. As Mittell (2004) documents, children were never a significant part of the market or considered to be an important target audience. Even toy companies ignored the children's market thinking that they could not sell toys to children through television advertising, as children were not perceived to be active consumers. This all changed, however, in 1955, when a start-up toy company called Mattel took a huge risk and invested in advertising its product on television by sponsoring ABC's *The Mickey Mouse Club*. Mattel's move turned out to be a huge success as its Burp Gun ended up becoming the first bestselling toy nationwide. Mattel took a similar approach with its new toy, Barbie, in 1959 by advertising it on television and achieving greater success. Mattel's success in advertising toys through television made many companies that sell "child-friendly" products (particularly cereal companies) to pay attention to this new and growing market.<sup>10</sup> So as the networks scrambled to find the best time slot for toy and other merchandising companies interested in targeting children they settled on Saturday mornings, "the least attractive time slot on television" (Banet-Weiser, 2007, p. 183).

Despite being the ratings hinterland, networks were attracted to Saturday mornings for their cartoon products for a very particular reason: the density of child viewership during that timeslot. Although the number of total child viewers was higher for late-afternoon cartoons the proportion of child audience for Saturday mornings was higher (69% on Saturday mornings versus 40% in the late afternoons), which means advertisers that want to specifically target children could pay less rates when advertising

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<sup>10</sup> It might have been natural for the marketers to pay attention to this growing children market since it was part of the sizable baby boom generation.

on Saturday mornings by avoiding the unwanted adult audiences (Mittell, 2004). The shift in the television regulatory practices also played a significant role in helping Saturday Morning Cartoons to be established. By the time the networks started to follow their “profit-maximization” principles and engage in expanding cartoons to Saturday mornings television was no longer under the FCC stranglehold led by Newton Minow. Minow, famous for his television as a “vast wasteland” speech at the 1961 National Broadcasters Association convention, admonished networks for failing to serve the public interest by putting banal and mediocre quality products on television.<sup>11</sup> One of Minow’s main concerns was children’s television, an interest Robert F. Kennedy deeply shared. Minow (with RFK) devised the “rotating children’s hour” plan, which propelled the networks to join together in producing a series of “uplifting” children’s programs that could be aired twice a week (Hendershot, 1998). As a way to appease the new FCC commissioner, the networks (although reluctantly) worked on improving children programming by including more “educational” and “enlightening” programs rather than filling the program with cartoons, leading to the creation of shows such as *Discovery* (1962-71), *Exploring* (1962-66), and *1, 2, 3 – Go!* (1961-62) (Mittell, 2004). But in 1963 Minow left the FCC and with the more business friendly Johnson and Nixon administrations that followed, which suppressed FCC’s hands-on policy, the networks quickly moved to maximize their profit and shifted their low-profit generating children’s

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<sup>11</sup> Minow believed that it was FCC’s role to actively serve the public interest (and because his understanding of public interest was defined in elitist terms he was heavily criticized) (Hendershot, 1998). For Minow, cartoons were one of the worst offenders for lowering the quality of television (Banet-Weiser, 2007). Minow’s perception of cartoons as low-quality and “time-wasting” was not particularly out of ordinary and rather reflected the cultural perception of television cartoons at the time.

educational program to the more marginal Sunday mornings, filling the Saturday morning lineup with commercial cartoons (Hendershot, 1998; Mittell, 2004).

As Saturday morning became the ultimate bastion for children's cartoon (by excluding as many adult viewers as possible), the notion that cartoons are only for children and not legitimate for adults firmly solidified. Also, the cultural assumption about children as innocent and easily impressionable played a significant role in forming the textual characteristics of cartoons, which enforced the notion that cartoons are *not* for adults. When Saturday Morning cartoons were established Frederic Wertham's arguments in *Seduction of the Innocent* (1957), which insisted on the negative effects of comic books on children (as well as the potential of television to negatively affect children weaned on violent television shows) still had a powerful cultural holding and continued to operate, strengthening the cultural assumption about children as inherently pure and innocent beings who lacked critical understanding or rationality to discern good from bad. One of the organizations that upheld this stance was the most influential national child advocacy group in the US, Action for Children's Television (ACT), led by Peggy Charren. ACT acted upon the belief that children's television, particularly cartoons, needed to be educational and harmless. ACT's advocacy has "had a considerable effect in changing the character of cartoons" as not only "less violent and more banal" but also more "formulaic and unappealing" which prompted many cartoon producers and broadcasters to claim ACT was hampering free speech (Wells, 2008, p. 148; Hendershot, 1998). Despite complaints and criticisms against ACT, the networks listened to the organization for advice in their children's television programming. Television, after all, as "a government-regulated, advertiser-supported" medium needed (and wanted) to listen

to expert advocates on touchy or controversial issues (Hendershot 1998; Montgomery, 1989, p. 217).<sup>12</sup> But because networks cannot heed to every advocacy groups' demands and requests they picked one particular group as community representative for one issue, which naturally made them "choose the most moderate group" (Hendershot, 1998, p. 73). ACT was attractive to the networks (and the mainstream media which needed sound bites and quotes from reliable sources in their news stories) because of various factors. First, ACT's media tactics were very savvy with its arguments and demands supported through academic studies and professional research. By fostering "an image of organized efficiency" ACT made sure that it was not perceived as a group full of "hysterical mothers" but a *professional* movement which appeared more respectable to the media (Hendershot, 1998, p. 67).<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, ACT cooperated with various corporate sponsors such as General Mills and McDonald's to advance its goal of serving children's needs and worked within corporate commercialism (it did not take an anti-commercial stance) despite being created to curtail the over-commercialization and poor quality of children's TV programming. In other words, its "white, nonfeminist, and non-'extremist,'" stance made it "ideologically compatible" with corporations, FCC, and the networks (Hendershot, 1998, p. 74).

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<sup>12</sup> Montgomery (1989) documents that the relationship between the networks and advocacy groups became so "institutionalized" by the late 1980s that the network executives started to consider the advocacy groups not as a disruptive force but rather as a "feedback system" (p. 216).

<sup>13</sup> ACT preached white, middle-class values by emphasizing professionalism and women's work outside the home. Although it was a woman's activist group, its moderate, pro-child/concerned mother platform differentiated it greatly from other social movements at the time, such as Women's Liberation, Civil Rights, and Gay Liberation (Hendershot, 1998).

The relationship between ACT, FCC, and the networks started to strain significantly with Reagan administration's deregulatory policies that paved way for the creation of various toy-based children's cartoons in the 1980s. If toys were sold through advertisements that aired during children's cartoons, the 1980s witnessed the emergence (and popularity) of the product-based cartoons or what Engelhardt (1986) refers to as "program-length commercials" (p. 69). With the reigning principles of free-market, laissez-faire capitalism during the Reagan administration and the Mark Fowler commissioned FCC not opposing to shows created purely for the purpose of selling, the broadcasting standards lowered significantly and allowed commercialism's further invasion to television, leading to toy-based cartoons such as *Strawberry Shortcake*, *G. I. Joe*, *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe*, *My Little Pony*, and *Care Bears* to air on television.<sup>14</sup> Because the toy-based cartoons dominated the television animation landscape in the 1980s this period is regarded as "the worst moment in animation history" (Banet-Weiser, 2007, p. 184). These toy-based cartoons had two goals: first, they were created as marketing tools which would encourage children to pressure their parents to purchase toys that are being displayed on the screen and second they worked as instructional materials which taught children how they could play with the toys exhibited

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<sup>14</sup> It is important to point out that although the deregulatory policies during the Reagan administration has significantly reduced and downsized the broadcast Standards Departments (a move based on its "free market" approach which ironically clashed with the administration's "family values" agenda) Children's Standards Departments were left almost untouched because children's programs were understood to be sensitive issues (Hendershot, 1998). The sensitive issues, however, were mainly about violence and sexuality (and rarely commercialism).



in the program (Engelhardt, 1986; Hendershot, 1998).<sup>15</sup> The hypercommercialization of the cartoon genre through the production of toy-based cartoons reinforced the notion that cartoons are “universally ‘formulaic’, ‘inane’, and ‘mind-numbingly banal’” (Buckingham, 2000, p. 160) and further pushed away the adult viewers.

Adults’ further disinterest in cartoons, then, was not due to cartoons’ inherent characteristics but because of the way they were being scheduled (Saturday mornings, the ratings hinterland without alternative time slots), marketed (by toy companies as their product tie-ins), and created (as an instructional material on how toys should be played). With these contextual factors being disregarded cartoons continued to be culturally understood as a children’s genre and an illegitimate form of entertainment for adults. But as cartoons gradually moved away from the Saturday morning time slot and a fledgling network, Fox, began to air an animated series, *The Simpsons*, as part of its prime time programming in 1989 and attracted a great number of adult audiences, this cultural understanding of the cartoon genre required revisions.

### **Return of the Prime Time Animation: The Massification of the Genre**

By the time *The Simpsons* debuted and paved way for prime time animations to reemerge various cultural and industrial shifts had occurred changing the cultural perception of cartoons as children’s entertainment. First, Disney’s animation, *The Little Mermaid* (1989), was a box office hit, leading the Disney renaissance in theatrical animations (*Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, *The Lion King*, *Pocahontas*, and *Mulan* being some of the Disney animation titles that became box office successes in the 1990s). If

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<sup>15</sup> How children are effective persuaders of their parents’ consumption is well documented by Juliet Schor in *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture* (2005).

Disney animations contributed in mainstreaming animations by inviting more adult audience to enjoy the genre the growing cult following of Japanese animations (known as animés or Japanimations) by older (not the average “children”) viewers in the 1990s also played a significant role in shifting the cultural understanding of the animation genre.<sup>16</sup> If Disney was the major player<sup>17</sup> in bringing adults back to animated films Fox played a major role in bringing animations back to prime time television and recontextualizing the animation genre for the adult audience.

Fox first launched on October 9, 1986 as the fourth network in the U.S. Just like ABC, which was a fledgling network in the 1950s, Fox found difficulties competing against the three major television networks. As ABC used animation to distinguish itself from the other two networks Fox decided to air *The Simpsons*, which was originally created as animated shorts for *The Tracey Ullman Show* in 1987, during Sunday night prime time. This was a programming decision that only Fox could afford to make as it had less to lose and more room to take risk in experimenting with programming. Fox’s strategy to include a cartoon show as part of its prime time program paid off as *The Simpsons* became the first Fox series to land in the Top 30 ratings. Just like the early 1960s, the success of *The Simpsons* encouraged Fox (as well as other networks) to

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<sup>16</sup> It is important to point out that television animations in Japan appeal to people of all ages rather than to a specific age segment. Thus, anime in Japan is a more “mainstream pop cultural phenomenon” whereas it still conveys a “sub” cultural feel in the States, despite its increased presence on American television. This may be partly due to the cultural differences in understanding the animation genre (Mittell, 2008; Napier, 2005).

<sup>17</sup> Disney also played a major role in paving way for Japanimation’s US invasion as the company was responsible for distributing many of Hayao Miyazaki’s masterpieces in the States. In 1996 Disney made deals with the Tokuma Publishing (Disney-Tokuma Deal) which granted Disney a worldwide (with the exception of Japan) home video distribution rights to many of Studio Ghibli’s (a film and animation studio Miyazaki co-founded) works, including *Kiki’s Delivery Service*, *My Neighbor Totoro*, *Mononoke Hime*, *Grave of the Fireflies*, and *Spirited Away*.

include more animations on their prime time schedule including *King of the Hill* and *Futurama*.<sup>18</sup> The reason an animated series like *The Simpsons* was able to be included in a network's prime time schedule is not merely because Fox was a new network but also because of a generational shift among the television networks' executives. The new generational of network executives grew up watching cartoons at night such as *The Flintstones*, *The Jetsons*, and *Johnny Quest* and therefore were familiar with the concept of prime time animations (Hilton-Morrow & McMahan, 2003). At least that is what Matt Groening, the creator of *The Simpsons* and *Futurama*, seems to think. He explained that one of the reasons Fox picked up *The Simpsons* as part of its prime time program is due to some Fox executives remembering watching prime time animation as kids and therefore not thinking that prime time animation was an outlandish concept. By reviving prime time animation, Groening explained, these first generation of network executives who weaned on television cartoons were "trying to emulate" what they grew up watching (Hilton-Morrow & McMahan, 2003, p. 80). Furthermore, if the network executives were fans of animation that meant that it was highly possible for many adult members of the viewing audience to be fans of animation as well. And that seemed to be the belief of many industry insiders including Cartoon Network's executive vice-president, Betty Cohen, and Comedy Central's senior vice president of programming, Eileen Katz, who both attributed their networks' prime time animation scheduling to the viewing adult audience who grew up with television animation (Hilton-Morrow & McMahan, 2003).

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<sup>18</sup> While Fox has found enormous success with its prime time animations (although there were moments of ups and downs such as the cancellation of *The Family Guy* in 2002) other networks have not been as successful (for instance, the failure of NBC's shortly aired *God, the Devil and Bob* and ABC's *The Critic*).

The creation of the new fourth network (Fox), the emergence of a new generation of network executives who grew up watching television cartoons, and a growing number of adult audience who did not necessarily think that cartoons were just for kids and openly enjoyed watching television cartoons all contributed to generating the second prime time animation boom. Another factor that played a major role in recontextualizing cartoons as a legitimate adult entertainment was the growing cable industry and the creation of cable networks that catered to and valued specific audience taste. Learning from Fox's prime time animation experiment cable networks that were particularly invested in attracting the young adult demographic began to create their own prime time animations. Because the cultural understanding of cartoons as children's entertainment still had a strong hold these networks considered that using the genre that is associated as children's entertainment to target adults to be subversive, a point of appeal to many young adults. Coupled with cartoons' inherently unruly and disruptive representation the use of cartoons for adult-oriented satires seemed to not only subvert the principles of cartoons but to critique "the conservatism of made-for-television cartoons" (Wells, 2003, p. 30), creating an aura of "hipness" for the networks that successfully deployed their animated series. Matt Groening's *The Simpsons*, MTV's Liquid Television (which included Mike Judge's *Beavis and Butt-Head*, *Daria*, and *Aeon Flux*), and Matt Stone and Trey Parker's *South Park* (which continues to air on Comedy Central) are all examples of how animated series have helped particular networks to build or strengthen a "cool, subversive" network identity that attracts the young adult viewers.<sup>19</sup> For these networks animated series have proven not only to be valuable additions to their program

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<sup>19</sup> Ironically, lewd animated shows with questionable contents such as *Beavis and Butt-Head* or *South Park* seem more subversive when children consume them.

(which allowed these networks to differentiate themselves from others) but also an “essential component” in establishing their distinctive network identities or brand images (Sandler, 2003, p. 90).

Banet-Weiser (2007) argues that the renaissance in prime time animation is a symbolic reflection of the current postmodern cultural climate in the United States. As postmodern expressive forms animations take up a self-reflexive tone that questions “the viewer’s relationship to an image or narrative” (Banet-Weiser, 2007, p. 187). The 1990s prime time animation then are symptoms of what Brian Ott (2007) refers to as “hyperconscious television,” television programs that consciously play with conventional media formulas and formats (through eclecticism, intertextuality, and self-reflexivity), deconstruct various traditional formal categories through irony and generic hybridity, pastiche, and such, and continuously engage the audience in discussing the meanings. But “hyperconscious television” is not the only postmodern form of television. With nostalgia being one of the postmodern conditions (Lyotard, 1984) the 1990s gave rise to “nostalgia television” as well “in response to the fears and anxieties brought on by the dramatic social, political and economic changes underlying the shift from the Industrial Age to the Information Age” (Ott, 2007, p. 138). As nostalgia became “an important mode of public discourse in the 1990s” (Ott, 2007, p. 138) the television industry took notice. ABC aired *The Wonder Years* (1988-1993), Nick at Nite, which was created as a late night programming block for Nickelodeon in 1985 continued to recontextualize old sitcoms as classics—without “their original historical and cultural meanings” (Murray, 2004, p. 73)—by pandering to adult viewers’ fond memories and nostalgia for the time those shows originally aired, and Viacom launched a new cable network, TV Land, that provided

adult viewers an escape to a simpler time of their childhood. With the rise of prime time animation and a generational change among the television network executives and adult viewers (who grew up watching television cartoons and reject the notion of cartoons being only for children) emerged Cartoon Network that “mobilizes discourses of nostalgia and classicism to appeal to adults, constituting the unified “psychographic” of “people who like cartoons” (Mittell, 2004, p. 91).

The growth of the cable industry in the 1990s has increased the number of outlets for less “mainstream” or “conventional” shows to air on television, which attributed to the increasing number of animation production on cable television. The shift in the cable industry has also enabled a greater number of “taste-based” cable networks that associate their channel identity with the audience’s larger lifestyle and set of tastes to emerge, including Cartoon Network (Mittell, 2004). By targeting people who enjoy watching cartoons regardless of their age, whether because of the fond childhood memories, aesthetic pleasure, or entertaining contents, Cartoon Network solidified itself as a “taste-based” brand. Having a vast library of Hanna-Barbera cartoons Cartoon Network has been able to appropriate many classic animations such as *The Jetsons* and the *Space Ghost* series to “fall in line with the network’s brand identity and to appeal to adult viewers” (Sandler, 2003, p. 99). And because many adult viewers remember Hanna-Barbera’s limited animation style nostalgically and fondly as the symbol of the “Golden Age” style, Cartoon Network has been able to target them (in addition to the children viewers who considered these cartoons to be new and fresh) as the ideal audience without many difficulties (Hendershot, 1998). One important characteristic about Adult Swim’s use of Hanna-Barbera cartoons is that it did not merely recycle them by airing the entire

shows in their original form but also repurposed them by placing the “nostalgic has-beens and counter-cultural fringe figures” (such as *Space Ghost*, *Harvey Birdman*, and *Zorak*) in a new cultural context (Space Ghost as a talk show host, Harvey Birdman as a lawyer, Sealab scientists as self-centered, immature adults) through playful engagement with irony and self-referentiality (Mittell, 2004, p. 86; Sandler, 2003). By recontextualizing the classic cartoon characters Adult Swim successfully added new meanings to the original animations with “alternative, hip, glossy sheen” (Sandler, 2003, p. 99) and generated a new hybrid programming style of “campy nostalgia” (Mittell, 2004). If Brian Ott’s (2007) understands “hyperconscious” and “nostalgia” television to be at the polar opposite of postmodern television, Adult Swim demonstrates that the two television styles can be mixed and merged to form a new hybrid postmodern television style.

A good example of Adult Swim’s hybrid postmodern television style (nostalgia and hyperconscious television) is *Robot Chicken*, Adult Swim’s low-budget, stop-motion animation that is packed with popular culture references and parodies. Created by Seth Green (who as the voice actor of Chris Griffin of *Family Guy* already had connections with Adult Swim) and Matt Senreich, former editorial director of *Toyfare* (a monthly magazine for action figure collectors) and *Wizard* (magazine of comics, entertainment and popular culture), *Robot Chicken* debuted in 2005. As one of the most popular Adult Swim originals (it is routinely among Adult Swim’s highest-rated shows, trailing just behind *Family Guy* repeats) (Itzkoff, 2006), *Robot Chicken* has helped Adult Swim to set high ratings for late night programming.<sup>20</sup> *Robot Chicken* has been able to appeal to many

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<sup>20</sup> *Robot Chicken* is an Adult Swim original series produced outside of Williams Street. Green and Senreich who originally planned to create short satirical stop motion animation videos for the Internet (their series landed on Sony Screenblast, a now defunct website)

adult viewers because of its nostalgic appeal that comes from the childhood pleasure of playing with toys, especially action figures. Explaining *Robot Chicken*'s popularity, Mike Johnson, co-editor of *Tim Burton's Corpse Bride* (another stop-motion animation that was a blockbuster hit in 2005), explained: "The show looks like what really every kid did: You got out your cars and G. I. Joes and smashed them together. The show works because it captures the joy of playing with your toys" (cited in Winer, 2007, n.p.). This sentiment is echoed by Keith Crofford, Cartoon Network's vice president of production, who stated: "If it can evoke memories of your childhood or playing with your toys, it just helps even more" (cited in Itzkoff, 2006, n.p.). What the popularity of *Robot Chicken* indicates is how youth nostalgia has become an essential component of adult culture (although that youth nostalgia seems to be confined to male youth nostalgia) (Itzkoff, 2006).

But *Robot Chicken* is not just popular because of its nostalgic appeal (evoking childhood memories of playing with toys). It is also popular because the show pokes fun at those popular toys (such as G. I. Joes, Transformers, He-Man, Care Bears, etc.) and subverts the childhood memories of playing with those toys by reducing those toy characters as sources of undoubtedly adult but also totally juvenile jokes (for instance, Optimus Prime having prostate cancer, Ken and Barbie having bedroom problems, and Care Bears' engagement with genocide) (Itzkoff, 2006). By recontextualizing various toy characters *Robot Chicken* not only questions innocence that is attached to toys and childhood play but also suggests how adulthood play can be as fun as, if not more fun

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and *Late Night with Conan O'Brien* established their own production studio, Stoopid Monkey. Green and Senreich reached out to Corey Campodonico and Alex Bulkley at ShadowMachine Films, a studio that creates music videos, to create their series, which later turned into a pilot for the Adult Swim original series (Itzkoff, 2006; Winer, 2007).



than, the childhood play. In the process, *Robot Chicken* twists “the cultural distinctions that are drawn between auteur-based animation and toy- and license-driven animation” (Banet-Weiser, 2007, p. 183) as it demonstrates how toy-based animation (although the toy characters are completely redefined and recontextualized) can be creative and “adult-oriented.”<sup>21</sup>

### **Flashimation, Limited Bandwidth and Adult Swim: Television Cartoons Grow Up**

Cartoon Network (and to some extent Nickelodeon) played a significant role in expanding cartoons’ target audience to adults by forming the channel’s identity as a taste-based network. By stacking its programming schedule with classic cartoons and animes, Cartoon Network made it feel natural for adults to watch (and enjoy watching) cartoons. Despite many adults’ pleasure in watching cartoons (even those that were created specifically for children such as *SpongeBob SquarePants*) Cartoon Network has been the only network that has provided a sense of “assurance” and “acceptance” for cartoon loving adults. Even Nickelodeon which have cartoons that are invitational of adult viewership through edgy humor and adult references makes sure that adult viewers does

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<sup>21</sup> *Robot Chicken* is not the only Adult Swim show that has appropriated childhood iconography to subvert childhood memories. In 2006, Adult Swim aired one of the most iconic children’s television shows, *Pee-wee’s Playhouse*, which many of its core viewers grew up watching as part of the Saturday morning program in the 1980s. Because of the show’s “anarchical spirit and frequent double entendres” (as Paul Reuben, the actor who plays Pee-wee Herman, originally created the character for adult-themed jokes) *Pee-wee’s Playhouse* appeared to be a good fit with the Adult Swim programming lineup (Short, 2006). By airing on Adult Swim, *Pee-wee’s Playhouse* was recontextualized into an adult show and appealed to the “ironic nostalgia” of many Adult Swim fans. In addition to *Pee-wee’s Playhouse*, Adult Swim aired a popular BBC show, *Look Around You*, in 2009. As a parody of children’s educational shows of the 1970s and ‘80s, *Look Around You* pokes fun at the dead seriousness and formality of the old educational shows through its absurd and nonsensical humor while retaining the feel of those programs. This is the reason Robert Popper, the co-creator of the show, said that *Look Around You* was created with “weird fondness” evoking a sense of “horrible nostalgia” (Heisler, 2009).

not overthrow its “kids first” principles. This was particularly highlighted in the *Ren & Stimpy* debacle when Nickelodeon kicked out the show’s creator, John Kricfalusi, from production because it believed Kricfalusi failed to make the show “kid-friendly” by making it too risqué and offensive. What Nickelodeon did not understand is that despite its presence on Nickelodeon *Ren & Stimpy* was actually “an adult cartoon show that brought along kids for the ride,” not the other way around (Hendershot, 2004, p. 183).<sup>22</sup> The network’s expectation for *Ren & Stimpy* to fit the “kid” animation mold was more of its “wishful thinking” void of any understanding of the cartoon’s appeal (Hendershot, 2004; Langer, 1997, 2004).<sup>23</sup>

If Nickelodeon operated under the cultural assumption that television animations are primarily for children (and adult viewers are add-ons) and therefore segregated its children’s cartoon programming from their nighttime programming, Nick at Nite, that aired old sitcoms and dramas, Cartoon Network operated against that cultural assumption by making cartoons available throughout its schedule. If cartoons were found only in the mornings and afternoons at Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network placed cartoons throughout the day by modeling its scheduling practice after CNN (also owned by Ted Turner) and

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<sup>22</sup> Nickelodeon claimed it ended its relationship with Kricfalusi not simply because of their disagreement over the cartoon’s content (as it did not want to be perceived as a company that suppresses artist’s individual creativity) but because of difficulties working with the artist (missed deadlines, budget problems, etc.). Kricfalusi criticized the network for its hypocrisy as it was Nick’s late approval of scripts, stories, and layout that caused delays in production (Gehr, 1992; also, Langer, 1997, 2004).

<sup>23</sup> *Ren and Stimpy*’s adult appeal is largely attributed to its aesthetic (“trash” aesthetic) style. Kricfalusi explained that his cartoon was modeled after the classic animations from the Warner Bros. Studio in the 1950s dominated by artists such as Tex Avery, Chuck Jones, and Bob Clampett (Gehr, 1992). This animation style satisfied many adult viewers “nostalgic for an animation feel of earlier cinematic cartoons” (Banet-Weiser, 2007, p. 198). Meanwhile, Langer (2004) argues that the show’s deliberate use of bad taste and animatophile trash aesthetic appealed to many young adult viewers who considered it to be hip and alternative to the mainstream culture.

ESPN that used a single genre (news, sports) to reach taste-based audiences in building up their network identity (Mittell, 2004). So when Cartoon Network developed Adult Swim, its late-night programming block, it filled the programming time slot with cartoons. But of course programming time slots are not neutral categories but connote various cultural and industrial assumptions and expectations. If morning and afternoon programs cater to the “lowest common denominator” (the child audience) late night programs are generally a child-free zone or “a safe-harbor for indecency” as the industry insiders would say it (Hendershot, 1998, p. 16). So cartoons that feature in Adult Swim tend to be more risqué and subversive than those that air earlier on Cartoon Network.

But Adult Swim retains Cartoon Network’s “campy nostalgia” style of animation programming by actively repurposing animation cels from its vast cartoon library as exemplified by *SGC2C*, *Harvey Birdman*, *Attorney at Law*, *Sealab 2021* and *The Brak Show* that filled the early Adult Swim program schedule. The increasing number of adults who grew up watching television cartoons were not only nostalgic for classic animations but also openly embraced cartoons as “adult” entertainment, which provided a great incentive for Adult Swim to recycle animation cels from its animation archive. Because using the Hanna-Barbara archive for the original program production significantly reduced the production cost (and considering that one of Mike Lazzo’s goals was to produce Adult Swim programs at the lowest cost as possible) it made economic sense to repurpose many old cartoon cels when creating original Adult Swim programs (the “hip” or “cool” aura that this recontextualization generated was just an added bonus). In addition to the Cartoon Network’s cartoon library, which played an important role in the aesthetic feel and style of the Adult Swim original programs, computer and software

technology played an important role in shaping the style and sensibility of Adult Swim programs.

One of the important software applications that emerged in the mid-1990s was Adobe Flash that became an important tool in animation and multimedia content creation for years to come. Because Flash is easily accessible and is relatively inexpensive it became widely used by many amateurs (and professionals) who were interested in creating content for the web. With Adobe Flash a new web-friendly animation format called “flashimation” emerged, popularized by John Kricfalusi, the creator of *Ren & Stimpy* who used Flash to produce *The Goddamn George Liquor Program*, the first cartoon series made specifically for Internet distribution (Simpson, 2007). Flashimation allows animations to be made with small file sizes and “tends to feature flat geometric shapes with clean outlines, simple coloring and shading, smoother animation than that usually seen in cel animation, and a large number of repeated animation loops or cycles” (Daubs, 2010, p. 53).<sup>24</sup> If the pre-Flash era required a team or an entire studio with expensive technological equipment to create media content Flash made it possible for the content production to become an individual process and encouraged more less skilled artists to create materials.<sup>25</sup> The popular belief is that flashimation as an alternative to television animation is independent from the institution of television. However, Daubs (2010) argues that this understanding ignores the complex interrelationship between

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<sup>24</sup> The mathematically calculated and rendered drawings of flashimation may be smoother and cleaner than hand drawn cels but can also appear fake and cold (Simpson, 2007).

<sup>25</sup> Because Flash decreases the production time for individual animators, allows users with greater control over their work, and opens more opportunities for amateurs and those outside of traditional media to participate it is frequently hailed as a democratizing tool in media production (Strukov, 2007; Daubs, 2010).

industrially produced and independently produced animation. Even Flash's ability to reduce file size is greatly indebted to the Hanna-Barbera limited animation style with terms such as "keyframe" and "tweening" deriving from the Hanna-Barbera's limited animation system (Daubs, 2010).

One factor that affected the visuals of flashimation was the limited bandwidth in the 1990s, a severe constraint that many web designers had to deal with at the time (Baldwin, Ludwick, & Duabs, 2006; Manovich, 2001). The limited bandwidth created a unique visual style for flashimations that differed significantly from hand-drawn cel animations with simpler and cleaner shapes and drawing, more limited coloring, and simpler characters and animation overall, a phenomenon that resembled the creation of limited television animation as an alternative to more artistic and realistic full animation in the 1950s (Baldwin, Daubs, & Ludwick, 2006). Flashimation and its visual style started to really have an affect on television animation when television productions began to incorporate web animation in its programs as a way to cut production cost.<sup>26</sup> Adult Swim is one of the networks that has actively incorporated Flash animation techniques in its production. For instance, Adult Swim aired two Flash animated shorts (*The Jetsons: The Best Son* and *The Jetsons: Father and Son Day*) created by the now-defunct Spumco, the company that John Kricfalusi co-created and developed Nickelodeon's *Ren & Stimpy*, in 2002. But Adult Swim's real venture in flashimation began with its production of *Harvey Birdman, Attorney at Law*. With flash, Adult Swim has been able to develop a unique Do-it-Yourself (DIY) aesthetic style for its original series. Furthermore, the visual aesthetics of flashimation has enabled Adult Swim to contain more crude and obscene

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<sup>26</sup> Flash animation production is significantly cheaper than the traditional cel animation production as flashimation requires less resource (time, labor, etc.).

contents, making the animation more “adult-oriented” (Baldwin, Ludwick, & Daubs, 2010).<sup>27</sup> So from *Harvey Birdman, Attorney at Law* to *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* and *Squidbillies* it has become common for Adult Swim flashimations to have “crude or sexually suggestive language and visuals” only appropriate for adults (Daubs, 2010, p. 55). Furthermore, with the use of flash Adult Swim’s aesthetic style resembles that of user-produced videos, generating “greater identification between producers and audience” (Daubs, 2011, p. 115). Enabling Adult Swim’s aesthetic style to resonate with many Adult Swim fans (among those are amateur/professional cartoonists who use flash for their own creative works) flash contributes to Adult Swim’s formation of an affective relationship with its fans, which has become a very powerful (as well as a profitable) component in today’s brand culture (Banet-Weiser, 2012).

Adult Swim’s incorporation of flashimation is not merely the networks’ aesthetic decision or economic decision to cut down its production cost. Another important reason Adult Swim quickly adopted flashimation is because of its use of the Adult Swim website to distribute its content. Since its creation Adult Swim has actively used its official website as a platform to distribute its materials (short clips, full episodes, etc.) as part of its brand extension strategy. But when Adult Swim first came to scene more than a decade ago the limited capacities of computer hardware and internet bandwidth prohibited Adult Swim (and any other television networks and studios that were interested in distributing their content on digital platforms) from distributing its video

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<sup>27</sup> As Daubs (2010) points out, because Flashimation emerged as an alternative to television animation it contains a somewhat rebellious, subversive spirit. In fact, based on Kricfalusi’s experience with Nickelodeon, his return to flashimation can be understood as a rebellious act against the power of television institution and its suppression of individual creativity.

contents without encountering technical problems such as the loading time, poor quality of sound and image, and so on. These technological limitations (inadvertently) created a new form of programming called “digital shorts” as the television industry scrambled to adapt their programs to fit the digital platforms (Dawson, 2011). To ensure faster loading time without distorting the image and sound quality of the videos and more pleasurable viewer experience the digital video files needed to be kept at an absolute minimum (Dawson, 2011). Having smaller file size, flashimations have helped Adult Swim to solve some of the technical problems that come with uploading its clips and videos online. Unlike conventional television animated shorts flashimations tend to be shorter just like many classic cartoons in Cartoon Network’s cartoon archive (which are 7 to 11 minutes long). Adult Swim’s original programs (most of which incorporate flash) mainly run 15 minutes (11 minutes without the commercials) instead of the conventional television running time of 30 minutes or an hour. Adult Swim’s deviation from the standard running time may be due to its incorporation of flashimation (Daubs, 2010), which has enabled the network to save money in its production cost as well as to satisfy the Internet’s requirement of shorter videos for better online viewing experience (Dawson, 2011).

Adult Swim’s successful attempts to recontextualize cartoons as a legitimate adult entertainment are mainly done through various practices that are not necessarily textual. Just like the Saturday Morning cartoons shifted the cultural meaning of cartoons Adult Swim has been able to challenge the children-cartoon linkage by creating adult-oriented cartoons and scheduling them late at night. The network’s strategic inclusion of animes, which are more adult-oriented and thus, have more cultural legitimacy as an adult entertainment than the animations in the U.S. in its programming schedule has also

contributed in establishing the network's identity as an adult entertainment brand despite (or in this case because of) the use of cartoons.<sup>28</sup> What these practices signify is that the cultural meaning and understanding of a genre can shift for reasons that are beyond the text. That is why Mittell (2003, 2004) fervently (and rightfully) argues that television genres must be understood and studied as cultural categories. Once we understand how various cultural and industrial forces operate to define a genre we can avoid misunderstanding the generic characteristics of a genre to be innate and ideologically neutral and falsely accusing fans of those particular genres as wrong, abnormal, or even detrimental to social progress and democratic civilization. Understanding genres as cultural categories also helps us to see the fallacy in the adult-child binary and correct the assumptions about adult-child taste that follows, as it is both harmful to our understanding of adults and children. As Buckingham (2000) points out when we dismiss and condemn cartoons as a "childish," "time-wasting," and "banal" genre we tend to do so without questioning the criteria that define the genre as such and provide "*evidence* that might exemplify and support" those arguments (p. 161, emphasis in original). Those claims, then, appear as neutral, and as self-evidently true while evacuating the "*social* basis for such judgments of taste" from the conversation and leaving the assumptions and values on which those judgments are based (about cartoons, about children and children's culture, about adults and adult culture, and so on) unchallenged, when in fact those

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<sup>28</sup> Although this is gradually changing animes have been hit hard by the American media because of the cognitive dissonance they create from the idea that cartoons are for children and therefore must be pure and free of sex and violence. In their criticism of animes, the American media have mainly focused on animes' erotic and violent characteristics (Yang, 1992).



assumptions and values “reflect the social positions and investments of those who make them” (Buckingham, 2000, p. 161).

So far I have focused on providing a historical background on the emergence of Adult Swim as a popular late night programming and an “adult” entertainment brand within its cultural, industrial, and technological contexts. The creation and popular reception of Adult Swim has been possible because of various factors including the rise of cable television and niche programming, popularization of the Internet which allows television networks to extend their programming contents to their websites and provide viewers an interactive brand experience, the reemergence of prime time animation in the 1990s, a generational transition in network executives and adult audience who are more receptive to the idea that adults can enjoy watching cartoons, the changing reality of social and economic conditions that challenge the long-held assumptions about adulthood and adult culture, and so on. Adult Swim, then, can be understood as a product of moments in transition. And as de Grazia (1996) points out, it is in the moments of transition when tensions around meanings of identities become especially visible (cited in Banet-Weiser, 2012). Although Adult Swim subverts cartoons as a children’s genre through its programming practices and branding strategies it does so by highlighting the tensions surrounding the meaning of “adulthood,” “adult taste,” and “adult culture.” Despite the proliferation of “adult-oriented” cartoons and increasing number of adult cartoon fans the notion that cartoons are for kids and that adults who watch cartoons are abnormal continues to persist. Thus, the study of Adult Swim has a great potential to contribute and enrich the cultural discourse about adulthood and adult taste. As I interrogate how Adult Swim builds itself as a preeminent adult entertainment brand and

addresses and understands its “adult” audience, I ask how its conception of “adult” relate to or contradict the prevailing cultural assumptions of adulthood/adult taste, how Adult Swim audiences/fans understand Adult Swim as a programming and a brand, and what their cultural expectations from Adult Swim and the Adult Swim community are.

## CHAPTER 5. METHODOLOGY: STUDYING ADULT SWIM CONTEXTUALLY

The goal of this dissertation is to examine Adult Swim as a popular adult-oriented entertainment brand within the context of the industrial and sociohistorical conditions in the U.S. This dissertation is particularly interested in investigating how Adult Swim has been able to become the number one rated network among young adults, particularly men between 18-34, and build itself up as a popular “adult” entertainment brand through various programming and branding strategies that subvert traditional understanding of adulthood and adult cultural taste. By aggressively blurring the boundaries between adult and non-adult cultural tastes (such as reappropriating cartoons and destabilizing them as a children’s genre) Adult Swim conceives its audience as young adults who are unconventional, ironic, and media savvy. The network’s construction of its audience as hip young adults who reject standard adult life not only engages with the social, political, and economic conditions in which this new adult identity emerged but also appeals to the young adults’ sensibility, affect, and feelings that are important in forming relationships with the audience in today’s brand culture.

Despite the increasing signs that cartoons are no longer just for kids with the resurgence of prime time animations and the gradual erosion of Saturday Morning Cartoons in the 1990s, the notion of cartoons as a form of children’s entertainment continued to prevail in the US as evidenced by the mainstream media’s and conservative organizations’ accusations against *Beavis and Butt-Head*, a cartoon that targeted older (non-children) audience, for its subversive messages that encourage impressionable

children to engage in violent acts.<sup>1</sup> Cultural critics continued to condemn adults who enjoy watching cartoons (especially those without kids) as symbols of infantilized culture, although cartoons such as *The Simpsons* or *Beavis and Butt-Head* “frequently functioned as a wider cultural critique” (Stabile & Harrison, 2003, p. 1). Furthermore, the pop culture that young adults of the 1990s enjoyed—which included *Beavis and Butt-Head*—were simply dismissed through catchwords such as “slackers” and “grunge” and those young adults who could not find jobs (and, for that reason, may have spent many hours in front of television) were easily accused of not taking “adult” responsibilities despite the “paralyzing economic and ecological anxiety” caused by neoliberal policies that older generations signed onto (Wilson, 2011, n.p.).

Alongside this shift in the formation of adulthood were the rise of cable television and the emergence of new media technologies, which privilege niche audience/marketing that further “commodity” identities based on differences from the mainstream (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Cartoon Network was created at this moment when the new media landscape full of niche channels no longer privileged the mainstream audience but rather those with specific cultural taste (in Cartoon Network’s case, cartoon fans). However, if Cartoon Network was a site where cartoon fans of all ages congregated, limiting the content of the shows to be less controversial (less sexual, political, and violent), its late night programming block, Adult Swim, was created as a place where adult cartoon fans could fully enjoy adult-oriented cartoons under the banner, “All kids out of the pool!” without feeling scorned for their taste for animations (Mittell, 2004).

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<sup>1</sup> When a five-year-old boy set fire on his family’s mobile home and killed his sister in Ohio in October 1993, the mother immediately blamed this cartoon for giving his son, who had just watched an episode of the show, an idea that playing with fire is fun (“Cartoon on MTV Blamed for Fire,” 1993).

To attract adult viewers, Adult Swim filled its programming lineup with cartoons (extending the brand image of Cartoon Network as a site for cartoon fans), further destabilizing cartoons as a children's genre and problematizing the link between the status of adulthood (or adult identity) and consumption of adult culture. Although the style, aesthetic, characters, and humor of many Adult Swim shows may make them appear immature (as well as adult fans who enjoy watching these shows), to simplify our understanding of Adult Swim as a symbol of the growing infantilization of culture not only makes us perpetuate the notion of cartoons as a "children-only" genre (regardless of their content or messages) or that one's status as an adult depends on his or her media consumption (what kind of television show you watch, what kind of films you see, etc.) but also to miss the social-critiques of pretentious adult culture, politics, conservative ideologies, race matters, and so on that are articulated (albeit in a different manner) in many of the Adult Swim shows. Furthermore, by understanding its adult viewers as those who embody the characteristics of the shifting adult identity in the new millennium (a new adult generation who grew up in different social, political, and economic conditions as well as different relationship with television) through its programs that express the postmodern sensibility and reality of everyday life Adult Swim has been able to appeal to its adult fans.

To understand how Adult Swim constructs its adult audience and reflects the shifts in adult identity of contemporary society it needs to be studied with what Douglas Kellner (1995) refers to as a "multiperspectival approach," that involves paying attention to the production of culture, the texts themselves, and the way the audience receive those texts. In addition to production, texts, and the audience, it is important for television

studies to incorporate or be mindful of an additional component, the sociohistorical milieu or context in which these industrial practices and audience experiences occur. As the “hallmark” of television studies, the contextual understanding of television allows the researcher to examine and understand particular textual forms as products of the industrial and cultural contexts (Gray & Lotz, 2012). As Gray and Lotz (2012) point out, it is important for those who study television to be aware of and to be willing to “engage the broader media environment in which they exist” (p. 24) and to “specify the context of the phenomenon of study in terms of sociocultural, techno-industrial, and historical conditions” (p. 25).

In my dissertation I examine Adult Swim as a popular adult entertainment brand created by the intersecting relationships between industrial practices (programming choices and decisions, marketing strategies, construction and selling of audiences, and so on), the Adult Swim texts, and Adult Swim fans. I understand Adult Swim to be a product of particular political economic conditions (deregulation of media markets which led to the privatization of cable, emphasis on niche marketing and branding, and the rise of new media technologies) and cultural practices (shifts in the understanding of cartoons as a genre, online fan activities which shape the Adult Swim brand and Adult Swim fans’ identities, the shifted meaning of “adulthood” and “adult” culture, and so on) animated by neoliberal capitalism and participatory culture. Thus, with the emphasis in the “contexts” in which Adult Swim has been produced, distributed, and consumed, this study intends to engage in what Douglas Kellner (2003) refers to as a “diagnostic critique” that allows us to understand the contemporary society and culture and to “grasp better the defining characteristics, novelties, and conflicts of the contemporary era” (p. 27). With the focus

of analysis on the interrelationship of media texts, audiences, and their material conditions, “diagnostic critique” enables us to overcome the dichotomy between “seeing media culture as an all-powerful force of manipulation and as mere popular entertainment that audiences can deploy for their own purposes.

### **The Circuit of Media Study: Studying Institution, Text, Reception, and Context**

Meehan (1999) argues that media research are generally divided into three parts: those that study media products as cultural artifacts (text), individuals or groups of people who interact with those media products (audience), or those who create, regulate, and construct (or destroy) the media products (institution). Regardless of research agenda or paradigm the study of media scholars focus on “media products, media audiences, and media institutions—or on some combination of these categories” (Meehan, 1999, p. 149). In addition to the three categories that Meehan provide I suggest context as an additional category that must be taken into consideration in media research. This is a position that is consistent with the “circuit of media study” that Julie D’Acci (2004) suggests.

The “circuit of media study” that D’Acci provides is an upgraded model of Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model, Richard Johnson’s circuit model, and the Open University’s circuit of culture model. By paying attention to the production, text, and reception of media as well as to the specific conditions that shape production, text, and reception of texts or programs (in other words, the context in which all of these activities occur), D’Acci attempts to provide a more integrated model of media studies.<sup>2</sup> As the

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<sup>2</sup> D’Acci’s “circuit of media studies” was suggested as a way to revitalize cultural studies that is in crisis due to various factors including corporatization of universities and the notion that cultural studies lack scholarly rigor because of its theoretical and methodological openness and overreliance on textual analysis with disregard for contextual (historical, industrial, institutional and so on) studies. Although D’Acci’s

first circuit model, Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model examines various phases of television practices (encoding, the TV program, and decoding). But its disregard for "pleasure or the operations of the unconscious," understanding of encoding as a homogenous process (as if the process of encoding has no contestatory character and is strictly dictated by the dominant ideology), and incompleteness as a circuit model without a continuous loop between decoding (or decoders) and encoding (or encoders) required revision (D'Acci, 2004, p. 426).

Richard Johnson's circuit model (1986) emerged as a way to revise and widen Hall's encoding/decoding model. D'Acci (2004) points out that the real difference between Hall's model and Johnson's model is that whereas the circulant of the former is the "cultural meaning," the circulant of the latter is "the cultural product," which is both a capital (as cultural products are produced in a capitalist system) and a "circuit of the production and circulation of subjective forms" (as it is through these cultural products that individuals form subjectivity and cultural identity) (p. 428). Johnson's unidirectional model (the circuit moves only in one direction) was updated by the Open University's "circuit of culture" model (1997), which investigates five "cultural processes": representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation. With the unidirectional arrows of the Johnson model corrected, this model is regarded to be the most similar to D'Acci's model.

D'Acci argues that despite various criticisms against the circuit model(s) (the phases or processes are reductive as each domain is predetermined, the focus seems to be

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"circuit of media studies" is rooted in cultural studies I understand it to be a model that integrates the arguments of both political economy (not in the reductionist, economy as the base-only sense) and cultural studies that emphasize contextualization of the study.



on consumption, culture is reduced to meaning-making, circuit is useless as no cultural studies research are the same, and so on<sup>3</sup>) it is still worth holding onto the circuit model as a guidance for media studies.<sup>4</sup> Thus, D'Acci provides her own circuit model, which she refers to as a "circuit of media study." In D'Acci's model there are four sites of analysis: production, cultural artifact, reception, and sociohistorical context. Each site, according to this model, is "porous and analytical rather than self contained and constituted," (p. 431) a point that appears more salient in today's digital culture where the site of consumption can easily be the site of production. Another important feature of D'Acci's model is that it recognizes how the researcher's subjectivity and experiences shape the reception of the text and analysis of the study. In other words, D'Acci's model requires researchers to be self-reflexive.

What D'Acci's model suggests is that each site is a convergence of "discursive practices" which mobilizes and is mobilized by "conjunctures of economic cultural, social, and subjective discourses" (p. 433). With the emphasis of "the conjunctural aspects of each individual site" and "seeing industries and their specific economic imperative in relation to the other three areas" D'Acci's four-site circuit model encourages the researcher of television studies to understand that each site needs to be understood in relation to each other (p. 434). D'Acci's circuit model provides a great

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<sup>3</sup> The most vocal opponent of the circuit model, according to D'Acci, has been Lawrence Grossberg who cites all of the above reasons for his opposition to the circuit model (particularly Hall's encoding/decoding model).

<sup>4</sup> One of the main reasons D'Acci argues for the usefulness of the circuit model is that despite every cultural studies project being unique and different (as Grossberg claims) it is also important to acknowledge that each project is indebted to previous works. As D'Acci (2004) says, "[A] circuit model doesn't hawk a formulaic approach to TV studies; rather, it underscores that we cannot start from ground zero each time we embark on a new project, and that explicitly working from the scholarship of the past...is the best way to structure our current inquiries and our pedagogical practices" (p. 431).

framework to study Adult Swim multi-dimensionally and relationally as I examine the production, the text, the fans/audience of Adult Swim, and its sociohistorical context. Although each site will be examined separately for analytical purposes I undertake the examination with an understanding of how the operations of other sites influence the activity of the site under investigation.

***Institution: Studying Media Industries***

Since its existence in 2001, Adult Swim has transformed continuously to maintain its position as a preeminent “adult” entertainment network through its programming and branding strategies to fit its understanding of the shifts in its adult fans’ cultural tastes and habits. In its early period, due to the lack of financial resource the Adult Swim programming was mostly consisted of reruns of old cartoons that aired on other networks (for instance, *Home Movie*, *Mission Hill*, *Family Guy*, *Futurama*, and so on), imported Japanese animes (such as *Cowboy Bebop*, *Inuyasha*, *Lupin the 3rd*, etc.), and repurposed Hanna-Barbara cartoons (*Space Ghost Coast to Coast*, *Sealab 2021*, *The Brak Show*, and *Harvey Birdman, Attorney at Law*). As Adult Swim began to gain more visibility, the program began to include more original programs, particularly those made outside of the Williams Street studio (for example, *The Venture Bros.*, *Robot Chicken*, and *The Boondocks*). Once Adult Swim began to gain more popularity (as indicated by the separation of Adult Swim from Cartoon Network for Nielsen’s rating purposes in 2005), Adult Swim began to include live sketch comedies (such as *Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!*, *Eagleheart*, *Loiter Squad*, and so on) and mockumentaries (such as *Look Around You*) to appeal to a wider segment of the adult audience who may not necessarily be fans of cartoons. Adult Swim’s incorporation of non-cartoon/anime genres

has generated heated debates in the Adult Swim fan community around the brand identity of the network (should Adult Swim be a cartoon network or an “adult” network regardless of the genre of the program). Beginning in May 26, 2012, Adult Swim began to air an animated programming block called Toonami as part of its Saturday night action block. Toonami used to be Cartoon Network’s primary action-block that aired during afternoons on weekdays. Although Toonami’s “Midnight Run” block aired late at night because of the more graphic and violent nature of the animes that consisted this programming block, Toonami, in general, targeted preteens and teens. However, Cartoon Network ended Toonami on September 20, 2008 after its eleven-year run. Cartoon Network decided to revive Toonami and include this programming block on Adult Swim as preteens and teens who weaned on Toonami grew into the young adult demographic of Adult Swim.

To understand the industrial and economic conditions in which Adult Swim programming and branding practices operate (not just Adult Swim’s “economic” activities of advertising and marketing but also its “cultural” activities of building “affective” relationships with its audience) I engage in close readings of industry discourses. Being one of the most popular late night viewing network by young adults Adult Swim is frequently covered in trade publications such as *Variety*, *TV Week*, and *Advertising Age*, the mainstream press such as *New York Times* and *Huffington Post* as well as various small and alternative media in the U.S. Through a discourse analysis I particularly pay attention to how Adult Swim presents itself (how it constructs and conveys its brand image) and how Adult Swim is understood in the American mainstream and trade press in general.

As a “careful, close reading that moves between text and context to examine the content, organization and functions of discourse” (Gill, 2000, p. 188), discourse analysis allows the researcher to understand how social reality is being constructed (rather than reflecting that social reality) through language, talks, and texts. The focus of discourse analysis is to understand how language, which is never neutrally used, works to shape and construct ideas and social reality (Tonkiss, 2004). Through various press releases and interviews creative workers at Adult Swim—who are generally considered to be the “above-the-line” workers, including executive producers, writers, creators, voice/actors, and so on—discuss and talk about Adult Swim in a particular way to present or highlight a particular brand image. The brand images these creative workers present are not necessarily coherent or coincide with the images that Adult Swim fans/audience perceive of the brand. Although it may not be possible to retrieve a “general” or “representational” viewpoint of Adult Swim through these texts it is possible to get an idea of how various views are being expressed by the Adult Swim creative workers to construct a certain notion or image of Adult Swim.<sup>5</sup>

Numerous interviews with creative workers of various Adult Swim texts<sup>6</sup> can be found on various online sites such as the Adult Swim official website, comic con websites, and even Adult Swim fan blog sites. Caldwell (2008) explains that the way media workers present themselves in the printed or videotaped trade press tends to be

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<sup>5</sup> As Tonkiss (2004) points out, the goal of a discourse analyst is “not necessarily aiming to give a representative overview of public attitudes...but seeking to examine how particular attitudes are shaped, reproduced and legitimized through the use of language” (p. 253).

<sup>6</sup> Instead of using the term, shows, I use texts here because Adult Swim is not just television programs that air on television but also online/mobile games and a parody website (Thing X).

“fueled by more acutely partisan marketing and advertising goals” (p. 23). In addition, as Stephen Zaifrau (2009) demonstrates film producers (particularly those who are up on the ranks such as executive producers and marketers) tend to flaunt their accomplishments and financial success in the industry or exaggerate the giftedness of their “gut” instinct when speaking in public (invited class or university lectures and so on),<sup>7</sup> pointing out how it is important to be reflexive of media workers’ public discourses. This is why Rosalind Gill (2000) explains that one of the key features of discourse analysis is “a spirit of skepticism” (p. 168) that accompanies a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge. Thus, I engage with these publicly displayed interviews with a critical eye rather than taking them at face value.

***Text/Program: Adult Swim Shows***

Studying the products—that is, the texts or programs—that the television industry creates enables us to examine our “lived cultures and experiences” (Denzin, 1992, p. 81) as media texts play a central role in shaping our understanding of the selves (identities, fantasies, desires, etc.) and our contemporary society. Television texts generally refer to television programs including their characters, plots, and images and textual analysis is the most common approach to studying the television texts. Textual analysis is “a process of deconstruction that investigates the operations of texts, their constructions, the

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<sup>7</sup> This tendency for media executives to exaggerate the “giftedness” of their “gut instinct” or “intuition” is not new as Hortense Powdermaker has already pointed this out in her 1950 fieldwork, *Hollywood: The Dream Factory*, which is considered to be “a foundational work” in cultural production by scholars in this field (Sullivan, 2009, p. 39). In this ethnography, Powdermaker (1950) noted that Hollywood studio executives understood and presented themselves to be “showmen gifted with special intuitive powers, who do not need to plan, and think, and work as presumably do the heads of factories turning out automobiles and prefabricated houses” (p. 93; cited in Zaifrau, 2009), despite the fact that they actually did have to work and plan as hard as other industrial captains at the time.

ways they produce meanings, what those meanings may be” (Burton, 2005, p. 49). Michele Hilmes (2009) explains that the role of textual analysis is not just to understand the meaning of a text but also to investigate various forces that work upon the text to “produce its genesis, development, specifications, narrative structures and trajectories, [and] audience formations and readings” (p. 25). Hilmes’s understanding of textual analysis than requires us to investigate texts within contexts, or to avoid understanding texts to operate in isolation. When texts are analyzed independently from the context of its production or even reception in regard to how the audience makes the meaning of the text it can create a de-historicized reading that ignores the social-constructedness of a textual meaning or how individual texts are “part of a wider web of textual occurrences and the meanings derived from them” (Sandvoss, 2007, p. 23). This is the reason why television scholars argue that “texts alone is rarely enough for television studies,” (Gray & Lotz, 2012, p. 28; Gray, 2006). This does not mean that textual analysis should necessarily be accompanied with industry, audience, and contextual analyses, although this multipronged approach that utilizes “a multiplicity of perspectives and critical methods” can certainly benefit the study (Kellner, 2009, p. 105; Gray & Lotz, 2012).

To examine Adult Swim shows within their specific contexts—the rise of cultural debates about the meaning of adulthood, shifts in adult tastes and values, the emergence of the post-network era with significant changes in television programming, development of various new technologies that has transformed all aspects of life, and so on—I do a critical textual analysis that engages with ideological criticism as suggested by Sonja Foss (1995) and Mimi White (1992). As White (1992) points out, ideological criticism begins with the assumption that “cultural artifacts...are produced in specific historical

contexts, by and for specific social groups” (p. 163). Because cultural artifacts such as television shows or online materials are created in “socially and historically specific contexts,” they can be understood as “expressing and promoting values, beliefs, and ideas in relation to the contexts in which they are produced, distributed, and received” (White, 1992, P. 163). The goal of ideological criticism, then, is to discover how a cultural text represents and endorses particular values, beliefs, and ideas (White, 1992).

Foss (1995), in a similar fashion, explains that the goal of ideological criticism is to reveal and make apparent the dominant ideology or ideologies embedded in the cultural artifact as well as the ideologies that are muted in the text. For a researcher who is interested in discovering ideology/ideologies that are embedded in a cultural text, Foss (1995) suggests a two-step process: first, identifying the nature of ideology and second, identifying strategies that are used to support this ideology. To understand the nature of ideology in the text (or to be able to answer questions such as what the preferred reading of the artifact is, what kind of values, beliefs, or ideas are embedded in the text, what kind of arguments are being made, what kind of topic or theme the text deals with, and so on) it is necessary to examine the content of the text to understand the overall messages and ideas that are offered. But as Foss (1995) points out, this does not mean focusing on finding one specific message in a text but rather “delineating the range of issues and questions raised within a program or across a set of texts” (p. 182). Next, to understand the mechanisms that are used to support that ideology it is imperative to investigate how that ideology is expressed. This requires paying attention to the form or style of the artifact such as the choice of words, visual aesthetics, tone, figures of speech, and so on.

By paying attention to the messages and how those messages are conveyed in the Adult Swim texts I analyze a selected group of Adult Swim television programs, particularly the early Adult Swim original shows that have established a particular brand of Adult Swim sensibility. I investigate what kind of language and style of expression Adult Swim uses to address its audience, particularly as an “adult” brand. I also examine the type and function of characters and personalities in Adult Swim, particularly in relation to their role in establishing a particular brand identity for Adult Swim.

The first step of analyzing Adult Swim television shows is “choosing.” So many shows are currently being aired or have been aired in the past as part of the Adult Swim program that it is impossible to study them all. Thus, rather than providing a large number of texts for analysis I focus on providing a “richness of the textual detail,” which results from a selective data with extractions from sections that “provide the richest source of analytic material” (Tonkiss, 2004, p. 253). Among numerous Adult Swim television shows, I focus on analyzing the early original Adult Swim shows that were produced at Williams Street as they are the ones that played the most important role in establishing an “Adult” Swim sensibility and brand: *Space Ghost Coast to Coast* (1994-2004, 2006-2008; total season: 10), *Harvey Birdman, Attorney at Law* (2000-2007; total season: 4), *The Brak Show* (2000-2003; total season: 3), *Sealab 2021* (2000-2005; total season: 4), and *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* (2000-present; total season: 9+). With the exception of *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* all of these early original programs have been canceled although Adult Swim occasionally airs the old episodes of these cancelled shows.



For all of the shows I have chosen for a critical textual analysis I watched all of the pilot episodes and then chose five episodes for each completed season based on the plot summary described on the DVD booklet.<sup>8</sup> However, I made a conscious decision to watch the first episode of each season because whenever changes are made to the show they tend to appear on the very first episode of the new season. Unlike animes, which tend to have linear storylines with each episode connected to one another (although this may not always be the case as exemplified by shows such as *Cowboy Bebop* or *Crayon Shin Chan*), Adult Swim's original programs have episodes that stand independently from one another. There may occasionally be an episode that refers to an incident/happening/character in the previous episode(s) but it is not necessary for the viewer to have watched the referred episode(s) to understand the happenings or the jokes in the current episode (although having watched the referred previous episode(s) do add a deeper layer of understanding for the viewer). Thus, watching a limited number of randomly chosen episodes for each season does not interrupt or prohibit the viewer from understanding the general characteristics, tenor, or sensibility of the show. However, if a chosen episode appears to be connected to previous episode(s) I watched the connected

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<sup>8</sup> The exceptions are *Space Ghost Coast to Coast* and *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*. Rather than examining the entire seasons of these shows I limited my analysis to the first seven seasons for these shows. The textual analysis for *Space Ghost Coast to Coast* was limited to the first seven seasons due to the issue of DVD availability and the analysis for *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* was limited to the first seven seasons because the show changed its name to *Aqua Unit Patrol Squad* on its eighth season (2011), changing the setting of the show (although the characters and the show's sensibility remain the same). The title of *Aqua Teen* changed again to *Aqua Something You Know Whatever* for its ninth season (2012). On January 25, 2013, David Willis, the creator of the show, announced on Twitter that the show's name will be *Aqua TiVo Avoidance Plan* for season 10. Also, it is important to note that although the first six seasons of *Space Ghost* aired prior to the creation of Adult Swim, I included episodes from these seasons in my analysis to compare the content of the show on Cartoon Network and Adult Swim (whether airing the show on Adult Swim has changed the tone or sensibility of the show).

episodes to gain better understanding of the text. For example, in the case of *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* I watched “Mayhem of the Mooninites” (Season 1, Episode 4) after noticing the connection with the episode of “Revenge of the Mooninites” (Season 1, Episode 8). The running time for the chosen episodes are generally around the 11 minute mark with the exception of several episodes of *Space Ghost*.

***Audience: The Adult Swim Community***

As Napoli (2003, 2009) points out one of the distinctive characteristics of commercial television is that it does not just create and sell contents (to the audiences) but also create and sell audiences (to marketers and advertisers). In commercial television, then, the central commodity is the audience (Gray & Lotz, 2012). The study of television audience started to take off in the 1980s with the works by the Birmingham School’s Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, particularly by David Morley and Charlotte Brunson’s study on audience’s decoding of *Nationwide*, a popular news magazine program in Britain. Since the *Nationwide* study (in *Everyday TV: Nationwide*) television audience studies began to proliferate as evidenced by the works of Dorothy Hobson (*Crossroads: The Drama of a Soap Opera*), Ien Ang (*Watching Dallas*), and Morley (*Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure*). Beginning in the late 1980s, however, a particular form of audience studies called “fan studies” began to emerge. Focusing on the media consumption of the disempowered individuals (fans) and their struggle against the powerful media corporations the early fan studies “represented and championed those disadvantaged within society” (Gray et al., 2007, p. 2) and argued for the justification of fandom and various fan activities which were generally ridiculed (both in the academia and the television industry) and perceived to be subversive. One of

the most significant scholars who have paved ways for fan studies to thrive since the 1990s is Henry Jenkins whose *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* demonstrated how fans are not only consumers but also active producers. In addition to highlighting fans' own production and active participation in textual activities (and in the process how they subvert dominant ideologies) Jenkins and other fan studies scholars (such as John Tulloch and Constance Penley) have argued fan activities (fandom) to be a "communal" cultural activity through which fans share "feelings and thoughts about the program content with friends, by joining a community of other fans who share common interests" (Jenkins, 1988, p. 88).

If fans were once despised and frequently pathologized by both the academics and the media industry (and thus, the works of fan studies scholars were used to justify their activities), the rise of interactive media shifted not only fan activities but also the media industry's understanding of fans and fandom. With the industry's gradual understanding of the importance of audience engagement with television shows to better target the audience, fans transformed into "ideal viewers" and online fandom became an important source of information for further audience engagement (Ross, 2008). So if the early fan studies focused on justifying fandom and fan activities the current fan studies, which generally examine fans and fan communities that have moved online, demonstrate the normalization of fan activities or the "fanification" of the everyday viewers as Nikunen (2007) puts it.

The rise of the Internet has not only changed fandom/fan activities or the media industry's perception of fandom but also the way media researchers study the audience. Because it is easier for researchers to access the traces of fan activities online "Internet

research has arguably become the dominant mode of studying audiences now” (Gray & Lotz, 2012, p. 75; Lotz & Ross, 2004; McKee, 2002). Using the Internet as a tool to study audience, however, has various limitations. First, when the researcher focuses on online forums to understand fan activities a great deal of fans who do not engage in online activities are left out of the study (Gray & Lotz, 2012). In other words, it ignores the existence of different levels of fandom (although, it can also be argued that this is not just a problem of the Internet research).<sup>9</sup> Thus, Alan McKee (2002) suggests that when studying fandom we need to take into consideration the different level of engagement of fans, which ranges from a very passive form of engagement to a committed level of engagement that entails continuous viewing, detailed analysis, and active participation in providing commentaries. In addition, the researcher needs to understand that online fan participation can be related to fans’ availability of access, time, and knowledge (Lotz & Ross, 2004). With these understandings fan studies researchers can “abandon the ideal of searching for the single truth about engagement with television, and rather accept a variety of forms of viewing” (McKee, 2002, p. 69). Second, although Internet audience research allows the researcher to trace the activities of fans online it does not allow researchers to trace those online activities “to a physical being in any definite manner,” leading some researchers to misunderstand the “real” identity of the fans—that is, online posters can always perform to be someone else as the researcher may not be able to assess their physical and socioeconomic conditions (Press & Livingstone, 2006, p. 188).

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<sup>9</sup> The different levels of fan engagement with media texts are well demonstrated in Joke Hermes’ work on readers’ engagement with women’s magazines. In her research, Hermes (1995) demonstrates how some readers would skim through the magazines while others would read articles for particular information, suggesting a variety of ways readers engage with texts.

In relation to this impossibility of tracking the “real” identity of the online fans another limitation of the Internet research is that researchers can only rely on “whatever context is online, and to whatever context is made available by the individual posters” (Gray & Lotz, 2012, p. 76). And finally, there are ethical concerns about the Internet audience research particularly when the researcher can lurk and do research without the acknowledgement of fans online (Gray & Lotz, 2012; Lotz & Ross, 2004). Lurking does not only bring up the privacy issue (which brings the private/public debate) but also precludes the researcher from engaging with the online fans to a certain extent (Lotz & Ross, 2004). The problem of lurking, however, can be minimized if the online discussions are open for access to the public and the identity of the online participant are protected (particularly if the discussion topics are socially sensitive) (Lotz & Ross, 2004).

Despite these various limitations, the Internet-based fan studies give the researcher an advantage of having an already prepared/available data, although it requires the researcher to arduously sort out and locate discussions that are relevant to the study (Press & Livingstone, 2006). Based on this understanding of the limitations and the advantages of the Internet audience studies I explore the Adult Swim official website’s online community (Adult Swim Message Boards) to investigate the type of discussions among Adult Swim fans, especially in relation to their understanding of and expectations for the brand. Although I tried to read through pages upon pages of commentary to get a good understanding of the general discussions on the message boards, with more than 70 different communities that have more than hundreds and thousands of different discussion forums it became impossible for me to trace all the ongoing and concluded discussions. Thus, I focus on the discussions that garnered much attention (those with

longest threads or most replies) and those initiated by the Adult Swim administrators to understand the relationship that the Adult Swim is trying to build with its fans/online participants. Also, because the message board has a search key engine I use particular search words to find discussions that are related to my study.

One of the characteristics of the online fan community is that it is not only a place where fans share their common feelings and ideas but also a place where heated arguments and disagreements break out. Discussions such as whether Adult Swim is “adult” enough (or who should be watching Adult Swim) can be polemical with one side of the group trying to persuade the other side of the group. Through a discourse analysis I investigate the conflicting ideas and varying positions that are expressed in the discussions, how the participating fans try to cope with contradictory views, and/or how alternative (less popular) positions/arguments are countered. In addition, I pay attention to how Adult Swim fans express both pleasure and displeasure with Adult Swim shows and its corporate decisions, particularly in relation to their understanding of what Adult Swim should be. As Gill (2000) points out, people use discourse not simply to express their ideas but “to *do* things,” (p. 175, emphasis in original) whether that is to defend, to blame, or to persuade. Through a critical textual analysis of the online discussions—topics, local meanings, style and rhetoric, or what van Dijk (1993) refers to as the “properties of the ‘text’” (p. 270)—I analyze how Adult Swim influences/persuades its branding/programming decisions to its fans, how fans influence/persuade each other in shaping their understanding of what Adult Swim is and how fans (try to) influence/persuade Adult Swim in its corporate/industrial practices.

My study of Adult Swim online fans is intended to provide an exploratory study rather than a totally scientific study. Thus, my goal is not to make definite, generalizable arguments about the Adult Swim fans and the online community but rather to present a rudimentary idea of who the Adult Swim fans are (or rather, who Adult Swim fans present themselves as online) and how they profess their likes or dislikes for Adult Swim and thus, express their understanding of the brand.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Industrial and Sociohistorical Contexts***

As I investigate the three key sites in my analysis of Adult Swim (the industry, the program/text, and the audience/fans) I engage in a contextual study that takes into consideration the “historical placement, the temporal environment, and the sociocultural moment in which texts, audiences, and industries find themselves” (Gray & Lotz, 2012, p. 123). Gray and Lotz (2012) suggest to do a “contextual program analysis” when examining the program as it encourages the researcher to not only find meanings within the text but between texts and its place in the program lineup. In addition, a contextual program analysis pays attention to the interrelationships among programs, audiences, and

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<sup>10</sup> By those who dislike Adult Swim I mean both the anti-fans who watch Adult Swim but nevertheless dislike the program and actively express their negative feelings on the message boards and the disgruntled fans of Adult Swim who have strong feelings for Adult Swim but would post negative messages about the program because of their temporary or prolonged dissatisfaction (with an episode, a show, a decision made by Adult Swim, etc.) and contribute to the online fan discourse. According to Gray (2003), anti-fans are as close followers of texts as fans although they “strongly dislike a given text or genre, considering it inane, stupid, morally bankrupt and/or aesthetic drivel” (p. 70). Anti-fans of Adult Swim can either be those who hate Adult Swim in its entirety (although those who do hate the program in its entirety rarely engage in online discussions) or those who hate specific Adult Swim shows or genres (comedies vs. cartoons or original cartoons vs. reruns or original cartoons vs. animes, and so on). Studying the message posts from both the Adult Swim anti-fans (in its various forms) and the “disgruntled” fans provides a better understanding of how fan expectations for the program, the brand, or even the genre constantly shift and are negotiated and what it means when the television program (or the brand itself) continues to fail them.

industries and how they work together to represent and manifest meanings on television in content.

As I conduct this contextual program analysis I locate Adult Swim at a historical moment in the US culture when the long-held understanding of adulthood is being challenged with the restructuring of traditional identities, social relations are in shift (particularly relations between producers and consumers with the rise of participatory culture enabled by interactive technologies), and the importance of affective marketing and branding is growing, all animated by neoliberal capitalism. Examining the production, circulation, and consumption of Adult Swim within this wider sociohistorical context will lead to a better (although not complete) understanding of why Adult Swim was created and how it has become a popular “adult” entertainment brand. Furthermore, this contextualized analysis of Adult Swim fulfills the mission of television studies, which “is at its best when it remembers that context is key” (Gray & Lotz, 2012, p. 140).



## CHAPTER 6. ONLY ON ADULT SWIM: EXPRESSING THE CONTEMPORARY ADULT SENSIBILITY

Despite being part of a big multinational corporation (The Cartoon Network, Inc. owned by Time Warner and Turner Broadcasting System) Adult Swim is generally described as creative, edgy, innovative, and unconventional in the mainstream and trade press. As a program full of shows that are anarchic, confrontational, and even mean-spirited (to the point where characters act like conniving, dim-witted sexists and racists) Adult Swim is perceived as a network that would air shows that would not have a chance on other networks. Justin Peters (2004) designated Adult Swim as the modern day hotbed of cultural innovation by airing shows that are bizarre but also wonderful in *Washington Monthly*. Dave Itzkoff (2005) of *The New York Times* described Adult Swim to have “unconventional, unpredictable sensibility” that pushes the boundaries of television. Sean Fennessey (2011) stated Adult Swim as bold, crazy, and innovative. Citing a 22-year-old college student, Rob Walker (2004) wrote Adult Swim to be “so different from anything else you’ll find on TV” (n.p.) in *The New York Times*. Heckert (2005) echoed this sentiment by writing in the *Atlanta Magazine* that Adult Swim is “different than anything on the air—it’s intelligent, it’s weird” (p. 136). All of these articles highlight how Adult Swim differs from other television networks and how this difference is attracting a particular demographic: young adults (more specifically, males) ages 18 to 34.

Various questions can be generated from the mainstream presses’ reaction to Adult Swim such as what they mean by Adult Swim being unconventional, unpredictable, and innovative, how Adult Swim is different from other television networks, and why and how Adult Swim appeals to the young adult demographic. In this chapter I answer these questions through a contextual textual analysis of various shows

that have created the Adult Swim sensibility. I will particularly pay attention to the early Adult Swim original shows that were produced at the Williams Street as they have played the most important roles in shaping the direction and identity of Adult Swim and constructing the Adult Swim fans. Through the process I also investigate how Adult Swim challenges and complicates the preexisting notions of adult identity and taste, how it understands contemporary adulthood as it constructs the Adult Swim audience, and what programming strategies it uses to build its image as a “different” network that appeals to contemporary young adults.

### **Reruns: Second Life on Adult Swim**

The early years of Adult Swim had a programming schedule that was full of repackaged, repurposed, and recontextualized shows. Because of this programming characteristic, Walker (2004) argued Adult Swim could be deconstructed as “a celebration of commercial detritus.” It is a very common practice for cable networks to fill its programming schedule with network reruns (or old Hollywood movies), which cost less than producing original programming, particularly in their early years when they still struggle to bring in substantial ad revenues (Napoli, 2009). As cable networks continued to fill their schedules with past movies and television shows, reruns became the “bread and butter” for these networks and worked to expand, rather than to provide an alternative to, television’s dominant logic of repetition (Kompare, 2005, p. 171). Cartoon Network, Adult Swim’s parent company, also operated as a reruns network as it filled its 24-hour schedule with classic cartoons from its Hanna-Barbera cartoon library due to financial constraints in its early years.

Cable networks, however, did not fill their programming schedules with random shows but rather carefully selected, acquired and aired those that fit their network image or that could be used as important sources for shaping and bolstering their brand identities (Kompore, 2005). Adult Swim, which was created to attract adults who tend to stay up late but also like cartoons, selected syndicated shows that could help it to become a legitimate adult cartoon program. It needed cartoons that could grab a lot of young adults' attention, help distinguish itself from Cartoon Network's daytime programming, and establish itself as a legitimate adult animation program by destabilizing the notion that cartoons are a children's only genre. Thus, Adult Swim selected *Home Movies* (which was the first syndicated show to air on Adult Swim), *The Oblongs*, *Mission Hill* and later Fox's *Futurama* and *Family Guy*. These syndicated shows had a common characteristic of being cancelled by the bigger networks in which they originally aired.

*Home Movies* (1999-2004), created by a standup comic and musician, Brendon Small and Loren Bouchard, first aired on UPN. However, the network cancelled the show only after five of its first episodes aired in 1999. Adult Swim picked up the remaining episodes of the first season and then extended the production of the show for three more seasons, resulting in a total of 52 episodes (13 episodes per season). *Home Movies* is a show about a precocious eight-year-old boy named Brendon Small (named after the creator) who lives with his newly divorced mother, Paula, and his baby sister, Josie. In his free time Brendon makes movies with his two friends, Melissa and Jason. Although the main protagonist of the show is a little boy the dialogues exchanged between Brendon and his friends, his mom, his alcoholic soccer coach, John McGuirk, and others are very "adult-like." The show has a deadpan humor and a drawing style where the characters'

outer lines would squiggle to give an impression that each frame was hand-drawn rather than animated (called “Squigglevision”), which makes the show quirky and different from other network/mainstream animations.

*The Oblongs*, which originally aired on The WB from April 1, 2001 to May 20, 2001, was also cancelled in the midst of the season. Adult Swim picked up the syndicated rights for the show and first aired its unaired episode on August 25, 2002. Created by an illustrator, writer, and animator, Angus Oblong, *The Oblongs* is loosely based on Oblong’s picture book, *Creepy Susie and 13 Other Tragic Tales for Troubled Children*, a compilation of horror stories that include topics such as cannibalism and murder. Oblong who worked as an independent publisher, author, and illustrator in San Francisco, a hotspot for independent comic publishers with Berkeley, incorporated the book’s dark, repulsive, and subversive sensibility to his television series (Russo, 2005). The show focuses on the Oblong family who live in the Valley, a toxic wasteland. All of the Oblong family members are physically deformed and disabled because of toxins and pollution caused by the residents of a rich community known as “The Hill” and Globocide Industries, the world’s largest pharmaceutical corporation. As the episodes revolve around the conflicts between the Oblongs (and their fellow Valley folks) and the Hills this show satirizes controversial issues such as class stratification, environmental pollution, and health care but provides no “concrete political stances of transgressive counterdiscourses” (Dhaenens & Van Bauwel, 2012, p. 127) as the show presents the status quo as the ultimate truth by never having the Oblongs/Valley people strive for wealth distribution or better working/living conditions (Silva, 2010).

Created by Bill Oakley and Josh Weinstein, former writers and producers of *The Simpsons*, *Mission Hill* originally aired on The WB from September 24, 1999 to July 16, 2000. Although Oakley and Weinstein had written 18 episodes only 13 were animated as The WB network ended production due to poor ratings (it was placed on a Friday night schedule, which is considered to be one of the toughest timeslots in finding audiences) and high production cost (it cost 1.3 million dollars per episode). Since July 14, 2002, *Mission Hill* has periodically appeared on the Adult Swim programming lineup and has gained a cult following because it related to many of the young Adult Swim viewers. Unlike other television cartoons, *Mission Hill* has various elements that made it a perfect adult animation that was not appropriate for kids (and as a network prime time animation). Oakley and Weinstein constructed the show completely out of the types of people who are between the ages of teens and 35<sup>1</sup> and created episodes that revolve around high school, horrible first jobs, romance, dating, and various other topics that young adults, particularly those who are in an awkward transitional period between graduating college and starting a career, could relate to. The main protagonists of the show are the 24-year-old Andy French and the 17-year-old Kevin French who live together with two other young roommates, Jim Kuback (who has been Andy's best friend since high school) and Posey Tyler (a Gen X version of a flower child) in a fictitious place called the Mission Hill that is reminiscent of San Francisco's Mission District (Fu, 2003). Satirizing and embracing American youth culture such as alternative lifestyles, MTV, and the underground, *Mission Hill* particularly appeals to the "young, disaffected

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<sup>1</sup> When working on *The Simpsons*, Oakley and Weinstein realized that none of the characters who live in the Simpsons world were between the ages of 10 and 35 (with the exception of Otto, the bus driver, who plays a very minor role in the show) (Fu, 2003).

person between 20-30 living in a city” (Fu, 2003, n.p.). Also, this animated show is able to come across as an “adult” animation by providing a realistic picture about sex and a mature portrayal of the show’s gay couple, Gus and Wally. Unlike prime time cartoons where gay characters are portrayed “ambiguously” or “supposedly,” there is no ambiguity in Gus and Wally’s sexuality and relationship.<sup>2</sup> Gus and Wally are never portrayed in stereotypes or flamboyantly and because of the honest and mature portrayal of their relationship the show received a lot of attention and eventually an award from Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) (Fu, 2003).

Although new episodes of *Futurama* and *Family Guy* currently air on television today these shows were cancelled by Fox at the moment Adult Swim first aired them. New episodes of *Futurama* and *Family Guy* were reordered by Comedy Central and Fox only after they had a huge success on Adult Swim. With the revival of *Home Movies*, *The Oblongs*, *Mission Hills*, *Futurama*, and *Family Guy* Adult Swim came to be known as a site where cancelled shows (or those in the danger of being cancelled) come for a second life.

*Futurama*, which is currently on its seventh season on Comedy Central first aired on Fox from 1999 to 2003. Created by Matt Groening, *Futurama* won critical acclaims from both the viewers and critics for its edgy sense of humor. However, Fox not only undermarketed the show but also aired it on erratic schedule by having it bounce back and forth between Sunday and Tuesday evenings. In late 2002, Cartoon Network won the syndicated rights to *Futurama* and started airing it on Adult Swim in 2003 when the show

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<sup>2</sup> Gus and Wally are shown kissing passionately in the elevator in the show’s very first episode. Oakley states that this was the first gay male kiss that broadcasted on television but nobody really cared because not many people saw the show (when it first aired on The WB network) (Fu, 2003).

was no longer part of Fox's programming lineup. *Futurama* became a hit with the Adult Swim crowd who appreciated the show's absurd sense of humor and its science fiction based themes. Ironically, the show's popularity on Adult Swim led the network to engage in a bidding war with Comedy Central over the show's syndication right in 2005 and eventually to lose in 2006. *Futurama* disappeared from Adult Swim on December 31, 2007 (right before the New Years) after Adult Swim aired every single episode of the show in a special *Futurama* marathon.

Featuring the dysfunctional Griffin family, *Family Guy*, which made its debut on Fox in 1999, is created by Seth MacFarlane as a parody of domestic sitcoms.<sup>3</sup> Although *Family Guy* is one of the most popular prime time animations today when Adult Swim first aired its old and never-before-aired episodes in 2003 the show had already been cancelled by Fox (for the second time), making Adult Swim the only place where *Family Guy* could be watched. Because of its adult humor, low-brow style comedy, and heavy popular culture references, *Family Guy* became an instant hit on Adult Swim (the premier on Adult Swim was recorded as Cartoon Network's most-watched telecast as of 2003), helping the network to dominate the viewership of late night programming. Furthermore, when the first volume of its DVD set (which contains episodes from Season 1 and 2) was released on April 15, 2003, its sales went through the roof (reaching #2 on Amazon's sales rank), becoming one of the most profitable television show on DVD (Ross, 2008). This surging popularity of *Family Guy* eventually led Fox to reorder new episodes for the show's fourth season.

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<sup>3</sup> Even the opening sequence of the show displays its function as a parody of domestic sitcoms as Lois and Peter are shown singing about the loss of traditional values with Lois playing the piano. This is a parody of the opening sequence of *All in the Family* in which Edith and Archie Bunker sing about the good ol' days while Edith plays the piano.

Regarding Fox's reversal of its decisions on *Family Guy* and *Futurama*<sup>4</sup> Matt Groening said, "There's a long, regal history of *misunderstood* TV shows, and to Fox's credit, the studio looked at the ratings on the Cartoon Network and how the show does overseas, and saw that there was more money to be made" (my emphasis, Rabin, 2006, n.p.). Groening's statement not only explains how Fox makes its animation programming decisions but also implies how Fox (and other bigger networks) do not understand the appeal of shows such as *Futurama* and *Family Guy*, unlike Adult Swim, which seems to get it and is able to cultivate new audience for these neglected network castoffs. Mike Lazzo, the vice executive president of Adult Swim, has stated in various interviews how Fox does not seem to really understand or support *Futurama* and *Family Guy* and how he thinks his network is a better platform for those shows (Ken P., 2003; C21 Media, 2003). And to prove Lazzo's (and Groening's) point the shows that the networks rejected (*Home Movies*, *The Oblongs*, and *Mission Hill*) found new popularity as the Adult Swim viewers, who like to consider themselves as defenders of "different" taste and like to demonstrate their elevated and/different taste by reacting against the industry and the mainstream audience embraced them (Ross, 2008). So when *Family Guy* reappeared on Fox it raised a lot of questions among Adult Swim fans whether *Family Guy* was worth being on Adult Swim as it no longer had the "marginal," "networked rejected," "non-mainstream" appeal. Although *Family Guy* is the most watched Adult Swim program, dominating the ratings among Adult Swim shows, it is also one of the most contested shows on Adult Swim today. *Family Guy* was able to have a cult following when it was

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<sup>4</sup> Comedy Central, which won the show's syndication rights wanted to produce new episodes of *Futurama*. With an agreement with the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Television where the show is produced, Comedy Central began to air new episodes on June 24, 2010.



just on Adult Swim due to the audience's desire for the continuation of the show but "once the show became "mainstreamed" (i.e., thriving with a larger audience base on a "Big Four" network), the cult following dissolved (Ross, 2008, p. 102). Furthermore, the fact that three of Seth MacFarlane's shows that air on Fox today are on the Adult Swim programming schedule (*Family Guy*, *American Dad*, and *The Cleveland Show*) has upset many Adult Swim fans who are concerned about the MacFarlane/Fox franchise dominance on Adult Swim as it leaves less room for the edgier neglected and rejected shows to be on the network (thus, it is not difficult to see forums with titles such as "I hate Seth MacFarlane" or "We don't need more Seth MacFarlane" on the Adult Swim online discussion forums).

Adult Swim, which needs *Family Guy* and other popular shows from Fox to increase its ratings understands how *Family Guy*'s continuous presence on Fox (and on TBS, its sister network) problematizes its image as a "different" network that understands the neglected rejects. Thus, it makes an effort to distinguish *Family Guy* on Adult Swim from *Family Guy* on Fox. First, it airs *Family Guy* episodes uncut and uncensored unlike Fox, which has to comply with the FCC regulations. Being a late night programming block on a cable network Adult Swim has less to worry about censorship issues although its has to deal with Cartoon Network's Standards and Practices. Second, Adult Swim airs controversial episodes that Fox avoided to air. A good example is the "When You Wish Upon a Weinstein" episode, which Fox refused to air, fearing it could be construed for anti-Semitism (although MacFarlane stated in the DVD commentary that he had the

script reviewed by two rabbis who approved it). This unaired episode, however, was telecasted on Adult Swim on November 9, 2003.<sup>5</sup>

But as the controversial never before aired “Partial Terms of Endearment” episode demonstrates Adult Swim may not be as non-squeamish or “non-mainstream” as the network projects itself. This episode, which was originally created as the final episode for *Family Guy*’s eighth season, deals with the topic of abortion (Lois becomes a surrogate mother to her old friend’s baby but decides to have an abortion when its biological parents die in a car accident). Fox refused to air this episode but said that the producers have the right to distribute the episode in whatever way they want (Itzkoff, 2010). Although many Adult Swim fans believed this episode would eventually air on Adult Swim the spokesperson for the Adult Swim announced that the network has no plans to air the episode (Itzkoff, 2010). So far, this episode has been aired only in the U.K. (on BBC3). Adult Swim’s refusal to air the “Partial Terms of Endearment” episode belies its claim of being a network that is not afraid to be unconventional, controversial, and “adult-oriented. When Adult Swim does not have any problems airing *Family Guy* with rape jokes or jokes that can be construed as racist and/or sexist<sup>6</sup> or frequently airs differently edited *Family Guy* episodes that have more “mature” dialogues or scenes its refusal to air this abortion episode reveals the conservative ideology behind Adult Swim’s “edgy,” “unconventional” brand identity.

Regardless, the attempt to differentiate Adult Swim’s *Family Guy* from Fox’s *Family Guy* continues to be made by the *Family Guy* producers and those at Adult Swim.

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<sup>5</sup> Fox eventually aired this episode on December 10, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Despite its edgy humor and adult jokes, *Family Guy* “has not historically been a bastion for feminist politics” (Wallace, 2009).

For example, the *Family Guy* episode that aired on Fox on January 3, 2010 had a fake Adult Swim style bump (in the conventional Adult Swim white-font-on-a-black-background style) right in the middle of the show. The bump read: “Can I ask you something?/ Why are you watching this on FOX?/ “Family Guy” is a lot funnier on Adult Swim, because we don’t cut out the funniest jokes./ You probably think you’re watching this on Adult Swim now, don’t you? Well, you’re not. It’s still FOX./ [adult swim].” Adult Swim got in this joke as well and replied with a Fox style bump (that resembles Fox’s promo for its Sunday night, “Animation Domination”) that read: “You’re watching FOX/ But not that FOX/ This FOX/ The FOX for people who watch FOX on Adult Swim/ So remember that’s FOX on Adult Swim / on Cartoon Network / on FOX.<sup>7</sup> This interplay between *Family Guy* producers and Adult Swim demonstrates how Adult Swim projects and is imagined to be a “different” kind of network that gets it unlike Fox. Also, it displays how Adult Swim tries to have its cake and eat it too by continuing to air the mainstreamed Fox animations such as *Family Guy*, which are important for Adult Swim’s brand expansion while maintaining its image as a different, non-mainstream, adult-oriented network (enabled by airing uncensored/differently edited episodes of the show).

### **Animes: The Art of Regression and Subversion**

Along with syndicated shows recycled Japanese animations (animes) have played an important role in establishing the Adult Swim brand identity, particularly in its early years. The decision to include animes in the Adult Swim programming lineup seemed to make sense both economically and culturally. First, Japanese animes have a lower price

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<sup>7</sup> All of the pictures that were used for this bump were from the “Big Man on Hippocampus” episode that contains the fake Adult Swim bump.

tag for rebroadcast rights (Grigsby, 1999). Second, at the time Adult Swim was launched, animes, which were once inaccessible and circulated only as bootlegged videos among a small number of fans, had become a powerful cultural force in the U.S.<sup>8</sup> whether it is because of the rise of Japanese culture as “the arbiter of cool” (Kelts, 2006), various fan activities such as ‘fansubbing’ that proselytized animes in the U.S. (Leonard, 2005), or the development of DVD technology that has allowed a variety of anime titles to be released in the U.S. (Cubbison, 2005). For Adult Swim, animes were particularly a great programming option because many of them engaged with adult themes (particularly sex and violence) to the bewilderment of many Americans “who like to think of “cartoons” as “childish” or “innocent”” (Napier, 2005, p. 9). Its unpredictable and complex narratives, engagement with adult themes and topics, and arresting visual styles made animes a perfect cultural product to fill the void of the “dearth of sophisticated adult animated programming in America” which “a promulgated rearticulation of the cartoon genre in the 1960s” has created (Leonard, 2005, p. 284).

The use of adult-oriented animes helped Adult Swim to further destabilize the notion that cartoons are merely children’s entertainment, appeal to a more mature audience, and construct itself as a cool, unconventional adult entertainment network. In addition to their engagement with adult themes, the characteristics of animes such as rapid shifts in narrative pace, continuous transformation in imageries, ambiguity in time and place, and questioning of humanity and its relationship to nature made them resonate

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<sup>8</sup> Approximately a year after the debut of Adult Swim, a cable channel called Anime Network was launched. Unlike Adult Swim which offers animes as just one part of its programming, the Anime Network’s only fares were animes. The network began a 24/7 linear broadcasting of animes in 2004 but discontinued this service on January 1, 2008. It now only provides Video-on-Demand (VOD) services for digital cable providers and online streaming services to subscribers (Anime News Network, 2008).

with many young adults who were dealing with “the shifting nature of identity in a constantly changing society” (Napier, 2005, p. 12). Anime’s ability to express “the postmodern obsession with fluctuating identity” made them relatable to many young adults whose “adult” identities were in continuous flux (Napier, 2005, p. 12). This was particularly true during the traumatic times in the U.S. when many young adults were dealing with political apathy (from the failure of Bush administration’s “wars on terror” and failed foreign and domestic policies), economic disenfranchisement from job losses and the frozen job market, disappearing opportunities for upward mobility, the widening gap between the rich and the poor, the lack of institutional support resulting from neoliberal economic policies that push further individualism, and so on (Kelts, 2006). Charles Solomon, an animation critic and historian who frequently writes for *The New York Times*, stated anime’s appeal to young American adults in a similar way: “I think that aspects of anime do appeal to young Americans, specifically at a time when the institutions of government don’t seem to represent them. They feel powerless. A pervasive theme in a lot of anime is industrial corruption, or military-industrial corruption, that is pervading society and using people against their wills. The vision of shadowy power structures and dark experiments going on does resonate with people today” (cited in Kelts, 2006, p. 30). The grey world of anime, riddled with uncertainties, indeterminacies, and ungraspable answers and solutions to various problems appeared truer to reality and thus attracted a great number of young adults who desire for a better world (Kelts, 2006).

Among many anime that fill the Adult Swim programming lineup I specifically talk about two anime here: *Cowboy Bebop* as it is the first anime that aired on Adult

Swim and is most strongly associated with the Adult Swim brand and *Crayon Shin Chan* as it signifies the precarious boundary between childhood/adulthood and demonstrates what “adult” means for Adult Swim.

*Cowboy Bebop* (original title: *Kauboii Kebopu*), was originally created in 1998 by a Japanese animation studio, Sunrise. It first aired on Adult Swim on September 2, 2001, the night Adult Swim launched. Consisted of 26 half-hour episodes, *Cowboy Bebop* is the first anime that Adult Swim telecasted as part of its programming. Set in 2071 where the earth has become an uninhabitable, and thus, a deserted place due to an explosion of an interplanetary gateway that has greatly destroyed the moon, *Space Bebop* revolves around five crew members of an old spaceship, *Bebop*, owned and operated by Jet Black, who is a disenchanted former policeman. The show’s main protagonist is Spike Spiegel, a young cynical bounty hunter who has a cybernetic right eye and is haunted by his past when he was a member of Red Dragon Crime Syndicate, a crime organization. In addition to Jet Black and Spike are Faye Valentine, who has a gambling problem and a past she cannot remember due to a memory loss after a space shuttle accident, Edward, a little girl (despite her name) who has brilliant computer skills, and Ein, a smart “data dog” that is able to find and recognize data (an ability that goes almost unnoticed by other crew members except Ed).

Although *Cowboy Bebop* is set in the future it is very retro in style in its presentation of technology (which is mostly depicted as junky) and uses of music, which is heavily influenced by the 20<sup>th</sup> century funk, jazz, and blues (the show’s opening theme song is reminiscent of the songs from the 1960s spy movies). This hybrid of retro and future presents a sense of timelessness. The show conveys a sense of statelessness

through genre-mixing, a “process of generic combination and interplay, not rooted in biological notions of taxonomic purity” (Mittell, 2004, p. 154). Although genre-mixing is not a new televisual practice (Caldwell, 1995) as genres have always been permeable categories (Mittell, 2004), genre-mixing has frequently been associated as a postmodern practice because it destabilizes the distinct categories of genres as organizing principles. With a mixture of science fiction, western (as the title of the show indicates), action, noir, comedy, and 60s-70s detective shows, *Cowboy Bebop* transgresses the artificial boundaries constructed through generic categories and engages its viewers/fans who are highly aware of the generic conventions in a deeper and more reflexive manner.

Ethnic bleaching in *Cowboy Bebop* is another factor that contributes to the show’s delivery of the “everywhere, nowhere” sensibility (Lu, 2008). Ethnic bleaching, or what Iwabuchi (2002) refers to as the erasure of cultural odor is generally a practice that neutralizes cultural “otherness” by eradicating the signifiers of differences. Ethnic bleaching/cultural de-odorization is commonly practiced in animes so they can be easily marketed in the international market and gain wider audience reception (Lu, 2008). In *Cowboy Bebop* ethnic mixing is shown through the characters’ names which are all westernized (Spike, Ed, Jet Black, Faye, Julia, Vicious, etc.), although this is not an unusual practice in animes (for example, the main characters in *Fullmetal Alchemist* are Edward and Alphonse Elric).<sup>9</sup> Second, despite the show’s origin in Japan, the main

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<sup>9</sup> It is quite common for the characters’ Japanese names to be changed into English, especially with animes that are scheduled to air on children’s television, to erase hints of Japanese-ness. For example, the main character of *Sailor Moon* has been changed from Usagi to Serena in the U.S. Both Satoshi (in *Pokemon*) and Haruka (in *Yu-Gi-Oh!*) were changed to Ash and May respectively in the U.S. However, as animes became more mainstream and the cultural differences represented in animes became more acceptable many of the characters’ Japanese names have started to remain unchanged to provide a

characters appear “whiter and internationalized” than as “Asians,” especially when compared to other Asian characters, who are generally depicted as illegal immigrants and speak poor English (Lu, 2008, p. 182). In addition, *Cowboy Bebop* heightens the sense of “statelessness” by erasing a distinctive national identity of place and by focusing on depicting a diverse society where people of different race (African American, Chinese, Hispanic, etc.) live together (Annett, 2011).

What makes *Cowboy Bebop* a compelling Adult Swim anime that resonates with many young adult Adult Swim viewers is its overarching consciousness of ephemerality that is embodied by the characters, particularly Spike. Spike is depicted as a young man who drifts from place to place without any meaning or purpose in life (and the wistful jazz and blues music in the background only heightens this sense of aimlessness), which many young (male) adults who live in a world of void and purposelessness due to the postmodern economic and political conditions can relate to. As Napier (2005) points out, the characters (even the criminals) in the show are portrayed as living in a state of regression where time has frozen (Faye was literally frozen in time as she was cryogenically frozen for many years after the accident and Ed is stuck in a child’s body) and the world does not change. The emphasis on regression, the hybridization of retro and future, various character flaws of the protagonists, unclear boundary between good and evil, and the perpetual condition of statelessness in *Cowboy Bebop* have made not only made it one of the most popular animes among Adult Swim fans but also an

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sense of more “authenticity” to anime fans (and this is more so with animes that are geared towards older fans).



important representative of the Adult Swim sensibility, which is why it continues to air as part of the Adult Swim programming to this day.<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, *Crayon Shin Chan* is a very different kind of anime from *Cowboy Bebop* as this show is a slapstick comedy full of low-brow toilet humor and has short simple storylines. It is very different from other conventional animes in terms of art style (very simple drawings that are closer to Adult Swim style than traditional artistic drawings of animes) and is more similar to American comedy series with its fast paced humor and American style jokes. These characteristics have made the show popular among many Adult Swim comedy fans who generally do not watch or like animes because of their different style from the Adult Swim comedy shows. Frequently referred to as the Japanese *South Park* because of the show's naughtiness and delivery of adult jokes through children's mouths (although *Crayon Shin Chan* existed long before *South Park* came into existence), *Crayon Shin Chan* is the first comedy anime series that aired on Adult Swim. Despite its shorter presence on Adult Swim, *Crayon Shin Chan* is worth mentioning here because the show's translation into the American context (via Adult Swim) provides hints of how Adult Swim understands what it means by "adult" (or how it defines adult humor) and how it problematizes the conventional understanding of "adult-ness" or "adult" culture.

Based on Yoshito Ususi's manga series *Crayon Shin Chan* is a very popular cartoon series in Japan as it has been on Japanese TV since 1992. The show revolves around a five-year-old boy named Shinnosuke "Shin" Nohara, his parents, his baby sister,

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<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, *Cowboy Bebop* has become a nostalgic show for many of the older Adult Swim fans who first encountered anime through this show. These fans' nostalgia, then, further heightens the show's quality of statelessness.

neighbors, friends, and teachers and focuses on Shin's inappropriate behaviors, misuses of languages, and awkward situations they create. The humor in the Japanese version mostly engages with references to Japanese popular culture and wordplay so some of the jokes in the dubbed version that Adult Swim airs have entirely different translations.<sup>11</sup> Shin's behaviors provide hilarity and social commentary as his honest observations and unfiltered comments inadvertently expose "the foibles and pretensions of his vain and materialistic parents and other adults" (Lee, 2000, p. 200). In other words, Shin's antics are intended to satirize the uptight/pretentious Japanese culture. *Crayon Shin-Chan* was originally made to target adults but increasingly became popular among children that it eventually became a family/children's show that air during family time (Japanese version of prime time) (Grigsby, 1999). Thus, it received much pressure from the Japanese Parent Teacher Association (PTA) to have the content toned down to make it compatible with the family television program (Grigsby, 1999). In Japan, the show targets the family audience, despite having child nudity in the show, and uses a distinct line of humor with many of the slapstick jokes aimed at children and the wordplay/sexual humor aimed at adults.

As one of the most popular shows in Japan, *Crayon Shin Chan* has been exported to various countries including China, India, Korea, Spain, and Vietnam, mostly as a

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<sup>11</sup> Unless one is fluent in Japanese and has a good understanding of the Japanese culture it is difficult to get some of the jokes that are in the original anime. This requires the Japanese jokes to be entirely rewritten to make them understandable to the American audience, which can change the tone and the sensibility of the show. A good example of how redubbing (a practice of providing a new sound/dialogue to the existing image) changes the feel and sensibility of the existing work is Woody Allen's directorial debut film, *What's Up, Tiger Lily* (1966). By redubbing the Japanese spy film, *International Secret Police: Key of Keys*, with a comedy script, Allen was able to completely transform the movie from an action film into a comedy (the plot: hunting for world's most delicious egg salad recipe).

children's cartoon for the entire family to watch. In Korea, *Crayon Shin Chan* aired in the late afternoons/early evenings, the children television hours, after the content went through extensive censorship (not just sexual jokes but also contents that signify "Japan-ness" due to the historical relationship between two countries). In Spain, the show was moved to a late night programming schedule after the parents associations made numerous complaints about its inappropriateness for children. In India, the Hindi version of the show first appeared on television in 2006. It was an instant hit with children and became the most watched program on Hungama, the channel that aired the show. However, the Information and Broadcasting (IB) Ministry banned *Crayon Shin Chan* from Indian television in 2008 after various complaints have been made about the content of the show (Sengupta, 2008). *Crayon Shin Chan* received a lot of heat in many of these imported countries because the show was understood to be a children's cartoon and that Shin's mischievous and rude behaviors (such as taking off clothes in the public, mooning people, urinating in the public, etc.) would encourage their children viewers to copycat these inappropriate behaviors. However, in the U.S. *Crayon Shin Chan* was introduced to the American audience as an adult cartoon via Adult Swim, which understands cartoons to be a legitimate form of entertainment for adults. For *Crayon Shin Chan* to become an Adult Swim material (in other words, an adult animation) its content needed to go through transformations to be more palatable to the American adult viewers.

Although the original *Crayon Shin Chan* was created for the children/family in Japan the show would not have passed as a kids show in America with child nudity.

Therefore, the show had to be rewritten for an adult audience, which FUNimation<sup>12</sup> did by putting in more sexual innuendo and creating a more offensive, darker show that touches taboo subjects such as suicide and abortion while simultaneously being funny (“Inside Shin Chan’s Massive Head,” 2007). Adult Swim, which already had encountered *Crayon Shin Chan* through Phuuz production in 2003 but passed on it because it seemed to be geared more towards the kid audience, showed interest in the series when FUNimation acquired the show’s license in 2005 (Maune, 2006). So Adult Swim actively got involved in the FUNimation production from the beginning and helped transform *Crayon Shin Chan* into an adult-oriented series by inserting more sexual jokes and adult humor in the English script.<sup>13</sup> By creating *Crayon Shin Chan* for the Adult Swim viewers Shin could be portrayed as a mischievous, naughty kid who likes to take off his pants to do the notorious Mr. Elephant impression (which is drawing an elephant on his genital

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<sup>12</sup> FUNimation Entertainment is an anime production company that acquired the licensing rights of *Crayon Shin Chan* in the U.S. in 2005. It produced the English dub of the series for Adult Swim.

<sup>13</sup> For instance, in the “A Very Wrong Engagement” segment in the “Pee-Strike” episode, Masao who has a crush on Ai decides to challenge Shin for a duel after seeing how horribly Shin treats Ai. However, Shin mistakes Masao’s proposal for an after school fight as a proposal for a marriage and becomes concerned about this unexpected “boy-boy” relationship. Georgie, Penny, and Bo, Shin’s kindergarten friends, see Masao’s outburst from a distance and are curious what the deal between Shin and Masao is all about. Shin and Masao meet at the Horsey Poo Park after school. Still thinking that Masao is in love with him, Shin tells Masao that he doesn’t have the same feelings but wants to remain as friends. The moment Masao hears Shin’s confession he begins to cry and says, “Oh, please Shin. Promise me we’ll never quarrel again,” while giving Shin a hug. After witnessing this encounter, Penny who was hiding with Georgie and Bo at the park remarks, “It’s like *Brokeback*, only with ugly kids,” referring to the famous gay cowboy movie, *Brokeback Mountain*. In the “Miscarriage Return Policy Tot For Teacher” episode Georgie, who is characterized as a wealthy conservative Japanese American, says things like “...and those are 911 reasons why Rudy Giuliani will be our next president” or “Reaganomics help the working poor worldwide.” These jokes demonstrate how the dubbing recontextualized this cartoon series into an adult animation to cater to the Adult Swim fans.

with his penis as a trunk), bares his butt to do the ass dance, and engages in inappropriate behaviors that embarrass his parents, teachers, and other adults without any qualms. Also, the FUNimation production incorporated many characteristics of Adult Swim original comedies such as dirty one-liners, toilet humor and fast paced political, topical jokes. What makes Adult Swim's version of *Crayon Shin Chan* appealing to the Adult Swim fans is that it disrupts the mythical notion of childhood/children as pure, innocent, and asexual as it has Shin (and his kindergarten friends) talking about "homosexuality," "humping," or "getting knocked up." The crude jokes and the adult humor in *Crayon Shin Chan* make it inappropriate for non-adults and erect a strong boundary between what is appropriate for adults and children (and the childhood-adulthood opposition). However, the show's focus on immature, silly behaviors and crude jokes also make it "childish. The Adult Swim fans' interest and pleasurable engagement with this text, then, also suggest a collapse of the adulthood-childhood boundary. Thus, *Crayon Shin Chan's* appeal comes from "the simultaneous dissolution and reinforcement of the boundaries between childhood and adulthood" (Hendershot, 2004, p. 193) and the subversion that comes from childish appropriation of adult humor.

Animes such as *Cowboy Bebop*, *InuYasha*, *Lupin III*, *Bleach*, *Ghost in the Shell*, and *Crayon Shin Chan* all played (and continue to play) an important role in the development and maintenance of the Adult Swim brand. However, for Adult Swim to grow from an obscure late night programming block to a powerful cultural brand it needed its own original shows that could signify a recognizable Adult Swim sensibility.

### **The Origin of the Adult Swim Sensibility: *Space Ghost Coast to Coast (SGC2C)***

As a network that was created to narrowcast a specific genre, cartoons, for its 24 hour programming schedule, Cartoon Network, like many of the startup cable channels, had to rely on reruns and repackaged programming in its early years (Mittell, 2004). This was not a problem since Cartoon Network had the Hanna-Barbera cartoon library (and later WB library when Turner merged with Time Warner) that contained more than 8000 half-hour animations, which they could use (Ken P., 2003). Repackaging “classic” cartoons allowed Cartoon Network to appeal to many adults who grew up watching those cartoons. Unlike its rival, Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network constructs its audience not by age demographics but by the audience’s taste culture (their taste for cartoons) regardless of age (Mittell, 2004). Thus, it is not surprising that many of the Cartoon Network audience are adults. Evoking nostalgia, the repackaged cartoons in Cartoon Network attracted many adult viewers who grew up watching and were familiar with the 1960s/70s Hanna-Barbera cartoons.

Repackaging and repurposing old cartoons not only helped Cartoon Network to provide old cartoons in a fresh new way but also to produce new programs quicker, easier, and at a much lower cost. As a young network Cartoon Network did not have enough money to venture into original programming in the early 1990s. The lack of monetary support from Turner<sup>14</sup> led Mike Lazzo and his production team with no option but to repurpose existing programming from Cartoon Network’s library if they wanted to create new, original shows. Lazzo explained how repurposing was an economic

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<sup>14</sup> According to Lazzo, Cartoon Network’s programming in its early years was limited to what Turner had in possession as Ted Turner told Lazzo, “I bought you a library, now utilize it” (cited in Weinstein, 1994, n.p.).

imperative: “We knew we were sitting on an enormous library, and there was a lot of potential with that – and to make new programming was just beyond our budget – so it was very quickly decided that we couldn’t even hire artists to draw new concepts up for us. If it wasn’t there already, we couldn’t use it” (Ken P., 2003, n.p.).

Cartoon Network’s formula of repurposing existing programs to create a completely new show was first concocted with *Space Ghost Coast to Coast (SGC2C)*, which became “the template for future Adult Swim productions: cheap, simple animation illustrating absurdist dialogue delivered in a jerky, Thelonious Monkish comic rhythm that flouts all shticky cartoon conventions” (Wolk, 2004, n.p.). By repackaging old footages with postmodern irony and humor, *SGC2C* demonstrates how hip, unconventional, and original shows can be produced and attract a greater adult audience through repurposing and recontextualizing old footages. Out of various Hanna-Barbera cartoon characters the decision to repurpose the Space Ghost character was made based on Mike Lazzo’s personal taste: it was his all-time favorite character (Weinstein, 1994).

*SGC2C* is based on the 1960s Hanna-Barbera cartoon, *Space Ghost*, which first aired in 1966 as part of CBS’s Saturday morning cartoons. *Space Ghost* was created at a moment when the notion of outer space captivated the minds of many Americans as evidenced by the creations of *My Favorite Martian*, *Lost in Space*, *Star Trek*, *The Jetsons*, *Space Kidettes*, and *Birdman and the Galaxy Trio* in the 1960s due to the space war between America and Soviet Union (Russo, 2008). Originally a superhero fighting villains in the outer space, Space Ghost returns as a talk show host for Cartoon Network’s *Space Ghost Coast to Coast* in 1994 after a long hiatus. The basic scenario of *SGC2C* is as follows: “Sitting up on the Ghost Planet, having vanquished all of his archenemies,

bored out of his cape, Space Ghost hears about the talk-show wars on Earth and decides he has to get into the battle. He builds his own set and hires a band a director—all animated and all up in outer space somewhere. In each show he interviews famous earthlings, who appear in live form on a TV screen beside his desk, interspersing the usual dull talk-show questions with his own special inquiries: “What are your superpowers? Do you have any secret identities? Who are your archenemies?” (Weinstein, 1994, n.p.).

When Lazzo and his creative team were drawing up ideas for *SGC2C*, Johnny Carson had just retired (in 1992) and the talk show war between David Letterman and Jay Leno was at its peak (Kenyon, 1998). Space Ghost was resurrected as an incompetent, bumbling talk show host who would join this talk show battle. As a parody of late night talk shows, *SGC2C* adopts various talk show conventions such as opening with a theme song and a guest introduction, Space Ghost’s opening monologue before the guest appearance, and an Ed McMahon-like sidekick. But being a parody, *SGC2C* also subverts the talk show conventions one by one. For instance, *SGC2C* has Zorak and Moltar, who used to be the villains in the Space Ghost original series (*Space Ghost and Dino Boy* and *Space Stars*), as the show’s co-host/bandleader and director/producer respectively. Because they are forced to work on Space Ghost’s talk show as a punishment for their earlier crimes they are bent on jeopardizing the show rather than helping Space Ghost to make the show better. By characterizing Zorak as an anti-sidekick who hardly agrees with Space Ghost the show pokes fun at the role of talk show sidekicks who participated in and often became the subjects of the talk show host’s pranks and jokes. Lazzo explained that Zorak’s characterization as an anti-sidekick reflects the sensibility of the



postmodern society and asked, “how many times have you looked at Ed McMahon and thought, ‘Are you really laughing?’” (quoted in Kenyon, 1998, n.p.).

*SGC2C*’s parody of late night talk shows is especially highlighted through Space Ghost’s interaction with his guests. Unlike conventional talk shows where hosts feign interests in their guests Space Ghost shows no interests in the guest nor tries to learn anything about them. For instance, in the “Girlie Show” episode (Season 2, Episode 2), where Space Ghost pays tribute to women in the entertainment industry, he invites Alice Cooper as one of the guests thinking he is a woman because of his name and his makeup. Or in the “\$20.01” episode (Season 3, Episode 2) Space Ghost continuously calls his guest, Joel Hodgson, the creator of *Mystery Science Theater 3000*, Joel Robinson, the fictitious character Hodgson played on the show.

The first episode of *SGC2C* aired on April 15, 1994, with Bee Gees as the show’s guest. Because it was a parody of late night talk shows, *SGC2C* aired late at nights. Being on a late night schedule, *SGC2C* attracted many young adult viewers who just happened to be staying up late. Its late night programming sensibility (a hybrid of late night talk shows such as *Tonight Shows* and *Saturday Night Live*, infomercials, and old campy and cheesy shows) not only made *SGC2C* popular among young adults but also created an Adult Swim sensibility and a comedy style that many Adult Swim original shows came to soon follow (Murray, 2012). On September 2, 2001, with its “Knifin Around” episode *SGC2C* moved to Adult Swim and became its essential feature. Because *SGC2C* aired late at night during its Cartoon Network period its move to the Adult Swim programming block did not require many changes.

Various factors contributed to the surprising success of *SGC2C*. First, as Lazzo points out, *SGC2C* emerged at a moment when popular culture was at the cusp of a renaissance (Ken P., 2003). After all, the 1990s was the moment when shows such as *Beavis and Butt-Head*, *Pop-Up Video*, and *Mystery Science Theater 3000* that were full of pop culture references and engaged with “contexting,” a practice that provides voice-over or textual commentaries to existing videotexts, were very popular (Burns, 2004). Located on the fringe television timeslots on cable channels (MTV, VH1, and Comedy Central respectively), these shows, which were created for a niche audience, particularly had a popular following (Reeves, Rogers, & Epstein, 1996). Full of pop culture references *SGC2C* greatly appealed to young adults who enjoy dissecting and deconstructing conventions of popular culture. Furthermore, because the show rewards viewers who have a higher level of pop culture knowledge than those who do not *SGC2C*’s fans had a higher incentive to watch the show. For instance, anyone who has seen and is familiar with *Space Odyssey 2001* could understand the “\$20.01” episode to be a parody of Stanley Kubrick’s classic through signs such as HAL-like technology that tries to replace human beings (in *MOE 2000*), the use of “Sprach Zarathustra” as the background music, and Zorak’s transformation into a fetus in a bubble floating in space and enjoy the episode more.

*SGC2C* is a pleasurable pastiche of pop culture, hewing various materials into one. Its parodies demand “a heightened state of awareness and mental participation” in the Adult Swim audience (Jones, 2010, p. 15). Relying on the intertextual mechanism, in which a sense making of a text occurs in relation to other texts, the parodies in *SGC2C* rely on the Adult Swim audience’s media savvy-ness and self-reflexive, ironic, and witty

sense of humor and reward them with a “media elite” status (Ott, 2007) for their vast amount of pop culture knowledge and understanding of the contemporary media culture.

*SGC2C* can be described as postmodern based on its textual characteristics: its use of pastiche, intertextual narrative traits, self-reflexivity and ironic deconstruction of text through parody, pop culture references and allusions to social topicality. Because of the bizarre mismatch of a cartoon superhero and supervillains in mundane situations, awkward execution of humor through the use of long pauses and silences, and incoherent delivery of story *SGC2C* seems to revel in the “perverse pleasures of dissonance” (Murray, 2012). Also, the show frequently uses Andy Kaufman-esque anti-humor (or deliberate attempt to be unfunny), which becomes one of the signature Adult Swim style humors. The use of anti-humor is particularly well displayed in the last ten minutes of the “Fire Ant” episode (Season 6, Episode 7) where all viewers get to see is Space Ghost crawling after an ant to find out its hiding place. When asked why *SGC2C* is popular among young adults, Lazzo said, “I don’t think you can say you’ve seen anything like *Coast to Coast* before. It is clearly a parody but it seems so ridiculous that it almost becomes a completely different thing. It is the freshness of a concept that hasn’t been seen before” (in Kenyon, 1998, n.p.).

Lazzo’s point about *SGC2* being different from existing television shows may be a bit exaggerated as the 1990s, the period that the show was created, was full of television shows that shared the show’s sensibility by celebrating various symbols of postmodernism: *The Simpsons*, *Mystery Science Theater 3000*, and *Beavis & Butthead*, which, loaded with intertexts and pastiche, provide ironic, hip, banal, self-reflexive, and even smart and witty commentaries and observations about American culture and society.

But Caldwell (1995) argues that to call these textual strategies that were deployed in many of the 1990s television shows as “postmodern” may be problematic as they have been central components of television from its infancy. Providing examples from the 1940s and 1950s shows such as *Texaco Star Theater* (intertexts), *Your Show of Shows* (pastiche), and Dumont Network’s *Window on the World* (intertexts), Caldwell (1995) argues that a systematic study of television history will show that all of the “narrative traits once thought to be unique and defining properties of postmodernism—intertextuality, pastiche, multiple and collaged presentational forms—have also been defining properties of television from its inception” (p. 23). According to Caldwell (1995), then, postmodernism has always been a characteristic of television and thus has “little to offer broader explanations of American television” (p. 22). Although I agree with Caldwell that postmodernism may not be an effective category to describe a particular television’s historical period I still think it is still useful to talk about television within the postmodern framework for this study because the Adult Swim viewers who are mostly “the youth of the new millennium are the first generation to *live* the themes of postmodern theory” (Best & Kellner, 2003, p. 76) due to the social, political, and economic conditions that structure their lives (corporate downsizing, disappearance of works and casualization of labor, economic recession, identity shifts, and so on). To speak to the emotion and sensibility of the young adults, *SGC2C* may have adopted the textual strategies such as awkward execution of humor, low-brow animation style, and self-reflective, cynical and ironic humor intentionally, which also reflect the American cultural zeitgeist where nothing is clear or makes sense in a world that continues to be haunted by the 9/11 attacks, wars on terror, and global climate and financial crises

(Llyod, 2007). In this sense, *SGC2C* (and the Adult Swim texts that use *SGC2C*'s template) can be understood as a “symptomatic text” that tells us about the very cultural moment or cultural conditions in which the text exists (Dubrofsky, 2011; Walters, 1995).

The dominant sensibility of cynicism and ironic mode of address of *SGC2C* enable the show to resonate with many young adult viewers who use irony, cynicism, and sarcasm as weapons to critically dissect and deconstruct the mainstream culture that deserve scrutiny (Shugart, 2001; Marinucci, 2005). But what makes *SGC2C* really appealing to the young adult viewers is its embrace of contradiction, inconsistencies, and ambivalence, which are the fundamental characteristics of young adults of the millennium (Shugart, 2001) particularly in regard to the show's existence within a commercial context. It demonstrates and also reflects today's young adults' attitudes of being non-mainstream, non-conformist, anti-establishment, and unconventional while embracing commercialism (without a label as a “sell-out” or a “hypocrite”). After all, today's young adults grew up watching more television than any other generations (Best & Kellner, 2003) and are thus more aware not to trust the media while being influenced by them the most (Marinucci, 2005).

The “Joshua” (Season 4, Episode 25) in *SGC2C* is a good example of how the contradiction between critical and commercial is being embraced in the show (as well as by the *SGC2C*'s viewers). “Joshua” is an episode that parodies corporate videos that public relations/marketing departments create to promote their products and extend their brands. With the exception of the last two minutes the entire episode is constructed around the fake *SGC2C* corporate video which explains why Space Ghost would be an effective tool for other corporations for branding (and Space Ghost make statements such

as “Saddle me up, and ride me into the future!” or “When it comes time to allocate your advertising dollars, and/or to make your endorsement selections, please let the Space Ghost be a part of the future of you!”). Once this fake corporate video ends Space Ghost introduces two winners of a contest called “Haiku’n for Space Ghost” who appear on Space Ghost’s telecast and cite their winning haikus. The appearance of the two haiku winners (who must be fans or regular viewers of *SGC2C* to participate in this contest) in this “Joshua” episode, which makes fun of corporate PR and marketing creates a moment of irony (which is intentional) as the “Haiku’n for Space Ghost” was a contest co-sponsored by Tower Records (Sandler, 2003). The “fake” *SPC2C* corporate video then self-mocks Cartoon Network’s use of Space Ghost as a merchandising/promotional tool for its brand building.

Of course, *SGC2C* is not the only show that is self-reflexive of its commercial ties. Sarah Banet-Weiser (2007) has pointed out the irony in *Ren & Stimpy*’s mocking of commercialism in children’s television as this show aired on a network “that was firmly ensconced in a corporate media environment, owned by one of the largest media conglomerates” (p. 197). However, whereas Nickelodeon was not particularly interested in highlighting that irony (Banet-Weiser, 2007), Adult Swim/*SGC2C* does not try to hide the irony of being unabashedly commercial while making fun of and critiquing corporate marketing. This kind of contradiction does not seem to be a problem with many Adult Swim fans as their response to Space Ghost’s appearance on a television commercial for an insurance company, Esurance, in 2007 demonstrate. Rather than calling Space Ghost’s commercial appearance as “selling out” or a betrayal (those who talked about selling out did so in an ironic way rather than as a critique) many Adult Swim fans found Space

Ghost's commercial appearance to be cool and hilarious and also good for Esurance's brand image.<sup>15</sup> This seems to prove Marinucci's (2005) argument on how the cynicism that young adults use to express criticism on various aspects of mainstream culture does not "always yield a principled critical response to consumer culture" (p. 507). Rather, it works to create "a generalized sense that things should not be taken too seriously" (Marinucci, 2005, p. 507). The commercialization of *SGC2C* (or the commercial use of Space Ghost) reflects how Adult Swim understands "the futility of a binary understanding of culture as authentic (not mainstream/non-commercial) versus commercial" in today's brand culture (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 43). Adult Swim's ability to project a non-mainstream sensibility while simultaneously being a "commercial" entity demonstrates how today's brand culture is "structured by ambivalence" (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 43) and how that ambivalence can be a powerful component for profit accumulation.

### **No Money, More Creativity: Williams Street as a Creative Oasis**

The unique non-mainstream sensibility of Adult Swim began with *SGC2C*, which provided a model for what future Adult Swim shows should be like: absurd, surreal, anarchistic, creative, and experimental. James Poniewozik (2003) attributes Adult Swim's difference from other programs to its low production budget. Calling Adult Swim shows "lunacy on a low budget" Poniewozik (2003) argues that Adult Swim comedies are "richer for being poorer" with small number of writers providing an "original" voice for the program. This argument is not that different from Mike Lazzo's who stated that

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<sup>15</sup> The Esurance commercial follows the format of *Space Ghost Coast to Coast* with Erin Esurance appearing as a guest on Space Ghost's telescreen. While Erin talks about her secret identity as an insurance salesperson all Space Ghost can think about is how hot Erin is.

Adult Swim's originality and creativity were a result of the network not having any money (Ken P., 2003). Unlike prime time cartoons, which involves lots of money and human resource Adult Swim cartoons are freer from corporate rules because they do not use many resources. After all, it only cost \$50,000 to create one episode of *ATHF* and \$150,000 for *Harvey Birdman*, whereas it cost nearly \$2 million to create a half-hour episode of network shows such as *The Simpsons* (Wolk, 2004). Being free from many corporate rules has allowed the workers at Adult Swim to have "And now for something completely different" mentality" (Ken P., 2003, n.p.). When asked if he thinks economics pushes creativity, Lazzo responded, "We always have felt very strongly that the lack of money improves your creativity. If you don't have any money, you've got to be more clever about stuff, and we think that has always benefited what we've done" (Ken P., 2003, n.p.). Using an analogy of a parent disciplining a child, Lazzo stated that the lack of financial support from Cartoon Network has allowed its workers to be more creative and eventually to bring better results for the company. Furthermore, he pointed out that even when Cartoon Network began to generate more money the network deliberately kept the budgets low to maintain creativity.

As Lazzo highlighted the connection between low budget and creativity he emphasized "creativity" as an important characteristic that makes Adult Swim different from other networks. Adult Swim's deliberate distancing from the "suits" and its low-budget creativity work together to create Adult Swim's image as anti-authoritative and subversive. This low-budget/creativity connection, however, also hints at the possibility of exploitation of creativity for Adult Swim's/Cartoon Network's capital accumulation. Furthermore, Adult Swim's deliberate practice in keeping the production costs low to



maintain creativity demonstrates the network's less interest in protecting the working conditions of its creative workers. When asked about the possibility of producing Fox cancelled animations, *Futurama* and *Family Guy* (these shows were cancelled at the time of the interview) at Adult Swim by shortening their running time (to 12 minutes like *Sealab 2021* or *Harvey Birdman: Attorney at Law*) Lazzo stated that it would be difficult to apply the Adult Swim model to those shows since they are produced in L.A., which means the network has to deal with the unions (which drives up the production cost). Lazzo also pointed out that in the early years of the production of *SGC2C* when the network had no money for original programming, *SGC2C* had to be made from the creatives' volunteer work: "There was no money allocated to an original production for four years, so we would take money from on-air promotion or money from show licensing and, of course, our time was just time that we spent outside our jobs at night, working on things like this. We were just using any resource we could, without actually having it dedicated" (Ken P., 2003, n. p.).

This kind of voluntary labor would not have been possible if the creatives working on the task did not find their voluntary work pleasurable. The pleasures of creative production are what propel workers to voluntarily work longer hours and why, in the case of Adult Swim, workers can call Adult Swim workplace as "like heaven...with a lot of work" (Wolk, 2004, n.p.). This kind of voluntary labor that combines elements of exploitation and self-will based on pleasure is referred to as free labor (Terranova, 2004). Free labor is "free" in the sense that it is not financially compensated while simultaneously being willingly/freely given (Terranova, 2004). Terranova (2004) uses this term to explain the type of labor that, as a fundamental component of late capitalism,

has been keeping the digital economy afloat. Her argument about how free labor emanates from “cultural and affective production” and how late capitalism “nurtures, exploits, and exhausts” it is worth paying attention to in this context (p. 94). The creativity over money rhetoric also reflects how the “subjective perceptions of work” take precedence over “objective employment conditions” in today’s cultural industries where “cool,” “creative,” and “autonomous” are the desirable qualities more than material rewards (Neff et al., 2005, p. 330).

But the “autonomy”/“creativity” over “money” and “financial reward” was not just a corporate mantra that Lazzo used to create and present Adult Swim’s image as a “creativity-oriented network.” Lazzo made great efforts to create a buffer between the Adult Swim creative team and the business people at AOL-Time Warner as he believed that his production team can produce their best work when barriers are erected between them and the corporate suits. So Lazzo had Jim Samples, Cartoon Network’s general manager, to function as a buffer between the network and the suits at Time Warner, especially more so after the AOL-Time Warner merger in 2000 when corporate scrutiny and interference were more intense (the fact that Cartoon Network is located in Atlanta and not in New York or Los Angeles made it much easier to maintain this distance). Next, Lazzo moved his Adult Swim production team outside of Cartoon Network to a warehouse that CNN used as its equipment storage to create a further buffer (Cohen, 2005). Matt Thompson, co-creator of *Sealab 2021* said that by moving the Adult Swim production to the old storage he was sending a note to the suits: “we’re gonna take this crappy-ass space, so leave us alone” (Wolk, 2004, n.p.). Although the distance between the Cartoon Network office and the warehouse, which later gets to be called Williams

Street, is not that great the highway between the two offices seemed to create just enough buffer for the Adult Swim production team to maintain its autonomy from its parent company (Cohen, 2005).

The security of creativity, Lazzo's encouragement/enforcement of collaboration among writers, and the "cool," working environment at Williams Street/Adult Swim (with *Star Wars* and Adult Swim paraphernalia decorating the studio) have encouraged Adult Swim creatives to stay rather than to leave for Hollywood (Wolk, 2004). Also, with low production budget and creative autonomy Adult Swim has been able to generate a unique aesthetic style that is deliberately unsophisticated, unpolished, and reminiscent of the amateur DIY projects. This Adult Swim code first created with *SGC2C* continued in the production of Adult Swim's other early programs which made Adult Swim a household name.

### **Adult Themes: Talking About Sex, Race, and Sexuality**

In December 2000, Cartoon Network premiered four new Williams Street produced shows unannounced: *Sealab 2021*, *Leave it to Brak* (later changed to *The Brak Show* on Adult Swim), *Aqua Teen Hunger Force (ATHF)*, and *Harvey Birdman: Attorney at Law*. These stealth premieres were aired as Cartoon Network's "special programming" with the purpose to test the audience responses. With the exception of *ATHF*, these new shows were created with repurposed footages of old Hanna-Barbera cartoons just like *SGC2C*. When Adult Swim launched in September 2, 2001 these four shows became part of the Adult Swim programs along with *SGC2C*, syndicated reruns, and animes and played an important role in further establishing Adult Swim as an offbeat, bizarre, absurd,

but also funny and brilliant programming block and expanding it into a powerful adult-oriented television brand.

Using the aesthetic style and narrative strategies that were established with *SGC2C*, the early Adult Swim original shows continued to push the boundaries of (adult) taste by focusing on silly banter between incompetent, self-absorbed characters, incoherent storylines, barrage of one-liners and abstract jokes, and parody of American/popular culture that challenges conventional wisdom. These anarchistic original shows helped Adult Swim to create a particular brand of absurdity that can alienate many who do not share the Adult Swim sensibility (thus, Adult Swim shows were referred to as television for stoners in the programming's early years). With budgetary constraints these shows all share a low-budget aesthetics with a primitive animation style and an amateur DIY feel, which generate a stronger subversive, non-mainstream feel for the program (although it is part of one of the biggest multinational corporations, Time Warner). Also, this amateurish aesthetics perfectly fits the online culture where DIY Internet-based contents continue to thrive as more people, particularly the younger generation, are not only becoming more familiar and comfortable with the digital DIY world but also increasingly becoming media producers themselves (whether it is posting their short videos on YouTube or producing new contents out of old through media mixing) (Croteau, 2006; Gauntlett, 2011). The low production budget not only shaped Adult Swim aesthetics but also its format as the 15-minute show became the signature format for Adult Swim's original shows. This 15-minute format has also shaped the content of Adult Swim shows as the shorter running time prioritized shorter

sequences and one-liner dialogues while making a coherent, overarching plot less important.

Caldwell (1995) argues changed industrial context, new developments in technology, and shifts in the market relations all push television to reconfigure its aesthetic style, format, and content to engage its audiences in new ways. One of the televisual style/format that arose from the historical connections among technology, aesthetics/style, and political economy today is the short-form web or mobile videos (Dawson, 2011). Adult Swim as television texts can smoothly transform into short-form web/mobile texts because they can easily be cut and divided into various short clips due to its format (less than 12 minutes without commercials), lack of coherent, overarching plot, and use of short sequences that are frequently irrelevant from the larger storyline to compose an entire episode. Just like the short clips of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* that are posted online and shared among viewers have contributed in increasing the visibility, importance, and popularity of these shows (Jones, 2009), various short clips derived from the original Adult Swim shows have allowed Adult Swim to be accessed, viewed, and understood in different ways.

Although the jokes in *SGC2C* were geared towards adults the show focused more on arbitrary jokes and non sequiturs rather than touching on “adult” topics. Topics such as sex and politics that are considered to be inappropriate for children began to be incorporated more in the early Adult Swim original shows, which not only demonstrated what “adult-only” cartoons should be like but also further destabilized the notion that cartoons are a children’s genre. However, Adult Swim’s penchant for irony, satire, and parody (as Adult Swim strives to be an unconventional, witty network) through the use of

(hyper)stereotypes would also generate juvenile jokes that are politically incorrect and also offensive (which can sometimes be the goal for these shows). And because these jokes are created mostly by white men and are more receptive by young male adults Adult Swim animations can also be referred to as “manimations” (Poniewozik, 2003). This then leads to questions about what “adult” means and what the characteristics of “adult-ness” are in Adult Swim. Here I will briefly examine four of the early Adult Swim original shows that have set the tone of adult humor for Adult Swim to understand the characteristics of “adult/ness” in Adult Swim.

Created by Jim Fortier, Andy Merrill, and Pete Smith, *The Brak Show* is a parody of domestic sitcoms as it plays with various conventional codes of the genre. The show revolves around Brak, originally a supervillain character (a space cat) from the 1960s *Space Ghost* series (like Zorak and Moltar) that is transformed into a teenage boy in this show, Brak’s Mom (a space cat) and Dad (a miniature size human being)<sup>16</sup> (whose names are not known as they are simply referred to as mom/mother and dad/father throughout the show), Brak’s sadistic best friend Zorak, and Mr. Thundercleese, Brak’s neighbor. As a parody of domestic sitcoms (particularly those in the 1950s and 60s) this show undermines the “Fathers know best” convention of this genre. Unlike conventional domestic sitcom fathers who tend to be “loving and stoic, deeply involved with his children’s lives, attentive to their needs, and physically available” (Leibman, 2002, p. 266), Dad is characterized as a self-centered, misogynistic, jobless man whose words of wisdom are always incoherent and ridiculous. For instance, in “The New Brak” episode

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<sup>16</sup> Dad’s size was never meant to be small. According to the DVD commentary, Brak’s father was originally intended to be normal but an error made during the composition of a scene rendered Dad’s file to be smaller compared to everything else. The producers thought this outcome was funny and decided to keep the character that way.

(Season 2, Episode 6), when Brak starts to worry that his friend who continues to imitate him will encourage others to imitate him as well and eventually make him obsolete Dad tells him, “Brak, sometimes when people want to be you, you should let them because what happens if they turn out to be better at being you than you are?”

The characterization of Dad as silly and foolish mocks and subverts the prevailing conventions of old domestic sitcoms that privilege the father status and the patriarchal authority by portraying fathers as wise and caring. Interestingly, *The Brak Show*'s characterization of Dad as disengaged, self-centered, irresponsible, and misogynistic (in other words, juvenile) and of Mom as more mature, intelligent and in control (although she is shown to be doing all the domestic chores, which is symbolized by her regular attire that is consisted of dish washing gloves and an apron) is a formula of what Havens (2007) refers to as “guy-coms,” a form of contemporary domestic sitcoms which place father/husband figures as superior despite their juvenile masculinity which makes them inept and incompetent fathers and husbands (as evidenced by sitcoms such as *Home Improvement* and *According to Jim*). So while *The Brak Show* parodies and pokes fun at the “fathers know best” type of old sitcoms it reflects the contemporary sitcoms where dads are childish, inept, and immature and have to deal with the open bickering, demands, and challenges from their wives (who have more power and choices in the postfeminist society) but still remain as the center of the family (while wives are relegated to supportive or invisible roles despite their assumed improved status) (Reed, 2003).

Because Dad is characterized as juvenile, unwise, and foolish his sexist comments (which he frequently makes while reading the newspaper in the kitchen dining table) are

conveyed as benign and too silly to be taken seriously. For instance, in the “Pepper” episode (Season 2, Episode 5) when the mother ship is making its visit to earth to choose the Lucky One, Dad (who always think of himself highly) believes he will be chosen. When Mom asks him why he does not think the alien ship would choose her Dad replies, “Sorry, but you’re a woman. Everyone knows that women are not equipped for golf or space travel. Space is a place of vacuum, buttercup, not a place to be vacuumed.” The ridiculousness in Dad’s comments is clearly intended to make fun of Dad’s misogyny and to unsettle and mock the patriarchal system that operates in domestic sitcoms. However, just like Archie Bunker’s racist jokes which were intended to be laughed at for its ridiculousness (both Norman Lear and Carroll O’Conner who played Archie were defenders of civil rights) were laughed along by many whites who actually agreed with Archie’s viewpoints (Vidmar & Rokeach, 1974), Dad’s sexist comments can also be understood by some male viewers as funny jokes that confirm their sexist viewpoint.

Palmer (1987) argues that humor is based on ambivalence as it contains both subversive and conservative characteristics. As *The Brak Show* demonstrates humor that is intended to transgress can actually be used to reaffirm dominant ideologies. This problem can also be seen in *Sealab 2021* as the sexual nature of the jokes can also be sexist in its nature. As the only early original show that deals with human beings *Sealab 2021* has been able to tackle more “realistic” or “everyday” issues regarding sex, race, religion, and relationship. Created by Matt Thompson and Adam Reed, *Sealab 2021* is based on *Sealab 2020* produced by Hanna Barbera that is about scientists working in a deep-sea pod laboratory station. *Sealab 2020* aired on NBC in 1972 as an educational children’s cartoon that taught kids about various undersea creatures and scientific facts.



*Sealab 2021* generates humor by recontextualizing *Sealab 2020*, which was innocent and serious into a silly nonsensical adult comedy and subverting viewer's childhood memory of the original series (Booker, 2006).<sup>17</sup>

With its numerous politically incorrect jokes on sex, race, religion, disability, and various other “taboo” topics *Sealab 2021*, which became the first Adult Swim show that had to deal with Standards and Practices at Cartoon Network (Heckert, 2007) challenges the limits of “adult” taste by being intelligently funny and edgy while simultaneously being juvenile and nasty. As the only early original series with female and ethnic minority characters as main characters the show intentionally and self-consciously plays with issues of race (particularly on affirmative action) and sex in a silly, but occasionally thought-provoking ways. The show mainly revolves around six main characters: Captain Hazel Hank Murphy who is in charge of Sealab, Commander Jodene Sparks, Lieutenant Commander Derek “Stormy” Waters, Lieutenant Commander Debbie Dupree, Lieutenant Commander Dr. Quentin Quinn, and Lieutenant Marco Marquez. The show characterizes the white male figures (Murphy, Sparks, and Stormy) as self-centered, juvenile, and imbecile, delegitimizing the dominance of white males, challenging male authority, while reflecting contemporary society's struggle and anxiety with the crisis of white masculine authority. In contrast to these white male figures Dr. Quinn, an African American scientist, is characterized as the most rational figure (he has a 260 IQ and five Ph.ds) who

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<sup>17</sup> The contrast in tone between the original series and *Sealab 2021* is greatly shown in the episode “7211” (Season 2, Episode 7), which is made with an actual footage of the original *Sealab 2020* episode. Matt Thompson and Adam Reed had *Sealab 2021* voice actors to read from the script of the original series that is serious in tone. This is the only episode without a joke (and the only episode viewers get to see Captain Murphy as an authority figure who is in charge of things). Viewers may find this “serious” episode funny when reading against other episodes in which characters mistreat others and engage in silly conversations on the most trivial matters.

is able to fix various problems that occur at Sealab. Despite Dr. Quinn's intellectual superiority he and Marco (who is characterized as a macho man who is extremely proud of his Latin heritage) are placed at the lower rungs of the social order in Sealab, which becomes the source of various jokes (and a point of satire) in the show. Meanwhile, the characterization of Debbie Dupree, the only female main character in the show, follows the sexual stereotype of a white woman as a "slut" as she is portrayed as a sex crazed woman who likes to flash. As the object of sexual interest of the male characters on Sealab (she is romantically linked to Dr. Quinn), she becomes the source of various sex jokes of the show. The show is very self-conscious of its sexist treatment of Debbie as indicated in various episodes such as "No Waterworld" (Season 3, Episode 12) in which she is told, "Debbie, the men are talking" whenever she tries to say something<sup>18</sup> or in the "Swimming in Oblivion" (Season 1, Episode 13) episode<sup>19</sup>, a fake behind the scenes episode of Sealab 2021 (the cartoon characters are referred to the names of the voice actors and are shown to be acting for the Sealab 2021 show). In this episode Kate Miller (the voice actor who plays White Debbie) complains about the sexual objectification of her Debbie character only to turn out to be just like her Debbie character. The blatant sexism in the characterization of Debbie/Kate in *Sealab 2021* is indeed intended to be a parody of the stereotyping of women that frequently occurs with female characters in the media. The hyperstereotyping of Debbie/Kate is to make viewers mock the process of stereotyping, not the characters (Gray, 2006). But as Ann Johnson (2007) points out,

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<sup>18</sup> Russo (2005) points out that the original *Sealab 2020* had mild sexist undertones by having Gail (who Debbie Dupree is based on) to occasionally appear weaker and more childlike than her male crew.

<sup>19</sup> The title of this episode refers to an independent movie called *Living in Oblivion*, which revolves around people who are making a movie at a movie set.

parodies and satires can also work as great covers for sexist ideologies as the jokes can be interpreted differently depending on the viewer. Parodies, in other words, are a text of “ambivalence” that encourage some viewers to laugh at the mocking of the outlandish blatant sexist jokes while other viewers to laugh at the object of those jokes (Griffin, 2008).

Among the four early original series, *Harvey Birdman: Attorney at Law* is the most topical as it deals with various social topics such as gay marriage, creationism, global warming, gun control, and surveillance and privacy. Like *SGC2C*, *Harvey Birdman* is also a recycle of Alex Toth’s old children’s cartoon with a superhero produced by Hanna-Barbera. The original show, *Birdman and the Galaxy Trio*, aired from 1967-1969 on NBC as part of the Saturday morning cartoons. Michael Ouweleen and Erik Richter, the creators and writers of *Harvey Birdman*, resurrected both the superhero and various supervillain characters in the original series to create a show about an ex-superhero turned attorney who defends clients that happen to be cartoon characters from other classic Hanna Barbera cartoons. The appearance of these old Hanna Barbera cartoon characters and the show’s play with the original personalities of these cartoon characters make intertextual reading of the show inevitable for a complete understanding of its jokes.

In addition to the show’s topical nature *Harvey Birdman*’s “adult” humor (as well as absurdity) is generated through the positioning of Harvey, a former masculine superhero, as queer (questions about Harvey’s sexuality has been raised numerous times in the Adult Swim online community). Throughout various episodes Harvey cross-dresses, kisses a man, marries another man (Magilla Gorilla), and is romantically

engaged with Boo-Boo Bear (a male bear character). In the “Evolutionary War” episode (Season 3, Episode 7), Harvey, wearing a princess dress, sings in a Disney musical style about his struggles with his identity of being “not quite a bird, not quite a man.” As Jo Johnson (2010) points out, because of the genre’s inherently malleable characteristic cartoons are a perfect medium to subvert “boundaries of anatomy, gender, and sexuality” and challenge “the traditions of male and female, heterosexuality and homosexuality” (p. 247). Traditionally, the drag performances of cartoon characters have mostly been done for comedic purposes rather than to express these characters’ (homo) sexuality (Johnson, 2010). Furthermore, because cartoons have been associated as a children’s genre that must follow family values by being “innocent” and refraining from “adult” topics such as sex and sexuality cartoon characters’ queer identity has always been temporary. In *Harvey Birdman*, Harvey’s queer sexuality (although never explicitly mentioned) is constantly touched upon through his various sexual encounters, bouts, and relationships. Many of these jokes are gratuitous, served to heighten the show’s absurdity and bizarreness but they do have transgressive and even progressive elements as they challenge viewers to question heteronormativity through playful engagements.

One episode that particularly crosses over the line between the homo- and heterosexuality and problematizes the homosexual-abnormal/heterosexual-normal link is the “Return of the Birdgirl” episode (Season 3, Episode 9), which shows Dr. Quest and Race Bannon (from *Jonny Quest*) trying to have a legal gay marriage so they can protect Jonny and Hadji.<sup>20</sup> Harvey has to deal with the Justices League (a dual reference to the Supreme

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<sup>20</sup> This is not the first episode that engages with the queer relationship between Dr. Queen and Race Bannon. The pilot episode of *Harvey Birdman* (“Bannon Custody Case”) is

Court Justices and the animated television series, *Justice League*) but faces difficulty in getting the case tried. Juxtaposed to the Bannon-Quest relationship is the Birdgirl-Phil Sebben (Harvey's boss and the co-founder of Sebben & Sebben law firm) relationship.<sup>21</sup> Birdgirl is the superhero identity of Judy Sebben, Phil's daughter. However, Phil is unable to recognize Birdgirl to be his daughter (despite all the obvious signs) so he continuously hits on her to go on a date. Birdgirl who believes protecting her secret identity is the most important thing in the world ends up going on multiple dates with her dad, which eventually leads to their engagement. Thinking that gay marriage is an abject perversion that denigrates his "heterosexual" marriage that is "totally natural and right in the eyes of both the laws of nature and of men" Phil tries to stop the Justices League (who resemble William Rehnquist, Antonin Scalia, Clarence Thomas, and Sarah Day O'Connor) from legalizing Dr. Quest-Bannon's marriage. The Justices League fails to rule the Dr. Quest-Bannon case and Phil and Birdgirl's marriage also falls apart (during their wedding) as Phil ends up falling in love with a busty blonde woman who looks just like him (who turns out to be Judy's Aunt Phyllis).

This episode, which aired in 2005, reflects how the legalization of the same sex marriage was a hot public issue at the time. In 2004, the Mayor of San Francisco, Gavin Newsom, had made headlines by issuing marriage license to approximately 4,000 same-sex couples. However, on August 12, 2004, the Supreme Court of California ruled those marriages to be void citing that the mayor lacked the authority to grant same-sex

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about the legal battle between Race Bannon and his longtime partner (coded sexually) Dr. Benton Quest for the custody of Jonny and Hadji.

<sup>21</sup> Phil Sebben was played by Stephen Colbert until he left to do his own show, *The Colbert Report*, for Comedy Central. Colbert has also lent his voice to Myron Reducto, who frequently appears as a prosecutor and Harvey's opponent in the show.

marriages. Meanwhile, Massachusetts became the first state to grant same-sex marriage beginning on May 17, 2004. This episode questions what is “normal”/“natural” and challenges the anti-gay marriage arguments that equate same sex marriage with immorality by juxtaposing a same sex relationship with a perverted heterosexual relationship. Because it subverts and deconstructs heterosexual relationship as normative the message on the same-sex marriage in this episode can be read subversively and even progressively. However, an argument can also be made that the juxtaposition of a same sex relationship with an incestuous relationship reflects the conservative homophobic rhetoric that places homosexuality on an equal footing with polygamy, bestiality, incest, and pedophilia. Also, with Dr. Quest-Bannon case unsettled the episode fails to provide “concrete political stances of transgressive counterdiscourses” (Dhanenens & Bauwel, 2012, p. 27). Nevertheless, by tackling controversial issues such as same sex marriage and various other political issues *Harvey Birdman* provokes viewers to critically, albeit temporarily, think about both the arbitrariness and normativity of social conventions.

Meanwhile, questions about white male normativity can be raised in *Aqua Teen Hunger Force (ATHF)*, a show that revolves around three anthropomorphized fast food items. Created by Dave Willis and Matt Maiellaro, *ATHF* is considered to be “the quintessential Adult Swim show” (Booker, 2006, p. 177) as it is the first original production from the Williams Street. The main characters are Master Shake, a self-centered milkshake who considers himself as the leader of the team, Frylock, a floating box of French Fries who is portrayed as most mature and intelligent in the team, and

Meatwad, a ball of meat that has the ability to morph into a shape of igloo or hotdog.<sup>22</sup> Then there is Carl Brutananadilewski, the human next-door neighbor, who as a dim-witted womanizer is no better than his anthropomorphic fast food neighbors.

One of the interesting features of *ATHF* is its appropriation of black culture. The show's opening sequence features graffiti art and rap music by Schoolly D. Schoolly D also provided the voice of periodic commentary for all of the episodes for season one. The show frequently borrows languages from rap and hip hop culture and has the characters occasionally engage in black culture, whether it is through adopting a hip hop/black language, hairstyle, or fashion. For instance, in the "Superbirthday Snake" episode (Season 2, Episode 1), Frylock who decides to enjoy his life without his roommates is shown in cornrows and a "pimp" outfit. In the "MC Pee Pants" episode (Season 1, Episode 9) the entire episode is devoted to gangster rap as Meatwad falls in love with a gangster rapper, MC Pee Pants.

The question about race and gender can be raised with *ATHF* as the show encodes fast food items that are supposed to be race-less and sex-less as white and male.<sup>23</sup> The show's use of whiteness as the unmarked, standard racial category is particularly highlighted in the "Shake Like Me" episode (Season 6, Episode), which temporarily transforms Master Shake into a black male after being bitten by a radioactive black man.

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<sup>22</sup> According to Matt Maiellaro, although Meatwad has an ability to transform to other shapes budget constraints have limited Meatwad's transformation. Maiellaro states, "We could only afford to have him animate into three different shapes. But it worked for his character. It would never occur to Meatwad to change into something besides a hotdog" (quoted in Poniewozik, 2003, n.p.).

<sup>23</sup> With Master Shake being performed by Carey Means, a black voice actor who also did the voice for Mr. Thundercleese in *The Brak Show*, Frylock's race has been a frequent topic of discussion in the Adult Swim community (the verdict is still out on this with the majority claiming it to be a race of fries).

Master Shake's transformation into a black man is signified by various black codes such as the tone of his color, an afro, his ability to freestyle rap and jump real high, his adoption of languages that include "hizzy with the shizzy," "trippin'" and "for real," and his sudden inability to swim. Meanwhile, Frylock tries to help Master Shake go back to his original self by getting him to participate in various activities that are encoded "white," such as watching professional hockey and buying an organic avocado at a grocery store. As various racial (both black and white) hyperstereotypes are played out through Master Shake's racial transformations, this episode makes fun of racial stereotypes by exposing the arbitrariness and silliness in cultural practices that mark certain behaviors and activities with a particular biological race. The intention of hyperstereotyping of race in this episode then is to make fun of the process of stereotyping (and cultural values, meanings, and ideas behind this stereotyping) rather than black behavior and activities (Gray, 2006). However, this kind of reading is not always guaranteed as the racial stereotypes used in this episode could be interpreted as racism as demonstrated by Arturo Garcia (2009)'s essay in *Racialicious*. Calling "Shake Like Me" a poor satire, Garcia (2009) argues *ATHF* has joined hipster racism, a term coined by Carmen Van Kerckhove (2007) to describe a process of using hip, urbane, ironic, and liberal ideas, language, and action to disguise how they actually denigrate another person's race or ethnicity. But this episode also demonstrates how whiteness functions as an unmarked, standard racial category as fast food characters that should have no race are coded as white, a point that is revealed through Master Shake's temporary transformation to black.



Another characteristic of *ATHF* is that it is marked as masculine. With the exception of few female characters who appear very briefly and mostly as prostitutes or sexual objects, *ATHF* is a very male-dominated world. Despite being fast food items (which have no biological markers that signify sex) the main protagonists in *ATHF* are encoded as male. Master Shake, who has no genitals is characterized as having a male sexual drive as he joins Carl in mail ordering a bride from Russia (although, unlike Carl, he wanted the mail-order bride for cooking/cleaning than for a sexual relationship). This is the same with Frylock who tries to seduce a woman through online chatting (“Super Model” episode-Season 2, Episode 5) or sexually harasses his computer repairwoman (“Fry Legs” episode-Season 6, Episode 8).<sup>24</sup> Meatwad is also assumed to be male although he does get accidentally pregnant (with spider eggs) in the “Gee Whiz” episode (Season 3, Episode 4) and is frequently shown playing with his homemade dolls. These, however, highlight Meatwad’s childlikeness than his sexuality or gender.<sup>25</sup> Thus, *ATHF* is a show where male-centric sensibilities dominate providing little room for female or feminine characters. This point is best highlighted in the “Chick Magnet” episode (Season 6, Episode 4) where the chick magnet that Master Shake purchases to attract women instead works to bring out Aqua Teen’s feminine traits. By showing the Aqua Teens (particularly Master Shake and Frylock) engage in various “feminine” activities, such as watching Oprah, exercising on a stairmaster, caring for each other’s feelings, or

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<sup>24</sup> Understanding Frylock’s gender is much more complicated than the other Aqua Team members because in the *Aqua Teen Hunger Force Colon Movie Film For Theaters* that was released in 2007, Frylock appeared as a woman on a full makeup with breasts, eyelashes, and pigtails. This is an example of how extratexts influence and complicate our understanding of the original texts.

<sup>25</sup> Implied in this characterization of Meatwad is the equation of femininity with childishness (and vice versa).

fabric shopping, this episode shows how femininity is an aberrant sexuality in *ATHF*. As Meatwad suggests in his letter to his roommates it is important for the Aqua Teens to get rid of the chick magnet that is making them “act like women and write little notes to each other and give out gifts all the time” and creating conflict with the male-centric world of *ATHF*. By temporarily showing the feminine sides of the Aqua Teens this episode demonstrates what the show is really about: not feminine. Placing masculine traits as the central characteristic of the show, *ATFH*, as the first non-repurposed original program, has contributed in firmly establishing Adult Swim sensibility as absurd, surreal, and undoubtedly masculine.

### **Adult Swim, We’re 20% More Gay: A Different Kind of Network**

Because animation is a boundary-defying medium “that playfully undermines hegemonic strictures” (Palmer-Mehta, 2006, p. 183) there is greater potential for animations to be used to talk about more controversial, transgressive subject matters. Thus, when Adult Swim wanted to create a late-night programming for adults it did not have to worry about creating adult contents despite the long-held cultural understanding that cartoons are a children’s genre. By engaging with more adult humor, particularly on the topic of sex and sexuality, Adult Swim created a “mature” animation block that made cartoons inappropriate for children to watch. But rather than talking about these adult subjects in serious ways, Adult Swim shows playfully crosses between absurdity and sense through intertextual mechanisms of parodies and satires. The playful means of satires and parodies have enabled Adult Swim to raise questions about the hegemonic conceptions of gender, race, and sexuality while making its process of ridicule more socially acceptable through humor and silliness (Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009).

Adult Swim shows have been particularly active in unsettling gender and sexual categories by featuring various queer characters and displaying gender transvestism with an understanding that today's young adults are more "cool" with talking about these topics as they understand heterosexuality to no longer be the standard sexuality (Shugart, 2001). Adult Swim's shattering of heteronormativity through the inclusion of various queer characters has helped the network to establish itself as a creative-driven network that has different sensibilities from the mainstream networks. When asked how *Harvey Birdman* was able to get away with its various sexually subversive moments, Erik Richter answered that Adult Swim does not ask much questions unlike other networks that would have required them (Richter and Michael Ouweleen, his co-creator) to explain many things (Thill, 2003). Ouweleen's answer was similar to Richter's but he also made a point about how Adult Swim's noninterference was a result of the shift in cultural understanding of sexuality: "...what I'm more amazed by is the atypical stuff that we're allowed to do. Like the man-on-man kissing, which isn't so much a standards issue in my mind. It's more that they allow us to do it because it's just so *weird*" (my emphasis, Thill, 2003). The network's acceptance of nonheteronormativity is, then, not because the network is necessarily politically supportive of LGBT rights but because it enables them to establish a brand that is "weird," and thus "different."

Writers and creators of other Adult Swim shows echo this idea that Adult Swim has included a wider range of sexualities because it is a different kind of network. For instance, when Huffington Post's "Gay Voices" interviewed *The Venture Bros.*' creators Doc Hammer and Jackson Publick (whose real name is Christopher McClulloch) and asked why the network has been more receptive to gay characters both Hammer and

Publick cited Adult Swim's difference as the reason. Hammer said, "It's a feral network, everybody who had a show and started on it was way *outside of the mainstream* and their opinions on humanity were a little *less mainstream*. So, when they included gay characters for their life—for their paradigm—it wasn't a big deal" (my emphasis, Burra, 2012a, n.p.). Publick had a similar answer to this question as he cited the network being young and countercultural as the reason to the presence of many gay characters in Adult Swim (Burra, 2012a). When the same question was asked to the writer (Janine DiTullio) and co-creator (Chrity Karacase) of *Superjail!*, a show that takes a jab at the 21<sup>st</sup> century surveillance state, they also pointed out the network's difference as the reason. DiTullio answered, "Well, Adult Swim is a relatively young network. It attracts creative people who don't pine to work in mainstream TV. Then on top of it, the network lets all these creative weirdos do their thing" (Burra, 2012b, n.p.). Meanwhile, Karacas answered that it may be the nontraditional tone of Adult Swim shows that has naturally led more queer characters to be created, an answer that is similar to Ouweleen's who argued Adult Swim's queerness to be a result of Adult Swim's expression of its sensibility as weird and different (Burra, 2012b). Because Adult Swim features more gay characters than other networks DiTullio suggested that the network should have a new tag line that read, "Adult Swim, we're 20% more gay" (Burra, 2012b, n.p.).

One thing that is clear from these Adult Swim shows' writers/creators is that the prominent presence of queer characters in Adult Swim is not politically motivated but is a representational strategy to signify Adult Swim as a different network (or because Adult Swim is a different network this representational strategy was possible). The "different" gay identities, then, are commoditized to prove Adult Swim's distinction and its rejection

of mainstream ideology. But the problem is when gay characters are used to signify Adult Swim's difference (whether it is its countercultural spirit, rebelliousness, or youthfulness) it has the effect of further marginalizing them as a distinct identity group that is different from the mainstream, which does not do much to advance their social power (Banet-Weiser, 2012).

One of the Adult Swim shows that is famous for featuring a diverse collection of queer characters is *The Venture Bros.*, which is a parody of old boy adventure television shows such as *Jonny Quest* and *The Hardy Boys*. *The Venture Bros.* is one of the first Adult Swim original series that is produced outside of Williams Street. With the growing popularity of Adult Swim and its goal for expansion and growth Adult Swim could no longer simply rely on the Williams Street production alone. As a result Mike Lazzo and his Adult Swim programming team had to find a show that had the Adult Swim qualities (low budget production, edgy humor, absurd, silly, but brilliant jokes, non-mainstream sensibility, and so on) despite being produced outside of Williams Street (or even Atlanta). One of the shows Lazzo and his team found was *The Venture Bros.* Originally created for a comic book, *The Venture Bros.* had many elements that would make it fit perfectly with Adult Swim programming: tropes borrowed from superhero comic books, witty dialogues and various pop culture references, sexual nature of the show, and parody of 1960s/70s action adventure children's television shows that many Adult Swim fans grew up watching. *The Venture Bros.* follows the adventures of Dr. Thaddeus S. "Rusty" Venture (imagine that Jonny Quest had grown up as a middle-aged man), his two sons, Hank and Dean, the hypermasculine Brock Samson, bodyguard and special agent who was sent from the Office of Secret Intelligence (OSI) to protect the Venture family, and

Dr. Venture's arch nemesis, The Monarch. As the show follows the exploits of the Venture family it introduces a wide cast of characters (whether they are enemies, spies, or alliances) in which many of them are characterized as queer: Doctor Girlfriend (as an assistant and wife of The Monarch she is very sophisticated, elegant, and intelligent but has a deep raspy voice like a man), Shore Leave (a flamboyant OSI agent), Alchemist, Colonel Gentleman, King Gorilla, and so on.

When asked why *The Venture Bros.* has so many gay characters (even for Adult Swim's standard), Hammer and Publick mentioned an interesting point about how the great presence of gay characters was an inevitable result of female invisibility in the all-male world of superheroes and adventurers. After all, it is the lack of female presence in the world of hypermasculine superheroes that allows us to read the relationship between Batman and Robin as homoerotic or the all-male world of *Jonny Quest* as a gay subtext. Publick said, "Probably some of the reasons why we thought to bring gay characters in, [is] not just because that's life, but we always dealt with this being an all-male world" (Burra, 2012a, n.p.). The patriarchal system that has created a world that is less influenced by women (or what Publick referred to as a "mommy-less world") has also made it natural for more gay characters to be present than females in *The Venture Bros.*, which not only is an action/adventure series but a parody of the old female-less action/adventure series. Thus, the presence of the gay characters in the show subverts hegemonic masculinity by introducing a wide range of male sexualities but upholds the legitimacy of the patriarchal system, by justifying (or being the culprit of) the absence of female characters.

The heightened visibility of queer characters in *The Venture Bros* and other Adult Swim shows, then, works to solidify the male-centricity of the Adult Swim world. In Adult Swim women are absent, marginalized, and sexually objectified when visible. Because Adult Swim is sexual in nature (it is one characteristic that makes Adult Swim, adult) women are frequently the objects of sexual jokes which can also be sexist and offensive. And couched in Adult Swim style silliness and absurdity these jokes are not to be taken seriously or only with irony. Regarding *South Park*, Hendershot (2004) says that the show's appeal is its adultified "childishness," in which the jokes may be racy and immature (for instance, toilet humor that focus on bodily functions) but also witty and sophisticated. Like *South Park* the playful immaturity and childishness that pervade Adult Swim is more likely to be "the boyish variety-the childish naughtiness of vicarious taboo-breaking" as the network's main target audience is the young male demographic (Hendershot, 2004, p. 193). When Adult Swim constructs itself as an "adult" entertainment brand by creating a male-centric world that is void of female presence or promotes sexist ideology in the name of humor or a joke the meaning of "adult" in Adult Swim needs to be critically scrutinized, particularly when Adult Swim can be understood as a symptom of the larger culture that it originates from and thus, provides us with insights about that very culture (Walters, 1995).

## **CHAPTER 7. [WE'RE LISTENING]: BUILDING AFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH ADULT SWIM**

It is no longer uncommon for a television show or a network to have its own official website. Ever since television producers and networks have learned the benefits of having their own websites television shows have come to “interlock and interact with their associated websites” (Brooker, 2001, p. 469). First, official websites can be used by television networks to promote their television shows and create buzz among its intended audience by providing important information about the shows and promising to fulfill their expectations (Gray, 2010b). With behind-the-scene information, clips, interviews, production notes, discussion forums, and various other extratextual materials on display, official websites have become a “value-added environment that is an attractive destination for viewers to hang out and revisit” (Sandler, 2003, p. 97). When online contents and television programs are integrated consistently with the ideas, feelings, and sensibilities of the television network, official websites can become a great channel for brand extension (Sandler, 2003).

In addition to functioning as a promotional tool, official websites are great for networks to establish relationship with their fans who are always searching for extra “contact points with their favorite television shows” (Gillan, 2011, p. 28). The official websites’ invitation for fans to engage with their favorite television shows and to interact with the shows’ writers, creators, or producers online creates a feeling that a personal connection or bonding is being formed between the fans and the producers, or more accurately, an “illusion of proximity” between the fans and the production team” (Gillan, 2011, p. 30). This fan-producer relationship encourages viewers to invest more time and money on their favorite texts and to participate in building and maintaining the brand



identity of television shows/networks. This emotional investment that drives fans' viewing and purchasing decisions is an important characteristic of affective economics (Jenkins, 2006). In affective economics, it is important for brands to imprint "lovemarks" on their consumers/users to engage them more actively and emotionally by not only providing them with materials that reflect their tastes and interests but also by promising a platform in which they can participate (Jenkins, 2006). Fan participation can be economically valuable for television networks as emotionally invested viewers spend more money in purchasing contents related to their favorite shows and occasionally produce fan arts that producers can use for indirect monetization (for instance, using them as part of network branding) (Pearson, 2010). Thus, fans' emotional investment can be easily transformed into an economic one (Sandler, 2003; Gillan, 2011).

Although fans may feel empowered through their online participation (whether it is providing feedback or creating fan arts), the proprietary media space of these official websites which invite viewer/fan participation can also be a space of control where fan activities get tamed and contained (Brooker, 2001). In addition, official websites are great for producers to get instant feedback from their viewers who post their comments, critiques, and opinions on various discussion forums (Andrejevic, 2007). Occasionally fans' comments do get incorporated into television shows as this practice reduces (audience) uncertainty while increasing viewer satisfaction (Andrejevic, 2007). Furthermore, fans' participatory works online (whether it is providing opinions, feedback, or self-disclosed information), which function to build brand identity can also be exploited for data mining and audience research that examine audience behavior (Andrejevic, 2007).

Like any television network, Adult Swim has created and used its own official website to encourage its viewers for further engagement and loyalty to the brand. Various features exist on the Adult Swim website, which invite and keep fans on the Adult Swim playground, such as Adult Swim online games and Thing X, a parody website created by former employees at *The Onion* for Adult Swim in October 2012. These features, of course, work to extend the sensibility and attitudes of the Adult Swim television shows and strengthen the Adult Swim brand as different, creative, and edgy. But the features that send “overt invitations” for fans’ active participation are the bump builder and message boards (Ross, 2009). In this chapter I investigate how the bump builder and message boards function to engage the Adult Swim fans to participate in establishing the Adult Swim brand (and extend the Adult Swim sensibility to the fans), how fan participation is used to build Adult Swim’s brand image as a network that listens to its viewers and thus “empowers” fans, and the potential of those fan participation to deliver political results.

### **Fans ‘R’ Us: Bumps**

In the 2003 IGN interview Mike Lazzo said that “the smartest way to run Adult Swim is to listen to everybody involved with Adult Swim...and that very often starts, number one, with the viewer” as they are the ones who get to vote with the ratings (Ken P., 2003, n.p.). Then Lazzo added, “hopefully we’re those viewers as well, ourselves” (Ken P., 2003, n.p.). In Lazzo’s comments is an implication that Adult Swim is a network that de-differentiates fans and producers and listens to its fans. Many Adult Swim fans (particularly in its earlier years) seem to accept Lazzo’s characterization of Adult Swim as evidenced by their protest against a group of scholars whose exchange of conversation

on the relationship between Adult Swim and its fans was posted on Flowtv.org in 2005.<sup>1</sup> Talking about Adult Swim's mysterious address of itself as "we" and its fans as "you" in the Adult Swim bumps these scholars assumed that the bumps were a marketing ploy by Adult Swim to create a sense that a real dialogue was happening between Adult Swim and its fans. Most of the comments that were left on this scholarly forum were written by self-confessed Adult Swim fans who criticized these scholars for accusing Adult Swim's use of bumps to feign an "establishment of intimacy between viewers and Adult Swim" (comment by Allison in Heinrich, Payne, & McManaman, 2005, n.p.). These fans argued that Adult Swim message boards and bumps were used as a channel for the Adult Swim producers to read and respond to what their viewers have to say, for the loyal viewers to provide input (an opportunity that is not given in any other networks), for Adult Swim and its viewers to interact at a revolutionary level, and for the Adult Swim producers to make fans feel important and wanting to come back by listening to and relaying their feedback (Heinrich, Payne & McManaman, 2005).

Bumps (or bumpers) generally refer to brief announcements that are placed between programs and commercial breaks (and vice versa). In the network's early years the Adult Swim bumps featured old people swimming in public pools (with a voice over of a lifeguard saying, "Adult Swim, all kids out of the pool!" through a megaphone). Then beginning on May 25, 2003, Adult Swim changed its bumps to text-based ones using black intertitle cards. In what has now become the signature Adult Swim bumps, the texts are mostly comments from those who work at Williams Street (Mike Lazzo and Michael Cahill were the main creators of the bumps in its early years) or from viewers

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<sup>1</sup> This incidence is well documented in Sharon Ross's (2008) book as well. The scholars'

who posted comments on the Adult Swim website (in the “bumps” forum) with the intent to make them part of the Adult Swim bumps. Lazzo explained that the text-based bumps were created as a result of network’s lack of money. Without having much money and not willing to spend a lot of money on packaging Lazzo and his team decided to do something that is “an anti what you would see on television...” or an “anti-package” (Ken P., 2003, n.p.). Also, finding television to have become very sterile and not humorous any more, Lazzo and his team decided to use bumps for a more human approach of just talking to people (Ken P., 2003).

Because they functioned as a channel for the Adult Swim fans and producers to interact Adult Swim’s text based bumps became a significant element of the Adult Swim program.<sup>2</sup> Functioning as chapters for each individual show that forms the Adult Swim program the bumps provide an idea of what Adult Swim is, means, and does. In this sense, bumps are important paratexts that set the tone and sensibility of the program (Gray, 2010b). And because viewers who are fans of the entire network/channel rather than just some particular shows display greater brand loyalty, which “is likely to translate more easily into the kind of metrics on which the television industry relies” (Gray, 2010b, p. 56) and bumps play a significant role in promoting the entire network rather than just some particular shows, the role of bumps seem all the more important for Adult Swim. With bumps providing a textual frame for audience’s television viewing we need to also pay attention to the channel idents/bumps and study the channel textually rather than just studying a show textually (Gray, 2010b). Studying Adult Swim bumps, then, will allow

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<sup>2</sup> Although text-based bumps are more generally used in the Adult Swim programming, Adult Swim often airs special bumps to promote specific shows or to celebrate a particular holiday.

us to understand how Adult Swim “monetizes and publicizes its content,” how the Adult Swim texts work, and how the Adult Swim audiences work (Gray, 2010b, p. 57).

In addition to being a promotional tool for the network, the bumps play an important role in encouraging viewers to watch more shows on the Adult Swim lineup so they can have a better understanding of what the jokes in the bumps are about (Ross, 2008). Also, bumps pressure viewers who have not yet entered the Adult Swim online space to visit its website and make attempts to create their own bumps. Before Adult Swim launched its “bump builder” feature in 2011 fans were able to participate in creating their own bumps by leaving comments on the Adult Swim message boards. The creation of the “bump builder” has made the bump building process not only more engaging but fun with fans now having the opportunity to create the entire bump by themselves by typing in the text directly to the intertitle frames, adjusting time for each frame’s appearance on screen, adding music from the provided audio track, and then submitting the created bump after previewing it. Furthermore, fans who have created their own bumps can share them with their friends via their social networks or emails, which becomes free advertising for Adult Swim. Because fans can engage in the entire production process of bump building and also promote Adult Swim by sharing their bumps with their friends, the bump building feature can be seen as a good example of how corporate labor gets offloaded to the consumers/fans (Andrejevic, 2007). In addition, as fans are encouraged to partake in the Adult Swim sensibility when creating their bumps, bumps “serve to hold together both the programs in the lineup and the viewers *with the lineup*” (Ross, 2008, p. 106). In other words, fans automatically identify “with the imperatives of producers” (Andrejevic, 2007, p. 137) when creating their bumps to

make them fit the characteristics and sensibility of Adult Swim (particularly if they want their bumps to air on television). Also, with all of the submitted bumps (or bump related materials) being posted and archived on the Adult Swim website for the online community to view and rate, bump building fans not only try to create bumps that fit the overall Adult Swim sensibility but also to make them witty and smart to impress the Adult Swim online community. Fans who participate in creating Adult Swim bumps, then, not only contribute to the meaning and value making of the Adult Swim brand but also are encouraged to adopt the Adult Swim logic in their own identity formation (Carah, 2011).

The participatory characteristic of bumps encourages fans to get more invested in and to build loyalty for Adult Swim. Because bumps create a sense that Adult Swim producers listen to fans and are interested in what fans have to say (particularly when bumps that air are Adult Swim programmers' responses to fans' comments on the Adult Swim message boards) they appear as a source of fan empowerment. In addition to the sense of empowerment, bumps create the notion that a direct personal relationship between fans and the professionals at Williams Street (those who are responsible for programming the bumps) is being forged apart from the interference and surveillance of "the suits" or the powers that be at Adult Swim (or more specifically, Cartoon Network, which owned and controlled by Time Warner and Turner Broadcasting). Bumps function to erect a stronger affinity between the fans and Adult Swim, reinforcing Adult Swim as a brand that is unique and cares for its fans (and what they have to say). However, although Adult Swim's bump building provides opportunities for ordinary people to create and share meaning it does not in any way guarantee ordinary fans to shape "the way

interactive space is organized” (Carah, 2011, p. 436; also in Andrejevic, 2007; 2009b, Turner, 2010). Whether it is bump building or participation in online forums, the online activities of Adult Swim fans are managed by the Adult Swim brand. In other words, the Adult Swim official website functions as a managed social space that constrain and cultivate Adult Swim fans’ online activities according to the Adult Swim brand philosophy (Carah, 2011; Foster, 2008).

Despite the hierarchy of power in the relationship between the Adult Swim brand that controls the meaning and the structure in which the meaning is created and the Adult Swim fans whose affect becomes the source of free labor in creating online contents that add value to the Adult Swim brand, many Adult Swim fans continue to participate in creating bumps, Adult Swim related fan arts or discussion threads on the online message boards. This is largely attributed to the Adult Swim fans’ notion that Adult Swim producers are just like “fellow fans who just happened to be on the other side of things, supplying the shows instead of watching them” as one fan commented online (CombatC on “Fans vs. Ratings: Has AS abandoned fan strategies,” 2007). This sense of de-differentiation between the producers and fans (that producers are one of them) has encouraged many fans to understand Adult Swim as a different network that pays attention to the fans as well as a place where they hope to work for one day.

### **My Dream is to Work For Adult Swim: The Ultimate Fan-Producer Alignment**

One young illustrator for 70-30, the production studio of *Sealab 2021* and *Frisky Dingo*, who also happens to be an improv writer/comedian in Atlanta explained that many adults watch Adult Swim because it feels like a network that a group of friends have taken over despite being owned and controlled by Cartoon Network: “It’s designed

to make the workers of Adult Swim laugh. Our audience just happens to be the same as us” (Heckert, 2005, p. 136). This sentiment that the audiences are the same as those who work for Adult Swim also resonates with many Adult Swim fans, particularly those who post messages on the discussion forums asking what they can do to get a job or work for Adult swim. Also, Adult Swim fans frequently discuss how they can pitch their ideas or scripts for an Adult Swim show although Adult Swim has a strict policy against unsolicited creative submissions and communications for legal purposes. The discussion threads on working at Adult Swim or interning for Adult Swim/Williams Street reflect the Adult Swim-fan affinity. For instance, in the “Working For Adult Swim...Is That Possible?” thread the original poster (OP) wrote, “I realized that Adult Swim and I belong together. Not only would working for such a marvelous place enhance my life, but I am positive I could increase the greatness of the already great Adult Swim.” Most of the fans who post in the discussion threads about working/interning for Adult Swim/Williams Street describe working for Adult Swim as a “dream job.” And although some of the fans who express their desire to work for Adult Swim have actual skills that can be used in the Adult Swim production (such as having experience or job as a designer and/or animator) many cite their Adult Swim fandom as qualification for employment.

Of course Adult Swim is not the only network or an entertainment brand to have fans who desire to work for them. As Neff et al. (2005) explain because works in media and entertainment are characterized in popular culture and media images as trendsetting, hip, and cool young people who are attracted to the supposedly glamorous aspect of the job are willing to work in those areas no matter what it takes. Thus, today’s young adults are frequently in a situation where they spend more time building “cultural capital” rather



than “capital capital” (Wayne, 2013). Media companies frequently take advantage of the cultural value their jobs have and continue to push “the envelope to see how much they can get out of young people for how low a stipend or salary” (Wayne, 2013, n.p.). MTV is one of the most notorious companies to exploit the unpaid internship system as it takes advantage of young students and interns who are willing to work for months or even years unpaid with hopes to be rewarded with a job or to get their big break (Klein, 2003). The legendary success story of Rick the Temp who became a star VJ for a Canadian music video channel after starting out as a phone answerer intensifies the expectations of young interns and temp workers to have a successful career after donating many hours of free labor (Klein, 2003). For many Adult Swim fans who would do anything to work at Adult Swim the success story of Mike Lazzo who dropped out of High School and started out his career by working in the mailroom of TBS only to eventually become the most powerful person of their favorite network gives them hope that with their love for cartoons and absurd, different kind of sense of humor will one day lead them somewhere in Adult Swim (or a similar place). Because of the perception that working at Adult Swim will be fun and cool and the works at Adult Swim will feel like non-works since people who work there share a similar lifestyle, think alike, and come from similar background many Adult Swim fans continue to dream of working at Adult Swim.<sup>3</sup> This appears to be the ultimate symbol of an alignment between the Adult Swim brand and its fans. Also,

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<sup>3</sup> This notion that working at Adult Swim is fun, not serious, and not like work is further solidified by the webcam videos of workers at Williams Street that are occasionally posted on the Adult Swim website. Adult Swim workers are shown simply throwing balls at cameras, playing ukuleles, or dancing horribly/comically. Although the webcam videos are performances rather than a real representation of these workers’ actual work at Williams Street the silliness highlighted in the videos reflects Adult Swim’s conscious effort to establish its working environment as fun, unconventional, youthful, and different.

the image of Adult Swim as a place where workers are like fans and fans can become workers further reinforces Adult Swim fans' belief that Adult Swim understands/listens to/pays attention to them. One of the cases that demonstrate Adult Swim fans' understanding of Adult Swim as a network that listens to its fans is the "Bring Back Toonami" campaign that occurred in 2012.

### **We Brought Toonami Back**

Since 2004, Adult Swim has celebrated every April Fool's Day by tricking its audience with different programming schedules or airing contents that have nothing to do with Adult Swim, such as a poorly made independent movie, *The Room*. On April 1, 2012, during *The Room*'s telecast (which was being played three years in a row) TOM (Toonami Operations Module), Toonami's robotic host, appeared on screen and introduced the episode of *Bleach* that was scheduled to air that day. Rather than playing scheduled shows Adult Swim aired programs that were features of Toonami (such as *Astro Boy*, *Dragon Boy Z*, and *Mobile Suit Gundam Wing*) as well as Toonami related bumps throughout the night. Many Adult Swim fans who were feeling nostalgic for Toonami enjoyed the prank and started to talk about Toonami on their social networks and the Adult Swim discussion forums. Suddenly, this one time joke began to drive many Adult Swim fans, particularly anime fans, to go online and demand Toonami's return. Even Steve Blum, the voice of TOM, encouraged Adult Swim fans to go to the Cartoon Network's website to express their desire for Toonami's return on his Facebook fanpage. The next day, Adult Swim tweeted, "Want it back? Let us know. #BringBackToonami." Fans responded by tweeting/retweeting the message for hours throughout the day that this message was trending nationwide on Twitter till the next morning (Jackson, 2012).

Several days later on April 4, 2012 Adult Swim tweeted once again with a message, “#BringBackToonami We’ve heard you. Thank you for your passion and interest-stay tuned.” On April 8, 2012, Adult Swim aired two bumps related to its #BringBackToonami tweet and showed the actual tweets by people who asked for Toonami’s return. Instead of ending these bumps with the Adult Swim signature, [adult swim], the first bump ended with [we’re listening] and the second with [we’re looking into it].

On May 16, 2012, Turner Newsroom announced that “in response to overwhelming fan enthusiasm and devotion” Toonami will return as a Saturday night anime block on May 26 (“Adult Swim Announces,” 2012, n.p.). That same day Adult Swim also tweeted, “Attention Toonami Faithful: We heard you. On 05.26.12. #ToonamisBackBitches,” and uploaded a picture of TOM with the hashtag and the date of Toonami’s return. On May 26, 2012, Toonami resurrected on Adult Swim making its return official with an intro bump showing TOM’s entrance with a rap song called #ToonamisBackBitches playing in the background.<sup>4</sup>

Although Adult Swim attributes Toonami’s return to fan demands there are other factors that contributed to Toonami’s comeback. First, off-network syndicated programs, such as *Family Guy* or *American Dad*, which continue to be the most watched Adult Swim shows and have helped Adult Swim to dominate the prime time and late night ratings, have become more expensive to air, which has propelled the network to look for cheaper alternatives to fill in some of the programming slots (Thielman, 2012). Second, with more mature content animes are great materials to use to attract the Adult Swim

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<sup>4</sup> This song was created and performed by Richie Branson, who is a young starting artist and a self-proclaimed anime otaku.

target demographic (and this has been one of the reasons why Adult Swim has included animes as part of its program in its early years when it was trying to establish itself as an “adult” brand). Third, many young adults of Adult Swim fans grew up watching Toonami, which used to be Cartoon Network’s daytime (and later Saturday evening) anime programming block that targeted tweens (9-12) and teens but ended in 2008 after a eleven year run. So many young adults who first encountered and watched animes through Toonami as middle/high school students in the early 2000s<sup>5</sup> had Toonami nostalgia (and it is possible that it is this new generation of Adult Swim fans/fanbase that demanded Toonami’s return). Toonami’s return then signifies not only the changing landscape of Adult Swim but also the generational shift in Adult Swim’s adult demographic. Last, but not least, animes became an attractive fare to include in the Adult Swim programming block as their price tags went down as the anime market took a great plunge in 2005 due to DVD rental (and later content streaming) services such as Netflix taking a big chunk of profit out of animes’ DVD sales (Thielman, 2012). According to James DeMarco, vice president of strategic marketing and promotions for Cartoon Network and Adult Swim, “with anime, the market is so depressed that the license can just be trade-out” (quoted in Thielman, 2012, n.p.). When Adult Swim aired Toonami as part of the April Fools joke in 2012 it was able to exchange an episode for a commercial (Thielman, 2012). But this does not mean that all animes come at a cheap price as the rights for titles such as *Dragon Ball Z* are out of the price range for Toonami which works with a shoestring budget.

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<sup>5</sup> Toonami moved from weekday afternoons to Saturday evenings in 2004 and included programs that are more “mature” than those that aired during the afternoon program.

Despite various factors playing into the return of Toonami many Adult Swim fans (along with Adult Swim) attribute the return of Toonami to their collective online/social media efforts. In fact, some fans even described their “Bring Back Toonami” campaign as a grassroots movement. So when Adult Swim announced Toonami’s return many fans congratulated each other for bringing back Toonami: “we are the ones who brought back Toonami,” “We did it,” or “We got it. Mission Accomplished.” Also, some fans posted thank you notes to Adult Swim for listening to them. Fandom, however, is not just about fascination (which gets the fans to engage with the text in the first place) but also about frustration (which drives fans to express their discontent and in some cases to remake and rewrite the original text) (Jenkins, 2006). So when Toonami returned in the midst of the flurry of welcome back notes were some discussion threads that expressed disappointment with Toonami’s programming lineup or raised concerns about the confusion this new Toonami was creating for Adult Swim’s identity.

Those who expressed anger or disappointment with Toonami mostly had issues with the block’s programming lineup, raising questions of whether Toonami should have replaced the Adult Swim’s Saturday evening Action Block (ASA) since there did not seem to much difference between the two. In the “Did we really need to bring back Toonami for that?” thread (posted the day after Toonami first aired) the OP wrote, “Take away the Toonami packaging and this was the same thing as the ACTN block fundamentally.” In a “#Toonami’s Schedule” thread the OP vented his/her frustration by writing, “ALL AS HAS DONE IS TAKEN THE CURRENT ASA BLOCK AND REWRAPPED IT WITH THE TOONAMI NAME!!.” Fans’ disappointment were not lost in the minds of those who are responsible of the Toonami block as DeMarco tweeted

the next day, “This is a marathon, not a sprint. Keep watching if you want more stuff, and we’ll keep you posted.”

Meanwhile, some fans questioned whether Toonami was worth being on Adult Swim as the contents on the programming block seemed to lack “maturity” or fail to live up to the Adult Swim standard of “maturity.” This question was discussed within the larger context of what Adult Swim fans thought Adult Swim should be in terms of maturity of the content, demographic of the target audience, and the characteristic of Adult Swim as an adult-oriented network.

One of the things that confused Adult Swim fans the most about Toonami’s placement on Adult Swim’s Saturday night schedule was how the programming block fit Adult Swim’s goal of targeting the “adult” audience. A thread called “Toonami is Toonami, Adultswim [sic] is Adultswim” is one example of the heated online discussion on what Toonami does for Adult Swim, what Adult Swim contents should be about, and who the Adult Swim demographic should be. On November 24, 2012, SpaceshipEDM posted a thread by sharing his Q/A experience with the Toonami team on Tumblr. SpaceshipEDM asked what others thought about this notion, “Adult Swim is Adult Swim, Toonami is Toonami” in the Toonami team’s answer:

**Question:** Some people heavily emphasize Adult Swim’s concept of airing adult programming. They feel that no matter what, the target demographic for a show on AS must be for adults, or otherwise it doesn’t belong. Because of this, some people showcase extreme discontent to SBT (*Sym-Bionic Titan*), TC (*Thundercats*), and even *Naruto* being on the lineup. So I got two questions: 1. Which one is more important to AS content? It being targeted for adults or adults liking it? 2. Does Toonami have to fulfill that non-kids show obligation?

**Answer:** Adult Swim is targeted to an 18-34 demographic, so Toonami has to make sure that whatever we broadcast can appeal to that age group. We think mature, exciting storytelling happens on “all ages” shows like *Thundercats*. The ratings have been proving us right so far? *Adult Swim is Adult Swim, but Toonami is still Toonami*, if that makes sense!

This idea about “Toonami being Toonami, Adult Swim being Adult Swim” and thus, non-adult materials becoming part of the Adult Swim programming generated a lot of discussions. In response to SpaceshipEDM’s observation JMan1333 wrote: “Kids shows do not appeal to adult demographics. It should be open and shut,” leading further discussions to focus on what Toonami on Adult Swim should be like, what are considered to be “adult” shows (or what “adult”/“maturity” means), and what the expectations for Adult Swim are.

In this thread fans were divided over what Toonami should be like, particularly as it was now part of the Adult Swim program. Fans such as JMan1333 and NoireAirwave argued that rather than having non-adult shows such as *Thundercats* or *Naruto*, Toonami shows should be more mature and appealing to adults since it is on Adult Swim. NoireAirwave argued that having too many kids show on Toonami leaves little room for adult oriented contents to be on Adult Swim and suggested that Toonami is a better fit with Cartoon Network, not Adult Swim. However, fans such as ThatGman, Jedijohn, and alexDS argued that Toonami does not necessarily need to have “mature” shows as long as it maintains itself as a “quality” action programming block. Also, citing the high ratings of *Thundercats* (which was on Toonami at the time this discussion was going on) and the adult appeal of kids shows such as *Young Justice* and *Samurai Jack*, the supporters of “Toonami should be Toonami” disputed JMan1333 and NoireAirwave’s argument that there is a clear split between kids show and adult shows. This made JMan1333 ask why it is necessary to even have an adult network if Adult Swim continues to air these kid-oriented shows. This led Venomlord to demand an explanation on “half the crap [sic] immature shows on Adult Swim” and how those shows pass as “mature” or “adult

content.” NoireAirwave who argued that there is more expectation for Toonami to be more mature/adult-oriented when on Adult Swim agreed that “Adult Swim is pretty immature” and “has some crappy comedy,” eventually contradicting his previous argument that Toonami should have more “mature” contents on Adult Swim. Then “Sketchor,” a SwimHELPer,<sup>6</sup> wrote that if Toonami shows were on Cartoon Network (as suggested by NoireAirwave) then the content of these animes would be heavily edited and argued that Toonami should stay on Adult Swim to guarantee the quality of the animes. There is a valid point to Sketchor’s argument on how animes get heavily censored when scheduled to air during daytime schedule as Cubbison (2005) explains how *Rourouni Kenshin* was heavily censored by Cartoon Network’s Standards and Practices Department because it was scheduled to air on the tween-oriented Cartoon Network’s Toonami block while *Cowboy Bebop* was left almost untouched because it was assigned to air on Adult Swim.

Another discussion in this thread focused on how a show qualifies as an “adult” or “mature” content. NoireAirwave pointed out there should be more seinen<sup>7</sup> than shonens<sup>8</sup> on Toonami on Adult Swim then added that maturity is not about violence and cursing but rather has to do with style, story, theme, and environment of the show. Interestingly, NoireAirwave’s suggestion of seinen as an example of “adult” content reflects the male-

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<sup>6</sup> All of the Adult Swim fans who want to participate online must register with a username and log in. Depending on the users’ online activity each username is given a different rank. Fan users who have expressed interest in a particular show, displayed a good knowledge of that show, and have a good track record are given an administration-assigned rank as either a SwimHELPer or SwimArbiter. SwimHELPer are responsible for monitoring the discussion forums, reporting any abuse to mods, editing out spoilers, merging repeated threads, and creating polls/announcements.

<sup>7</sup> Seinen is a demographic assignment of animes or mangas targeted at male audiences between 18-40.

<sup>8</sup> Shonen primarily targets preteen or teenage boys.



centricity in the definition of “adult”/ “mature.” This understanding of “adulthood” to mean “maleness” also continued in the conversation between JMan1333 and Luni-Tunz who (jokingly) wrote that *Naruto* was picked up for the Toonami lineup because *Sailor Moon* was not available. JMan1333 responded that shows for little girls do not even fit the MO of old Toonami to which Luni-Tunz retorted as “retro-actively wrong” since *Sailor Moon* worked out great for the original Toonami. JMan1333 backtracked by saying that it would not fit today’s Toonami as the show’s stereotypical *girliness* would not appeal to the modern audience unless people tune in to watch it because of nostalgia. WakaFlockaFlame pointed out the flaw in JMan1333’s argument by writing, “You know what else is girly? My Little Pony Friendship is Magic. But that didn’t stop a hoard of overgrown manchildren from liking it.”

The “Toonami is Toonami, Adultswim is Adultswim” thread demonstrates various conflicts among Adult Swim fans in their understanding of what Adult Swim should be (their expectations of the network), what constitutes as “mature” or “adult-oriented” contents, or even whether Adult Swim (or in this case, Toonami on Adult Swim) should be just for adults. There seemed to be a wide acknowledgment among Adult Swim fans that despite Adult Swim’s primary target audience being adults between 18-34 many of the active Adult Swim viewers are those who are younger than that target demographic (and that Adult Swim not only recognizes this but casually targets this younger demographic). Questions such as who Adult Swim viewers are (in terms of age, gender, race, etc.), what Adult Swim shows should be like, or whether Adult Swim is for adults are some of the perennial questions on the Adult Swim discussion forums. Examining a selected number of threads that discuss these questions provide some

understanding of how Adult Swim fans recognize the Adult Swim brand, the Adult Swim viewers, and the meaning of “adult”/“mature.”

### **Who Watches Adult Swim, or Who Should Watch Adult Swim?**

Because Adult Swim online users are not allowed to post their personal information such as age, location, phone number, etc. and/or request personal information from another user the actual age of Adult Swim fans is not an accessible information (unless someone posted their age and the moderators/other fans failed to report the violation). Regardless, discussions on who the Adult Swim viewers are or should be are one of the frequent topics on the Adult Swim discussion forums. These discussion threads on who the Adult Swim viewers are/should be (particularly regarding age) display how fans perceive and expect Adult Swim viewers should be. Among various threads that exist in the Adult Swim online community I focus my analysis on the threads that explicitly talk about Adult Swim viewers in general, demonstrate how viewers understand Adult Swim and expect it to be like, and display agreements/disagreements over the characteristics and directions of Adult Swim.

When a question about whether adults really watch Adult Swim appeared on one of the threads (“Do Adults Even Watch Adult Swim cause i [sic] think”) on June 19, 2006, many “adult” fans defended the “adult” status of Adult Swim by providing themselves and their “adult” friends as examples of Adult Swim viewers. Some even chided the OP for asking such a ridiculous question. The consensus was that “adults” do watch Adult Swim despite the notion that Adult Swim is “stupid” for adults to watch (as the OP stated). When two posts in this thread questioned the “adult” status of Adult Swim they were immediately challenged. One poster opined that the weird part about Adult

Swim is that despite its name being Adult Swim not many adults watch it. This led several posters demanding a credible source to support the poster's claim. Another poster made a similar argument on how Adult Swim is being watched more by kids and young adults than actual adults and added, "and I think the only adults that watch (ages 30 and up)..well, just think about a grown man watching cartoons, its [sic] not normal. At least all the time it isnt [sic]. Its [sic] probably a guarentee [sic] that a really successful business man, or a lawyer wouldn't be watching [as] all the time, if ever." This idea about how cartoons are a children's genre and adults who watch cartoons are irresponsible or immature generally frustrates many "adult" fans of Adult Swim as demonstrated by a user who countered the above notion with a post that read:

"...that's part of the problem Adult Swim faces, the idea that cartoons are for kids and not something any responsible adult would watch. Fact is that I'm a responsible adult who fulfills his family and workplace duties and tries to be a positive contributor to the community. I just happen to love cartoons and especially anime. I also play with toy trains (I collect old Lionel & American Flyer) and play make-believe (I perform in community theater). To most folks, a grown man who watches cartoons, plays with trains and plays make-believe is a loony, an adult trapped in childhood. But so long as I fulfill my adult responsibilities, what I do with my playtime is nothing to be ashamed of."

The general perception about Adult Swim, then, is that it is a program that is watched by adults. But this does not necessarily mean that those who are not adults (non-adults) stay away from watching the program. A related question then is whether kids (non-adults) can watch Adult Swim, which is supposed to be an "adult" program. When this question was posted ("Do you think kids should watch {as}?") the answers were split. Those who opposed the idea mostly cited the mature ratings and the late night schedule of Adult Swim shows as reasons why Adult Swim is inappropriate for kids. Some claimed that Adult Swim can be appropriate for non-adults depending on the show and the kid. Those

who argued that kids can watch Adult Swim based their argument on how Internet allows kids to watch Adult Swim anyway, that watching Adult Swim is better than watching porn, that there are plenty of worse networks than Adult Swim for kids such as Comedy Central, MTV, VH1, or E!, and that they watched Adult Swim when they were underage but turned out fine. One user pointed out that to base Adult Swim's "adult" status on its late night programming schedule is erroneous as Adult Swim first airs at 5pm in Hawaii<sup>9</sup> because of time zone differences, complicating the discussion on what makes Adult Swim "adult." Although users were divided in their answers (whether it is a yes, a no, or depending on the show/kid) they all seemed to agree that Adult Swim is an "adult" content not really designed for kids' viewing (unlike 'Nick-at-Nite' as one opposing user suggested).

Many of the Adult Swim online users understand Adult Swim as an "adult" network that is targeted to adults and is actually watched by adults. However, not many agree on what the network's identity is or should be. The debates among Adult Swim fans in regard to Adult Swim as a network and a brand are frequently demonstrated in two interrelated types of discussion threads: first, discussions on Adult Swim programming and second, discussions on Adult Swim's transformation from its earlier era.

Although Adult Swim began as a late-night cartoon/anime programming block things have started to change in 2005 as Adult Swim grew into a separate network from Cartoon Network and expanded its programming schedule. No longer being able to fill its programming block with Williams Street originals Adult Swim began to air animated

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<sup>9</sup> With Adult Swim's expansion in January 2011 the first show that airs on Adult Swim now begins at 4pm in Hawaii.

series created by non-Williams Street production studios such as Titmouse or Stoopid Monkey located outside of Atlanta. Thus, shows such as *The Venture Bros.* (2003-), *The Boondocks* (2005-), and *Robot Chicken* (2005-) began to air along with animes, syndicated reruns, and Williams Street produced originals. Then beginning with *Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!*, which premiered on Adult Swim in 2007, Adult Swim started to officially venture outside of the anime/cartoon genre by incorporating more live action comedy series to its programming lineup. 2009 was particularly the watershed moment for Adult Swim live action comedy as shows such as *Delocated* (2009-2013), *The Mighty Boosh* (2009-), and *Look Around You* (2009-) began to air. Adult Swim even purchased the rights of the famous British sitcom series, *The Office*, and began to air it on 2009. Since then live action comedies such *Children's Hospital* (2010-), *Eagleheart* (2011-), *NTSFT: SD: SUV* (2011-), *Off the Air* (2011-), *The Eric Andre Show* (2012-), and *Loiter Squad* (2012-) have appeared on Adult Swim, playing an important role in shaping the Adult Swim sensibility. As Adult Swim grew into one of the most significant television networks for American comedy (Lashley, 2012), its transition away from just animated programming has confused and angered many Adult Swim fans (particularly those who became Adult Swim fans because of its original cartoon and anime series). Thus, heated debates among fans on what kind of shows Adult Swim should air are frequently made in the Adult Swim online space. Examining these discussion threads provides an understanding of how Adult Swim fans understand the network and what they expect the network should be.

With the exception of some Adult Swim fans who like everything on the network Adult Swim fans are generally divided along the lines of animes, original comedy cartoon

series, live action comedy series, and syndicated reruns. The biggest division among fans are between those who are cartoon/anime fans and live action comedy series fans.

However, although animes and original comedy cartoon series are both animations not every Adult Swim fans who love Adult Swim's original comedy cartoon series such as *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* or *Frisky Dingo* are fans of animes. Also, not every anime fans are Adult Swim cartoon fans. Some fans of Adult Swim cartoons also express discontent with the syndicated cartoon series, particularly the MacFarlane-Fox franchise, as they consider them to not to match the defining characteristics of the Adult Swim comedy.

Because Adult Swim began as an extension of Cartoon Network with adult-oriented cartoons and animes filling up its programming schedules the discontent with Adult Swim mostly occurs from the cartoon/anime fans who are frustrated at the increasing invasion of live action comedies in the Adult Swim programming lineup. So it is not difficult to encounter threads with titles such as "No more live action crap!," "Please no more non-cartoons!," or "Why do you guys budget for the live-action shows?" Frustrated with the live action comedies on Adult Swim one fan started a thread with a title, "Is AS on Cartoon Network or Comedy Central?" and wrote why there were more comedy shows (with real people) on the network than action cartoons. One of the threads that generated a lot of discussion in regard to Adult Swim's network identity and its programming of live action shows was, "Please stop with the live action." The OP for this thread wrote: "You guys keep shoving these live action shows down our throats and it's got to stop. STOP MAKING LIVE ACTION TRASH, we all know your [sic] just doing it because it's cheaper than paying an animator and half the stuff was out sourced [sic] from the BBC. ...bottom line is this [.] its [sic] called cartoon network, not live

action network.” Many users disagreed with the OP’s assumption that Adult Swim, as part of Cartoon Network needs to use a programming strategy that reflects the name of Cartoon Network:

“Actually, the real bottom line is it’s called Adult Swim, not Cartoon Network. If Adult Swim wants to show live-action comedies, then it is perfectly within its rights to do so.” (Majikthise)

“This isn’t Cartoon Network. This is Adult Swim and it plays by its own rules.” (Dark\_Lord\_Khrima)

“Just like Nick at Nite is different from Nickelodeon, Adult Swim is different from Cartoon Network. Adult Swim and Cartoon Network are two different networks that share the same channel” (TheHafk).

Those who argued that Adult Swim has no obligation to air just cartoons used separate Nielsen ratings and offices (as Adult Swim offices are at Williams Street) as evidence of the division between Adult Swim and Cartoon Network. One user who became frustrated with the argument that Adult Swim needs to focus on airing just cartoons because of its relationship with Cartoon Network posted a cynical note that read: “With that logic, I can complain about the fact that [adult swim] shows no dedication to programming of adults partaking in the pastime of swimming” (ZorakFan3271).

Meanwhile, the defenders of “but Adult Swim is Cartoon Network” continued to argue that a channel’s name needs to coincide with its programming if not to alienate the viewers or to deviate from the purpose of the network (like MTV which focuses more on airing reality shows or the Sci Fi channel which now airs a wrestling program called *WWE Smackdown*). The debate on whether live action shows should continue to be part of Adult Swim revolved around Adult Swim’s network identity (is it a separate network that can operate without abiding by Cartoon Network’s rules or is it part of Cartoon Network and therefore should focus on airing just cartoons?).

These anti-live action arguments also persistently appear on discussion threads that complain about the current state of Adult Swim or reminisce the bygone eras of Adult Swim such as “What happened to the Adult Swim I knew and loved?” or “2001-2005. The golden age of Adult Swim.” One thread that ignited a heated debate on whether live action shows are ruining Adult Swim or not is “When did Adult Swim start turning to crap?” as the OP attributed horrible live action comedy as one of the reasons. Some fans agreed with the OP about Adult Swim’s demise and live action shows being the culprit (“It all started when live action was introduced into [as] programming. live [sic] action comedy doesn’t belong on adultswim” or cartoons are what drew most of us to tune into Adult Swim), some agreed on Adult Swim’s downturn but blamed syndicated shows as reasons (“AS started getting stale the moment weekdays became fodder for reruns” or “Family Guy and KOTH (King of the Hill) killed Adult Swim”), and some rejected the notion that Adult Swim was heading in the wrong direction (“For a millionth and one time: Adult Swim is it’s [sic] own network!! It only shares channel space with Cartoon Network. It can be whatever it wants to be!!!).

Meanwhile, this same argument that “Adult Swim is Adult Swim and not Cartoon Network” was also used by one of the Adult Swim fans to suggest getting rid of all cartoon shows on Adult Swim (this kind of argument, however, is rarely made considering Adult Swim’s origin) in the thread “Get rid of all of the cartoons!” The OP wrote:

“This is ADULT Swim not CARTOON swim. Adult Swim is not a block on Cartoon Network [.] it is it’s [sic] own network. It simply shares space with Cartoon Network. It has no obligations to air cartoons. Cartoons are silly and are just for kids. Keep the anime though because anime is way more mature than cartoons and are made with adults in mind.”



One opposing fan pointed out that Adult Swim's history is with the cartoon genre, not live-action shows. Meanwhile, many others took offense at the OP's comment about cartoons not being suitable as an adult entertainment:

“Cartoons can be for mature can be for mature audiences. Hence the animated series still fit the title Adult Swim.” (mgangel1124)

“Cartoons aren't defined by childish nature! Saying that cartoons are for kids is like saying anything drawn is for kids. Is art only for kids?” (M0N573R)

“If you think shows like Family Guy, American Dad, and The Boondocks are for kids, I bet there's a bunch of p!ssed-off parents that would be more than happy to see you straight!” (Alchemist81)

As demonstrated in this thread and the thread, “Do Adults Even Watch...,” mentioned earlier, Adult Swim fans overall view cartoons as a legitimate form of adult entertainment and defend adults who enjoy watching cartoons from false accusations that cartoon watching adults are irresponsible, weird, or not right. This position became really prominent when a botched Adult Swim marketing campaign created a bomb scare in the city of Boston in 2007 and Adult Swim and its fans came under attack for being immature and irresponsible.

### **Marketing Campaign Gone Awry: *ATHF* and the Boston Bomb Scare**

On January 31, 2007, part of the city of Boston was temporarily closed down because of a suspicious package that was found at an overhang about 15 feet up at the busy Sullivan Square subway station in Charlestown. The unknown object was a foot square blinking electronic sign powered by a battery. A morning commuter who discovered the sign alerted the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, which summoned vast resources including the FBI, the bomb squads, and the Coast Guard to identify the device. Commuters were forced to leave the subways and part of Route 93 as

well as the Charles River was closed. A total of 38 similar blinking signs were found scattered across Boston. These discovered objects turned out to be part of a promotional gimmick for Adult Swim's *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*. The weird shaped sign was identified as a Mooninite character (holding out his middle finger) from the show. Boston officials arrested two men, Peter Berdovsky and Sean Stevens, on a felony charge for placing a "hoax" device and a charge for disorderly conduct (Levitz, 2007). These men planted these signs after being hired by a third-party guerilla marketing company called Interference, Inc., which Cartoon Network hired for the *ATHF* marketing campaign. This failed marketing campaign enraged many Boston officials including Thomas Menino, the mayor of Boston who said, "It is outrageous, in a post 9/11 world, that a company would use this type of marketing scheme. I am prepared to take any and all legal action against Turner Broadcasting and its affiliates for any and all expenses incurred during the response to today's incidents" ("Boston Mayor Targeting Turner Broadcasting," 2007, n.p.). After an immense media coverage and criticism, Turner Broadcasting and Interference apologized and promised to pay \$2 million as a settlement (\$1 million to reimburse the costs associated with the response and investigation and \$1 million as goodwill funds for homeland security programs), which would release them from all of the civil and criminal liability (Koch, 2007).<sup>10</sup>

From a marketing perspective this campaign would be a failure as the cost of guerilla marketing is supposed to be low (it cost Cartoon Network \$2 million after all)

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<sup>10</sup> Although criminal charges on Berdovsky and Stevens were not made both men had to make a public apology and do community service (80 hours for Berdovsky and 60 for Stevens) at the Spaulding Rehabilitation Center in Boston ("Charged in Marketing Stunt," 2007). Meanwhile, Jim Samples, the original Cartoon Network manager, took responsibility for the failed marketing stunt that cost the company \$2 million and resigned ("Cartoon Network Boss Quits," 2007).

and it created an unnecessary panic among the public who are not all Adult Swim fans (or are familiar with the Adult Swim shows). Zuo and Veil (2006) argue that the ATHF campaign can be seen as a failure for various reasons. First, it failed to recognize the target audience of the campaign. In an interview with *Brandweek*, Sam Ewen, the CEO and founder of Interference, said that the marketing campaign's target was primarily the current Adult Swim fans although it hoped to reach new people who were not familiar with the show to get interested (Ebenkamp, 2007). According to Zuo and Veil (2006), if the Adult Swim fans were the targets of the campaign as Ewen said, then it would have been more effective to install the Mooninite signs in places where they would be more recognizable such as college campuses. Zuo and Veil (2006) cite the marketers' unawareness of the public sentimentality in the post 9/11 Boston as another reason the campaign failed. Because Boston is one of the two original cities of the two hijacked 9/11 flights the mysterious devices would have stirred more concern among the citizens in Boston than in any other places (Koch, 2007). This may be the reason why despite the same guerilla campaign happening in nine other cities (New York City, Austin, Los Angeles, Seattle, Chicago, Atlanta, Portland, San Francisco, and Philadelphia) Boston was the only place that was alerted by this unknown object (Zuo and Veil, 2006; Koch, 2007).<sup>11</sup> Zuo and Veil (2006) also argue that this guerilla marketing failed because it breached the ethical, legal, and societal boundaries and caused public panic.

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<sup>11</sup> The question that can arise from this incident is why the Mooninite signs went unnoticed throughout the campaign (two-three weeks) in New York City, a city that is associated with 9/11 the most.

But what Zuo and Veil (2006) do not recognize is that this “failed” marketing campaign became a very successful “branding” campaign as it strengthened both the Adult Swim’s brand image as “subversive,” “anti-authority,” and “non-mainstream” and the relationship between the Adult Swim fans (“who got it”) and the Adult Swim brand. The day after the bomb scare occurred *Boston Globe* published an article that highlighted the generational gap in the reaction to the ATHF marketing campaign and the recognition of the Adult Swim brand. According to the article, the reason this debacle was created is because the person who spotted the Mooninite sign and reported to the authorities did not recognize it as a character from *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*, unlike the 22-year-old design student, Todd Vanderlin, who after instantly recognizing the sign, took pictures, and posted them on his blog (Levinson & Cramer, 2007).

The overreactions by the public officials such as Mayor Menino (who called the campaign “irresponsible”), the Massachusetts Attorney General Martha Coakley (who called the incident a “major disruption” in Boston on so many different levels), and US Representative Edward J. Markey (who called it an “appalling publicity stunt”) made Adult Swim fans to form a closer bond with one another (affinity among those who get it against those who don’t) and with the Adult Swim brand. So did the media’s negative reaction to the situation. For instance, the *Hartford Courant* editorial called the stunt “unfunny” and “indefensible” (“Boston Stunt Not Funny,” 2007) while Shepard Smith of Fox News said, “This stupid alien image is from, I am now told, a Cartoon Network program named Aqua Teen Hunger Force. Yes. Aqua Teen Hunger Force...It’s stoner kind of stuff, you know? ...And now, these little alien guys called Mooninites have shut down a great American city...Stoner stuff is what it is. You know, not that I have that

much against that, I'm just saying that's what this is... This will not be funny to much of anybody" (cited in Poniewozik, 2007). What the public officials, politicians, and mainstream media, particularly Fox, failed to understand was considered to be a very funny and hilarious stunt among Adult Swim fans. So while the public officials, the media, and police authorities were chasing after the harmless objects Adult Swim fans reacted to the scare with a smirk. One 29 year old blogger in Massachusetts wrote, "Repeat after me, authorities. L-E-D. Not I-E-D. Get it," making the point that the light emitting from the signs are not the same as improvised explosive devices (Levinson & Cramer, 2007). Furthermore, this scare episode generated various mash-up videos such as Jack Bauer, the lead character of Fox's *24*, interrogating the Mooninite and popular paraphernalia such as t-shirts with the Mooninite characters or logos that read "Remember 1-31-07" (the date of the Boston bomb scare) or "I survived Boston Mooninite Invasion" (Koch, 2007). The more the public officials and the mainstream media denounced the marketing ploy and tried to create scare by using terms such as "hoax," a term that signifies intention of a threat and deception, the more Adult Swim fans ridiculed those public officials, the media people, and the city of Boston. The "overreaction" by the media and the public officials then energized the Adult Swim fans to build a stronger bond with the Adult Swim community and the brand.

The Boston bomb scare was also fervently discussed among Adult Swim fans on the online forums with many expressing frustration at Mayor Menino, public officials, politicians, government authorities, and Fox News (particularly Smith who called ATHF, a "stoner stuff") for overreacting and passionately expressing their support for Adult Swim. In the "Boston Bomb Scare-A/S (ATHF) prank gone awry" thread the OP linked a

CBS news article, ““Hoax” Triggers Boston Security Scare,” and asked community members who they thought would get fired for the incident. Rather than answering the OP’s question, the users mostly focused on commenting on their reactions when they heard about the stunt. Many found what had unfolded to be “funny” and blamed those who freaked out to have “no sense of humor.” Some fans living in the Boston area wrote how they laughed when hearing about it (“I live down the street from one of the “bombs” here in Allston, MA. We have been laughing our **\*\*bleep\*\*** off at this whole thing”) or wished they had discovered the Mooninite characters (“What if I found one? I could eBay it for lots of CASH xD”). This sentiment about the ATHF campaign (that it is funny or hilarious) was pervasive throughout various threads that discussed the Boston bomb scare. Some fans posted media’s, particularly Fox News’, coverage of the incident to ridicule the overreaction and make fun of reporters who tried to explain what *ATHF* is and failed to pronounce the names of the Mooninite characters correctly (Ignignokt and Err). One thread that was created to specifically discuss Fox News’ report on the ATHF campaign was “foxnews [sic] reported ATHF in volved [sic] in Boston hoax.” This thread was created the moment Fox news was covering the bomb scare in Boston and soon became a minute by minute update on what Fox (and occasionally CNN, a sister network of Adult Swim) was saying about the incident. Generating more than 750 comments the discussion thread was used to criticize Fox for continuing to call the discovered LED Mooninites as bomb materials and suggesting that Adult Swim intended to create chaos in the city of Boston. Many fans claimed they were watching Fox just to get a kick out of how they were reporting the incident while others commented on Fox News’ credibility (or lack of) in general. For instance, one fan commented, “Shepard

Smith isn't always honest" and "Neither is the rest of Fox News" and posted links to Media Matters' profiles of Fox News and Smith.

In a sense, the "Mooninite" incident that went awry as a marketing campaign became a powerful branding campaign as it further established the ties and affective relationship between the Adult Swim brand and the Adult Swim fans. In fact, one Adult Swim fan created a thread called, "Bomb hoax in boston...ATHF Fans We should help out" the day after the incident to suggest a fundraising to help Adult Swim to pay for the damage in Boston (this, of course, never transpired, as many fans pointed out that Adult Swim has more than enough money to pay the fines. However, almost all of the fans who commented in this thread expressed their support for the network). What this outcome demonstrates is that in today's brand culture, branding is not just about economics in which commodities and money circulate but also about culture in which a brand is able to build "an affective, authentic *relationship* with a consumer, one based—just like a relationship between two people—on the accumulation of memories, emotions, personal narratives, and expectations" (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 8). This deep, entangled affective relationship between Adult Swim and Adult Swim fans formed through an alignment of their "unconventional" adult sensibility (which is "unique" and "different" from non-Adult Swimmers, public officials and authorities, etc.), then, is what makes Adult Swim to exert itself as a "non-mainstream" brand despite being a *corporate* entity.

Interestingly, while many Adult Swim fans ridiculed those who overreacted to the ATHF fiasco some took offense at being described as childish, immature, and slackers by the media and the non Adult Swim viewers. So when *Boston Globe* published opinion letters from the non Adult Swim viewers who had no understanding of Adult Swim or its

fans or called cartoons as childish in its online editorial (“Even had things not escalated, we would still be treated to LED figures giving us the finger on our way to work before the show’s slacker target audience is even awake in the morning”; “...an “adult” cartoon (isn’t that an oxymoron?)”) one Adult Swim fan became angry and started a new thread (“Do only children and slackers watch Adult Swim?) to urge fellow Adult Swim fans to write a letter to the editor of *Boston Globe* so their voices can be heard. The OP wrote that as a person who works an average of 60 hours a week and doesn’t “believe cartoons are something only a four-year-old should be able to enjoy” the letters printed on *Boston Globe*’s website is offensive and unwarranted for many Adult Swim fans who do not fit the “slacker” or “childish” descriptions. Most of the fans who participated in the thread expressed a similar sentiment by talking about how they do not fit the “slacker”/“childish” mold that the letter writers used to talk about the Adult Swim viewers. Some of those who posted comments included a military officer who has served the United States Air Force since 1986, a 50 year old who owns two corporations, a female well out of college (“not even [as]’s target demo) who just happens to enjoy watching cartoons and doesn’t take herself seriously, a college student who has a high grade point average and wakes up at 5 to work every morning, and a girlfriend of an Army Warrant Officer who is an Adult Swim fan.

Because online discussion forums operate anonymously there is no way to confirm whether these fans are being honest about their status. But what is noteworthy from these comments is that these users all fervently tried to construct what Crawford (2006) calls a pluralist model of adulthood by expressing frustration at the unwarranted generalizations about Adult Swim and its fans and actively rejecting the notion that



cartoon watching is childish. This pluralist model of adulthood recognizes “the diversity of adult lives” but does not “consider everyone to be adult” or all modes of living should be validated. Rather it “still allows for judgments to be made about whether an individual is adult or not” (Crawford, 2006, p. 278). When one member questioned why it mattered to the OP how non Adult Swim viewers perceive Adult Swim fans the OP replied because it is frustrating to have one’s cultural taste to be continuously judged as bad or poor (for instance, OP’s love for heavy metal music, which gets easily labeled as trash). The OP added, “if you don’t say something you will never be heard. If you only say it where few people or people who you already know are likely to be of the same thought are listening, it will forever remain marginalized.” From the OP’s final comments what seems to be at stake is the matter of who gets to decide what is tasteful or valuable, who has the authority to prescribe what is “adult” culture or not, and/or how taste gets to be classified by hierarchy (Crawford, 2006). Thus, it is the OP’s personal taste and individual choice that become the means of political participation or resistance. This fits Jeffrey Jones’ (2010) argument about contemporary political culture being “increasingly marked by a lack of commitment to traditional institutions, yet composed of temporary alliances around issues and values linked to everyday life” (p. 20).

Considering that not all Adult Swim fans participate online and that online community operates with the real identity of the participant hidden it is not possible to construct a general notion of who the Adult Swim fans are. Rather than providing a general claim of who the Adult Swim viewers are the goal of this chapter is to understand how Adult Swim uses its interactive website to create and maintain a relationship with its fans, how fans partake in building the Adult Swim brand, and how they express their

understanding of what Adult Swim is and should be. Through features such as the “bump builder” and discussion forums Adult Swim tries to establish its identity as a brand that listens to its fans. Although there are some fans who are skeptical of the notion of “being heard” (but nevertheless, they continue to participate online) by Adult Swim producers, many fans also believe that what they have to say about Adult Swim does matter and has an effect as evidenced by their reaction to the return of Toonami or to the group of scholars who called Adult Swim’s online community “imaginary.” The relationship that Adult Swim fans form with Adult Swim then reflects Jenkins’ (2006) assertion that “a politics of participation starts from the assumption that we may have greater collective bargaining power if we form consumption communities” (p. 249). But whether that sense of empowerment that comes from online participation leads to greater social, cultural, or political transformation needs to be more critically examined.

The interactive digital tools that allow users/fans to talk back to authorities (media producers, politicians, etc.) and among each other encourage more people to participate online, particularly in online communities with “like-minded” people, as they provide pleasures in communication and “a respite from the vagaries of the real world” (Shirkey, 2004, n.p.). However, this act of “talking back” does not necessarily lead to real political participation or changes as many scholars point out (Dean, 2008; Turner, 2010; Zizek, 1997). Using the concept of “demotic turn” Graeme Turner (2010) asserts that although interactive technology allows more opportunities for ordinary people to participate in media production (whether it is by appearing on reality shows or by leaving online feedback) it also creates a deficit in democratic participation. Meanwhile, Zizek (1997) argues that interactive technologies, which make users believe that they are being active

and making a difference by engaging in various online activities (whether it is clicking a “like” button, posting a comment on message boards or social media, etc.) are actually turning them into passive subjects as it is actually the technology that does all the active works. Using the term, “interpassivity” Zizek (1997) points out that many users/fans’ active participation online may create and circulate various new ideas and messages but only to prevent real actions or transformations from occurring. Dean (2008) also argues that there is a need to separate an understanding of “politics as the circulation of content and politics as official policy” (p. 102). According to Dean (2008), with many Americans being left with not many choices for political participation (mostly limited to voting, which an increasing number of Americans choose not to participate in and donating money) it is not surprising that “many might want to be more active and might feel that action online is a way of getting their voice heard, a way of making a contribution” (p. 110). Dean (2008) asserts that we are at risk of falling into the trap of empowerment that is created by the “fantasy of participation,” in which politics is being displaced by the “activities of everyday or ordinary people” (such as creating a blog, posting comments, or sharing links to an article, etc.).

The points made by the above scholars are important to take into consideration when thinking about the relationship between Adult Swim fans and the brand (and how fans’ online participation is used to create economic values for a commercial entity). Particularly, with an understanding that “the market is not a system for delivering political outcomes” (Dean, 2008, p. 104), we need to be critical of the commercial practice of Adult Swim fans’ cultural participation. However, we should do so without overgeneralizing all online activities as “interpassive” or “fantasy of participation,” as

greater political transformations can begin with the “micropolitics of everyday life” such as sharing personal stories and resisting negative stereotypes as evidenced by the early feminist movement (the personal becoming political).

## CONCLUSION: ADULT SWIM GROWS UP

This dissertation began with the goal of understanding who the “adult” in Adult Swim is, which engages with three pronged questions: how is “adult” or “adulthood” defined and understood in the Adult Swim programs (in other words, what are the characteristics of Adult Swim programs that make it a popular “adult” television program and a brand); how does Adult Swim construct and imagine its “adult” audience; and how do the Adult Swim viewers/fans understand their “adult” identity and how does Adult Swim shape or contradict their understanding of “adult”/ “adulthood”?

What started as a program that aired two nights a week has now become a nightly event, gradually amassing a greater number of young adults in front of television late at night. This marginal programming block has grown into not only one of the most popular cable networks but also a popular adult-oriented entertainment brand, particularly as television transitioned into the digital era. Branding of television networks has become a very significant strategy in the digital era because television networks with a strong, distinctive brand identity are not only able to compete effectively in an increasingly overcrowded television marketplace but also can bring greater profits to their parent companies by conveying and distributing various products associated with the network brand via multiple media platforms (Johnson, 2007). Adult Swim has been able to establish itself as a strong adult-oriented entertainment brand by developing and airing a string of programs that share a particular and unique sensibility that appeals to many contemporary young adults.

This Adult Swim sensibility is characterized through Adult Swim programs that provide absurd, surreal humor in which nothing seems to make sense (and the fact that

the majority of the Adult Swim original shows run for approximately 12 minutes—without commercials—that make it difficult to develop a coherent plot contributes to the absurdity in various Adult Swim programs) and that continuously transgress and subvert the adult-child boundary or the childhood-adulthood opposition as they mix discussions of adult/mature themes such as politics, sex, and sexuality with silly, immature, and crude jokes. In other words, it is the “simultaneous dissolution and reinforcement of the boundaries between childhood and adulthood” (Hendershot, 2004, p. 193) that characterizes the Adult Swim sensibility. Challenging conventional assumptions about adulthood and adult taste by appropriating and subverting products and culture (cartoons, video games, toys, etc.) associated with childhood/children for adult entertainment (as exemplified by shows such as *Robot Chicken*, *Look Around You*, *Sealab 2021*, and so on) Adult Swim programs reflect and express the unclear (and arbitrary) boundary between “adult”/“child” taste as well as the ambivalent feeling that many contemporary young adults have about conventional understanding of adulthood, adult taste, and adult lifestyle.

This dissertation reveals how the arbitrary construction of cultural artifacts such as cartoons as “childish” can create misperceptions about both those cultural artifacts and those who consume (and enjoy consuming) them. The long-held establishment and understanding of cartoons as children’s-only genre (or inappropriate/illegitimate “adult” entertainment form) have created tensions for many of the Adult Swim adult viewers who happen to be cartoon fans (especially those who became attracted to Adult Swim because of its cartoon/anime lineup). As demonstrated in chapter 7, many adult fans of Adult Swim actively defy the notion that cartoons are not for adults and that adults who enjoy

watching cartoons are “abnormal” or “un-adult.” Even those who acknowledge Adult Swim to be juvenile and immature resist the connection between that their consumption and pleasure in cartoons and Adult Swim shows and their identity as “immature” and “irresponsible” adults who fail to fulfill adult responsibilities (as a parent, an employee, a citizen, etc.). Rather, many adult fans of Adult Swim strive to make their “unconventional” taste to be recognized as legitimate “adult” culture by highlighting their identity as responsible, mature adults. In fact, as exemplified by the comments left by some “adult” fans of Adult Swim on the Adult Swim message boards, particularly in the discussion thread that was created to encourage Adult Swim fans to write to *Boston Globe* to challenge the way Adult Swim fans were characterized in the aftermath of the botched *ATHF* marketing campaign, the Adult Swim fans’ understanding of adulthood/adulthood is not really different from the conventional characterization of adulthood/adulthood as serious, hard working, and responsible.

Through various programming practices and branding strategies based on its understanding of its “adult” audience, Adult Swim has established itself as a “different,” “non-mainstream,” and “creative” brand. However, this kind of brand image was created at the expense of textually excluding or marginalizing women (although this does not mean that women failed to become Adult Swim fans) and commercially appropriating queer identities. In this sense, Adult Swim’s “edgy” brand image is aligned with conservative understandings of women and minorities, reflecting the patriarchal ideology of the media industry culture. But the absence of female presence and the boyish immaturity and naughtiness that characterize Adult Swim sensibility also seems to reflect and characterize the prevailing cultural discourse on the new adulthood and adult culture

in contemporary society and how the shift in adult identity and sensibility has led to “adulthood in crisis,” particularly “American masculinity in crisis” as the standard of manhood as mature, responsible breadwinners and caretakers is traditionally associated with adulthood.

Like any other cable networks that “constantly monitor their ratings for apparent shifts in their audience’s tastes” and incorporate contents to fit their brand image (Kompare, 2005, p. 172) Adult Swim has also made various changes to its programming and branding practices based on its shifting conceptions of its “adult” audience, which is a key element of its brand image as “cool” and “youthful.” Adult Swim programs use irreverent humor, postmodern tropes of parody and satire, intertextual mechanisms that reward viewers who have higher level of knowledge of popular culture with greater textual pleasure, and amateurish DIY aesthetics that are widespread on web videos, which reflect the young adult sensibility and media consumption habits. But as the “experimental” comedy style of *Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!*, which polarized the Adult Swim community in the understanding of the Adult Swim identity, demonstrates Adult Swim not only reflects the contemporary “adult” sensibility but also tries to shape and expand it by pushing the limitations of absurdity and surrealism.

With the expansion of its schedule it become inevitable for Adult Swim to make changes in its programming practices. But it was important that they made the changes without deviating from the Adult Swim sensibility (Cohen, 2005). Instead of relying just on internal production, Adult Swim began to work with external independent production studios such as Stoopid Monkey (production studio of *Robot Chicken*) and Titmouse, Inc. (production studio of various Adult Swim shows including *The Venture Bros.* and



*Superjail*). Also, to fill up its expanded programming schedule Adult Swim incorporated more live-action comedy shows (*Tim and Eric*, *The Mighty Boosh*, *Eagleheart*, *Children's Hospital*, and *Loiter Squad* just to name a few), creating numerous debates on what Adult Swim's identity is. As exemplified by the heated online discussions on Adult Swim's message boards different understandings of Adult Swim's identity encourages Adult Swim fans to have different programming expectations. Those who understand Adult Swim as part of Cartoon Network's programming block argue that the Adult Swim programming should reflect the brand identity of Cartoon Network by running only the cartoon/anime genre. Meanwhile, those who understand Adult Swim to be a separate network from Cartoon Network (although they share a common channel) expect Adult Swim to provide "adult-oriented" shows that are in good quality regardless of the genre. In addition, Adult Swim's expansion beyond the tube with its new ventures into various digital platforms (such as online/mobile games and interactive website) further complicates defining what Adult Swim is.

One of the dominant debates in regard to the Adult Swim identity is its "adult" audience: who are the "adult" audience and what does it mean to be an "adult." This will be an ongoing debate as Adult Swim continues to see its "adult" demographic change. The shifts in the Adult Swim demographic will ultimately influence the Adult Swim programming practices and branding strategies as well as the overall Adult Swim sensibility. Currently, it is not difficult to see many old Adult Swim fans posting nostalgic messages about the early Adult Swim shows. With each generation having different sensibilities and cultural expectations from a brand, the task that lies ahead for Adult Swim is figuring out how to conceive its "adult" audience (who are the ideal

viewers and what are their characteristics) and negotiating the taste and preference of the earlier Adult Swim fans and those of the newer Adult Swim fans.

But it is not just the “adult” fans of Adult Swim that have changed. Celebrating its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2011, Adult Swim has also grown up and expanded significantly. What used to be a marginal, alternative late-night programming has now become a primary source of entertainment for many young adults. As Adult Swim ages (and its adult viewers grow older), the formula that worked in building the network as “non-mainstream,” “unique” and “different” becomes stale. In regard to the current programming practices of Adult Swim, John Lichman of *Indiewire* raised a question about whether Adult Swim is stuck in a rut of the “nostalgia bait” (Lichman, 2012).

So what happens if the Adult Swim formula becomes appropriated by other networks? How will Adult Swim maintain its status as a “subversive,” “underdog” brand when it has become part of the “machine” that Mike Lazzo has been afraid of turning into? In his IGN interview in 2003, Lazzo explained that despite the expansion, Adult Swim has been able to retain its “frontier spirit” because many of the people who were instrumental in building up the network continued to work at Adult Swim. Although some people have left for other shows Lazzo claimed that Adult Swim’s ability to retain most of the personnel has been the reason why Adult Swim has been able to be what it is (“If it were not so, we wouldn't be”) (Ken P., 2003, n.p.). Since that IGN interview some of the core original Adult Swim members have left to work for other networks. For instance, Adam Reed and Matt Thompson, the creators of *Sealab 2021* and *Frisky Dingo*, have moved on to Floyd County Productions (also located in Atlanta), to produce *Archer*, which has become a very popular animation for F/X. The animation style used in *Archer*

is very similar to *Sealab 2021* in the sense that the “adult” characters who have serious jobs (secret service agents) are self-centered and are infantile, the setting of time is ambiguous creating a heightened sense of surrealism (by mixing contemporary elements such as popular culture references and characters’ use of modern technology with old-fashioned aesthetics and styles), the dialogs between characters are witty but absurd. Furthermore, in January 2013, Fox announced that it will launch a new 90 minute late night Saturday programming block called, Animation Domination High-Def (ADHD; named after FOX’s Sunday prime time animation block), on July 27, 2013 from 11pm to 12:30 am. To run this new late-night programming block, Fox hired Nick Weidenfeld, who worked as the executive producer of Adult Swim’s *Children’s Hospital* and *The Boondocks*. All of the shows will run for 15 minutes (six shows will consist the 90 minute programming block), just like many of the Adult Swim original programs. In addition to Weidenfeld, Dino Stamatopoulos, who created Adult Swim’s *Moral Orel* and *Mary Shelley’s Frankenhole* will join ADHD with his show, *High School USA!*. The mainstream media have already dubbed ADHD as “FOX’s version of Adult Swim” (Mantheson, 2013) or the “first direct competition of Adult Swim” (Stampfli, 2013), although Weidenfeld denies ADHD was created to compete against Adult Swim as he explained: “I’m not sure I’d call it competition with Adult Swim. They do action programming on Saturday night, so I think there’s space for interesting animated comedy to exist....I think if we’re competing with anyone, it’s with the Internet and with ourselves more than any other network” (cited in Richmond, 2013). With Adult Swim’s success more competition from other networks will be inevitable as the television industry is well known for copying others’ successful formula to the point of saturation.

And as Jason Mittell (2004) points out, it was the innovation-imitation-saturation cycle that led to the demise of the first generation of prime time animations in the 1960s.

Even without the external competitions, however, Adult Swim is showing signs of difficulties in remaining “original” and “different” from others. On January 17, 2013, Adult Swim debuted a new show called, *Newsreaders*, a satire of network television newsmagazines such as *20/20* and *60 Minutes*. A spin-off from Adult Swim’s *Children’s Hospital*, *Newsreaders* is created by the veterans of *The Daily Show* who are also the executive producers of *Children’s Hospital*, Rob Corddry (who is well known for playing a correspondent on *The Daily Show*), Jonathan Stern, and David Wain. The showrunner of *Newsreaders* is Jim Margolis, who worked as a producer at *The Daily Show* for a long period of time. Unlike *The Daily Show*, which creates satire from real news, the entire news in *Newsreaders* are fake (and thus, the show is considered to be more of a sketch comedy than a fake news program like *The Daily Show* or *The Colbert Report*) and thus, is more scripted and performance-oriented. In an interview with *The Plain Reader*, one thing that Jim Margolis tried to emphasize was how *Newsreader* is different from *The Daily Show* despite the connection between the two (just like Weidenfeld denied ADHD’s connection to Adult Swim). Margolis pointed out that there is a difference between producing a scripted comedy show (*Newsreaders*) and a daily late-night comedy show (*The Daily Show*) and said that although he greatly learned how to write and produce good comedy the materials on *Newsreaders* will not be from *The Daily Show* (Heaton, 2013). But because of the cross-pollination between *Newsreaders* and *The Daily Show* the latter’s influence on the former is inevitable, which raises questions on how

“Adult Swim” can continue to claim its difference from other networks, particularly Comedy Central (the network that runs *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*).

### **Suggestions for Future Research on Adult Swim**

Despite being one of the most popular late night programming blocks, there is a great lack of scholarly research on Adult Swim. Those who have studied Adult Swim did so by focusing on one particular show (such as *The Boondocks* or *The Venture Bros.*) and with a narrower focus of analysis (race, gender, animation studies, etc.). Rather than choosing a particular show with a narrower focus I chose to study Adult Swim as an entire network or a brand as I was interested in understanding the meaning of “adult” in Adult Swim and the cultural meaning of its popularity as an “adult” entertainment brand, particularly with its use of a programming strategy that seemed to go against the conventional notion of adult taste and values. I was especially interested in how Adult Swim seemed to reflect and produce the problems of evaluating contemporary adults based on the standards of the earlier eras. I also chose to study Adult Swim as a brand because it allowed me to study a wider spectrum of the Adult Swim audience, how they identified with the brand, and how Adult Swim’s brand identity was used to build and maintain relationship with its audience/fans, especially via its interactive website. The goal of this dissertation, then, is to contribute to the ongoing discussions on the changing concept of adulthood and the growing scholarship on brand culture by situating Adult Swim as a specific product that reflects the ambivalence of contemporary adulthood and the brand culture (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Based on this dissertation project various studies can be developed that can enrich the scholarship on Adult Swim, media/television studies, gender studies, and globalization.

One of the things that I wanted to study further but could not because of time restrictions and the requirements of the dissertation was the female fans of Adult Swim. Despite the male-centricity in the programming and branding strategies, Adult Swim enjoys a growing female viewership. In fact, it is not difficult to encounter female fans of Adult Swim shows online. For instance, *The Venture Bros.*, which hardly has any female characters and adopts the style of old boy-adventure shows, have various fan blogs/podcasts that are run by female fans such as *Very Venture Vodcast*, *Go VentureRadio! (GVR)*, and *Hench 4 Life* (Garcia, 2012). Studying these female Adult Swim fans and their use of the Adult Swim brand identity in their identity formation could greatly contribute to scholarship on fandom and feminist media studies.

Second, one of the limitations of this dissertation is that its analysis of Adult Swim and Adult Swim fans is mainly textual. Thus, this dissertation can be productively supplemented by an ethnographic work with producers. With on-site fieldwork this study can interrogate how Adult Swim workers construct their “adult” audience and use that understanding in the creation of their programs, how their working environment influences their understanding of the Adult Swim audience and the brand, and how they work to align their “adult” sensibility with that of the audiences. Through a production study the researcher can observe the working/production conditions and environment, the daily routines and production practices, and the constraints and obstacles that make it difficult for the workers to create materials that they truly believe represent the Adult Swim sensibility. Also, through a production study the researcher can have the opportunity to directly talk with the workers whose information can be beneficial in understanding how they understand contemporary adulthood (adult identity, adult taste,

and “adult” values) and how that understanding influences their envisioning of the Adult Swim viewers and the Adult Swim brand. An integration of ethnographic production studies will allow a more holistic Adult Swim study that provides a more “multiperspective.” Ethnographic work can also be done with the Adult Swim audience. By directly engaging with and interviewing the Adult Swim fans this research can have a better understanding of how Adult Swim shapes or reflects their “adult” sensibility, what Adult Swim means to them in their everyday lives, and what it means for them to be fans of Adult Swim.

In this dissertation I was only able to examine a selected number of Adult Swim television shows and the Adult Swim online forums. Because Adult Swim is no longer just about a television program but also a cultural brand, which utilizes various materials to further establish and extend its brand power it is necessary to study other cultural products of Adult Swim. First, the online/mobile games developed by Adult Swim can be investigated. Since Adult Swim signed deals with the now defunct, Midway Games, Inc. in 2005, it has actively ventured into the gaming industry. Adult Swim games have not only brought great profits to the company but also have played an important role in growing the Adult Swim brand. Another feature that could be studied is Thing X, which was created through a partnership with former writers of *The Onion*, a popular news satire organization. Billing it “All the Internet You’ll Ever Need,” Adult Swim launched Thing X to reach to a wider adult audience (particularly those who can spend most of their times on the Internet) and to extend the Adult Swim brand identity. In conjunction with the Adult Swim television shows these extratextual materials work together to create an Adult Swim brand with a particular personality. Thus, in order to enrich the study on

Adult Swim as a product of cultural brand it is necessary to take into account the way these extratextual materials operate to establish a brand identity for Adult Swim and to attract the Adult Swim (and non-Adult Swim) audience.

Michael Curtin (2009) argues that media scholars need to pay more attention to the globalization of media in today's media landscape in which media imagery and contents flow more fluidly across borders and reach more diverse audiences as successful media enterprises try to extend their brand power. Adult Swim, which has been actively expanding its reach to other countries, needs to be understood in a global context as well. The Adult Swim shows are currently being aired or have been aired in various countries including Australia, New Zealand, Canada, France, Germany, United Kingdom, and India. Depending on the local market conditions, government regulations, and licensing issues, Adult Swim either appears or has appeared in these international markets either as individual shows or as a programming block just like the Adult Swim in the U.S. It is important to point out that not all countries air the Adult Swim block on their Cartoon Network channels. For instance, in Australia, Adult Swim which used to air on Australian Cartoon Network (owned by Turner International Australia and Time Warner) took this animation block off its program for its business reasons. Since February 2008, the Adult Swim block airs on The Comedy Channel in Australia with Adult Swim signature shows such as *Harvey Birdman* and *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*. In Canada, the Adult Swim programming block began to air on Cartoon Network, when it was launched on July 4, 2012 (Arrant, 2012). Before the launch of Cartoon Network, Adult Swim shows appeared on Teletoon's adult programming block, "Teletoon at Night." Because Cartoon Network Canada and Teletoon are sister networks, Teletoon continues to air Adult Swim shows



despite Cartoon Network's launch in Canada. Meanwhile, in Poland, a selected number of Adult Swim shows are aired as the Adult Swim programming block does not exist. In Russia, Adult Swim shows are dubbed in Russian whereas in France all of the shows air in English with French subtitles.

Adult Swim in the foreign markets appear in many different ways: via selected Adult Swim shows or as a programming block, as part of the Cartoon Network programming block or as part of a late night programming block for non-Cartoon Network channels, in original language with subtitles or dubbed in a local language, and so on. How Adult Swim appears in other countries are determined by both political economic issues such as Time Warner-Turner's business strategies, local media policies, and government censorship and cultural issues such as how cartoons are received in the local market (are they regarded as children's only entertainment or received as a genre that has intergenerational or adult appeal), how adulthood, adult culture, and adult identity are understood, and how "adult" humor, tastes, values, and sensibilities are defined. To study which shows are chosen for the local Adult Swim programming block and which are frequently left out (and why) should provide us with hints of how "adult" sensibility is constructed in those countries (who are the "adult" target market in other countries) and enrich our understanding of Adult Swim's impact on our ideas about adulthood and adult identity, particularly as Adult Swim expands itself as a global entertainment brand.

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