

# Peripheral Attraction

The Formation of Adult Fandoms around American Animation  
for Children and Adolescents



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This paper examines the formation of adult fandoms around American animation intended for children and adolescents. My research question is, why do some adults consume children's animation for themselves? What is the attraction there, considering that adult animation is also available? Do children's animations offer something that adult animation does not?

Animation is at times stigmatized as being children's entertainment, although if we look at the history of American animation, for example, we will find out that children have been just one audience among others since the days of Winsor McCay's vaudeville performances in the 1910s. It is this background as well as selected works from animation, audience and fan studies that serve as the historical, theoretical and methodological framework for my thesis.

I have carried out my study by focusing on a specific fan collective of the American cartoon series of my choice (Chris Savino's *The Loud House*; Nickelodeon, 2016–). The community resides at a subsection of Reddit, titled /r/theloudhouse. With the permission from the moderators, I conducted a voluntary survey consisting of five, thematically arranged sections dealing with subjects like the show itself, being a fan and part of the /r/theloudhouse community, other animation and attitudes towards animation and its audiences. In the end, I received filled-out questionnaires from six volunteers.

My findings from the gathered material show, that the fans of *The Loud House* are passionate about their favorite show, but in general appear to lack some of the usual traits of fanness, such as active participation in community interaction, creation of fan works and display of fanness in public, such as purchasing show-related merchandise. For them, the most important thing about being a fan is to simply watch and enjoy *The Loud House*. Regarding my research question, I noticed that adult fans of children's animation may choose to reject adult animation because of the very elements distinguishing it from animation for younger audiences. They do not necessarily want to watch something that caters towards their age group, and may consider "adult" and "mature" jokes and topics to be anything but, while still relating to narrative elements in children's show even outside nostalgia.

I recommend conducting further studies on the aspects of subtexts and sound in children's animation, since they were mostly marginalized in this study.

Subjects: animation, audiences, audience reception, cartoon, fandom, fanness, fan studies, identity, popular culture, television.

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# 1. Introduction

This paper will focus on the formation of adult fandoms around American animation aimed for children and adolescents. Despite the growing selection of adult animation, cartoons and animated feature films intended for younger audiences still captivate people outside their primary target demography. Parents who are watching animation with their children may have a specific reason for this – it is fun to watch together and it also provides opportunities to monitor as well as ration what the child will see and hear on television, streaming services or home media. At the same time, there will also be opportunities to cultivate the media literacy of both the child and the parent.

However, there are also adults who consume children's animation for themselves, whether or not they have offspring. My primary research question is, *why do adult fandoms form around animated series and feature films aimed for children and adolescents? Why do adults become fans of these despite the availability of adult animation? Are there some things offered in children's cartoons and animated movies that can not necessarily be found in adult animation, resulting in the consumption of both or possibly even the outright rejection of the latter?*

It needs to be noted that whenever I mention animation in this paper, I am always referring to animation made in The United States, unless otherwise stated. The same goes for any mentions of movies and film industry, which in this case means anything created in Hollywood or outside of it but still within The United States. In some instances, the actual animation process may have been outsourced to a different country, but the essential planning and production has still occurred in The United States.

## 1.1. Entertainment for All Ages

The idea for my research topic formed out of an observation I made at the Kinopalatsi cinema complex in my hometown of Turku, Finland, when I went

there to see *Toy Story 3*, a feature-length computer-rendered animation produced by Disney and created by Pixar, on August 2010. As I entered the auditorium, I noticed that a large chunk of the audience consisted of adults, mostly between the ages of 20 and 30. My initial thought was that there were probably a lot of parents attending the screening with their children, but after the screening ended I saw that a considerable majority of audience members leaving their seats were adults.

Despite the fact that the time of this particular screening may have been rather late for children (I have a faint recollection that it was around 6 PM), an entire auditorium with that many adults watching a movie aimed for children stuck with me as a surprising phenomenon. Because the movie happened to be the third one in the *Toy Story* franchise (with the first two movies having been made in 1995 and 1998, respectively), one could acknowledge that the mostly adult audience comprised of existing fans simply coming back for closure to a storyline that began in their childhood. In fact, that was one of the reasons I was there myself.

When toy company Hasbro premiered *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic!* – a cartoon series based on the recently redesigned toy line of the same name – in the fall of the same year, it garnered a rather large fandom in a relatively short time period. What really made it an interesting case was that despite being aimed primarily towards girls between the ages of 5 and 8, the cartoon performed extremely well amongst adult males. These fans, who call themselves Bronies (adult female fans are sometimes called Pegasisters), have received a lot of media attention for their keenness and dedication, although the purpose of the various news articles and editorials concerning them alternate from attempts at understanding to pure sensationalism. Academic research has also been made about Bronies, with emphasis on various media discourses surrounding them.

One of the most important themes about the Brony phenomenon is the appropriateness of being a fan of animation aimed towards children and adolescents. The existence of adult fans in this context has been perceived as somewhat of a problem not only due to fan-made creations but also due to the

visibility of both those creations and the Bronies themselves. Comparisons have been made to both pedophilia and dysfunctional social behavior, both of which have been furthered by some Bronies' tendencies to sexualize the ponies in fan art and fan fiction (Jones 2015, 120–122). Fan-made content has also been a problem to Hasbro which has, for example, intervened and halted the production of two fan-made video game projects, *MLP: Online* and *Fighting Is Magic*. The latter was considered problematic by Hasbro since its usage of the ponies as characters in a fighting game may have been damaging to its product family (Romano 2013, electronic document).

My student exchange trip to Western Washington University at Bellingham, WA, in 2016 cemented the decision to stick to the topic of my paper when I found out that over half of my classmates were actively watching cartoons. Having talked about it briefly with them gave me the impression that they perceived children's animation simply as one particular manifestation of the various offerings in audiovisual entertainment. Some of these people also attempted to find a deeper meaning to various topics within the shows they followed, such as those of faith, politics and gender dynamics. None of them also felt that watching children's animation was an inappropriate hobby for childless adults.

Considering all these examples I have provided, it is clear that children's animation is very important to some adults. It is also apparent that there appear to be social norms and expectations about "age-appropriate" entertainment. However, it has to be noted, against the historical background of American animation (which I will be expounding upon further in chapter 2), that cartoon series, animated features and short films were not solely, and not always, for children and adolescents in their country of origin. The target demography of animation could vary, with many different factors affecting it such as the time of the production, the company in charge of production, the animators creating the content and even film censorship and world wars.

This study will also connect to my personal life as I have been a fan of (mostly) American animation since my childhood. The animation I watch, old and new, include televised cartoon shows, feature-length animated films, classic animated short films (e.g. *Looney Tunes*), and also animation in video games

(e.g. *Cuphead*) and on the internet. I've also participated in animation-related discussions in various fan communities, albeit the focus has more often been in topics surrounding aesthetics, plot elements, fan interpretations the current status of American animation industry rather than on a specific cartoon or an animated movie.

## **1.2. Choosing the Research Material**

I chose to execute my study by conducting an online survey targeting adult fans within a Reddit subsection (a subreddit) dedicated to a specific children's cartoon show. Collection of research material occurs with the permission from the subreddit's moderators, with voluntary participants either sending me their answers either via email or through Reddit's private messaging system. The survey, which consists of a questionnaire, allows for free-form, open answers, and will feature questions based on a variety of topics relevant to the research question, such as the fans' own analysis on their favorite show's structural elements, the various ways their fanness is reflected in their daily lives, and also their attitudes towards adult animation and how their age may affect their positioning as fans of a children's cartoon. An interview study would have been my primary method of choice but I abandoned it after deciding against doing a local study, as it is extremely difficult to conduct online due to time-zone differences.

The biggest challenge in the study is the vastness of the research question in relation to the small size of the sampling but I hope it will at least provide direction for further studies and a variety of perspectives for this particular question. I also hope that by allowing the participants to give open answers instead of multiple-choice selections and Likert scales, I have been able to bring an element of qualitative research to the study. This will also allow the completion of the study with a relatively small number of participants: in fact, my initial expectation was somewhere between five to fifteen participants. It is also worth noting that due to the dissimilarities between people it is impossible to find a single answer to explain my research question.



This study does not focus on any particular animation but rather the adult fans with the selected animation outlining it, which is why the questionnaire includes topics for both the cartoon of choice as well as other animation fandoms. The decision to conduct the survey over at Reddit was made due to the site's allowance of anonymity to some degree but still making it easy to pinpoint who said what (contrast this with the total anonymity of 4chan), its global reach and its popularity over traditional message boards. The ability to send private messages was also a significant factor, as Reddit may have a more "casual" appeal as a way of two-way communication over regular email.

Due to the study containing both animation terminology and fan "jargon," I have written a brief glossary to clear out some of the more commonly used terms. It can be found in the 'Appendices' section.

### **1.2.1. *The Loud House* as an Example**

The animation I've chosen as an example is Nickelodeon's *The Loud House* (2016–), created by Chris Savino (b. 1971). The cartoon focuses on the Loud family, where 11-year-old Lincoln Loud tries to manage everyday life, daily routines and wacky hijinks alongside his ten sisters (Lori, Leni, Luna, Luan, Lynn, Lucy, Lana, Lola, Lisa and Lily). In the course of an episode Lincoln often breaks the fourth wall by relaying his thoughts and commenting upon his activities, as if he was aware of his existence as a cartoon character. Genre-wise, *The Loud House* can be categorized as a "slice-of-life" comedy, meaning that it does not focus on over-arching stories or plot lines outside its basic premise. Savino is a long-term animator with a portfolio spanning several decades of various cartoon shows, such as *Rocko's Modern Life* (Nickelodeon, 1993–1996), *Dexter's Laboratory* (Hanna-Barbera & Cartoon Network, 1996–1999; 2001–2003) and *Kick Buttowski – Suburban Daredevil* (Disney, 2010–2012). *The Loud House* is also partially rooted in Savino's own life experiences, such as growing up with many siblings (Liew 2016, electronic document).



Figure 1: *The Loud family.*  
Taken from [www.theloudhouse.wikia.com](http://www.theloudhouse.wikia.com).

I ended up choosing *The Loud House* for three reasons. First, it is a relatively new series and still in production (as of November 2017). Therefore, the fandom of the show should still be eager and active with discussions and content production, since the characters are not yet completely exhausted and there are still new stories to be told. This is important to motivate the creation of fan-made content since it allows fan art and fan fiction to fill in the gaps. Second, the show's two-dimensional, caricatured art style in character design and vivacity of action separates it clearly from many an adult animation, where characters may be purposely drawn in a more realistic or crude manner and lack fluid animation due to there being more focus on dialogue. Third, the show centers around the daily lives of children, and the protagonist (Lincoln) as well as the most important ancillary characters (Lincoln's sisters) can be considered to be quite ordinary children. What I mean by this is that, for example, they lack magical powers and the show in general lacks fantastical elements, contrasting it with shows like *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic!* (which also features anthropomorphic animals) or *Adventure Time* (Cartoon Network, 2007; 2010–). Thus, we can exclude escapism rooted in fantastical elements as a major attraction of the show.

I have watched several episodes of *The Loud House* when it was brand new but have not actively followed the show. I like Savino's visual style a lot, but the series has not offered me anything that would turn me into its hardcore fan. The episodes I have seen, at least from my point of view, appeared to feature pretty standard plot lines and comedic elements, both in good and bad. There are a lot of characters, which will likely help to attract more fans ("something for everybody") but so far I have not been able to identify with any of them. Despite all of this, I do not dislike the show either. My personal opinion towards the show, therefore, is somewhat neutral which may actually benefit this study by preventing potentially subjective viewpoints from appearing in situations in which they do not belong.

### 1.2.2. Assumptions

I have made several assumptions regarding my study. These are rooted in two particular areas: emotions and aesthetics. My first assumption is that animation intended for children and adolescents can offer certain audiovisual aesthetics and some emotional connections that adult animation cannot. My second assumption is that the absence of certain thematic or narrative elements – such as cynicism and the kind of adult issues that would be unsuitable for younger audiences – is also an important factor.

Despite all of this, I will not deny that adult animation is unable to toy with aesthetics more common in children's animation, nor do I claim that children's animation is wholly devoid of dealing with adult matters. For example, Comedy Central's *South Park* (1997–) bore a strong visual resemblance of a children's cartoon created with cut-out animation especially in its early years, whereas Nickelodeon's *Hey Arnold!* (1994–2004) occasionally dealt with themes that could be considered adult<sup>1</sup>. Subjectivity also makes it tricky to draw the line: some audience members may see things differently than others, sometimes by

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<sup>1</sup> Episode 14B of season one, titled 'Pigeon Man', is about loneliness and isolation from society, centering around the eponymous character that has lost his faith in humanity and chooses instead to live on a rooftop with pigeons. The goodhearted Arnold does his best to help him out and almost convinces him to give people another chance, but fails after a group of bullies wreck his columbarium. The episode ends with the Pigeon Man jumping off the rooftop and flying away, escorted by his beloved pigeons in an almost dream-like sequence.

choice or interpretation<sup>2</sup>, and what constitutes as being ‘adult’ or ‘mature’ is also hard to define.

*The Loud House* fits within my assumptions about aesthetics and emotions in several ways. First, despite being digitally animated, the show appears to be designed to resemble traditional newspaper comic strips, such as *Peanuts* or *Garfield*. The title of the episode, its director(s) and its writer(s) are displayed within comic strip panels and speech bubbles at the beginning of each episode. The color scheme of the show appears to slightly favor muted tones, and the title cards are skirted with what appears to look like brownish newsprint, giving it a dash of vintage 1970s and early 1980s look. The aesthetic choices of the title cards as well as the overall art design of the show are deliberate, as Savino wanted to pay homage to the comics he read as a child (Liew 2016, electronic document). Second, the main cast consists of kids of various ages and heavily plays on family dynamics, so it provides a multitude of characters to follow and relate, as well as various situations for them. While the show is primarily comedic in tone, it does have its more serious moments that, assuming an emotional connection is successfully established between the viewer and the character, could be very effective, and even more so if audience members find something there to reflect with their own lives – regardless of their age.

Nostalgia is also something to be considered, as it could explain adults getting drawn into children’s entertainment. For instance, one may choose to watch cartoons since that was a childhood habit, and thus actual moment of watching a cartoon may temporarily re-establish an emotional connection (or an illusion of it) to their past. This may also be due to animation being perceived as children’s entertainment – an image that has also been reinforced by several notable people in the animation industry, such as Walt Disney and Leon Schlesinger. However, these opinions were not supported by everyone in the industry, as will be evident in the next chapter, where I will briefly observe the history of American animation and its audiences.

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<sup>2</sup> What I mean by this is the alternative reading of media texts, such as finding particular subtexts in something not necessarily intended to be read that way by the creators.

## 2. The Audiences of American Animation

In this chapter, I will be briefly going through the various phases of American animation with the focus on its audiences. I will also include statements from industry members as well as the writings of scholars and animation historians when necessary.

### 2.1. A Brief History of American Animation

#### 2.1.1. Early American Animation (1910s–1930s)

Winsor McCay, an early animator and the creator of the newspaper comic strip *Little Nemo*, showed animated short films as part of his vaudeville performances in the early 1910s. Unlike later short animations that were distributed to dedicated movie theaters, McCay would narrate or even pretend to interact with them live (Canemaker 2005, 160; 175–177). John Kenrick (2004) defines vaudeville as a form of variety theater that has been “cleaned” from its more coarse aspects, making it suitable for women and children, and thus larger audiences in general (Kenrick, electronic document). Therefore, it can be inferred that McCay’s vaudeville audience consisted of both children and adults. The popularity of McCay’s animations, especially *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914), began attracting film production companies to get involved in the nascent animation industry (Callahan 1988, 223). There was also budding interest amongst other current and future animators, including Walt Disney, who has emphasized the significance of *Gertie the Dinosaur* in the formation of his own career (Canemaker 2005, 255).

In 1928, Disney and animator Ub Iwerks created Mickey Mouse, whose success story began later in the same year with the release of *Steamboat Willie*. It was the character’s first short film that came with a synchronized audio track – a decision made by Disney – which is considered to be an important factor that led to Mickey’s swift rise in popularity (Wasko 2001, 9–10). Merchandise was quickly crafted around the breakthrough character. Mickey-themed writing pads

were already being sold in the following year, and in 1932 Disney hired Herman Kamen to lead the company's sales and marketing department, which increased the amount of Disney products even further (Heide & Gilman 1995, 37–39). Disney animations and merchandise were also marketed through The Mickey Mouse Club, a fan club that organized children's matinees in movie theaters. By 1932, The Mickey Mouse Club consisted of one million members worldwide, and Disney contributed to its growth by distributing instructions to local movie theaters about getting started with club activities. (deCordova 1994. cf. Wasko 2001, 10–11).

### **2.1.2. The “Golden Age” of American Animation (1930s–1950s)**

Brothers Max and Dave Fleischer, who were producing animated shorts for Paramount, created a new character called Betty Boop in 1930. Originally debuted as an anthropomorphic dog, Betty became the centerpiece of Fleischer animations in just a few years. (“Part One: Betty's Rise to Fame”. Fleischer Studios' web page. 13.11.2017). An article in *Film Daily* magazine, dated 1932, suggested that Betty offers movie going audiences “...something Brand New in cartoon characterizations...” and noted the character's “doll-like Face” combined with “a mature figure,” as well as Fleischer Studios' tendency to refer Betty “...as if she were Greta Garbo...” (Film Daily 1932. cf. “Part One: Betty's Rise to Fame”. Fleischer Studios' web page. 13.11.2017). To sum up the article's description, Betty Boop is a sexually attractive cartoon character, whose function is to entertain adult audiences.

Betty eventually ended up in a bad spot when the film industry moral guidelines known as the Hays Code came into effect in 1934 (Smoodin 1993, 32). The code was essentially the film industry's attempt at self-censorship in order to protect itself from scandals and accusations, which it had had to endure during the 1920s (Gomery 2005, 66–68). It was also thought that reinforcing the code would prevent the U.S. government from interfering with the operations of film production companies (Prince 2003, 21). Lengthening hemlines and shrinking necklines eventually covered up Betty's body at the insistence of Paramount Pictures. These changes did not please either the animators or the audiences.

(Maltin 1980, 102. cf. Smoodin 1993, 37. see also Cohen 2004, 20–22). By the end of the 1930s, the production of *Betty Boop* animations was halted and she was substituted with Gabby, a juvenile, asexual male character (Smoodin 1993, 37–39).

When *The Jazz Singer* (1927), produced by Warner Brothers and starring singer Al Jolson, demonstrated the synergy of musical performances and motion pictures in entertaining audiences, animation followed the example it set. Walt Disney created a series of animated short films based on musical numbers, titled *Silly Symphonies*, and its first part, *The Skeleton Dance*, premiered in 1929. The purpose of these shorts was not to be necessarily funny but rather create emotional sensations and experiment with the combinations of music, sound and animation. (Wasko 2001, 11. see also Strauss 2002, 7). Warner Brothers, which had begun producing animation with encouragement from producer Leon Schlesinger and Harman-Ising Studio, countered Disney's musical animations by creating two competing series utilizing the same principles – *Looney Tunes* in 1930 and *Merrie Melodies* in the following year (Strauss 2002, 7). Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer joined the fray with its *Happy Harmonies* series in 1934 ("Happy Harmonies Theatrical Series -MGM". Big Cartoon Database's web page. 25.11.2015).

These animated musical numbers also had a commercial significance outside movie theaters. Disney merchandise was decorated with the names and illustrations of characters popularized by *Silly Symphonies*, such as Donald Duck (Wasko 2001, 11; 112). Warner Brothers was able to use *Merrie Melodies* to market the popular music they owned and distributed, as well as songs from their musical films (Ward 2003, 227. see also Strauss 2002, 7). Both *Merrie Melodies* and *Looney Tunes* shorts were shown before Warner's feature-length films in movie theaters (Smoodin 1993, 52; 56).

By 1940s, both Warner Brothers and MGM animated short films appeared to be catering mostly towards adult audiences, whereas Disney focused more in children's and family entertainment. A notable animator from this period is Frederick "Tex" Avery, who worked for both Warner (1935–1941) and MGM (1941–1953), and crafted animated shorts that were timely satires of other

animations, pop culture and fairy tales mixed with adult humor, such as *Red Hot Riding Hood's* (1943) scenes of The Big Bad Wolf's over-the-top display of sexual lust towards the titular Red, who is re-imagined as an adult showgirl working at her grandmother's nightclub. Avery has gone on record saying that he attempted to circumvent the threat of censorship by adding in consecutively wilder gags in hope that at least one of the jokes would survive into the finished product (Cohen 2004, 37).

The Second World War also signaled the use of animated short films as wartime propaganda. Disney, Warner Brothers and MGM each produced animation featuring their most popular cartoon characters fighting the Axis. Warner Brothers and United Productions of America also created instructional shorts, such as *Private Snafu*. These were part of Frank Capra's *Screen Magazine* series, which were shown to military recruits in American bases. The series teaches proper procedures and warns about the consequences of laziness and carelessness in a humorous manner. (Smoodin 1993, 71–74) They also contain slightly more adult jokes and risqué depictions of scantily-clad women than what was allowed in regular animation. Tight security was exercised with the production and distribution of the *Snafu* series, as they were considered to be a military secret (Cohen 2004, 40).

### **2.1.3. Animation Moves to Television (1950s–1960s)**

In 1957, former MGM animators William Hanna and Joseph Barbera founded a new animation production company, Hanna-Barbera Productions, Inc. It specialized in animated TV commercials and ad hoc cartoon series for television distribution. (Barrier 1999, 561). Some of Hanna-Barbera's earliest series appear to have been targeted towards children. For example, *The Huckleberry Hound Show* (1958–61) was the first cartoon series to win an Emmy Award for Outstanding Achievement in the Field of Children's Programming ("Hanna-Barbera Sculpture Unveiled Animation Legends Honored in Hall of Fame Plaza". Television Academy's web page. 14.11.2017). Another Hanna-Barbera cartoon, *The Quickdraw McGraw Show* (1959–61), was also nominated for an Emmy in the same category ("Primetime Emmy Awards



(1960)". Internet Movie Database's web page. 25.11.2015). The biggest difference between Hanna-Barbera's television animation and the theatrical animated shorts that preceded them was that the former was cheaper and faster to produce, which also showed in its stiffness and overall more simplistic look<sup>3</sup>. This type of animation, especially in the sense of Hanna-Barbera's TV animation, is often called *limited animation*. (Barrier 1999, 561).

Warner Brothers also expressed interest in bringing their animation to television in the early 1960s. *Adventures of the Road Runner* (1962), which served as a pilot episode for *The Road Runner Show* (1966–1973), is one of Warner's most peculiar entries in television animation when observed with animation audiences in mind. The episode in question is actually a compilation from earlier, theatrical animated shorts starring popular *Looney Tunes* characters Wile E. Coyote and the Road Runner, with newly added animation segments to tie otherwise detached scenes together or even change them. As an exception to Warner's earlier theatrical shorts where fourth-wall-breaking moments sometimes include adult audience members casting silhouettes against the silver screen (and thus over the animation, appearing as opaque shapes), *Adventures of the Road Runner* instead cuts away to two little boys following the Coyote's mishaps on a television set. The audience that Warner Brothers depicted watching their show consisted of children, even if some of the reused animation was originally geared towards adults.

In 1960, the concept of *prime time animation* was created to compete with live action entertainment during the best possible viewing time when Hanna-Barbera premiered *The Flintstones* (1960–66). The show depicts what was at the time considered to be the lifestyle of a modern American family (and society) in an imaginary version of the Stone Age. *The Flintstones* was designed with adult audiences in mind right from the start, which was visible in its structural similarities with many American sitcoms of the 1950s as well as its sponsors, such as Winston-brand cigarettes (Wells 2003, 29–30). According to

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Wells (2003) views the aesthetics of limited animation in a different light, suggesting that early television animation appears aesthetically inferior "when the work is measured against the dominant aesthetic created by Disney" (17–19). This is an important aspect to note, especially as a reminder for those researching animation history for scholarly purposes to pay careful attention to how said history is framed and thus creates a value statement on what constitutes as 'good animation' and what is 'bad'.

Jason Mittell (2003), the contemporary critics reviewing the show did not question the appropriateness of animation for adults, which suggests that the stigma of cartoons being for “kids only” had not yet been established (Mittell, 45).

#### **2.1.4. Television for Children, Movies for Adults (1970s–1980s)**

Television cartoons in the 1970s and the majority of the 1980s were primarily children’s entertainment. The basis for some of these cartoons was existing cultural product or phenomenon, such as musical groups (e.g. The Jackson 5) or live action television shows (e.g. *Happy Days*). In the 1980s, the primary function of cartoon shows such as *G. I. Joe: A Real American Hero* (1983–1986) and *My Little Pony* (1986–1987) was to benefit toy sales and serve as “commercials” of sorts. On the other hand, shows like *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids* (1972–1985) aimed to use animated cartoons as educational platforms. The ethnic diversity of animated series increased in the 1970s: Hanna-Barbera’s *The Harlem Globetrotters* (1970–1972) was the first cartoon where the majority of the cast consisted of African-Americans (Hendershot, 106). While ethnic minorities were certainly not been excluded from animation before, they had usually been represented with strong racial stereotypes and as butts of jokes. For example, Japanese people featured in *Private Snafu* shorts were depicted with protruding teeth, slanted eyes and often wearing large glasses (Nel 2007, 478–479).

Movie going audiences continued to be entertained by Disney’s family-friendly animated films, but since the Hays Code had been abandoned by then, strictly adult audiences now had the opportunity to consume R-rated animation, such as Ralph Bakshi’s *Fritz the Cat* (1972), *Heavy Traffic* (1973) and *Coonskin* (1975). These movies were typified by their incontinence towards themes unsuitable for children, such as sex and racism, which ended up getting their creator in trouble with motion picture production companies and special interest groups (Beck 2005, 58–59). Bakshi’s more restrained productions, *Wizards* (1977) and *The Lord of the Rings* (1978) had more mainstream appeal due to their PG-rating. The late 1980s and the early 1990s also saw the production

and release of two feature-length motion pictures that combined animation with live action: Robert Zemeckis' *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988; rated PG) and Bakshi's *Cool World* (1992; rated PG-13). Both movies were primarily intended for adult audiences, and the latter even featured sexual intercourse between a human and a cartoon character as a critical plot element.

### 2.1.5. Creator-driven Cartoon Series (1990s–2000s)

American animation in the 1990s was characterized by two aspects: the elevated importance of cartoon creators (who were usually animators, but sometimes also producers) and network liability. While cartoons of the early 1980s are easily recognizable from animation studios and production companies, the end of the decade saw a change towards emphasizing the name of the people who created cartoons, such as Matt Groening with *The Simpsons* (Fox Network, 1988–). Similarly, network channels with dedicated programming started to see the appeal in cartoons exclusive to them.

An important initiator of this concept was Geraldine Laybourne, who served as Nickelodeon's president from 1984 to 1996. Laybourne was not fond of the toy-based programming of 1980s cartoons and instead wanted to promote creator-driven shows for children. (Banet-Weiser 2007, 185) This provided the opportunity for animators such as John Kricfalusi (*The Ren & Stimpy Show*, 1991–1995) and Craig Bartlett (*Hey Arnold!*, 1996–2004, 2017) to develop shows that they wanted to create, rather than yield complete submission to the marketing department. The toy sales were still there, but they were no longer the absolute driving force.

Nickelodeon's prime competitor, Cartoon Network, in turn produced their own launch pad for potential in-house cartoon shows in cooperation with Hanna-Barbera and Frederator. The result was a show called *What a Cartoon!* which allowed animators to create and showcase pilot episodes in hopes that the network would pick them up. (1995–2002) (Larson 2003, 69<sup>4</sup>) Several notable shows were conceived from this experiment, such as Genndy Tartakovsky's

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<sup>4</sup> Instead of *What a Cartoon!* Larson uses the series' original title, *World Premiere Toons*.

*Dexter's Laboratory* (1996–1999, 2001–2003) and Craig McCracken's *The Powerpuff Girls* (1998–2005, 2008, 2014). Kevin S. Sandler (2003) notes that Cartoon Network was also able to capture the attention of adult viewers by recontextualizing some of the older shows it was rerunning in ironic and self-referential ways (such as *Scooby-Doo*), and also structure cartoon marathons and certain days with specific themes around classic cartoons and vintage theatrical shorts, such as *Looney Tunes* (Sandler, 98–99). Adult viewers of Cartoon Network UK were also able to watch experimental video mashups combining random clips of old and new cartoons, 1970s B-movies and in-house production in the form of Xavier Perkins' and Brett Foraker's *Cult Toons* (1999–2000).

Warner Brothers, which had reopened its animation department in 1980, was also revitalizing its cartoon production with the help of film director Steven Spielberg, who served as the executive producer of *Tiny Toon Adventures* (1990–1992, 1994) and *Animaniacs* (1993–1998). Whereas Warner's anthology series from the 1960s recycled material from theatrical *Looney Tunes* and *Merrie Melodies* shorts, the new cartoons featured completely new animation. The humor of both shows toyed with contemporary pop culture phenomena but would occasionally make references further in the past – *Animaniacs* specifically was very self-aware of the legacy of Warner's theatrical shorts (Knoell 2014, 25–26).

### **2.1.6. The 2000s and Beyond: The Rise of Adult Animation**

As the concept of prime time cartoon was revitalized with the arrival of *The Simpsons* in 1988, other networks eventually followed the example set by Fox. Cartoon Network's Adult Swim programming block, FX Network, its sister network FXX and Comedy Central are some of the most notable presenters of adult animation. A considerable amount of adult animation, such as the majority of animator Seth McFarlane's productions<sup>5</sup>, tend to follow the "animated sitcom"

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<sup>5</sup> *Family Guy* (1999–2003, 2005–), *American Dad!* (2005–) and *The Cleveland Show* (2009–2013) all focus in the lives of a single American family, although *The Cleveland Show* alters the premise slightly by being about a blended family.

structure originally established by *The Flintstones* while imitating the “dysfunctional family” setting from *The Simpsons*. Other series, such as Adam Reed’s spy satire *Archer* (FX Network, 2009–2016; FXX, 2017–) are purposely striving to do something different. The smoothness of animation is not always an important factor in adult animation, as the emphasis may be more on dialogue and storytelling. However, it would be erroneous to assume that there are never stylistic decisions: for example, Seth Green and Matthew Senreich’s *Robot Chicken* (Adult Swim, 2005–) utilizes stop motion animation and action figures to stage random and often deranged sketches in a way that are evocative of children playing with toys. Scott Gairdner’s *Moonbeam City* (2015) in turn is based upon Patrick Nagel’s illustration and mixes it with retro aesthetics reminiscent of the 1980s. (Edwards 2014, electronic document).

## **2.2. The Mixed Audiences of American Animation**

When observing the history of American animation, it can be argued that children have been, are right now and will be simply one audience along others. Surprisingly enough, the perception of animation being children’s entertainment is not as new phenomenon as one might think, considering that McCay’s vaudeville performances were inclusive to both children and adults. These may have also been the earliest audiences for American animation, though it cannot be said for certainty.

As animation advanced through integration of techniques such as synchronized sound, animated characters began to have more appeal in the eyes of audience members. Both Disney and the Fleischer brothers realized that having a target audience would result in a more sustainable popularity. Wasko and Smoodin, who both acknowledge the socio-political and commercial aspects of animation industry in relation to animation audiences, offer their viewpoints regarding animator-audience relations. Disney, who wanted to control each and every part of production, contributed to the rationalization of animation industry but

simultaneously curtailed his staff from receiving credit from their labor<sup>6</sup> (Wasko 2001, 15–16. see also Smoodin 1993, 96). His animations could also be interpreted to make clear distinctions between social strata and gender (Wasko 2001, 115–119). In theory, this could narrow down potential audience participants if they choose to reject what is being offered as social norms in the motion pictures.

Besides focusing more for adults, the Fleischer brothers' *Betty Boop* series may have been targeting a more wider audience in general, at least during the pre-Hays Code era. According to Smoodin, the female heterosexuality of Betty was not connected to class issues, nor is related to the cartoon narrative (Smoodin 1993, 30). However, Holberg (1999) argues that while Betty Boop is a Jewish girl assimilated into American society, she is still labeled as an ethnic character one animated short after another (Holberg, 305–306, 311). After the progressive implementation of the Hays Code, Fleischer Studios gradually turned against their own, conscious resistance towards Disney ideology, culminating in Betty Boop being subordinated to class hierarchy and later being replaced with the child-like Gabby (Smoodin 1993, 37–38). Holberg suggests that problem arose from the Fleischers' refusal to go with the changing cultural climate, in which humor thought to be low-brow and conscious emphasis on ethnicity was seen inappropriate (Holberg, 308–309). According to this interpretation, it appears that the *Betty Boop* series lost its original audience and failed to find a new one.

If Disney and the Fleischers were able to envision who their target audiences were, Warner Brothers appeared to be vaguer about it. In his analysis of the way social hierarchies were constructed through film bills, Smoodin (1993) notes how different movie studios approached the idea of including cartoons with feature films, depending on what kind of audience they were attempting to attract. Animation, he argues, was not considered "high culture," which is why a major MGM production such as *Grand Hotel* (1932) was opened "with no supplemental films [...] with all seats reserved for the two daily performances." On the other hand, Warner Brothers (at least back in the 1930s) appeared to be aiming for a more diverse audience, specifically of people who viewed motion

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<sup>6</sup> The only credited person in Disney animations made in the 1940s is Walt Disney (Wasko 2001, 16).

pictures primarily as entertainment rather than an elitist signifier of higher social status. (46, 51–53).

The staff members of Warner Brothers' animation department have made somewhat conflicting statements regarding the primary audience of their animated short films. Due to budgetary reasons, screening the animations for test audiences was prohibited (Jones et al. 2005, 134). Warner Brothers animator Chuck Jones has said the following:

*"We didn't know what the audience wanted. And it probably still doesn't know what it wants — this business of testing and marketing is pretty silly. We made the pictures for theaters, and for ourselves."*

(Jones et al. 2005, 147)

Here we have an example of an animator positioning himself as the target audience. On the other hand, Producer Leon Schlesinger alleged that Warner's animated short films were made for children with the code taken into account:

*"We cannot forget that while the cartoon today is excellent entertainment for young and old, it is primarily the favorite motion picture fare of children. Hence, we must always keep their best interests at heart by making our product proper for their impressionable minds."*

(Look, 17.1.1939, "Hollywood Censors Its Animated Cartoons")

Unlike the MPAA film rating system that succeeded it in 1968, the Hays Code did not differentiate between adult and underaged audience members. When animation started increasingly appearing in television during the 1960s, clear distinctions began to take shape. Besides the public discourse and workers within the animation industry, a new factor began to determine animation audiences: television programming. The placement of *The Flintstones* in the prime time slot clearly defines it to be aimed towards adult audiences, even if the intended target demography shifted towards the inclusion of children as the show progressed ("Excavating Bedrock: Reminiscences of "The Flintstones". Hogan's Alley's web page. 15.11.2017).

New technologies and the interest towards animation from network channels in part rejuvenated interest in cartoon series after the more commercially-oriented 1980s. The enthusiasm from powerful figures such as Laybourne and Spielberg

provided chances for many a young animator to create cartoons with a personal spin. At the same time, we have been able to witness the steady growth of adult animation, spearheaded by *The Simpsons*, which remains still in production. *The Loud House*, despite being a product of the mid-2010s, is still very much rooted in the cartoon traditions of the 1990s and quite possibly owes a big part of its existence to Laybourne's creative retooling of Nickelodeon. After all, it is aired on the very same channel and started out in the mind of a single creator, who envisioned a cartoon show loosely based on his own childhood.



### 3. Earlier Studies

The biggest challenge I faced when choosing this particular topic for my Master's thesis was the low amount of academic studies directly relating to it. Instead, I have relied on either other animation-related studies or fan studies that do not necessarily touch on animation, but do focus on researching audiences. In the end, I had to "patch up" my theoretical framework from a variety of literature and articles.

#### 3.1. Political Economics of American Animation

While consumerism and economics are not in the focus of my thesis, it would be unwise to bypass them completely, seeing how fan cultures are often tightly wound together with consumption, as the now Disney-owned *Star Wars* franchise has shown. Another important aspect to note is that of branding, which is how modern-day network television organizes its animation selection and packages it for consumer markets.

Janet Wasko's *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy*, published in 2001, makes a grand effort to collect as many aspects of the multifaceted corporation as possible under a critical cross-section comprising an equally impressive set of analytical methods. The book is meticulously organized and relatively easy to follow, and while the end result is still very much focused on political economics, also delves into various audiences of Disney, as well as adult Disney fans and anti-fans.

According to Wasko, audience research that acknowledges Disney usually concentrates on children, consumerism and globalization, with the concept of cultural imperialism being a commonly used framework (2001, 11–12). This means acknowledging cultural products as carriers of certain values, prepackaged into them and then being globally distributed, thus allowing those values to potentially be adopted by audiences and consumers. It should be noted, though, that several global audience studies have not pointed towards a

passive adoption of American culture or values, but rather shown a variety of reactions, such as resistance and partial adoption. (ibid, 13; Phillips, 2001, 44–46)

Adult Disney fans – as well as ex-fans and non-fans – also fit into this scheme, although the reasons to why they became who they are vary. Wasko offers several explanations, but the most prominent one suggests that perhaps they are merely grown-ups who became Disney fans at a very young age and retained some sort of connection to that fanness. The continued consumption could then be a sign of pursuing the magic and enchantment experienced at a younger age, and Wasko suggests a loss of connection between the original motivation of liking Disney entertainment and the habit of consuming. (Wasko, Phillips & Meehan 2001, 223–224). Sometimes fans will grow disillusioned and will purposely begin to resist the company for various reasons. The traditional view is that of a leftist criticism, but Wasko identifies conservative antagonism as well. (ibid, 212–214, 224–225)

The examples above show the power of strong *branding*, in both good and bad. Branding is also a favored business model of network televisions showing animated shows, with each network building a particular identity and selection of programming to attract audiences and compete over them. (Sandler 2003, 90–91). For example, FOX has crafted an animation block around *The Simpsons* and various animated sitcoms, many of which were created by Seth McFarlane, in hopes of attracting a particular type of adult audience. Ironically, this is also why some animated shows, such as Everett Peck's adult cartoon *Duckman* (USA Network, 1994–1997), may end prematurely when the network decides they do not fit the desired image or brand (ibid, 93).

Branding, whether it is done by Disney or a television network, ties heavily into the concept of identity. By producing a particular image, a corporation can effectively craft and cultivate a consumer base that, as the case has been with some Disney fans, will keep coming back time after time to consume more. Still, branding does have its dangers as well. Sandler (2003) notes that networks may willingly censor content if they wish to protect their image: for example, this

was the case with Cartoon Network refusing to air classic cartoons that depicted racially insensitive imagery of certain ethnicities (104–106).

### 3.2. Adult Fandoms of American Animation

The adult following of American animation intended for children and adolescents is still a relative new area of study. The few scholarly articles that have been written about it vary in their approaches in explaining the inner workings of adult fandom. A common theme can still be found in identity, though, even if it is not always the focus of the study. Identity in this context usually means how the fans of a cultural product perceive themselves as well as how they are perceived from the outside, in connection with the object of the fandom as well as the larger social and cultural context.

The emergence of Bronies – adult male fans of Hasbro's *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic!* – is a good example of a fandom that is fruitful to study, since there are many different ways one can approach it and attempt to explain the possible reasons behind its popularity while keeping identity at the center. Venetia Laura Delano Robertson (2014), for example, approaches the phenomenon from the concept of anthropomorphism and suggests it plays a very important role in helping the show become popular (21–22, 34). What this basically means is that by employing the use anthropomorphized animals, *MLP:FIM* offers the show's fans a possibility to "seek an authentic expression of selfhood" (ibid, 34). This, in turn, allows them to reconstruct and negotiate identities of geek culture and masculinity (ibid, 22, 27), as well as explore things that are traditionally situated outside the boundaries of those afore-mentioned categories.

While Bronies themselves have a generally optimistic view on their fandom, not everyone on the outside agrees with them. Robertson (2014) notes that Bronies have received very mixed reactions in media, with the negative ones focusing on the way Bronies "subvert expectations surrounding gender, age, and the consumption of media" in ways that are considered "sick, wrong, or 'creepy'" (27). In her article about Brony anti-fandom, Bethan Jones (2015) argues that

instead of focusing on *MLP:FIM* being a 'bad text'<sup>7</sup> the anti-fandom (as well as *MLP:FIM* fans not identifying themselves as Bronies) in this instance has a problem with Bronies themselves on a gendered basis. The examples she raises tend to focus on the erotic fan works, and the part of the Brony community that create and consume them. (120–122). Whereas Robertson was interested in studying the Bronies' identity from the inside – as in, how Bronies themselves classify it – Jones looks at the phenomenon from the outside, with emphasis on the struggle on identity politics caused by the Bronies not fitting into the expected idea of masculinity.

While identity is a viable way to explain the adult attraction of an animated show (and potentially the adult unattractiveness of its fandom), it is not the only possibility. Jonah Lee Rice (2009) offers another concept alongside audience identification, which he defines as brain candy (1103). Simply put, this means that a cartoon show may be perceived in a way that the enjoyment comes from recognizable narratives and cultural elements. Rice points out that "many adults seem to watch [*SpongeBob Squarepants*] for more sensuous reasons" and that "audiences looking for brain candy at the end of a stressful day may not detect the virtuous overtones of the show" (2009, 1108–1109). Essentially, this means that adult audiences may choose to follow a cartoon show on a surface level without looking too much into any deeper meanings or hidden subtexts.

This does not necessarily mean that identity is completely inapplicable, nor incompatible with the concept of brain candy – on the contrary, a cartoon show's attractiveness can work on more than one level<sup>8</sup>. While Robertson suggested that anthropomorphism and educational content make *MLP:FIM* a meaningful show for Bronies, she also recognized the show's art style as being heavily influenced by Japanese anime and manga, which gives them meaning as "subcultural signposts" for the geek communities (2014, 29). While this aspect is connected to identity (Bronies possibly identifying themselves as

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<sup>7</sup> Jones summarizes the concept of 'bad text' to be a text that in itself is considered to be "badly written, lacking in literary merit or problematic in the sexual, racial or gender politics it expresses." Two examples mentioned within the article are E. L. James' *Fifty Shades of Gray* and Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight*, two book series that were later turned into film adaptations. (2015, 121)

<sup>8</sup> Rice explains this through a metaphor of *SpongeBob* offering both "dessert" and "meat and potatoes" (2009, 1109).

geeks, or vice versa, due to recognition of certain aesthetic elements present in *MLP:FIM*), one could also argue that this is an example of potential brain candy, alongside the show's writing style and humor, as it would appeal based on recognizable cultural elements.

Another important aspect of animation studies that needs to be noted is the concept of transcultural fandom. Sandra Annett (2011) argues that the common choices of cultural studies and political economics shouldn't be the only choices in studying animation, because they seem to offer just two binary choices for media globalization – namely "worldwide Disneyfication or grassroots fan communities" (165). Instead of that, Annett suggests that it is important to note the effects of globalization and how it is important to put more emphasis on "what can one do with animation" (2011, 165–166).

The strengths in observing animation fandoms from the transcultural perspective is that while it builds upon familiar concepts, such as exporting cultural values from one country to another and resisting uses and reinterpretations, it attempts to form a more coherent image of how fandoms operate in the contemporary world of online connectivity. Fan culture, in this sense, is transnationalistic and as such allows multiple voices of all kind to come together and collaborate (ibid, 174). This means that a fan's geographical location matters less in a restrictive sense, because the internet allows – for those that have the privilege of accessing it – to participate in a fandom on a global level. Although it may not be reflected in this particular study, Annett's article is nonetheless worthy of attention.

### **3.3. Summary of Animation Audience Studies**

The selection of scholarly literature available for studying animation is not as compact as I originally feared. Nevertheless, the amount of studies made of adult audiences of animation is still very limited and, with the notable exceptions of the more recent studies of Bronies (e.g. Jones 2015 and Robertson 2014), tends to focus more on consumerism rather than identity and meaningfulness. It is also important to note the suggestion of transcultural aspects of animation

studies, as noted by Annett (2011); after all, most animation fandoms nowadays operate online, and have fans all over the world participate in their love of a show or a movie.

Due to the limitations of animation-related audience studies, the methodological backbone to my study comes from Kaarina Nikunen's dissertation *Faniuden aika*, published in 2005. It consists of three case studies about television program fandoms in the turn-of-the-millennium Finland, with each study covering different types of fandoms and forms of fanness. While it is not focused on animation audiences, Nikunen's thesis is nonetheless a very comprehensive work in the fields of fan studies and audience reception.

## 4. Preparation and Execution of the Study

In this chapter, I will introduce the fan community where I gathered research material for my study, my initial findings through observation of the fan interaction within this place and explain the choices I made when planning out the questionnaire. I will also describe my interaction with this fan community when I was ready to begin conducting the survey.

In order to figure out suitable questions as well as get myself acquainted with the fans, I began my research with an observation phase, where I followed various discussions occurring within the fan community of my choice, which in this case was a Reddit subsection dedicated to *The Loud House*. My ultimate goal was to gather enough data to help me formulate suitable questions for my survey as well as outline them to be detailed enough, yet avoid making them overwhelmingly sprawling. I initially thought about participatory observation, but decided against it on the grounds that I was not familiar and invested enough with the show to pass off as another fan, and putting up a façade would have been dishonest.

Kaarina Nikunen (2005) notes that fans may come to view a researcher's ignorance about the object of their fan desires as a positive thing, since it allows them to be experts on the subject (114). However, I have personally witnessed situations, where a fan community has lashed out at someone who has openly admitted of not being in the know<sup>9</sup>. While I don't think these particular fans of *The Loud House* would have reacted to my ignorance about their favorite cartoon in a hostile manner, I still wanted to play it safe just to be sure.

### 4.1. /r/theloudhouse

/r/theloudhouse is a subreddit dedicated to *The Loud House*, consisting of about 900 subscribers (as of November 2017). The subreddit is open for everyone,

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<sup>9</sup> Despite her earlier statement, Nikunen does take into account this possibility as well, noting that especially in larger fan communities, new members may be "directed" rather bluntly (2005, 134).

meaning that anyone with a Reddit account is able to start a discussion or write a comment, while those without an account are restricted to just browsing its contents. Conversation topics and shared content can be freely dictated and chosen by the subscribers as long as it has something to do with the show. Pornographic content is forbidden, as is the illegal distribution of files, which include show episodes that the subreddit recommends to be viewed either on Nickelodeon or from other legal sources (and thus back up the series financially). ("The Loud House". Reddit's web page. 17.11.2017) It is often quite difficult to figure out the median age of the subscribers just from browsing the various submissions, although I happened to witness at least one discussion about the fans' ages, in which several participants admitted to be adults. (/r/theloudhouse's "How old is most of the fanbase of this show?" discussion on April 2017. 17.11.2017)

The pace of discussions within the subreddit tend to be relaxed and occasionally even quiet, but gets elevated after a new episode airs, enticing fans to gather around and comment upon it. These conversations begin almost always with answers in the vein of "What I liked/hated the most about this episode," but almost invariably focus on the structural elements of the show. An example of this can be observed in the reaction by user Weavillain to season 2 episode 11B ('Pulp Friction'), in which Lincoln and his friend Clyde have a comic they have produced for a competition confiscated by Principal Huggins. When listing his favorite moments of the episode, Weavillain notes both larger and smaller elements in plot and character development as well as tropes familiar from antecedent television series, criticizing prevalent trends in *The Loud House* fan fiction on the side (Weavillain: Re: "The Loud House Official Discussion Thread - S02E11B - Pulp Friction". /r/theloudhouse, 14.4.2017. 17.11.2017)

Other animated shows aimed for children and adolescents serve as direct comparisons to *The Loud House*. When fans are debating about Lincoln's poor treatment in season 2 episode 3B ('Brawl in the Family') and season 2 episode 8A ('No Such Luck'), one of the subscribers mentions an episode of *SpongeBob Squarepants* (Nickelodeon, 1999–) episode 'Stuck in the Winger', where SpongeBob ends up in trouble despite being innocent (Omnipotentmonkey: Re:



“Is TLH Fandom Guilty Of Being Oversensitive to Lincoln?”. /r/theloudhouse, 14.4.2017. 17.11.2017). In a similar fashion, the feel-good vibe of the holiday special kicking off season 2 (‘11 Louds a Leapin’) is compared with *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic!* (Hasbro, 2010–) and *Steven Universe* (Cartoon Network, 2013–) (/r/theloudhouse’s “You know, I never thought that The Loud House would make me cry?” discussion on March 2017. 17.11.2017). Demarcation between adult and children’s animation (as well as other forms of entertainment) also occurs, but seldom.

When it comes to shared content, such as links to articles and images outside the subreddit, fan art, fan fiction and online documents and articles about *The Loud House* dominate. Out of these, fan art is the clear winner. There are some fan-made music and animation that occasionally pops up, but it is not as common as the other categories. The subject matter of these fan creations vary a lot, but the most popular ones appear to be illustrations of the Loud children occupied with various hobbies and daily routines, pin-up-style pictures<sup>10</sup> and romantic depictions of either existing couples from the show or fan-imagined pairings (*ships*). Some of these “ships” may also include fan-created “original characters” (OCs).

Age restrictions, copyright laws, boardrooms and other confining or affecting elements do not necessarily aggrieve fans; after all, resisting these forces is sometimes even the purpose of fan-made content. This is evident in some of the shared content within the subreddit: Lincoln is sometimes “shipped” with his siblings, fan art and fan fiction include a multitude of references to and crossovers with R-rated movies and video games, and some of the fans aren’t afraid to craft stories wholly unsuitable to the show’s format and general atmosphere (such as Lincoln’s slow death as a brain cancer patient) (/r/theloudhouse’s “Some child's fanfiction where he's dead. Something's kind of disturbing about this.” discussion on April 2017. 17.11.2017). While the reception amongst other fans towards these creations vary – as does the

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<sup>10</sup> Please note that “pin-up” here does not mean erotically-charged “cheesecake” art, but rather a detailed illustration that centers on one or two characters, which are usually drawn completely instead of cropped close-ups.

interpretation of whether or not they are mature or immature<sup>11</sup> – they adulthood of some of the show’s fans is nonetheless reflected in them.

Considering the multitude of directions that a fan creations can go, then how do the fans perceive the show itself? In a conversation topic started by user Jas114, titled “Question about the show’s morals,” it can be witnessed how two fans of the show can wind up with completely different interpretations of their beloved show. In this submission, Jas114 wonders about the show’s tendency to repeat same morals time after time and ponders if there is something wrong with it. It would seem that to him, the show has previously appeared to be somewhat educational, but after repeated viewings Jas114 has come to question this definition. User Weavillain disavows the notion of *The Loud House* being purposely educational, suggesting that these kinds of elements mostly serve as a catalyst to drive the episode’s story and thus their repetition couldn’t serve as proof of an erroneous definition. A third user, JackTheZocker, takes Weavillain’s side but admits that repeating the morals is a quality-related problem. (/r/theloudhouse’s “Question about the show’s morals.” discussion on March 2017. 17.11.2017)

Observing the interchanges between Jas114 and Weavillain within this conversation as well as others it can be inferred that the former takes the show a lot more seriously than the latter, or at the very least finds it important enough on a different level. Jas114’s original interpretation of the show also reflects that of the assumed educational function of children’s animation, which was actually realized in American Saturday morning cartoons during the 1980s (Butler 1994, 283).

Despite there being reciprocal dissonance between some of the fans, the conversations within the subreddit go along composedly for the most part, and many of its subscribers allow room for differing opinions and perspectives. However, criticism aimed towards the show originated from outside the subreddit (such as in the form of an article slamming the show) may get a rather

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<sup>11</sup> “But I love the boatload of super edgy angst fics! /s” (Bamakid1727: Re: “The Loud House Official Discussion Thread - S02E11B - Pulp Friction”. /r/theloudhouse, 14.4.2017. 17.11.2017)

sullen reception, which ranges from ignoring “haters” to feeling that the attack was on a personal level.

## 4.2. Observation Results

Nikunen (2005) proposes that media publicity can define fanness by producing imaginary audiences. Fans and fan communities, in turn, proportion themselves based on this and, as a result, may strive to challenge the mainstream media’s definitions on which the primary demography of a show may be by using this publicity. (329–331) According to my observations, it seems that there is an understanding amongst the members of /r/theloudhouse that adult fans are a peripheral audience. Disputes in this context arise mostly about the intensity of being a fan (whether it is about being a fan of the show or a fan in general) before it appears symptomatic. One such form of undesirable fanness to some subscribers is erotic fan art based on the show’s characters, which is why it is restricted to a whole different subreddit, aptly titled /r/thelewdhouse (Jas114: Re: “\*\*\*Rule 2 of the Subreddit: NO NSFW!!!\*\*\*”. /r/theloudhouse, 4.3.2017. 17.11.2017).

Simply observing the activities within the subreddit will not be enough, though. The slow pace of discussions coupled with the general passiveness of the subscribers compared to communities such as those of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic!* makes it a challenge to gather enough research material in a short time period. Based on my observations, /r/theloudhouse also appears to be missing a strong sense of community, or at least it’s not being brought up very often. The most active members of the subreddit are posting there on a daily basis but their number isn’t very high. The most active discussions gather about 15 to 20 comments per topic in the time span of several days, and most of the new submissions contain shared content rather than attempts at creating conversation topics. It is also important to remember that the series is still relatively new and thus is still slowly accumulating members. There is also the issue that while Reddit can be used as a bulletin board system (BBS), it is primarily an aggregation service. From this perspective, *The Loud House* fans’ active sharing of fan creations and news articles about their favorite show

instead of creating threads based on in-depth discussions is actually a sign of them utilizing Reddit as intended.

According to Nikunen (2008), fan communities of television series tend to create a particular interpretation – a *fanon* – about the show they watch, and deem it to be the correct one (189). I did not discover any sort of predominant reading of the show by /r/theloudhouse subscribers during my observation phase. The closest to something like this was probably the emphasis on a particular perception of character development amongst some users. Even in the case of the show's episodes being stand-alone, comedy-centric stories, it is very important to the fans to follow the potential growth of their favorite characters. The narrative ranking of the characters (e.g. protagonist, deuteragonist, background character etc.) does not appear to have an effect on whether or not their development is considered to be important or not.

### **4.3. Finding the Suitable Questions**

Coming up with the questions for the survey posed me a challenge for several reasons. First, since a direct interview would've proven to be difficult due to time zone differences and yet a qualitative angle was desired, the questions needed to be both designated and open-ended. Second, in order to avoid leading participants too much and thus getting skewed answers, the questions also needed to cover enough ground that in case a participant (consciously or subconsciously) devises an answer he assumes the researcher may like to hear, there is at least one more question that allows for another answer – or can otherwise provide usable data during analysis – within the same field. Third, the questions need to avoid using too much academic language, and instead use standard language and terms more commonly used in online fan communities to ensure that potentially any English-speaking member of the subreddit is able (and willing) to participate. Fourth, the questionnaire itself should remain at a length that covers enough ground to provide usable data but is also short enough so that filling it out is not going to be too much of a chore.

I began by dividing the questionnaire into different sections, with each having its own theme, starting out with the basics and ending with topics very close to my research question but without being too on-the-nose about it. Another reason for this is to hopefully capture the interest of the participants and get them energized enough to complete the early portions of the questionnaire with enough eagerness to keep them going for the more in-depth, meta-level questions that appear towards the end. Each question starts with a letter, followed by questions and subquestions using the format x.y.z. where x is the letter determining the section, y is the ordinal number of primary questions and z is the ordinal number of subquestions relating to the specific primary question.

Section A consists of general information, allowing the participants to introduce themselves briefly, with some details about their age, gender, nationality and the country they currently live in, as well as their educational background and favorite hobbies. The information here is mostly used to help categorize the participants, although it may also reveal something interesting.

Section B jumps directly into *The Loud House*, with questions about the discovery of the show, first impressions, preferred characters, episodes and what about it is that some people like and dislike. I also decided to make separate questions for favorite characters and relatable characters, since they are not exchangeable: for example, one may perfectly like a comedic sidekick but still identify mostly with a serious protagonist and their struggles to beat the odds. The placement of this section as the second one is done for two reasons: first, it is likely going to be the most fun part of the questionnaire for these fans, and second, it is probably the easiest section to fill out. However, it should be noted that this section is not included just for fun, as it may provide very insightful data about the attraction that *The Loud House* has in the eyes of adult fans.

Section C is a passageway from questions about the show to questions about being a fan, attempting to map the fan community of /r/theloudhouse and the participants' placement within, as well as *The Loud House* fandom in general. The questions deal with in-community fan relations, creation of fan-made content, display of fanness outside the online community (such as cosplaying

and consuming merchandise) and the various aspects of *The Loud House* fandom that they consider to be great or not-so-great. Ideally, this section would reveal more details about the inner workings of the /r/theloudhouse community unreachable through simple observation.

While the actual spaces where fanness is being reproduced and negotiated are not the focus of this study, it is important to elaborate on their nature in this context. Although some online forums are essentially public spaces (and /r/theloudhouse definitely is, since it can be viewed even without an account), it can also be argued that they offer an intersection of anonymity and publicity, or even a double-layered privacy (Nikunen 2005, 97–98). This is the main reason why I have chosen to make a distinction between online and real life in the questionnaire. I would also argue that message boards and social media have mostly replaced physical hangout and meeting spaces, except for conventions. These, however, differ from regular hangout spaces by having considerably larger numbers of fans and they usually cater to multiple fandoms. Most conventions also occur only one or several times a year as opposed to daily or weekly fan gatherings. They are also areas where displaying one's fanness is encouraged to be performed as a semi-public spectacle (e.g. cosplaying, live contests and games, live fan art commissions).

Section D combines the previous two sections and expands it to contain other animation outside *The Loud House*, and similarly includes questions about favorite shows, earlier fandoms and viewing habits, such as how much animation is viewed over live action entertainment and vice versa. Since my study focuses on American animation, it retains that focus in all of the questions as well, although animation made elsewhere in the world is noted and included when pertinent. Both Sections C and D focus on fanness, but it needs to be noted that none of the questions in them make any distinction about age, because it is not important to mention yet.

The final section, E, wraps up the questionnaire and deals with attitudes towards animation, with specific focus on audiences. This is where age comes to play, as some of the questions are about the participants' views about defining animation audiences, what constitutes as 'adult' animation and even

one relatively personal question about controversial situations caused by adulthood in the context of animation fandoms. It deals with the research question a lot more directly and as such centers around finding what the participants think about their own situation as fans of something not necessarily intended for them, as well as the notion of their fanness in the context of outside attitudes and expectations towards them as well as their interest in question. The ideal scenario here is one where the participants, having gone through the previous sections, would use their earlier answers (if needed) to synthesize and elaborate their explanations in this section. An additional section, F, was also written as a back-up plan in case more material was needed, but in the end was not used.

The finished questionnaire, including the afore-mentioned unused section, can be viewed in the 'Appendices' section.

#### **4.4. Conducting the Survey**

In order to conduct the gathering of my research material in an ethical manner, I needed to contact the moderators of /r/theloudhouse and ask permission to inform the subreddit's subscribers about my study and that I was looking for volunteers to participate in it. I also made it clear that the answers returned to me would be handled with utmost confidentiality. After I was granted this, I created a topic about the subject and in it, briefly explained what the survey was about and provided links to the questionnaire, both in Adobe PDF and Rich Text Format (RTF). These formats were chosen for their relatively strong multi-platform support.

Besides the questionnaire itself, the files contained a summation of the research, albeit without the research question (as to avoid leading the potential participants), as well as a promise about confidentiality and brief instructions about the questions themselves (mainly that I was looking for answers that were more than just 'yes' or 'no'). I also mentioned that if there is a question that anyone considers to be too sensitive or uncomfortable, there would be no

liability to provide an answer. Finally, I also provided my university email address and noted that I can be reached either through that or via Reddit's PM system, and that the answers may be sent through using whichever one was preferable. I gave the participants about one month to fill out the questionnaire, and ended up extending it with additional two weeks, though without any additional results. At the same time, I was assisting potential participants when they asked me questions about the survey. To increase visibility, I also asked the moderators if they were willing to "sticky" the thread, so it would remain on top even when new topics were created by others. To my absolute delight, they agreed.

In the end, only six people participated out of the expected five to fifteen, although that was enough considering the qualitative nature of this research. Most of the participants contacted me within the first week. Their methods of returning the answers to me were quite evenly divided, with slightly over half the participants preferring email over Reddit's PM system. Each and every one of the participants had followed the instructions on adding the prefix (x.y.z.) marking the question order to their answers, thus making it easier to transcript the received data.

Both my "stickied" message to the subreddit (as it appeared after I had closed the survey) and the introductory message of the survey questionnaire can be viewed in the 'Appendices' section.



## 5. Analysis and Findings

In this chapter, I will review the answers I received from the survey I conducted in /r/theloudhouse, analyze them and report my findings. Like the original questions, the collected answers are organized according to their designated sections. The answers varied from long and detailed to short and to-the-point, and ranged from admissions of personal level to distant and neutral. Only one participant chose to refrain from answering certain questions, with no reason given, although it could simply be that he felt they had been answered earlier. When necessary, I will be identifying individual participants, ranging from Participant #1 (P1) to Participant #6 (P6). This arrangement also follows the order in which I received answers.

### 5.1. Reviewing the Answers

#### 5.1.1. Section A: Introduction

All of the six participants are men with the mean age of 21.2 years. The youngest were 18 years old at the time, while the oldest was 26. The unilateral gender representation amongst the participants may be due to the low amount of volunteers for this study, although it would also be a misconception to think that a show with a high number of female characters is automatically more popular amongst female audiences. At least two of the participants did mention having female relatives watching the show as well. The countries represented in this study are, in order of answers received, The United States of America, Brazil and Germany, with three out of the four stateside participants listing their nationalities as Costa-Rican-American, French and Venezuelan. This seems to indicate that while a slight majority of fans live in the series' country of origin, it would probably be more accurate to say that the show appeals to people from the Western world in general.

What needs to be addressed here is the level of education and schooling amongst five out of the six participants: they either have or are working towards

attaining at least an undergraduate academic degree. This does not necessarily reflect most adult fans of animation, but may rather be a sign that people with interest in academics or personal experience simply gravitate towards partaking in an academic research more than others (although even that itself is also an assumption). It is possible that had I given the fans more time or perhaps retooled the questionnaire to be written in a more habitual manner, there may have been more volunteers with more diverse educational backgrounds. The length of the questionnaire may have also been too long for some that may have otherwise agreed to volunteer.

When asked about favorite hobbies, half the participants stated watching cartoons and animation in general as a major interest, with one of them (P2) going to attend an art school in order to improve his artistic skills, all because of his love towards animation.

### **5.1.2. Section B: *The Loud House***

All the fans seemed to find out about *The Loud House* through a variety of sources. TV ads (most likely on Nickelodeon) and animation-related discourse on the internet, such as YouTube videos and various online forums, were the most common ways to discover the show. First impressions of the show varied, with roughly half the participants saying they either felt wary or were not impressed with the show at all, but kept watching it nonetheless to see if it improved. One participant even admitted feeling awkward when he realized he liked the new cartoon:

*"I liked watching it, but I knew it was directed for children so I only watched it on my phone as I walked my dog.(embarrassment, enjoyment)"*

(Participant #4)

Watching the show alone appears to be the norm, although there does not seem to be a distinct preference to do so, as many of the participants mention that they occasionally enjoy it with the company of close friends or family members, or as Participant #4 puts it, may have people "...come in and watch

parts” because they watch it in the living room. Only one participant (P6) distinctly mentions watching the show on his own.

The questions regarding favorite and popular characters as well as identifiable characters were answered as I expected, meaning that a favorite or popular character in a show does not necessarily equal relatable character. The most popular characters in the show appear to be Luna, the guitar-playing rocker (four mentions); Lincoln, the protagonist (three mentions) and Luan, the jokester (also three mentions). However, the answers for the relatable character only provided Lincoln two spots, with six other characters (Lori, Clyde, Luan, Luna, Lynn<sup>12</sup> and Lucy) each getting one vote, with several participants naming multiple characters. Relatability to a character was described with things such as Lincoln being caring despite his status as a “black sheep” (P1) and being “...a reliable problem-solver when dealing with [...] struggles” (P2), Lori for being “a grumpy but overprotective older [sibling]” (P1) and Clyde “because of his perspective as an only child” (P3).

Despite all of the participants being men, there were only two male characters that were mentioned as being relatable (Lincoln and his friend Clyde), which suggests that gender is not necessarily a divisive factor when it comes to character relatability within the context of this show. This is comparable to Nikunen’s findings about male fans of *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995–2001) identifying with a female protagonist on a level that is not necessarily tied in to romantic or sexual attraction (2005, 162). Participant #5 also said that he relates to “...many characters on an episode [sic] basis,” meaning he has no specific character he relates to the most, but rather chooses them within an episode depending on how they – and possibly the overall story – are written.

When asked what the participants considered to be “alluring and interesting in the show, and why,” the most popular features brought up were its visual style, which two of the participants (P5 and P6) compared to having a newspaper comic strip look – thus showing understanding of Savino’s intention to pay homage to the comics of his childhood. The show’s writing was also brought up

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<sup>12</sup> The show features two characters named Lynn. The one mentioned here is Lynn Jr., one of Lincoln’s ten sisters. The other Lynn (Lynn Sr.) is their father.

by many participants, claiming it to be “top-notch” and including “...things you wouldn’t typically see in a kids [sic] show” (P2), as well as having dialogue that is “...funny and well-written, with the humor striking a good balance between slapstick, witty jabs and silly jokes” (P6). In other words, both the visuals and the writing are almost equally appreciated as its strengths.

*“I think the show captures a lot of what made older, episodic cartoons so great. I enjoy how the show expands on characters that seem one-dimensional at first to display realistic character growth, and the themes and events that people can relate to and compare to their own experiences (albeit in a lovably cartoonish and exaggerated fashion, of course.)”*

(Participant #1)

What is interesting is that despite *The Loud House* being a comedy first-and-foremost, comedic writing was directly mentioned by just half of the participants (P3, P5 and P6) while writing related to character development and telling stories were emphasized, either directly or indirectly, by all but one participant (P4). Another important aspect of the show’s writing is considered to be its thematic elements, a lot of which deal with families and family dynamics, stemming from the show’s premise about following the life of a boy with ten sisters. This might also explain why, despite comedic writing being a popular reason to like some episodes (such as “Luan’s April Fools episodes,” mentioned by Participant #4), coziness and warmth are highly valued: the only episode to receive two direct mentions was the holiday-centric ‘11 Louds a Leapin’. In the words of Participant #3 (who also named the afore-mentioned episode as his favorite):

*“The show has a great feel-good atmosphere to it.”*

(Participant #3)

Cuteness and heartwarming can also work as part of what Robertson (2014) calls ‘neo-sincerity’, which she describes as a “pattern of blurring irony and sincerity” in the context of Bronies’ consumption of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic!*. She identifies image board website 4chan ([www.4chan.org](http://www.4chan.org)) as one such place where neo-sincerity is used, describing how pictures of cute kittens were posted amidst threads filled with otherwise shocking content, eventually leading to the internet meme “LOLcats.” The general idea is that people who

spend time in an environment swarming with overwhelmingly negative discourses and antisocial behavior (which also expects its participants to perpetuate it even further) are purposely mixing antithetical elements in it. (24–25) In the case of *The Loud House*, the show's most heartfelt moments could resonate with some adult viewers in a way that its more comedic elements probably couldn't, and bring happiness in the middle of everyday struggles.

Despite getting praised earlier, the biggest issues with the show were also considered to be in its writing, with bathroom humor (three mentions) getting most attention. Other writing-related problem ranged from continuity issues (three mentions, although one participant suggests it could be due to Nickelodeon airing episodes out of order) to repetition of jokes and overuse of comedic character traits and continuity issues (one mention). Outside writing, Participant #5 mentions that “the limits [sic] computerized *Toon Boom*<sup>13</sup> animation can show pretty often.” It makes sense that the aspects of the show that get criticized are basically shortcomings of the same features these fans appreciate the most, since it means they won't be getting as much character development, good writing and quality animation as they would like. Continuity is also important to some of them, although it is usually not something to be expected in an American cartoon show<sup>14</sup>.

Out of all the participants' answers regarding the highs and the lows of *The Loud House*, the sole exception to this seems to be Participant #4, who noted that he's not entirely sure why he watches the show: “I don't think the story or character development is good.” While he considers the show to have “an addictive quality,” he's not sure what it is. While he does bring up nostalgia, he immediately adds that it alone cannot fully explain his liking of the show. He also does not like to be reminded that the show is intended for children. So far, Participant #4 seems to be the only one who is noticeably bothered by his position outside the perceived target audience (children), although he likes the show enough to not let this potential pressure stop him from watching it.

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<sup>13</sup> *Toon Boom* is an animation software product line created by Toon Boom Animation Inc.

<sup>14</sup> In a *Vox* interview about his cartoon show *Gravity Falls*, published on August 1, 2014, animator Alex Hirsch states that while cartoons can have overarching story lines and continuity, serialized cartoon shows are not common due to the small budgets and limited time allocated by the networks and production companies (VanDerWerff 2014, electronic document).

Participant #4's conflicting attitude towards the show and his own fanness aligns with Nikunen's suggestion that a fan identity is not necessarily a total, single identity dominating the subject but rather one of many, even contradictory identities (2005, 38).

### 5.1.3. Section C: Being a Fan of *The Loud House*

The participants seem to represent many different levels and aspects of fanness rather equally: a third of them (P3 and P5) are casual fans, another third are enthusiasts (P4 and P6), and the remaining fall somewhere between (P1 and P2). Two of the fans (P1 and P6) could also be categorized as producers of fan works, since they both write fan fiction.

The appropriateness of these titles needs to be questioned, though, at least in the sense they are generally understood in fan studies. Outside the "producer" title (which was something I gave them during the transcription phase based on their answers), the fans themselves suggested these categories when asked directly about them. Further questions and the answers provided to them indicate that these titles do not accurately reflect their overall activity and behavior. For example, many of them do not actually showcase their fanness in the public sphere outside the internet, nor do they all interact within /r/theloudhouse. When asked about how active he is within *The Loud House* fan communities, one of the enthusiasts (P4) even goes to say that he is "kind of embarrassed to be [a fan]" and is "not at all" active. Therefore, this person's way of seeing himself as an enthusiast appears to point towards an inner passion towards the show rather than the expected, extroverted interaction with other enthusiasts.

Most of the participants do not seem to be very invested in fan theories or fanons. About the only things I found in the answers that can be considered to belong in the realm of fanon were the occasional mentions about character pairings, ships. One of such that seemed to appear several times in one participant's answers was that of Lincoln and his female friend, Ronnie Anne Santiago. A quick peek into the fan-made *The Loud House* wiki (The Loud

House Encyclopedia) indicates that the two characters had a brief romance in one episode (S1E15B, "Save the Date"), which turned into a regular friendship in following episodes ("Ronnie Anne Santiago". The Loud House Encyclopedia's web page. 18.11.2017). While the official status of the pairing was (at least for the time being) dissolved via retconning, it does not seem to lessen the participant's preference of it. In fact, it can be even argued that *because* that pairing was official for at least a while, it now has more validation than other fan pairings.

Overall, many of the participants are not that heavily invested with the fandom itself, outside some of them partaking in discussions within the subreddit. Active involvement with other fans appears to be limited, and some participants even mentioned that they "don't know any fans very well" or that they "[do not] have any friends among the fandom." Two of the participants even consider themselves to be lurkers, and the most popular activity that is mentioned is browsing for fan art, which is a more passive activity (since interaction with others is not needed). Thus, being a fan of *The Loud House* for these fans primarily means watching and enjoying the show. This was further reaffirmed in section c.7. where each and every participant responded, more or less directly, that liking the show is the most important thing about being a *The Loud House* fan. Participant #2 elaborates that it is also important to be critical of the show, and that a true fan is not above pointing out flaws in the thing he loves. None of the participants mention the fan community or being a part of it.

These findings are interesting when considering the notion of *activity* as a signifier of one's fanness. There appear to be a variety of interpretations among scholars on what constitutes as such activity: one example would be that of collecting material relating to the fan's target of interest, such as photographs, trivia and merchandise (Nikunen 2005, 50. see also Jenkins 1988, 85–107). Henry Jenkins (2003) suggests that as new media technologies have arrived, allowing their users to manipulate and alter media content, it sustains a participatory culture in which fans produce tributes and reinterpretations of cultural products they enjoy, which may also include political statements as well as the rejection of a corporation's understanding of an intellectual property (Jenkins 2003, electronic document). However, Nikunen (2005) argues that

what is categorized as a sign of this activity can be very multifaceted, whether or not it occurs in public or private (51). This is also backed up by Fiske's (1987) expansion of the definition, where, for instance, watching television can be understood as activity on itself on a semiotic level when what is being viewed is evaluated, refused and negotiated (1987. cf. Nikunen 2005, 50).

Judging from the answers I received, all the participants are, at the very least, actively producing their fanness in this particular manner even if they mostly appear to disregard interaction amongst each other or do not create fan works. Most importantly, however, they all consider themselves to be fans of the show. As Nikunen points out, embracing a fan identity is the prerequisite for being a fan despite the varying significance in its private or public indication, and it is quite important if the fan has positioned themselves as such despite any negative stereotypes (2005, 52). While not active in a sense of what Jenkins' specification of participatory culture entails, the fans at /r/theloudhouse do show appreciation towards its manifestations that are brought in there from outside source, such as the online art portal DeviantArt ([www.deviantart.com](http://www.deviantart.com)) which also contains fan-made illustrations.

When compared with other animated shows, *The Loud House* seems to poll relatively well with the participants: half of them feel more invested in it than with any other show, such as the Cartoon Network show *OK K.O.! Let's Be Heroes* (2017–). It needs to be noted that the other shows listed<sup>15</sup> by the participants are all children's cartoons. Participant #6 brings up the family aspect of the show as a factor that "somehow speaks more to [him] than in than most other shows [he has] watched," although he did not specify it any further.

Only one of the participants sees no difference between being a fan of something on the internet and in real life, whereas others explain that they mostly consider themselves to be online fans, rarely bringing up the show outside the subreddit or other online discussion forums. This is also reflected in my question about cosplay, to which only one person said he has cosplayed as

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<sup>15</sup> Besides *OK K.O.!* other shows mentioned were *Ed, Edd 'n' Eddy* (Cartoon Network, 1999–2009) and *The Grim Adventures of Billy & Mandy* (Cartoon Network; as part of *Grim & Evil*, 2001–2003, and as its own series 2003–2007).



Lincoln, while another one said he was considering it – the rest of the participants either had a resounding ‘no’ as an answer, or no answer at all. Consuming show merchandise is also uncommon: only two participants have purchased official show-related items (one owns a DVD set of the first season, the other owns a comic book). Participant #2 also relayed a story of getting bootleg t-shirts, and was the only one to sufficiently explain why he doesn’t own official show merchandise, suggesting that “...Nickelodeon hasn’t released any mainstream merch for the show yet.”

Judging from the response above, it appears that while there are some fans who are potential consumers, they have not found suitable merchandise. A quick search on Amazon ([www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)) reveals that officially licensed *The Loud House* products are mostly limited to comics, story books, DVD box sets and digital video-on-demand. In turn, there appears to be no shortage of bootleg apparel, backpacks, wall posters, pillow cases and even birthday cake frosting sheets. The quality of these items is questionable to say the least, and a large amount of them feature fan art instead of official illustrations, perhaps out of carelessness (or to avoid law suits from Nickelodeon).



Figure 2: A bootleg *The Loud House* throw pillow case (30 × 20”), showcasing the usage of fan art (with no credit given to the artist).  
Taken from [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).

When asked about what elements of the fandom the participants do not care about, only one participant said “I like everything I’ve seen from the fandom.” The most prevalently disliked phenomenon was the incestuous sexualization of the characters, also known as “loudcest,” which was mentioned by three participants (although one of them alluded to it indirectly by mentioning how he’s “never been fond of some aspects of shipping, primarily when characters are shipped with others in ways that make no sense, and are often just done disturbingly oversexualized ways”). While no specific mention was made of which characters are featured in these types of fan creations, it is safe to assume that most of them involve members of the Loud family due to them being the focus of the show and also because of the term “loudcest” being an amalgamation of ‘Loud’ and ‘incest’.

*”LOUDCEST. Jesus golly gosh, Loudcest may be the worst things about this fanbase [...] Incest in general is appalling [sic] to me, so seeing people not only willingly going along with this, but actively encouraging this is just... well... it’s not the best thing in the world, now is it?”*

(Participant #2)

The concept of erotic fan art (and erotic fan fiction) can be a touchy subject to many fans, sometimes even more so than to those who are on the outside of a fandom, looking in. When writing about Brony anti-fandoms, Jones (2015) notes that the focus tends to be on the erotic fan works of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic!* and the part of the Brony community that create and consume them. The anti-fans defend their views by claiming that this behavior poses an issue due to the show’s primary demography consisting of children, some going as far as claiming Bronies to be pedophiles. Many Bronies have noted that while not all of them subscribe to eroticizing the show’s characters, those who do will get enough attention that “it becomes read as representative of all adult, male *MLP* fans.” (121–122)

Much like Bronies, many of *The Loud House* fans who participated in the survey made it absolutely clear to me that they were not part of and did not accept this “seedier” part of the fandom, with Participant #2 being particularly vexed by it. After all, as Jones suggests, “negative fan stereotypes” and “devaluation of othered texts and its audiences” can be utilized within fandoms to stifle certain

kind of behavior (ibid, 122–123). While I have not come across any distinctive terms to refer to fans of “loudcest,” the term itself is already loaded with instantly recognizable meanings that value it accordingly.

Erotic fan works form one of the most critical junctures in the crosscurrents of adult fandoms and children’s entertainment, since they so inherently encapsulate some of the particular expectations of what constitutes as ‘adult’ when brought within the conceptual area of “child-friendly” or “child-safe.” As noted in chapter 2, American animation has not always been considered to be exclusively children’s entertainment, although the arrival of television began to reinforce that stigma, especially on televised cartoons. In the case of anti-Bronies vs. Bronies, there were even accusations of pedophilia, which may have stemmed not from the erotic fan works themselves, but rather from the association of there being something sexualized in the same context as children. Alternatively, there may be fear that potential predators may attempt to lure children to themselves through these creations. One distinctive difference that Jones (2015) notes between the anti-fandoms of Bronies and those who are opposed of preteen *Twilight* fan girls is that the perceived sexual pathologies of the latter are considered to change as the girls reach adulthood; with Bronies, no change will occur as they already are sexually mature. This, she argues, plays into the more severe accusations that Bronies receive than compared to these young, female *Twilight* fans. (123)

While part of the opposition towards “loudcest” in the participants’ answers may have been a genuine distaste towards its supporters, I do not consider it to be on the same level than Brony hate within and outside the *MLP:FIM* fandom. In case of the ponies, the perceived problem stems from, as Jones pointed out, the series being aimed for young girls and thus considered unsuitable for men (2015, 120). This is not the case with *The Loud House*, which does not appear to have a target demography as strongly gendered as *MLP:FIM*. Because of this, the negative attitude towards “loudcest” fans appears to lack the gendered angle that the Brony hate has. Besides, while there is genuine distaste and concern within those statements, it appears to be far more focused on the end product (erotic incest-themed fan works) than its producers and consumers. Additionally, I also believe that some of the participants may have felt that it was

imperative to convince a researcher that incest erotica featuring the Louds was not an all-encompassing element of their fandom.

#### 5.1.4. Section D: Other Animation

This section delivered quite possibly the most detailed answers from the entire questionnaire, which goes to show that animation is quite important to these fans (even though the first section's answers regarding fan interests made me suspect it wasn't nearly that prevalent). All the participants are active followers of animated TV series, and three of them (P1, P2 and P6) mention being animation fans ever since they were young, having never stopped watching cartoons. The most popular show – listed by all the participants – appears to be Cartoon Network's *Steven Universe*, which began in 2013 and is still in production, and leans much more heavily towards season-spanning story arcs and world building. There are also mentions of other shows from the current era, and before: those participants who have been actively watching cartoons mention shows all the way from 1980s and 1990s, such as *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* (Filmation, 1983–1985) and *Gummi Bears* (Disney, 1985–1991). When listing their favorite cartoons and animations, there seems to be no separation being made between children's cartoons and adult animation, although most of the mentions go to the former (then again, a separation of that kind was not included in the question, either).

Most of the animation being watched amongst the participants consists of American and Canadian shows, but at least one person (P5) also watches European animation and another one (P2) mentions a couple of live action shows (*Timeless* and *Seinfeld*) on an equal footing. Anime gets a mention from two participants (P1 and P6), but overall, the country or culture of origin does not matter to these fans. Only two of them emphasize The United States (P3 and P5) and Canada (P5) as the countries that produce most of the animation they view.

*"While I notice cultural differences between animation shows from different countries, I usually don't care where they are made, just as long as they are of good quality and/or appeal to my tastes."*

(Participant #6)

The amount of animation being watched over live action content tends to be quite a lot, usually 60–70% of both film and television. Only one participant (P3) mentions that it is a "a pretty balanced amount of both," while another one (P5) states that he watches "animated television almost exclusively in comparison to live action." In the light of afore-mentioned statistics, it comes as no surprise that animation fandoms are a very familiar concept for these people. Four out of six participants have belonged (or still belong) to one or many animation fandoms before their discovery of *The Loud House*. This falls in line with Nikunen's (2005) statement about fanness following one another (125). When taking the median age of the participants into consideration, as well as the fact that half of them mentioned having watched cartoons and other animation since their childhoods, it seems, at this point, that many adult fans of children's animation becomes ones simply by sticking to their accustomed viewing habits.

As with this particular fan community, involvement in these earlier and other fandoms seems to be mostly passive. When asked to compare *The Loud House* fandom with other fan communities, several differences were mentioned, such as the larger size of many of the other communities, the difference in discussions (with more plot-heavy shows having more in-depth discussions about future plot developments and solving mysteries) and there being more adult fans. Thus, according to these people, *The Loud House* fans are generally younger and the discussions within the community tend to be "lighter" due to the show not emphasizing a series-spanning plot development. Perhaps the self-contained nature of the episodes may sometimes discourage rather than encourage fans to create their own fanons?

When asked if there have been any other shows that have attracted them on the same level as *The Loud House*, four out of the six participants responded positively. Again, the most oft-mentioned example is *Steven Universe*, but it certainly isn't the only one nor is it the oldest. One adult show also got a mention (*The Simpsons*) as well as one web series (*RWBY*; Rooster Teeth,

2013–). The remaining two participants, who considered *The Loud House* as was the first show to impact them in a big way, suggested several reasons that elevates it over others: Participant #3 stated that other animated shows lack the kind of atmosphere that *The Loud House* has (which he described as “feel-good” in Section B), while Participant #4 compared its casting to that of the video game *Overwatch* (2016), suggesting that the show has so many main characters you’re bound to find someone relatable amongst them.

The biggest issues the participants have with American animation are the overuse of certain tropes, clichés and stereotypes<sup>16</sup>. Considering their long-term fanness of all things animation, they are more than capable of picking it apart, if needed. Specific annoyances that were mentioned are “emphasis on potty humor” (P1) and “high school stereotypes when they are taken too seriously” (P6). All of these issues can be traced to writing, although stereotyping and clichés can also occur in art design, such as with certain expectations on how some character types might look<sup>17</sup>. Corporate politics also get mentioned. Participant #2 does not mince words about how “corporations in the late 20th century” have, in his opinion, produced a generally dismissive view that people have towards animation as an art form. Participant #5 also appears to have similar views, although his issues are more rooted in the development and production of animation rather than the public view.

*”Limitations on being able to produce cartoons with sexual themes over violence, the misconstrued stereotypes of cartoons being exclusively for kids. Outsourcing hand drawn animation to Korea or other countries. Non-comedy animation being hard to find outside of short films and non-mainstream movies like Persopolis [sic].”*

(Participant #5)

Nevertheless, it could be argued that this hypothetical view may, in turn, discourage companies hoping to maximize profits to go in certain directions due to lack of interest or valuation. After all, it may be safer to repeat what has

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<sup>16</sup> Much of these answers mirrored the participants’ criticism towards what they perceived as the weaker elements of *The Loud House*.

<sup>17</sup> For example, a clichéd high school male jock (who doubles as a bully character) might have a buzz cut hairdo, wear a varsity jacket and generally appear to be bulky and tall, with a limited personality/character that’s centered around football, teasing nerds and chasing after cheerleaders.

proven to work (and considering the sheer amount of reboots and remakes of feature films and television series Hollywood produces, it seems to be working).

Participant #5 also went to criticize a practice he calls “the mono-block format,” which he described as a programming tactic used by Cartoon Network and Nickelodeon, consisting of hours of re-runs of just one or two shows, usually those that are popular on the channel. This is in some ways comparable to what Sandler (2003) has said about network branding, except radically simplified (90–91).

### **5.1.5. Section E: Attitudes towards Animation (Audiences)**

Defining what constitutes as animation appears to be very challenging. Raz Greenberg (2011) notes that the classification of animation as a genre “...is a common misconception” and that “animation spreads across a wide variety of contents and styles.” Cartoon, however, *is* a genre, and Greenberg suspects that this may be contributing to the confusion. (3–4) The first question in this section is about defining animation, and I may have unintentionally made it possibly even more difficult by requesting a more abstract meaning (its function and purpose – *why* is it made?) without focusing on animation techniques. The general idea was to inquire how the participants, as fans of an animated series, would perceive the style chosen for their beloved show.

The utilization of animation was another concept that I thought posed an interesting question not only because of the stigma about animation being children’s entertainment but also because animators themselves are not always in agreement about it. For example, John Kricfalusi, the creator of *The Ren & Stimpy Show* (Nickelodeon, 1991–1995), has argued in his blog that the cartoon genre is best used to provide laughs, and demonstrated this with short comic featuring cartoon character George Liquor using a chainsaw outside its primary function of cutting down trees, showcasing the resulting silliness as an analogy (Kricfalusi 2009). It needs to be stressed that Kricfalusi is *only* referring to cartoons, and not to animation as a whole, but it is still a valid example because of shows like *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (Nickelodeon, 2005–2008) and *Gravity*

*Falls* that while also providing laughs, feature season-spanning story arcs, mystery and drama.

*"Computer generated imagery, hand drawn [sic] frames, stop motion, and even live action movies with CGI enhancements are what I consider animation. The general purpose is to fill in gaps of theatricality that normal live action filming cannot accomplish, or to demonstrate figments of imagination."*

(Participant #5)

In the end, many of the participants still defined animation through technical production (e.g. moving pictures, CGI, hand-drawn animation, stop motion and the mixture of various techniques). Another popular way of definition is the qualities of animation as an art form, which some of the participants mentioned as "...[demonstrating] figments of imagination," "...[capturing] scenes, characters and actions that would not fit in real life" and "...[being] and effective way of expressing creativity." As for the question about the purpose of animation, the answers offered here ranged from basically 'anything goes' to 'strictly entertainment', with participants taking a standpoint that is somewhere between or even accepting everything from the entire scale, even if this is not necessarily reflected in the commercial offerings. While these answers show that defining animation and its purpose is tricky and very subjective, it is obvious that all the participants have clearly put a lot of thought into thinking about this as they truly care about the style. Kricfalusi's sentiments are perhaps partially reflected in the answers that deem entertainment to be the purpose for animation, but as is the case with animators themselves, the audience too lacks a unanimous stance. Also, as a small bonus, none of the participants erroneously described animation as a genre.

When asked about animation audiences, the participants almost unanimously considered them to be anyone, although Participant #6 did mention that "most animation is still aimed towards children, teenagers and young adults." Participant #2 offers a more detailed answer, claiming that "these days I consider animation fans to be people of all ages [...] ever since the 1990s, which many people consider to be the decade when animation started coming into its own for the first time since the '40s and '50s..." However, the attitude



towards animation amongst the majority of people<sup>18</sup> is a point of contest. Half the participants feel that nowadays, the stigma of cartoons as children's entertainment either no longer exists or is becoming passé, whereas the rest feel that it's still very much alive and kicking. Participants #4 and #5 are relatively pessimistic about it, with the former simply summing up his answer as "condescending" and the latter explaining that the attitude is comparable to that towards *otakus* (Japanese anime enthusiasts) and "weeaboos" (Western world anime enthusiasts).

*"I feel like animation can potentially appeal to every audience. Nowadays especially there's probably at least one animation for anyone."*

(Participant #3)

In short, while agreeing upon the idea that there are (and there shouldn't be) no limitations to who animation's audiences can be, half of the participants still recognize that the general consensus of animation being children's entertainment remains a dominant opinion. Only Participant #1 has a neutral stance, thinking that the majority have an indifferent feeling about the subject matter. The participants who think animation is now considered to be for everyone (P2 and P3) do mention that they think this is still a relatively recent change.

Regarding whether or not one's age matters when viewing animation, the participants were once again relatively unanimous when it came to their personal experiences. For most of them, it doesn't matter at least on a negative level, and when it does, it instead adds to their experience. Participant #3 mentions that being an adult means he's able to enjoy adult animation now as well, while Participants #1 and #6 both emphasize that it now means they can be more appreciative (P1) or critical (P6) about what they watch. The only one who is negative about this is Participant #4, who says "it should [matter], but it doesn't," which can be understood as him knowing he should not be watching children's entertainment. However, he does not seem to care about it enough to

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<sup>18</sup> As defined in the questionnaire, "majority" in this context means the participant's perception of people outside animation fandom(s) in their general geographical location as well as those that they come across online, such as on news portals, blogs, etc.

cease watching shows like *The Loud House*, or perhaps he simply cares more about the shows themselves.

The fans are almost in full agreement that *The Loud House* probably has more underage fans than adult fans, although Participant #2 suggests it's "fairly evenly split." What this means is that these people truly are a minority even when compared with other adult fans of children's cartoons, and it also reflects their earlier assumption that this fandom appears to have less adult fans than usual. While all the participants have expressed their love towards the show, the admissions about *The Loud House's* adult fandom being small and the passiveness of the fans imply that in general, the adults who follow the show lean more towards casualness and regular viewership than fanness – a characterization even acknowledged by some of the participants as well (see chapter 5.1.3. for more).

During her research on Finnish fans of Fox Network's comedy-drama series *Ally McBeal* (1997–2002), Kaarina Nikunen noted the difficulties she had reaching the show's fans at first, and observed a noticeable difference in their self-positioning as fans compared to another show's fan base she had studied (*Xena: Warrior Princess*). In the end, she came to the conclusion that these fans appeared to be realizing their fanness as *trend fanness*, which she described as being tied to "topicality, consumerism and publicity." The fanaticism aspect of being a fan was knowingly avoided by these people, and importance was put on dedicating time to watch and enjoy their favorite show. Also notable was the apparent lack of organization amongst these fans. (202–204). While *The Loud House* may not have as much media visibility as *Ally McBeal* did when it was still in production (which connects to the publicity aspect of trend fanness), the notion of topicality is apparent, as new episodes are being aired. The survey answers revealed a mutual admiration towards animation, and a long continuum of going from one fandom to another. If these findings are to be extrapolated to concern adult fans of *The Loud House* in general, it may be indicative that their fanness, then, is at least partially trend fanness.

The participants had a lot to say about question e.6., which deals with controversial situations caused by their adulthood and status as animation fans. While two participants (P2 and P5) mentioned having never encountered any problems, many of the others felt that was not the case. Participant #1 says he's been asked why he does not follow adult animation, to which he has countered that "being more 'mature' doesn't necessarily mean it is of higher quality." Participants #3 and #6 both explained that adult-oriented fan creations<sup>19</sup> sometimes irritate them.

Defending one's fanness is not a new concept, but almost a common element in being a fan. Nikunen (2005) indicates that in order to position oneself as a fan also means to accept it despite "all the negative stereotypes," although she adds that "fan identity may still force to contemplate cultural hierarchies and overcome certain prejudices." (52) Fans seeking out other fans and forming groups provide them shelter from contempt (Jenkins 1992. cf. Nikunen 2005, 51). The participants' answers imply that many of them have had to go through this process, and while they've generally succeeded, at least one of them is still affected by it:

*"My friends and family don't seem to care, but I still do."*

(Participant #4)

Over half of the participants do not appear to care about adult animation, which they consider to be repetitive in a sense that many of them attempt to be "mature" by simply doing things restricted in kids' shows, such as swearing, shock humor and jokes about sex and violence – which some of them mentioned are not necessarily a guarantee of maturity. Two participants (P2 and P3) suggest adult animation should attempt to do more, while one (P6) believes the problem is that they're doing just that, except they do it "often too hard."<sup>20</sup> In the case of these participants, adult animation often fails to capture their interest, although they don't completely reject them either. Ironically

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<sup>19</sup> No examples were given, but it can be assumed that they are referring to fan-made content intended for adults only, such as erotic fan fiction and fan art, and possibly "loudcest."

<sup>20</sup> It can be assumed that Participants #2 and #3 view "breaking the mold" as doing something adult animation usually doesn't do, while Participant #6 views it as exactly that, and that "breaking away" means "doing things you can't do in a kids' show," and the problem arises from superficial overuse of content unsuitable for children.

enough, the things that separates adult animation from children's cartoons is a turn-off for these fans, although in some cases the problem lies mostly in the execution, which gets a lot of criticism in the vein of "just because it's for adults doesn't mean it's mature."

*"To me, adult-oriented North American animation should be more than just 22 minutes of shock humor with some "social commentary." Adult cartoons should dare to break the mold of traditional animation and explore deep ideas and complex nuances, just like other "adult" pieces of entertainment in other mediums. Or, it can just make me laugh."*

(Participant #2)

Curiously enough, there are no distinct mentions made about the visual aspects of adult animation as something that annoys the participants, and most of the problems they have are related to thematic elements in the writing. Some of the participants would actually like to watch adult animation that deals with adult topics, but demand a better (and more mature) representation of these things.

*"Most of them try (often too hard) to break conventions and rely a lot on sexual or violence jokes. Adult cartoons that do not try to use mostly vulgare [sic] comedy are rather rare. On the other hand, I think adults can find a lot of enjoyment in cartoons for kids, too. So, in my eyes adult cartoons are mostly cartoons with elements that are inappropriate [sic] for minors, while children cartoons are more for everyone (with the exception of those aimed at very young audiences)."*

(Participant #6)

In the final question, which allowed each participant to elaborate any of the earlier topics or something else relevant to them, Participant #1 suggested that "...the idea of adults being fans of animated shows is that there is nothing wrong with it."

## **5.2. Conclusion**

### **5.2.1. Comparison of Assumptions and Findings**

In chapter 1.2.2., I offered several assumptions that I had regarding the study. These were, in order, offering certain audiovisual aesthetics and emotional

connections which adult animation cannot, lacking certain thematic or narrative elements, such as adult issues unsuitable for younger audiences and cynicism. I also mentioned nostalgia as another possible factor, connecting to a multitude of cartoons having focus on children and childhood, as well as teenagers and teenhood.

While the visual aspects of *The Loud House* received much praise and many of the participants understood Savino's aesthetic choices, I did not find any contrast or comparisons made with the visual elements of adult animation. I thought about creating additional questions that would've asked the participants to tell me about what they liked about adult animations in the same manner as question b.7., which asks these things about *The Loud House*. However, I decided against it on the grounds that it would've been too leading, which is why I did not include it even in the possible continuation survey (see Appendix A, Section F). The nostalgia factor was another assumption that appeared to be absent from the findings. With the exception of Participant #4 suspecting it as a factor in his liking of the show (and then partially dismissing it by suggesting that it cannot explain everything), nobody else really brought it up. While not a focus in this study, the aural dimensions of *The Loud House* – or animation in general – remained unmentioned despite being offered as an example about specific show elements, with the exception of Participant #2 “nitpicking” (as he himself put it) about the way Lincoln's voice suddenly changing.

However, what the assumption regarding emotional connections turned out to be spot on. With the exception of Participant #5, each participant was able to find one or more relatable character. The show's overarching themes, mainly those of focusing on family life, sibling relations and the concepts of families pulling together through hardships resonate heavily. The relatability is, then, also connected to them, as a character like Lori Loud can have appeal through being “grumpy and overprotective” older sibling, but even more so than usual when her character is placed in servitude of a story or plot element. Still, as was in the case of visual aesthetics, no mention was given to adult animation being devoid of these elements.

The participants' views about adult animation were discordant at best. All of them had given it a chance, many times, and some even watched adult animation, but the preference was clearly in favor of animation geared towards children and adolescents. The biggest issue appears to be what the creators, producers, distributors and marketers of adult animation consider to be the selling points, mainly the notion of "this thing makes this adult and mature."

*"I'm rather dismissive as its humor tends to not appeal to me despite giving it chances. Swear words and the appearance of blood and alcohol/drugs."*  
(Participant #5)

The lack of "wrong" adult elements in children's animation, such as *The Loud House*, is considered by some of the participants to be a positive thing. Since it was not clearly stated or mentioned by a vast majority of the participants to fully confirm my assumption about the lack of adult issues and cynicism in children's animation as an appealing element, it does seem to ring true for at least some of the adult fans. The appraisal of *The Loud House's* atmosphere and moments of heartwarm, as well as the condemnation of "loudcest" and erotic fan works in general could be interpreted to be manifestations of this, although I cannot say for certain.

### **5.2.2. A Variety of Fans**

The lack of intensity when it comes to expressing fanness through various fan-related activities –interaction with other fans, consumption of merchandise, production of fan-made content and public display of fan status – came off as a bit of a surprise. While /r/theloudhouse does have its share of active users and posters, there does not appear to be a strong sense of community unless an outside attack was made either towards the show or them as fans of the show. The reasons for this cannot be completely disclosed, although the fans themselves suggested that because of *The Loud House* being a comedic show without a strong continuity, it does not attract the same level of fan intensity as its story-driven competitors such as *Steven Universe*. Nevertheless, I would definitely consider all of the participants to be fans and not casual viewers of the

show, mostly because they *are* subscribers to a fan forum and also because they consider themselves to be fans<sup>21</sup>. They are also very familiar with various fan conventions, having belonged to other fandoms before.

However, for adult fans of *The Loud House* in general, I am leaning more towards their fanness being at least partially trend fanness, with emphasis on the topicality of the show. What this means is that the general attraction of the show, or at least what served as an incentive to capture these fans' attentions back in 2016, was that it was *new* and it was *a cartoon*. If the assumption is made that adult fans, like the participants, generally prefer animation over live action (and possibly have long-term investment into the style), then the interest towards animation is the primary motivator – the show itself may not matter as much in the sense that it could basically be about anything, as long as it is subjectively good enough to hook the viewer.

Nikunen (2005) mentions a repeating phenomenon of fans either being described as, or identifying themselves (often in an ironic manner) as being 'crazy' or 'mad'. In some cases, it can even be used to resist negative mainstream renditions of fanness. (87, 96, 124–125) Interestingly enough, I could only find one clear example of this in Section E, question e.6., when Participant #5 explains that "I've generally accepted that I'm a bit weird and mostly watch things by myself." In this context, the participant positions himself against the "expected norm" and makes a quip about his age being well above the average of *The Loud House's* target demography. However, questionable opinions and behavior akin to mental instabilities are occasionally alluded to when touching on negatively-viewed aspects of *The Loud House* fandom, such as "loudcest." In instances like these, there is rarely much irony used as some of the fans appear to be genuinely bothered. The distancing of one's fanness from the fanaticism of the "typical" fan depiction is also an element of trend fanness, which portrays being a fan as something that's everyday, mundane and public (Nikunen 2005, 203).

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<sup>21</sup> As Nikunen (2005) argues, the definition of whether or not someone is a fan or a viewer is ultimately a decision they themselves make (204).

### 5.2.3. Splintered Communities

While most of my research material came from the survey answers, I feel that I should also make some concluding remarks about the earlier observation phase as well. As I noted in chapter 4, /r/theloudhouse appears to not be very active outside its subscribers occasionally commenting on latest episodes and sharing fan art. I also mentioned that this behavior is actually closer to Reddit's function as a social news aggregation website.

While the survey answers indicate that the adult fandom of *The Loud House* is relatively small, the sheer amount of fan art I saw being shared during the observation phase may hint towards a spatially splintered fandom, with either individuals or small "cells" operating from various websites and portals, geared towards particular activities, such as distributing and archiving fan art and fan fiction, or social media services like Facebook and Twitter. In fact, I am relatively certain that had I conducted my study about adult fandoms of children's animation roughly ten or fifteen years earlier, I may have witnessed more centralized fan communities operating on various PHP and MySQL-powered bulletin and message boards, with far more activity simply due to higher user amounts.

At the time of this study, reblogging and sharing over various different websites and online services are popular ways to spread news and content, but it does make it difficult at times to discern the boundaries of online communities, both for research as well as the communities themselves. The solution to this, then, is to rethink these boundaries and definitions, and adapt to the changing environment. After all, what may at first be perceived as failure may sometimes be indicative of a new discovery<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> Compare this with Nikunen's (2005) realization that her difficulties with reaching Finnish *Ally McBeal* fans were not due to a methodological mistake, but rather indicated that despite the show's popularity, it failed to create a strong fan culture or fan identity (202).



## 6. Concluding Remarks

As I stated in chapter 1, the vastness of my research question prevents an all-inclusive answer to the phenomenon of adult fandoms forming around children's animation. However, based on my analysis of the research material, I have been able to provide some explanation to why this happens.

The six participants from /r/theloudhouse are very much aware of their status as adult fans of an animated show intended for children, as well as the fact that there exist animated shows catered towards their age group. However, the overall stance they have towards adult animation is more negative than positive. Considering their arguments for shows like *The Loud House* and against adult cartoons, it can be inferred that they dismiss the notion of "adult" and "mature" that they feel are offered to them. As such, there is a chance that they may like some adult animation, but it needs to avoid the usual pitfalls the participants listed, or at least avoid their poor execution. For example, it is not necessarily a bad thing to deal with sexuality in animation, but potential viewers may demand a proper approach towards it<sup>23</sup>.

Not everyone wants to dwell on adulthood. Children's animation can offer escapism from the seriousness of adult life and provide nostalgia of the past. However, they may also include narrative elements that resonate with grown-ups in the present. Just because a character is a child does not mean you need to be one to like that character, or relate to them. The struggles of Lincoln Loud as the middle child in a big family can speak to adult viewers, because growing up does not mean a three-way tension between siblings and their parents suddenly disappears (it may actually get even worse). These elements, therefore, have universal attraction that rises above age, but because they have to be suitable for children (and possibly have focus-tested appeal...), they lack certain "maturity," which then becomes the selling point of adult-oriented animation. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, it is exactly the *lack* of that "maturity" that may work as a peripheral attraction for some adults. The question I posed in the beginning of my study about children's animation

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<sup>23</sup> See also Bethan Jones' definition about 'bad texts' in Jones 2015, 121.

possibly having things to offer that adult animation does not now has a potential (if slightly amusing) answer: yes, they have – by *not* having what adult animations have!

As is typical of life, things may suddenly change in a very unfortunate way. On October 17, 2017, as I was transcribing and analyzing my research material, I received news that the creator of *The Loud House*, Chris Savino, had been suspended from Nickelodeon after allegations of sexual harassment towards his female co-workers (Amidi 2017, electronic document). On October 19, 2017, it was confirmed that Savino had been fired (ibid). A public apology penned by Savino later appeared on Facebook (Petski 2017, electronic document). As expected, the subscribers of /r/theloudhouse was appalled by the turn of events, condemning Savino's inexcusable behavior but also lamenting the now uncertain future of their favorite cartoon show (/r/theloudhouse's "BREAKING NEWS: 'The Loud House' Creator Chris Savino Fired From Nickelodeon After Sexual Harassment Allegations." discussion on October 2017. 19.11.2017). Had this occurred while the survey was still active, it would have likely had an effect on some of the answers, considering that the show is heavily based on Savino's own childhood<sup>24</sup>. Still, since my study did not focus on animation creators, I decided to press on and not attempt to redo the survey.

## 6.1. Further Studies

Considering the vastness of the subject matter, it is ripe for further studies. One aspect that was lacking in my study was the potential of subtexts and alternate readings in defining the adult fandoms. In the answers I received, there were no mentions about subtexts or fan interpretations, although there were no questions about them, either. Granted, the self-contained nature of *The Loud House* episodes is in opposition of serialized cartoons such as *Gravity Falls*, but that doesn't mean there aren't any subtexts to be found within. It may be necessary to choose a show with a larger and more active fan base, though.

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<sup>24</sup> For example, Savino grew up with nine siblings, mirroring the Loud household having almost a dozen children (Liew 2016, electronic document).

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the ‘audio-’ part of audiovisual aesthetics ended up being almost completely ignored on all ends. While it was not the focus of my study, I was curious to hear if the participants had anything to say about it, especially when contrasted with adult animation. The sound of animation certainly deserves to receive more attention. There is a wide variety of research subjects within, such as the established audience expectations on sound effects, music and voice acting, as well as animation voice acting (such as voice actor fandoms, or the corporate tendency to choose celebrities as voice actors, and then market their feature-length animation using their fame<sup>25</sup>).

A fantastic topic for animation studies with a transcultural perspective could be the phenomenon of “abridged series,” which usually consist of anime (although non-anime animation is sometimes included as well) that has been run time-compacted and features re-written dialogue that is humorously voice acted by amateurs or semi-professional fans, sometimes from different parts of the world. The “abridging” usually occurs on YouTube, and its rise in popularity is generally given to a British *Yu-Gi-Oh* fan LittleKuriboh (“LittleKuriboh”. Abridged Series Wiki’s web page. 19.11.2017). Anime studios and local distributors may or may not give consent to these videos, which makes it sometimes a point of contest and a legal gray area.

It is also worth mentioning that while this study may have appeared to highlight the uniqueness of children’s animation as a choice of entertainment for adults this may not be the case. While the survey results showed the high consumption of animation when compared to live action film and television, it needs to be stressed that it reflects the media habits of people who have an existing love towards the art form. However, it might be interesting to attempt to find out how children’s animation polls in the overall media consumption of movie going and television audiences, which may or may not include animation fans. A study like this may be more fruitful to conduct using quantitative methods, such as multiple-choice online questionnaires either on a local or global level.

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<sup>25</sup> For example, one of the movie posters for Dreamworks Studios’ 2010 release, *Megamind*, advertised the movie with a tag line “Ferrell vs. Pitt,” referring to the celebrities providing their voices for two of the animated feature film’s characters (“Megamind”. Internet Movie Database’s web page. 18.11.2017)

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## Title Illustration

*A Star Is Loud*

Drawing by Javier Bernal Gallego, 12.11.2017

Used with permission.



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Last but not least, I want to give my most sincere thanks to **the subscribers and moderators of /r/theloudhouse** for participating in this study! Without you, this would not have been possible.

# Appendices

## Appendix A: Survey Questionnaire

### Voluntary survey-questionnaire for /r/theloudhouse subscribers

*Joonas Välimäki*  
*University of Turku*

#### Thank you for participating in this interview!

This questionnaire consists of five segments, each covering a particular topic related to the overall study. There are primary questions (formatted as x.y.) as well as subquestions/continuation questions (formatted as x.y.z.). **You need to answer to all of these questions.** While there are some questions – especially primary questions – that can be answered with just one word (such as ‘yes’ or ‘no’) or just one sentence, the ideal answer is one that explains in detail *why* your answer is what it is. Please note that you must be at least 18 to participate.

You can choose to either answer directly in the questionnaire (by saving a copy of the text document, filling it out and then emailing it to me at [jvhval@utu.fi](mailto:jvhval@utu.fi)), or you can view the questions from a PDF file and then answer them on a separate message or document. If you choose to answer separately, please give your answers a prefix that matches the one from the original question.

If there are certain questions you find to be insensitive or too intrusive, you can skip those and let me know which ones you found to be such way, and I’ll see if I can reformat the question to be more pleasant. Please remember, though, that all the information you give to me through these questions will be considered confidential, handled with care and disposed of when the paper has been published. I will **not** forward your information to anyone, and your identities will be protected in the finished paper. In case you actually *want* to be referenced in the study, you can mention this, although I cannot guarantee if the university approves of it (they might enforce anonymity).

After I have gathered all the submissions, transcribed and analyzed them (I estimate this should be sometime in late September), I might send some of you an additional sixth segment, which consists of two questions. Again, like this one, it is also voluntary and I do not obligate anyone to answer to them.

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to send me a PM via Reddit ([\[REDACTED\]](#)<sup>26</sup>) or email me at [jvhval@utu.fi](mailto:jvhval@utu.fi).

Peace! :)

---

<sup>26</sup> I have censored my Reddit account name here and in Appendix B, since I do not wish to disclose it, plus I do not have plans for using it in the future.

## **a. Introduction**

- a.1. Please specify your age, your nickname at /r/theloudhouse, your gender and nationality, as well as the country where you currently live.
- a.2. What is your educational and occupational background? A short, brief answer will suffice.
- a.3. What hobbies and interests do you have? A short, brief answer will suffice.

## **b. *The Loud House***

- b.1. How and when did you discover *The Loud House*?
- b.2. What were your first impressions of the show?
- b.3. How frequently do you watch the show? For example, do you watch the latest episode right away or later, and how often do you re-watch old episodes?
- b.4. Do you watch *The Loud House* on your own or with a company? If the latter, who is it that you watch it with (e.g. family, friends)?
- b.5. Who and what are your favorite characters in the show, and why?
  - b.5.1. Do you identify with a particular character?
- b.6. What is your favorite episode and why?
- b.7. What do you find alluring and interesting in the show, and why?
 

Examples: characters, themes, atmosphere, aesthetics (visual, aural, pacing etc.), writing (incl. stories, dialogue), potential nostalgia, fan communities and fan works (fan culture), connections to real world (eg. depiction of large families, school-aged children's daily routines, depiction of teen and tween life, cultural factors), the show speaks to you on an emotional level
- b.8. Is there anything about the show you don't like, and why?

## **c. Being a fan of *The Loud House***

- c.1. How would you describe yourself as a fan?
  - c.1.1. Would you consider yourself more as a casual fan, or perhaps an enthusiast?
  - c.1.2. How heavily do you feel invested in some of the more integral and already established parts of *TLH* fandom such as shipping and headcanon/fanon?
 

NOTE – you can also include your own headcanons if you have any but please mention if they are yours.
  - c.1.3. Would you consider you being a fan of *TLH* to be different compared to you being a fan of other cartoon shows of its kind (eg. your level of enjoyment, different level of dedication/interest in the show)?
- c.2. How active are you in *TLH* fandom(s), and in what way?

c.3. How do you express yourself as a fan?

Examples: discussions (what do you like discussing the most about *TLH?*), fan fiction, fan art, fan-made music, fan-made remixes, fan animation, YouTube-inforvideos/-vlogs, fan Wikis

c.4. What are your relations to other *TLH* fans? Do you have friends amongst them?

c.5. What is your relation to the */r/theloudhouse* subreddit and/or other *TLH* communities?

c.5.1. How did you discover */r/theloudhouse*?

c.6. Are you a fan of the show outside the internet?

c.6.1. How do you display your status as a fan in real life?

c.6.2. Do you own/purchase any merchandise, or attend cons? Do you cosplay?

c.7. What would you consider to be the most important aspect about being a *TLH* fan?

c.8. Is there an element in the *TLH* fandom that you don't particularly care about?

#### **d. Other animation**

d.1. Have you watched other animated series before? If so, then what? You can only mention series you remember the best.

d.1.1. Have you belonged to animation fandoms before *TLH*?

d.1.2. If you answered 'yes' to d.1.1 then how would you compare those with the *TLH* fandom? For example, you can mention what aspects of them you find to be similar and what you'd consider to be different.

d.2. To what extent have you watched animated series and feature films over live action entertainment?

d.3. Do you specifically/primarily watch American and/or Canadian and Mexican animation or not? What would you consider to influence your viewing choices in that regard?

d.3.1. Do you also watch European and Japanese animation? Please elaborate briefly why you do or do not.

d.4. Has an animated series you've previously watched attracted you on the same level as *TLH*?

d.4.1. If you answered 'yes' to d.4. then please specify the name of the show and elaborate briefly on its impact on you.

d.4.2. If you answered 'no' to d.4. then please specify what *TLH* has that you feel caught your attention unlike any earlier show (you can refer back to your answers for b.7. if needed)

d.5. Are there any aspects about American animation that you don't like?

Examples: visual/aural aesthetics, clichés and tropes in writing (stories, characters), overall themes and settings etc.

### **e. Attitudes towards animation (audiences)**

e.1. How would you define animation in general and – most importantly – what do you perceive to be its function and purpose?

NOTE – You do not have to get into the technical aspects of animation, such as elaborating on different animation methods but rather elaborate on what animation *means*, why it is made.

e.2. What is your view on the audiences of animation in general? Who do you consider them to be?

e.3. How would you describe the attitude towards animation amongst the majority of people?

NOTE – ‘Majority’ here means your perception of people *outside animation fandom(s)* in your general geographical location as well as those you come across online, such as on news portals, blogs and so on.

e.4. Would you consider your age to have any meaning to you as an animation fan?

e.5. What would you consider the distribution of *TLH* fans between adults and children/adolescents?

e.6. Have you faced any controversial situations where adulthood (either yours or in general) has had an effect on your experiences as an animation fan?

Examples: feeling pressure to watch animation more age-appropriate or not watch animation at all, dealing with adult-oriented content made by fans (for, against or neutral), attempting to define what is ‘adult’ or ‘mature’ with other fans etc.

e.7. What is your opinion towards adult-oriented North American animation? What

do you consider makes them ‘adult’ as opposed to ‘children’s cartoons’?

e.8. If you have anything else to say or elaborate on any of the topics discussed or something else you feel is relevant to them, please provide an open answer/response in this section.

### **f. Conclusion**

NOTE: This is an optional segment that was to be used in a short, follow-up survey in case I deemed it necessary to gather more material from the participants of the first survey. In the end, it went unused.

*Think back to everything that has been asked from you and the answers you’ve given in the preceding survey before responding to the final questions.*

f.1. Using *The Loud House* as an example, is there something in an animated series aimed for children and adolescents that you cannot find in animation

aimed for adults? Are there elements much more common in/unique to adult animation that you do not like?

NOTE – If you answered *d.1.* and possibly *d.4.* with mentions of adult-oriented animated series, you can use them as direct comparisons with *TLH* when answering to *f.1.*

*f.2.* Similar to *f.1.*, would you consider there to be something missing in adult animation fandoms that you witness in *TLH* fandom? Alternatively, do you prefer *TLH* fandom for *not* having aspects found in adult animation fandoms?

Examples: particular topics, fan behavior, fan creations of certain orientation/themes etc.

## Appendix B: Survey Invitation Message

MY SUBREDDITS HOME POPULAR ALL RANDOM THELOUDHOUSE ANNOUNCEMENTS POSTS PICS MOVIES WORLDNEWS NEWS TOP TREAS

COMMENTS

**WANTED: Volunteers to participate in an academic research about animation/\*The Loud House\* fans** self.theLoudHouse  
Submitted 1 month ago \* by [redacted] - announcement

**UPDATE (on Tuesday, October 11):** I'm now closing the thread as well as the questionnaire. Thank you for all those who participated!

**UPDATE (on Monday, October 2):** I'm going to close this thread after this week. You still have time to participate, if you're interested, during the next seven days by either PM'ing or emailing me your answers (details below). As for those of you who already turned in their answers, thank you so much your time and work!

Greetings, /r/theLoudHouse!

I'm a student of Media Studies from the University of Turku, in Finland, and I'm writing a Master's thesis on adult audiences of American cartoons aimed for children and adolescents, with *The Loud House* as the primary example. The purpose of my research is to delve into what attracts adults (18+) to children's cartoon series and why some of them prefer those over the increasingly wider selection of animation aimed towards adult audiences. As someone who's an animation enthusiast myself, I find it a fascinating topic and one that has been grossly underrepresented in academic research.

Since the best way to approach that subject matter is to inquire about it from fans themselves, I decided to form my thesis around a fanbase of a contemporary cartoon of my choice, which of course ended up being *The Loud House* for a wide variety of reasons (eg. still in production, active fans, distinctive aesthetics). What is truly great is that the good moderators of your subreddit have graciously permitted me to conduct part of my study here, and that's why you're reading this post right now :)

Due to time zone-related constraints, I'm unable to do one-on-one interviews and instead I've compiled an open-form questionnaire for you to fill out. Participation is voluntary, and moderators can also participate if they want to. About 5 to 15 participants are enough due to my research being of qualitative nature. There is only one condition, and that is that you are 18 years old or over, since the study focuses on adult fans.

The questionnaire goes through various topics such as the show itself, fan communities, watching animated entertainment and so on. There are five sections, and filling it out shouldn't take more than 30 minutes. I did my best to ensure that there aren't any questions in there that might be too sensitive or personal and as usual, no-one is obligated to talk about anything they might consider to be a private matter. More information can be found on the questionnaire itself.

You can participate in filling out the questionnaire here and then replying me via a private message or sending me an email (you can find the address in the questionnaire) with your answers. I've provided the questionnaire in both PDF and Rich Text formats, so you can either answer on a separate message/text file or within the questions, depending on your preference.

**LINK(S) TO THE QUESTIONNAIRE**

[Adobe PDF](#)  
[Rich Text Document](#)

After I've completed all interviews, I will analyze the results and see if there is need to commit a follow-up interview, which will then focus of two additional questions. In that case, I will personally notify those of you that I wish to partake in that, although once again it is completely voluntary.

Thank you in advance!

All My Best,  
Joonas Välimäki  
Bachelor of Arts

Media Studies  
University of Turku

9 comments edit share unsave hide delete nsfw spoiler

Figure B.1: A cropped image from a screenshot I took from my survey invitation message after closing the survey on 11 October, 2017.  
Taken from [www.reddit.com](http://www.reddit.com).

## Appendix C: Glossary

Since my study is centered on animation and its fandoms, there are certain terminology and “jargon” that will be used accordingly throughout this thesis. This glossary is intended to briefly explain some of the words that are not necessarily commonplace or generally known outside both areas.

- *Animation* is often erroneously categorized as a genre, but in reality “spreads across a wide variety of contents and styles.” (Greenberg 2011, 3–4). *Cartoon*, on the other hand, is a genre in animation. According to Greenberg, the confusion about animation being a genre stems from cartoons and their “important role in shaping the early stages of American cinematic animation” (ibid, 4).
- *3D animation* does not necessarily refer to animation presented three-dimensionally, but may also mean computer-generated animation, where the animated characters and their environments may be three-dimensional models. A good example of the latter is Pixar’s *Toy Story* (1995), which was the first feature-length animation created with this technique. Traditional, hand-drawn or digitally produced animation, where, at the very least, the characters are *not* (or do not appear as) three-dimensional models, is sometimes called “*2D animation*,” usually by animation fans. Both terms are somewhat misleading, since they can occasionally be mixed together<sup>27</sup>, which makes defining them even more difficult. Using this classification, *The Loud House* can be categorized as a 2D cartoon.
- There are many different animation techniques. The most common ones used in cartoons are *cel animation* and *digital animation*. In the former, the animation is created frame-by-frame on transparent cels, which, after being shot on a film, forms a sequence that creates the illusion of motion and movement. The latter, instead, uses computer software created for the purpose of animation (e.g. Maya, Toon Boom, Adobe Flash, etc.). Digital animation can practically be both “3D” and “2D,” depending on the choice. Animation can also be done with the use of *stop motion*, where, for example, a character made of clay is moved one frame at a time.

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<sup>27</sup> Disney’s *Treasure Planet* (2002) has most of its character animation and some of its backgrounds created with traditional animation techniques, but also contains significant amounts of three-dimensional models and surroundings. *Paperman* (Disney, 2012), released ten years after *Treasure Planet*, is a short animation completely created as 3D animation, but purposely mimics the aesthetics of traditional cel animation.



- *Limited animation* usually means animation produced for the need of television (Barrier 1999, 561). Budgets allocated for TV animation tends to be considerably smaller than those of theatrical animation (either feature-length or animated short films). As a result, limited animation is often viewed to be inferior in quality. Limited animation can be produced very quickly due to its economic nature: for example, movement of a character can be provided simply by animating separate frames for legs, hands and mouth while the rest of the body remains completely still. A good example of limited animation is Hanna-Barbera's *The Huckleberry Hound Show* (1958–61).
- *Live action* usually refers to anything that is *not* created using animation, but rather makes use of real actors. The rising popularity of *computer-generated imagery* (CGI) has blurred the boundaries of live action and animation, such as in many special effects-heavy Hollywood blockbusters that may have entire scenes rendered in CGI – including the characters themselves.
- *Original character (OC)* is a fan term indicating a character invented by a fan. These can range from simple self-insertions to elaborately designed (and written) characters. OCs are heavily featured in fan art and fan fiction, often interacting with official/canonic characters and other fan characters.
- *Retconning* (derived from *retroactive continuity*) is a verb meaning revision of one or more elements in fictional work to create new interpretations and continuities. Retconning something may also result in pre-retconned continuities or narratives to be no longer canon due to continuity issues.
- *Shipping* is a fan term, which means supporting the romantic pairing (*ship*) of two characters featured in one or more (sometimes unrelated) media texts. Ships can be formed from practically any combination of characters, although some fans may prefer to ship just “canonical pairings,” meaning the romantic pairing already existed within a media text at one stage. Some fans are adamant that there can only be “one true pairing” (OTP), and will actively dismiss any other ship that features a character from their OTP.

## Appendix D: Pro gradu -tutkielman tiivistelmä suomeksi

Pro gradu -työni aiheena ovat aikuisikäisistä faneista koostuvien yhteisöjen muodostuminen lapsille ja nuorille suunnatun yhdysvaltalaisen animaation ympärille. Aikuisten animaation tarjonnasta huolimatta lasten piirrossarjat ja kokoperheen animaatioelokuvat kiinnostavat myös varttuneempaakin väkeä, mistä on osoituksena mm. lelujätti Hasbron tuottaman *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic!*-televisiosarjan (2010–) ympärille syntynyt aikuisista miehistä koostuva fanijoukkio, bronit (*Bronies*). Tämä yllätystä ja ajoittain myös hämmenystäkin aiheuttanut ilmiö on samalla luonut työsarkaa akateemiselle tutkimukselle, joista mainittakoot V. L. D. Robertsonin (2014) ja Bethan Jonesin (2015) artikkelit identiteettipoliittikkaa painottavan tutkimuksen saralla.

Tutkimuskysymykseni on seuraava: *miksi lasten ja nuorten animaationsarjojen ja -elokuvien ympärille muodostuu aikuisista koostuvia fanikuntia?* Miksi lasten ja nuorten animaatiota fanitetaan, vaikka myös aikuisille tarkoitettua animaatiota on saatavilla? Onko niissä jotakin sellaista, mitä aikuisille suunnatusta animaatiosta ei välttämättä löydy? Koska tutkimuskysymykseni on laajuudeltaan valtaisa, en usko voivani esittää mitään yksiselitteistä vastausta, vaan lähinnä tarjota suuntaa-antavia viitteitä jatkotutkimuksille. Lisäksi on huomioitava, että ihmisten erilaisuudesta johtuen on mahdotonta löytää yhtä ainoaa syytä tai selitystä.

Tässä kohtaa on huomioitava, että kun puhun pro gradu -työssäni animaatiosta, tarkoitan sillä aina yhdysvaltalaista animaatiota, ellei toisin mainita.

Halusin ensisijaisesti toteuttaa tutkimuksen laadullisena tutkimuksena, jossa otettaisiin mukaan jonkin lasten animaatioelokuvan tai piirrossarjan aikuiset fanit globaalilla tasolla, mutta kuitenkin osana jotakin rajattua internet-yhteisöä (esim. tietylle piirrossarjalle omistettu keskustelufoorumi). Ennakko-oletuksista mainittakoon, että lasten ja nuorten animaatio tarjoaa sellaisia audiovisuaalisia ja emotionaalisia elementtejä, mitkä puuttuvat aikuisten animaatiosta. Esitän myös, että tiettyjen aikuisille luonnehdittujen elementtien puuttuminen lasten animaatiosta (esimerkiksi lapsille sopimattomat asiat ja aikuismaailman kyyni-

syys) voivat vastaavasti myös toimia houkuttimena. Näiden lisäksi arvelen nostalgian olevan myös vaikuttava tekijä.

Valitsin tutkimuskohteeksi Chris Savinon tuottaman piirrossarjan *The Loud House* (Nickelodeon, 2016–). Sarja keskittyy Loudin perheen elämään, jossa 11-vuotias Lincoln Loud yrittää selviytyä päivittäisistä askareista ja kommelluksista kymmenen sisarensa kanssa. Jaksojen aikana Lincoln kommentoi elämänsä ja tekemisiään suoraan yleisölle, ikään kuin olisi tietoinen elämästään piirroshahmona. Genreltään *The Loud House* on “slice of life” -komedia, eli sen keskipisteessä ei ole mitään kaikenkattavia juonikaaria varsinaisen premissin ohella. Sarjan valintaan vaikuttivat sen suhteellinen uutuus, omintakeinen visuaalinen estetiikka karrikoituine hahmoineen sekä sen painottuminen lasten arkielämään suhteellisen tavallisine henkilöihahmoineen. Sarjassa ei myöskään ole fantastisia elementtejä, joten niihin nojaava eskapismi ei voi selittää sarjan suosiota.

Yhdysvaltalaisen animaation historiaa tarkastellessa voidaan havaita, että animaation yleisöksi on eri aikojen saatossa hahmottunut hyvin erilaisia katsojakuntia. Niiden muodostumiseen ovat vaikuttaneet lukuisat eri tekijät, kuten kulttuurinen ilmapiiri, yhteiskunnalliset asenteet, maailmansodat sekä uudet teknologiat ja kaupallisuus.

Aikaisempaa tutkimusta lasten ja nuorten animaation aikuisista faneista ei ole kovinkaan paljoa, mikä teki tutkimuksen toteuttamisesta haastellisen. Animaatiota on toki tutkittu aiemmin, mutta näkökulmana ovat olleet lähinnä sen poliittis-taloudelliset ulottuvuudet (kuten Disney-tutkimuksissa, kts. esim. Wasko 2001 sekä Wasko et al. 2001) tai identiteettipoliittikka, kuten aiemmin mainituissa bro-ni-artikkeleissa. Fanitutkimuksen saralla nojaudun vahvasti Kaarina Nikusen (2005) väitöskirjaan, jonka kohteena ovat suomalaiset televisioviihteen fanit kolmen eri tutkimuksen suunnasta.

Aloitin tutkimukseni toteutuksen esivalmistelun Reddit-keskustelusivuston *The Loud House*lle omistetussa alaosiossa (subredditissä) nimeltä */r/theloudhouse*. Sen ensimmäinen vaihe koostui havainnoinista, jossa seurailin etäältä osion toimintaa, sen keskusteluja ja yritin hahmotella paikan sopivuutta aineistonkeruun

kannalta, todeten sen lopulta hyväksi. Aineistonkeruuvaiheen päätin toteuttaa osion käyttäjille suunnatun kyselylomakkeen avulla, minkä jaoin viiteen aihepiiriin: yleiset kysymykset, *The Loud House*, *The Loud House*-sarjan fanina oleminen, muu animaatio sekä animaatioon ja sen yleisöihin liittyvät asenteet. Laadin kysymykset siten, että niihin oli mahdollista vastata suhteellisen avoimesti, jotta tutkimuksen laadullinen ote säilyisi. Kun lista oli valmiina, otin yhteyden osion moderaattoreihin ja pyysin heiltä luvan toteuttaa tutkimus. Mainitsin sekä moderaattoreille että mahdollisille osallistujille, että tutkimukseen osallistuminen on täysin vapaaehtoista, ja etten vaadi ketään vastaamaan niihin kysymyksiin, jotka he tuntevat olevan liian henkilökohtaisia tai muuten vaivaannuttavia. Kysymyslistan sekä yhteisölle (luvan saatuani) lähettämäni kutsun tutkimukseen ohjeistuksineen löytää tämän liiteosion alusta.

Odotin kyselyyn vastaajiksi n. 5–15 henkilöä. Loppujen lopuksi sain vastauksia kuudelta vapaaehtoiselta kolmesta eri maasta. He vastasivat lähes tulkoon kaikkiin kysymyksiin, ja suurimmaksi osaksi niin, etteivät vastaukset jääneet yhden tai kahden sanan varaan. Vastanneet ovat kaikki miehiä, joiden keski-ikä aineistonkeruuhetkellä oli yhteensä 21,2 vuotta. Heille kaikille on yhteistä kiinnostus animaatiota kohtaan. Viisi kuudesta vastaajasta on koulutustaustaltaan joko suorittamassa tai on jo suorittanut vähintäänkin alemman korkeakoulututkinnon. He löysivät *The Loud Housen* joko televisiomainosten tai internetin animatiiodiskurssien välityksellä. Ensireaktiot vaihtelivat hyvistä huonoihin, mutta kaikki vastanneet jäivät koukuun. Yksi vastaajista myönsi kokevansa sarjan katsomisen hieman häpeälliseksi asiaksi. Vastaajilla oli monia suosikkiahmoja, mutta nämä eivät välttämättä vastanneet samaistuttavia hahmoja. Myöskään hahmojen sukupuolella ei näyttänyt olevan vaikutusta siihen, pitkö niistä tai ei (vrt. Nikunen 2005, 162).

Sarjan esteettisyys ja käsikirjoitus saivat kiitosta lähes kaikilta vastaajilta, ja erityisesti hahmojen kirjoittamisesta ja sarjan käsittelemistä teemoista (esim. perhedynamiikka) pidettiin. Huumori näkyi merkittävänä tekijänä *The Loud Housen* suosiossa monen vastaajan keskuudessa, mutta myös ”mukavat” ja ”sydäntä-lämmittävät” tuokiot olivat heille tärkeitä esimerkiksi oman suosikkijakson valinnan suhteen. Nuhteita sarja sai pääasiassa vessahuumorin ja samojen vitsien liiallisesta käytöstä sekä hahmojen tiettyjen tunnuspiirteiden liioittelusta.

Vastaajien fanitoiminta osoittautui hyvin heikoksi ja hiljaiseksi. /r/theloudhouses-  
sa käytyjä keskusteluja lukuun ottamatta monet vastaajista eivät osallistuneet  
esimerkiksi fanituotosten tekemiseen, ostaneet oheistuotteita tai osoittaneet fa-  
niuttaan internetin ulkopuolella ”oikeassa maailmassa.” Tästä huolimatta vas-  
taajat kuitenkin pitivät itseään faneina, heille tärkeintä fanina olossa on katsoa  
*The Loud Housea*. Osa vastaajista myös totesi, että *The Loud Housen*  
fanikunta on heistä keskimäärin pienempi toisiin piirrossarjoihin (esim. *Steven*  
*Universe*; Cartoon Network, 2013–) verrattuna ja aikuisia fanejakin tuntuu ole-  
van vähemmän. Nämä tulokset viittaisivat siihen, että suurinta osaa *The Loud*  
*Housen* aikuisten fanien faniutta (mutta ei kuitenkaan vastaajien) voisi eräällä  
tapaa luonnehtia *trendifaniudeksi*, jolle on Nikusen (2005) mukaan tyypillistä  
väljä organisoituminen, tyypillisten faniaktiiviteettien puuttuminen sekä faniuden  
suurimpana ilmentymänä ajan omistaminen ohjelman katsomiselle (203–204).  
Määritelmästä ei kuitenkaan täyty Nikusen listaamista elementeistä – ajankoh-  
taisuus, konsumerismi ja julkisuus – kuin jälkimmäinen (ibid).

Vastaajia tuntui omassa faniyhteisössään eniten häiritsevän ”loudcest,” millä  
tarkoitetaan inestiaiheisia eroottisia faniteoksia, joiden keskiössä ovat Loudin  
perheen jäsenet. Tekeleitä ihmeteltiin ja niiden sisältöä kuvattiin mm. järkyttä-  
väksi. Vastaajien reaktio muistuttaa jossain määrin Jonesin (2015) tulkintaa bro-  
neihin kohdistuvasta antifaniudesta, jossa eroottista fanitaidetta ja -fiktiota kulut-  
tavia broneja syyllistetään sukupuolittuneella tavalla huonosta käytöksestä ja  
haukutaan mm. pedofiileiksi (121–122). ”Loudcestin” kohdalla kyse saattaa kui-  
tenkin olla enemmän itse teoksiin kohdistuvasta inhosta, ja siitä puuttuukin  
esimerkiksi antibroniudelle tyypillinen sukupuolittunut viha.

Animaation määrittämisessä vastaajat olivat yksimielisiä siitä, että se on moni-  
käyttöinen taiteenlaji, ja että sen yleisö voi olla hyvinkin monipuolinen. Osa vas-  
taajista oli sitä mieltä, että animaatio mielletään valtavirrassa yhä lasten viih-  
teeksi, kun taas toiset sanoivat sen olevan vanhentunut käsitys. Aikuisanimaat-  
ioon suhtauduttiin pitkälti torjuvasti, joskin osa vastaajista myönsi katsovansa ja  
pitävänsä siihen lukeutuvista sarjoista. Ongelmaksi aikuisanimaatiossa todettiin  
sen yritykset olla ”kypsää” ja ”aikuismaista,” mitä jotkut vastaajat totesivat ole-  
van lähinnä ”seksi- ja väkivaltavitsejä” sekä ”šokkihuumoria.” Toisin sanoen, ne  
asiat, joilla aikuisanimaatio yrittää houkutella (aikuisia) katsojia ja erottautua las-

ten animaatiosta ovat juuri niitä piirteitä, mistä osa aikuisista ei pidä lainkaan. Kaikkia ei kuitenkaan häiritse mm. seksuaalinen sisältö, ja yksi vastaajista totesikin olevansa harmissaan, ettei yhdysvaltalaisessa animaatiossa tunnuta voivan käsitellä seksiä yhtä vapaasti kuin sen ulkopuolella. Tämän perusteella voitaneen sanoa, että aikuissisällön ongelmana saattaa toisinaan olla se, miten se on toteutettu, eikä niinkään sisältö itse.

Kuten tutkimuksen alussa totesin, ei tutkimuskysymykseeni voi saada tyhjentävää vastausta. Olen kuitenkin sillä kannalla, että saamistani vastauksista voidaan tehdä johtopäätöksiä, joilla pystyy osittain selittämään lasten animaation aikuisfaniutta. Ensinnäkin, lasten animaatiot tarjoavat aikuisille eskapismia ja nostalgiaa. Täysi-ikäiset katsojat voivat kokea tuttuutta niissä esiintyvissä narratiivissa rakenteissa ja samaistua sarjan hahmoihin siltikin, vaikka he olisivat lapsia tai lapsille tarkoitettuja. Toiseksi, sarjoissa käsitellyt teemat ja hahmokehitys voi hyvinkin olla verrattavissa aikuisen omaan elämään myös nykyhetkessä. Kolmanneksi, juuri tiettyjen aikuismaisten elementtien puuttuminen lasten animaatioissa voi olla se vetovoima, mitä niitä kohtaan tunnetaan.

Tutkimustuloksista ja kerätystä materiaalista huomautettakoon vielä, että *The Loud Housen* luoja, Chris Savino, erotettiin Nickelodeonilta seksuaalisen häirinnän takia 19.10.2017. Savinon tuomittava käytös ja irtisanominen aiheuttivat järkytystä *The Loud House*-fanien keskuudessa. Kyselystä saamani aineisto oli tuona ajankohtana jo kerätty ja litterointivaiheessa, mutta mikäli olisin toteuttanut sen myöhemmin tai jatkanut uusien vastausten keruuta, olisi tämä uutinen todennäköisesti enemmän tai vähemmän muuttanut kyselyyn osallistuneiden vastauksia ja mielipiteitä.

Jatkotutkimuksiin on paljonkin erilaisia vaihtoehtoja. Yhtenä mahdollisena tutkimuskohteena voisi olla *The Loud Housen* tyyppisten komediapainotteisten piirrossarjojen fanitulkintojen ja subtekstien tutkimus. Myös piirrettyjen äänimaailmassa (mikä myös sivuutettiin tässä tutkimuksessa) olisi paljon kiintoisia kohteita, kuten vaikkapa yleisön odotukset piirrettyjen äänisuunnittelussa ja musiikissa, ääninäyttelijöiden ympärille muodostuvat fanijoukot sekä kokoillan animaatioelokuvaan erikoistuvien animaatiostudioiden tapa markkinoida elokuviaan ääninäyttelijöiksi palkkaamallaan julkisuuden henkilöillä.

Transkulttuurisen tutkimuksen näkökannalta mielekäs tutkimuksen kohde olisi myös nk. "abridged"-sarjat, jotka tyypillisesti ovat lyhenneltyjä animejaksoja uudella, humoristisella dialogilla ja fanien tekemällä dubbauksella. Abridged-sarjoja löytyy mm. YouTubesta, eivätkä ne välttämättä ole animea tuottavien tai sitä levittävien tahojen suosissa tekijänoikeussyistä johtuen.

Tutkimukseni käsitteli pääasiassa aikuisia lasten ja nuorten animaation faneja, mutta olisi myös kiintoisaa nähdä, kuinka suuri lasten ja nuorten animaation on osuus yleensäkin ihmisten mediakulutustottumusten keskuudessa. Tämä luonteeltaan kvantitatiivinen tutkimus voitaisiin toteuttaa verkossa kyselykaavakkeella joko paikallisella tai globaalilla tasolla.