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That's freakin' sweet: The collecting of Family Guy

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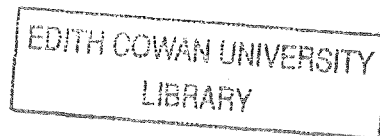
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That's Freakin' Sweet

The collecting of *Family Guy*



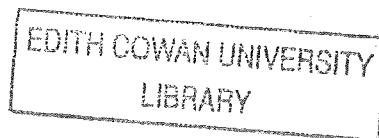
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Communications and Contemporary Arts

June 16, 2006

That's Freakin' Sweet

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Abstract

The animated series *Family Guy* (1999-2006) has been cancelled twice and resurrected twice mainly because of the efforts of viewers. It is worth asking, however; why has *Family Guy* attained a level of fanaticism that repeatedly rescues it from permanent cancellation?

Arguably, the *Family Guy* audience is made up predominantly of members of generation y and as such, the way they view the program and their relationship to it will differ to that of previous generations. In short, *Family Guy* was cancelled due to poor ratings, however, these ratings were a result of erratic scheduling that was not conducive to the establishment of a strong audience base. This encouraged viewers to look beyond the television for information relating to *Family Guy* (i.e. air dates or missed episodes) and to discuss the show in general, creating an 'imagined community' online.

The establishment of community whilst facilitating organized protests to have the series continued in times of cancellation does not explain why viewers have gone to this extreme. Popular culture is becoming increasingly complex, and it is possible to suggest that *Family Guy* is more complex than previous animated series. The way in which *Family Guy* is constructed may appear unusual to some, yet to members of generation y who are familiar with this style of animated series (having grown up with children's series similar to it during the 1990s) it appears to be a natural progression from previous series. As a result they identify strongly with the series and perhaps even view it as something produced *for* them.

This level of identification and the series history of being cancelled has led to the collection of episodes and information (namely quotes) around *Family Guy*. The collection of knowledge is indicative of the level of importance viewers place in the series and it becomes necessary for the maintenance of friendships. Labeling downloaded episodes as a collection is problematic as they constitute a vastly

different type of collectable to material items. It is suggested, that this is a result of rigid and possibly outmoded perceptions of collectables and collecting and, that the term collecting should be considered as covering different forms of collecting and different levels of involvement on the part of the collector.

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Friends, Family, and my Emma.

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Introduction

Following the huge success of *The Simpsons* (1989-2006), the 1990s were characterised by a major increase in the production of animated series (Raugust, 2004, p. 1; Hilton-Morrow & McMahan, 2003, p. 79). Competition was strong and most did not survive much past their first season. A select few, however, have managed to continue production for a number of seasons, having established a firm audience base and their own place within the animation spectrum. *Family Guy* (1999-2006) is one such series.

Family Guy provides a clear example of how a television series is embraced by an audience through digital communications and collector culture and how an audience can impact upon the production of television. Twice *Family Guy* has nearly been cancelled and twice it has been rescued through the efforts of fans. To understand why this is so, it becomes necessary to consider the make up of the *Family Guy* audience. *Family Guy* appears to speak to generation y¹ more so than to any other generation. It has attained an underground cult status due in large part to its erratic scheduling, and its unsuitability for prime time viewing, which seems to have assisted in building the show's popularity.

Arguably, generation y watch television animation more regularly than other generations as they have been conditioned to understand the codes inherent to episodes. A part of the popularity afforded *Family Guy* is a result of it continuing a tradition of animated family sitcoms started by *The Flintstones* (1960-1966) and continued by *The Simpsons* and, that the show retains the more absurdist nature of animation, particularly animation produced for an older and often, alternative audience, that would have been familiar to generation y during the 1990s as exhibited by programs making up part of children's television time slots. In this way the

¹ According to the age of respondents (more on this in chapter 1) (see Figure 1) and that when *Family Guy* was a part of the Adult Swim line up on Cartoon Network, it was out-rating Jay Leno and David Letterman in the 18 – 34 year old male viewer bracket (Wolk, 2005).

generation y audience not only watch *Family Guy* often, but feel an affinity with the program that many others do not.

Arguably, each generation aligns itself with the latest technology or a cultural production (i.e. a particular film, or film genre) and this comes to define that generation by being taken on as a source of identification (Arnett, 1995, pp. 524-525). For members of generation y, the technology of choice could be any number of televisual entertainment^A devices (such as mp3 players, 6th and 7th generation video game consoles, or the Internet), though arguably the most pervasive technology for this generation is the Internet, "today's teen-agers embrace Internet technology the way Baby Boomers did television" (Colkin, 2001)². Generation y are not the heaviest users of the Internet (generation x uses the Internet more (Chen, Boase & Wellman, 2002, p. 88)), however, generation y use the Internet differently, meaning that they are more inclined to pursue their consumption of programs such as *Family Guy* via the Internet. In many ways the show owes its popularity to the Internet and the way in which members of generation y not only collect digital media^B downloads, but freely distribute them amongst their friends.

As *Family Guy* has had difficulty finding a regular timeslot³, fans of the program have been driven to other means to stay up to date. The constant and imminent threat of cancellation has led to the collection of *Family Guy* episodes. The strength with which members of generation y relate to the series, means that viewers have an incentive to collect knowledge built around *Family Guy*. The collecting and sharing of this knowledge and episodes constitutes a shared experience, a commonality that establishes and/or strengthens friendship groups. This collecting, however,

² To name generation y as the 'Internet generation' is perhaps premature as members of generation y live at home with their parents longer than other generations (Ghandour, 2006; Grose, 2005, pp. 122-123) meaning it is unlikely they pay for access to the Internet. It will be interesting to see if generation y are still considered the Internet generation (in terms of usage) once they have to pay for access themselves.

³ This has been the case with the United States and has resulted in vastly fluctuating ratings (see 2.4) It is also the case here in Australia where it has been aired both late at night (currently *Family Guy* can be seen on Network 7 at 11:30pm on Thursdays) and at midday as part of the network's school holiday programming (during December 2004 (Murphy, 2004)), despite initially being aired at 8pm as a part of Network 7's primetime line up in July 2000 (Bad bubs, porn-fed pups, 2000).

particularly of digitally downloaded episodes, constitutes a different type of collecting to that which is usually anticipated or recognized. It is probable that the collecting of *Family Guy* episodes is a result of fandom, however, collector culture is the focus here, not fan culture, and it is possible to have collector culture without fandom⁴.

This investigation of the *Family Guy* audience, its viewing habits and relationship with the show, and how and why audience members collect items associated with *Family Guy*, is designed to consider why generation y watches *Family Guy* more than other generations; what role *Family Guy* plays within friendship groups, and why *Family Guy* is collected and what this means for more traditional conceptualizations of collector culture.

Research Questions/Hypothesis

This project considers a number of research questions, from different areas;

- Who is the *Family Guy* audience?

⁴ The term fan (not to mention fandom, fan culture, etc.) can take on many varied meanings though it is perhaps necessary to provide an explanation (all be it a simplified one) of the term in the context of this paper. Fan tends to denote an element of fanaticism. Unlike viewers, fans have an extra level of involvement in the text. However, the forms this involvement may take can vary greatly. Henry Jenkins (1992) discusses fandom in relation to 'textual poaching', claiming that fans are also often involved in creating their own media by poaching characters etc. from their favored text (pp. 24-49). Matt Hills (2004) takes it a step further, mentioning that the media producing fan is (by some) favored over and above the fan who simply purchases all available merchandise (p. 30). In my experience, and this shapes the frame of reference for this paper greatly, textual poaching is not an acceptable pastime. For example, friends who are comic book artists refuse to copy their favorite characters and value above all else creating their own unique style, despite their fandom. There are different forms of fandom and my introduction to fandom has revolved around collector culture more than fan culture. For example, television programs such as *The Transformers* (1984-1987) a series which I would say I am a fan of, was created to sell merchandise (*The Transformers* toys were released prior to the television series (Transformers – Yesterdayland Saturday Morning TV, 2002)). Many other programs produced at the same time had heavy involvement from toy manufacturers and similar to *The Transformers* were made to sell toys (Kline, 1993, pp. 278-281), perhaps explaining the devaluation of fan produced material. Throughout this paper the term fan is used, though it needs to be pointed out it is used in its most generic form, to explain the relationship certain individuals have with a media property as being stronger than is the norm (i.e. it is unlikely that casual viewers would protest the cancellation of a show, where as fans would). As survey respondents and focus group members were not asked if they considered themselves fans, it is not possible to label them as such.

- How and why do audience members collect items associated with *Family Guy*?
- Why does generation y feature more prominently than other generations within the *Family Guy* audience?
- What role does *Family Guy* play within the friendship group?
- What does the collection of *Family Guy* episodes mean for more traditional conceptualizations of collector culture?

These theories then point to the hypothesis that; members of generation y are more inclined to view *Family Guy* than other generations as it is taken on as an element of their shared experience as members of their generation. The program's history, however, has led to the download of episodes, and as such has seen the establishment of an 'imagined community'. In this way, digital media files are perhaps taking the place of previous cultural items such as physical pieces of music, namely records, CDs, etc.).

Methodology

A focus group and online survey were conducted to gather primary data to address the research questions at hand.

The main reason for the focus group was to gauge the potential responses to the online survey and to consider possible ways to reword questions or shift the focus of questions where needed. The focus group sessions were conducted as informal discussions, meaning participants often went off on tangents (many of which were useful and insightful) and provided a large amount of qualitative data.

The focus group was an opportunistic sample, established with a group of adolescent males known to be friends and viewers of *Family Guy*, all living in Western Australia. There were six participants for the first session and five for sessions two

and three. During the first session an episode of *Family Guy* was shown to the group to establish what elements of the program they enjoyed the most, and to see whether or not they, as an Australian audience, understood/recognized all the inter-textual, historical and popular culture references.

The focus group discussions were transcribed and key points of interest established prior to completion of the survey design. The nature of the focus groups meant that designated questions were all answered fully and adequately. Clearly, the focus group participants were not representative of the overall *Family Guy* audience. As they returned some unexpected results (such as their narrow field of interests), the need for a greater and more diverse sample size became apparent. However, the focus group did offer an introduction to possible responses and provided an insight into the collecting of downloaded *Family Guy* files, an issue that was not particularly well covered by survey respondents, many of whom were unforthcoming when it came to divulging where they obtained files from.

Given the spread of Internet usage, and the key role it plays within the consumption and collection of *Family Guy*, the size of the focus group and selection of participants was inadequate. The online survey consisted of 53 questions (Appendix A), and was advertised on a large and influential *Family Guy* fan site named, *Planet Family Guy* (www.planet-familyguy.com). This site was chosen as it receives on average, 13,000 (A. Carter, personal communication, January 23, 2006) unique visitors a day, has played a role in the campaigns to have *Family Guy* commissioned for further episodes⁵ when the series has been threatened with cancellation, and has webmasters from a number of countries (and therefore news and locally relevant information for America, the UK and Australia/New Zealand), meaning a broad, global sample could

⁵ Technically *Planet Family Guy* was not involved in these campaigns, however, the site *Stewie's Minions* was involved (*Stewie's Minions: The first Save Family Guy* campaign, 2005) and now points to *Planet Family Guy*. According to *The Family Guy Directory* (n.d.), *Planet Family Guy* was created out of the merger of two other sites, one of which was *Stewie's Minions*.

be expected. The survey was made available for completion for 1 week⁶, during which time 376 accurately⁷ completed surveys were received.

Most of the survey questions were made up of two parts, a 'yes' or 'no' question and then a text field allowing respondents to provide more information and/or some qualitative data.

Most survey responses were answered adequately, however, it became apparent during analysis that there were some elements of bias and/or confusion, particularly surrounding qualitative, open ended fields. Questions were designed with text fields to allow respondents to provide extra information, similar to the way focus group participants did. In some responses this information was most useful, in others it was left blank, or answered incorrectly⁸. The other issue arising with this method of survey is that it creates a great deal of qualitative data that requires post-coding prior to quantitative analysis – an exercise that is time consuming and permits bias. It is suggested that the 'optimal length' for a mail out survey is 125 questions and that this number can increase if respondents are interested in the topic (Dillman, cited in Balnaves & Caputi, 2001, p. 85). The length of the *Family Guy* survey and that respondents were recruited through a *Family Guy* fan site should have resulted in a greater response rate than occurred⁹. Most survey responses that were received, were adequate, however, some were incomplete¹⁰. As the survey was administered over the Internet the research is not a representative sample of *Family Guy* viewers, thus impacting upon the results.

⁶ In actual fact it was available for a little longer than this (about 10 days) as the webmaster did not remove it in time. At the 1 week mark, it was advertised on *Planet Family Guy* that the survey was no longer available and only results that were received in this time period were used.

⁷ The total number of surveys received was greater than this though some sent through were completely blank while others were sent twice: these were disregarded.

⁸ When answered incorrectly, responses ranged from nonsensical rants to abuse and, in some cases, it was clear that the respondent had not read/understood the question; such as question 26, where respondents were asked to rank the importance of televisual devices. These fields were often filled out with hours.

⁹ It should be noted that Dillman was referring to mail out surveys and it is likely that the optimal length and response rate for online surveys will be different. In any case, 376 responses from an estimated 91,000 visitors appears low.

¹⁰ A number of respondents left all qualitative sections blank, and some questions were ignored/missed altogether.

There is a tendency for the data from the focus group and the data from the online survey to be considered in opposition to one another, however, it needs to be understood that this is a result of the fact that members of the focus group are different types of media consumers to that of the majority of survey respondents.

This research represents an introduction to a number of areas and was further constrained due to the time (6 months) and space (maximum 15,000 words) limitations of an honours thesis.

Literature Review

In recent years there has been an increase in animation produced with an older audience in mind, following the success of programs at international animation festivals and the emergence of smaller cable television networks such as Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network (Neuwirth, 2003, p. 250). Despite this increase in production, there appears to have been little consideration of why this has occurred. There is an abundance of historical analysis of cartoon series and animators (Bendazzi, 1994; Grant, 2001) and even detailed explanations of the mechanics of today's animation industry are available (Raugust, 2004). Yet why animation is being produced for an adult or alternative audience is not made explicitly clear.

There are perhaps two aspects worth consideration; why is it being produced and why is it being viewed? Neuwirth (2003), unlike other authors, examines the animation of the last couple of decades and pinpoints animated series that have resulted in a shift in the way producers and television networks think of animation audiences, namely realising that it is something that can be produced for adults. It has been said a number of times that generation y watch *Family Guy* (according to viewer demographics) (Wolk, 2005), often repeatedly (Itzkoff, 2004), though why this is the case has not been covered.

If animation production is being produced increasingly for an adult audience, in theory there should be an audience ready and waiting for new series, however, the reasons behind this have not been explored. Johnson (2005) suggests that popular culture is becoming increasingly complex and that this complexity leads to a greater level of enjoyment as a result of satisfaction at 'decoding' the complexity. *Family Guy* is arguably more complex than other programs and while it excludes some viewers, generation y grew up watching the more 'alternative' and complex animated programs that while not necessarily produced with children in mind, often aired in children's timeslots. As a result they arguably possess the skills required to understand a program like *Family Guy*, more so than other generations.

The complexity evident in *Family Guy* is likely to be a part of the reason why it rated poorly during its first three seasons, resulting in its cancellation. The series was subjected to erratic scheduling (Murphy, 2004) encouraging the establishment of what Anderson (2003) terms an 'imagined community' of fans. Turner (2004) mentions being a fan of *The Simpsons* (1989-2006) while in college in the early 1990s and attending screenings held at bars which allowed fans to meet one another and discuss the show (pp. 2-3, p. 7). The same sort of interaction is occurring today, although this time with generation y, who rather than meeting in a bar, are meeting on the Internet.

Research suggests that children and adolescents do not make up the largest demographic of internet users (Chen, Boase & Wellman, 2002, p. 88), however, they will use the internet differently. Brignall and Valey (2005) suggest that the internet contains its own set of rules for communication and socialising and that perhaps, having grown up with the medium, young people are more adept at making full use of it. That generation y would readily take to the Internet and associated technologies is hardly surprising as they are characterized as valuing technology highly and having been marketed to heavily (Grose, 2005, pp. 14, 91). The imagined community built

around *Family Guy* is possibly also a result of *Family Guy* viewers being members of a generation that is “highly connected to each other” (Grose, 2005, p. 14).

Family Guy viewers identify strongly with the series and cite it as important in the establishment and maintenance of their friendship groups. Turner’s (2004) work comes across as anecdotal at best, yet it is made clear that the sense of community that he felt through the shared experience of viewing *The Simpsons* was of vital importance. This is the case for viewers of *Family Guy* today as friendships are strengthened through a sense of shared experience (Hardin & Conley, 2001, pp. 8-9) and it is likewise important for individuals to have a sense of belonging (Fiske, 2004, p. 16). Though how a television series can serve this function is something that has not been adequately addressed.

This need to be familiar with *Family Guy* and its history of being canceled and rescheduled without warning has led to the collection of episodes and information. There has been a substantial amount of work done to consider collecting by the likes of Belk (1995), Baudrillard (1996), and Pearce (1992), however, their views relate to traditional forms of collection. The internet has made collecting of traditional items easier by making them more accessible, though has also made the widespread collection of digital media files possible. While Belk (1995) provides what appears to be a solid definition of what collecting is, there are points that need addressing in the context of collecting as it occurs presently, particularly the collection of digital media files.

While connections can be made between these texts and the questions asked can have answers constructed, it is the aim of this paper to probe and explore these areas further. A dearth of appropriate research has necessitated the undertaking of primary research, which has unfortunately reduced the amount of analysis that could be performed upon other texts.

Chapter 1

The *Family Guy* audience

The animated series *Family Guy* (1999-2006), is not broad in its appeal, instead it speaks to a certain demographic, made up predominantly of members of generation y. While *Family Guy* is often referred to as a program with a cult following (Wolk, 2005; Lowry, 2005; P, 2004), those who view *Family Guy* with their friends have usually met one another through their social and environmental circumstances, rather than as a result of their shared enjoyment of the series. The survey results show that viewers are media savvy and tend to have access to multiple televisual devices, yet over half of them play some form of sport. Televisual entertainment is important to respondents, however, the level of interest in other areas suggests that it makes up but a small part of their entertainment needs.

Family Guy audience member's Backgrounds

The establishment of where one generation ends and another begins is somewhat sketchy...there is no consensus on dates, especially when it comes to generation x and generation y. 76.6% of the survey respondents were under 25 years of age¹¹ (see Figure 1). Viewership of *Family Guy* drops sharply with an increase in age and only 1.7% of respondents were aged 40 years and over.

What this means for *Family Guy* is that its audience base is strongly generation y¹². Some social commentators, such as Michael Grose, suggest that generation y begins

¹¹ To avoid the potential for ethical/legal issues associated with underage survey participants in various countries, the age ranges available to respondents began with 18-21 years old. However, it appears that some respondents were in fact under the age of 18 as responses to some qualitative question fields were somewhat juvenile and often mentioned school. Whilst school may refer to tertiary education, it needs to be acknowledged that this may not always be the case.

¹² It should be noted that the term generation y is problematic, if for no other reason than that it covers such a large range of ages and to assign the same characteristics to individuals who may have been born 20 years or more apart is risky. Ideally, generation y should be broken into sub-generations, though for the scope of this project this was not possible.

as early as those born in 1976 (2005, p. 14), in which case 92% of the respondents are members of generation y. This is a generation that has grown up with widespread computer usage, the Internet and mobile telephones. They are technologically savvy, yet according to research, use the Internet less than generation x (Chen, Boase & Wellman, 2002, p. 88). Generation y will, however, use the Internet differently to older generations (downloading more material, more often, for example, according to Freestone and Mitchell, generation y are more permissive of piracy (2004, p. 126)), perhaps accounting for the way in which they relate to *Family Guy*.

88% of survey respondents were male, suggesting that either *Family Guy* is more popular with males than with females and/or that the *Planet Family Guy* site has a disproportionately large male audience. It is tempting to say that *Family Guy* is indeed more popular with males given these results and articles written on adult animation viewership that suggest *Family Guy* and programs similar to it, are viewed more by men. However, to make such an assertion is risky as there are other factors involved¹³.

When asked how they met their friends who like/watch *Family Guy*, 88.6% of respondents clearly knew each other before viewing *Family Guy*; answering that they already knew their friends that watch *Family Guy*, that they met at school, at work, or that they were long term childhood friends (see Figure 2). Only 1.7% said that they met as a result of *Family Guy*, with a further 2.3% saying they met online. In this way it can be surmised that *Family Guy* does not often bring viewers together...it does not usually make them friends. Instead, *Family Guy* may strengthen existing ties created as a result of other circumstances, (namely face to face interactions at school, work and social situations). This appears to be an important role: 98.1% of respondents had friends who shared their interests, and 97.3% had friends who like *Family Guy*.

¹³ It is possible that the authors of articles (for example Wolk, 2005 and Itzkoff, 2004) on adult animation are exhibiting bias and since an even sample of genders was not sought for the survey, it is possible that this figure is inaccurate and not representative of the 'true' *Family Guy* audience. For example, perhaps females view *Family Guy* in a more casual manner, thus not frequenting a website such *Planet Family Guy*.

Friendships are strengthened through shared experience (Hardin & Conley, 2001, pp. 8-9) and the viewing of *Family Guy* may support the establishment of an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 2003, p. 25). Arguably, this is a community to which most *Family Guy* viewers actively belong, in as much as they circulate information or files related to the program to each other (58.6% share information and 62.8% share episodes). *Family Guy* has established a particularly strong fan community, in that it owes its continuing existence to fan-based protests upon cancellation of the series. The very fact that *Family Guy* returned to production at all was because of the viewer response. As the president of Fox said, "all we were really doing is following the people's choice" (cited in Wolk, 2005). Consequently, *Family Guy* viewers (if they choose to believe and/or are involved in action) are part of something bigger than themselves, part of a group, providing a sense of belonging that is particularly important (Fiske, 2004, p. 16). Some even went as far as naming the relationships they are afforded through knowing *Family Guy* as constituting a "secret society", magnifying their importance through the exclusion of others (Fiske, 2004, pp. 436-439).

Participants of the focus group had all met through attending the same school, with the exception of one member of the group, who was introduced through a mutual friend due to their common interest in lanning^C. 80.8% of survey respondents indicated they had family members who shared their interests, and while the focus group participants also had family members that shared their interests, they provided extra information suggesting that their family dynamic was more complex than that. Focus group participants said they had family members who shared their interests but that they had developed their interests themselves, perhaps introducing them to the rest of their family, "we pretty much like...just by ourselves go off and watch things". As a result of this there is a feeling that a program such as *Family Guy* 'belongs' to them. A sense of ownership is created out of the way in which viewers seemingly discover the program for themselves. A number of survey respondents claimed to have introduced their friends to *Family Guy*, with one saying "I started watching it and my carent [sic] friends started to watch after I introduced them to it. I got my

friends to like *Family Guy*.” Respondents to the survey also expressed pride at having been the first in their group to ‘discover’ *Family Guy* and expose others to it. This in turn has led to viewers, particularly these early adopters, identifying with the program even more strongly than may have been the case otherwise.

Dependence upon televisual entertainment

Given that most respondents are of generation y, it was expected that that the majority would say they could not see themselves living without televisual entertainment, as they have grown up with this form of technology (Grose, 2005, p. 92). Yet 64% replied they could live without televisual entertainment, with over half the total number of respondents saying they had interests outside of televisual entertainment. Of these, 20.4% had reservations about living without televisual entertainment, saying things such as: it would take getting used to, and that it would be hard. Of those that said they could live without televisual entertainment, 10.7% said that their lives would be boring without it. A number commented that they wouldn’t know what to do with themselves. These results seem to suggest that they see televisual entertainment as important, but perhaps not important enough to obsess over.

The focus group participants had a harder time dealing with the idea of a loss of televisual entertainment, “I think this goes for everyone. As sad as it may seem...it would be hard for me to find something to do, cause it fills in time, quite a lot”. The general consensus was that it would not be possible to live without televisual entertainment. There was one participant who suggested living without televisual entertainment wouldn’t be as dire as the others made out, however, his suggestion that “people did that before so what’s so hard about it now? You just have to adjust”, was quickly decried by the others¹⁴. The question of living without televisual entertainment and just how easy participants would find it to learn to adjust was the

¹⁴ Later during the session this same participant tried once more to have his opinion heard and was again dismissed by the others. On every other point, the members of the focus group were able to reach consensus, or at very least acknowledge and respect each other’s views.

only point that elicited opinions so strong that certain view points were not validated by the group. However, the focus group participants are a particular type of televisual entertainment user: they rely greatly on their computers, spending the majority of their spare time gaming. As such, it is likely that they possess different opinions to the majority of survey respondents relating to televisual entertainment usage (consider Figure 3 where only 49.6% of respondents listed computer games as an interest).

Figure 2 suggests, that respondents do not rely on televisual entertainment for the formation of their social groups. However, generation y is considered to be “highly connected to each other” (Grose, 2005, p. 14), so while they may not rely greatly on televisual entertainment to establish social connections, it is conceivable that the loss of such technologies would impact on their socialising¹⁵. The focus group members not only play computer games online, but also against one another as a part of LANs (Local Area Networks^C). Some participants lament their lack of computer power, however, as it excludes them from some activities within the group, namely playing particular games. This indicates how important it is to keep current with technology to retain friendship groups.

Of those surveyed, 65.7% of respondents had access to their own computer, their own television, VCR and DVD player, cable television, broadband Internet, messaging software, a mobile phone, an mp3 player and a gaming console (see Figure 3)¹⁶. The key items of choice, the computer and television, are owned by the respondents themselves (not a family/household item) with over 95% owning both. With both mobile phone and messaging software (such as ICQ, IRC, MSN and, AIM) usage

¹⁵ Televisual entertainment is required for the formation of social groups not only through shared experience but for the establishment and maintenance of relationships (“Online interactions fill communication gaps between face-to-face meetings” (Quan-Haase, Wellman, Witte & Hampton, 2002, p. 294)). When it is considered that 81% of teens use email and 70% use instant messaging (Brignall & Valey, 2005, p. 336), it is clear the loss of such technology would impact upon their socializing.

¹⁶ Within the survey, respondents were asked if they had their own computer, their own television, their own VCR, and their own DVD player. As for pay television, broadband Internet, messaging software, mobile phones, mp3 players and gaming consoles, respondents were asked only if they had access to the devices. No mention was made of ownership.

over 81%, it is clear that it is not solely entertainment value they appreciate, but the connectedness they feel with their peers. Yet as illustrated by Figure 14, more time is spent using televisual entertainment for entertainment purposes (52% of time) than socialising (15%) though this may be a result of entertainment (i.e. watching a film) simply taking longer than socialising does and may not be indicative of importance to respondents.

All members of the focus group make use of messaging software, and some use forums as well to stay in touch with one another and with those who live outside their local area. They all use the same program (though have experimented with other software), and during the focus group discussed using one program in particular to communicate with one another on a regular basis, again highlighting the need to keep current with technology to retain friendships; but also the importance of socialising to the group.

When asked about their interests, respondents favored televisual entertainment (see Figure 3). However, less technology-based pastimes/interests still rated highly; literature (56.8%), sport (54.4%), and art (28.8%), suggesting again televisual entertainment is not 'that' important to respondents. Members of the focus group, however, were once again quite different to the majority of survey respondents, showing little to no interest in anything outside of televisual entertainment. Some participants played organized sports and while this was tolerated by other focus group members, most had no interest in participating themselves. Informal sport¹⁷ on the other hand was decidedly looked down on by participants. They did not see it as an acceptable hobby and considered it as something undertaken by those without many friends. However, it does appear to be that this attitude is something the participants have developed over time, "gradually it's just like...that's what you do and you just pretty much don't do anything else". Given that some respondents partake in sporting

¹⁷ The focus group were asked if they played informal sport and were provided with the example of kicking a ball at a park.

activities and others have done so in the past, arguably, they would not find a loss of televisual entertainment as dire as they currently make out.

Perhaps more interesting than respondent's access to televisual devices are the cases where respondents have multiples of a device. It became apparent during focus group discussions that while the group preferred computers for gaming to gaming consoles, some of those that did have gaming consoles, had more than one. Of survey respondents that had a gaming console, 36% had three different gaming consoles (see Figure 6) and some claimed to have as many as five or more. This sounds excessive, though the reasons behind such numbers are quite reasonable. Often different games are available on different consoles¹⁸, and console technology is upgraded quite often, roughly every 5 or 6 years a new 'generation' console is released (List of video game consoles, 2006). The expenditure involved in owning a gaming console can be quite high¹⁹ and as such it appears respondents are hesitant to get rid of superseded models unnecessarily.

Given that 72.4% of survey respondents say they have access to all the media and televisual entertainment devices they could want/use suggests one of two things: either *Family Guy* viewers value technology so highly that they must have everything available to them, or that they believe that they can not/do not need to have everything and as a result are content with what they have. Given Figure 6, the later seems unlikely. The probable reason for such results is that the majority of respondents were members of generation y (see Figure 1), a generation that values technology highly (Grose, 2005, p. 14). Generation y has been marketed to 'heavily', making up "the second biggest market segment behind baby boomers in terms of volume" (Grose, 2005, p. 91), meaning that respondents are probably just heavy consumers. According to Grose, companies are marketing to generation y in a manner

¹⁸ Take for example the Nintendo/Sega rivalry of the 1990s with Mario and Sonic games.

¹⁹ When you consider the purchase of the console itself, extra controls, memory cards and games. Presently the Sony Playstation 2 retails for \$189, yet with the addition of a second controller, a memory card and perhaps three games, this can blow out to over \$450. The latest game console, the X-box 360 has a base level system retailing for \$484 and a pro level system for \$643, however, this is without a second controller or any games (JB Hi-Fi, n.d.).

they will respond to, magnifying the ‘semiotic redundancy’ (Braham, 2003, p. 131) of technology based products even more by making them fashion items²⁰.

When participants of the focus group were asked to provide an approximation of the total number of hours they spend per week using televisual entertainment, there was not a single member of the group that was able to quantify their usage. When surveyed, nearly 40% of respondents did not provide an estimation of the total number of hours they spend per week using televisual entertainment²¹. Of those that did answer, there are perhaps two significant types of televisual users evident (see Figure 7). There is a large peak of survey respondents at 20 hours per week, and another smaller peak at 100 hours. While the majority of respondents spend 20 hours per week on televisual entertainment, the second spike may be evidence of students or those who use televisual entertainment as a part of their employment as this number requires 14 hours per day spent using televisual entertainment devices. Within the survey results it is possible to suggest that there are different sorts of televisual entertainment consumers, even within generation y.

Televisual entertainment and sport

Despite the large number of hours spent on televisual entertainment, 56.9% of survey respondents play some form of sport. As Figure 8 indicates, the sporting activities pursued vary greatly²² – respondents listed over 80 different sporting activities that

²⁰ Although it should be noted that semiotic redundancy in terms of technological items is problematic. Semiotic redundancy tends to refer to items that still possess some use value but are replaced for fashion’s sake. The problem with technological items being labeled as semiotically redundant is that they have progressively diminishing use values as newer and ‘better’ items are produced (a process that occurs rather regularly). This is particularly apparent in the release of computer games that become more demanding of computer hardware, requiring users to upgrade their computers to play.

²¹ This figure is made up of respondents that simply left the question blank for reasons unknown and those who filed it out incorrectly by, for example, providing more hours than are in a week. Although the ‘exaggeration’ of the number of hours spent may be the result of respondents multitasking, a common practice, particularly amongst members of generation y (Wallis, 2006; Colkin, 2001).

²² It must be noted that these figures are not indicative of sports played per country, but representative of sports played by respondents of the survey, i.e. since more Americans responded to the survey than any other nationality, American Football, Baseball and Basketball feature quite prominently.

they take part in. Even more surprising is that of those that play sport, 54.7% participate in more than one sporting activity. Figure 9 demonstrates there is no correlation between the number of sports played, in some cases zero, and the number of hours spent per week using televisual entertainment. This can be seen by the linear trend line presented on the graph. Figure 10 shows sporting activities adoption rates in countries with a significant number of respondents. In Australia, America and England, over 50% of respondents that play sport, play more than one.

The high incidence of sports participation suggests that for the majority of respondents, sporting activity makes up a part of their overall lifestyle and that televisual entertainment, whilst an important part of their lifestyle is just that, a part of their lifestyle. Clearly, when a new pastime is introduced into an individual's schedule, something must be given up or no longer be pursued as often (Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 2002, p. 21). The assumption that increased use of televisual entertainment leads to a lower incidence of sports participation, or indeed other social pursuits, appears unfounded. The downloading of television episodes from the Internet (not to mention VCR and digital hard drive recording) also makes it possible to participate in time shifting, which could allow for more sports to be pursued. So rather than changes in televisual entertainment being the death knell for sporting activities, in some instances it can allow increased sports participation.

New Interests

Perhaps not surprisingly, when asked if they had come across new interests as a result of using the Internet, most survey respondents and focus group participants listed televisual entertainment, namely television programs and computer games. However, there was again a sense of the need to find things for themselves: 70.5% of survey respondents answered that they had discovered new interests, with only 23.2% finding new interests from their online friends. Although group socialising is clearly

important to *Family Guy* viewers, these results would suggest that the way in which they socialize is through discussion of interests they already know they share.

Other interests listed by participants were predominantly television programs, where respondents had searched out other programs, in some instances as a result of discovering *Family Guy*. Focus group participants explained how a simple bit of curiosity about another program could develop into a fully fledged interest. Some searched out programs such as *Lost* (2004-2006) after receiving positive testimonials from others, and immersed themselves in the plotlines thereafter; while other participants said they downloaded complete seasons, having previously resisted the urge to watch a program (either on the computer or on television), only to find in some instances that it became their favorite show after having the opportunity to view multiple episodes in one sitting.

Importance of televisual entertainment

That televisual entertainment is important to *Family Guy* audience members is clear, however, just how important it is to them is perhaps less tangible. 60% of respondents answered that televisual entertainment was quite important or very important to them (see Figure 11)²³, with 52% of respondents' time using televisual entertainment (see Figure 5) spent on entertainment. They claim they could live without televisual entertainment (64% said they could), although it appears it is a required and important part of their type of lifestyle (consider Figures 3, 5, 9). Even if it is used mostly for entertainment, they still view this as a valid and important use.

Reasons for downloading

²³ It should be noted that respondents were asked to rate televisual entertainment according to the categories provided in Figure 11, categories that are subjective by nature and perhaps account to some degree for the ambiguity discussed here.

Of those respondents that admitted to downloading various media (see Figure 12), 94.3% download music, which is to be expected given the growth of the music download industry (both legal and illegal) over the last few years²⁴. A more surprising Figure, considering bandwidth limitations and the infancy of the industry (for example, Apple's video Ipod has only been available since October 2005 (Klaassen, 2005)), is that 58.8% of respondents download television programs. Such a high incidence of downloaded television programs could mean one of two things: that respondents are not willing to pay for copies of programs (i.e. DVD releases); or that television programs and/or the file format presently available to them are inadequate.

When this point was broached with the focus group, the general consensus was that they would not be willing to pay for television episode downloads, namely because of the write protection placed upon these files²⁵. Participants saw this as too limiting an option, they wanted to be able to use the file as they saw fit. They listed a number of programs that they were interested in, yet they only download them. This may be a result of the limitations imposed upon commercially released DVD copies of programs²⁶ or the cost. Though a more important factor appears to be the attitude participants had towards downloading, taking great pride in their downloads, similar to the pride associated with collector culture (Belk, 1995, p. 76).

The focus group were clearly interested in television programs but admitted to not watching much broadcast television, preferring instead to download episodes to watch in their own time and space. Put simply, illegal downloads were the medium of choice for television programs as these were deemed adequate for their needs. They did not like being forced to watch a program when a television network deemed it should be aired. Neither did they feel pay TV services were worthwhile as they were seen as being a waste of money due to the still pervasive advertising and being still

²⁴ In the 7 days from Christmas to New Years 2005-2006, a record 20 million songs were downloaded legally from iTunes and other retailers (Garrity, 2006).

²⁵ There are a limited number of times they may be moved from one computer to another, they can only be copied as data files (i.e. not made into a DVD) and cannot be sent to another user via the Internet (Apple – iTunes – Videos, 2006).

²⁶ Such as Macrovision, Content Scrambling System, Region codes and disabled user operations (DVD, 2006).

too far behind American broadcaster's²⁷ schedules. DVDs were not an alternative because they are released too late, and compromised by copy limitations. This is in stark contrast to the majority of survey respondents who admitted to downloading television programs. They often added that they only retained downloaded copies until episodes were commercially available, saying that illegal downloads, particularly of *Family Guy*, were wrong. This duality illustrates the differences in ethical attitudes towards use of the Internet and media between different televisual entertainment users.

By far the biggest motivator to download television episodes, including *Family Guy*, is a result of focus group participants and survey respondents feeling the need to keep up with television programs. This means keeping up with friends, knowing episodes as deeply as your contemporaries, but also, (and this is more of an issue for those outside of America where most programs air first) keeping up with the most recent episode aired. Members of the focus group expressed annoyance at having major plotlines being disclosed by other Internet users, and cited this as a key reason to be up with the latest episodes. Survey respondents were of a similar frame of mind, citing the need to keep up with their friends. Something which is important, as "consumers use goods to make and maintain social relationships" (Isherwood, cited in Corrigan, 1998, p. 17). However, survey respondents also said that they relied on *Family Guy* to make them happy or help them relax, again creating a need for episodes to be readily accessible and for a variety/library of episodes to be available to choose from, highlighting once more the importance of televisual entertainment.

Conclusion

²⁷ Discussing Foxtel, participants said that it wasn't good enough and were instead looking forward to video on demand. As regular Internet users and consumers of a select few programs, the focus group had experiences where other users had provided information on an episode or a major plot line (known as spoilers) before they had seen it themselves, highlighting the need to keep up to date and the inability to do so, in their minds; without illegal downloads.

The results of the survey and of the focus group suggest that the *Family Guy* audience is primarily made up of generation y, mostly male and highly technologically minded. They have access to many different televisual entertainment mediums and devices, often to the point where they claim to be content with their technological resources. The number of hours spent using televisual devices varies. However, most say they use televisual entertainment for more than 20 hours a week, with some claiming to spend as many as 100 hours or more. Despite this, most respondents undertake sporting activities, with over half of these playing more than one sport. They value televisual entertainment highly, yet are conscious of the fact that it is not a vital part of their lives. They place importance upon televisual entertainment and require friends to share their interests, yet they meet as a result of finding like minds in their social circumstances, rather than searching for friends who share their passions. They download media in order to keep up with their friends (and to avoid spoilers) and in some instances, see it as their right to do so since television broadcast services do not meet their needs²⁸.

²⁸ It should be made clear that some of these figures are a result of the method in which the survey was administered. Had it been a mail-in survey, or a survey advertised on another website, it may have garnered different respondents.

Chapter 2

Family Guy's popularity

Arguably, generation y watches *Family Guy* (1999-2006) more than other generations because they have been conditioned by other television programs to enjoy the style of story telling and subject matter covered, such as non-linear stories and absurdist and nonsensical plot lines²⁹. In addition to this, the viewing habits of generation y (encompassing elements such as television viewing and the downloading of episodes) have been conducive to the growing popularity of *Family Guy*. The trading/sharing of episodes and information to build a complete collection of the series (an element of generation y's viewing habits) also appears to have led to more viewers. *Family Guy*, more so than many other programs, has made a connection with its audience that makes this sort of collecting relationship possible.

Why do participants like *Family Guy*?

When considering why *Family Guy* is popular with its audience, it is perhaps worth while considering programs of a similar vein and the viewing audiences they attract. *Family Guy* is the latest in a long line of animated series that push the boundaries of what both audience and censors will accept in a medium that is still characterized as predominantly for children³⁰. There are two main reasons why focus group participants and survey respondents enjoy *Family Guy*. When asked, the vast majority provided the answer, 'it's funny'. However, when this response is examined more closely, *Family Guy's* popularity may be a result of viewers (mostly members of generation y) growing up with animated series and television programs of a similar

²⁹ Plot lines such as 'Da Boom' when every building on earth is destroyed as a result of the Millenium bug, or bizarre twists, such as Peter in 'North by North Quahog' telling Lois as she enters the room that he didn't have his hand down his pants with no prior reference to this action, or GI Joe appearing to give drug and alcohol advice in the toilets of the school dance.

³⁰ The time at which animation became something considered more for children is difficult to pin point, however, what has become an issue is what constitutes an adult cartoon. A good example of this is the fact that Network 7 aired *Family Guy* (a program that receives an M, M15+ or MA 15+ rating for DVDs released in Australia) as a part of their school holiday lineup (Murphy, 2004).

style (such as *The Tick*^D (1994-1996), *The Ren and Stimpy Show*^E (1991-1996) and, *Earthworm Jim*^F (1995-1996). In many ways it is more challenging than other programs, with more complex stories, making viewers 'work' to decipher plot lines and jokes, providing satisfaction, something which is a result of the programs that came before it.

***Family Guy* and 'the Sleeper Curve'**

The 'sleeper curve' refers to the gradual increase in cognitive demands placed upon consumers of popular media. As time goes by, television programs, such as *Family Guy* are created, based loosely on those that have come before them. Though for programs to truly develop, it becomes necessary for them to draw from genres other than their own.

Perhaps unjustly, *Family Guy* has often been considered in opposition to *The Simpsons* (1989-2006) rather than being recognized as an entity unto itself³¹. When it comes to considering *Family Guy*'s appeal to adolescents, however, this opposition is useful. The similarities between the two programs are quite obvious, albeit superficial. They're both programs which feature families; dumb father, house-wife mother and 2.3 children. *The Simpsons* may well be accused of plagiarizing the animated sit-com family, made popular by *The Flintstones* (1960-1966)³², particularly when it is considered that both programs attained prime-time viewing positions, and stayed there, something which is historically unusual for an animated series. After *The Flintstones*, there wasn't another animated series airing during prime time until

³¹ For example, Douglas Coupland suggests that *Family Guy* may be 'better' than *The Simpsons* (cited in Turner, 2004, p. vii), and in an episode of *The Simpsons* titled 'The Italian Bob' there is a scene where an Italian police officer, looking through a book of American criminals, finds a picture of Peter Griffin (from *Family Guy*) with 'Plagiarismo' written underneath it. These two examples are just a small part of the rivalry between the two shows, though to say they are the same would be inaccurate. Rather, they enjoy a rivalry as a result of their both being about American families and a part of the Fox network's primetime programming.

³² In fact *The Simpsons*' creator Matt Groening actually perpetuated this early on. Following the *The Simpsons*' success on *The Tracey Ullman Show* Groening approached Fox to produce the show as a complete series describing it as "a *Flintstones* for the nineties" (cited in Turner, 2004, p. 21).

The Simpsons in 1989 (Hilton-Marrow & McMahan, 2003, p. 77). Yet, the similarity between these programs is rarely discussed. *The Flintstones/The Simpsons*, are certainly less frequently compared than *The Simpsons/Family Guy*. This may be a result of *The Simpsons*' style of story telling being vastly different to that of *The Flintstones* and that it is produced for a different style of television viewing. They are products of two distinctly different time periods. It should also be acknowledged, however, that *Family Guy* and *The Simpsons* are also of two distinctly different periods. It would be wrong to suggest that any of these programs copied one another. Rather, they have developed their own styles based upon a myriad of other programs.

The different time periods do not result in different programs solely because of changing social codes, but because of the ways in which entertainment is produced and what is expected of the audience. Steven Johnson (2005) calls the gradual increase in popular entertainment's complexity 'the sleeper curve'. He suggests that viewers/consumers are increasingly required to use "systems analysis, probability theory, pattern recognition, and...*patience*" (2005, p. 9) to understand popular culture, stating that this means "The most debased forms of mass diversion...turn out to be nutritional after all" (2005, p. 9). For television, elements such as: 'multi-threading' (that is multi-thread or layered plot lines); the absence of 'flashing arrows' (requiring viewers to fill in the gaps in a story; where clues to the plot or the punch lines to jokes are alluded to, but not explicitly presented); and, social networks (the increasingly large number of supporting cast members that need to be followed, understood and, remembered). All of these elements add to the complexity and the cognitive demands placed upon the viewer, but also adds to the 'reward' and satisfaction as a result of accomplishing these cognitive requirements (Johnson, 2005, p. 77).

In the 1980s Matt Groening was invited to meet with television producers to discuss the possibility of producing a series of animated shorts for inclusion in *The Tracey*

Ullman Show (1987-1990)³³ on the strength of his success as a comic book artist, writer and creator. In the end Groening decided he didn't want to hand over the rights to his established comics and instead he created *The Simpsons* (Turner, 2004, pp. 16 – 17; Neuwirth, 2003, p. 6). During the early 1990s *The Simpsons* was hugely popular³⁴ ushering in a new era of animated television. *The Simpsons* brought animated television back to primetime (Hilton-Marrow & McMahan, 2003, p. 77), replicating the earlier success of *The Flintstones*. More importantly, its success inspired television producers to commission more animation. Unlike the animation of the 1980s, which were often based on the product lines of toy manufacturers³⁵ the 1990's programs such as *The Tick* (created by Ben Edlund, a comic book artist and writer) were pitched by those in the comic book industry and often based on established comic books series. Other series', even though they did not have a comic background, had a stronger focus on being new, edgy and in tune with the creators' vision³⁶, such as *The Ren and Stimpy Show* (created by John Kricfalusi as a result of his frustration at creativity being stifled as he saw it within the animation industry (cited in Neuwirth, 2003, p. 58)) and, *Rocko's Modern Life*^G (1993-1997) that was produced by Nickelodeon in association with the creator's production house, Joe Murray Productions³⁷. The comic book industry's audience has changed over time. Originally comics were often aimed at children but gradually some came to be read by an older audience also, such as *Spider-Man* (Lee, cited in DeFalco, 2004, pp. 20-21). The programs produced in the 1990s, however, often remained true to the original comics. They were often produced by companies involved in children's programming (*The*

³³ The 1980s saw an increase in animated television production prior to *The Simpsons*, following the deregulation of children's television in America by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), allowing to manufacturers to be involved in the production of animated series (Kline, 1993, pp. 277-278).

³⁴ By the end of 1990, \$750 million worth of official merchandising had been sold (Turner, 2004, p. 27).

³⁵ Such as *The Transformers*, *Care Bears* (1985-1988) and, *Dino-Riders* (1988).

³⁶ *The Tick* nearly wasn't made at all as there were difficulties in reproducing something for television that everyone involved was happy with, particularly that didn't veer too far away from the artistic vision of Edlund (cited in Neuwirth, 2003, p. 99).

³⁷ The first generation of commercial creators and animators cut their teeth on animated shorts for cinema (such as Walt Disney, Tex Avery and William Hanna and Joseph Barbera) and later full length features (Bendazzi, 1994, pp. 63, 137-139), initially working for the film industry, they became respected producers in their own right following their own vision (Bendazzi, 1994, pp. 61-62, 137-139). The creators of the 1990s were not the first to follow their own vision, but they were the first of a new generation to be given this opportunity.

Ren and Stimpy Show was produced by Nickelodeon, for example, who are probably best known for their series *Rugrats* (1991-2003)) even though the comics were not produced for children or even a mainstream audience. In this way, animation was gradually produced for an older audience, although perhaps not consciously.

The first full season of *The Simpsons* aired in 1989 and as such, is produced in the same primetime sit-com mold as programs such as *Roseanne*^H (1988-1997) and *Seinfeld*^I (1989-1998): “They wanted a different kind of humor – different from what we were used to in cartoons...They wanted a far more sitcom kind of humor” (Margot Pipkin, *The Simpsons* animation producer, cited in Neuwirth, 2003, p. 38). It is a program that offers relatively cheap laughs, often with a moralistic ending. Programs of this era are clear descendants of previously successful programs such as *MASH*^J (1972-1983). However, *The Simpsons* has managed to move with the times and has become increasingly complex, though this has been accomplished primarily through the links between recurring characters (social networks (see above)). The fact that parallels can be drawn between *The Simpsons* and previous mainstream successes has assured its position as watchable by most, by drawing on established television comedy convention.

Family Guy on the other hand is both familiar and unfamiliar. It often covers challenging or controversial subject matter and consists of inter-textual, historical and popular culture jokes and references that are not always explicitly clear to the viewer (a lack of ‘flashing arrows’). It does not tend to have multi threading in the way that Steven Johnson (2005) describes it, however, the constant jumping from the main story to flashback sequences (historical and popular culture references and memories of the characters) does constitute a form of multi-threading, perhaps a form of threading that is more suited to a series, as most multi-threaded television programs are serials. In this way *Family Guy* can be viewed as more complex than other programs, particularly *The Simpsons*. Yet it achieves this complexity with fewer characters than programs such as *The Simpsons*, and does so whilst still working within the ‘traditional’ sitcom framework, making it familiar.

Unlike *The Simpsons* (where there is arguably some ambiguity), *Family Guy* is clearly not for children, and in most instances is barely suitable for primetime³⁸ viewing (it has often received criticism for subject matter and been featured in the Parents Television Council's worst prime-time shows for family viewing list (Criticism of Family Guy, 2006)). This may provide the first indication of why it is popular with an adolescent audience...there is something illicit about it, it's a 'naughty' cartoon show, similar to *South Park*^K (1997-2006) and perhaps, more importantly, it is NOT *The Simpsons*. For some, *Family Guy* is considered as more adult than *The Simpsons*. As one respondent wrote, "it [*Family Guy*] seems to be popular with me as I am maturing and have moved out of watching the simpsons as the maturity of that program is really (sic) for youths". Whereas *South Park* earned mainstream popularity despite its crudeness³⁹, *Family Guy* has remained a relatively underground phenomenon because it tackles issues in a less direct manner and its complexity and style excludes some viewers.

Rather than being the anti-*Simpsons* or, the anti-cartoon⁴⁰ that *South Park* is, *Family Guy* draws on its similarity to lesser known animation of the 1990s. For some, the popular culture references and seemingly unrelated, slightly tasteless flashback sequences (e.g. Adolf Hitler in the episode, 'Death Has a Shadow' or Helen Keller in 'Peter's Got Woods'⁴¹) don't make any sense. These instances make *Family Guy* a

³⁸ Primetime refers to the early evening to late night (i.e. before midnight) period of programming. According to the Commercial Television Industry code of practice programs with an M classification can only be shown on weekdays between 8:30pm and 5:00am. Programs receiving an MA classification must be broadcast between 9:00pm and 5:00am (Commercial television industry code of practice, 2004, p.16), explaining the current scheduling of *Family Guy* on the 7 network.

³⁹ The shock value of *South Park* earned it mainstream coverage (Ott, 2003, pp. 220-221) and by association fans, whereas *Family Guy* has not had the same response due to its complexity.

⁴⁰ By anti-cartoon I mean that the style of animation is minimalist for design purposes (Biddle, 1997; Neuwirth, 2003, p. 18) and that its crudeness and vulgarity in terms of subject matter runs counter to what some may see as appropriate for animation. *Fritz the Cat*^M (1972), for example, is similarly crude and caused Bill Hanna to remark, "We don't need to pervert the industry. I truly feel that our medium should be used in the proper manner" (cited in Slafer, 1980, p. 260).

⁴¹ In 'Death Has a Shadow', Lois explains to her daughter Meg that most of the world's problems stem from poor self image, at which point a fantasy sequence begins, depicting Hitler as a scrawny young man working out at a gym who is jealous of a muscular Jew as his physique makes him popular with women. In 'Peter's Got Woods' Stewie comments that Brian's date will be more pathetic than the time

very strange program indeed particularly in comparison to the relatively straight forward narrative structure of *The Simpsons*⁴². However, for those who are familiar with programs like *Earthworm Jim*, *The Ren and Stimpy Show*, *Rocko's Modern Life*, *CatDog*^L (1998-2001), and *The Tick* (whose creator describes it as “weird, and stupid” (cited in Neuwirth, 2003, p. 98) nothing in *Family Guy* seems amiss. Such animated programs, while often scheduled in children’s viewing timeslots, were arguably not produced for children but are the sorts of programs that members of generation y would have grown up viewing (*Earthworm Jim* aired on Kids WB! during 1995 and 1996 (Earthworm Jim (TV series)), *The Ren and Stimpy Show* aired on Nickelodeon from 1991 to 1996 (The Ren and Stimpy Show), and *The Tick* was began broadcasting as a part of Fox Kids’ Saturday morning lineup in 1994 (Neuwirth, 2003, p. 100). *The Tick* was technically aimed at 8 to 12 year old boys for example. However, it ended up getting a stronger response from teens and university students on Comedy Central⁴³, with regular reruns (cited in Neuwirth, 2003, pp. 100 – 101). Despite this, younger viewers did tune in and as such have developed an appreciation and understanding for these more complex programs.

As the vast majority of *Family Guy* viewers are members of generation y (see 1.1), the characteristics of this age group need to be explored. Arguably they have grown up watching animation that makes demands on its viewers similar to the way *Family Guy* does. In addition to this, it has been suggested that many adults cannot enjoy watching animation, possibly due to the fact that it is too detached from reality (Gribbish, 1994, p. 18). *Family Guy* is perhaps more detached from reality than most cartoon series. Its sheer absurdity is both the reason for its immense popularity and the reason why some potential viewers are excluded from viewing (along with its complexity). Generations older than generation y may not be as familiar with this

he played marco polo with Hellen Keller. The sequence features Keller standing in the middle of a swimming pool, with Stewie swimming in circles calling ‘marco’.

⁴² It should be noted that *The Simpsons* do have popular culture references and flashback sequences also, though these are not as obscure as those in *Family Guy* and the jokes inherent within are depicted more explicitly.

⁴³ Comedy Central is a cable channel that was formed in 1991 and broadcasts programs such as *South Park*, *Drawn Together* (2004-2006) and *The Daily Show* (1996-2006).

style of story telling/animation, creating a situation where some adults are excluded while others (such as older members of generation y) are not.

Popular culture is becoming more complex, though this does not mean in subject matter alone. Minute details in *Family Guy* carry over from one season to the next without their origin or meaning being made obvious to the less devoted viewer (such as 'the greased up deaf guy' or the 'evil monkey'⁴⁴); story lines become more convoluted, with multiple threads running through a single episode (such as 'The Cleaveland – Loretta Quagmire'); and viewers are required to fill in the gaps within programs...they're forced to make connections that are merely alluded to in order to follow the plot or understand the joke.

With 25 years between them, it is clear that *The Simpsons* should differ substantially from *The Flintstones*. With 10 years between the premieres of *Family Guy* and *The Simpsons*, the same rule applies, *Family Guy* has become popular and differentiated itself from the more mainstream *The Simpsons*. Although, it is worthwhile remembering that while *The Simpsons* may be considered mainstream today, in 1989 it was just as confronting as *Family Guy* is today⁴⁵. Animation is becoming more complex (and in some cases, more adult) and will continue to do so as a part of development, but what this means is that to fully appreciate some productions, a degree of conditioning on the part of the viewer is required.

⁴⁴ Both characters appear sporadically, the greased up deaf guy discloses in 'North by North Quahog' that he used to be a lawyer, though his relationship with the other characters and his role in society is not made explicit. The evil monkey according to the episode 'Ready, Willing, and Disabled' became evil after finding his wife in bed with another monkey, though how he came to be in Chris' cupboard is not explained.

⁴⁵ *The Simpsons* "is the show most Australian parents forbid their children" (Neumann, 1996) and after more 'extreme' or adult programs have aired, "*The Simpsons* still represents the worst in television for many parents" (Alters, 2003, p. 165). Arguably, *The Simpsons* can be viewed as having a 'negative' impact on viewers, as discussed by Turner (2004, pp. 263-272), and even caused Barbara Bush to label it in 1990 as "the dumbest thing I had ever seen" (cited in Turner, 2004, p. 250). *The Simpsons* does not appear to have produced the sort of criticism leveled at *Family Guy* or *South Park*. Though *The Simpsons* was the first in a new generation of primetime animation and as such its reach is perhaps broader. While not as extreme as other programs *The Simpsons* is potentially more threatening due to its popularity and level of recognition with television viewers.

Family Guy episode analysis

During the first focus group session, participants watched the first episode of the first series of *Family Guy*, 'Death Has a Shadow'⁴⁶. This is an episode with which all the participants were familiar, so much so that they were anticipating following scenes, in some instances even quoting along with the television. This indicates the importance of the series to the group as it is unlikely they were aware of *Family Guy* when it first aired, meaning they search out past episodes to be familiar with the whole series. This episode was chosen deliberately as part of the research process because it had a good mix of references that may not be clear to an Australian audience (historical references and popular culture references) and has one of the 'better' story lines of the series.

By watching the episode with the participants it was possible to find out just what aspects of the program they enjoyed the most. As would be expected (given participants were all viewers of the show and admitted to watching episodes repeatedly) there were laughs throughout; for them, repeat viewings do not appear to diminish the entertainment value.⁴⁷ Reactions to many jokes were poor serving more as a sign of recognition, 'I remember this part', as familiarity reduced the humor due to a reduced spontaneity of the punch line.

Early on within the episode, there is a reference to Adolf Hitler and anti-Semitism which some participants indicated as a particularly favorite part of the episode. Another historical reference, the Tiananmen Square massacre, received a similar response. It would appear that the political incorrectness of the series is highly

⁴⁶ The title of this episode is said to be a reference to the titles given to old radio show dramas and is reportedly the way all episodes were to be titled early on (Death Has a Shadow References).

⁴⁷ Even so it would be interesting to consider at what point repeat viewings would no longer be enjoyable and how great an impact watching the episode together as a group (something that is unlikely to occur often) had upon the response.

valued. A sentiment echoed by a number of survey respondents who said they appreciated that *Family Guy* was not afraid to broach any subject⁴⁸.

What elicited the smallest laughs, as was suspected, were the references to American popular culture that - given the age of the participants - were virtually unknown. *The Brady Bunch* (1969-1974) parody seems to have been recognized but perhaps the limited understanding/knowledge surrounding *The Brady Bunch* resulted in a lacklustre response. A subsequent reference is made to Aunt Jemima's Pancakes, where Aunt Jemima calls through the window whether anyone wants any pancakes, to which Peter comments, "that's the worst we've got...Jemima's Witnesses". Participants' responses would suggest they understood the play on words of Jemima and Jehovah, though it is debatable whether or not they recognized the character herself. A Jerry Seinfeld parody also resulted in few laughs and actually made one participant feel the need to point out who it was. Scott Baio^N being attacked by a bear fared marginally better, however, it is likely this was a result of the scene being slapstick in nature, not the fact that it was Scott Baio being attacked.

The scenarios that received the big laughs were the more universal themes and references within the show; a scene where a toy company employee (who looks and speaks just like Woody Allen) at Peter's work suggests they produce a GI Jew action figure^O, the sequence depicting Peter as a lightweight when it comes to drinking and the scene where Peter's boss, upon receiving Michelangelo's David's phallus, hugs it and exclaims, "I shall call you Eduardo". Towards the end of the episode, during a court case, the mascot for the Kool Aid cordial company bursts through the wall yelling "ohh yeah", a reference to their commercials. This situation is funny and receives probably the best reaction from participants for the whole episode, though it is clear that they do not fully understand its relevance as one participant labeled the scenario as 'random'^P. At the following focus group session this scene was discussed again, and only one participant stated knowing that the jug represented a cordial

⁴⁸ This is similar to *South Park* (with episodes covering subject matter such as AIDS, racism and scientology), though the difference here is perhaps *South Park* goes too far. *Family Guy* is often politically incorrect but without being tasteless.

company, information that may have been obtained through the *Family Guy* direct to video movie, *Stewie Griffin: The Untold Story* (2005)⁴⁹.

So while viewers of *Family Guy* may indeed find the show hilarious, those unfamiliar with references to American popular culture are arguably viewing it in a less complete manner. As will be discussed in chapter 3, some viewers feel the need to make themselves familiar with all elements of the program and make the effort to search out the significance of unknown references. It could also be argued that a general lack of understanding is not all together detrimental to the series, as it means a greater level of cognitive work is required. According to Johnson this ensures a greater level of enjoyment: “the pleasure in these modern television narratives comes from the cognitive labor you’re forced to do filling in the details” (2005, p. 77).

***Family Guy* history**

During the first few seasons of *Family Guy*, as with most animated series⁵⁰, there was a period of distinct uncertainty as to its longevity. The increase in animation production following the success of *The Simpsons* led to an increase in animated television production during the 1990s (Raugust, 2004, p. 1; Hilton-Morrow & McMahan, 2003, p. 79). A number of well animated, well written series have faltered after only one season⁵¹ and *Family Guy* was very nearly another one of these. It was not immediately picked up for a second season at the end of its first run in 1999 and, after season three in 2002 it was cancelled until 2005, when it was renewed for a

⁴⁹ At the start of the movie there is a red carpet scene where the cast of the following movie are talking to reporters and the crowd. One of the characters present is the Kool Aid jug and someone yells out “Hey Kool Aid!”. This scene does not explicitly say that Kool Aid is a cordial, but it at least makes it clear where the jug is from.

⁵⁰ Series such as *Santo Bugito* (1995) and *Clerks: The animated series* (2000) were canceled within their first season. A part of the reason for this is likely to be that according to Raugust networks are increasingly taking control of the production of series directly as coproducers or complete owners (2004, pp. 72-73).

⁵¹ Bill Oakley and Josh Weinstein’s *Mission Hill* (1999-2000) is just one example. Oakley and Weinstein were both executive producers and writers on *The Simpsons* and yet even they were incapable of producing a series as successful as *The Simpsons*.

further two seasons after protests and respectable DVD sales⁵². This means there are two distinct periods of production; pre-cancellation and DVD release (1999-2002) and post-cancellation, airing on Adult Swim and DVD sales (2005-present).

The fact that *Family Guy* has now been produced (albeit on and off) for eight years suggests that it constitutes a relatively solid format and that the producers are doing something right. However, it did take time for an audience to be located and properly established, possibly another factor in its 'final' cancellation in 2002. During the first season the series was aired in a variety of different time slots (Wolk, 2005; Murphy, 2004), making the building of a strong audience base difficult. This fact may have motivated viewers to congregate on the Internet in an attempt to keep current with the series, or just to vent their frustrations. Seasons 2 and 3 suffered much the same scheduling fate, and with ratings not high enough for the Fox network (at one point the Nielson ratings for *Family Guy* dropped as low as 2.8/4 (complete ratings archive, 2002)), *Family Guy* was taken off the air again. At around the same time that *Family Guy* started production (the late 1990s), Cartoon Network⁵³, a cable channel devoted to animated series and animation production, began airing a late night 'adults only' series of cartoons in a fixed time slot named Adult Swim. For many, this was their introduction to *Family Guy*, along with reruns on the Fox network, however, it was Adult Swim that perhaps really targeted the audience that *Family Guy* was made for. Many survey participants mentioned seeing the program as a part of the Adult Swim lineup and also listed other Adult Swim series as television shows they would/already do collect episodes of (such as *Harvey Birdman, Attorney at Law* (2000-2005), *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* (2001-2005) and, *Sealab 2021*(2000-2005)). It was within this timeslot that some of the more resistant viewers were given the opportunity to see *Family Guy* for what it is, rather than a *Simpsons*' clone (Itzkoff, 2004). By being given a second (and a third) chance to establish a regular audience, *Family Guy* beat the odds and eventually acquired a large enough audience base to warrant continued

⁵² The *Family Guy: Volume One* DVD is the second highest selling TV DVD (Wolk, 2005)

⁵³ Cartoon Network was debuted in 1992 and has since produced many animated series including *Dexter's Laboratory* (1995-2003), *Samurai Jack* (2001-2004) and the Emmy Award winning *Powerpuff Girls* (1998-2005). They also own the rights to the Hanna-Barbera back catalogue (producers of *The Flintstones*, *Scooby Doo* (1969-2006), etc.).

production⁵⁴. This solid audience clearly contributed to DVD sales, and the scheduling issues during the show's first three seasons potentially encouraged viewers to congregate on the Internet⁵⁵, particularly following the show's 'final' cancellation in 2002.

After *Family Guy*'s first cancellation in 2000 a protest was launched by *Stewie's Minions*⁵⁶ in an attempt to bring the series back. There have been a number of notable Internet protests surrounding popular culture; the large scale Grey Tuesday⁵⁷ protest and the protest of Batman fans around the selection of Joel Schumacher as director of the *Batman and Robin* (1997) film⁵⁸ as outlined by Will Brooker in his book *Batman Unmasked* (2005). These are two good examples as they both received not only attention from those in charge, but engaged them in debate, ultimately resulting in a 'win' for the fans. The protest around *Family Guy*, however, is one of the few that has had a positive outcome, with creator Seth MacFarlane saying "I think the vast numbers of letters that were sent to Fox...had a great deal to do with its return. So we thank our fans for being so loyal, and for keeping the show on the air" (cited in *Stewie's Minions: the first Save Family Guy campaign*, 2005). This protest created a

⁵⁴ In fact Cartoon Network were so impressed with the number of viewers tuning in they offered to buy new episodes from Fox (Wolk, 2005).

⁵⁵ One *Family Guy* forum, named *Damn You All* (www.damnyouall.net) has over 11,000 members, for example.

⁵⁶ *Stewie* is the name of one of the key characters in *Family Guy* (see glossary). The *Stewie's Minions* website emerged as a result of email lists being created by fans trying to disseminate information and create a unified protest movement (*Stewie's Minions: the first Save Family Guy campaign*, 2005).

⁵⁷ UK DJ, DJ Dangermouse produced an album named the *Grey Album* using the vocals from Jay-Z's *Black Album* and audio pieced together from numerous samples taken from the Beatles' *White Album*. EMI refused to allow the album to be released. After a small number of promotional copies were leaked to the public, a protest was organized where protestors made the *Grey Album* available for download from their websites for one day only. Most protestors were then threatened with legal action themselves. Approximately 170 websites participated in the protest with an estimated 100,000 copies of the album downloaded on the one day (Grey Tuesday – Free the Grey Album February 24). EMI issued cease and desist notices, showing that they took note of fan's actions, even if it was only to protect their intellectual property.

⁵⁸ Following the release of *Batman Forever* (1995), directed by Joel Schumacher, some Batman fans had concerns for the following film. Their fears were founded as Schumacher produced another film that in their view, diverged greatly from what Batman should be and so various protests of sorts were organized (Brooker, 2005, pp. 302 – 305). The fan's protests were noted, as during a press tour George Clooney apologized for killing the batman franchise (Brooker, 2005, p. 305) and *Batman 5* which was originally to be released in 1999 (Brooker, 2005, p. 307) wasn't released until 2005 as *Batman Begins*, an attempt to 'reinvent' Batman and the result of a number of attempts to produce a 5th Batman film (*Bat to basics*, 2005, pp. 44-45; Russo, 2005, p. 68).

situation where fans feel protective of *Family Guy*⁵⁹, almost a sense of ownership as they are responsible for the series being renewed for further seasons. The different production periods, means that there are two distinct groups of viewers; those who have watched since day one, and those who have jumped on board after seeing reruns or DVD copies. Whilst *Family Guy* fans appear to be genuinely pleased that others take as much enjoyment out of the program as they do, there is a sense that those viewers who were early adopters feel a greater sense of ownership and pride at having been followers of the series from as early as 1999.

As a result of *Family Guy* being cancelled twice, viewers have been made acutely aware of the likelihood that their favorite series will one day (supposedly when it is no longer profitable, or within 9 years of production according to Seth McFarlane (P, 2004)) no longer be available. This perception has also influenced the way in which the *Family Guy* audience view episodes of the series.

What do participants get out of watching *Family Guy*

When asked what they get out of watching *Family Guy*, most participants answered 'it's funny' or 'it's entertaining', however, some participants said that it brought them together with their friends, that they felt like they belonged, or that they recognized that watching *Family Guy* meant they had a connection with others. It is believed that this is the case for most/all viewers (particularly considering the need survey respondents expressed to have friends who share their interests (1.1)), with perhaps only a select few being consciously aware of it.

In his book *Planet Simpson* (2004), Chris Turner talks of the regular meetings of *The Simpsons* fans at college campuses and bars around the United States during the early 1990s (pp. 2-3, p. 7). In a manner analogous to how *Family Guy* appears to speak to

⁵⁹ Some survey respondents download *Family Guy* episodes and retain them until DVDs are available, at which time they purchase the DVDs as they feel the need to support the production team, particularly the series creator, Seth McFarlane.

generation y, *The Simpsons* belonged to generation x before that (Turner, 2004, p. 6), and for much the same reasons, namely that it is a program that appears to be produced 'for' them⁶⁰. Regular meetings and discussions around *Family Guy*, however, instead of occurring in a bar, arguably occur more regularly online as there are fewer limitations (such as location or age restrictions) to viewers communicating this way. One *Family Guy* forum named *Damn You All* (www.damnyouall.net) has over 11,000 members, for example.

The history of *Family Guy* is slightly more problematic to chart than *The Simpsons* as there is a significant break within production periods. *Family Guy* brings people together through a sense of shared experience of watching the program and satisfaction as a result of the 'sleeper curve' (see 2.2). Though arguably some feel the shared experience more so, by being actively involved in the show's production (via protests), through Internet interactions and through the circumstances surrounding *Family Guy*'s history that has encouraged viewers to discuss the show. In this way some viewers feel not only a sense of community, but are granted membership to a community that is more 'real'. Real in the sense that the 'imagined community' makes its presence felt, in this case, by being involved in the 'Save *Family Guy*' campaigns.

Arguably, this is a generation more segmented in its interests and experiences than previous generations⁶¹. Yet *Family Guy* brings together some members despite the fact that it is not viewed the same way by everybody, the way that the newspaper may be read and assists in the formation of nation (Anderson, 2003, p. 25)⁶². *Family Guy*

⁶⁰ Turner (2004) does not explicitly discuss generation x here, however, given that he was attending *The Simpsons* viewings at bars during the early 1990s and that in early episodes the Simpson children refer to themselves as generation xers, it is possible to make this connection.

⁶¹ When asked what their interests were, survey respondents (most of which were generation y (1.1)) listed nearly 70 different interests that had not been provided for them. Couple with this the fact that interests such as music and film will be shaped by personal preferences and that "Gen Y appears to be 'notoriously fickle'" (Morton, 2002) it can be suggested that generation y are indeed greatly segmented in their interests. A likely cause is the ease with which information can be gathered (namely via the Internet), enabling the pursuit of interests in a way not possible previously.

⁶² The reading of a newspaper meant that members of a community could imagine themselves as part of something larger than what they experienced personally. The currency of a newspaper meant that, in

unites elements of generation y through its need for discussion (due to its complexity) and the difficulty in keeping current (due to its scheduling). Both of these encourage viewers to share with one another and if they do not watch the program in the same manner, they still possess the shared experience of viewership and the shared experience of accessing content (both information and episodes), often through the Internet.

How is *Family Guy* viewed?

The majority of survey respondents say they view *Family Guy* via DVD (67.3%), with just over half of the participants viewing on pay television (56.7%). This may reflect the high number of American respondents to the survey as over 69% of American television viewers have cable, 32.3% have pay cable television and a further 12.3% of viewers having access to satellite (cited in Raugust, 2004, p. 10). Just under half of the respondents watch on free to air television (48.1%). The surprising figure, however, is the proportion of participants 39.3%⁶³ watching *Family Guy* as a digital file (mostly episodes in AVI, MPEG and DivX files) on the computer.

The downloading of video files over the Internet is nothing new, particularly following the introduction of broadband Internet (1.6). What is new, however is the legal download of television episodes, suggesting that a high proportion of the respondents who admitted downloading television episodes are, or have been, involved in piracy. The scheduling problems experienced by *Family Guy* not only drove viewers to meet on the Internet but to also trade 'missing' episodes. The ability of the viewers to download and watch episodes in their own time has the potential to

theory, everyone would be up to date and familiar with current events. Though with a program like *Family Guy* it is possible for the shared experience to be somewhat segmented as episodes may not be viewed at the same time, in the same way (i.e. commercial free) by all viewers. Arguably, this may diminish the imagined community to a degree though such an assertion requires more discussion than can be afforded here.

⁶³ These figures total more than 100% because respondents were asked how they viewed *Family Guy*, with many of them viewing it in more than one way.

increase television viewing and DVD sales. Thus preventing access to illegal episodes may turn out to be detrimental to the popularity of the series⁶⁴. The focus group participants viewed *Family Guy* almost exclusively on their computers. Unlike a number of survey respondents, they did not express the same loyalty towards the producers and the producer's interests⁶⁵ that dictate that downloading episodes is wrong. It is possible that a part of the reason for this is that the focus group participants were not involved in the *Family Guy* protests and so do not have the same loyalties as some of the survey respondents.

Given the figures, it is possible to underestimate the importance of computer files/downloads for the *Family Guy* audience base, given that downloads make up a considerably smaller percentage of the ways in which the series is viewed, compared to television. Yet clearly the Internet has played a significant part in how the program is viewed. The Internet and the relative ease of distribution of video files has also been influential in the ways in which *Family Guy* is viewed, and this sharing has greatly influenced the spread of the show's popularity.

Sharing *Family Guy*

When asked whether or not they shared episodes with each other, 62.9% of survey participants said they did, and all members of the focus group participated in trading. One or two of the focus group participants would usually download a series and distribute it amongst the others. Survey respondents traded mostly by lending their DVDs to each other (61.2%)⁶⁶, and many commented that the downloading and trade

⁶⁴ It has been suggested that illegal downloads can assist in CD sales, "The growth period for music file sharing was 2000 to 2001, and during this period CD sales actually rose five per cent" (Kibby, 2003). In fact, in one study 26% of teenagers claim to have purchased more CDs since downloading Napster (Colkin, 2001).

⁶⁵ As one respondent said, "I have every episode on DVD that has been released on DVD so I can watch it and also to financially support the people who make it"

⁶⁶ It is possible that some of these DVDs are pirate copies as most respondents did not make it clear if they were lending DVDs they made themselves or they had purchased.

of episodes is wrong. An interesting concept considering that this form of 'communication' is in many ways responsible for the series' success.

The sharing of dialogue, talking in quotes from *Family Guy*, is an even more widespread practice with 90.7% of respondents claiming to share dialogue with each other. Members of the focus group all claimed to participate in speaking in quotes. They also commented that in some of their classes at school, as many as 50% of students were not only aware of the program, but knew significant quotes. In addition to this, 65.7% of survey respondents said they did share or discuss jokes and references that they did not understand. Sharing general information was less popular, and for the focus group the only information they were interested in was air dates so they knew when they could expect new episodes to be available for download.

This sharing serves as another element of shared experience, building upon the imagined community. It also creates a situation (particularly in the case of quotes) where there is an inside and outside group. Although, 56.7% of survey respondents claimed to discuss program information with others outside of their friendship group, suggesting a large network of *Family Guy* fans contributing to a central knowledge base. Clearly, this sort of sharing plays a great role in the creation of the imagined community and the programs continued popularity.

Conclusion

Family Guy viewers enjoy the program for a variety of reasons and on various cognitive levels, resulting in differing levels of engagement. The 'sleeper curve' means that a particular generation, or perhaps more accurately, a particular type of television viewer, is more adept at decoding *Family Guy* and more likely to enjoy it. The actions of the Fox network in scheduling the program erratically resulted in it being cancelled twice, and drove those who watch it to congregate on the Internet, creating a cult hit in the process and unwittingly ensuring/building *Family Guy*'s

continued popularity. This cult status has influenced the ways in which the program is viewed, distributed and discussed and has resulted in the creation of a fan culture situated largely on the Internet, that collects *Family Guy*.

Chapter 3

Collecting *Family Guy*

The majority of respondents (86.1%) collect *Family Guy* episodes, and 57.3% collected items before they had access to the Internet. However, what they collect, why they collect it, and their understanding of what constitutes a collection varies greatly. Many *Family Guy* (1999-2006) viewers possess a desire to collect *Family Guy*, in many instances solely so they can watch episodes when they wish. However, some admit they rarely watch episodes more than once, suggesting that the act of collecting may be a status related activity.

What is collecting?

There are clearly different ways to collect, and different forms of collecting. The collecting of *Family Guy* episodes, mainly through downloads, constitutes a very unusual form of collection, differing from other, more 'traditional' methods. Generally, for something to be considered as a collection, there are a number of rules or criteria that are applied to the set of objects. When it comes to collecting downloaded files, however, many of these rules no longer apply.

According to Belk, the definition of collecting is "the process of actively, selectively, and passionately acquiring and possessing things removed from ordinary use and perceived as part of a set of non-identical objects or experiences" (Belk, 1995, p. 67). What is interesting here is the idea that to be a part of a collection an item must be removed from 'ordinary use', suggesting perhaps that items that are still used for their ordinary or original purpose cannot be a part of a collection. In the case of *Family Guy*, items are removed from ordinary use not so much on a practical level, but on a conceptual level, in order to facilitate their inclusion in the collection. Episodes are no longer a part of a transient broadcast, but instead become a stored archive. Although, this is a conceptual leap that is not adopted by all.

For something to be a collection, according to Belk, it needs to be seen as a set of objects (1995, p. 66). For *Family Guy* episodes, however, this is not enough. As Russell Belk says, a collection may grow in size, and/or may grow in quality (Belk, 1995, pp. 66 & 87), yet for a number of survey respondents and one focus group participant⁶⁷, having a set of something and even having a set of something that may grow in size or quality is not enough to make it considered as a collection. Arguably, a collection can only exist if the collector (or perhaps more accurately the consumer) considers it to be so.

Collecting is a form of consumption. According to Belk's definition of collecting, it differs from "hoarding, possessive accumulating, and acquisitive buying" (Belk, 1995, p. 68); all of which, in my view, are forms of collecting. Granted, collecting traditionally requires a collector to seek items and to be passionate about them as a set, though I would argue there are some forms of collecting which are – technically speaking – 'hoarding, possessive accumulation and acquisitive buying'. The way a collector feels about the objects in question will dictate whether or not they are considered a collection, even if the way they are consumed does not ring true of Belk's definition. Just as it is not possible to think of consumption as a singular process, it becomes necessary to think of collecting in the same way...there are degrees of collecting and different methods of collecting.

Youth culture and collecting

Youth culture tends to be defined by a particular style, or a particular popular culture item, often associated with the latest technology. This dynamic is evident in the past 50 years' worth of 'youth' movements. The 1950s were defined in large part by Rock 'n' Roll and later generations have been defined by various music styles, comics,

⁶⁷ While only one focus group participant expressed these thoughts, there was no objection from the rest of the group so this may well be a sentiment possessed by the rest of participants.

street press/fanzines and, more recently, the Internet and digital file downloads. The common thread here is an attraction towards the latest technology and these technologies association with fashion and as a result, an increasing susceptibility on the part of these items towards semiotic redundancy.

Adolescents and young adults are marketed to more strongly than other demographics (with the possible exception of baby boomers) (Grose, 2005, p. 91), and while this alone is not enough to result in a collecting habit, it clearly has the propensity to trigger it. Fashion tells us to discard and replace items with the newest ones available, regardless of whether or not they still possess value as useful items (semiotic redundancy), yet at the same time, we are encouraged to hold onto items as to eliminate them purely for fashion's sake would be wasteful. Yet the fact that these items are retained suggests some degree of emotional connection with them, opening up the possibility for them ultimately to become a collection. Nostalgia plays a big part in a refusal to throw out items, although nostalgia doesn't usually come into the equation until some time has passed. Admittedly, Belk suggests that accumulating objects can become a collection, though this can only happen if the already defined rules are imposed upon the set in question (collection must be actively, selectively and passionately compiled, removed from ordinary use and items must be a non-identical set, gathered within predefined boundaries (Belk, 1995, p.66)). In my view, not all of these rules need to be retained.

There are only three essential rules that need to apply for a group of objects to become a collection; objects must have a relationship to one another (be seen as a set), the owner of the items needs to have a connection to the set (emotional or financial) and, the owner must consider the set as a collection. It is not possible for a spectator to make a set of objects a collection by considering it as such, as they lack the connection with the set of objects and without this, they cannot make meaning out of the set – a collection is an extension and expression/indicator of identity of the collector. There is a similar dynamic when a bonsai artist purchases a bonsai from another artist. It is considered bad form to display the newly acquired bonsai until a

few years have passed, as it will take this long for the new owner to make their mark on the tree (Bonsai Society of Western Australia, personal communication, 2005). A collection should be considered in this way. These three rules are not as limiting as Belk's definition (Belk, 1995, p. 67), creating the possibility for a greater number of types of collecting.

The slogan of *Pokémon*^Q (1998-2006), one of the most popular and collectable phenomenon of the 1990s, perpetuates this very idea: 'gotta catch 'em all'⁶⁸. There is a need or a desire permeating throughout youth culture over time to have a collection and, if at all possible, a full set of whatever popular culture item is important to your friendship group. Having collected basketball trading cards during primary school, I understand the desire to have a full set. I never managed to complete any set of cards I purchased⁶⁹, though I do remember making foolish trades in a vain attempt to come close. Whilst working in the toy department of a local department store I was confronted with this phenomenon time and time again as customers told me that there was no point in their child having a single action figure or soft toy from a series – in their eyes it was only worthwhile if they had the full set.

Collecting digital media

Whether or not more people are collecting nowadays than in the past is debatable. It is possible to suggest, however, that generation y are more inclined than previous generations to collect digital media files as these are closely tied with their youth culture. As such, members of generation y are familiar with the skills required to search out and gather digital media files.

⁶⁸ This form of consumption, where repeated purchases are encouraged to either complete a set or as a result of synergy (i.e. *Pokémon* consisted of a television series, feature films, toys, computer games, etc.) appears to run through many aspects of youth culture, such as comics which are numbered and often have stories run across multiple issues, encouraging collection.

⁶⁹ Hardly surprising when they often numbered nearly 500 cards and collecting subsets was more difficult given their rarity. The 1993/1994 Upper Deck series, for example, totaled 510 cards, including 6 subsets.

Participants of the focus group said they did collect, and would always collect digital files, by virtue of the fact that they have fast Internet connections and large computer hard drives⁷⁰. The group's response suggests not so much a concentrated and focused form of collecting, but one that is more akin to hoarding, where they collect simply because they do not dispose of downloads. Focus group participants were all members of torrent sites, as were a number of survey respondents⁷¹, meaning they have downloads "spoon fed" to them as one participant put it⁷².

According to the focus group and some survey respondents, torrents are the best way to collect digital media files. Users download client software that is set up to receive BitTorrent files. They are then required to become members of torrent sites (such as *Torrentspy* (www.torrentspy.com)), giving them access to various downloadable television programs, movies and software that have been made available by other site users/members. For those intending to download large digital media files, torrents have obvious advantages and disadvantages. Focus group participants all viewed torrents as being superior to public file sharing software such as Kazaa⁷³, mainly, in their view, due to torrents being available earlier, and of better quality. However, participants also suggested that torrent sites encouraged hoarding of digital media. Some torrent clients use a rating system by issuing members with a score determined by dividing how much they download by how much they upload for others is downloaded (BitTorrent, 2006). Ideally, this is meant to be a one to one transfer. If a rating falls too low, however, users risk being banned. The problem with this threat is that a rating may fall through no fault of the user; instead the rating may be a reflection of other users not wanting to download what the first user makes available. This may increase media consumption as it encourages users to download (and retain)

⁷⁰ It is possible, however, that participants have fast Internet connections and large hard drives so that they can collect...it is a case of which one came first?

⁷¹ Respondents who admitted to downloading *Family Guy* episodes often did not provide information as to where they downloaded from.

⁷² By spoon fed, this respondent was referring to the fact that it is not possible for a torrent user to search for files using the client itself, instead they are provided with a list of torrents that are available by joining a search site, such as *Torrentspy* (Jones, 2005, p. 290).

⁷³ Kazaa is a peer-to-peer file sharing program that operates differently to BitTorrent, which is why it is slower. Kazaa also allows users to deal directly with one another, so there is less quality control than with Torrents that have a mediator of sorts, through Torrent sites.

media they may not actually be interested in, to ensure they can provide files that others will download and thus retain an acceptable ratio.

As with most collectors (Belk, 1995, pp. 66 & 90), collectors of digital media are primarily concerned with completing their collections⁷⁴ and ensuring that what they have is of the best possible quality. According to the focus group, torrent sites are the best way to achieve these objectives, however, it does mean collecting in a vastly different manner from most other collectables. The nature of the torrent ratio encourages a form of collecting less interested in the self, but in the wants and needs of others. Further, focus group participants claimed to categorize and group together their files, creating some level of order, which is akin to 'traditional' collecting. However, for a user to retain their ratio they may have to provide a large number of files, or files they no longer want. In this way hoarding can be viewed as a form of collecting. The idea of collectors 'selectively' acquiring pieces for their collection is problematic. In terms of downloads, the selection process may not be associated with predefined boundaries as Belk puts it (1995, p. 66), but instead the personal choices of collectors. For example, a collector may only retain television episodes they enjoy, rather than the whole series. In this way boundaries may not be pre-defined and are likely to be more fluid in nature, shifting and evolving over time. Again, this runs counter to what we know of as the traditional collection process, though the fact that the consumer considers their eclectic range of downloads to be a collection means that it is. Whilst this sort of accidental collecting/hoarding occurs often, the research suggests this does not mean that there is not a more concentrated, active and selective form of collecting on the part of some fans also⁷⁵.

Opportunistic collecting is another behavior that occurs within the digital download collecting community. Participants of the focus group said that in some instances they had become interested in a television program after they had the opportunity to

⁷⁴ Although, Baudrillard (1996) suggests that perhaps collections are not meant to be completed (p. 92).

⁷⁵ Hoarding may occur for many reasons, however, it is arguably more likely to occur with digital media files, particularly in the case of torrent files.

download a whole series...they didn't 'collect' the series because they wanted it, they collected it because they had the opportunity to do so. Some focus group participants became fans of the series *Lost* (2004-2006) after this sort of opportunistic collecting, rating it as one of their favorites. Arguably, such behavior begs the question: does this constitute collecting?⁷⁶ Torrent sites often allow users to download an entire series in one hit, so could someone be said to have 'collected' a television series when they acquired their whole collection at one time? Normally a collection requires some degree of searching to make a complete set (Belk, 1995, p.67), although this lack of searching does not diminish the passion that may be attached to the program downloaded.

Another question also needs to be asked: how many items are required to constitute a collection? One participant of the focus group said it was not possible to have a collection of a program such as *American Dad* (2005-2006), as only 23 episodes have aired thus far – a number too small to be named a collection, in their opinion. This view exists when a small run/new series such as *American Dad* is placed in opposition to a program like *The Simpsons* with well over 300 episodes, and would not necessarily be the view of other collectors, or indeed the case for all collections. A definitive number for a set of objects to become a collection cannot be ascertained.

Other than collecting for enjoyment and opportunistic collecting or accidental collecting, there is collecting for the sake of ego or reputation (Belk, 1995, p.68; McIntosh & Schmeichel, 2004, p. 93). Focus group participants said they felt a sense of satisfaction at being able to distribute files to others, though they could not clearly articulate why, as they suggested that what they were doing could be done by anyone

⁷⁶ This may be an example of meta-collection, where multiple series make up the collection rather than multiple episodes as this would require the collection process to occur a number of times, however, it is also possible to consider a number of television episodes gathered as a single download as a collection, particularly if there is a commonality between episodes or they make up a larger set of related items. The issue with collecting digital media is that it is possible to have a collection of one medium (i.e. a television series) or, a collection of digital media files (such as a couple of television episodes, some song files and perhaps a movie). This multi level classification can occur with many collectables and is an issue that requires far more discussion than can be afforded here.

and required no particular skills⁷⁷. As with other forms of collecting (Belk, 1995, p. 68), collectors of digital media appear to take great pleasure in having a larger collection than their peers. Members of the focus group were aware of the term *e-penis* which, in this case, refers to the ego boost collectors of digital media get from having a large collection. It is possible that there are some collectors who amass a collection not so much for their own pleasure but to impress others, though this does not appear to be the impetus for members of the focus group to collect. According to Belk, a collector needs to be discerning in what items they collect (1995, pp. 66-67) or, at least, retain within their collection. This is not the case with collectors of digital media files as space limitations are arguably less of an issue than for collectors of physical items. When a hard drive is full, digital file collectors have the ability/technology to copy files to a CD or DVD. Thus, collectors of digital files have the opportunity to store very nearly everything they could want to collect, although it is likely that some degree of selection is involved.

What makes collecting these files unique compared to other collectables is that they are not strictly speaking rare, thus diminishing the normal competitive element associated with collecting (Belk, 1995, p. 74; Pearce, 1992, p. 51). Digital files can be easily copied and the quality will often be just as good as the original (depending on compression formats, files will be indistinguishable from the original), something that does not occur within traditional collectables⁷⁸. While there is a tendency to trade files, rather than give them out freely, the fact that digital downloads can be copied relatively easily (assuming copyright protections are overcome) aids their distribution and means that it is far more possible to acquire a complete set of any given television program. The collection process is far easier to accomplish, making the collecting of digital media files both more enjoyable/desirable and less so at the same time. A part of the lure of collecting is the challenge and competition of the 'hunt' (McIntosh &

⁷⁷ It should be noted that this was in the view of the focus group members. To someone unfamiliar with what is required to download television episodes, the action may be more impressive, or someone involved in 'ripping' episodes and bypassing copy protection systems may believe a greater level of skill is required.

⁷⁸ There are examples of collectables that have been copied, however, collecting tends to focus on originality and as such it is unusual to trade/collect items when they are known to be replicas, unless of course the collection in question is a collection of replicas.

Schmeichel, 2004, p. 91), with the obvious goal of completing your set. When it is as easy to complete a collection as it is for digital media, it loses some of its appeal by being less competitive and elitist; yet gains appeal by being an objective which is attainable.

Opinions on collecting

There are two schools of thought surrounding the authenticity of long term collections. The first argues that keeping pieces original is all important; the other focuses on keeping pieces functional, often restoring them to new or working condition. This does not apply to the sort of collecting that most *Family Guy* fans appear to partake in - namely digital file downloads - however, these two perspectives do inform respondent's views.

As a collector of a number of things myself (predominantly action figures and associated toys), I am all too familiar with the debate regarding whether or not to keep pieces original. There are often debates about toys as these are worth more in terms of both monetary value and heritage if they are kept in perfect, unused condition⁷⁹. What needs to be remembered is that items are (usually) produced to be functional: they may become collectable once their use has been superseded, or if they are otherwise removed from ordinary use. Even so, it does seem to be a shame to let something never be used or never used again to preserve its integrity as a collectable. In some cases, retaining the functionality of an item is wholly beneficial as it assists in the education and general preservation of cultural heritage⁸⁰. Ideally collectors would have two of every item they collect; one restored to be functional and one to keep intact in 'original' condition.

⁷⁹ A good example is the debate surrounding toy collecting where it has been asked; if a new toy has been packaged with batteries, is taking the toy out to remove the batteries saving the toy or damaging it? The general consensus appears to be that it is best to leave the item in its package and risk the batteries leaking, though this opinion varies greatly depending on the toy in question and its rarity.

⁸⁰ The Early Television Foundation and Museum in Ohio restores their televisions to a state of working order to show visitors how various television broadcast systems and technology differ (ETF – Working Condition).

The removal of an object from its ordinary use, as Belk suggests, is necessary for it to become a collectable (1995, p. 66), and is closely related to the idea that a collectible cannot be functional, for if a collectable were to be functional, it would in all likelihood be functioning as part of its ordinary use. A number of survey participants were of the view that a collectable cannot be functional, perhaps only being familiar with static-style museum exhibits. In their minds it was not possible to have a collection of pieces that are either functioning or at least, functional. As a result of this they did not view their set of *Family Guy* episodes as a collection. There were also problems surrounding the fact that downloaded files are not physical objects (unless burnt to CD or DVD). This created further confusion for respondents who seemed to conceive a collection as objects that take up shelf/cupboard space.

Collecting *Family Guy*

86.1 % of survey respondents claimed to collect *Family Guy* episodes, a figure which sounds high, though one which is backed by the high DVD sales figures. What is really interesting is that such a large number of respondents would label themselves as collectors⁸¹, although only 71.7% considered their *Family Guy* episodes as a collection.

56.9% of respondents claimed to have every episode of *Family Guy*. At the time the survey was conducted, only seasons 1 through 3 were available in a retail context, however, it would be wrong to suggest that this proportion of respondents is necessarily involved in the illegal download of episodes⁸². Nevertheless, it is

⁸¹ It was suggested in 1988 that somewhere between a quarter and one third of all adults in the western world at any one time would consider themselves collectors (Belk, cited in Pearce, 1998, p. 1). However, considerable time has passed since and collecting has changed, so it is possible that while the figure mentioned here is high, it may not be unrealistic.

⁸² The data does not make it clear whether or not respondents were involved in illegal downloads. It should also be pointed out that some survey respondents explained in later qualitative fields that they had all that were available, not all that had been produced and that they would purchase seasons 4 and 5 upon their release.

interesting to note that so many respondents were intent on having a full set of *Family Guy* episodes. 72.6% of those who do not have every episode, say they want every episode.

One important point about studying the collection of *Family Guy* episodes is the strong correlation between what may be viewed as die-hard collectors, and those who have a history of collecting. Of the 56.9% of respondents that claimed to have every episode of *Family Guy*, 78.9% collected items before having access to the Internet. Items collected ranged from rocks to trading cards to shot glasses. Given that not all the episodes of *Family Guy* that have been produced were available for purchase at the time of the survey being conducted, those with every episode of *Family Guy* must have downloaded at least some of them to complete their set⁸³. Those who are willing to go the extra distance and actively pursue and collect episodes may do so as a result of a history of collecting in the past, arguably their behavior has been engendered by prior collecting experience.

The impetus to collect *Family Guy* episodes may be the result of two phenomenon that do not affect other collectibles; that *Family Guy* has a history of unexpectedly being cancelled, and that *Family Guy* fans desire to know the show well, often purely for the sake of being able to converse in *Family Guy*-speak with their friends. The way that *Family Guy* has been treated by various networks has perhaps made fans of the show acutely aware of the tenuous commitment of network television in terms of scheduling and production. It is possible that they have been shocked into collecting *Family Guy* by having it repeatedly taken away from them at short notice. If they amass their own set of episodes, they no longer have to rely on untrustworthy network broadcasts: they have their collected series of *Family Guy* to sustain them.

The other key reason for collecting *Family Guy* - knowing the episodes very well - has the potential to be a double-edged sword. It is tempting to say that all fans are

⁸³ Many respondents said they considered downloading episodes wrong as they felt the need to support the creators of the show. They would, however, download episodes until they were released on DVD.

obsessed with knowing all there is to know about *Family Guy*. However, this simply is not the case. *Family Guy* is collected by many as a result of their specific need to know the episodes well enough to know quotes and scenarios to discuss with their friends.

It should be pointed out, however, that there is an element of bias in these results as regular users of the Internet are more likely to be collectors of digital media files. It is possible that had this survey been administered differently it would have indicated fewer collectors of *Family Guy*.

Collecting knowledge around *Family Guy*

Unlike some programs⁸⁴ *Family Guy* fans - according to the survey respondents and focus group - do not feel inclined to collect information around the production of the show. Clearly there is an interest in how the show is produced (as evidenced by articles on the *Planet Family Guy* website, and the audio commentary available on DVDs) but for the most part, as far as production is concerned, fans were only interested in when the next episode would air and where it would be available from (either on television or for download).

The knowledge that appears most popular to collect are quotes with only 5.3% of survey respondents never using quotes or references to episodes in conversation or social situations. Some respondents claimed to have met friends by hearing people quote lines, or via quoting lines themselves. Despite this, only 48.6% of survey respondents said it was important to them to know the episodes well. So while they enjoy being able to quote (some speak of satisfaction and pleasure being derived from quoting), for most this is constructed as nothing more than a fortuitous coincidence. Of those who did feel it was important to know *Family Guy* episodes well, nearly 50

⁸⁴ Such as Chris Turner and his analysis of fans in *Planet Simpson* (2004), where respondents know episodes by their production codes, rather than episode titles (p.12).

% said that the knowledge was important because they needed to be able to quote, or to recognize quotes when they were made by their friends.

Family Guy's importance within the friendship group

The importance of *Family Guy* within friendship groups is variable, but it can be a critical element. There were some survey respondents who claimed that a shared interest in *Family Guy* brought them closer together, and others who said they became friends after meeting and bonding over their shared experience of watching *Family Guy*. It is possible that there were some who underestimated the importance of the show in the construction of their friendship network, given its importance to a select few respondents. Many others simply said 'I don't know'.

Most of the survey respondents (56.5%) said that someone within their friendship group knew more about *Family Guy* than the rest of the group, yet for nearly all, this made no difference to the importance of *Family Guy* for the rest of the group.

Theories surrounding models of technology adoption and diffusion, suggest that a group of (potential) consumers can be broken into adopter categories (Rogers, 2003, pp. 282-285) and that the social group is important to the diffusion of innovations (Hawkins, cited in Green, 2002, p. 27)⁸⁵. Yet the idea that individuals will have different histories of involvement does not detract from the importance of the series to the group as a whole. It is not the be-all and end-all of their existence/friendship, despite the need expressed by some to collect in-depth knowledge of the show.

Conclusion

⁸⁵ That different members within a friendship group may be the early adopters for different media is also plausible, creating a sort of layering effect, whereby some may be more interested in television programs, others games, and others movies, and then disseminate new information for their area of interest to the rest of the group. These innovators/early adopters of select media or fields of interests are known as 'opinion leaders' (Green, 2002, pp. 35-38) and this sort of interaction (that of the opinion leader with the rest of the group) was evident during the focus group sessions.

According to Belk, collecting tends to be subject to a number of clearly defined rules, most of which do not apply to the collection of digital media files. It is important to consider collecting as a multilayered pursuit, with different types of collectors and different methods of collecting being contained under the one heading. In this way it becomes possible to think of digital media files as collectables. *Family Guy*, for the majority of respondents, means more to them than other programs. That fans are willing not only to watch episodes, but collect them and information around the show, means they have a relatively strong relationship/identification with *Family Guy*, making it important to them and to their peers.

Conclusion

These research findings can be interpreted in a number of different ways and point towards the need for more research and further consideration of a number of key issues which could not be encompassed within the context of an Honours thesis. Critical analysis and audience studies around animation – particularly animation that is not produced primarily for children – is an area that is lacking, especially considering the number of media productions available in this genre. Further research is also required around the future of television series production, and the role of the Internet. The ways we think of collecting; methods of collection, what constitutes a collection, and the role a collection may play in a collector's life also need further consideration. In particular the differences between the collection of digital media files and material items need to be addressed in a refinement of collecting theory.

While there has been a great deal written on the history of animation, critical analyses of what a series is about, and how an audience responds to that series, is lacking. What this study suggests is the sort of socialising forged through being an active audience member of an animated series should not be underestimated. In the past, animation may have been discussed as something 'for children', and viewing cartoon shows labeled as a childish pursuit (not to mention the stigma associated with actually enjoying them). While there may be elements of escapism and nostalgia tied up in the adult and adolescent viewing of animation, it does serve a practical and positive function for adults, in bringing groups of friends together into shared experience, and making cognitive demands of them.

Many respondents said it was important to them to be familiar with *Family Guy* (1999-2006) episodes, particularly the stand out jokes/quotes and historical and popular culture references, so that when friends brought these up in conversation they were not left in the dark and/or made to look stupid and thus theoretically marginalized. The strong audience following retained by *Family Guy* after the series was not aired regularly, and even after production ceased for nearly two years, is

testament to the value audience members place upon the show and indicates that television production is still an important cultural construct for the Internet generation.

Television, particularly free to air television, runs the risk of becoming no longer profitable according to past economic models with the prevalence of cable networks, Hard Disk Drive recorders such as TiVo, and alternatives such as cheaply available DVDs and streaming programs over the Internet. This dynamic need not, however, spell the end of television production (although it will in all likelihood result in a different way of producing television, and different sorts of programs being produced). *Family Guy* is one example of a different sort of program made available to a new audience in different ways and, made more readily available to an audience forged through television to build their fandom of the show. It has been able to garner such a strong response from audience members that it is pursued via different mediums such as Pay TV, DVD and the Internet. The fact that *Family Guy* has twice been cancelled, and twice reinstated, indicates how delicate the relationship is between television production and ratings. Though clearly there are other determining factors that producers will consider before canceling a program.

One interesting aspect of fan culture is the building of a relationship between fans and the cultural item. This engenders a very real sense of ownership for some in the fan community and is the sort of relationship that television networks should aim to build. While it is likely that the protests and actions of fans on behalf of *Family Guy* were frustrating for the Fox Network in the first instance, arguably, the fans' commitment and DVD purchases averted Fox making what could have been a costly mistake⁸⁶ by canceling the production permanently.

This research also indicates just how important the Internet may be for the longevity of other animated series, by establishing a fan base and/or retaining and drawing

⁸⁶ *Family Guy* has now been produced for 5 seasons comprising 77 episodes and a feature length film, with DVD sales of the series reaching 3.5 million by April 2005 (Stanley, 2005).

together existing fans by allowing them to communicate with one another and making a programs back catalogue available. Some series, such as *Happy Tree Friends* (n.d.), have both a strong web presence (making episodes available for download) and a television series. This scenario is a possibility for other series also, though it is not without its limitations. Producing media in this manner is usually the result of an absence of corporate finance but even free streaming episodes can exclude many potential viewers, and there is always the difficulty associated with making a series that viewers are going to want to tune into as a contemporary broadcast when it is also available on their own terms online.

The use of the Internet to discuss *Family Guy* – and share/collect information and episodes – has influenced the way in which it is viewed and consumed as well as influencing its success. It is unlikely that the creators of *Family Guy* intended this to occur (the way that web-toon producers might have done), however, it has been clearly advantageous for them. In acknowledging this, *Family Guy* creator Seth MacFarlane has made himself available for interviews for *Family Guy* fan sites, such as *Planet Family Guy*. This helps perpetuate the *Family Guy* Internet culture that may have been started accidentally as a response by fans to inadequate scheduling and subsequent frustrations. While it is unlikely that a majority of intellectual property owners would make their work publicly available without charge⁸⁷, this may not be entirely condemned by the producers of *Family Guy*. The downloading of *Family Guy* episodes helped solidify the fan base, and the loyalty expressed by a number of fans suggests that little has been lost in the way of DVD sales. Nevertheless, consideration of how great a role gift economies and participatory culture play in the downloading activities of generation y may offer new insights. Purposely making television episodes available for free download would probably be financially risky, even though in this case informal access has worked well for the longevity of the series.

⁸⁷ Especially if the production has the possibility of reaching an audience, take for example the case lobbied against Napster by Metallica. As the band believed they had the potential to make a profit from their songs the last thing they wanted was for them to be made available to listeners without charge.

For something to be a collectable, and for someone to be considered a collector, they usually meet a number of criteria. There is room for some ambiguity here, however. There are different sorts of collecting, and definitional issues are worth addressing in relation to contemporary fan culture. The Internet, thanks primarily to sites such as eBay⁸⁸ (www.ebay.com), has brought collectors together and greatly aided in the formal collecting of material items, particularly in sourcing rare, difficult to find, or regionally specific artifacts. It has also introduced (or at very least made widely accessible) a different type of collecting, the collecting of digital media. The collecting of something like magazines, or ticket stubs may have (in the past) been considered as hoarding, whereas now items such as these are legitimized as ephemera⁸⁹. What needs to happen now is the legitimization of collecting activities with respect to digital media files.

Fans of *Family Guy* who admitted to downloading episodes from the Internet could be termed as hoarders, particularly where they downloaded these as a part of a torrent site membership. Some, however, did discuss categorizing episodes, suggesting that this was a collecting activity; and most respondents viewed their set of *Family Guy* episodes as a collection. As new media becomes available, it will undoubtedly be collected by some, regardless of whether or not it may be considered a collection by others. If it is gathered, valued and viewed as a set, it should constitute a collection, which can be the case with digital media files.

The fact that *Family Guy* is collected (maybe in some cases obsessed over), means that it is more than 'just a television show'. This program and others like it, can and indeed appear to, take their place as cultural icons, as popular music has, for example, in the past. In some ways, *Family Guy* unites and defines an element or elements of a generation, they identify with it. Whether it will be remembered decades from now,

⁸⁸ eBay is often reported to have been established to facilitate a fan community around Pez dispensers and while the truth is not as romantic (reportedly the first item to be sold was a broken laser pointer and the site made up a part of the creator's personal homepage (EBay, 2006)) it cannot be denied that eBay users can (and in all probability do) create an imagined community through their shared experience and the opportunity to communicate with one another.

⁸⁹ Ephemera are collectables that when produced had a limited life span, such as catalogues, newspapers, and promotional pieces.

the way 'great' music of the 1950s and 1960s has been, is yet to be seen. For those immersed in *Family Guy* culture presently, however, its potential longevity is of little relevance. The fact is that this television program is very important to its fan base, and this in itself makes it worthy of further academic research.

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Glossary

Some of the terms used throughout this paper can mean vastly different things to different people. To avoid confusion, an explanation is offered as to the meaning assigned to these terms in the context of this paper. Some of the television programs and films mentioned throughout also require extra explanation in how they relate to the arguments they are used within.

A - Televisual entertainment – televisual, meaning “relating to or suitable for television” was used for any entertainment device where a screen is used, as television suggests viewing as a part of a television network’s broadcast, which for most viewing *Family Guy* is not the case as it is watched on computer or DVD, etc., making it no longer a part of television, despite being produced as a television show. Its close ties to television does create some confusion as television is a largely a passive medium (though this is debatable), compared to computer games which are more interactive and user defined/directed. It was not enough to talk of television, however, and a blanket term was needed for electronic entertainment devices.

B - Digital media (also digital files and digital downloads) – this refers to any audio, video, or software file that is downloaded. Digital television and DVDs are also forms of digital media, though for the sake of this paper digital media refers to media obtained through the Internet.

C – Lanning/LANs (Local Area Networks) – in the context of the focus group this refers to the connection of the participant’s computers to enable them to play multi-player computer games and to a lesser degree, to trade digital media files.

D – *The Tick* (1994-1996) – originally a comic, *The Tick* featured a large, muscular, dimwitted superhero who often referred to himself as ‘the wild blue yonder’. Together with his sidekick Arthur (an ex-accountant in a moth suit) the Tick wages war against villains such as Chairface (a man with a small wooden chair instead of a

head). The series was characterized by comedy derived from bizarre scenarios and whilst action packed and slapstick enough for children to view, the satirical take on superheroes is likely to have been missed.

E – *The Ren and Stimpy Show* (1991-1996) – at first glance this series is reminiscent of the early animated series produced by the likes of Warner Brothers in its use of animals living together, however, these animals are far from cute. The violence and vulgarity displayed in *The Ren and Stimpy Show* may not be as extreme as that of *South Park*, but what the series did was serve as a wake up call to parents, that perhaps not all cartoons are for children. Again the story lines (such as when Ren receives Stimpy's butt fat for pectoral implants so he can impress the girls at the beach) and plot twists were nothing short of bizarre.

F – *Earthworm Jim* (1995-1996) – perhaps more kid friendly than some of the other series mentioned, *Earthworm Jim*'s style of comedy still revolved around the unexpected and features references to popular culture (though ones that require less cognitive work) similar to *Family Guy*. Jim was a worm, until a super suit fell from space, at which point he decided to become a superhero. Together with his sidekick Peter Puppy and on occasions his 'girlfriend' Princess Whatsername, Jim fights the likes of Bob the fish (an intelligent fish who rules over a planet of cats) and Professor Monkey-for-a-Head. Throughout the episodes there are references to contemporary popular culture such as going to the mall, going on a road-trip and using vending machines, possibly preparing young viewers for popular culture references in later programs.

G – *Rocko's Modern Life* (1993-1997) – Rocko is a young wallaby living in America in what is his first experience living out of his parent's home. For the most part this series provides simple cartoon comedy, however, if you dig deeper it is more complex than it first appears. For example, Rocko's best friend is a male cow, named Heffer Wolf (he was adopted by wolves when he was young). There is the odd popular culture reference (such as an episode where an old sea captain tells the boys

that Davey Jones had a locker, in fact, all the Monkees had lockers), and some light political themes (such as the musical episode featuring songs 'R.E.C.Y.C.L.E. Recycle' and 'You can't fight city hall').

H – *Roseanne* (1988-1997) – what I mean by this is not so much that the programs are the same (although an argument could be made for them both representing lower-middleclass America) but that they have similar origins and work on a similar framework. Episodes of *The Simpsons* can be almost formulaic in their structure, particularly in their forever moralistic and happy endings, similar to *Roseanne*.

I – *Seinfeld* (1989-1998) – arguably *Seinfeld* is a little different in that it is more complex than *The Simpsons* or *Roseanne*, largely due to the continuity within it (such as George's penchant for the name Vandalaé, where as *The Simpsons* would rather ignore continuity). However, its comedy still relies in large part on sight gags and the situations the characters get themselves into.

J – *MASH* (1972-1983) – the comedy in *MASH* is all sight gags and situations and these jokes are arguably less complex than those of programs that followed it. All episodes are strongly moralistic, an element that was carried through into programs such as *The Simpsons*.

K – *South Park* (1997-2006) – it is likely that most people today know of *South Park*, however, it needs to be explained why this program is perhaps more confronting than others. In essence the program does not feature anything that has not been seen in animation before (violence, risky subject matter), though the problem with *South Park* is perhaps that it approaches subject matter in a manner that almost suggests the intention is to upset as many people as possible. The program also stars a group of 8 year old boys, perhaps assisting in not only its notoriety (the assumption being that a cartoon show starring children must be made for kids) but the disgust it instills in some critics to see children acting in this way. It is likely the series would not receive anywhere near as much criticism (nor viewers) if it featured 18 year olds instead.

L – *CatDog* (1998-2001) – this series is more for children than any of the others mentioned, however, it still preferences the strange. *CatDog* is a ‘creature’ that has a cat at one end and a dog at the other (they share a stomach) and hardly an episode goes by without its body being stretched for hundreds of meters.

M – *Fritz the Cat* (1972) – was produced as a feature length animation, quite explicit in nature it received an R rating.

N – Scott Baio – is an actor who starred in *Happy Days* (1974-1984) towards the end of its run and the spin-off series, *Joanie Loves Chachi* (1982-1983), perhaps offering an explanation as to why he was made a target.

O – GI Joe – the GI Jew figure is an obvious reference to the GI Joe line of action figures that have been produced since the mid 1960s and are often sold under the tag line ‘a real American hero’.

P – Random – a term that is used all too often. It can refer to something being truly random (usually in the context of generation y, something amusing), though is also used by members of generation y when they do not understand something.

Q – *Pokémon* (1986-2006) – pokémon are animals that possess special abilities that are used in battles between pokémon trainers. The series follows a young pokémon trainer named Ash Catchem as he works through various pokémon tournaments on his way to becoming a pokémon master. The goal for the characters is to become as familiar as possible with the many varied pokémon and while they do part ways with their pokémon from time to time, the emphasis is on having possessed every pokémon at some time, a theme well suited to children’s television producers looking for marketing tie-ins.

Figure 1

Age and Gender of survey respondents

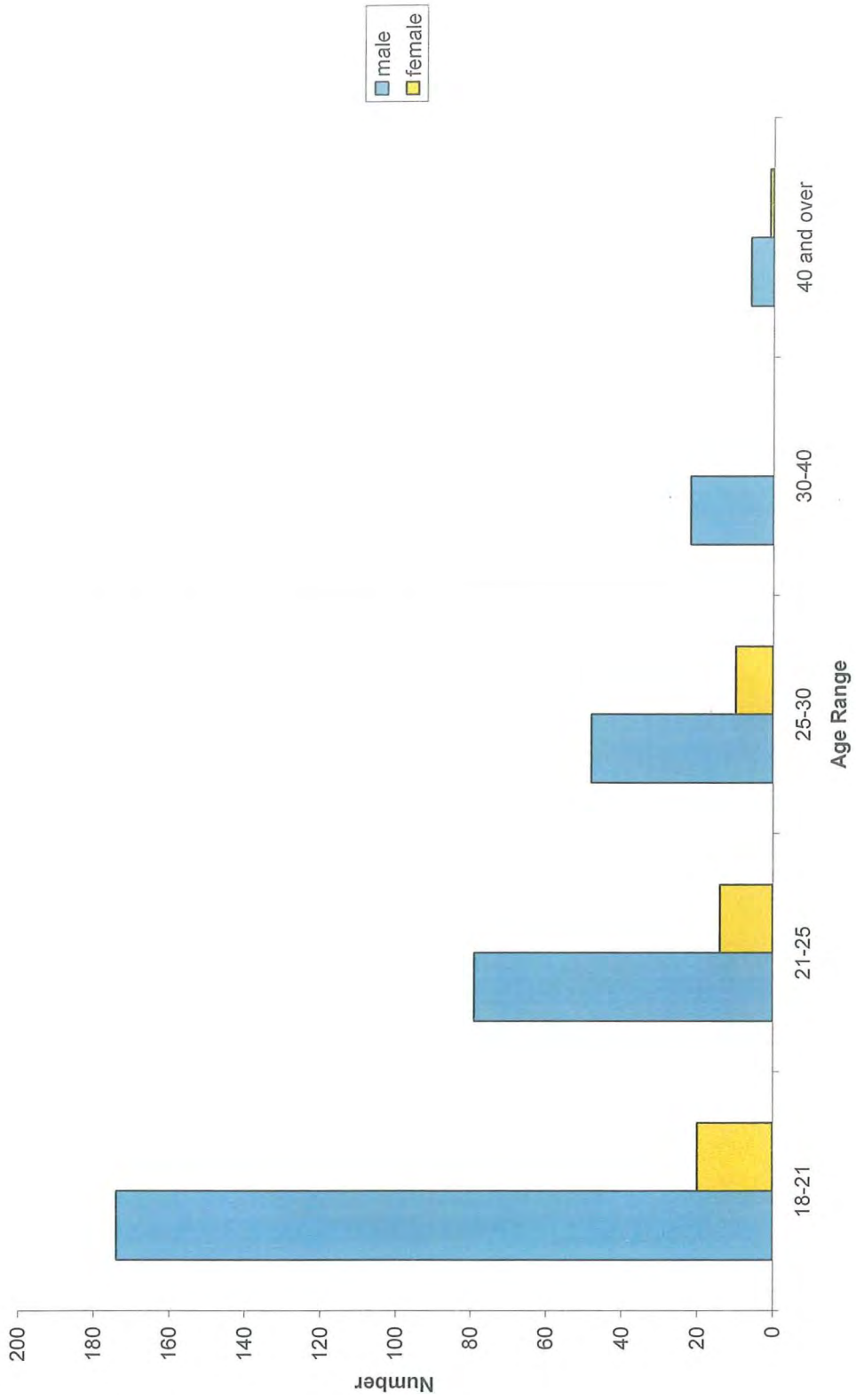


Figure 2

How respondents met their friends

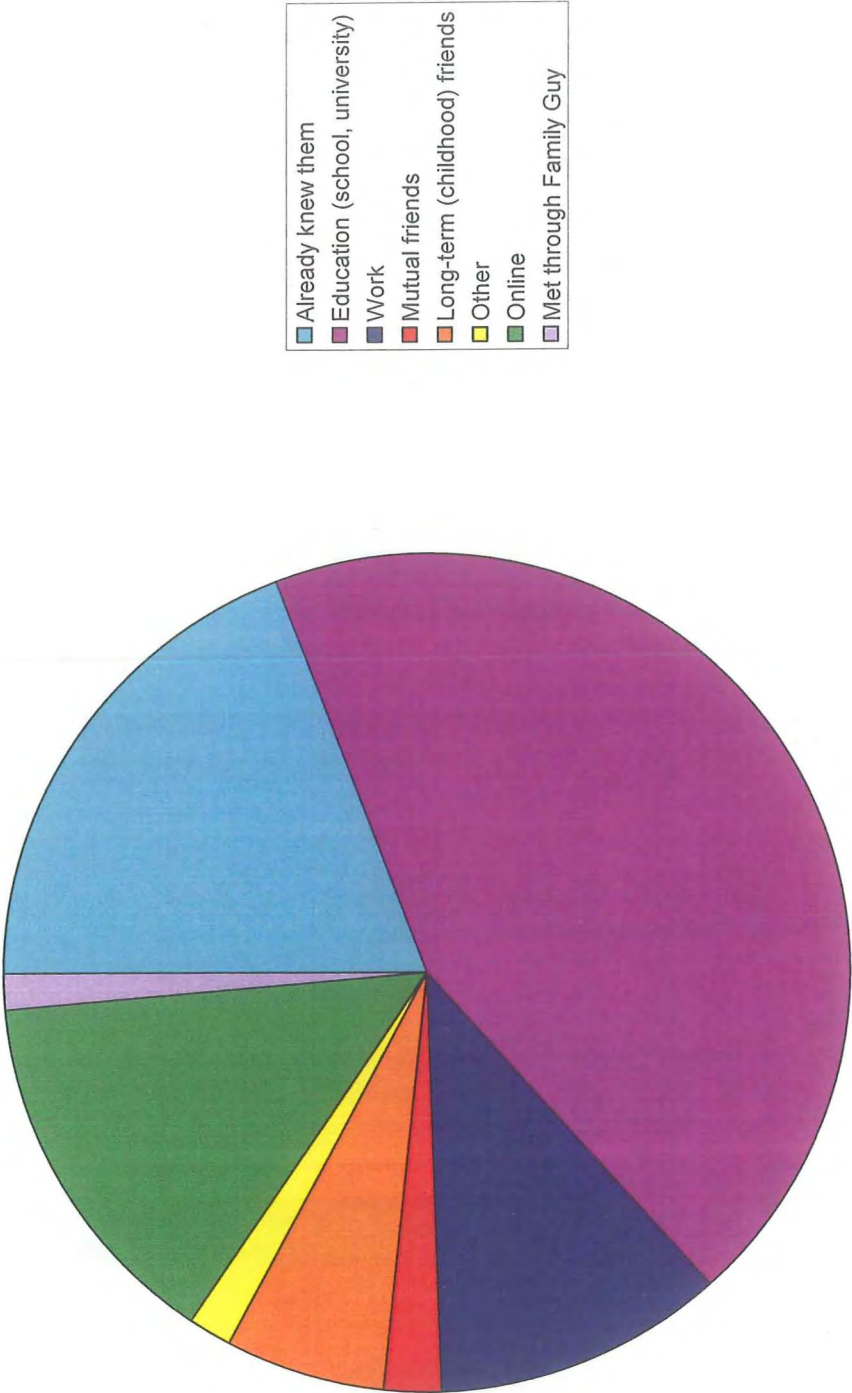


Figure 3

Percentage of respondents interested in each interest group

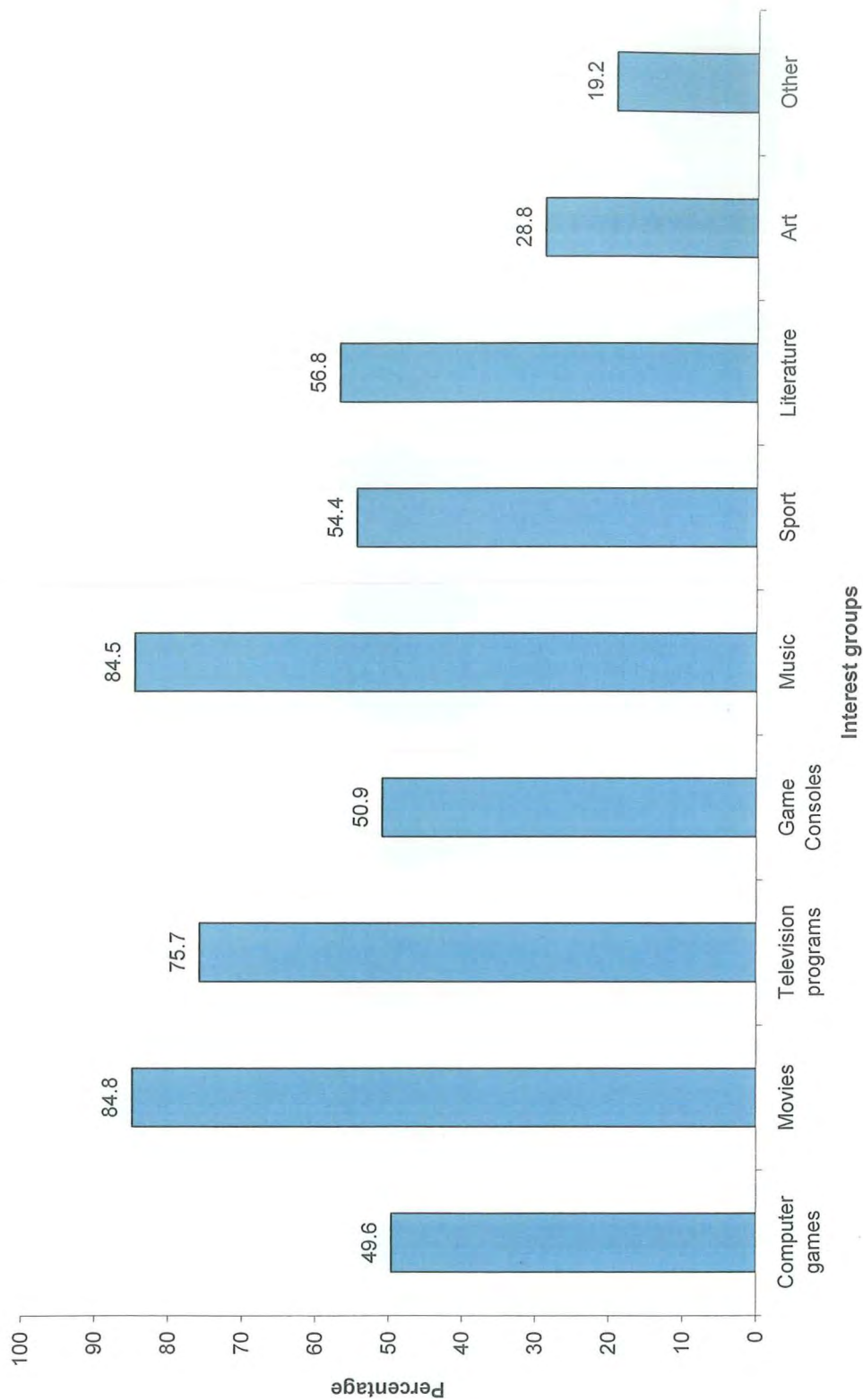


Figure 4

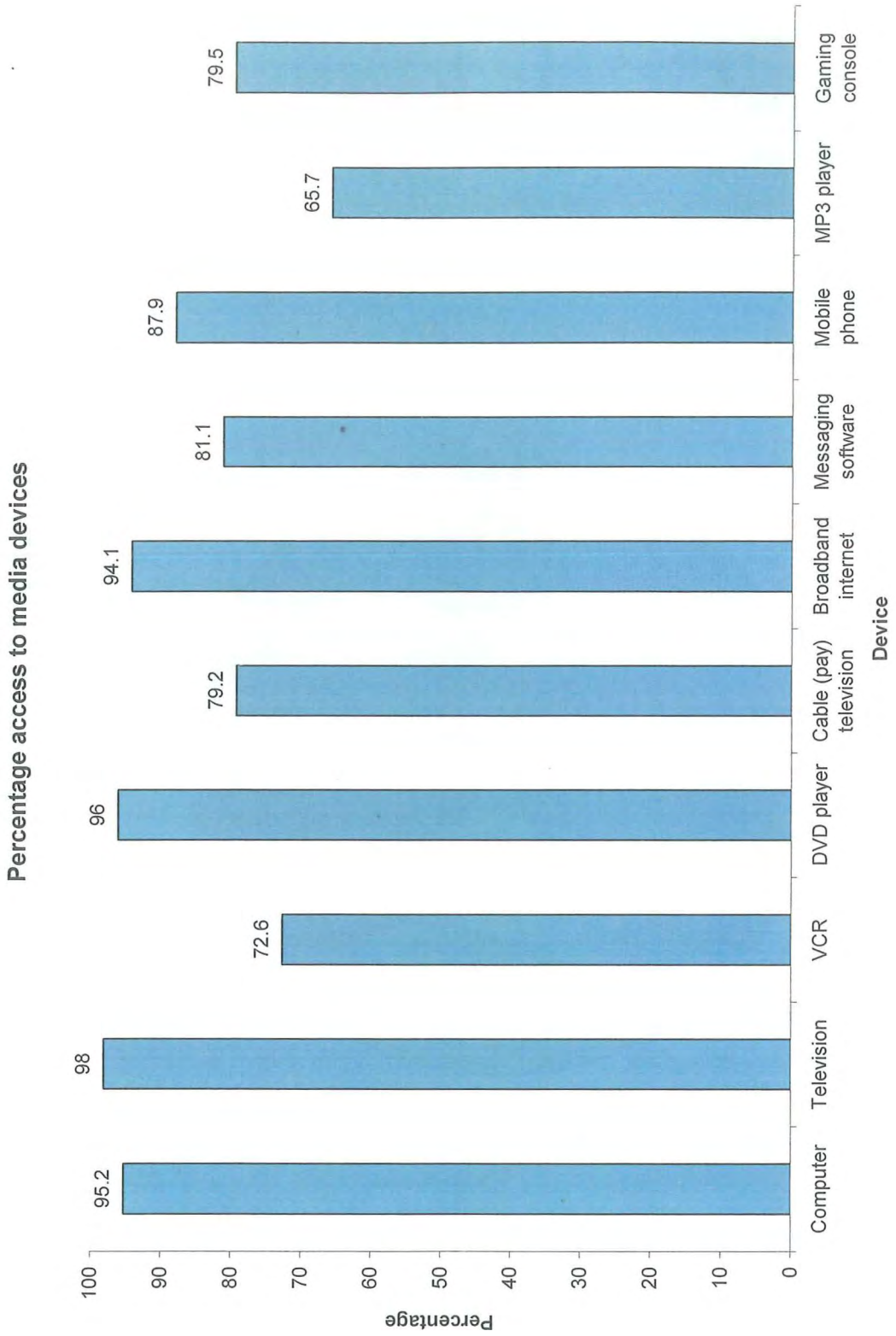


Figure 5

Average percentage use for televisual entertainment

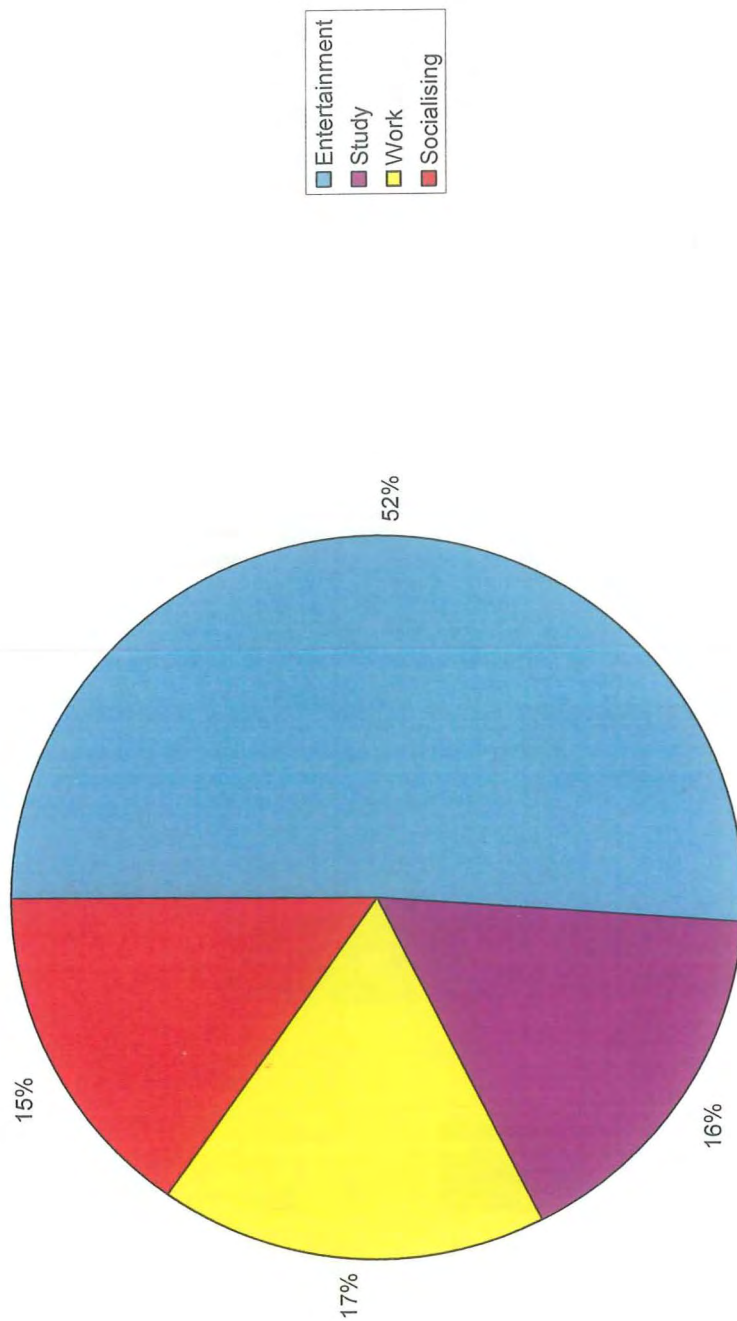


Figure 6

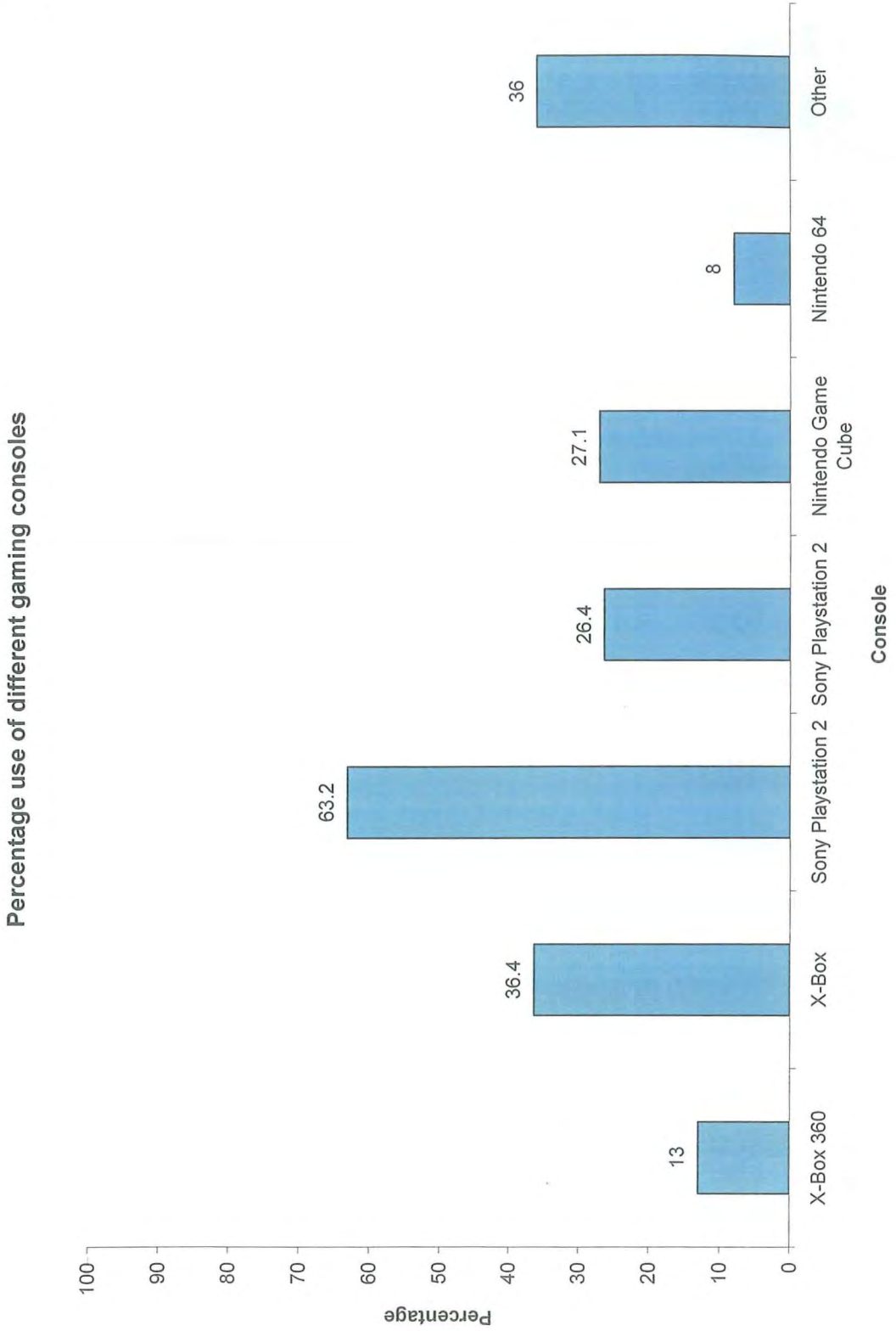


Figure 7

Number of hours respondents use televisual entertainment per week

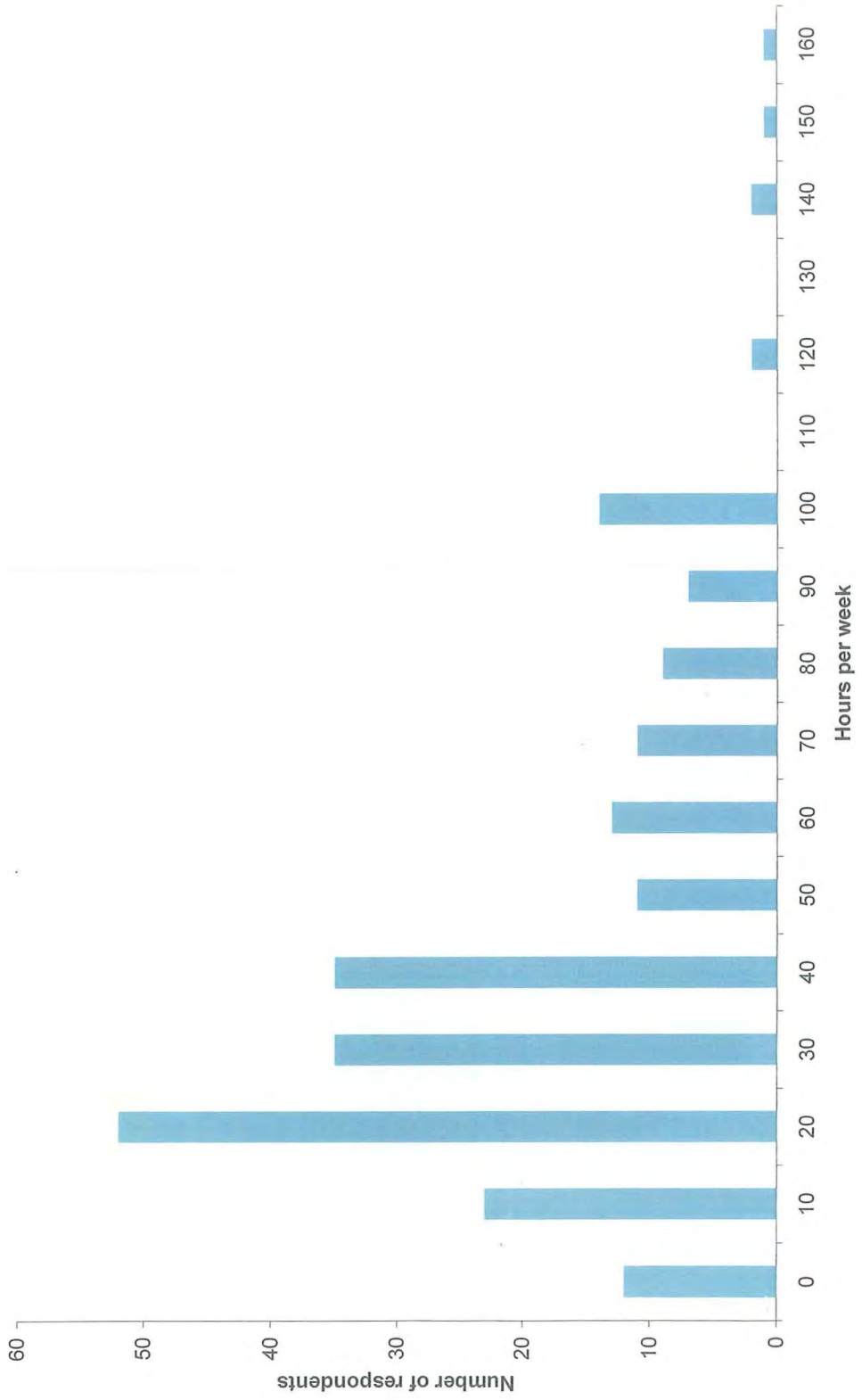


Figure 8

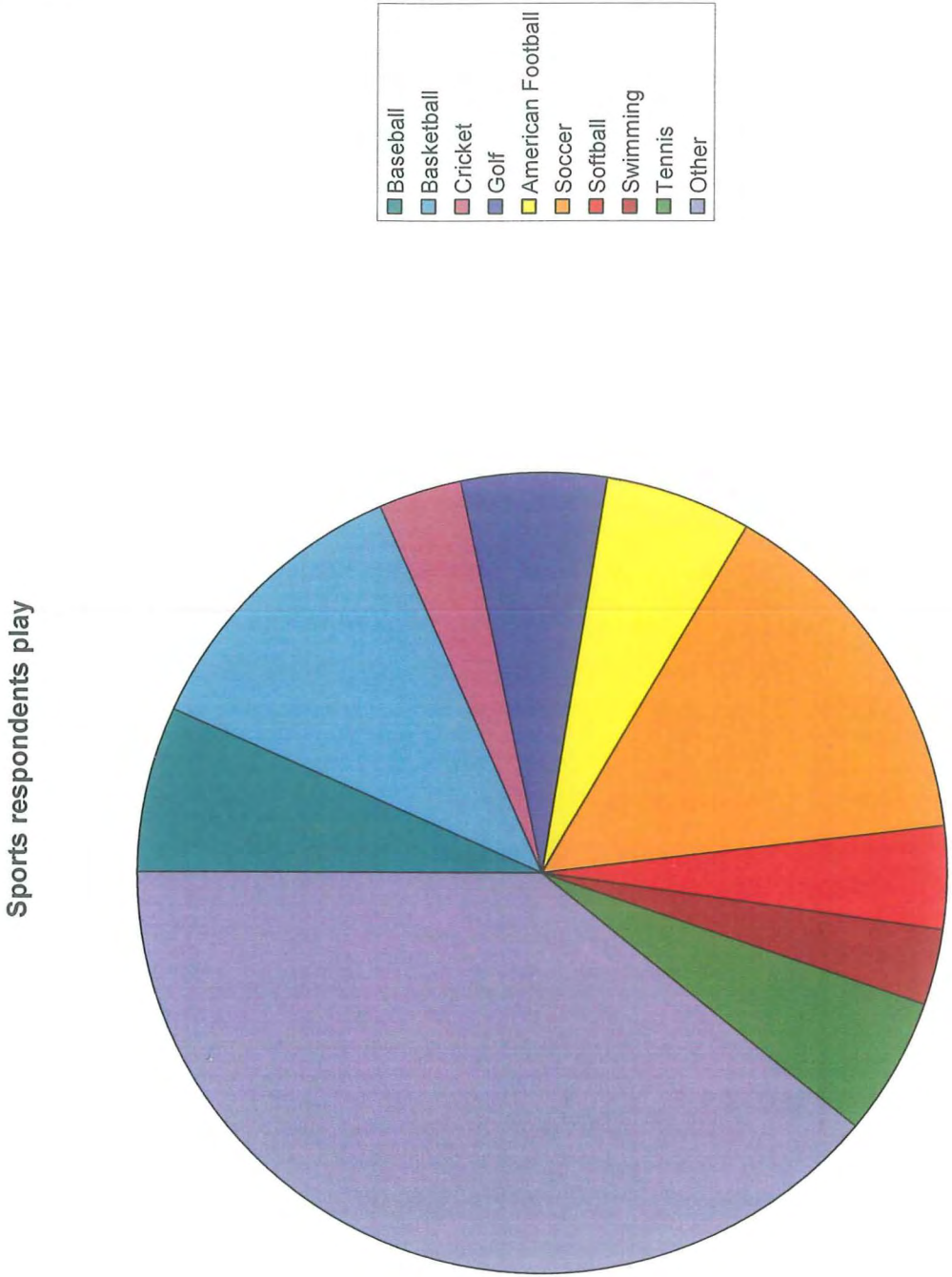


Figure 9

Number of hours spent using televisual entertainment verses the number of sports played

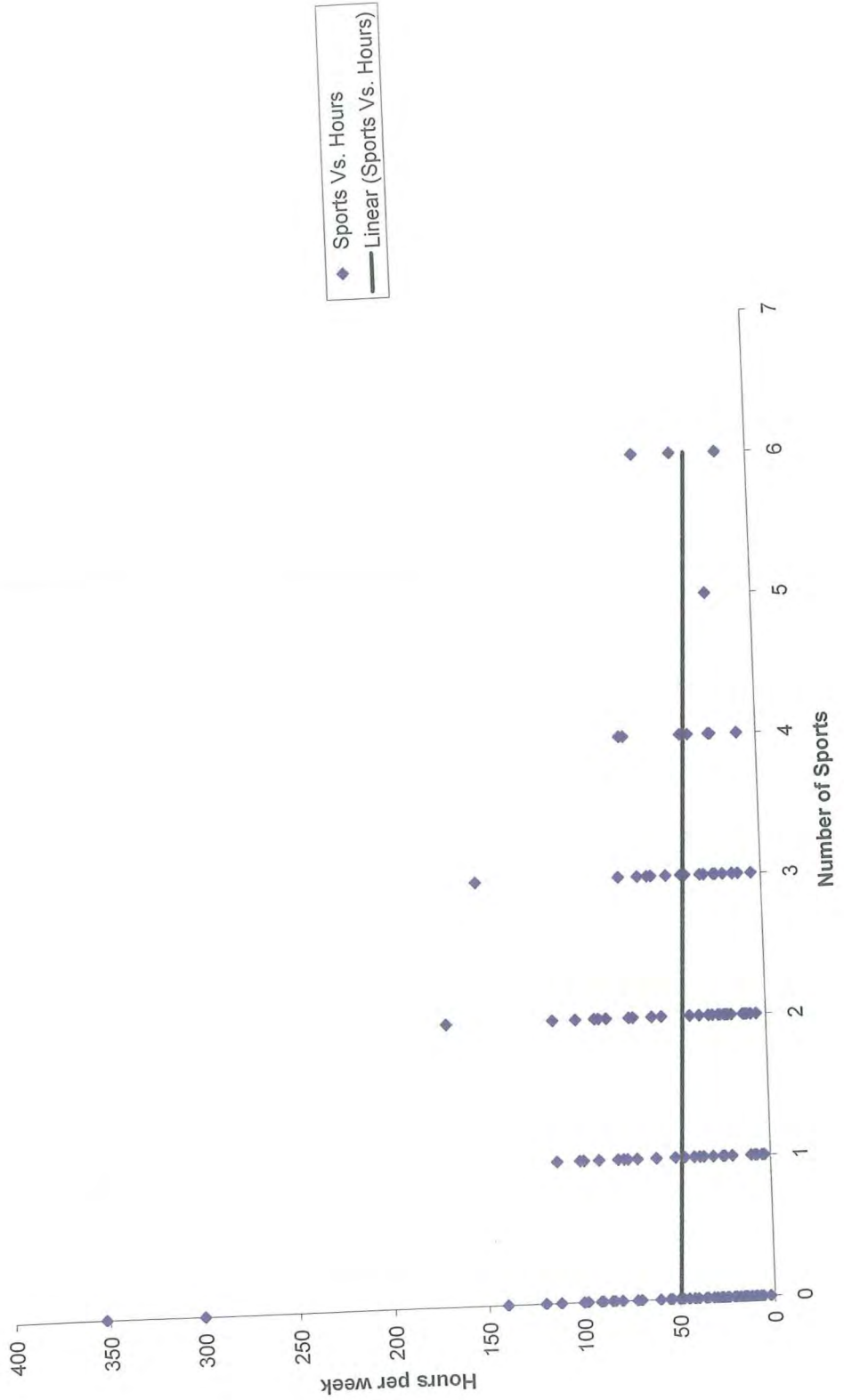


Figure 10

Number of respondents that play sport and within this, the number that play multiple sports

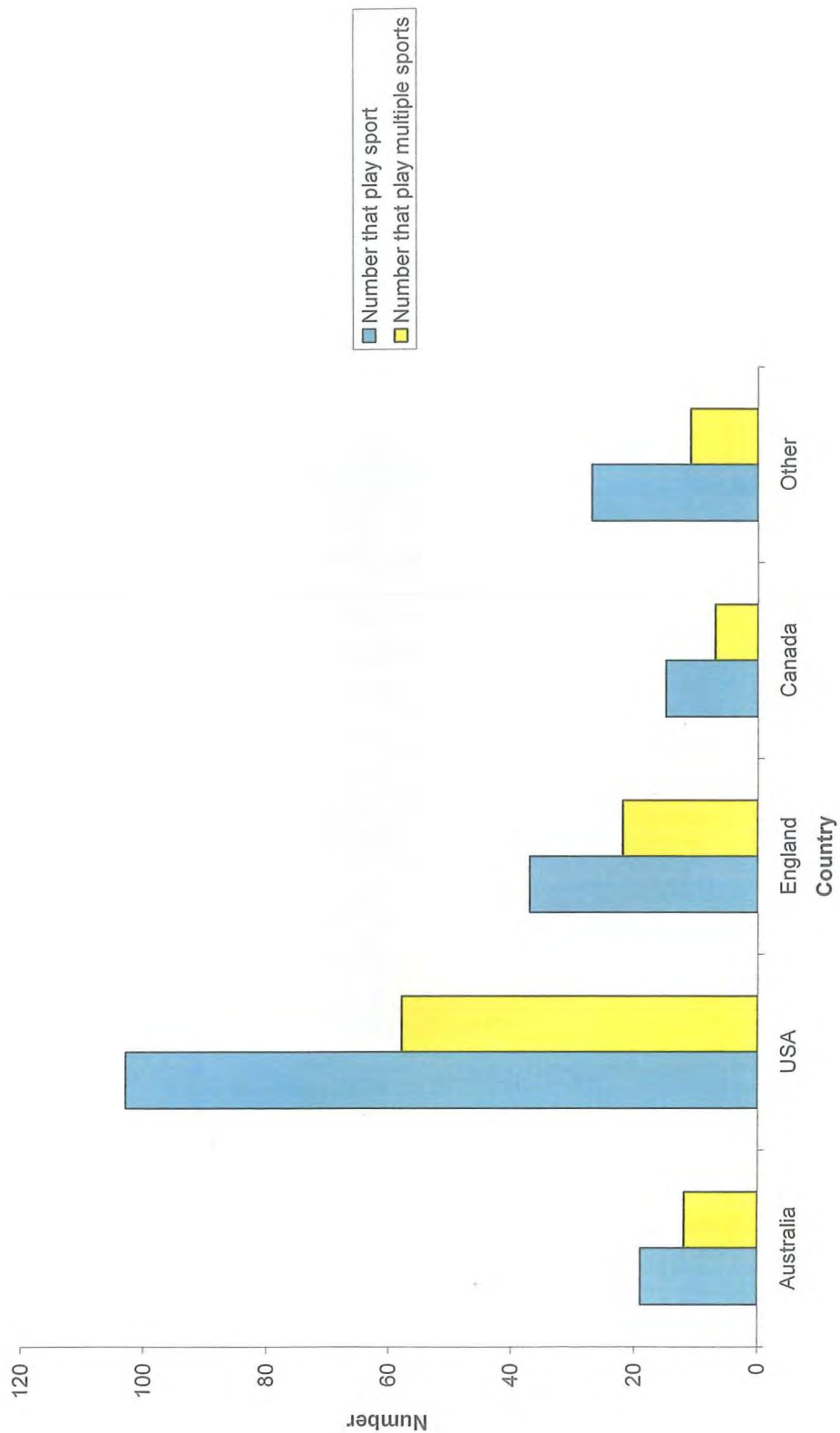


Figure 11

How important televisual entertainment is to respondents

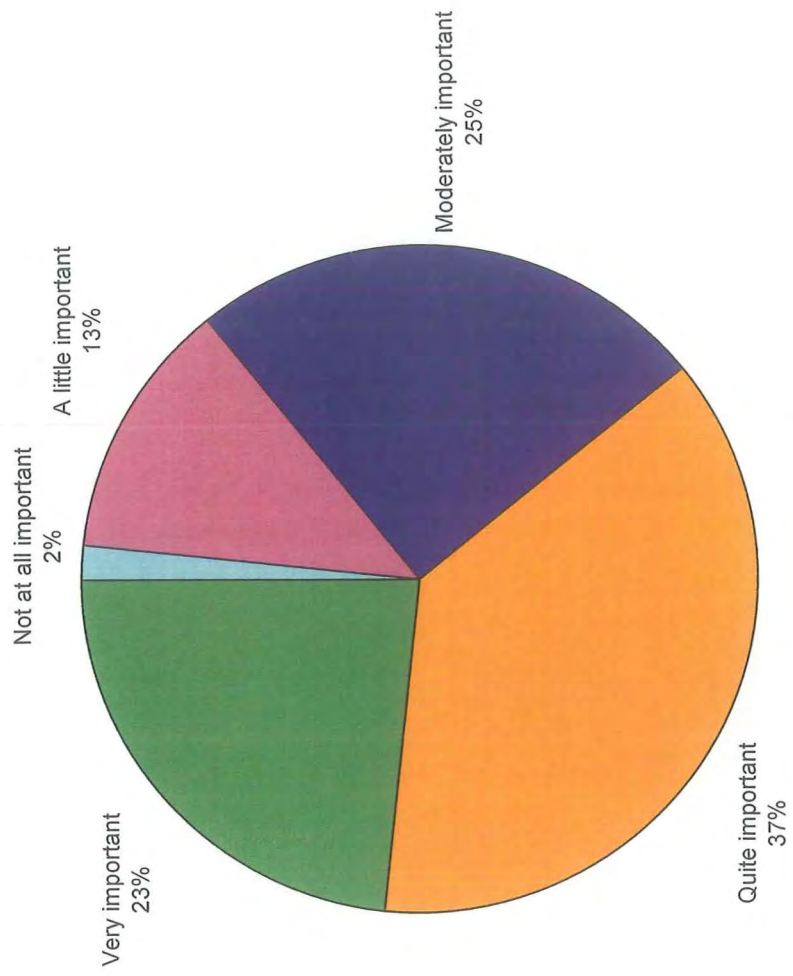
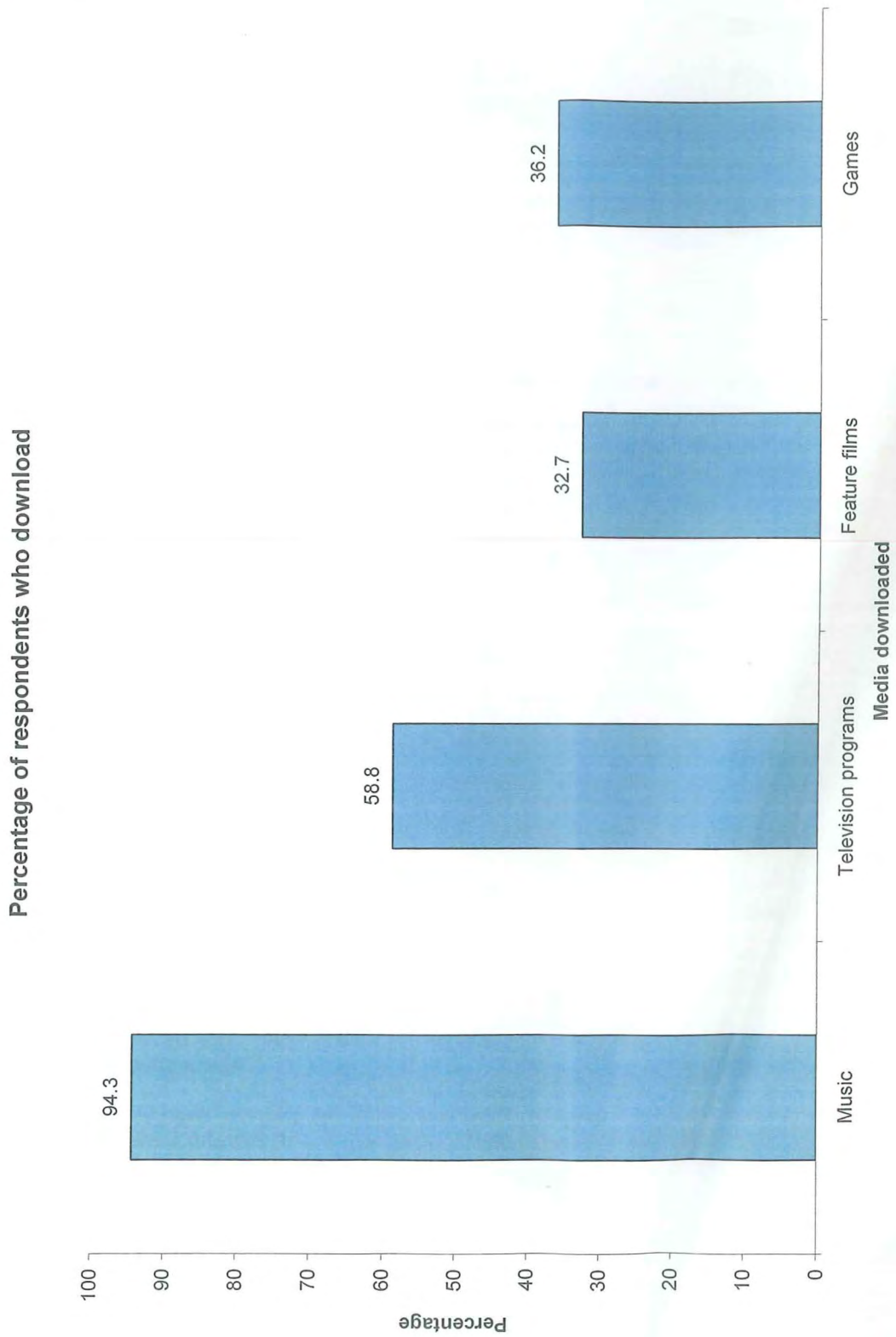


Figure 12



Appendix A

	Question	Answers	Operation
1.	Gender	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - male - female - under 18 - 18 – 21 - 21 – 25 - 25 – 30 - 30 – 40 	Either/or
2.	Age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 40 and over 	One only
	Location – city		
	- state		
3.	- country		Text box
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - computer games - moves - television programs - game consoles - music - sport - other - music - television programs 	Any combination
4.	What are your interests?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - feature films - games 	Text box
5.	Do you download any of the following?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - yes - no 	Any combo
6.	Does anyone in your family share your interests?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - yes - no 	Either/or
7.	Do you have friends who share your interests?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - yes - no 	Either/or
	Do you have friends who enjoy <i>Family Guy</i> as much as you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - yes - no 	Either/or
8.	How did you meet your friends who like <i>Family Guy</i> ?		Text box
9.	Is the group of friends that watch <i>Family Guy</i> your main group of friends?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - yes - no 	Either/or
10.	Do you have your own computer?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - yes - no 	Either/or
11.	(a) If you do not have your own computer, what restrictions are placed upon your computer usage?		Text box
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Television - VCR - DVD 	
12.	Do you have your own of any of the following?		Any combo
	(a) If you do not have you own any of these items, what restrictions are place on their use?		Text box
12.	(b) Do you have access to pay television (cable)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - yes - no 	Text box
13.	Do you have access to a broadband internet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - yes - no 	Either/or
14.			Either/or

	connection (ADSL)?		
		- ICQ	
		- IRC	Any combo
	Do you use any of the following messaging services?	- MSN	
15.		- Other	Text box
		- None	
		- yes, on a contract	
	Do you have a mobile (cell) phone?	- yes, prepaid	Either/or
16.		- no	
	Do you have an mp3 player?	- yes	
17.		- no	Either/or
		- playstation	
		- playstation 2	
		- x-box	
	Do you have any of the following gaming consoles?	- x-box 360	Any comb
18.		-	
		- Computer	Text box
		- Television	Text box
		- VCR	Text box
		- DVD	Text box
		- Pay (cable) Television	Text box
		- Internet	Text box
		- Messaging software	Text box
		- Mobile (cell) phone	Text box
		- Gaming Console	Text box
19.	Roughly, how much time would you spend using each of the following in an average day?		
	How much time a week would you spend in total using all of the devices mentioned in the previous question?		Text box
20.			
	If you play sport (organized or otherwise) what sport do you play?		Text box
21.			
	How important is televisual entertainment (that is any activity where you use a computer or television screen) to you?	- not at all important	
		- a little important	
		- moderately important	
		- quite important	One only
22.		- very important	
	Could you live without televisual entertainment?		Text box
23.			
	Of the media/devices you have access to, is there anything else you would like/think you would use and what are they?		Text box
24.			
	What percentage of time do you use televisual entertainment for the following?	- entertainment	
		- study	
		- work	Numerical boxes
25.		- socializing (i.e. chat)	
		- computer	
		- VCR	
		- DVD	
		- Pay (cable) television	
		- Internet	
		- Messaging software	Numerical boxes
26.	Rank the following devices that you do have access to from used most, to used least.	- Mobile (cell) phone	

		- Mp3 player	
		- Gammig console	
27.	Have you made friends through your interest in televisual entertainment?	- yes	Either/ or
		- no	
28.	Have you discovered new interests (new television programs, computer games, etc) since using the internet?	- yes	Either/ or
(a)		- no	
28.	(b) If yes, what are they?		Text box
29.	Have you discovered new interests from online friends?	- yes	Either/ or
(a)		- no	
29.	(b) If yes, what are they?		Text box
		- the story lines	
		- popular culture/historical references	Any comb
		- similarity to other programs	
30.	What do you like about <i>Family Guy</i> ?	- other	Text box
	Why do you watch <i>Family Guy</i> – what do you get out of it?		
31.			Text box
		- on free to air television	
		- on pay (cable) television	
		- VCR tape copy	
		- DVD copy	
		- As a file on the computer	Any combo
32.	How do you watch <i>Family Guy</i> ?	- As a pirate dvd/cd	
33.	Do you share episodes with other?	- yes	Either/or
(a)		- no	
33	In what format do you share them?		Text box
(b)			
33.	Where do you get these files from?		Text box
(c)			
	Do you share dialogue from <i>Family Guy</i> with your friends (talk in quotes)?	- yes	Either/or
34.		- no	
	Do you share/discuss jokes from <i>Family Guy</i> , particularly the jokes/references that don't immediately make sense?	- yes	Either/or
35.		- no	
	Do you gather and share information on <i>Family Guy</i> with your friends (i.e. air dates, production schedual, product releases)?	- yes	Either/or
36.		- no	
	Do you share information on <i>Family Guy</i> with others	- yes	Either/ or
37.		- no	

- outside your friendship group?
- Where do you get information on *Family Guy* from?
38. Text box
- Within your group of friends that like *Family Guy*, do you share a similar taste in music?
39. - yes
- no Either/ or
- Within your group of friends that like *Family Guy*, do you share music downloads and/or CDs?
40. - yes
- no Either/or
- Within your group of friends that like *Family Guy*, do you share comics or magazines?
41. - yes
- no Either/or
- (a) 41. Which ones? Text box
- (b) Is there any reason why you trade/share comics and/or magazines rather than purchasing your own copies?
41. Text box
- (c) Within your group of friends that like *Family Guy*, do you share/trade anything else (digital files or physical items)?
42. - yes
- no Either/or
- (a) If you do, what are they and why do you share/trade them?
42. Text box
- (b) Within your group of friends that like *Family Guy*, does anyone collect anything else?
43. - yes
- no Either/or
- (a) Is yes, what do they collect?
43. Text box
- (b) If you didn't collect *Family Guy*, do you think you would collect another program(s) instead?
44. - yes
- no Either/ or
- (a) 44. If yes, which ones? Text box
- (b) To date, roughly how much time have you spent collecting *Family Guy* episodes and information about *Family Guy*? (note this does not include download times, this is how long you spend trying to find a download source etc)
45. Numerical box
- How much time do you spend collecting digital media (files) in an average
46. - less than 1 hour
- 1 – 4 hours
- 4 – 8 hours One only

	week? (note this does not include download times, this is how long you spend trying to find a download source)	- 8 – 12 hours - 12 – 16 hours - 16 – 20 hours - 20 – 24 hours - more than 24 hours	
47.	Before you had access to the internet, did you	- yes	
(a)	collecting anything?	- no	Either/or
47.	(b)		Text box
48.	If yes, what did you collect? Of things that you do collect, what are you most passionate about?		Text box
48.	(a)		Text box
48.	(b)		Text box
49.	Why does this item mean so much to you?		Text box
49.	Do you have every episode of <i>Family Guy</i> ?	- yes - no	Either/or
49.	(a)		Text box
49.	(b)		Text box
50.	Do you view your <i>Family Guy</i> episodes as a collection?	- yes - no	Either/or
50.	(a)		Text box
50.	(b)		Text box
51.	Why do you, or do you not consider them a collection?		Text box
51.	(a)		Text box
51.	(b)		Text box
51.	Is it important to you to know <i>Family Guy</i> episodes well?	- yes - no	Either/or
51.	(a)		Text box
51.	(b)		Text box
52.	How often do you use <i>Family Guy</i> references/quotes in conversation/social situations?	- never - occasionally - often - all the time	One only
53.	Within your group of friends that like <i>Family Guy</i> does anyone know more about the show than the rest of the group?	- yes - no	Either/or
53.	(a)		Text box
53.	(b)		Text box