Explicit Nudity in Western Adult Animation Segment: Case Study



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Abstract
In this article, the authors investigate how often Western mainstream animation content creators employ explicit nudity (in sexual and non-sexual nature) in their storytelling. The authors identified 65 animated TV series that were produced in the Western cultural sphere and labelled as "adult animation". Findings revealed that only one-third of all titles employ explicit nudity for storytelling purposes, while nine-tenths of the analysed TV series portray graphic violence and use obscene language. The results also suggest that there is an animated nudity hierarchy - the most common spectacle involving nudity is female bare breasts, while the least common nudity is male genitalia. The results of the study strongly suggest that in Western animation industries, there is a strong self-censorship phenomenon that treats explicit nudity as immoral and indecent imagery.

1. Introduction
This article is part of ongoing investigations of the adult animation segment and its ability to employ explicit nudity to tell mature stories. The authors of this article, in the previous studies on this topic, quite a few times address indirect evidence that there is a strong quasi-taboo in Western animation industries that repels mainstream animated content creators from approaching explicit nudity in their projects targeted at adult audiences [1], [2], [3]. In other words, mainstream adult animation content creators have no reservations regarding using explicit (and often extremely graphic) violence and obscene language. Yet, explicit nudity (from content creators', distributors', and broadcasters' point of view) is something that is too uncomfortable for Western audiences.

It is also important to address that this quasi-taboo regarding the topic of nudity is not limited to just the animation industry – the topic is extremely under-research. In other words, among all the topics within adult animation phenomena, the subject of explicit nudity (in erotic and non-sexual forms) is systematically ignored. The subject is particularly stigmatised.

This inability to express explicit nudity in Western mainstream animated content for adults is quite puzzling, especially if we compare the situation with

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the live-action medium. To provide some context - 66.8% of all primetime TV shows in the USA contained some form of sexual behaviour [4]. Furthermore, studies on prime-time programming in the UK and Ireland show that the appearance of intercourse scenes on TV screens is considerably higher than in the USA [5], [6]. Finally, theatrical films are a couple of times more abundant with sexual content than the prime-time TV lineup [7], [8], [9].

Thus, in order to offer a perspective on explicit nudity in adult mainstream TV, this article evaluates the occurrence of explicit nudity and its various types as they appear on screen. The primary goal of this article is to provide an account of the range and intensity of explicit nudity in Western mainstream animated TV content for adult audiences.

2. Literature review

At its core, adult animation is animated content that is created for adult audiences and can be expressed in any format, genre, and platform. Adult animation is an entertainment form that uses animation medium and tackles narrative themes (a conceptual or intellectual premise [10]) such as death, divorce, sexuality, identity, politics, war, loneliness, existential ennui, or addiction. Although the animation medium is over a century old [11], the rise of animation content (in mainstream media) created explicitly for adult audiences is still relatively new and niche. The situation is not helped by the fact that cinemas (even today) often identify animated films as a genre, creating a condition for movie-goers to believe that animation is primarily a light-hearted form of entertainment [12].

One of the most critical factors behind the misconception that animation is a genre and not a medium was censorship for cinema and TV that regulated what animation could portray and what it could not. In other words, around the globe, institutions were established whose job was to protect the public from cinematic content that (in the institution's opinion) violated moral, religious, and political values and, in such ways, could cause harm to the community. For the greater part of the existence of this medium, the world's animators working in the mainstream media have devoted much effort to hiding or avoiding adult themes in their creations. As Cohen [13] noticed, during formal censorship in the USA (1934 to 1968), most writers were careful not to create anything that could cause problems. This self-censorship, in turn, was adapted into a way of life. Many animation creators confess that "they were never affected by the censors as they never worked on anything that needed to be changed" [13].

Today, most democratic countries have abandoned formal censorship systems in favour of ones that rate cinematic production based on suitability for different age groups [4][1]. This age rating system is primarily a tool to protect certain groups in society from potentially harmful cinematic content by rating classifications that either warn parents about violent, sexual, or immoral material or restrict theatre access to children. It must be noted that

4 It is important to note that age-based censorship is implemented in very different ways worldwide. In some countries, the age-based census only acts as guidance for parents and guardians. In other countries, the age-based census is enforced by law. And there are countries, where a variation of both practices is still applied.

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the importance and necessity of this tool are not in doubt.

After examining the regulatory documents that govern the process of rating films in Australia, Ireland, Lithuania, Sweden, the UK, and the USA, it was revealed that, at least conceptually, most of the analysed countries perceive what content should be accessible to adults exclusively are quite similar. The following cinematographic (thematic, visual, and aural) elements have been identified (in one form or another) in all analysed countries as suitable only for mature audiences:

- mature themes (perceived through narrative);
- violence (any form of danger to the characters);
- language (obscene, vulgar, offensive, or profane);
- depictions of nudity and/or sexual activity;
- adult activities (i.e. activities that adults, but not minors, may engage in legally);
- illegal activities.

In addition, it is vital to note that not only the display of the listed elements but also the intention to perform actions which are perceived as an experience that should not be a part of a child's world will lead to stricter age censuses by the censorship apparatus. The purpose of the stricter age census is not only to protect the younger audience from witnessing imagery that could negatively affect the child's development but also to protect them from ideas and thoughts that could lead young viewers to unsettling questions.

From a censorship apparatus point of view, movies, as a whole, are not judged to be child-appropriate. Instead, the separate scenes will determine what age ratings the movie will receive. Abandoning one or more scenes can result in an age rating that opens the movie to be watched by younger viewers. This can be a powerful economic motivator for filmmakers [14]. Thus, investors' pressure on animation content creators to abandon scenes that lead to stricter censorship assessments can be quite intense, even if those scenes are central to the whole work.

Decades of formal censorship combined with investors' reluctance to have a higher age censure after the change in the censorship system produced a strong work culture of self-censorship in the Western animation community [13], [15], [16]. Specifically, when it comes to explicit nudity. In other words, even when the story (that is targeted at adult audiences) requires nudity, animators from the Western cultural sphere often will seek creative solutions that would suggest nudity rather than explicitly expressing it to the viewer.

This situation directly influenced another negative outcome regarding explicit animated nudity—the considerable lack of skills and knowledge among the animation professionals necessary to produce high-quality animated content that exhibits explicit nudity. In other words, even when Western mainstream animated content creators have the courage to tell stories with explicit nudity, that does not mean that employed animators will be able to create the best possible aesthetic experiences that an animation medium can provide.

Finally, the authors of this article would like to touch upon the topics of erotica and non-sexual nudity. The first one is a genre where sexual overtones are intended companions with the imagery of explicit bareness or sexual intercourse. In this genre, nudity is presented in

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such a way that it invokes sexual stimulation or arousal. Furthermore, in erotic stories, sexual sensations are pursued as beauty in aesthetics – as something pure and ethereal [17].

However, it is important to note that erotica is not synonymous with pornography. As Scarlett [18] states about erotica as a (literature) genre, "Erotica is not just a book with lots of explicit sex in it'. Yes, sexual themes (or even explicit sex) should be found in a book (or any other medium for that matter) that is labelled as erotica, but these scenes need to be integral to the story because, without them, the character's journey would not make sense.". And, as [19] Suraiya sums up, "Erotica represents the complex cartography of desire, full of hazard and mystery, inviting endless exploration', while pornography 'is a dumbed-down diagram leading to a cul-de-sac whose only destination is libidinal claustrophobia". Thus, erotica is not about showing explicit nudity; it is about (a) a story that tackles sexual themes and (b) a particular aesthetics that invokes the viewer's feelings of sexual admiration and desire.

Non-sexual nudity is imagery that, although it has all traits of what otherwise would be considered (at the very least) erotic and (in some cases) pornographic, invokes no 'lust lure' from the viewer. There is imagery in visual and audiovisual media that, although it presents explicit nudity or sexual intercourse, does not initiate sexual arousal. For example, medical pictures of naked subjects (imagery that is consumed for informational purposes), paintings of naked slaves in a slave market, pictures of nude infants, naked people with severe illness, dead people, naked prisoners in Nazi gas chambers, visual documentation of rape or other types of sexual abuse and torture. In some cases, even a healthy nude person (who is not in a dire situation) would not invoke sexual arousal due to the cultural values of the community. In other words, there are quite a few situations when the explicit imagery would not result in sexual arousal.

As is the case with erotica, non-sexual nudity is an important storytelling tool to telegraph to the audience information about the character's physical or mental condition, values, intimacy, or cultural background. Non-sexual nudity can also be used as a powerful tool to invoke empathy or even to shock the audience. However, it is important to note if an artist wants to tell a story involving rape, torture, or (sexual) abuse, it is necessary to solve the emerging ethical dilemma – to present the uncensored reality, or to display a sterilised and non-offensive version. Thus, a wide variety of stories can use non-sexual imagery for a better cinematographic experience.

And lastly, it is necessary to address the topic of explicit nudity of children in animation. Even though this type of nudity has a long historical precedent, imagery of naked children and minors today is extremely controversial. Especially in the Western cultural sphere. Thus, even though it would be hard to present an argument that naked infants or toddlers call to "action", the moral panic surrounding child sexual abuse and child pornography is evident [20]. Therefore, the very nature of non-sexuality in children's nudes does not guarantee that the viewer's fears or moral convictions would not group the nudes with the pornography genre and, what is even worse, label the artist as a child pornographer.

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3. Methodology

The study sample included Western animated adult TV series released in 2020-2023. The timeframe of the series was chosen for two reasons. First, Evershed, in his White paper published in 2020 [15], was the first industry insider to claim that the adult animation segment will soon experience significant expansion – a phenomenon that he personally titled "The Great Adult Animation Boom". Secondly, the four-year timeframe was chosen in order to provide a broad, more comprehensive segment situation analysis.

For this study, 65 titles of mainstream animated TV series that targeted adult audiences were identified (titles are listed in Appendix A). To compile the list, Evershed report [21] on the adult animation segment was a starting point – in his document, Evershed presents over 100 titles that were supposed to be produced and aired in 2021-2023. However, a great number of the titles from the list were cancelled (during development or production stages) or reshaped to be more children-friendly. Thus, to compile the list, additional sources were examined (such as news posts, industry reports, official SVOD content list, etc.). It is important to note that for a title to be considered Western, at least half of the top-tier creative team must be from the Western cultural sphere.

Every title's age census was checked in order to identify if the content was truly targeted at adults. For this, two types of information were gathered – one from the content owners (i.e. what age census the content creators give to the animation) and one from Common Sense Media. The latter census-providing platform was chosen because it is based on viewers' opinions (rather than internal or external censorship apparatus). However, not in all cases both of the information was available. This information was useful to identify and remove content that was suitable for children (and thus not created specifically for adults).

It is important to address that for this study, only the first season of any given title was examined. This decision was made because the authors of this article were primarily interested in identifying how willing content creators are to use explicit nudity to tell their stories from the very start. The rationale for this decision was that with the established popularity of the shows, the animated content creators might acquire additional soft power (towards investors and broadcasters) and be much more willing to risk employing creative decisions that previously could be regarded as too dangerous (career-wise). Thus, by including just the first seasons in the study, the authors can acquire a better understanding of whether animators are really ready to include explicit nudity in their content for adult audiences.

The final list contained 65 titles. However, the authors could not acquire access to two TV series. Thus, the final size of the study sample is 63 titles (in total, over 1140 hours of content (including credits)). As animated explicit nudity is not treated equally (for example, male explicit nudity is much rarer than female), the explicit nudity that shows female breasts, female genitalia, male genitalia, and children's genitalia are marked separately. In addition, the authors took note of whether the explicit nudity was sexual or non-sexual in nature.

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It is important to note that in situations when only naked buttocks were visible to the audience (but not genitalia or female breasts), it was not regarded as a case of explicit nudity. This approach was made based on various countries' censorship patterns that do not perceive visible buttocks as unacceptable animated material for children. The same approach was taken with any explicit content that was presented outside of the animated characters' bodies. In other words, paintings, illustrations, or just plain "dick drawings" on the wall or paper in this study were not perceived as cases of explicit nudity.

Finally, the authors of this article decided to compare how these titles approach others explicitly for adult audiences with suitable elements such as (i) obscene language, (ii) violence, and (iii) (legal and illegal) activities that most of the censors agree that children should not be exposed to (i.e. drinking, intoxication, prostitution, gambling, crime, etc.). Other data that was gathered in the study were the genre, date of airing, the buyer (first window), platform (SVOD, VOD, cable, or network), number of episodes in the season and average minutes per episode, and finally, the exact moment when the explicit nudity appeared in the episode.

4. Findings

Thirty per cent of titles had explicit nudity in the sample. However, this group also includes titles that showed just one nude shot that lasted for one second (or less) in an entire season. In other words, quite a few titles were marked as content that showed exclusive nudity only on technicality. For example, in "Chicago Party Aunt" (2021-2022) episode 3, around the end of the 4th minute, there is a shot where a naked man jumps from the toilet. And although throughout the scenes, the man's penis is blurred for a brief moment (during the jump), the audience can see the genitalia as the blur fails to move in sync with the man. But, in the opinion of the authors of this article, such type of display of explicit nudity much more supports the notion of the existence of self-censorship rather than the courage to use explicit imagery for storytelling purposes.

In regard to explicit female breast nudity, the data shows that 27 per cent of the titles show topless women in order to tell mature stories. In other words, only two titles in the sample pool choose to show naked men but not women's breasts. Naked women's breasts are shown almost equally in erotic (19%) and nonsexual (23%) contexts. However, it is important to note that while the categories of "non-sexual" and "erotic" were chosen as opposite in nature when addressing in what manner nudity is shown, it was early in the study identified that the term "erotic" was not always a perfect term to label scenes where characters are presented a sexual activity. The reason for this lies in the aesthetic implementation - far from all scenes representing sexual activities can evoke sexual arousal (as it should happen with erotic imagery). Thus, in this study, "erotic" means only the factual nature of the imagery and not its ability to produce a specific response from the viewer.

Nineteen per cent of the titles show naked female genitalia. However, there are quite a few cases when the female genitalia are shown just for a brief moment or are stylistically presented in a way that the vulva cannot be clearly

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identified. In other words, although, in the shot, it is indicated that the female character is naked, there are no visual cues that would help the audience identify the existence of the female reproductive organ. Thus, in many cases, the female genitalia are suggested rather than shown. Seventeen per cent of titles show female genitalia in a non-sexual manner, and 13 per cent of titles present explicit female nudity in situations that can be perceived as sexual by nature.

Only 17 per cent of the titles show explicit male genitalia. However, as it was mentioned previously, in many cases, the imagery is shown only once throughout the season and only for a second. In other words, this type of imagery is a blink-and-you-will-miss-it content. In addition, it is necessary to note that not one case presented a male penis in erect position. Even when the animated male characters were shown in scenes that have sexual overtones. Fourteen per cent of titles presented explicit male nudity in a non-sexual manner, and only 3 per cent of titles showed nude men in situations that can be perceived as sexual by nature.

Two titles (4%) have shown explicit children's nudity. In both cases, it was a male baby.

The study also revealed that 86 per cent of the titles use obscene language (however, in a few cases, they do bleep the word fuck, although it could be argued to what success the aural censorship protects the viewer from the ability to identify what word is being used), 74 per cent of the titles present activities that are suitable only for mature audiences, and 94 per cent of the titles examined in the study use imagery of violence. And it should be added that, in many cases, the violence is extremely graphic.

Finally, the gathered data revealed that only four titles (6%) were given the 18+ age census. In all cases, the strict census was given by the content providers and not matched by Common Sense Media ratings, which gave three 17+ ratings and one 16+. Thirty-eight titles (60%) were rated (by content providers) 16+ or 17+. Fourteen titles (22%) were given 14+ (or lower) age census. The rest of the titles did not provide a clear rating. For example, one title just presented a warning that the animated content is for "mature audiences". Interestingly, out of 47 cases when the age census was provided by the Common Sense Media users, 19 (or 40%) were assessed with a milder age rating than the one indicated by the content providers.

5. Discussion

Literature reviews suggest that, although most of the world has moved from formal to age-based censorship, there are still additional challenges regarding adult animated content. Not only are decision-makers in broadcasting, distribution, and cinema sectors reluctant to take a chance on adult content, but there are indicators that, in general, animators themselves actively practise a self-censorship work culture and produce work in a manner so as not to irritate the censorship apparatus and potentially lose any access to film markets.

However, the fact that only 1/3 of all titles employ explicit nudity to tell mature stories, as opposed to 94% of titles that use violence, 86% that use profanity, and 74% of titles that portray activities not suitable for minors, strongly suggest, that self-censorship in Western mainstream

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animation affects only the ability to produce explicit nudity imagery. Furthermore, as it was indicated in the findings, the fact that most of the titles use explicit nudity only once per season in a blink-and-you-will-miss-it manner suggests that the content creators use this visual storytelling tool in the most minimal possible capacity in order to minimise any potential risk that comes with portraying this kind of spectacle.

The study also clearly indicates that there is a hierarchy of explicit nudity. The most common choice is to portray female breasts (27%), then female genitalia (19%), and finally, male genitalia (17%). The latter, of course, must only come in flaccid form. This suggests that the penis is still perceived as something axiomatically vulgar, obscene, and, thus, offensive. At least from the content creators' point of view. Thus, it cannot be shown for longer than a few seconds at a time. And never in erected form.

It is vital to add that, although only one-third of all titles showed explicit nudity, it does not mean that other titles did not approach sexual topics. Although the authors of this article did not specifically count how many TV series provided censored (i.e. blurred or strategically covered) imagery of a sexual nature, the number would be great. Furthermore, there are quite a few cases when the scene puts the viewer in the middle of an orgy. Or extensively verbally provide information of sexual activities that correctly happening (or just happened). In one case, a young male character's face is covered in semen, which was the result of masturbatory activity shown just a second ago. But, of course, no explicit nudity was shown (during the masturbatory action) to the audience.

Interestingly, this situation suggests that content creators want to approach and explore various sexual themes, topics, and situations. However, the chosen approach is to push the acceptable limits in all directions but one – presenting explicit nudity. This is indirectly related to another phenomenon observed by the authors, which, unfortunately, was not separately recorded in quantitative terms. The authors of this article noticed a recurring aesthetic result, where scenes depicting explicit nudity are significantly more non-sexual in the provided cinematographic experience than scenes from the TV series that chose to (self)censor the erotic content. In other words, there is an aesthetical pattern where explicitly naked animated characters would be presented in an un-erotic manner. This raises an interesting question – is it a result created by choice or due to a lack of necessary skills? Unfortunately, the answer to this question cannot be obtained by quantitative means.

The children's animated explicit nudity was extremely rare (only two titles). However, it is understandable, as it was indicated in the literature review, that naked children (even in animated form) are a very controversial topic. Thus, the choice to show characters not older than toddlers (i.e. up to 3 years of age) provides the best chance to communicate the imagery as non-sexual. And, in turn, minimise any potential cause for controversy.

In addition, it is worth discussing the very concept of adult animation. The study indicated that only 6% of the examined titles were labelled as 18+ content. At the same time, one-fifth of the titles were labelled as suitable for 14+ viewers. It is important to note that all of the

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TV series in the study were referenced as part of the adult animation segment by one source or another. In other words, every title in the study was selected because the buyer, industry insiders or journalist working closely with the animation industry claimed that the content is suitable only for (or at least targeting) adults. Yet, the investigation clearly indicates that most of the content in this segment is suitable (in content providers' and viewers' opinions) for teenagers. Content that (nine out of ten times) has extremely graphic depictions of violence and presentation of obscene language. This situation suggests that the label "adult animation" at the moment functions not as an indication of mature content but rather as a brand that seeks to provide awareness to the target audience (which, in many cases, are teenagers). In other words, the label "adult animation" is used not to inform about the existence of mature content but rather to inform the absence of childish content.

Animation is an incredible medium that can use explicit nudity to provide a very sensational cinematic experience. It is extremely easy to imagine how these two phenomena can work together in synergy to create something sensual and captivating. Thus, by deliberately avoiding using explicit nudity, Western animators lost the opportunity to tell full stories. Stories that are important to our collective culture, stories that matter to us, and narratives that reflect (or challenge) our values, beliefs, and perceptions.

To sum up, the authors will employ a simple metaphor – animation without explicit nudity (be it in erotic or nonsexual form) is like a teen with excellent prospects yet is forbidden to mature. Sure, like every teen, the medium can try to be cool – use profanity and worship the aesthetics of violence, but the topic of (non)sexuality ... it can be discussed, admired, even implied, but not experienced because all that is related to sexuality is for grown-ups. Therefore, animation in the Western cultural sphere is in perpetual adolescence – rebellious and loud yet without actual agency. A member of the cinematic community that doesn't (yet) have the right to sit at the adults' table.

6. Conclusion

In this article, the authors present a study's results about how many animated adult TV series from 2020-2023 dared to employ explicit nudity in their stories. The results suggest that Western mainstream adult animation has quite a few (mental) boundaries to break before animation medium reaches the creative potential that live-action medium has with explicit (non-)sexual imagery. In other words, until self-censorship is not effectively removed from the minds of animated adult content creators, there is a creative limitation to the stories this art form can produce. Furthermore, without breaking this artificially created limitation, the animation will not be able to grow up.

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Appendix A

1. TV series titles included in the study sample (alphabetical order):

2. Kong: Skull Island, 10 Year Old Tom, Adventure Beast, Agent Elvis, Arcane, Birdgirl, Blade Runner: Black Lotus, Blood of Zeus, Blue Eye Samurai, Captain Fall, Captain Laserhawk: A Blood Dragon Remix, Carol & the end of the world, Chicago Party Aunt, Clone High, Close Enough, Crossing Swords, Cyberpunk: Edgerunners, Devil May Care, Doomsday Brothers, Duncanville, Fairfax, Farzar, Fired on Mars, Godzilla: Singular Point, Helluva boss, Hit-Monkey, Hoops, Human Resources, Inside Job, Invincible, JJ Villard's Fairy Tales, Koala Man, Krapopolis, Little Demon, M.O.D.O.K., Magical Girl Friendship Squad: Origins, Mulligan, Onyx Equinox, Poor Devil, Praise Petey, Q-Force, Resident Evil: Infinite Darkness, Royal Crackers, Santa Inc., Scavengers Reign, Smiling Friends, Solar Opposites Star Trek: Lower Decks, Tear Along the Dotted Line, Teenage Euthanasia, The Boys Presents: Diabolical, The Freak Brothers, The Harper House, The Legend of Vox Machina, The Midnight Gospel, The Pole, The Prince, Ultra City Smiths, Velma, Wild Life, Woman in The Book, YOLO.