

Locating commercial media in children's everyday lives: A comparative study of free-time activity preferences in the UK and USA

Merris Griffiths

Aberystwyth University, UK

Abstract:

This article presents a comparative study about the presence of commercial media in the free-time activity preferences of nine- to eleven-year-old children in the UK (Wales) and the USA (Montana). Using a creative approach to data-gathering, the children were asked to draw what they liked to do in their 'free-time after school'. Of the six 'activity' themes that emerged, commercial media were both explicitly mentioned and subtly embedded, and were generally taken-for-granted. The children's drawings revealed the use of specific media products in their lives, brand awareness, involvement in commercial/consumer activities, and broader (non-specific) forms of media engagement.

Key words: Middle childhood, everyday life, commercial media, creative methodology

Contemporary public debates powerfully shape the nature of 'concerns' about the status of the commercial world in children's everyday lives. There are implicit assumptions about the notion of 'impact', 'influence' or 'effect' and such discourses tend to be negative in their claims and conclusions, with suggestions that modern childhoods are 'toxic' (Palmer, 2006) or 'remotely controlled' (Sigman, 2007) by commercialised, materialist forces. Published research in this field – often inflected by the social codes, conventions and agendas of the countries in which the work was produced – can be emotive, highly politicised and polarised. The result is a perfunctory debate characterised by cyclic truisms, preventing balanced or progressive discussion of key issues and often neglecting the perspectives of children themselves.

Arguments about children and the commercial world tend to be evidenced in terms of unhelpful cause-and-effect relationships which are always highly problematic within

media and cultural studies and 'do not do justice to the complexity of issues' at stake (Buckingham et al., 2009: 3). Indeed, the problems and concerns associated with increased commercialisation tend to be framed in terms of often quite politicised (sociological) questions relating to children's wellbeing, the family, peer groups and social equality (Mayo and Nairn, 2009; Schor, 2004; Furnham and Gunter, 1998; Kline, 1993).

Buckingham et al. (2009) note that the role of commercial media in children's lives needs to be understood in broad(er) terms, within the context of the economy and family life. This sentiment is evident in research that has emerged over about the last ten years. Martensen and Tufte (in Hansen et al., 2002: 10), for example, note that there has been a shift in terms of how the interrelationship between children and the commercial world is framed. Attention has moved away from the more traditional (and absolutist) effects approach towards a greater interest in 'how media products are *used* in everyday life' (*my emphasis*). From this perspective, the commercial world is accepted as a 'fact of life' for contemporary children, and a dimension of the everyday that must be learned and negotiated in much the same way as any other social and developmental factors. This is reminiscent of Kline's (1993: 74) assertion that commercial media (especially marketing) are part of the 'matrix of socialisation' during childhood. The issue of 'everyday life' is central to this investigation and it is hoped that this small scale study will contribute to understandings of the presence of commercial media during middle childhood.

The aim of this article is to examine the relative status of the commercial world and commercial media in children's self-selected free-time activity preferences. In definitional terms, agreement about what constitutes 'commercial' media is in flux. Traditionally, 'commercial' dimensions in the media were easily identified in terms of advertising texts that explicitly marketed products by using a clear sales message. However, boundaries have arguably become blurred when one considers issues of hybridisation/cross-over within and between (multi-)media environments, and it is less easy to demarcate commercial and non-commercial media content. A corporation like the BBC, for example, which is considered non-commercial because it emphasises public service over profit, is clearly engaged in more subtle forms of commercial activity. *CBeebies*, the BBC's commercial-free pre-school television channel, for example, may not carry advertising but it does exhibit commercial elements as a result of the numerous product tie-ins and merchandising associated with many of the programmes it broadcasts (including toys, clothes, DVDs, books and magazines), giving it a potentially 'material' presence in a child's everyday life.

In a report by Buckingham et al. (2009), entitled 'The Impact of the Commercial World on Children's Well-being', the spectrum of the different commercial elements that are present in children's everyday lives are effectively mapped. The authors intentionally adopt a broad definition of 'the commercial world' to include an assessment of 'products; commercial messages; the children's entertainment business and children's publishing (print, music, new media); shopping; the market for children's goods and services; and any further involvement that children may have' (2009: 18).

This flexible framing will be applied in this article, to facilitate exploration of a diverse range of everyday activities that feature – to greater or lesser degrees – commercial elements. Shopping, for example, would be an obvious commercial activity, yet something traditionally considered to be ‘non-commercial’, such as outdoor play with siblings, may also exhibit commercial traces through the use of less obvious, taken-for-granted products (e.g. branded toys). It is anticipated that the commercial elements within the typical media landscape will be assigned different ‘values’ and ‘functions’ depending on how and in what context they are utilised, and the extent to which they are explicitly mentioned or left ‘unspoken’. The differential positions assigned to various media will be examined through a comparative sample of nine- to eleven-year-old children in the UK and the USA, to map the various ways in which commercial media elements are traceable in their preferred free-time activities.

Commercial media and childhood: Established patterns

Concerted efforts to investigate the presence of commercial media in children’s everyday lives seem a little patchy within a research landscape that has tended to be distorted by the persistent negativist focus on ‘effect’ (cf. Buckingham et al., 2009: 8). Commercially driven companies, such as advertising agencies, hold significant data on child target audiences but do not readily share that information with academics or the wider public (for commercial reasons). There are, however, some points of reference within already published research which proved useful in terms of locating the current investigation.

Hofferth and Sandberg (2001a: 301), for example, published the results of a substantial study about ‘How American Children Spend their Time’. In it, they suggest that approximately 30% of an American child’s week – the equivalent to 51 hours – is available as ‘free-time’. Of this, they estimate that about 15 hours is occupied in unstructured play, 12 hours in watching television and the remaining time spent outdoors, playing sport, going to church and visiting people. From this initial finding, they examined the status of television in more detail, and found that there was an increase in the amount of viewing as children got older. Six- to eight-year-olds, for example, watched approximately seven-and-three-quarter hours of television whilst nine- to twelve-year-olds (the age group under review in the current investigation) spent approximately thirteen-and-a-half hours in front of the screen per week. The researchers found a degree of stability over time relating to the role of television in children’s everyday lives, noting that it tended to occupy ‘slightly less than two hours per day’ throughout childhood’ (Hofferth and Sandberg, 2001a: 301), and this ‘stability’ continues to be evident in recent research by Ofcom (2012).

In addition to television, Hofferth and Sandberg considered other free-time activities, many exhibiting ‘commercial’ characteristics. They refer, for example, to ‘passive leisure’ activities – something that occupied about two hours in the average week – as involving going to the cinema, watching sports, ‘listening to music and just sitting around’ (2001a: 301). They also included reading activities in their study and noted, interestingly, that there was little variation in reading practices amongst the children they studied (ibid),

where most children 'seemed to spend about one hour per week reading for pleasure' (with younger children being read to by their parents, and older children reading alone). The researchers did, however, note a slight gender difference in their sample, in that the girls tended to read less than the boys in an average week (ibid: 304-5).

Newman et al. (2007) reviewed gender-related findings from various studies of children's free-time activities and found that boys tended to be characterised as being more technology-oriented. Hofferth and Sandberg (1998, in Newman et al., 2007: 436) found that nine- to twelve-year-old boys in the USA spent more time using computers than girls of the same age. In cross-cultural studies spanning the USA and Europe, boys also tended to watch more television (Bianchi and Robinson, 1997) although this was not the case in more recent work by McHale et al. (2001) who found no gender differences in television viewing habits. Newman et al. (2007: 451) also note 'no gender difference in the amount of TV viewing' in any of the countries they studied (Bulgaria, Taiwan and the USA) although they do suggest that gaming may have taken over from television viewing as the preferred activity for boys.

Buckingham et al. (2009: 149 ff.) usefully map some of the key issues relating to the presence of the commercial world in children's 'play, leisure and public space'. The authors argue that there has been a gradual shift in children's play – within a climate of social fear – from open public spaces to the more closed environment of the family home and/or 'supervised commercial settings' (ibid). They argue that, as a result of context, 'leisure is increasingly blended with shopping and consumption'. The notion of a close relationship between 'leisure culture' (which arguably includes free-time) and promotional culture is also touched upon by Livingstone (1998). She notes that 'modern marketing directs flows of popular culture' and facilitates or enables the creation and maintenance of the citizen-consumer (cf. Ofcom, 2004: 7); that consumption practices, as a result of globalisation, 'infuse the life world of the family' (Lash and Urry, 1994, in Livingstone, 1998: 11), becoming embedded, naturalised and taken-for-granted.

This portrait of 'childhood', however, arguably reflects the reality of growing up in sub/urban environments, where population concentrations are higher, perceptions of traffic-danger and stranger-danger are often acute (Mayall, 2002: 101-2), and opportunities for 'leisure' are more likely to be easily accessible, diverse and staged in what Buckingham et al. refer to as 'supervised commercial settings' (2009: 149ff). Few studies take account of rural environments where children's use of space is often less of a concern or issue because perceptions of 'danger' are lower, and where there are arguably fewer opportunities to encounter and consume 'commercial leisure' media. Whilst the current study is small-scale, in terms of the number of children who participated, it is hoped that it will offer an additional dimension to other published research in the field by attempting to locate commercial media in *rural* childhoods.

Rationale and methodology: Creative workshops

One of the main difficulties encountered by any researcher working with children is establishing a means by which the research participants can confidently express their

thoughts and ideas about relatively complex and abstract concepts. In such a context, the validity of using the spoken word as the *only* means of communication may be limiting. So, in this investigation, drawing/art was chosen as an additional 'layer' in the data-gathering process, to allow children to 'display their competencies' (Punch, 2002: 12).

Using drawing/art as a data-gathering tool has a long-established history in child-related studies, both within and beyond academia. Many researchers argue that it can lead to insights into a spectrum of issues such as emotions, attitudes, dreams, inner-fears, conflicts, confusions, and modes of attachment (Davis, 1985, in Sitton and Light, 1992: 26; Fury et al., 1997: 1154). Christensen and James (2000: 164) note that the use of various 'visual' methods in social research is 'now a recognized way in which to engage effectively with children'. It can also help to overcome language-related issues when working in bi-/multi-lingual contexts (Griffiths, 2005, 2011).

Creative techniques are enjoying a resurgence in popularity in the social sciences (see Banks, 2001), where drawing, photography, film-making, diaries, scrap-books and forms of creative play are becoming increasingly standardised methods to encourage and scaffold self-expression (Griffiths, 2005; Buckingham and Bragg, 2004). Consequently, it is argued here that drawing/art is able to generate insight into children's perspectives on the everyday, enabling them to produce visual 'representations' of what their lives involve.

Encouraging children to draw something can allow them to set their own agendas in relation to what they consider important, beyond what their parents and teachers might organise for them within and through the (adult-generated) spheres of 'family' and 'school'. Similarly, the method can offer a degree of choice and enable children to reveal something of their own individual identities, preferences and lifestyles. Further, by accumulating a set of drawings, a bigger picture relating to 'kid culture' begins to form, signalling how children engage with or reject 'typical' activities, which include their engagements with commercial media (cf. Lealand and Zanker, in Carlsson and Feilitzen, 2005/6: 127). Finally, drawings work well as a basis for conversation with children in the research setting, offering stimuli for questions and enabling children to talk about themselves and their lives, even prompting 'memories or emotional responses' (Buckingham, 2009: 636). Götz et al. (2005: 27) argue that the act of drawing can create a 'space for reflection' and can provide a non-verbal access-point to children's thoughts, opinions and concerns without the pressures associated with 'narration'. This echoes Punch (2002: 13), who suggests that the method can give children 'time to think' and a flexible means of expression (in terms of making additions/modifications during the creative process).

There are a number of examples of studies that have utilised creative methodologies to reveal details about and generate insight into children's lives and media engagement. Christensen and James (2000) used drawing-based activities to gauge the ways in which in group of ten-year-old children in the north of England filled their time and understood their everyday lives at home and in school, generating some insights into free-time. Lealand and Zanker (in Carlsson and Feilitzen, 2005/6) approached things slightly differently by using drawings to map 'flows of consumer culture and media use' (ibid: 120). In wanting to gain

insight into both 'real' and 'dream' bedroom spaces, they argued that the approach helped them to access 'peer group cultural aspirations' (ibid). Interestingly, the researchers suggest that the emergent patterns indicated children's awareness of commercial brands, as well as their engagement with various media technologies. Both of these studies link to aspects of the current investigation, and signal the suitability of creative methodologies as a data-gathering tool.

However, as with the adoption of any research methodology, it is important to show an awareness of its short-falls (see Buckingham, 2009). Coates (in Lewis et al., 2004) outlines some cautionary caveats in light of a study in which she used drawings to explore emergent writing skills in children aged three- to seven-years-old. At the upper end of the age-range (i.e. closer to the age-range in the current investigation), she found that the children became sharply critical of their own drawing abilities and, hence, inhibited in their attempts to represent thoughts, ideas and feelings on paper. Arguably, children of this age can be 'paralysed' by drawing tasks set by researchers (cf. Punch, 2002: 14). Coates also makes an interesting point about the talk that often surrounds children's drawings. She reflects on the richly 'descriptive nature of the children's narratives about their completed pictures' (ibid: 20). In some cases, she suggests that children can tend to work to what they believe is an 'acceptable formula'; one which pleases the adults in the room and one which tends to be dominant in the classroom environment. However, on other occasions, she notes that 'a real storyline (often) emerged' (ibid).

Finally, Götz et al. (2005: 28) make an important point about the relative affordances of using drawing as a data-gathering tool, and describe the approach as 'a compromise that... can only be more fully understood in direct communication with the child'. This is accommodated in the current investigation, in the sense that the children's drawings were used as a means to generate and scaffold conversation with them, and the emergent meanings were further supported by in-class observations and follow-up conversations with the classroom teachers. As such, the study acknowledged the significance of collective and social processes of meaning-making (Buckingham, 2009: 640), and echoed the sort of multi-dimensional, participatory data-gathering approach advocated by Punch (2002).

The sample: Comparability of school contexts

This study recounts field research conducted in two elementary/primary schools – one in the USA (Montana) in 2005 and the other in the UK (Wales) in 2006. Both contexts were rural and relatively geographically isolated, with less than 'easy access' to commercial settings, arguably adding something new to the spectrum of child-related studies that conventionally focus on sub/urban childhoods. The school and community contexts were deemed comparable on a number of levels. Both schools served a demographic population of primarily C1 (lower middle-class), C2 (skilled working-class) and D (working-class) groupings, with a small minority of families classified as B (middle-class). Likewise, both schools catered for the full range of primary school ages, from Kindergarten (age 5)/Reception (age 4) to Grade 5 (age 12)/Year 6 (age 11).

The US School served a neighbourhood in Missoula, a small city in the west of Montana (population: 66,788, Census, 2010). It was the smallest elementary school in the city with 200 children enrolled at the time of the study (other schools in the area typically catered for 300+ children). The State of Montana, which is the fourth largest in the USA, is very sparsely populated (ranked 44th out of 50) and predominantly rural. The main industries are agriculture, tourism, lumber/logging, and mining. There are large Native American populations who continue to speak their own tribal languages.

The UK School served a small rural community in Ceredigion, west Wales. The school had a comparatively large population, having 43 children enrolled at the time of the study. An Estyn (School Inspectors’) Report, described the area as ‘neither prosperous nor economically disadvantaged’ (Estyn, 2005 – unreferenced for reasons of anonymity). The county of Ceredigion is one of the least populated and most rural in Wales (population: 75,900, Census, 2011). The main industries are agriculture, food processing and tourism. The county is traditionally Welsh-speaking and has a high concentration of fluent Welsh-speakers (47.35%, Census, 2011) whilst the school itself was designated ‘Category A’ by the Local Education Authority, meaning that the children received their education mainly in Welsh.

The children who participated in this study were, in light of issues relating to educational, environmental, social and economic contexts, considered to be comparable. The overall sample of children is summarised in **Table 1**. It should be noted that, in the context of the US School, there was a sufficiently large school population to warrant age-specific classes (in this case, Grade 3, aged nine- to ten-years-old), whereas in the UK School three year groups (Years 4, 5 and 6, aged nine- to eleven-years-old) were being taught in the same classroom by the same teacher (which is quite usual in small rural school environments). Overall, there was an acceptable gender balance in the sample, both within each individual school and across the two settings.

Table 1: Sample Summary – Number of boys and girls in the USA and UK contexts

USA SCHOOL			UK SCHOOL		
Boys	Girls	Age	Boys	Girls	Age
11	11	9	3	6	9
-	-	-	5	8	10
-	-	-	1	0	11
Total US Boys	Total US Girls	US TOTAL	Total UK Boys	Total UK Girls	UK TOTAL
11	11	22	9	14	23

It is important to note that, whilst the pace of change in the children’s media landscape may be perceived as ‘rapid’ between the data-gathering process and this write-up, automatic ‘take-up’ on the part of children and their families cannot be assumed. Indeed, statistics

published by Ofcom in 2006, 2010, 2012 and 2013 indicate a degree of stability in media access/engagement over time (especially in Wales). Similarly, the findings of a two-year (2010-12) Wales-wide audience research project, analysing seven- to thirteen-year-old children's media preferences and practices (Griffiths, 2014), suggest that the everyday worlds of the 'types' of children featured in this investigation tend not be subject to dramatic changes or reflect the perceived dominance of commercial media in childhoods more generally. The data discussed, therefore, remain valid.

Ethical considerations and managing the fieldwork

In both school contexts, access was made possible through known contacts. This facilitated acquisition of gate-keeper consent and enabled the researcher to integrate as a participant observer by spending a sustained period of time in each classroom (typically a few days either side of the workshop exercises). Standard procedures of best practice in social research were adhered to (cf. Farrell, 2005), and the subject-matter was considered 'low risk' in light of the researcher's institutional Research Ethics Committee guidelines; that '... the research (did) not expose participants to any physical or psychological conditions different to those experienced in everyday life'.¹ The purpose of the drawing activity was explained to the children at the outset, and they were reassured that they were not compelled to participate. The classroom teacher was present throughout each activity, so was able to ensure a sense of continuity. The identities of the schools and participating children were anonymised, with identifying details focusing only on gender, country, and age.

The drawing workshops were presented equitably in each case, making expectations clear (cf. Messenger Davies and Mosdell, 2006: 120), and the children were asked to 'Draw something that you like to in your free-time after school'. Whilst the primary aim of the data-gathering process was to gain insight into the children's 'free-time' (Griffiths, 2011), it provided an interesting opportunity to gauge the (unspoken) presence of commercial media in their everyday lives. That is to say, the children were not asked to specifically focus on the media, but included unprompted references to them within and as a result of their free-time activity preferences.

During the course of the workshops, the researcher utilised participant observation techniques and circulated around the classroom, speaking with each individual child about their drawings and gathering as much information as possible to enhance analyses of the finished pictures (cf. Christensen and James, 2000: 164). Each child was re-visited at least three times, establishing an increasingly strong sense of rapport. Much like Götz et al.'s (2005: 25) description of how to facilitate such interactions with children, the researcher 'mirrored' the child's responses to 'stimulate continued conversation', often by rephrasing the children's statements as questions.

Mapping thematised patterns

The children's drawings were subjected to content analysis – counting the number and type of activities depicted across the sample – and cross-referenced with their own talk about (and around) the images. Echoing Christensen and James's study, a set of multi-layered materials was produced 'both by the image(s) and ... (the) very process of production' (2000: 165), offering children a participatory opportunity to be 'reflexive interpreters' (ibid: 172ff) of their own drawings and, as a result, sketching a peer group free-time portrait. Indeed, the 'process of production' alluded to by Christensen & James (2000:165) revealed much about the peer groups under review. Throughout the workshop activities, the children talked excitedly with one another (as much as with the researcher), shared free-time stories and discussed each other's drawings. This often resulted in new ideas being sparked and modifications to drawings being made (cf. Punch, 2002: 13), which helped to highlight lifestyles, preferences and aspirations. These group dynamics were recorded in field-notes, and were used as an additional means to interpret the children's drawings in ways that remained true to their original intentions.

Six broad thematised categories emerged across the sample (see Götz et al., 2005, 39). By far the most popular way in which the children said they liked to spend their free-time was engaged in 'outdoor activities', and their interests and preferences could be loosely grouped according to 'sport' (Theme 1), generally involving a team element and requiring a degree of organisation, and 'play', connoting more casual activities relating to recreation and leisure (Theme 2). Interwoven with these categories were references to spending time with family and friends (Theme 3), often when engaged with a particular activity (e.g. camping with a parent or playing ball with a friend). Spending time with and caring for pets in the family environment was also a marked interest and was included in this broad category.

Indoor 'media-related' activities (Theme 4) tended to revolve around engagement with computers and gaming equipment, television, books and music. Some of the children decided to focus on 'special occasions' (Theme 5) like birthday parties and family holidays as the thing they 'enjoy the most', whilst a final and slightly random category of 'other' (Theme 6) referred to activities like 'doing nothing'. Interestingly, 'differences' between the USA and UK were negligible when compared with the strong parallels that emerged in terms of the *shared* activities enjoyed by the children. The comparability of the two settings (socio-economically, environmentally and culturally) no doubt contributed to these similarities.

Each of these themes is explored in detail elsewhere (Griffiths, 2011), but it should be noted that media-related preferences and references were evident within and across all six themes. As a discrete category, where children referred to various media and commercial activities in explicit terms, it occupied a 'middle-ground' position on a spectrum of free-time activity preferences. Yet commercial media were 'automatically' embedded in myriad other free-time contexts that the children did not regard as media-specific. These elements were not flagged by them as being important or significant but were certainly present.

Emergent findings in elaborated talk: Locating commercial media

During the process of producing the drawings, the children spoke animatedly about their free-time activities. The various ways in which media-related activities and traces of the commercial (media) world featured in the children's drawings and talk are a key focus here, especially in light of the fact that the children were not explicitly asked to refer to such things. When applying Buckingham et al.'s (2001: 18) definition of commercial media to the children's drawings and elaborated talk, four key strands emerged from the data, relating to: the presence of specific media products, evidence of brand awareness, evidence of commercial activities, and broader (non-specific) forms of media engagement. Each of these strands will be explored in turn.

Presence of specific media products

Specific media products were named in the children's drawings, with three emergent sub-strands relating to books, (computer/video) gaming and trading cards.

Reading proved to be a favoured activity in both settings (but especially in the UK School) and emerged as a prominent strand in terms of named products (cf. Hofferth and Sandberg, 2001a: 301), primarily because most of the children wanted to identify specific books, to signal something about their own preferences and interests, rather than to talk about books in general. Some of the children referred to the books that they were reading at the time of the study, offering factual declarations about current circumstance, whilst others adopted more emotive and passionate positions by talking about their favourite reads and themselves as 'fans' with specialist knowledge.

B9-UK(11)², for example, talked excitedly about all the books he devoured and listed Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, Rowling's *Harry Potter* series and Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy as his favourite texts. A clear preference for the fantasy genre was revealed and even 'performed', to emphasise a sense of ownership over the texts. This enthusiasm for 'classic' reading materials was also shared by some of the girls. G11-US(9), for example, depicted herself lying on her bedroom floor reading Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*. She stressed how important her book collection was to her and was proud that she had her own book shelf in her bedroom, which she described (and drew) as 'bulging'. In many ways, the pride and status that she attached to having such a book collection was reminiscent of marketing discourses about children as 'accumulators' (Acuff, 1997: 190).

Continuing with the reading theme, B4-UK(10) said that he loved to read and his drawing featured a book entitled *Pwtyn*. This is a Welsh-language adaptation of the book *Small* by Clara Vulliamy, about the relationship between a young boy and his favourite toy. Technically, this book is targeted at very young readers so it might seem unusual that a ten-year-old boy should like it so much, but B4-UK(10) had compromised literacy skills due to significant learning difficulties and needed one-to-one learning support; this book was about right for his reading age. This highlights the importance of needing to spend time in a

research context, as a participant observer, in order build knowledge about the participants; such a finding would otherwise have been considered a strange anomaly.

B6-UK(10) loved to read too, but his interest in books overlapped with his passion for drawing. He depicted the 'Rotten Rulers' edition of the *Horrible Histories* (a book written by Terry Deary and illustrated by Mike Philips) – which has a distinctive 'cartoon strip' aesthetic – and explained that he liked the book because of the illustrations. He was a gifted artist and exhibited highly developed skills in cartoon-style drawings; this particular book series was an inspiration to him and had helped him to refine his own techniques. As such, the aesthetic appeal of the book was more meaningful to him than the actual subject matter.

Gaming activities generated a number of well-known product/brand names which included both hardware and game brands (cf. Fromme, 2003). B4-US(9) talked in detail about playing videogames and said that he liked old *Nintendo* games the best, 'cos they started it all'. He seemed to appreciate *Nintendo's* legacy in the gaming world and liked the retro kudos of the brand. This sentiment was echoed by three UK School girls who all liked gaming on the *Nintendo DS* (G2-UK(9), G3-UK(9) and G8-UK(10)). In elaborated talk, G3-UK(9) explained that she didn't play 'new' games but preferred things like *Super Mario Brothers* because it was an 'old favourite' and a 'classic'. An additional issue operated here, relating to the cross-generation appeal of such 'classic' games and the fact that they could be enjoyed, with parents and older siblings, as part of a shared culture. From the ways in which these children talked about their play, the 'community' associated with gaming was as important as the product/s.

B4-US(9) also talked with pride about owning numerous consoles – *X-Box*, *PS2* and *Game Cube* – and depicted a full technological 'set-up' in a drawing of his bedroom. His drawing was interesting because it depicted his bedroom landscape from a bird's eye perspective with the gaming controllers occupying the heart of the space. This drew attention to their importance and connoted the centrality of their role in his leisure time; everything else was framed around them. A small number of the US girls also made non-specific reference to *Playstation* (G6-US(9)) and to 'online surfing' (G10-US(9)), while G10-US(9) explained that her internet browsing was mostly focused 'on the *Disney website*' so would certainly have been a 'branded' and highly commercial experience³. These rather vague references could arguably indicate a less-committed engagement with the media being mentioned, when compared with those responses that noted specific products and provided elaborate details in order to display knowledge and expertise.

Finally, B8-UK(10) explained that he was an enthusiastic trading card player (cf. Buckingham and Sefton-Green, 2003) and decided to depict his *Yu-Gi-Oh* trading cards – 'Blue Eye's [sic] – White Dragon' – in his drawing. He took pride in his authentic recreation of actual product details and Japanese Manga design. In the course of our numerous conversations during the workshop, he offered complex explanations of the game and its rules, and explained that he had a big collection of cards (cf. Acuff, 1997: 190). His active participation and interest in this global phenomenon was clearly evident, and the accuracy of the details in his drawing was of paramount importance to him. He was making a clear

statement about his dedicated loyalty towards various products associated with the *Yu-Gi-Oh* brand (cf. Lindstrom, 2003).⁴

Evidence of brand awareness

In some respects, the naming of specific media products correlated with a degree of brand identification/identity, as mapped in the previous section. However, there were some exceptions to this broad pattern. A small number of children appeared to ‘embed’ recognisable brands into their drawings without commenting specifically on them. These ‘embeds’ tended to relate to sporting equipment, fashion/clothing and travel, and were wholly ‘natural’ and taken-for-granted (cf. Livingstone, 1998: 11). They emerged as being of secondary importance to the activity itself or the anchoring ‘story’ being told.

B6-UK(10), for example, explained that he enjoyed playing cricket. In terms of formal coding procedures, his free-time preference was categorised under Theme 1 (Outdoor – ‘Sport’), but his picture incorporated clear branding. In small letters of the neck of his cricket bat, he included the initials GM. This was not explicitly discussed in the workshop but he was clearly alluding to Gunn and Moore, manufacturers of cricketing equipment. B6-UK(10) was reflecting on his first-hand experiences of playing the game, and his naming of the brand was merely an authentic recreation of reality. Two girls in the UK School also embedded known brands into their drawings. G12-UK(10) liked skiing and labelled the skis in her picture *Salmon* [sic] (outdoor equipment brand *Salomon*). Similarly, G13-UK (10) made it clear that she swam in a *Spedo* [sic] suit. Both of these examples effectively illustrate the simple functionality assigned to many of the branded products mentioned by the children; that the items were simply tools or props to enable participation in a given activity and had a far lower status than the activity itself.

The sporting theme continued in the US School, when B11-US(9) talked about his love of basketball. He depicted two basketball players wearing branded shirts – one reading ‘Lolo’ and the other reading ‘Big Sky’. The importance of this child’s immediate situation and context came to the fore (cf. Griffiths, 2011), in that the former made reference to the basketball teams at Lolo elementary and middle schools in Lolo, Montana, while the latter referred to the high school in Missoula where B11-US(9) aspired to be. Whilst these were not global or instantly recognisable brands, their meaning hinged on powerful local resonance, suggesting that product signification on a micro level was of paramount importance.

Less clearly, two further embedded brands were evident but could not be directly or clearly linked to real-world products (cf. Götz et al., 2005: 82). G6-US(9) depicted herself wearing a t-shirt with ‘Mis Mos’ written on the front. No such brand appears to exist, although it closely matched (European) clothing company, *Mismo*. Finally, during his conversations about ‘going on holiday [sic]’, B1-UK(9) drew an aeroplane with a branded tailfin featuring a Union flag, probably connoting British Airways. This indicated B1-UK(9)’s literate awareness of visual symbol systems in the context of travel, but his lack of reference to or comment about it also gave further indication that brands were often secondary,

inconsequential elements of a 'higher status' story i.e. the good memories associated with a family holiday.

Evidence of commercial activities

Interestingly, explicit discussion of consumer-related activities were strictly the reserve of a small minority of (four) girls in this sample, since none of the boys mentioned any direct involvement with or interest in the 'marketplace'. Whilst this might arguably reflect a classic gender stereotyped divide, this sample stands in stark contrast to the statistics quoted by Schor (2004, 31-33) who suggests that shopping is 'fives times' more dominant than playing outdoors (p. 31). Whilst the purpose of the current investigation was not to measure 'hours spent' but rather degrees of preference, the data indicate that, at the very least, these children did not *favour* shopping as a way to spend their free-time even if it was, in reality, a marked characteristic of their everyday lives and participation in necessary family activities.

The activity of shopping sparked enthusiasm and real commitment in two of the girls. G8(9)-US drew a picture of the local mall and explained that she loved to shop in 'girls' shops'. Her drawing operated as a conceptual 'map' of the mall, as if she was visualising and acting as 'expert guide' through what was a familiar physical space. In follow-up conversations with the classroom teacher, it transpired that shopping was a very significant part of G8(9)-US's life outside school and was something of an 'obsession'. Her penchant for the activity revealed itself in her class-work in that she consistently wrote stories and poems about shopping. G13(10)-UK was similarly consumerist and talked enthusiastically about shopping and 'getting my nails done'.

Broader (non-specific) forms of media engagement

Media engagement also featured more informally in the children's drawings, in that they did not always reveal specific details but simply indicated things in more general terms. Gaming, television, film and music, for example, were often subject to vague treatment. Four children (two US boys, one US girl and one UK girl) liked to spend time on their home computers. There were subtle differences in terms of how this was presented in the children's drawings, as if these activities were simply 'there' and did not warrant any marked enthusiasm, with contrastive portraits of 'play' and 'productivity' emerging. Whilst G3-UK(9), for example, was clear that she liked to 'play' on her computer, B1-US(9) elected to hedge. He began by explaining that he mainly played games, but then checked himself by noting that he also liked to 'type stuff'. This seemed to be a way of qualifying or legitimising the 'quality' of his computing activities. Arguably, he was trying to (re-)present his time spent on the computer in the form of an 'appropriate', adult-approved activity with possible educational value, in line with the school-context of data collection (see Coates, in Lewis et al. 2004: 20).

Film and television were frequently mentioned. The social pleasures of 'going to the movies with friends' were noted (B8-US(9)), but films and programmes were largely

encountered in the home environment (cf. Livingstone and Bovill, 2001). B9-US(9), for example, liked to watch boxing on the television and depicted himself with his feet on the coffee table and the remote control in his hand. G1-US(9) drew herself watching television, lying on the living room floor in a state of relaxed inaction that she seemed to relish. Only one participant (G2-US(9)) noted a specific programme – *Spongebob Squarepants* – which proved hugely popular with the children during a separate workshop about favourite television programmes.

Three children mentioned that they listened to music, but were non-specific about what type and did not provide any insights. B11-US(9) made it a priority to stress that he listened to his music through giant headphones, emphasising that this was a crucial factor in his enjoyment and hinting that the actual music was not so important. The headphones were relegated to the role of ‘prop’ and as a means to ‘look cool’, rather than as a catalyst for discussing music. One further indicator of media engagement emerged in the study, which appeared to signify an awareness of news reporting. In the context of representing his passion for reading, B9-UK(11) drew a two page illustrated book featuring a tower that collapsed, including the following text: ‘Once upon a time, there was a tower. Crumble. And it fell. The end’. It was undeniable that the drawing resembled media footage of the collapse of the Twin Towers during the 9/11 New York World Trade Centre attacks in 2001. Such a ‘re-imagining’ of the incident was likely to be a result of the timing of the workshop, which occurred around the fifth anniversary of 9/11; news media at that time were broadcasting ‘reflections’ on the incident as a form of remembrance.

Discussion and conclusions: Locating commercial media in children’s lives

Methodologically, the approach taken in this investigation worked well and produced an interesting data-set. The timing of each workshop meant that both groups of children viewed the drawing exercise as a ‘treat’ (post-State-wide testing in the US context, and in place of Friday afternoon ‘arts and crafts’ in the UK). Concerns noted by Punch (2002: 14) regarding the risk of children feeling ‘paralysed’ by drawing tasks did not appear to be a problem. Perhaps the only exception was an unwillingness by a small minority of the boys (especially in the US context) to produce more than one illustration, when compared with the many children who wanted to draw more than one thing. There was some evidence of ‘formulaic’ responses to the task, such as B1-US(9) attempting to ‘qualify’ his computer-use as having educational value. However, on the whole, the exercise revealed rich narratives (cf. Coates, in Lewis et al.: 20). The children’s talk of ‘doing nothing’, for example, often masked elaborate and imaginative activities such as telling ‘scary stories’ or ‘watching traffic’, whilst reference to a fishing trip revealed the powerful importance of a post-divorce father-son relationship (Griffiths, 2011).

In reviewing the emergent patterns, it would appear that – for this sample of children, at least – the presence of commercial media tended to operate on a sliding scale of significance and occupied varied statuses in their everyday lives. This is akin to Götz et al.’s (2005: 81) suggestion that ‘media traces’ occur on a sort of ‘continuum’. At one end of the

scale, some of the children referred to specific named products, whilst at the other extreme, somewhat vague comments were associated with general media use. This tended to indicate the relative centrality (or otherwise) of commercial media in their preferred free-time activities. Commercial media with a 'high status' were often the primary focus in the children's drawings, included careful detail, tended to be clearly identified/identifiable, and featured heavily in the accompanying talk. 'Low status' equivalents tended to be subtly or inconsequentially present, but never mentioned in talk, and were generally treated as 'invisible' or irrelevant.

The types of free-time activity preferences identified in other research studies did feature in this investigation – for example, reading, gaming, television viewing, music, and shopping – but did not always manifest themselves in the ways identified by other researchers. Unlike the findings reported by Hofferth and Sandberg (2001b: 30ff.), for example, there were no marked gender differences in the current sample and, in some cases, traditional gender stereotypes appeared to be unfounded or contradicted. Likewise, contrary to popular belief and scaremongering (e.g. Palmer, 2006), the children did not choose to spend *all* of their time glued to the television or absorbed in surfing the net.

The *range* and *balance* of the children's free-time activities clearly indicated that they liked to engage in numerous different pastimes, demonstrating that they were able to 'weave together a huge diversity of activities' (Livingstone, 1998: 10). The children's engagements with commercial media – across two comparable cultural settings – indicate that these exist on a broad and multi-faceted spectrum of preferences, activities and 'influences'. However, the positioning of various commercial media indicated far more than simply 'types' of possible activities. The children's drawings and talk also revealed the elaborate ways in which they would make use of various media for their own benefit and to meet their own individual lifestyle needs/preferences at a given time.

The children's drawings were not about simply 'recalling' the presence of a product or activity in their lives, but demonstrated agency, choice-making, and adaptation to enable them to maximise their free-time enjoyment; a clear demonstration of what Martensen & Tufte (in Hansen et al., 2002: 10) no doubt meant when they referred to 'how media products are used in everyday life'. The passive manipulation often hinted at in negativist discourses about the commercial world (e.g. Palmer, 2006) was challenged by the ways in which the children focused on interests well beyond material goods, placing the greatest 'value' on people. Time with family and friends, together with marked leanings towards outdoor (sport- and play-related) activities, were considered of primary importance (see Griffiths, 2011); commercial media engagement/references seemed to be merely a consequence of these activities or were used as a time-filling 'substitute' if favoured activities were not possible.

The issue of status or importance of commercial media can also be linked with their relative 'influence'. For example, the young people who participated in Buckingham et al.'s (2009) study consistently regarded their family and friends as being a more significant force *in* their lives than the commercial media flowing *around* their lives. This was certainly

evident in the current investigation, where media-related activities, on the whole, appeared to occupy something of a passionless middle-ground, and seemed to hold only partial value for the children. Similarly, Livingstone (1998: 10) notes the importance of the immediate environment with regards shaping children's free-time activities and suggests that media use becomes personalised; children/young people and their families 'construct their own local contexts' within which 'media use becomes meaningful' (cf. Qvortrup, 1994). The significance of micro-level lifestyle considerations in relation to the status and use of commercial media were certainly apparent in the children's meaning-making processes in this study, and were used – by them – as the explanation for media preferences and practices.

This study indicates that the impact or effect of the commercial world – so often the focal point of discourse in this field – is perhaps less important than the nature of its *presence* in the everyday lives of contemporary children who are growing up in a socio-cultural and ideological (western) framework that is fundamentally 'commercial'. Here, commercial media emerged as tools with utilitarian functionality, facilitating or scaffolding activities considered to be at the core of 'childhood' – such as 'play' – but were not a primary, conscious concern in these children's lives. Where passion for commercial media were expressed, this tended to be articulated as displays of expertise, knowledge and knowing engagement, enabling individuals to 'perform' specific roles and identities (as 'reader', 'gamer', 'sporty' or 'fan') or position themselves as collectors/accumulators (with the associated 'status' attached).

Commercial media were, for the most part, unquestioningly embedded in the children's free-time preferences, where media *use* was taken-for-granted but not necessary significant in and of itself (cf. Martensen and Tufte, in Hansen et al., 2002: 10). Importantly, the presence or absence of such products did not seem to impact on the nature of the children's free-time choices; branded goods were not an essential component in the enjoyment of free-time but rather emerged as a fact-of-life 'by-product' of the embedded nature of such goods within their contemporary, 'packaged' childhood landscapes (cf. Shipman, 1972: 28).

Biographical note:

Merris Griffiths is a Lecturer in the Department of Theatre, Film and Television Studies, Aberystwyth University (UK). Her research interests are located within the broad field of the sociology of childhood, with an emphasis on the media and popular culture. She recently completed a two year (2010-12) Knowledge Transfer Partnership project, with television production company Boom Pictures, which focused on seven- to thirteen-year-old Welsh children's media preferences and practices. Contact: LMG@aber.ac.uk.

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Notes:

¹ Aberystwyth University’s Ethics Committee for Research Procedures FORM02 (not publically available).

² Respondents were identified by Gender, Number within the sample, Country and Age. In this instance, Boy Number 9 (Aged 11) in the UK School sample is being referenced.

³ Disney’s website features tabs/links to their holiday resorts and online shops, as well as showcasing their latest film releases and associated merchandising: <http://home.disney.co.uk/>.

⁴ The complex world of Yu-Gi-Oh can be explored online: <http://www.yugioh-card.com/uk/>.