

Chapter 4: Creative and Visual Research

In the preceding chapters the discussions of representations and audiences have sought to illustrate how these areas have been conceptualised: both in terms of their theoretical formulations and the understandings held by audience members themselves. However, many of the methods employed by the empirical studies mentioned previously remain grounded in participants producing instant verbal (or sometimes written) responses – usually within the artificial environment of an interview or focus group discussion – and/or lapse into privileging the researcher’s interpretations as the ‘authoritative voice’. Therefore, these approaches do not engage sufficiently with the role of media texts in *actual* lived experience and, as a result, the gulf between theoretical formulations and understandings held by audience members continues to be problematic. In order to facilitate a more holistic method of enquiry, this study seeks to readdress this balance by engaging participants in the creative production of visual materials that will be interpreted by the participants *themselves* as a strategy for interrogating the following research questions:

- How do young people utilise the media in the shaping of their self-identities?
- How do categories such as gender and ethnicity impact upon young people’s formulations of their own identities?
- How can creative and visual research methods facilitate a greater understanding of young people’s conceptualisations of their identities and relationships with the media?
- How can creative and visual research methods make a contribution to social research which explores individuals’ identities and media audiences?

Thus, this chapter discusses a wider body of research which has specifically utilised creative research methods to examine individuals’ attitudes, experiences and their conceptions of self. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a critical summary outlining the validity of principles proposed by creative research methodologies.

4.1 Creative Methods

Within recent years a number of studies have utilised creative research methods in order to explore attitudes and understandings held by audience members. The adoption of such techniques has arisen as a direct response to the perceived limitations of, and dissatisfaction with, established research methods. As David Silverman (2001, pp. 32-34) notes, criticisms of existing approaches have centred upon the reliability, anecdotal nature and validity of methods employed and data produced. Although he stresses the central significance of existing research methods within any given analysis, Silverman's discussion importantly identifies the susceptibility within the methodological frameworks to select specific examples of data which can, in turn, lead to a wholly subjective interpretation by the researchers (see pp. 219-257).

The search for an alternative methodological framework that would help overcome such limitations is evident in Ien Ang's influential study *Watching Dallas* (1985). The importance of this work was that it took the audiences of popular media as a valid object of analysis and did so by assessing the participants' *own* responses to the text. Ang achieved this by placing an advertisement in the Dutch magazine *Viva* inviting people to 'write and tell me why you like watching it [*Dallas*] ... or dislike it' (p. 10). In response to the advert she received forty-two letters which constituted the empirical material for her study. As discussed in Chapter 3 the analysis revealed that despite *Dallas*' ostensibly unrealistic nature, for many viewers its appeal lay in its *emotional realism* which articulated concerns and emotional states experienced by them, albeit in melodramatic form. For other viewers pleasure was gained by engaging in an ironic mode of viewing, distancing themselves from the text and any supposed ideological content. The significance of Ang's study therefore, was that it revealed that each viewer had a 'more or less unique relationship to the programme' (p. 26). As a method then, the production of written texts by respondents in this study arguably enabled Ang to attain a deeper insight into the participants' experiences of watching *Dallas*. However, as Ang herself stressed, the responses could not be considered representative for the *Dallas* audience as a whole or indicative of a particular social category – for example, women (p. 10). Furthermore, she claimed

that the letters could not be regarded as an unproblematic or straightforward expression of the writers' motives for loving or hating the programme:

What people say or write about their experiences, preferences, habits, etc., cannot be taken entirely at face value, for in the routine of daily life they do not demand rational consciousness; they go unnoticed, as it were. They are commonsensical, self-evident; they require no further explanations. This means that we cannot let the letters speak for themselves, but they should be read 'symptomatically': we must search for what is behind the explicitly written, for the presuppositions and accepted attitudes concealed within them (p. 11).⁹

Hence, in Ang's formulation, the letters themselves must be considered as texts produced within an ideological framework, and this framework comes to bear on the manner in which the respondents construct their letters as discourses on the appeal or rejection of *Dallas* as a popular cultural text.

Developing the method of using written texts produced by audience members as a focus of analysis, David Gauntlett and Annette Hill (1999) employed this technique in order to 'consider what people have to say about their own experience of television and everyday life' (p. 9). As discussed previously (see Chapter 3) this project is notable due to its scale: a longitudinal study running from 1991 to 1996 in which 509 participants (dropping to 427) completed a diary three times a year on their media habits. In addition, these diaries were supplemented with the completion of standardised and open-ended questionnaires in which the participants documented not only their media use, but also personal reflections on their lives. Therefore this enabled the researchers to collate participants' thoughts on various issues raised within the diaries and ground these findings within the diarists' accounts of their own social worlds. In doing so, Gauntlett and Hill's study incorporated a 'life analysis' approach of the participants which 'assumes that through close study of people's everyday lives over time, we will acquire a picture of broader changes in society

⁹ It should be noted, as Gauntlett (2007) states, that 'Ang has no particular method with which to achieve this (informed guesswork notwithstanding). Attitudes which are *actually expressed* are fine ... But how do we find the "concealed" attitudes, the views which (by definition) are not included in the words actually written down? If "we cannot let the letters speak for themselves", then what *can* we do?' (p. 7, original emphasis).

which are having an impact at the individual level' (p. 18). Thus, they were able to identify not only participants' changes in attitudes towards media, but also how personal life changes affected their interpretations of the media. Importantly, Gauntlett and Hill stressed that they did not impose a theoretical framework upon their data specifically in order to allow their findings to be driven by the participants' responses themselves.

The above studies have highlighted how the production of written materials by audience members can be used to elicit a more comprehensive range of views and responses to media texts than would have been possible had the participants been required to give instant verbal responses. On a similar theme, the Glasgow Media Group have approached the issue of media influences by utilising such methods (e.g. Kitzinger, 1990; Philo, 1990). In their book *The Mass Media and Power in Modern Britain* (1997), John Eldridge, Jenny Kitzinger and Kevin Williams acknowledge that although audiences are able to articulate a critical awareness of media messages, this awareness does not negate the possibility of the media's *influences* (p. 160). To explore this notion, a research technique termed the 'news game' (p. 161) was devised in which 'research participants were actively engaged in trying to write and criticize a media report' (*ibid.*). In order to achieve this, participants were provided with materials such as news photographs and headlines, and asked to write an accompanying text that could take the form of a newspaper report, news broadcast script or a headline. A significant finding revealed in studies using this method was that although participants *apparently* presented their own perspectives on the issues in hand, in practice they replicated the ideological discourses predominant in the initial news reports.¹⁰ For example, in Kitzinger's study *Understanding Aids* (1993) participants were given thirteen photographs around which they produced a news

¹⁰ Importantly, a criticism of the 'news game' method is that when participants reproduced existing ideological discourses in their own media texts, they did so not because they agreed with these ways of thinking, but because they may have thought that this was what they were being *asked* to do. Therefore, researchers should consider such issues when devising and conducting exercises as well as in their conclusions. Furthermore, *discussion* with participants may assist their understanding of the exercise's aims and objectives, and thus benefit the research process.

report on AIDS that then became the focus of a group discussion.¹¹ In these reports it was found that the participants reproduced the terminology and attitudes circulated by the mainstream press, such as ‘promiscuous, irresponsible drug users or gay people’ and ‘innocent victims’ (p. 277). Furthermore, her analysis also highlighted the forcefulness of visual representations in the participants’ understandings of AIDS: ‘television and newspaper representations are, for many people, the lens through which they view the reality of AIDS. Media images of the visible ravages of disease thus form the template for their perceptions of the world and of the people in it’ (Eldridge, Kitzinger and Williams, 1997, p. 163). Consequently, according to Kitzinger, media representations may dictate how audiences perceive an issue, even though this may contradict ‘informed’ opinion and observations based on personal experience.¹² Thus, as the above study demonstrates, the use of strategies that integrate both the creative production *and* discussion of media texts can arguably provide the researcher with a more thorough understanding of the attitudes held by audience members – attitudes that may not have become apparent within more conventional interviews or focus group discussions.

Expanding on this theme Brent MacGregor and David Morrison’s (1995) study of the Gulf War sought to overcome limitations which they felt were imposed by purely focus group based research, believing that a research method was required that would bring ‘respondents into closer contact with the text ... enabling them to articulate their response in an appropriate manner’ (p. 143). This was achieved by appropriating the principles of the ‘news game’ method, in which they asked participants to edit existing audio-visual news footage to create ‘a report that you would *ideally* like to see on TV, not what you think others would like to see, not what you think journalists would produce’ (p. 146, original emphasis). Prior to editing the footage MacGregor and Morrison noted participants all claimed that they aimed to produce ‘an ideal, impartial, neutral account’ (*ibid.*) by selecting what they considered to be the more reliable material. Importantly, the researchers observed that although there was

¹¹ In Kitzinger’s discussion of research methods, she states that meaning cannot be determined by content analysis alone: ‘the meaning produced by the encounter between text and subject cannot be “read off” straight from textual characteristics’ (Morley, 1980, quoted in Kitzinger, 1990, p. 320).

¹² Although Kitzinger acknowledges the role of parody in some of the participants’ responses, these tend to conform to generic codes and conventions (1993, pp. 298-299).

considerable similarity between participants' comments made before and after editing, *crucial* nuanced differences were noted as a result of the editing process itself¹³: 'Positions articulated in discussion which would have been reported as definitive in focus groups were modified as a result of the active engagement with the text' (p. 147). Therefore, the employment of this method seems to have enabled MacGregor and Morrison to access more significant and meaningful results than would have been made available by traditional methods.¹⁴

In an attempt to move further beyond the reliance on interviews and focus groups in qualitative research, David Gauntlett's *Video Critical* (1997) aimed to evaluate audiences' responses by engaging participants in the *creation* of their *own* original texts, rather than the production of materials from, or reflecting upon existing sources. For this project, Gauntlett worked with groups of children from seven primary schools in which they used video equipment to make documentaries on the issue of 'the environment'. Initial group discussions between the researcher and students identified the predominance of television in informing the children's views on environmental matters (pp. 96-97). Gauntlett therefore maintained that the active involvement in the *process* of video-making provided a valid method of analysing the children's understanding of environmental concerns, as it engaged them in the procedures in which their own viewpoints were in fact constructed:

[W]here the audience have received most of their input on the subject from the mass media, as it was established was the case with the environment and children in this study, then the videos which they produce can be assumed to reflect their understanding of which issues and angles are the most pertinent and pressing; and this can be presumed to have been influenced by the media (p. 85).

¹³ For example, MacGregor and Morrison note that participants described one text as having 'an undesirable emotional tone' (1995, p. 147) but were unable to identify why this was the case. However, on engaging in the editing process, the participants were able to suggest how this affect had been created by presentation techniques.

¹⁴ Furthermore, MacGregor and Morrison state that this method is 'not a methodological solution looking for a research problem, but a real tool capable of producing significant results in any situation where tangible viewer contact with the text can unlock new insights into the dynamic of how audio-visual texts are read' (1995, p. 148).

Hence, this study recorded the children's conception of the impact of environmental issues on their lives and facilitated an understanding of how these beliefs were informed by media output. In its entirety then, this analysis enabled the researcher to amass a considerable body of ethnographic data through observation and discussions with the participants throughout the video production project, in addition to the completed videos themselves – which Gauntlett claimed can be read as 'constructed, mediated accounts of a selection of the perceptions of the social world held by the group members' (p. 93).

In agreement with the principles proposed by MacGregor and Morrison, Gauntlett highlights that initial discussions with participants are not necessarily indicative of their legitimate attitudes or beliefs, rather they act as what he terms a "brain dump" of *potential* interests and concerns' (p. 150, original emphasis). That is to say, much of the information generated during the initial group discussions will be misleading or superfluous, and it is only during the project's progression *itself* that these ideas are refined and thus more genuine opinions emerge. However, leaving the issue of the problematics of data collection aside, Gauntlett also proposes a number of fundamental advantages the video-making method can offer the participants. Firstly, he states that this method offers its participants a degree of media education, not only in terms of gaining basic film-making skills, but also in its ability to foster the development of a critical awareness which can, in turn, lead to more in depth and valuable information being made available to the researcher. In addition, Gauntlett adds that such methods constitute a significant departure from previously existing techniques, which confined the participants within a predetermined structure that only allowed for limited responses, by enabling the participants to influence the research process itself. Within such a framework, participants are able to construct a free and open response to the research brief which, although possibly intimidating to a conventional researcher, Gauntlett encourages as a productive strategy, stating that 'the video project researcher celebrates their own inability to predict what will happen – a "risk" worth taking' (p. 93). Finally, he asserts that the method can importantly empower its participants on a number of levels: the video production method enables the participants to engage in new modes of self-expression that transcend the possible restrictions of existing techniques grounded in written and verbal accounts; and through the opportunity to produce 'alternative representations of themselves' (p. 92)

it is hoped that the participants will gain a more affirmative sense of their own identities and that of their communities than those offered by conventional media representations, as Stuart Hall has suggested:

[I]t is important to get people into producing their own images because ... they can then contrast the images they produce of themselves against the dominant images which they are offered, and so they know that social communication is a matter of conflict between alternative readings of society (Hall, 1991, quoted in Gauntlett, 1997, p. 92).

It should be noted that a number of commentators have advocated the methodological advantages of visual and audio-visual research. For example, in Gerry Bloustein's (1998) study of how ten Australian girls constructed their gendered identities, the participants were invited to video record what they believed were salient elements of their lives in an attempt to investigate 'everyday lived experience ... *through their own eyes*' (p. 117, original emphasis). During this work she claimed that the film-making process facilitated an arena in which the girls were able to experiment with the way in which they represented their identities, whilst also paradoxically revealing the restrictions and difficulties encountered in their quest to articulate 'alternative selves' (p. 118). According to Bloustein then, the film-making process *as well as* the actual completed videos reflected the social/cultural frameworks and limitations impacting upon the girls' perceptions of themselves. Importantly, she claimed that the use of the camera empowered the participants, the camera becoming 'a tool for interpreting and redefining their worlds' (p. 117). Similarly research by Horst Niesyto (2000; see also Niesyto, Buckingham and Fisherkeller, 2003) has highlighted the ever increasing proliferation of media materials in young people's lives and how these are integral to the construction of social worlds and self-perception. In addition, he further noted that although there are a vast number of films that focus on youth which have provided the basis for critical analysis, very few of these films are produced by the young people *themselves*. In consideration of these factors, Niesyto developed a method which has been utilised within a number of projects in Germany where 'young people had the chance to express *personal images of everyday experience* in self-produced films' (2000, p. 137, original emphasis). Within these studies, Niesyto observed how different modes of filming revealed different

perspectives of representation. For example, the ‘collage-like video films’ gave insight into emotional and ambivalent aspects of identity through association and metaphor (p. 143) and this was a particularly rewarding mode of expression utilised by the participants he described as ‘marginal’, as in many cases their media literacy exceeded their competence in more conventional forms of expression, such as talking and writing (p. 144). Therefore this position shares many of the central tenets of Gauntlett’s approach, as Niesyto has stated:

In view of media’s increasing influence on everyday communication, I put forward the following *thesis*: If somebody – in nowadays media society – wants to learn something about youth’s ideas, feelings, and their ways of experiencing the world, he or she should give them a chance to express themselves *also* by means of their own *self-made* media products (p. 137, original emphasis)!

These principles are evident and further developed in the more recent international project ‘Children in Communication About Migration’ (CHICAM), which sought to explore the lives and experiences of migrant and refugee children in a number of European countries.¹⁵ To facilitate this researchers and media educators worked with groups of children, engaging them in the production of visual materials including animation, collage-making, photographic projects and video productions. These visual materials were then viewed and discussed with groups of children in other countries through the use of the internet. Thus, this method provided the researchers with a wealth of valuable data – or ‘thick description’ (Geertz, [1973] 1993) – generated not only from the products produced by the children, but also from observations, written reflections and discussions by both researchers and children throughout the entirety of the project. Hence, in this formulation verbal data is not abandoned in favour of the visual, rather they are considered as complementary factors:

In an era when audio-visual media play an increasingly influential role in children’s and adolescents’ perceptions, it is important that researchers not only rely on verbal approaches alone, but also give young people the opportunity to express themselves in

¹⁵ This project ran from November 2001 to October 2004. For further details see: <http://www.chicam.org>

contemporary media forms. Audio-visual data should not be considered an alternative to verbal data but rather a source of data with a different quality (Holzwarth and Maurer, 2003, p. 127).

The methodological principles underpinning such work are demonstrated in a significant body of work on children's media literacy undertaken by David Buckingham (1987, 1993a, 1993b, 1996, 2000, 2003). In his collaborative research with Julian Sefton-Green (1994), which discussed the pedagogic practices of Media Studies, they used a wide variety of methods in their analysis including observations, interviews, surveys, and importantly examined the students' creations of, and reflections upon their *own* media productions. In so doing, the students were not considered solely as consumers but also *producers* of popular culture. Furthermore, they questioned established Cultural Studies approaches to popular culture in which texts are symptomatically 'read', rather they considered students' material as a form of *social action* in relation to the environment in which it was created:

[W]hat students say about popular culture, and the texts they produce, are part of the process by which they construct their own social identities. Although this process, inevitably, is defined in terms of social power – for example, of social class, gender, ethnicity and age – we would see the meanings of these categories not as predetermined but as actively constructed in social relationships themselves (p. 10).

In addition, Buckingham and Sefton-Green rejected the notion of 'theoreticism' (p. 11) – the privileging of theory – rather they aimed to explore the interrelation between theory and lived experience. Consequently, they attempted to foreground their own position as researchers, thus revealing rather than disguising epistemological issues inherent in the power relations between researchers and the students, identifying themselves instead as '*participant observers*' (*ibid.*, original emphasis):

We are not simply explicating what young people are doing, or seeking either to defend them or to enable them to speak on their own behalf ... As teachers, we are not under any illusion that we can simply abolish these differences of power or knowledge. On the contrary ... they seem to us to be an indispensable aspect of the pedagogic process (*ibid.*).

An example that can demonstrate these points is their discussion on the issue of evaluation (pp. 145-165) which specifically focuses on the work of two GCSE Media Studies students, giving particular attention to 'the relationship between practical work and written reflection, and the students' own perspectives on this issue' (p. 146). Integral to this exercise was the production of posters by the students in which they expressed their identity, these in turn becoming the subject of written reflections. Buckingham and Sefton-Green report that the written feedback ostensibly appeared to be limited in scope, observing that one student did not comment upon the fact that the only image of a black person in his poster was his own (p. 157). Furthermore, they noted that the students themselves found the writing of a log a frustrating and pointless task (p. 160). However, Buckingham and Sefton-Green claimed that the written logs served as a springboard for revealing and valuable discussions with the students, claiming that the students themselves came to recognise the role of the written reflections as the project continued (pp. 159-162).¹⁶ Hence, they maintained that the combined process of production *and* reflection can uncover valuable information that was not made available by any one element alone. In this formulation, they argued that writing facilitates what they termed 'a "metacognitive" function' (p. 160), that is to say:

[The writing] made explicit those cognitive developments which are largely implicit in the production process itself. In other words, by writing things down in the log, the student 'translates' those understandings arrived at empirically into a more abstract, theoretical understanding of media production (pp. 160-161).

Therefore, this study demonstrated the value of research that exploits the interconnections between creative processes and evaluative reflections, a notion which is developed further in the following study.

David Buckingham and Sara Bragg's (2004) study of young people aged 9 to 17 aimed to explore their attitudes towards representations of sex and personal

¹⁶ As Michael, one of the students discussed says, 'There is a good point to it, 'cause after you've done a project, otherwise you've just enjoyed it, you haven't learnt anything and it's not until you sit down and write about what you've done you think "Oh! I've learnt that", and I've thought "Why did I do that?". It makes you think about what you've just done, otherwise it would just be copying out, basically' (1994, p. 162).

relationships in the media. To achieve this the researchers utilised a number of methods: the completion of a diary or scrapbook in which the children documented their personal responses to media representation; interviews where they expanded upon the statements made in their diaries; group discussions that centred around a selection of video clips; further interviews discussing extracts from tabloid newspapers and magazines; and finally surveys that extrapolated further information about their opinions and social lives (pp. 18-19). Importantly, Buckingham and Bragg state that ‘Research is not a natural conduit that extracts the “truth” about a topic or about what participants “really” feel and think about it’ (p. 17). Rather they acknowledge that their findings would be determined by the methods employed, the environment in which the study was conducted, relationships between the participants predating and developed during the research as well as their own chosen system of analysis. Ostensibly, although this position may appear to limit the potential scope of the research, it may in fact broaden the range of possibilities available to the researcher. As Buckingham and Bragg highlight, tasks were specifically arranged so they would prompt either ‘personal’ or ‘public’ responses from the participants’ dependent upon the nature of the individual task, such as writing or speaking in a group (p. 22). Thus, by locating participants in varying discursive fields, they were more able to elicit ‘different voices’ which facilitated a more complex and arguably comprehensive understanding of the students involved.¹⁷ Furthermore, as Buckingham has noted elsewhere (1993c, p. 92), talk functions as a *social act*, that is to say talk is not merely a statement of held beliefs and attitudes, rather it is a behaviour or process which draws upon available cultural concepts to fulfil specific functions: ‘people achieve identities, realities, social order and social relationships through talk’ (Baker, 1997, quoted in, Buckingham and Bragg, 2004, p. 23).

In consideration of this, Buckingham and Bragg emphasise the significant role of reflexivity in their approach – ‘that is the role of researchers in interpreting, representing and producing knowledge from the voices of research subjects’ (2004, p. 38) – to promote an informed understanding of how their standpoints may influence

¹⁷ In their analysis, Buckingham and Bragg ‘aimed at what Laurel Richardson (1998) has described as a “crystal” structure or a range of viewpoints, none of which is necessarily more transparent or true than any others, but where we can learn from the contradictions and differences between them to develop more complex ways of seeing issues’ (2004, p. 22).

and impact upon the research process. Noting then how their methods have moulded their work, they assert that *all* research is limited by the methods applied. However, they maintain that their methods will enable researchers to gain a greater insight into children's understandings and uses of the media that are not provided by other techniques. This, Buckingham and Bragg state is due to the systematic, multi-faceted and holistic approach of their own work:

[R]eaders should be wary of the extent to which *all* methods necessarily constrain what research is able to show or prove ... We would strongly contest the idea that qualitative research is automatically more 'subjective' than quantitative research, or more subject to interpretation. The methods we have used enable us to be systematic and rigorous, both in ensuring the representativeness of the data we present and analyse, and in comparing material gathered through different methods and in different contexts (p. 41, original emphasis).

4.2 Visual Research

A significant feature demonstrated in a number of the above studies is their engagement with visual imagery and/or data within their methodological frameworks. Recently this interest in the study *and* use of images (for example, drawings, photography and video) to understand the social world is becoming more common in the social sciences as reflected in a small, but growing of body of literature on visual research methods (Prosser, 1998; Emmison and Smith, 2000; Banks, 2001; van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2001; Pink 2001, 2003; Knowles and Sweetman, 2004). Specifically, these texts emphasise that visual research is not an independent, self-contained approach; rather it is methodologically and theoretically diverse, utilising a variety of analytical perspectives (for example, anthropology, sociology and psychology) to study a broad spectrum of issues. Thus, in such formulations, visual research methods are regarded as complementary to existing approaches in the analysis of the production and analysis of visual imagery and, as Christopher Pole (2004) has suggested, have 'the capacity to offer a different way of understanding the social world' (p. 7). However, despite the potential value offered by visual research methods, the approach arguably remains marginal within existing qualitative practice.

In his discussion of image-based research, Jon Prosser (1998) claims that the limited status of images within social research is attributable to the employment of ‘scientific’ paradigms, as well as established qualitative strategies which give primacy to the written word. To support this view he notes that in a content analysis of ethnographic and methodological texts, minimal coverage (in some cases less than one percent) was given to visual methodologies (p. 98). Instead, Prosser asserts that the focus of these comments tended to highlight ‘the drawbacks and limitations of using images in a qualitative enquiry’ (*ibid.*) rather than the benefits such approaches could provide. As such, he states ‘The impression I gained from mainstream methodological texts was that images were a pleasant distraction to the real (i.e., word-orientated) work that constituted “proper” research’ (*ibid.*). Elaborating on this point, Prosser argues that in instances when images are included, the *manner* and *tone* of their use is further revealing. In terms of *manner*, he claims that a limited range of images are presented within texts, taking the form of black and white photographs or line drawings, which predominantly serve as illustrations of researchers, participants or objects under investigation. With regard to *tone*, Prosser maintains such texts suggest that images are constructed subjectively, distorting what they aim to represent, and therefore render objective analysis problematic. Thus, he proposes that the role of visual imagery within research is considered credible only in its supportive function to written accounts, and ‘are unacceptable as a way of “knowing”’ (p. 99) due to the perceived partial nature of their production making them unsuitable for effective analysis. In consideration of these factors Prosser stresses that methodological discussions give little credence to resolving such difficulties, and fail to emphasise how similar criticisms can be levelled against word-orientated research. Furthermore, he adds that although image-based research is actively being undertaken across a wide range of disciplines, it is precisely this diversification which limits the approach from articulating its position in opposition to orthodox methods. Despite Prosser’s perspective appearing initially pessimistic, he observes that whilst such diversity reflects wider shifts in current qualitative practice, what *unites* image-based research is the principle ‘that research should be more visual’ (p. 109). He therefore concludes, ‘The question remains – if we believe that Image-based Research is undervalued by the orthodox qualitative research community and that it can make a proportionately greater contribution to research, how is this to be achieved?’ (*ibid.*).

In response to the concerns highlighted by Prosser, an increasing number of researchers have utilised a wide variety of visual methodologies in order to demonstrate the methodological advantages of such approaches. For example, in their analysis of curriculum development in health education, Noreen Wetton and Jennifer McWhirter (1998) identified that existing literature aimed at young children sought to convey complex health information symbolically through the use of cartoon characters. However, they argued that as the producers of these methods ‘fail to “start where the children are” in terms of the information, the language and the images they offer to children’ (p. 265), this resulted in the intended meaning of images being misinterpreted. As Wetton and McWhirter’s discussion of dental healthcare campaigns illustrated, when children attempted to decipher connotations behind ‘Suzy Sugar’ (a character promoting the dangers of sugar consumption), they responded with contradictory and confused readings.¹⁸ This, they claimed, was a consequence of the children mediating their understanding of the image through pre-existing knowledge structures. That is to say, although the children could associate smiling with kindness, they could not comprehend the wink and were therefore not capable of constructing a comprehensive interpretation of the image. To explore this notion further, Wetton and McWhirter invited 300 children aged between 4 and 11 to draw a picture of ‘Suzy Sugar’ based purely upon a verbal description of her personality and agenda. Importantly, their findings revealed that in every instance the artwork produced failed to resemble the original character or include any of its ambivalent traits. Thus, Wetton and McWhirter suggested that the use of drawings helps facilitate a deeper understanding of children’s perceptions of *their* worlds (see also Williams, Wetton and Moon, 1989a, 1989b). This method, which is termed the ‘draw and write’ technique, was originally developed by Wetton in 1972 as part of a research project which aimed to explore emotional literacy in 7-8 year old children. Significantly, this work established that although children could express particular emotions visually – using both drawing and writing – they lacked this ability when relying solely on written or spoken words:

¹⁸ Wetton and McWhirter observed that the children mistook the wink as a sign that ‘Suzy Sugar’ had something in her eye and thought her crossed legs indicated she needed to go to the toilet (1998, p. 267).

It became apparent that the children experienced and empathized with a wide range of emotions including anger, frustration, despair, remorse, guilt, embarrassment and relief as well as delight, enjoyment, excitement. The children differed only from adults in that they did not have the vocabulary to express themselves (1998, p. 273).

Hence, by foregrounding the children's *own* written and visual responses, Wetton and McWhirter stated that this approach can instruct curriculum developers on how children conceptualise health and safety issues. In addition, they argued that the combined process of drawing *and* writing enables researchers to access aspects of children's knowledge that eludes conventional techniques.

Developing the method of using drawings within health research, Marilyns Guillemín (2004) employed this strategy in order 'to explore the ways in which people understand illness conditions' (p. 272). Noting how existing work has remained grounded in word-based approaches, she asserted that this limits the potential scope of meaning available to the researcher. Guillemín further observed that when drawings have been used in such studies, the use is primarily restricted to children due to the perceived constraints of their vocabulary. Her analysis therefore, sought to identify how women apprehended heart disease and menopause through the production of visual representations. This was achieved by Guillemín conducting initial interviews with the participants about their conditions, which simultaneously helped establish a rapport with the women prior to engaging them in the drawing exercise. Furthermore, she claimed that although the task was met with some hesitancy, following a period of reflection, participants were able to create powerful expressions of their illnesses. According to Guillemín then, this hesitancy was a result of words being privileged over images in the meaning making process:

Meaning making at an individual level is often word based. We primarily explain the way we feel and think by using words rather than images, and it is therefore not surprising that some participants had difficulty expressing themselves using images. Moreover, many participants were experiencing difficulties related to their illness conditions, difficulties that they were still coming to terms with and making sense of. Asking these participants to draw forced them not only to reflect on their illness condition but also to make sense of their experiences in a way that could be conveyed in pictorial form (p. 285).

Consequently, Guillemin highlighted that an interesting feature which emerged from the drawings was participants' ambiguous use of colour and metaphor.¹⁹ In light of this, she stressed the need for the women's *own* interpretations of their images to clarify what they aimed to disclose. However, acknowledging such subjectivity has raised questions regarding the validity of visual methodologies (and qualitative research in general; see Silverman, 2001), Guillemin rejected these notions arguing that 'the use of drawings as a research method expands our interpretations as researchers of the many, diverse ways in which illness can be understood and experienced' (2004, p. 286). Thus, by assimilating both visual and interview based research methods in her work, she demonstrated how this approach allows complex social issues to be evaluated with greater sophistication. Moreover, as Guillemin herself proposed, the technique grants participants who are more able to express themselves visually than in words a voice in social research.²⁰

The above studies have highlighted how the use of drawings can be used to elicit a broader and richer range of data than would have been possible through traditional word-orientated approaches. Expanding on this theme, Lorraine Young and Hazel Barrett's (2001) study of Kampala street children adopted similar strategies in an attempt to understand their 'socio-spatial geographies in relation to their street environments and survival mechanisms' (p. 142). Crucially they recognised that existing methods are not devised to provide an accurate reflection of the child's perspective, and fundamentally fail to allow them any influence on the research design and process.²¹ Therefore, Young and Barrett specifically aimed to develop procedures which fostered a high degree of child-led participation in order to produce 'research "with children" rather than research "about children"' (p. 144). In addition, they stated that as the majority of children in this study were illiterate with no basic

¹⁹ For example, Guillemin explains that a participant named Helen did not draw 'her heart or heart disease per se' (2004, p. 279); rather, Helen illustrated her frustration with the medical profession via a picture depicting someone with their hair on end.

²⁰ For an overview of the potential benefits offered by visual methodologies within health and illness research, see Harrison (2002).

²¹ As Young and Barrett explain, '[T]raditional social science research methods have been denounced as problematic because they rarely involve children in the research process. These methods are often based on positivist methodologies using questionnaire surveys for generating large quantities of statistical data' (2001, p. 142).

schooling, habitual substance abusers (which hindered their concentration) and had little time due to the demands of day-to-day survival, such factors had to be accounted for within their methodological framework. To accomplish this, the researchers utilised a number of visual methods which included drawing based exercises (mental and 'depot' maps, thematic and non-thematic drawings and daily time lines) as well as the production of photo diaries.²² In doing so, Young and Barrett argued that this generated significant advantages for both researchers and participants by *actively* engaging the children's enthusiasm for the tasks. Developing this point, they maintained that the participants found the art based exercises fun, as the realities of their existence denied them access to such opportunities. Furthermore, the practical nature of these activities facilitated an arena in which the children could communicate their thoughts freely, with time being given to consider and formulate their responses. Finally, the completed artworks served as effective prompts during discussion for gaining a greater insight into their lives. Indeed, Young and Barrett claimed that photographic images were particularly successful in this instance, as even the seemingly weakest pictures conveyed a wealth of information gained through the children's *own* interpretation of their photographs. For example, in the case of an image which ostensibly appeared to depict a general street scene, the researchers stated 'it was through discussion with the photographer that the main subject was identified. This resulted in a detailed description of a street child pick-pocketing which is not immediately obvious to the observer because the photograph is "busy" and distant' (p. 147).²³ This, they asserted, was aided by the children being able to take photographs independent of the researchers' influence and in areas inaccessible to them. Moreover, Young and Barrett identified that from participants' perspectives, the role of the camera was especially pertinent, as it not only introduced them to previously unavailable technology, but being given custody of equipment increased

²² In one exercise 22 children drew mental maps to detail places they went to during the day and 'depot' maps which showed where they and other street children visited regularly. Within another activity 23 children produced three thematic or non-thematic drawings of their own day-to-day experiences. Moreover, a further 22 children participated in a group exercise in which they created symbols to represent everyday activities, with each child taking a turn to place them on a daily time line to illustrate their typical day. In addition, 15 children produced a photo diary which consisted of pictures that they had taken over a 24 hour period of their activities and places they had visited.

²³ Indeed, the researchers note that in many cases the peripheral details revealed as much, if not more, information than the subject of the photograph itself (2001, p. 148).

their feelings of self-confidence and esteem. Thus, the use of visual methods seems to have enabled the children to maintain a degree of ownership over the research exercises and, as Young and Barrett explained, ‘proved to be particularly important for developing gainful insight into the street child’s urban environment from the child’s perspective’ (p. 142).

On a similar theme, Michael Schratz and Ulrike Steiner-Löffler (1998; see also Raggl and Schratz, 2004) used photographic images produced by children in an attempt to evaluate the ‘inner world’ (1998, p. 235) of school life from the pupils’ standpoint. This decision resulted from their belief that traditional research methods – such as interviews and questionnaires – are based on written and spoken language which, they claimed, young people had difficulty responding to. Consequently, in such formulations, Schratz and Steiner-Löffler further observed that this leads to the power balance within research processes becoming biased in favour of the (adult) researcher. In spite of this, they suggested that social science disciplines have continued to disregard the value of ‘the visual imagination’ (p. 237), citing Schratz and Rob Walker (1995) who stated ‘Despite an enormous research literature that argues to the contrary, researchers have trusted words (especially their own) as much as they have mistrusted pictures’ (p. 72). Thus, in their own work, Schratz and Steiner-Löffler sought to demonstrate the benefits of photo-evaluation by inviting participants to photograph what they ‘liked or disliked’ (1998, p. 235) about the school environment, these in turn providing the basis for group discussions. Importantly, their study indicated that the pictures instigated a dialogue amongst pupils and teachers about issues which had not formerly been discussed, including personal reflections of schooling. What is more, they proposed that participation in such activities has the capacity to effect *actual* change: ‘often initiatives are started by the pupils to change things they dislike (e.g., a group of 6th graders started a campaign to get a second “long break”’ (p. 245). In its entirety then, Schratz and Steiner-Löffler maintained that this method helps promote greater reflexivity on behalf of the participants, with the photographs offering a more holistic vision of the individual’s experience.

The use of photography as a research tool has been documented by a number of commentators (e.g. Harper, 1998; Prosser and Schwartz, 1998; Banks, 2001; Collier, 2001; Bolton, Pole and Mizen, 2004; Wright, 2004), and can be further illustrated in

Alan Radley, Darrin Hodgetts and Andrea Cullen's (2005) enquiry into how homeless people perceive their own lives. Departing from previous studies which, they claimed, give precedence to 'the multiple causes of homelessness' (p. 274) as well as issues of vulnerability and re-settlement, Radley, Hodgetts and Cullen argued such positions neglect the possibility 'that homeless people may have an active life' (*ibid.*; see also Dewdney, Grey and Minnion, 1994). Therefore, their study aimed to analyse how twelve homeless adults in London established a 'home' for themselves and survived on the city's streets.²⁴ To examine this, the researchers initially conducted interviews with participants through which they developed a contextual understanding of each person's life. This was followed by a photo-production project in which individuals were asked to photograph places and activities of personal significance, in order to 'collect a series of glimpses of the city as seen through their eyes' (2005, p. 276). On completion of this, Radley, Hodgetts and Cullen invited participants to discuss the images they had produced, identifying those that most effectively represented their experiences, and were encouraged to articulate reflections on their completed work including the actual practise of photograph taking itself. During this exercise, the researchers noted the use of cameras for recording social life was important for two reasons: firstly, the photographs detailed places associated with homelessness; and secondly, they featured public spaces both homeless and domiciled people use. As such, Radley, Hodgetts and Cullen asserted that the visual nature of this data produced an understanding of locations used by homeless people which would not have been made apparent by other methods. However, they claimed that photographs did not constitute an object of study in themselves, rather they served to engender communication, which itself became intrinsic in the analysis:

We used photography in this research so that homeless people could show us their world as well as interpret it. Rather than see the photographs as bounded objects for interpretation, they are better understood as standing in a dialectical relationship with the persons who produced them. Their meaning does not lie in the pictures, except in so far as this is part of the way people talk about them. To talk about the photographs

²⁴ Radley, Hodgetts and Cullen elaborate on this emphasising that homelessness 'is not just a passage through which people travel but a culture in which they engage to a greater or lesser degree. And because that culture is not separate from society but part of it, we need to conceptualise a way of envisaging the relationships of homeless people to others in the city' (2005, p. 275).

one has taken is to make claims for them – to explain, interpret and ultimately take responsibility for them (p. 278).

Hence, within such a framework, Radley, Hodgetts and Cullen claimed that the interview can be conceptualised as a *dialogic* relationship between researcher and participant, through which meaning is produced in a dialectic process, and therefore not imposed by either party.

In agreement with the principles outlined above, a wide body of video research has demonstrated advantages of combining discussion and visual productions (e.g. Dowmunt, 1980, 2001; Pink, 2001, 2004; Noyes, 2004). For example, in a study conducted between 1998 and 2000, Ruth Holliday's (2004) exploration of queer performances employed video diaries in order to evaluate their potential 'for capturing some of the complex nuances of the representation and display of identities' (p. 1597). This was enabled by assigning participants video cameras and requesting them to detail how they represented themselves in differing everyday environments – 'work, rest (home), and play (the scene)' (p. 1598) – both verbally *and* visually. Holliday specifically achieved these aims by encouraging respondents to film themselves in the appropriate settings whilst wearing, discussing and commenting upon the suitability of their typical clothing for each occasion.²⁵ In doing so, she maintained that this approach allowed her to 'chart the similarities and differences in identity performances' (*ibid.*). Significantly, Holliday established that the use of video diaries helped amass information on 'identity performances' in ways that are unique to this method. On the one hand she suggested that, as opposed to a tape-recorded interview which can only express what the participants *say*, the video's provided a *visual illustration* that allowed for a more 'complete' image of self-representation; on the other, the act of making a video not only generated a visual representation, but these were also supported by the individual's *own* narrative. Moreover, Holliday stated that the *process* of video-making permitted participants to choose, alter and refine their

²⁵ Importantly, Holliday observes that in many cases the participants exceeded her expectations by displaying particular cultural products – such as books, CDs and clothing of specific importance – which conveyed deeper insights into their identities. This information, she states, can only be made manifest through the medium of video (2004, p. 1607).

presentations of self, thus affording them a more reflexive role within the research process:

Against other methods that focus on ‘accuracy’ or ‘realism’, then, this approach affords diarists greater potential to *represent* themselves; making a video diary can be an active, even empowering, process because it offers the participant greater ‘editorial control’ over the material disclosed (p. 1603, original emphasis).²⁶

4.3 Metaphor in Social Research

The increased focus on reflexivity within qualitative enquiry (see Denzin and Lincoln, 2005) has been central to developments in visual research methodologies and, it is argued, helps advance a fuller understanding of participants’ experiences of their social worlds. More recently the use of metaphor has emerged within social research as an effective means of exploring individuals’ experiences and identities. These ideas are highlighted in Russell Belk, Güliz Ger and Søren Askergaard’s (2003) analysis of consumer desire which engaged participants from Denmark, Turkey and the United States in a series of tasks to investigate ‘the thoughts, feelings, emotions, and activities evoked by consumers in various cultural settings when asked to reflect on and picture desire, both as their particular idea of a general phenomena and as lived experiences’ (p. 332). Within these exercises, a proportion of the participants were instructed to complete a journal detailing their own accounts of fulfilled/unfulfilled desires and interviewed on the issues raised; remaining participants undertook tasks specifically designed to provoke metaphorical representations of desire including: collage-making; drawing; and writing stories (*ibid.*). Although Belk, Ger and Askergaard acknowledged the journals and

²⁶ It should be noted that the issue of ‘empowerment’ within the research process remains a contested issue, as Gauntlett (1997) notes ‘it has been suggested that the notion of empowerment may represent little more than academics and teachers idealising their own position, and expecting [individuals] to desire the supposedly “powerful” knowledge of which they are the keepers’ (p. 92). For example, Buckingham and Sefton-Green (1994) state ‘While the idea that knowledge is power may be reassuring for those who possess educational capital, it may not necessarily be shared by those who lack economic capital’ (p. 209); nonetheless such criticisms should not be misunderstood as detracting from the validity of creative research projects. Moreover, as Gauntlett importantly asserts ‘whilst an affective variable such as “empowerment” is difficult to measure in any meaningful way, it is at least a possible outcome’ (1997, p. 93; for a summary of ‘video work as empowerment’ see pp. 92-93).

interviews provided valuable *descriptive* information, they maintained that the projective tasks revealed a greater depth of data. This is best exemplified in the collage-making activities, where participants not only represented what they desired, but also created metaphors for desire's dualistic nature by juxtaposing abstract images (p. 333-340). Therefore, they claimed the combination of metaphoric expressions *as well as* participants' explanations enabled them to construct a thematic portrait of desire that exceeded constraints of language, and would not have been possible through any one method alone:

We found the projective and metaphoric data to be very rich in capturing fantasies, dreams, and visions of desire. The journal and depth interview material was especially useful for obtaining descriptions of what and how desire was experienced. Although this is useful data, especially concerning the things people desire, it also showed some evidence of repackaging in more rational-sounding terms. Some informants found it difficult to elaborate on their private desires or did not want to reveal those desires. Hence, the projective measures sought to evoke fantasies, dreams, and visual imagination in order to bypass the reluctance, defence mechanisms, rationalizations, and social desirability that seemed to block the direct verbal accounts of some of those studied (p. 332).

Similarly, research by Brandon Williams (2002) on interprofessional communication in healthcare has highlighted the usefulness of metaphors within collage-making as a means for developing a more complex and comprehensive understanding of individuals. In this work he demonstrated how participants' creations and reflections in group environments helped facilitate an 'increased awareness of the different perceptions of shared issues' (p. 53).²⁷ For Williams then, collage acts as a 'communication tool' (*ibid.*) through which barriers to expression can be overcome. This, he stated, is strengthened as the value of collages resides in participants not feeling intimidated by their possible lack of artistic skill and, consequently, more

²⁷ For example, Williams notes that in a workshop on pain relief within cancer care settings, one doctor had used an image of a crying child with the word 'sad' placed next to this. Although other participants had initially interpreted this as a reflection of children suffering, the doctor explained that it was intended to represent her own helplessness and vulnerability when unable to offer assistance. Thus, Williams states, the exercise enabled greater empathy and understanding between participants from differing professions (2002, p. 55).

likely to engage with such tasks. Furthermore, he maintained that this reduction of anxiety promoted discussion, adding that ‘via the safety of metaphors’ (p. 56) the collage-making exercise itself eased free association and ‘open expression’ (p. 55) which enabled numerous attitudes, ideas and beliefs to be articulated: ‘Creating one’s own image allows for more possibilities, more unconscious associations, and more creative integration of parts into a whole’ (Carter, Nelson and Duncombe, 1983, quoted in Williams, 2002, p. 55).

These ideas are evident and further developed in Gauntlett’s (2007, see also 2006) more recent work that engages participants in *building* metaphorical constructions of their identities using Lego bricks.²⁸ This approach, he explains, derives from Seymour Papert’s theory of constructionism (see Papert and Harel, 1991) which maintains ‘that people learn effectively through *making* things’ (2006, p. 7, original emphasis), and argues against mind-body distinctions, claiming that our perceptions and experiences of the world are mediated bodily *as well as* mentally (see Merleau-Ponty, [1945] 2002). Therefore, within such a formulation, physical engagement with our environment activates alternative cognitive procedures to those triggered by purely cerebral activity. Thus Gauntlett claims, by building metaphors of their identities prior to discussion, participants are not only granted *time to reflect* on what they create, but this process engages a *different type* of thinking about the issue itself. In doing so, he suggests the exercise avoids problems inherent in approaches which aim to elicit an immediate reaction, by allowing a considered and reflective response to the research task. Importantly, Gauntlett adds, the method allows for a more complex representation of the concept that does not presume an individual’s identity is a fixed, discernable artefact which can be described in a linear manner, but acknowledges its multifarious, amorphous and changeable nature more suited to symbolic expression. Furthermore, he states that the *process* of building a Lego model is particularly appropriate in this instance as it entails improvisation and experimentation, hence providing diverse forms of conceptualisation, as Gauntlett explains ‘it’s an alternative way of gathering sociological data, where the expressions are *worked through* (through the process of building in Lego, and then talking about it) rather than just being spontaneously generated (as in interviews or focus groups)’

²⁸ This method was originally used for business and organisational consultancy purposes. For further details see: <http://www.seriousplay.com>

(2006, p. 5, original emphasis). Consequently, Gauntlett concludes that the method affords individuals time and opportunity to build a *whole* presentation of their identity (or snapshot anyway) that is exhibited ‘all in one go’ (2007, p. 183), and as such enables participants to establish a sense of ‘balance’ in their work.

4.4 Summary

A review of the preceding studies has demonstrated that creative and visual research methods offer unique methodological advantages for considering individuals’ identities and their relationships with the media. For example, Kitzinger’s (1993) analysis of media influences on people’s understanding of AIDS highlighted that although participants articulated a critical awareness of the media’s rhetoric, they replicated the dominant discourse of the medium. Thus, the use of the ‘news game’ technique enabled Kitzinger to elicit attitudes that may not have been uncovered by more traditional methods. Similarly, by asking participants to create original media texts, Gauntlett (1997) also revealed that participants were highly influenced by existing media coverage. However, the significance of this work was that it was the very process of the children’s *active engagement* in producing the videos that granted Gauntlett access to more comprehensive and worthwhile data. Furthermore, the methods employed not only benefited Gauntlett’s study but also, arguably, the participants involved, by attributing them with a degree of empowerment over their self-presentation and expression. Developing this point, Buckingham and Bragg’s (2004) work on young peoples’ attitudes towards sex and relationships in the media, specifically sought to draw out participants’ responses through the adoption of a variety of methods including diaries, interviews and group discussions. In doing so, the study facilitated a more complex and reflexive understanding of the students’ thoughts and beliefs. Expanding on this theme, Belk, Ger and Askergaard’s (2003) work revealed that metaphors could overcome the limitations of language to convey ambivalent emotional and intuitive responses, whereas Williams (2002) concluded that metaphors enabled participants to circumvent linguistic barriers and facilitated communication. In addition, Gauntlett’s (2007) more recent study, in which metaphors of personal identity are constructed using Lego, acknowledges this process

exercises different modes of thinking that can produce more nuanced representations of the self.

The above studies have then started to trace a trajectory of research that employs creative and visual methods in the process of their investigations. The researchers discussed have argued that these methodological approaches offer crucial and distinct benefits over alternative techniques, providing a rich and varied supply of data for analysis. Having outlined the potential merits and validity of creative and visual research methods, it is within this field that the present study intends to locate itself. The following chapter will therefore detail the aims and procedures of this study.