Promoting critical digital literacy in the leisure-time center: views and practices among Swedish leisure-time teachers

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Abstract
This article focuses on the leisure-time center (LTC) as an arena for developing critical digital literacy. The main research question concerns how Swedish leisure-time teachers (LT teachers) work to promote critical digital literacy. In addition to this, the article directs attention to one specific aspect of critical digital literacy, namely, critical understanding of Internet advertising. The second research question thus concerns how LT teachers approach Internet advertising in the LTC, and whether their approaches to advertising encourage a critical understanding. The study is based on 20 in-depth interviews with Swedish LT teachers, and Buckingham’s (2015) conceptual framework for critical digital literacy is used to analyze and discuss the data. The results reveal a broad range of approaches and practices, from not promoting critical digital literacy at all, to planned learning activities and spontaneous discussions that encouraged critical reflections about digital media. The participants concentrated on source criticism, photo manipulation, and discussions with children about their digital media usage. There were also different approaches to Internet advertising, from not addressing this issue to critical reflections regarding the role of advertising. The participants also described uncritical ways of relating to Internet advertising, such as approaching advertising as a form of entertainment. The article discusses the implications of these results for policy, teacher education, and future research.

Keywords
Critical digital literacy, digital literacy, digital competence, critical reflection, advertising, source criticism, leisure-time center, after-school program

Introduction
In a digitizing society with pervasive marketing, hidden advertising and fake news, critical reflection and a critical understanding of digital media become fundamental (Buckingham, 2018; McGillivray, McPherson, Jones, & McCandlish, 2016). Critical understanding of digital media has been conceptualized in different ways, for instance, as one aspect of digital literacy, and more specifically as critical digital literacy (Pangrazio, 2016). Critical reflection has also been defined as one dimension of the more general notion of digital competence (Ilomäki, Paavola, Lakkala, & Kantosalo, 2016), and as part of the even broader concept of media and information literacy (Carlsson, 2013). The notion of digital competence has come to the center of attention in recent years, much due to the fact that the European Union has identified it as a key competence for lifelong learning in a fast-changing knowledge society (EUR-Lex, 2006). However, a more developed discussion around critical reflection related to digital media is being conducted primarily within media education.
research, and in relation to the concept of critical digital literacy (Buckingham, 2015; Hobbs, 2011; Kellner & Share, 2007; Pangrazio, 2016).

Different social actors and social arenas can support children in developing critical digital literacy, such as parents, siblings, friends in the home, and teachers at school. In this article, I direct attention to the leisure-time center (LTC) as an arena for developing critical digital literacy, with a focus on how leisure-time teachers (LT teachers) work to encourage critical reflection on digital media. The Swedish LTC is an integrated part of the education system, which children from preschool class up to sixth grade can attend during mornings, afternoons, and holidays, and has the mission of supporting children’s learning and development. When it comes to critical reflection of digital media, the curriculum’s introductory chapter states that “They [pupils] shall also be given the opportunity to develop a critical and responsible approach to digital technology, to be able to see possibilities and understand risks, as well as to be able to evaluate information” (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018, p. 8, author’s translation). In chapter four of the curriculum – which sets specific goals for the LTC – it furthermore states that teaching should focus on: “Ethnicity, gender roles, body ideals, and consumption, as well as critical examination of how these phenomena are represented in media and popular culture” (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018, p. 24, author’s translation). The supplementary material for the curriculum provides a few examples of what this may entail, for instance, talking with pupils about questions like, “Why do some want us to consume more?” (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2016, p. 23, author’s translation). Hence, policy documents leave much space for interpretation and little guidance for LT teachers in this regard.

The main research question addressed in the present article is How do Swedish LT teachers work to promote critical digital literacy in the LTC? In addition to this, this article directs attention to one specific aspect of critical digital literacy, namely, critical reflection on advertising, and thus also poses the following question: How do Swedish LT teachers approach Internet advertising in the LTC, and do their approaches to advertising encourage a critical understanding? This particular focus is motivated by the fact that advertising and marketing have become ubiquitous in children’s everyday lives. Powerful commercial forces shape children's Internet use, and seek to target children online using various strategies (Martínez, 2019). Hence, having a critical awareness and understanding of today’s commercial media environment is essential for children.

Previous research on the LTC and questions related to digital competence and digital literacy has focused on the technical skills dimension. Studies thus center on how children learn to use digital technology in creative activities and for various learning purposes in LTCs (e.g. Barkhuus & Lecusay, 2012; Davis & Fullerton, 2016; Klerfelt, 2006; Lagerlöf, 2016; Lecusay, 2014; Prieto et al., 2016; Vakil, 2014). However, how critical digital literacy is promoted within the LTC has not, to my knowledge, received attention in previous research. The present study, hence, provides a first step in exploring this complex issue, with the hope of spurring further research into this area. This study also has societal relevance, as the findings can lay the groundwork for reflections about what learning opportunities are provided children in LTCs, which can be used in a wider discussion on how to develop both policy and practice.

1. According to the curriculum, the LTC should stimulate children’s learning and development by emphasizing learning that is group oriented, situation based, and experiential, and by taking its point of departure in children’s interests, initiatives, and needs. The curriculum specifies four main areas of education for the LTC: 1) Language and communication, 2) Creative and aesthetic forms of expression, 3) Nature and society, and 4) Playing, physical activity, and outdoor activities (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018, p. 22–25).
Critical digital literacy

As stated above, the notion of digital competence has come to the center of attention in recent years, and is currently dominating Swedish educational policy when it comes to identifying what media related knowledge and skills children need to develop. This can be seen in the Swedish curriculum for compulsory school, the pre-school class, and the leisure-time center, where the notion of digital competence was introduced in 2017 (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018). In the curriculum, a “critical approach” to technology is identified as one dimension of digital competence. However, the concept of digital competence is a loose boundary concept originating in policy documents (Ilomäki et al., 2016), and is theoretically underdeveloped. Hence, to study how LT teachers promote a critical understanding of digital media, I will use the literature that has been developed around the concept of digital literacy, and more specifically, the conceptual framework outlined by media education professor David Buckingham (2006; 2015). This framework is relevant for the purposes of this study because it distinguishes central aspects of critical digital literacy in a multifaceted and integral framework, and it pays specific attention to the issue of advertising and the commercial dimension of digital media, which is of particular interest in the present study.

Buckingham (2015) stresses the importance of learning about digital media and not only focusing on learning through or with digital technology in education. This entails developing a critical understanding and a critical attitude toward digital media, thus “asking questions about the sources of that information, the interests of its producers, and the ways in which it represents the world; and understanding how these technological developments are related to broader social, political and economic forces” (p. 25). The framework is based on four main concepts: representation, language, production, and audience. The first concept, representation, puts focus on the fact that media represent rather than reflect the world, that media messages embed ideologies and values, and “invokes broader questions about whose voices are heard and whose viewpoints are represented, and whose are not” (Buckingham, 2015, p. 25). The second concept, language, concerns knowledge about how communication works and is structured in digital media, and the “code and conventions” of particular genres. Particularly important in relation to digital media is how interactivity is structured, for instance, what control is given to the user (Buckingham, 2015).

The third concept, production, has to do with understanding “who is communicating to whom, and why” (Buckingham, 2015, p. 26), and awareness of how different actors – individuals, companies, and interest groups – use the Internet for influence and persuasion, for instance through advertising messages. In relation to production, Buckingham (2015) specifically stresses the need to be aware of commercial interests operating online. The fourth concept, audience, concerns knowledge about one’s position as user/audience, how media is targeted at different audiences, how people respond and use it, as well as the ways in which media is used differently by different groups of people. This also involves understanding of how users are addressed and encouraged to navigate by different sites, and how information is collected about users. Additionally, this involves reflections on how digital media is used in everyday life, and how it can be used differently.

Buckingham’s (2015) framework shares similarities with other frameworks that discuss the critical dimension of digital literacy, as well as media literacy. The importance of understanding media and media use in its social, cultural, and economic context as well as the importance of focusing on representations, media influence, and power relationships is discussed by, among others, Hobbs (2011), Kellner and Share (2007), Pangrazio (2016), and Pötzsch (2019). One can also see connections between Buckingham’s (2015) framework and
the wider scholarly discussion around the concept of critical reflection and critical thinking. On the one hand, striving to go beyond the surface of media representations has to do with identifying and challenging assumptions that lie behind ideas and actions, which is central to critical reflection (Brookfield, 1987). On the other hand, centering on ideology, whose voices are heard and not heard, and the issue of influence and persuasion, shed light on power relations, which are also considered central aspects of critical reflection (Brookfield, 2016).

It is also important to note that there exists later developments and alternative understandings of the notion of critical digital literacy. For instance, Pangrazio (2016) maintains that critical digital literacy “requires rethinking in light of the fast-changing nature of young people’s digital practices” (p. 163), and argues for a critical digital design approach. In this framework – which also shares important similarities with Buckingham (2015) – Pangrazio (2016) stresses that critical reflection should start in the personal affective experience of digital media, and from there move towards the more abstract critique of ideology and power. Hinrichsen and Coomb’s (2013) framework for critical digital literacy differs from the one discussed above. Drawing on “a model for read/write literacy” (p. 6) they specify five resources of critical digital literacy: decoding, meaning making, using, analyzing and persona. This framework puts focus on the interpersonal level of communication in digital media and marginalizes issues of representation, power, and ideology. While this framework is based on the tradition of literacy education, the approach used in the present study is more aligned with critical theory and cultural studies (Buckingham, 2015, p. 24–25).

Method
This study draws on 20 qualitative interviews with LT teachers working in the south of Sweden, conducted in 2018. Qualitative interviews were considered a suitable method for the purposes of the study, as I wanted to gain in-depth descriptions of LT teachers’ experiences and perspectives (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), and obtain knowledge about a broader range of practices in different contexts than would have been possible using participant observation. This choice of method is made with the awareness that interview data are co-constructed between interviewer and interviewee, and not a direct window into people’s experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 54). Quality and validity of the data was ensured by encouraging rich and detailed descriptions using follow-up prompts, and by creating trusting relationships with participants (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). I also got the opportunity to observe pedagogical planning and pedagogical material in connection with some interviews, which also form part of the data.

The LT teachers were selected purposively to gain variation among participants, primarily in terms of age, gender, and the age of children they worked with. Among the participants, there were 12 women and 9 men, between the ages of 20 and 60 years. The participants had worked in the LTC between 3 and 40 years, and most of them were educated LT teachers, except 4 who had other education in pedagogics. Some worked with the youngest children (preschool class and grade 1), some with the oldest children (grades 4–6), and some with mixed age groups. The participants were recruited by contacting schools’ principals and asking them to put me into contact with interested teachers, and through professional networks, such as a national Facebook group focusing on leisure-time pedagogy.2

2. I do not have information regarding exactly how many LT teachers received information about the study, and therefore it is not possible to know how many declined to participate. However, there were several schools that did not answer the e-mails, and this may be due to time constraints, or because no teachers wanted to participate. All those who wanted to join the study were included.
The study was presented as focusing on how LT teachers work to promote digital competence in the LTC. The concept of digital competence was used as this concept dominates the Swedish educational context, and as the terms “digital literacy” or “critical digital literacy” are rarely used in Swedish language.

The interviews were conducted as individual interviews (19), while one interview was conducted as a group interview with two participants who worked together in the same LTC. Most interviews were made face-to-face in their workplaces; however, three interviews were made by telephone, due to geographical distance. Literature on qualitative methodology highlights both opportunities and challenges with telephone interviewing (Block & Erskine, 2012). In this study, interviewing through telephone enabled me to include more geographically distanced participants, and when comparing the telephone interviews with the face-to-face interviews, it seems as if they are equally rich in data (see also Stephens, 2007). However, I experienced starting the telephone interviews as the more stressful, as there were limited opportunities for small talk and building rapport beforehand (see also Irvine, Drew, & Sainsbury, 2012).

Before the interviews, the participants were given an informed consent sheet with information about the research and the ethical guidelines of the study. This included, for instance, assurance that participation was voluntary and could be interrupted at any time, and that their identities would remain anonymous. The interviews were recorded with a digital sound recorder, and started with general questions about their work with “digital competence”, and how participants worked with digital media in the LTC. The interview guide contained two questions that specifically aimed at eliciting information about their work with the critical dimension: Have you worked with critical reflection related to digital media in the LTC? Have you worked with or discussed advertising on the Internet in the LTC?

The interviews – which on average took 64 minutes – were transcribed verbatim, including significant tones of voice, and pauses. The interview transcripts were analyzed using qualitative coding (Bazeley, 2013), and Buckingham’s (2015) four dimensions of critical digital literacy were used as sensitizing concepts that guided the analysis (Blumer, 1954, p. 7). This allowed me to analyze the LT teachers’ specific ways of working with critical digital literacy, and to identify what aspects they did not focus on. In addition to this, I coded the various approaches to advertising described by the participants and analyzed these approaches in light of Buckingham’s (2015) framework to see in what ways these approaches encouraged a critical understanding.

**Promoting critical digital literacy in the leisure-time center**

The results section is structured thematically in four subsections. The first three subsections focus on different ways of promoting critical digital literacy. The last subsection focuses specifically on how the participants approach Internet advertising. The quoted participants are given pseudonyms, and to contextualize the findings I also provide information about the ages of the children they worked with (i.e. the grades that the pupil were in).

Before centering on the details of their work, it is important to note that there were participants saying in the interviews that they had not engaged in promoting critical reflection. Some of these acknowledged in the interview situation the importance of this work, and came up with ideas about how one could do such work. However, there were also those who did not see this as an activity of the LTC. For instance, Anna (grade 1) said that children hopefully would work with critical reflection related to digital media when they are older, in secondary school. Regarding the issue of advertising, there were also those saying that they
had not approached this question in the LTC. This is analyzed in more detail in the last sub-
section focusing specifically on advertising. In addition to this, there were a few partici-
pants stating that they had worked with critical reflection and the issue of advertising in
compulsory school, during art class and social studies class. ³

Working with source criticism
One way to promote critical digital literacy in the LTC was to discuss critically sources of
information on the Internet, which is one dimension of Buckingham’s (2015) category of
representation. The LT teachers described how they encouraged children to question the
veracity of information, to think about the authors of messages, and how they taught chil-
dren how to judge the correctness of information. These discussions could arise spontane-
ously in connection with discussions the children engaged in. Charlotte (grades 4–6) told
about a situation in which the children started a discussion on the veracity of information
online:

There was some American rapper who had said in his blog that he... if there had been some such suicide
attempt. And it was a massive discussion about this [among the children]. And I know there was some-
one who said: “But that’s not true, that’s not how it was,” so we had to check where that had been written
and if it was, like, the rapper himself who had written it, or someone else, or was it some newspaper...
So we did that for some time, just trying to figure out what had actually happened, and if anything had
actually happened or was it just someone who had said something.

In this quote, Charlotte describes how she focuses on evaluating messages and questioning
claims about reality. Hence, these discussions around source criticism, as reported by the
interviewees, centered on the dichotomy true–false, but did not touch upon broader ques-
tions of, for instance, ideology and power.

There were also LT teachers describing how they worked with planned learning activi-
ties that focused on source criticism. Louise and Christian, working in the same LTC with
children in grade 3, described how they had worked with fake news in connection with
their ongoing learning activity “Wallbook.” “Wallbook” was an analogue version of Face-
book in the form of posters on a piece of black cloth put up on the wall above a sofa in the
LTC, which aimed at teaching children about communication in social media. These post-
ers functioned as “posts” which the children could comment on, and like or dislike by sign-
ing with their initials. In the interview, Christian demonstrated one of the posters with the
following headline: “AFTONBLADET EXTRA [special edition of the Swedish tabloid
Aftonbladet] – LÖFVEN: FALL BREAK TO BE POSTPONED TILL SPRING!” The chil-
dren had written the following comments on the poster: “Fake news!” “Not true,” “So
not true,” “Obviously not true,” and “Stop lying!” Christian and Louise described how they dis-
cussed this particular poster with the children:

Christian: We talked about it, that it was in Aftonbladet, and it was the Swedish prime minister, Löfven,
who said it. “Cause anybody can actually write it. Anyone can make this up – so you always have to check.
Who said that? And how are you supposed to check?"

Louise: Is it credible? Can you somehow have a sense: “Hmm – could this be true or could it be not true?”

³ The LT teachers’ descriptions of their work in compulsory school are not analyzed further in this article, as the
focus is specifically on the LTC. In the interviews, I did not prompt the participants to speak in more detail about
their work in compulsory school, so these descriptions are only on a very general level.
This learning activity focused on promoting awareness about false information online, which is one aspect of Buckingham’s (2015) category of representation. In the quote, Christian and Louise described how they primarily taught children methods for judging credibility of news. One way was to “feel” whether the information seems trustworthy. “Feeling” whether something is likely to be true must build on previous experiences, thus evaluating information based on “their own direct experience” (Buckingham, 2015, p. 25).

Promoting awareness about photo manipulation

Another way to promote critical digital literacy in the LTC was to focus on photo manipulation. This involved discussions around the ways in which photos can be changed, but also included experimenting with and transforming pictures. Buckingham (2015) argues that media production is a powerful way to teach critical digital literacy, and that editing is particularly illuminating, as “the selection, manipulation and combination of images … can be addressed in a much more accessible way” (p. 32). Petra (grade 4–6) said:

We had a look at photoshopped images. There’s a free app that the kids cannot have on their computer called Gimp. They have Chromebooks, so they can’t have all the programs. But on my computer, I could have something called Gimp that’s approximately like Photoshop, where I could go in and change certain images. So they could go in and change some images. We pasted a shark into a swimming pool. So, just chatting about it, like: “Look at what you can do.”

In this quote, Petra describes how she and the children make changes to pictures, and exemplifies this work by relating how they placed a shark in a swimming pool. Focus here lies on discussing representation (Buckingham, 2015), but rather than focusing on, for instance, ideology and values, Petra centers on the possibilities of the media to alter reality and create fantasy worlds that appear real.

Another participant, Julia (grade 1), explained how she discussed and made changes to photos with the children in grade 3 that she had last semester, and how she posed questions about photos and emotions in her discussions with children: “Can you re-do the images and things like that? What do they convey? What do they mean? Why does this one look different from that one? Well, it’s because in some way they are trying to influence us – images.” Then Julia continued describing:

So I got a discussion going. I think, about the light in different images. And then they were supposed to create two images and make the light different on the second one. And then, why do different images make you feel different? One was darker, the other lighter. Why does this one seem happier?

In this quote, Julia describes how she discusses with children about pictures, how they affect people emotionally, and how photos can be manipulated to elicit certain emotional responses. This puts focus on the affective side of representations, rather than the ideological (Buckingham, 2015). This work also goes beyond the issue of representation by highlighting the question of influence and by encouraging reflections about oneself as the audience, for instance, how audiences/users respond to the media (Buckingham, 2015).

Reflections about children’s Internet use

When asked about their work with critical reflection related to digital media, some participants referred to discussions with children about their Internet use. These discussions could emerge when they needed to explain to children why they were not allowed to use
certain websites or apps in the LTC. In these discussions, they drew attention to – in their view – the problematic aspects of this media, and they discussed other websites that could be used. In this way they put focus on how digital media is used in everyday life, and how it can be used differently – which is one dimension of Buckingham’s (2015) category of the audience. Petra (grade 4–6) told about her discussions with children:

When we have the computer room, the pupils have had to submit an application for pages. Because we don’t just give them unlimited access. They have to give reasons why we should give them access, and they have to demonstrate the Internet page and explain to us why you should use it. “What’s it good for?” “Is there maybe some other page that is similar but maybe better?” “Why might it be better, then?”

In Petra’s LTC, the children were allowed to use their laptops rather freely once a week, but they needed to “apply” to use new websites that were not yet approved. As described by Petra in this quote, they discussed with children about their choices and encouraged them to think about using other websites. Petra related that these discussions commonly revolved around age restrictions:

They want to check out videos of people playing different games, and then we have to intervene and tell them... “There’s an age limit of 18 for this game, and even if it’s a video, the age limit is still 18,” and “Why’s that? Who decides these age limits?”

By focusing on age restrictions, focus is put on the children as audience/user (Buckingham, 2015). By also asking questions such as “Who decides these age limits?” these kinds of discussions also center on contextual knowledge about the digital media system, and how “technological developments are related to broader social, political and economic forces” (Buckingham, 2015, p. 25).

In Eva’s LTC (preschool class to grade 3), they had decided to block access to YouTube on their iPads, but sometimes they watched a video to discuss it with the children:

And on occasion we’ve actually opened YouTube and watched something that they want to watch. “I’ve seen this,” we hear. And then we might have sat and discussed: “Yeah, but listen to the language they’re using. How are they speaking? What are they saying? Does this feel okay?”

In this quote, Eva describes how she encourages children to reflect on the language used in YouTube videos and how she problematizes this language use by asking: “Does this feel okay?” In this way, she promotes reflections about the appropriateness of different kinds of media usage in everyday life, and encourages children to connect with and analyze their emotions in relation to media representations.

The participants also described how they discussed with children about their use of social media and digital games at home or in the LTC. In these conversations, they encouraged children to question their assumptions about what is going on online, and reflect on how one should or should not behave. Petra, for instance, said that she prompted children to reflect on how they share information and who they meet online, asking questions such as: “What can you tell others about yourself?”, “How do you really know that this is a 14-year-old sitting on the other side?”, and “Is this person really who they say they are?” These kinds of discussions with children about their communication online, and issues related to safety, encourage reflections on how digital media is used in everyday life, and how it can be used differently (Buckingham, 2015).
Approaching Internet advertising in the leisure-time center

The participants told about different ways of approaching advertising in the LTC. There were those describing how they engaged in discussions with children about the role of advertising, and how advertising works to influence people, which are central aspects of the production dimension (Buckingham, 2015). These discussions commonly surfaced when advertisements appeared on YouTube. Sebastian (grade 2–3) said:

And then we had a period when we had to call out “Advertising!” whenever it appeared. So we did this: “Advertising” [spoken with clipped, military-sounding voice]. And then I asked, like, “Yeah, what’s this?” “Yeah, it’s advertising.” “Yeah, what is advertising trying to do?” [spoken with clipped, military-sounding voice]. “It wants to sell you stuff,” the children answered, and so we went on about that for a while... I can only somehow make them aware that “This has one purpose only and that is to create a need in you that you didn’t know existed.”

In this quote, Sebastian describes how he promotes awareness about advertising among children, by posing questions about what advertising is, what its aims are, and by explaining how advertising seeks to change people’s desires. Sebastian relates how he instructs children to call out “advertising” when it appears, and in this way he makes children aware of advertising as specific media content with persuasive intents (Buckingham, 2015).

Another way to approach advertising in the LTC was to instruct children to click away advertisements when they appeared on, for instance, the virtual world MovieStarPlanet, and this could involve informing children about advertising. Nik (grade 1) told: “We have said that when they [adverts] appear they should just click them away, nothing else. And then we have explained that it’s advertising.” These practices, when accompanied by explanations, can create awareness about advertising and create understanding among children about “when they are being targeted by commercial appeals” (Buckingham, 2015, p. 26). However, encouraging children to click away advertisements without explanation or discussion is unlikely to promote critical digital literacy (Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2014, p. 87).

There were also ways of approaching advertising in the LTC that can be considered uncritical. Marianne (grade 4–6) described how she approached advertising as a source of information:

On YouTube we often get talking about it – when we’re watching YouTube. So often something flies up and you’re supposed to press on it and: “Should we buy it?” We talk about that, but it’s when it comes from them. And the children: “Which one should you buy?” “Which one is the best?” And you have to compare them and so on, and I think it’s important that you do that.

By focusing on advertising as a source of information and discussing which products to choose, Marianne socializes children to become efficient consumers, rather than promoting critical digital literacy.

Another way of approaching advertising that can be considered uncritical was to engage with advertising as a form of entertainment without discussing or questioning it. Johan (grade 2–3) stated that children commonly wanted to watch advertising on YouTube, such as advertising for an online casino, but said that he did not talk to children about it: “No. It’s just something we sort of hum together. They love the jingles... when Ninja Casino comes up... Poof! The ninja! [spoken with excited voice]. They all come over – they want to watch. They are curious.” By singing along with children, Johan reinforces positive attitudes toward advertising, in line with advertisers’ goals. Hence, in this case, the LTC becomes an
arena for supporting – in this case dubious – commercial interests, rather than giving children the opportunity to deconstruct and criticize them.

In addition to taking these critical and uncritical approaches to advertising, there were also participants who very clearly expressed that they had not approached advertising at all. When asked about their work, some participants responded quickly and without hesitation that they had not addressed advertising in any way in the LTC. At the same time, these participants related how children came into contact with advertising in the LTC, including advertising for violent games. Petra (grade 4–6) said:

No, actually, we have not talked about advertising. I’ve thought about it. That it’s a subject we should talk about. The staff have talked about it – how we should address the topic. There are a number of games and apps on our iPads that we know involve a lot of advertising. And we’ve talked about how we should deal with that.

In the quote, Petra stresses how she had not discussed advertising with children in the LTC in any way, and she expresses uncertainty about how to approach this question. Petra was one of those participants who had worked extensively with critical thinking in other ways, but, apparently, this does not imply that one also works to promote a critical understanding of advertising.

**Discussion**

This article has explored the LTC as an arena for promoting critical digital literacy. The main research question concerned how Swedish LT teachers work to promote critical digital literacy in the LTC. The results of the study reveal a broad range of approaches and practices, from not promoting critical digital literacy at all to planned learning activities and spontaneous discussions that encouraged critical reflections about digital media. The LT teachers described how they worked with source criticism, how they promoted awareness about photo manipulation, and how they discussed with children their use of media. Hence, several aspects that are central to critical digital literacy as defined by Buckingham (2015) were addressed by the participants. The analysis shows how the LT teachers primarily concentrated on the question of true and false information online. However, broader questions concerning, for instance, ideology and power – also central aspects of critical digital literacy (Buckingham, 2015) – were not highlighted by the participants. This focus reflects a wider trend in Swedish society and education where the issue of source criticism (källkritik) receives much attention (Erlandsson, 2019), and becomes the focal point of what a critical approach to digital media entails.

While the LT teachers promoted aspects of critical digital literacy that relate to Buckingham’s (2015) framework, some differences to this framework can also identified. As demonstrated in the analysis, participants encouraged children to reflect on and connect with their emotions when discussing digital media representations, for instance when editing photos and talking about language use in YouTube videos. This is in line with Pangrazio’s (2016) approach to critical digital literacy, which holds that critical reflection should start in the personal affective experience of digital media, and then move towards the more abstract critique of ideology and power. However, there is no evidence in this study that the LT teachers progressed from these reflections on emotions to the more abstract level of critique.

The second research question posed in this article centered on how Swedish LT teachers approach Internet advertising, and whether their approaches encourage a critical under-
standing. The results show a wide variety of approaches and practices, from not addressing this issue at all, to critical discussions with children in the LTC regarding the role of advertising that encourage critical digital literacy (Buckingham, 2015). However, the LT teachers did not only promote a critical understanding; there were also uncritical ways of approaching Internet advertising, such as discussing advertising as a source of information for consumption purposes, and using it as a source of entertainment. This variation in views and practices shows that critical digital literacy is not a self-evident part of the LTC, or part of LT teachers’ ideas about what learning in the LTC is about. One can argue, based on the results of the present study, that critical digital literacy – including critical reflections about Internet advertising – is out of the field of vision for some LT teachers. The vague formulations in the curriculum and the supplementary material regarding critical thinking and digital media may create a situation where these questions vanish out of sight.

However, as shown in this study, promoting critical digital literacy is indeed part of some LT teachers’ work. The LT teachers primarily took advantage of spontaneous situations to guide children to reflect critically about digital media. These learning opportunities arose, for instance, when children discussed things that they had read in a blog, or when advertisements appeared on YouTube. Illeris (2013, pp. 92–94) argues that competencies develop best in authentic situations that learners find relevant. Hence, one can argue that children’s self-initiated discussions around the media, and their more self-selected media use, such as selecting their own YouTube videos, can be particularly relevant situations for enhancing critical digital literacy. Based on this, one can argue that the LTC – where LT teachers can approach children’s discussions and media use – has special opportunities when it comes to promoting critical digital literacy.

From this study emerges a contradictory picture of the LTC, where, on the one hand, the LTC is an arena for developing aspects of critical digital literacy, and on the other hand, the LTC is an arena for supporting commercial interests. Hence, Swedish LT teachers create very different opportunities for children when it comes to developing critical digital literacy. The uncritical ways of relating to advertising was a particularly surprising finding of this study, and is a practice that can be considered highly problematic. One could argue that the well-being of children is not prioritized in situations where advertising is approached uncritically. The implications for policy of these results are that policymakers should specify the LTC’s mission to promote critical reflection, by, for instance, developing the curriculum’s supplementary material. The implications for teacher education are that higher education should support teacher education students to develop their theoretical knowledge about critical reflection related to digital media. It is also important to make students aware of the fact that the LTC can and should be considered a space for developing critical digital literacy.

The present study has made a first effort to explore the LTC as an arena for promoting critical digital literacy, and there are clearly some limitations of this work. This article has demonstrated the variety of views and practices among LT teachers; however, this does not give any indication regarding how these approaches are distributed in the wider population of LT teachers. Hence, future studies using quantitative methodology are needed. Further studies should also seek a deeper understanding of LT teachers’ practices, and the factors – both individual and institutional – that contribute to the wide variety of approaches. Particularly important is gaining a better understanding of LT teachers’ uncritical ways of relating to Internet advertising, because an environment that encourages uncritical thinking may effectively hinder children from developing their critical reflection skills. By investigating these issues further – and encouraging reflections among LT teachers and education
students – LT teachers can become better equipped to create learning situations that support children’s critical digital literacy.

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References


