

**THE AGE OF LOST INNOCENCE****REPRESENTATION OF CHILDREN IN TELEVISION ADVERTISEMENTS**

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**Abstract**

We are living in a 'mediatised' world, in which the dominant mode of communication seems to be shifting from symbolic to iconic. Earlier cultures primarily depended either on face to face symbolic communication or later print, however, with the advent of television and accompanied developments in communication technologies; the contemporary culture seems to be dominated by images. Undoubtedly, television as the dominant medium of mass communication in the contemporary world spawned intractable questions about values and belief systems. As image dominated medium of communication, it influences everybody irrespective of their age and intelligence. It is said that even cats can understand television programmes at their own level. A child is born innocent and for years remains innocent, because of protection by parents and lack of exposure to outer world. However, the changes that are taking place in the technological and cultural spheres in recent years, pose a serious challenge to parents and the society at large. In earlier cultures, children make sense of their world through symbols which necessitated some practice and dependence on elders but now they understand the world through images which need not necessarily require a higher level of competence and guidance of elders. As the images of television ubiquitous, children are getting over exposed to them. Through the exposure to television programmes, children developing an understanding about the world out there and in turn seem to be losing their innocence at tender ages. Such developments critics say will have serious implications on society and culture. It is in this context the paper analyses the representation of children in television commercials from postmodern perspectives. For the purpose of analysis television advertisements have been selected on the basis of the presence of the children in them. As the study deals with the representation of children, the ads selected feature children as the main protagonists.

**Introduction**

In the contemporary world, Children are exposed to the television programmes at a very early age. In emerging nuclear families where both the parents are working the children have got no alternative and therefore they spend most of their time sitting in front of the television by surfing various channels. The advertisers presume the children to be the soft target and are easy to be lured. In the context of children, advertisements are not only the product promotions but also a means of entertainment and enculturation. The variety of advertisements increases their understanding of the different kinds of products available in the market. And thus brings to them the power of making their own purchase decisions. At the same time through the exposure to ads children develop a perception about the world. It needs to be noted that the treatment of children in advertisements is changing in recent years. We are witnessing a shift in the advertisements targeting and/or featuring children. The children are being taken more seriously than ever before by the advertisers. They are being dealt as individuals like adults. As Unnikrishnan and Bajpai noted that "the trends in the industry are changing, the kids are no more being treated as kids; they are being provided with their individual identities like adults and are made to feel empowered" (Unnikrishnan & Bajpai, 1996). If the depiction of children in television commercials is to be believed then children are no more ignorant. Some critics comment that these advertisements develop a false conception of the world among children.

Children nowadays do not gulp down the fantasies as told. They developed their own mediated perceptions of the world, which has been possible because of the open information sources available to them at a very early age. The proliferation of new media technology made it simple to get information regarding any matter, thus giving rise to a

false confidence to face the world. The studies also indicate that the institution of advertising greatly influenced the development of self-images. It is suggested that whatever the manner or role in which children are depicted in advertisements affect their perceptions. Some scholars have argued that the children do not understand the persuasive intent of advertising. However, others are of the opposite opinion. There exists a general concern among parents and other social activists that the television advertising may have a negative influence, which may be intended or even unintended which can result into a parent-child conflict.

### **The Age of Lost Innocence: Postmodern Perspectives**

According to Jean-François Lyotard the term 'modern' used to designate 'any science that legitimates itself with reference to a meta discourse' or that makes 'an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth' (Lyotard, 1984: xxiii). He further noted that 'Our working hypothesis is that the status of knowledge is altered as societies entered what is known as the post-industrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age' (Lyotard, 1984: 3) The era is marked by the demise of 'grandes histoires' or an incredulity towards meta narratives and the emergence of 'petites histoires' or 'micro narratives' in their place. In other words, there is a disillusionment with ambitious 'total explanations' of reality such as those offered by science, or religion, or political programmes like communism; instead there is a growing preference for smaller scale, single issue preoccupations, so that people devote their time to saving whale, or opposing a proposed bypass road.

In other words, knowledge in the postmodern era can no longer be legitimated or sanctioned according to the great 'narratives' that have shaped western knowledge to date, like the notion of progress embedded in the Enlightenment, or the notion of social liberation through history embedded in Marxism, or the release from unconscious trauma harboured by Freudian theory. Indeed, Lyotard sees such narratives as violent and tyrannical in their imposition of a 'totalising' pattern and a false universality on actions, events and things; hence knowledge can be partial, fragmented, and incomplete. This is regarded as a radically new form of epistemological freedom, resisting the dominance of overarching pattern which appear to ignore the details and experiences of differences in their effort to construct patterns which make sense of the world on a grand scale.

We are living in a world which is changing very fast. Some commentators believe that the Jean Francois Lyotard's postmodern condition already visible everywhere. These changes can be witnessed in everyday life in terms of how people view the world, their perception about reality and truth, and the way they deal with the fundamental questions of life. This will have tremendous implications on our beliefs and value systems. In ancient societies people bestowed upon tremendous faith on religious authorities and considered their sermons as absolute truths. They believed that religion can provide the answers to life's mysteries. We find a shift in the belief and value systems of the people with the emergence of modern outlook in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. The foundation of Modern society laid on the pursuit of objective knowledge and the scientific method. People in the modern societies believed that traditional beliefs are obstacles to enlightenment and they need to be discarded altogether. Modernity believes that truth is based on facts. In the modern worldview, people should believe only what they can observe. Modernity trusts the power of reason and critical thinking to solve the world's problems. It looks to science, and not to religion, to provide the answers to life's mysteries. Modern people have often developed an optimistic faith in the progress of humanity through knowledge, scientific inquiry, innovation, invention, and rational thought. However, since the middle of the twentieth century the societies seemed to be shifted from industrial to post-industrial and its cultures shifted from modern to postmodern.

Postmodernists believe that happiness and peace cannot be achieved through reason and scientific temper. They think that the industrial revolution that is based on scientific research devastated the environment, we have witnessed the bloody history of the twentieth century, and continued misery, poverty and hunger around the globe. None of these problems were solved by scientific knowledge. On the contrary, the by-products of science and the industrial revolution exacerbated many of our human problems. Science has provided cures to disease, but it has also created the threat of global warming and nuclear annihilation.

Postmodernists question Enlightenment beliefs. Some of such beliefs as identified by Jane Flax are as follows:

- language is in some sense transparent;
- there is 'a stable, coherent self';
- reason and its "science" – philosophy – can provide an objective, reliable, and universal foundation of knowledge;
- knowledge acquired from the right use of reason will be "true" ;
- by grounding claims to authority in reason, the conflicts between truth, knowledge, and power can be overcome;
- freedom consists of obedience to laws that conform to the necessary results of the right use of reason. (Flax, 1990: 41–2).

Contrary to general belief postmodernism does not seek to return to an earlier time. Nor does it seek answers through authoritarian religion. Postmodernists have of the opinion that both religion and science have failed to answer the questions related to realities of life. They believe that neither science nor religion could able to solve the mysteries of the universe.

Postmodernists reject the notion of absolute truth. They no longer trust authority and they reject any institution that claims to have a claim on absolute truth. They have become highly suspicious of facts. They believe that all truth, even to some extent scientific knowledge, is subjective, biased, and socially constructed. Truth depends on what one's culture regards as truth. Therefore the truth is not really true. In the postmodern worldview, people become their own authority and accept only what they personally experience. There is a sense that feeling is all that counts because, in the end, feeling is all there is. The postmodern attitude is, "If I can feel it, if I can touch it, then it must be true."

The world in which we live is changing. For the past three hundred years we have been part of an age called modernity. The modern age is now giving way to a postmodern age. This transformation will change how people view the world, how they understand reality and truth, and how they approach the fundamental questions of life. The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognising that the past, since it cannot be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently. I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows that he cannot say to her 'I love you madly', because he knows that she knows (and that she knows he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still there is a solution. He can say 'As Barbara Cartland would put it, 'I love you madly'. At this point, having avoided false innocence, having said clearly that it is no longer possible to speak innocently, he will nevertheless have said what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her in an age of lost innocence. If the woman goes along with this, she will have received a declaration of love all the same. Neither of the two speakers will feel innocent, both will have accepted the challenge of the past, of the already said, which cannot be eliminated; both will consciously and with pleasure play the game of irony... But both will have succeeded, once again, in spreading of love (Eco, 1994: 67-68).

As Peter Brooker noted 'hyper reality' is a term associated with the effects of Mass Production and Reproduction and suggesting that an object, event, experience so reproduced replaces or is preferred to its original: that the copy is "more real than the real". In the writings of the French social philosopher and commentator on Postmodernism, Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco, hyper reality is associated especially with cultural tendencies and a prevailing sensibility in contemporary American society. In Baudrillard's discussion, hyper reality is synonymous with the most developed form of Simulation: the autonomous simulacrum which is free from all reference to the real (Brooker, 1999).

It is believed that in the contemporary society the mass media wields enormous power. However, at the same time some critics lament that the media barons enjoy this power without responsibility. Some people consider media as a source of power - either in its own right or as the tool of dominant forces in society. However, Foucault offers a different perspective on the sources of power which might suggest ways in which the media might be constrained. He

rejects "truth" as an absolute because he does not believe in absolutes at all. According to him history is a series of fictions and what is interesting is not what happened so much as how people were brought to think what happened.

Many of the theories on media power are based on a model of hierarchical domination of the many by privileged groupings. For example Marxists believe that the dominant group in the society use mass media as tools for creating a false reality so as to disguise a reality of oppression and exploitation. Though Foucault does not appear to be challenging these effects, but offers another perspective on how power operates. He rejects the simple, hierarchical approach and suggests instead that power is not a unitary concept, not an absolute. Instead he says that "Power comes from below; that is, there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations, and serving as a general matrix - no such duality extending from the top down and reacting on more and more limited groups to the very depths of the social body. Instead, he sees power as being dispersed through the network of relationships which make up society and based in discourse. This is not to deny that power struggle might be unequal but to suggest that it is not exercised in a single, downward vector. For Foucault, a critical component of power is freedom since power can only be said to create an effect if the object of power has the ability to resist. Power is not simply repressive; it is also productive. Power subjects bodies not to render them passive, but to render them active. The forces of the body are trained and developed with a view to making them productive. The power of the body corresponds to the exercise of power over it. Hence there is the possibility of a reversal of that power.

From Foucaultian perspective if history is a series of fictions then the present is a fiction too which further implies that power has implications for knowledge. If we claim to know the present, it can only be power that is causing us to apply the absolute of knowledge to a fictional present. According to Foucault "power produces knowledge" and he sees them as two sides of the same process. It suggests that in the power and knowledge discourse "truth" is always unstable. If this is so then the effect of power is not just unstable but, as a consequence, unpredictable and this idea has significance for any theory of dominant power through the mass media. Foucault takes another, broader view of the production of "truth" via power when he says: "Truth isn't outside power ... Truth is a thing of this world; it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint... And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth; that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true" [Quoted in Stuart Hall & Bram Gieben (Editors), *Formations of Modernity* (Cambridge, 1992: 295)]. Michel Foucault, as Sheridan noted "is a slayer of dragons, a breaker of systems" (Sheridan, 1980: 225). As he says there is no absolute truth. It can change as a result of the very discourse which uses it as a premise. His central thesis is that power is everywhere and can be expressed in a multitude of individual discourses. From Foucaultian perspective mass media can be seen as a site of power and resistance. The outcomes of power are not inevitable and can be resisted.

### **Representation of Children in Television Commercials**

'The rise of television and its enormous appeal were the source of much theorising about the consequences for social experience. A recurring theme has been the degree to which most of our experience is literally mediated through the words and images of the dominant medium of our time' (Mc Quail, 2000: 110). Meyrowitz's thesis is that the all pervasiveness of electronic media has fundamentally changed social experience by breaking down the compartmentalisation between the social spaces that was typical of earlier times. Human experience, in his view, has traditionally been segmented by role and social situation and sharply divided between private ('backstage') and public ('onstage') domains. Segmentation was by age, gender and social status, and the 'walls' between zones of experience were high. Television appears to put all aspects of social experience on show to all, without distinction. There are no longer any secrets for instance, about adulthood, sex, death or power (Mc Quail, 2000: 111). Older bases for identification and for authority are weakened or blurred, sometimes to be replaced by new group identities... Everyone tends to move in the same information environment, but the result is a culture without any distinct sense of socially or physically bounded place. (Mc Quail, 2000: 111)

### **Methodology**

The Semiotic Analysis technique has been employed in this study to evaluate the representation of children on Indian television commercials. All the selected ads have casted the children in active roles and all have the children as the central characters. Pierce has categorized the meaning in signs as iconic, symbolic, and indexical. An iconic sign is one which is, in one or more respects, the same as the object signified; a symbol refers to conventional signs used, for instance, in speaking and writing (in Lechte, 2000). An index is a sign physically linked to an object. All these three types of signs are used in visual communication. Eco argues that a sign is not only something that stands for something else, but must also be interpreted (in Lechte, 2000). In semiotics the meanings of ads, which are developed by their creators, provide perceptions to our sense of reality. While studying the advertisements aim to decipher the framing of meaning since they always have a social and cultural aspects associated with them. They are always knitted around a social context. Without a context, neither a meaning can be produced or derived, because the visual will become meaningless, so commercials establish connections between the meanings and images/presentations of products. Bignell (in Atkinson, 2002, parag. 5) states that a semiotic analysis needs “to identify the visual and linguistic signs in the ad, to see how the signs are organized by paradigmatic and syntagmatic selection, and note how the signs relate to each other through various coding systems. The semiotic analysis of commercials is to make meanings from linguistic and visual signs.”

The ads have been analyzed on the basis of the 16 elements which include both the audio and the visual elements. These elements are as follows: Characters, Language, Dialogues, Jingles, Voice-over, Punch-line, Background setting, Lights, Sound, Music, Colour, Attire, Camera Movements, Camera Shots, Editing techniques and Culture.

**Characters:** The characters featured in the ads, and their relationship with each other. The ads draw heavily from the characters featured as they are able to add the emotional appeal to the overall scenario.

**Language:** The language is one of the most important aspects of the ads. This element drives the message home. The kind of language presents the background the characters belong to and also the light in which the people are casted.

**Dialogues:** This category includes dialogues. The tone of conversation and the interaction between the characters

**Jingles:** It is a kind of short tune. This has now become a trend in the Advertisements to use short songs and jingles, as it adds to the attention grabbing.

**Voice-over:** This is present in almost every advertisement. There are ads which do not have a conversation involved but this is compensated by the voice-over as this serves the purpose of creating awareness among the audiences. The voice-over usually explains about the benefit of the products, their price and sometimes addresses the audience itself.

**Punch-line:** This element of the ad sums up the entire promotional activity. It provides the gist of the advertisement to the audiences. They are usually one-liners and establish an impact on the mind of the audiences as they are the last thing to be broadcasted in the advertisement. Sometimes like the jingles, they also establish a rapport with the audience.

**Back-ground setting:** The sets designed in the ads, they can be from kitchen to classrooms, from out-door playgrounds to the doctor's clinic. The location in the advertisement enhances the visual image in the minds of the audience.

**Lights:** The kind of lights used cast a powerful impact on the scenario of the advertisements. Lights are a very important part of the production process they are also used to derive out a meaning from the situation.

**Sound:** It is the aspect which has an influence on the audio element of the ads. The kind of sound used from the ambience adds to the overall advertisement. Even if there is silence it is an important aspect.

**Music:** This is the element which enhances the impact of the ad. It is a very powerful aspect is instrumental and can also be used to derive meanings. It creates a mood or situation.

Colours: Colours bring alive the exact situation for which the message has been designed. The colours used in the children's ads employ brightness and happiness for example yellow, white, pink etc.

Attire: This reveals the essence of the characters. The dresses worn by the characters also indirectly hints at the strata at which the ads are targeted. And also fulfills the demand of the story.

Camera movements: The camera frames the objects with different motions. A pan or a tilt or zoom can be used to emphasize a particular aspect of the ad and also gives meaning.

Camera shots: This help in emphasizing a particular object in the frame or also gives an emotional appeal to the advertisements.

Editing techniques: This gives an overall meaning to the ads. The techniques used also provide meaning to the ad and creates a mood of the audience.

Culture: This category analyses the effects the ads can have on the culture. The cultural effects generated because of the advertisements are a vital element of the changes in the society, as established by the previous studies which state the mass media as a culture manufacturing industry.

#### **Semiotic Analysis of Advertisements under Study**

##### **Flipkart.com**

Two kids dressed as adults are sitting in a restaurant and are talking in the voice of a man. One is a hippie who is busy with his laptop and the other is just sitting in a relaxing posture wearing a spectacle.

Boy1: WIFI mila to nichod lega kya?

Hippie: Off course

Boy1: Online shopping? What you are ordering now?

Hippie: mp3 player

Boy1: Aur kuch faulty nikla to?

Hippie: Flipkart.com pe? No chance!! aur agar hua bhi to replace kardenge.

Boy1: Replace? Awesome! What's going to be your first song?

Hippie: Ringa ringa roses

Boy1: That's a classic!

The 'voice' over says "30 days replacement guarantee on all products".

Two kids are shown sitting in a restaurant in the get-up of adults. They are shown to be friends with one as a hippie working on his laptop and the other one sitting on the next chair watching him. Their way of talking, body posture, voice quality all these resemble to the mature individuals.

The dialogues have the tone which matches that of the adults when they are into a conversation. The body-language as well as the location, which is a restaurant is adding to the appeal of the ad. The colours used are dull resembling those which are used in the ordinary ads where the target audience is not the children. This further enhances the motive of the advertisers to cast children in place of others. "WIFI mila to nichod lega kya?" is a typical slang language used by youngsters among friends. The ringa ringa roses song said to a classic by one of the kids, establishes their cuteness

and brushes up the child factor. The punch line is also asserting that the online store is a responsible one, although the ad features kids it talks of no kidding and no worries. The voice-over here is played along with the creative visualization and the voice is of a male because here the product is of a non-kids product category and involves the serious business tone. The colours used are dark and hints at the children as the adults having a little conversation over a coffee table, which is unusual for the kids.

The attire of the kids is also similar to that of adults. The hippie look given to one of the characters signifies that they are making their own style statement which is unusual in case of a kid and also that they are trendy and with the times. The sound is of the ambience of the restaurant and the music is light and reveals a relaxing mood. The lights are dim and establish a mood of relaxation after a long day's work.

The camera stays at a position and then takes a close-up of both the kids during their conversation to establish the seriousness of their conversation. The editing technique is that of the cut.

This ad places the children in place of adults which becomes the USP of the advertisement. Although matured voices and children's faces come as a contrast it is the attention grabbing feature of the ad. The product is established as one which is so perfect that even a child understands and trusts the online store and it's no joke. The children are depicted to be intelligent using the product and confirming the faith in the online-store.

### **Bournvita Little Champs**

The kid is sitting on the sofa studying, the mother comes and sits on the other end, a celebrity (KAJOL), the child asks "maa, ek question hairy batao, February me serf 28 days kyun hote hain? the mother looks puzzled and says "kal bataun?". Then the mother gives the child Bourn vita little champs, the v.o says "samajhdaar moms bachon ko deti hain Bourn vita little champs, 2 se 5 saal tak ke bachon ke liye, jisme hai DHA, dimaagi vikaas ke liye. Thodi mehnat to aap ko bhi karni padegi."

The mother-kid duo is shown but here instead of children the ad targets their mothers. The location is the living room and the mother is dressed in modern attire which signifies the strata of mother the ad is aiming at. The colours used are lively and bring out the childish innocence of the kid. The background setting is that of the kid sitting on the sofa of his living room. This is generally the comfort zone of the children. The mother is shown reading books memorizing facts so that she can answer her child's questions in different scenes while ironing the clothes, while at home, also in the books store.

The question asked by the kid projects his intelligence. When the mother says "aasmaan main anginat tare hote hain" the child replies "wo to maine kab ka poocha tha.", this signifies that the child has a good memory as well the kind of questions put up to his mother also shows the intelligence of the child, which thus proves the advertised product. The kid despite the presence of the celebrity in the frame is not shown as the secondary but as a central character, which highlights the individualism being drawn out for the kids as well. The voice-over is that of a female and adds to the emotional appeal of the product.

However the punch line "Thodi mehnat to aap ko bhi karni padegi" strikes a chord with the mothers directly as it individually aims at every mother. The music is very soothing and soft and adds to the puzzling questions put up to the mother. The lights used are adding to the calm atmosphere of the ad a relaxing mood is established by the use of soft lights. The shots taken are from that of a static camera position and involve the close-up of the child to reveal his innocence, at the same time it also puts forward his seriousness towards his studies and how eager he is to learn about the things. And also the close-up of the mother to show how deeply engrossed she is learning things to answer her child. The editing technique is that of a cut.

This ad indirectly sends a message that for the development and growth of a child use Bourn vita little champs and then you will also have to learn things to answer the queries of your kids. It also indicates that only kids who drink the product become smart and intelligent. This also presents a negative shade to the mothers who do not give the product

to their child as if they are not interested in making their kids grow perfectly. The question is that if children do not use the product, wont they be able to learn the thing well.

### Conclusion

We are witnessing a major shift in the representation of children in the advertisements in recent years. The shift in the portrayal of children seems to be influencing their perceptions of the world in which they are living and this in turn, changing their attitude and behaviour. Firstly, kids are shown to have their own say; they have their individual demands, and are no more believe whatever they are told. Secondly, the advertisements feature kids as mature individuals and not as children. The 'innocence' factor of the kids is being challenged; the children shown in the advertisement exhibit the characteristics of adults. The children are being projected as those who are self-dependent and confident. Thirdly, the advertisements project the kids as empowered independent individuals. The concept of power decentralization comes into play. They are no more a secondary target in the advertisements. Fourthly, the significance of the mother's teachings and care is being challenged; it is always said that mother is the first teacher of the child and home is the first school. However, the ads are now questioning the teachings and habits developed by mothers in their children. Fifthly, the ads promote instant gratification and develop a feeling that everything in society is simple: The ads show the products to be fast and simple to use. More and more user-friendliness is projected through the ads to suit the fast paced world. Sixthly, the kids are casted as responsible individuals.

With the advent of television the mode of communication seems to be shifted from symbolic to iconic. Subsequently, new media technology further simplified this process by providing additional avenues for adults as well as children to produce and disseminate images. The contemporary world seems to be profuse with images. The process helped to cross the barriers of language and literacy. Now human beings irrespective of their age and education could able to develop their understanding about the world. In the contemporary world innocence seems to be an obsolete term. Thus, there appeared a postmodern condition where grand narratives replaced with micro narratives. At the same time, with the proliferation of televised as well as social media images the real often replaced with the hyper real and this seems to be more real than the real. As Foucault says there is no absolute truth. It can change as a result of the very discourse which uses it as a premise; because power is everywhere and can be expressed in a multitude of individual discourses. In this fast changing political, economic, cultural and technological landscape, we need to learn and negotiate with the changes in order to survive and lead a better life.

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