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Children as Visual Appeals: A Study of Innocence, Emotion, and Persuasion in Indian Advertisements

Asst. Prof. Shweta Ashok Bangal, Department of Communication Studies New Arts,
Commerce and Science College, Ahilyanagar (Autonomous)

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Abstract: This paper examines how Indian advertisements strategically use children's imagery to build emotional appeal, reinforce cultural narratives, and influence consumer behaviour. Using a qualitative visual rhetoric analysis of five market-leading brands—Flipkart, Surf Excel, Dettol, Horlicks, and Maggi Noodles—the study explores how visuals of children evoke empathy, symbolize morality, and build brand credibility. The paper draws on Barthes' semiotics, Kress and Theo van Leeuwen's visual grammar, and Aristotle's rhetorical appeals to interpret these representations. Though effective in persuasion, these portrayals raise ethical concerns about stereotyping, emotional manipulation, and the absence of children's agency. Despite being visually cantered, children in these campaigns rarely exhibit agency—they do not make autonomous choices or influence the outcomes of the narratives. Their role is largely symbolic, framed to evoke emotion rather than depict authentic individuality or empowerment. The paper integrates relevant consumer data to justify brand selection and examines formal complaints filed with the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI), calling for greater ethical accountability in child-focused advertising.

Keywords: Advertising Ethics, ASCI, Childhood Imagery, Cultural Narratives, Indian Advertising, Visual Rhetoric

Introduction

Advertising in India has evolved significantly over the years. As brands seek to connect with a diverse and emotionally rich audience, the use of children in advertisements has become a powerful strategy. Children symbolize innocence, purity, and vulnerability—qualities that naturally evoke deep emotional responses and build trust. Indian advertisements often use these qualities to reflect cultural values and persuade consumers.

This trend is not new. As Joeanna Rebello Fernandes notes in her *Times of India* article, “**Ads by Kids, but Not for Kids,**” some of India's most iconic campaigns from the 1980s and 1990s—such as the “Vick's Girl,” “Britannia Boy,” and “Rasna Girl”—featured children as central characters. However, these ads were mostly aimed at adults, using children to



emotionally appeal and influence adult purchasing decisions.¹⁹ This highlights the longstanding role of children's images as emotional tools in Indian advertising.

The rise of "kidfluencers" has reshaped Indian advertising. This trend raises ethical and legal concerns, especially given the gaps in current child labour and advertising regulations in the digital space. While there is ample research on advertising and digital media, few studies focus specifically on how children are portrayed in Indian television commercials—a crucial gap, as TV remains a dominant medium across diverse Indian audiences.

This study examines how children are visually represented in Indian TV ads and how these portrayals use visual rhetoric—images, symbols, and narratives—to build emotional and cultural appeal. By analysing campaigns from Flipkart, Surf Excel, Dettol, Horlicks, and Maggi, the research seeks to uncover how advertisers craft persuasive, culturally resonant messages through the imagery of childhood.

Research Problem Statement

Indian advertisements frequently use children as visual appeals, leveraging their perceived innocence and emotional resonance to persuade audiences. While this strategy is widespread, there is limited academic understanding of the specific visual and emotional mechanisms at play, and how these elements influence consumer behaviour. Addressing this gap is crucial to understand media effects and child persuasion.

Research Aim: To analyse the role of children as visual appeals in Indian advertisements, focusing on the interplay of innocence, emotion, and persuasion.

Research Objectives:

- To examine how Indian advertisements visually depict children in terms of innocence, emotion, and success.
- To study how these portrayals reflect Indian cultural values related to family and childhood.
- To assess the ethical concerns surrounding the use of children in advertising, including stereotyping, emotional appeal, and lack of agency.

Visual Rhetoric in Advertising

Visual rhetoric refers to the use of images and visual elements to communicate messages and persuade audiences (Foss, 2005)²⁰. In advertising, visuals often work alongside text to create emotional and cognitive effects that influence consumer behaviour (Machin & Thornborrow, 2003)²¹. Scholars emphasize that visual elements such as colour, composition, facial expressions, and symbolism contribute to meaning-making in ads (Kress & van Leeuwen,

¹⁹ Fernandes, Joeanna Rebello. "Ads by Kids, but Not for Kids." *The Times of India*, 12 Nov. 2017, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/ads-by-kids-but-not-for-kids/articleshow/61612319.cms>.

²⁰ <https://www.sonjafoss.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Foss41.pdf>

²¹ Machin, David, and Joanna Thornborrow. "Branding and Discourse: The Case of Cosmopolitan." *Discourse & Society*, vol. 14, no. 4, 2003, pp. 453–471. **SAGE Publications**, doi:10.1177/09579265030144002.



2006)²². In advertising, the meaning of images depends on how visual elements—such as gaze direction, size, colour, proximity, and perspective—are composed. These choices are never neutral; they encode cultural assumptions, emotional cues, and power dynamics. When children are central figures in advertising, the visual composition often amplifies innocence, vulnerability, or joy to maximize engagement.

Children as Emotional and Persuasive Appeals in Advertising

Children have long been deployed in advertising as emotional triggers. Goldberg and Gorn (1987) demonstrated that children in ads evoke trust, affection, and empathy, from adult viewers. These responses are rooted in biological and cultural instincts to protect and nurture the young. In Indian advertising, children are not just emotive devices—they are symbols of **hope, morality, and future potential**.²³

Peñaloza (1994) argues that children help create what she calls the “emotional economy” of advertising—where products are sold not for their utility, but for their emotional associations. Brands use children to signal purity, competence, or parental care which translates into consumer trust.²⁴ In Indian culture, childhood is idealized as a stage of *sanskaar* (moral training) and *shuddhata* (purity). Advertisers align with these sentiments by showing children not as autonomous beings, but as vessels of values. As Jain and Bagdare (2021) note, children in Indian ads are often framed as **idealized extensions of adult aspirations**—emotionally engaging but narratively dependent.²⁵

Child-centric advertising in India raises ethical concerns, including emotional manipulation, stereotyping, and lack of informed consent (Srinivasan and Raman 2018). Brands like Horlicks, Surf Excel, and Maggi often reinforce narrow ideals such as success, obedience, and caregiving. While the ASCI has set protective guidelines, enforcement is inconsistent, and emotional appeals remain widespread.²⁶

Recent research shows that children have become increasingly important in Indian advertising, not just as cute faces but as key emotional connectors that influence both adults and kids (Choudhary and Roy, 2022).²⁷ Studies like Sharma and Tiwari’s (2021)²⁸ reveal how advertising even seeps into children’s everyday lives, shaping how they see the world—sometimes without them realizing it. Food ads often use kids and family feelings to appeal to

²² Kress, Gunther, and Theo van Leeuwen. *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2006.

²³ Goldberg, Marvin E., and Gerald J. Gorn. "Happy and Sad TV Programs: How They Affect Reactions to Commercials." *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1987, pp. 281–300.

²⁴ Peñaloza, Lisa. "Immigrant Consumers: Marketing and Public Policy Considerations in the Global Economy." *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1995, pp. 108–118.

²⁵ Jain, Shilpa, and Shilpa Bagdare. "Consumers' Attitudes towards Sustainability Marketing: An Indian Perspective." *Jaipuria International Journal of Management Research*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2018, pp. 70–75.

²⁶ Srinivasan, Ramesh, and Anand Raman. *Advertising and Children: Ethical Perspectives and Indian Context*. Indian Journal of Marketing, vol. 48, no. 6, 2018, pp. 7–18.

²⁷ Choudhary, Anjali, and Rajesh Roy. "The Changing Portrayal of Children in Indian Advertisements (1990–2020)." *Young Consumers*, 2022, <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/YC-10-2021-1402/full/html>.

²⁸ Sharma, Meena, and Anil Tiwari. "Deciphering the Impression of Advertising Through Child Art." *Shodh Kosh*, 2021, https://www.granthaalayahpublication.org/Arts-Journal/index.php/ShodhKosh/article/view/ShodhKosh_55.



audiences, but they rarely focus on health, which raises concerns (Soni and Vohra, 2014).²⁹ Other research points out how children are especially vulnerable to ads because they're still learning to think critically (Makhanlal Chaturvedi University).³⁰ With the rise of social media and kid influencers, current rules aren't enough to keep up, which makes this a hot topic for debate. Altogether, these studies highlight cultural and ethical issues in how children are used in ads in India but also show there's still room to explore how visual storytelling works - something this study aims to do.

Recent studies also point out some ethical concerns, like how ads might manipulate emotions or take advantage of kids' vulnerability. But there is still not enough research that looks closely at how the visuals work together with cultural meanings and ethics in Indian ads. Also, we do not know much about how kids themselves understand these ads or how social media and digital platforms are changing things. This study aims to fill this gap by applying qualitative visual rhetoric analysis to key Indian brand campaigns featuring children.

Theoretical Framework and Application

This study draws on three key frameworks to analyse how children are visually represented in Indian advertisements:

Barthes' Semiotics helps decode both literal (denotation) and symbolic (connotation) meanings. In most ads, children's facial expressions, posture, and attire connote purity, moral value, and idealised family roles—symbols that deeply resonate in Indian culture.

Kress and van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar focuses on how gaze, composition, framing, and modality influence meaning. Children are often framed centrally at eye level, using soft lighting and bright colours to engage viewers and create a sense of trust and emotional realism.

Aristotle's Rhetorical Appeals clarify how ads persuade:

- Ethos (credibility): via trusted parent-child settings
- Pathos (emotion): dominant—through empathy, joy, and vulnerability
- Logos (logic): rarely used, with few factual claims visually presented

Children in these ads function not merely as characters but as emotional and symbolic appeals. Their presence often reflects cultural ideals such as *parivaar* (family), *sanskaar* (moral upbringing), and *shrama* (effort). For instance:

- Dettol portrays children as vulnerable and protected
- Horlicks presents success as product-driven
- Maggi shows warmth and care, but without active agency

Methodology

This study employs a **qualitative visual rhetoric analysis** to interpret how Indian advertisements use children as visual appeals. This method focuses on how elements like facial expressions, colour, framing, and gaze combine to convey meaning and influence emotion. The

²⁹ Soni, Ritu, and Rajesh Vohra. "Advertising Foods to Indian Children: What Is the Appeal?" *Young Consumers*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2014, pp. 135–147, <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/yc-06-2013-00380/full/html>.

³⁰ Makhanlal Chaturvedi University. "Use of Child Actors in Advertisements and Its Impact on Children's Behaviour." *MCU Repository*, 2021, <https://www.mcu.ac.in/use-of-child-actors-in-advertisements-and-its-impact-on-childrens-behaviour/>.



analysis centres on five prominent Indian brands—Flipkart, Surf Excel, Dettol, Horlicks, and Maggi—selected through **purposive sampling** for their cultural relevance and strong use of child-centric visual storytelling.

Each advertisement was examined across four key parameters:

- Visual Grammar (composition, gaze, colour, realism)
- Narrative Function (child's role in the storyline)
- Cultural Resonance (alignment with Indian values)
- Rhetorical Effectiveness (ethos, pathos, logos)

This approach allows for a deeper understanding of how children's imagery is constructed evoking trust, emotion, and persuasion in Indian advertising. It also provides a lens to evaluate ethical concerns such as stereotyping, lack of agency, and the commodification of childhood.

Five prominent Indian ad campaigns that centre on child imagery are given below:

No.	Brand	Campaign	YouTube Link of Advertisement
1)	Flipkart	"Kids as Adults"	https://youtu.be/wX9IEPW40j4 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fy8rdjjtITs
2)	Surf Excel	"Daag Achhe Hain"	https://youtu.be/MocKmftqNI8
3)	Dettol	"Be 100% Sure"	https://youtu.be/BgGomfobqS8 https://youtu.be/eKCA5cYx7EM
4)	Horlicks	"Taller, Stronger, Sharper"	https://youtu.be/Mbz18RTcli4
5)	Maggi	"New Maggi Happy Bowl"	https://youtu.be/cuXIES0e3gc

Discussion

Children have always held a special place in advertising for their ability to evoke strong emotions. In Indian ads, they often serve as rhetorical symbols of innocence, joy, morality, and aspiration—traits that strongly appeal to adult viewers, especially parents. However, this emotional power raises ethical concerns. Children's innocence is used as a marketing tool. Such portrayals may reinforce stereotypes or unrealistic expectations, and often deny children agency or full awareness of their role in these narratives.



(Image Credit- Google Images)

- In **Flipkart ads**, children are showing **behavioural traits of adults**- blurs child-adult boundaries.
- In **Surf Excel ads**, children get dirty while voluntarily helping others – the parents are happy with the stains.
- In **Dettol ads**, children are shown as **vulnerable**—the parent acts, the child is protected.
- In **Horlicks ads**, the child performs well **after consuming the product**—not because of natural ability or choices.
- In **Maggi ads**, the child is simply a **receiver of food and love**, not an active participant in caregiving or decision-making.

Brand	Child's Role	Key Appeal	Ethical Concern
Flipkart	Miniature adults	Humour, confidence	Blurred child-adult boundaries
Surf Excel	Moral agents	Empathy, social duty	Virtue signalling, moral pressure
Dettol	Vulnerable dependents	Protection, caregiving	Fear-based messaging



Horlicks	Overachievers	Aspiration, success	Pressure, narrow success definitions
Maggi	Passive receivers	Comfort, nostalgia	Gender bias, commodified care

These representations align with traditional Indian values such as *parivaar* (family), *sanskaar* (moral upbringing), and *shrama* (effort/work ethic). Across all campaigns, children are **not the decision-makers** but **tools to evoke adult emotion**, reinforce societal norms, or elevate the brand's moral image.

Notable Complaints:

- **Horlicks (2018, 2022):** ASCI ruled against exaggerated height/growth claims without scientific backing.
- **Dettol (2020–21):** Ads during the pandemic were flagged for promoting excessive germ paranoia in homes with children.
- **Maggi (2015, 2022):**
MSG content controversy led to a nationwide ban.
“2-minute” claim challenged as misleading and unrealistic under real cooking conditions.
- **Flipkart (2019):** Public concerns raised over children mimicking adult behaviours in business settings.
- **Surf Excel:** No direct ASCI ban, but scholarly critiques discuss how moral framing limits creative play.

These examples show how child-focused messaging in Indian ads often treads close to ethical and regulatory boundaries, sparking both public and institutional responses.

Flipkart: Kids Or Adults?

Flipkart's “Kids as Adults” campaign humorously shows children dressed and acting like adults—CEOs, shopkeepers, teachers even *Munnabhai* and *Circuit*. This playful role reversal delivers the message that Flipkart's platform is so easy to use that even children can navigate it.

The campaign uses costumes, confident body language, and mature expressions on kids to create a memorable contrast. This juxtaposition creates a humorous effect that grabs viewers' attention. The humour engages viewers emotionally (pathos), while portraying children as competent users builds trust (ethos). The visual rhetoric is highly effective in engaging the Indian audience, especially families.

However, a **critical perspective** invites deeper reflection. The depiction of children as adults may unintentionally blur boundaries between childhood and adulthood. While playful, these ads risk **normalizing adult responsibilities and consumerism in children's worlds**, reflecting societal trends where childhood is increasingly commercialized. The ads rarely engage with children's actual needs or experiences; instead, they use kids primarily as comedic props to sell products aimed at adults.



Surf Excel: Daag Acche Hain?

Surf Excel's iconic "Daag Achhe Hain" campaign reframes stains not as problems but as symbols of kindness, sacrifice, and real-world learning. Children are shown getting dirty while helping others, with bright colours and candid visuals reinforcing their innocence and good intentions. This emotional narrative taps into Indian parenting values, where moral growth is often prized over physical appearance.

Visually, the ads use close-ups of joyful, active children, paired with natural lighting and symbolic mess—mud, paint, or food—that reflects empathy and teamwork. The campaign challenges traditional cleanliness norms by presenting stains as evidence of holistic development, courage, and compassion.

However, a critical reading reveals limits. The "good" stains are framed only within socially approved contexts—helping others, standing up for friends—which means messiness is accepted only when it reflects adult-defined virtues. While the ads appear to celebrate freedom, they subtly reinforce adult authority and surveillance. This reflects Indian anxieties about cleanliness, behaviour, and family image.

Dettol: Protect What Matters Most

Dettol advertisements focus on children's vulnerability and parental protection. The green and white palette symbolizes health and safety. Close-ups of cheerful children and warm domestic settings visually reinforce the brand's promise of care and cleanliness.

Beyond hygiene, Dettol positions itself as a symbol of love, learning, and responsibility within Indian families. A standout ad shows a boy breaking his piggy bank to buy his mother a gift. When she's injured picking up the shards, he gently applies Dettol to her cut—a reversal of traditional caregiving that appeals strongly to pathos and highlights the brand as a facilitator of compassion.

From a positive perspective, children are portrayed as active participants rather than passive figures. These ads often empower children by presenting them as learners or even caregivers within the family. On the downside, some portrayals place children in emotionally charged or risky situations to evoke sympathy. The settings are often idealised, not reflecting every child's reality. The focus tends to be more on product use than on promoting broader hygiene awareness.

Horlicks: Aspirational Childhood

Horlicks advertisements often depict children striving for academic or athletic excellence, set against bright visuals in schools or sports environments. These ads appeal strongly to Indian parents' aspirations, combining emotional resonance (pathos) with brand trust (ethos), and positioning Horlicks as a nutritional ally in a child's journey toward success.

The imagery is aspirational children studying late, winning medals, or outpacing peers, typically supported by proud mothers. Phrases like "Taller, Stronger, Sharper" and comparisons with traditional foods (roti, spinach, milk, bananas) act as simplified metaphors, appealing to both emotional and logical parental concerns.

However, the messaging often promotes a narrow definition of success—high marks, height, and achievement—with little space for play, creativity, or failure. This can generate fear-based appeal, especially toward mothers, implying that without Horlicks, their child might fall



behind. Though, framed as empowerment, the ads risk reinforcing performance anxiety, reflecting societal pressures. The “before and after” visuals reduce complex growth into product-driven transformations, side-lining holistic health.

Additionally, On April 10, 2024, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry told online shopping platforms to remove Bournvita and similar drinks from the “health drinks” category. This happened after FSSAI (Food Safety and Standards Authority of India) said that calling these drinks “health” or “energy” drinks could mislead people. The warning came after complaints about high sugar levels in such products. According to food rules, only drinks with less than 5 grams of sugar per 100 grams can be called “low sugar” or “healthy.” A member of the FSSAI scientific panel noted that four servings of such drinks could give a child 40 grams of sugar—far above the WHO’s daily limit of 25 grams. In Indian households, additional teaspoons of sugar are often added to chocolate-powder drinks as well.”³¹

Maggi – Nostalgia and Nurture

Maggi advertisements often portray children returning from school or play—tired, hungry, and eager—mirroring real-life routines. Their joyful reactions upon receiving Maggi create a strong emotional connection. Children are shown symbols of innocence, happiness, and love—turning Maggi into more than food: a medium of affection.

Despite the variety of meals typically prepared in Indian homes, Maggi has dominated the instant noodle segment through emotional branding, nostalgia, and convenience. For many families,—it represents comfort, quick solutions, and childhood memories, helping the brand maintain a strong market presence among both children and young adults.

However, this emotional appeal masks nutritional concerns. Instant noodles are often high in sodium, preservatives, and refined carbs, raising questions about their suitability for children. The ad downplays these issues, instead promotes emotional warmth. Health experts warn that repeated exposure to such messaging may normalise unhealthy eating habits.³² The long-standing “2-minute” claim has also faced scrutiny from ASCI for being misleading.

Visual Strategies and Ethical Concerns

Indian ads often place children right at the centre—both visually and emotionally. They are shown at eye level, with soft lighting and warm colours that make them feel relatable and real. These choices help viewers connect emotionally. Each brand uses colours and settings to send subtle messages—Flipkart’s cool blues feel modern and simple, Surf Excel’s whites suggest cleanliness, Maggi’s yellows feel warm and homely, Dettol’s greens stand for health and Horlicks often uses school scenes to show ambition. These visuals build trust by using children’s innocence to make the product feel safe and reliable.

But there are concerns too. These ads often repeat the same ideas and rarely show children from rural, disabled, or diverse backgrounds. Most of the time, kids do not make decisions; the story is told around them, not by them. From a bigger perspective, these ads show children as ideal citizens of the future—smart, healthy, and moral. But while the emotions are strong, clear

³¹ <https://indianeconomyandmarket.com/2024/05/29/the-health-drinks-category-redefined/>

³² World Health Organization (WHO) - Marketing of Foods High in Fat, Salt and Sugar to Children

- <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241515543>



information about the product is often missing. In the end, advertisers must strike a better balance between emotional appeal and honest, respectful representation of children.

Conclusion

Children in Indian advertising are powerful rhetorical devices—capable of evoking trust, sentiment, and shared values. The analysis of five top brands—Flipkart, Surf Excel, Dettol, Horlicks, and Maggi—reveals how children are embedded in visual storytelling not as autonomous individuals, but as carriers of emotional or cultural codes.

Children's images appeal to emotions, family values, and cultural ideals. This study demonstrates how brands use these images to build trust, evoke empathy, and create culturally resonant narratives. While these campaigns resonate with Indian audiences, they also reinforce rigid ideals: ideal behaviour, ideal childhood, and ideal family dynamics. The ASCI complaints and critical reception show growing awareness about the need for responsible advertising.

Yet, the practice demands a balanced view. On one hand, children's portrayals can foster positive messages about growth, care, and community that align with Indian cultural values. On the other hand, there is a potential for exploitation, stereotyping, and emotional manipulation that advertisers must be cautious to avoid. Ultimately, a responsible approach is essential—one that respects children's dignity and agency while harnessing the emotional power of childhood imagery ethically. Future research should further explore audience perceptions and advocate for ethical standards that balance commercial goals with social responsibility.

This paper urges advertisers to:

- Integrate product transparency and avoid misleading emotional cues
- Respect childhood diversity, agency, and creativity
- Move beyond stereotypes in gender and performance
- Acknowledge the cultural responsibility of visual storytelling

Future research should include audience interpretation studies, especially with children and regional consumers, to better understand reception and long-term effects. As Indian media continues to evolve, so must our approach to visual ethics—where creativity, cultural alignment, and social responsibility can coexist.

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