Representations of Children and Childhood in Indian Television Advertisements

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Introduction

The present article rests on the assumption that childhood is a social construct (James and James, 2004; Qvortrup et al. 2004) and each culture has its own notions and ways of defining children and childhood (Jenks, 1996). There are varying cultural conceptualizations, contexts and subsequent social practices associated with them, within which childhood unfolds and thus to understand childhood, it must be situated within these. In different points of history and in different societies, childhood has been differently understood, institutionalized and regulated. Subsequently, the ways in which adults initiate, evaluate and respond to children has been different in specific historical periods and cultural locations. As a repository of social and political meanings (Burman, 2008), childhood has to be situated and understood through a cultural lens (Sharma and Chaudhary, 2011).

The fact that children and childhood are represented in television advertisements (Parida, 2013) necessitates the need to analyze these representations, which may provide a better understanding of how childhood is conceptualised in a particular social and cultural context. Thus, the present article attempts to explore the representations of children and childhood as portrayed in selected advertisements on Indian television. The target audience for these advertisements included both children and/or adults. More specifically stated, the article examines-what are the dominant representations of the nature of children and childhood that the advertisements on Indian television project; do the selected advertisements depict childhood and adulthood as dichotomous or continuous; how are
children located within the units of family and the larger society; what are the different ways in which children as consumers find expression in the advertising medium. These representations give us insights into the ways in which advertisements construct the concept of children and childhood and position children within the Indian society.

**Discourses of Childhood**

In order to appreciate how children are positioned within contemporary India, it seems almost imperative to acquaint oneself with the discourses of childhood. The modern concept of childhood was non-existent at other times (Aries, 1962). The manner in which children are ‘defined’ and ‘positioned’ today is not reflective of other periods of human history. Varied conceptualizations of childhood existed in different locations, contexts and across socio-cultural-historical periods (Jenks, 1996). Thus, in order to understand discourses of childhood today, these must be situated within a broader history.

Aries (1962) argues that in the West ‘Childhood’ was not considered a separate category worthy of adult attention until sixteenth century. European children in the Middle Ages were expected to behave as adults and little empathy was shown towards the needs of children. However, there was a gradual shift in the way childhood was understood in the Western ideology. Unlike the middle ages where children were rejected, the nineteenth century saw a positive shift in child socialization characterized by acceptance and nurturing and caring attitudes. The twentieth century was characterized by the definition of childhood as a special period of life and thus children’s needs gained recognition and legitimation as distinct and different from adults (Aries, 1962).

The discourses of childhood mentioned above are significant to establish the contrasting typifications of childhood in the Western and Indian traditions. Although for a relatively long period of human history, until the advent of the 20th century that was marked by globalization, the manner in which childhood was understood in the West continued to be the central
means of understanding childhood academically (Kumar, 2006; Kakkar, 1981). However, ‘childhood’ is not just a ‘natural’, ‘biological’ or ‘universal’ category but a culturally-specific, socio-historical ‘construct’ that can be understood differently in different locations, contexts and periods (Aries, 1962). Each culture defines children and childhood differently and these particular cultural constructs are a product of the long-term evolution of the cultural consciousness of people over centuries. Such constructs shape how people within cultures behave with, and relate to children (Kakkar, 1979).

The rejecting and accepting nature of the child, which was the characteristic and defining feature of the western tradition, interestingly was not a feature of the Indian tradition. A child in the Indian philosophy was always welcomed and considered a unique being, with his own set of needs and requirements that should be valued (Kakkar, 1981). In ancient Indian texts such as *Manu Smriti* (the ancient Sanskrit text where *Manu*, the progenitor of mankind, supposedly told the laws of social classes to a group of seers; according to the Hindu tradition, *Manu Smriti* records the words of *Brahma*, the creator of the world), *Ramayan* (important Hindu Indian literature, *Ramayan*, is the tale of *Ram*, the dutiful king of Ayodhya who fought with king *Ravana*, which exemplifies the victory of good over evil; it dates back to the *Treta yug* of the four eons or yugs of Hindu chronology) and *Mahabharata* (the literature is a narrative of *Kurukshetra* war between *Kauravas* and *Pandavas*; it incorporates Hindu Indian philosophy of life and dates back to the post-Vedic age), childhood was deemed a legitimized period of life. A child was conceived as born with innate capacities and predispositions from the previous life. Both of these gave directions to the child’s life, both during fetal stages and after birth. Since boys were positioned as heirs to the patriarchal family, begetting a boy child was considered one of man’s highest duties (Dutta, 1895). A boy child was thus ‘provided’, ‘protected’, ‘nurtured’ and ‘cared for’ (Kakkar, 1981).

In the section that follows, how and why advertisements can be used as a methodological tool for understanding cultural representations of children and childhood has been presented.
Television Advertisements as Tool for Understanding Cultural Representations of Children and Childhood

There are multiple sources through which representations of children and childhood can be examined, media being one of them. The manner in which children and childhood are represented in media can provide insights into how children are positioned in the changing contemporary India. Within media, advertising occupies a special position. Considering that India had 161 million television households and 139 million Cable and Satellite subscribers in the year 2013 (FICCI-KPMG Report, 2014), one can estimate that television advertisements have a fairly large viewership, and serve as an important audio-visual medium to reach out to people (Gupta, 2005). Children view approximately 40,000 advertisements each year (Kunkel, 2001). Since children influence the choices of products that a family consumes, such as car purchases and meal selections, and shapes the buying patterns of their families (Kunkel, 2004), advertisers include children in their advertisements both as potential consumers as well as models to advertise particular products.

Advertisements are a reflection of the society (Zantides and Zapiti, 2011) and can be perceived as powerful agents in constructing the society itself. Bignall (1997) states that advertisements are ‘designed’ to represent societal realities. Advertising supports certain ideologies, products, services and images which then begin to be considered ‘the norm’ by the society (Bignall, 1997). Sinclair (1987) states that the representations of children and childhood as devised by the advertising media serve as a window to the prevailing cultural ideas, values and attitudes towards children. Advertising gives these “cultural form through its signifying practices” (Sinclair, 1987). Goldman (1998) claims that advertisements are loaded with ‘meanings’ and these meanings are always produced in a social context; they are relational and contextual. The representations of children and childhood in television advertisements project messages about how children and childhood are perceived in society. These messages are powerful enough to become the resources for circulation of everyday understandings (Burman, 2008). The
meanings carried by these images perhaps get diffused into the belief systems of the society. Hence, deciphering the representations of children and childhood depicted through advertisements would thus enrich our understanding of what meanings they may carry within the society. They inform adults how to initiate, evaluate and respond to children and also gives a lens to children to construct images of ‘self’ based on these representations. These influence how children see themselves and understand how they are being viewed by others in the society. They inform children and adults about what children (and mothers, fathers and significant others) around them are like.

It is important to note here that advertisements do not mirror social realities in a neat fashion. Advertising is an economic entity; it occupies a special position within the economic organization of a modern society (Kang, 1997). Advertisements are designed to sell products and therefore, while studying representations through television advertisements one needs to be mindful that these representations could be commercial in nature. The section below presents the methodology undertaken for the study.

Methodology undertaken
This article is rooted in the author’s ongoing doctoral research. To gather the dominant representations of children and childhood as portrayed in Indian television advertisements, the author viewed television advertisements that featured in the commercial breaks from 8:00 pm to 11:00 pm IST. Each of the daily soaps (running for duration of half an hour) in this time slot, ordinarily has two commercial breaks. The chosen time slot is considered prime time slot at most Hindi entertainment channels. This is also supposedly the time when most middle class families sit and watch television together (Kaur and Singh, 2011; Verma and Larson, 2002). Any commercials projected within this time are therefore more likely to reach out to the entire family as a unit. Four Hindi Entertainment Channels that have high TRPs were viewed to collect the data. Each of the channels were viewed for three days from Monday to Thursday to identify the advertisements. The selected four channels were viewed over a period of twelve days spread over three weeks in total, during
which approximately 144 commercial breaks appeared. The table below summarises the number of breaks viewed to gather the data.

**Table 1: Number of commercial breaks viewed to gather the data**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Television Channel</th>
<th>No. of days the channel was viewed * No of hours for which the channel was viewed</th>
<th>Commercial breaks per hour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Channel A</td>
<td>3 days * 3 hours= 9 hours</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Channel B</td>
<td>3 days * 3 hours= 9 hours</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Channel C</td>
<td>3 days * 3 hours= 9 hours</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Channel D</td>
<td>3 days * 3 hours= 9 hours</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total viewing hours=36 hours</td>
<td>Total commercial breaks observed=(36 hours * 4 commercial breaks per hour)=144 commercial breaks in total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The advertisements were intended for children as well as adults. They tried to sell children’s personal product as well as home or other products targeting adults. The advertisements selected for the present study either featured (1.) children as ‘lead’ characters (2.) children as characters but not as ‘lead’ characters or (3.) had some reference to children or childhood in the advertisement. Since children were explicitly present in the visuals of the advertisements, the presence of children was thus confirmed by visual seeing of children in the advertisement. In some of the advertisements, children were not directly shown but the voiceover of advertisements mentioned the words, ‘child’ or/and ‘children’. Along with the visual imagery and the voiceover, the content and the context of the advertisements were also important and hence examined.

Each of the advertisements that appeared during the commercial breaks was noted and also video-recorded. The frequency of the occurrence of the advertisements was tabulated, however, in the present article the observations of this are not elaborately taken up in the findings. The frequencies confirmed that the advertisements had repetitive value; similar advertisements were getting repeated across channels and also on the same channel. The data was subjected to content analysis. Content analysis
allowed investigating the content of the advertisements which included the themes and the main ideas presented in them, which formed the primary content (Nachmias and Nachmias, 1976). This provided an opportunity to systematically understand the characteristics (Holsti, 1968) and the audience (Weber, 1985) of the messages as well as the meanings and intentions contained in the messages. Further, the social contexts within which the messages were embedded, the kinds of messages that were stressed or ignored and the influence of social factors on them also came to light.

Content analysis permitted flexibility (Cavanagh, 1997) to formulate the categories of analysis after the initial inspection of the data (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Data analysis was done in steps. In the first stage of analysis, the data was organised around themes and subthemes that emerged recurrently throughout the data. At a later point through the process of analysis, the subthemes were revised and brought together under broader themes (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). Inferences and conclusions were drawn based on the manifest content of the messages (Berelson and Salter, 1946) and the latent content or the symbolic meanings (Holsti, 1969; Miles and Huberman, 1994) that permeated the themes portrayed in the advertisements. The interpretations drawn from the data were supplemented with author’s reflexive understanding of the Indian society and interspersed with ‘interpretive’ meanings (Rosengren, 1981). It is worth mentioning that the sender (i.e. the advertisers) or the audience may or may not attribute the same meanings to the content. In addition to that, keeping the variability in the socio-cultural and economic conditions in the Indian subcontinent (Kakkar, 1997) in mind, reader’s ingenuity and discretion is significant while drawing generalizations.

**Representations of Children and Childhood: Multilayered Contours**

The results indicated that the advertisements featured children in varying contexts, within families, playgrounds, schools and so forth. In some of the advertisements children played the role of the protagonist while in others they made an appearance only for a brief part of the advertisement. In yet others,
children were only present in the visual frame; in the background, but they did not say anything nor played an active role.

The advertisements examined for this study, painted a multilayered portrait of children and childhood as a life stage. The representations of children and childhood in the advertisements were not singular and normative but pluralistic and complex. The images that emerged presented a series of diverse and to some degrees contrasting representations. It established that a variety of representations coexist and provide insights into the multiplicities that characterize childhood in India. These have been discussed at depth in the following sections.

The advertisements examined constructed a picture of childhood with shades of innocence as well as vulnerability. Childhood was being celebrated as a time in one’s life marked by innocence, spontaneity, free exploration and playfulness. Jenks (1996) categorised children with such qualities as ‘The Apollonian children’ who are angelic, uncorrupted and untainted by the world. They embody natural goodness and play, smile and laugh, both spontaneously and also with adult encouragement. The Parle-G biscuits’ celebrated these traits through the lyrical composition in their advertisement, “…Roko mat, toko mat; sochne do, inhe sochne do; mushkilo ke hall khojne do; nikalne to do, aasman se judenge; ande ke andar hi, kaise udenge; ..bachpan se bada koi school nahi, curiosity se badi koi teacher nahi” (…don’t stop them! let them think; let them find solutions to problems; let them flourish, let them touch the sky; how will they fly inside an egg; there is no greater school than childhood, there is no bigger teacher than curiosity). Here, children’s will to know, explore and learn was encouraged, enabled and facilitated. The formalization of this Apollonian child occurs in the writing of the philosopher Rousseau. He suggested that children have innate, natural virtues, dispositions and immanent capacity for reason. He proposed that each child has a unique potential that must be valued and nurtured (Rousseau, 1979).
Locke’s (1693/1989) notion of children as *tabula rasa* (blank slate) also features in the Indian advertisements. The socialisation model of the child with parents as key guardians and custodians of learned ‘good’ and ‘appropriate’ behaviour also featured, although sparingly. The Dionysian image proposed by Jenks (1996) states that children have a tendency to stray away from the appropriate path that human culture has provided for them and hence they may indulge themselves in activities that give them pleasure and self-gratification. This image was depicted in the *Rin* detergent advertisement where children were shown bullying their “good” classmate and thereby deriving sadistic pleasure out of the act.

However, ‘good’ children were not merely painted as potential victims; indeed they emerged victorious, either by their good behaviour or intelligence. Prout and James (1997) support that children are active and creative social agents. They produce their own unique children’s cultures while simultaneously contributing to the production of adult societies (Corsaro, 1997). This found articulation in a number of advertisements. Children were not just depicted as innocent and dependent but also as aware, knowledgeable and socially participative. As mentioned above, the *Rin* washing detergent advertisement portrayed a ‘good’ child being mocked by a group of children, nevertheless, the good child walked tall claiming that ‘position is not taken but earned’, pointing to working towards ‘becoming’ and ‘acquiring a position’. Here, it is noteworthy that middle class values of ‘goodness and hard work’ found expression in defining ‘normative’ and ‘prescriptive’ childhood.

**Revisiting the Child-Adult Binary**

With reference to the debate over child-adult discontinuity versus continuity, childhood was largely acknowledged in the advertisements as a distinct stage and category, separate from adulthood. Childhood was viewed as ‘something’ short of adulthood and a state of ‘becoming’ an adult—both in intellectual and physical terms. Certain pre-requisites seemed necessary for entry into what is called ‘adulthood’ and children were depicted lacking those. In terms of cognitive abilities, Piaget (1936, 1977) believed children lack adult rationality
and logic; only to be achieved in adulthood. This developmental immaturity of children was manifested through the child in a Surf Excel washing detergent advertisement where the boy beats/splashes mud to make it say sorry to the girl who’s hands and clothes got stained with mud. Further, in the Pepsodent toothpaste advertisement-a son (read child, less knowledgeable!) asked his father (read adult, more knowledgeable!), “Danto me sadan kaise hoti hai? (How does the tooth decay?)”. Likewise, the Hp Tablet advertisement depicted the child seeking knowledge from his tutor, “…Chand par iska weight kitna hoga (How much does it weigh on the moon)”. Children were shown seeking information from adults, who were represented as the ‘more knowledgeable ones’.

Certain products asserted to bridge the child-adult gap by claiming development of mental abilities as well as physical growth by consumption of their products. This held especially true for health supplements and energy drinks. For example, a child raced with the mother (Bournvita, milk supplement advertisement); a child sought advice from the doctor to increase height failing which his schoolmates will tease him (Complan, milk supplement advertisement). These representations reinstated the becoming model.

To entrench (perhaps unconsciously) the idea that when measured against the parameters of adult capacities, being a ‘child’ means being ‘lesser’, further into the psyche of the masses, tasks that were too simplistic were associated and equated with childhood. Children were depicted to know the easiest, obvious, readily available and most mundane pieces of information. In certain advertisements, it was also projected that if a child can know and master something, then everyone else would ‘definitely’ be able to do it. Advertisers made children dress and pose as adults in order to make their products and ways of purchasing, such as online shopping, appear easy to the masses. The task was paralleled to being a ‘child’s play’ and hence uncomplicated enough to be mastered by everybody. It is interesting to note that in the Flipkart.com (online-shopping portal offering a range of products such as clothes, books, electronic goods and so forth) advertisement children
featured posing as adults and made claims that online shopping was easy. In contrast the advertisement of Ixigo.com (online travel assistance search engine) advertisement featured an adult, dressed up like a child, who failed to enter into the Taj Mahal because he arrived without seeking information on the days when the Taj Mahal was closed for visitors. Here, the advertisement made a mockery of the adult who could have acquired this information online at Ixigo.com. Hence, failing a seemingly ‘simple’ task was associated with ‘childishness’. Similarly, an advertisement of Idea cellular mobile network operator depicted a mother seeking advice from her son on how to use Social Networking Sites (SNSs). This too made it appear that ‘everybody’; ‘even a young child’ knows that help at Idea customer care is available by dialling a phone number. Likewise, the child in the Kelloggs cornflakes advertisement was shown adding different flavours and nutritious elements to his bowl of corn flakes. Consequently, his mother makes a comment at the audience claiming that ‘only they’ (read, the audience) eat Kelloggs in a same/repetitive manner each time i.e. without adding different nutritious elements to it. In congruence with the observations shared above, the advertisement pointed that ‘even a child’ knows how to add different flavours to Kelloggs, which affixed simplicity to the task.

Although, the traditional dichotomised relationship between childhood (marked as irrational, dependent and incompetent) and adulthood (marked as rational, independent and competent) was observed, these binaries no longer exist as straight categories but perhaps as a continuum. In a number of advertisements children appeared dependent on adults and in others they assumed active care-taking roles as well. To elaborate, with regards to dependency, children were shown in need of care, support and protection by adults. Advertisers like Huggies (nappies), Johnson’s and Dabur lal tail (massage oil), Dettol (sanitizer and soap), Vicks (topical cold and cough ointment) showed mothers taking care of physical and emotional comfort, well being and health needs of the child. Here, infancy was depicted as a state of total helplessness and dependence. However, this is not to say that advertisers did not represent children as caring, dependable and reciprocating beings. On the other end of the continuum, Clinic Plus Vita Oil portrayed a
mother oiling her daughter’s hair in a bid to provide her comfort. In the second half of the advertisement, when the mother is stressed, the daughter reciprocated care in a similar fashion by oiling her mother’s hair. The same held true for Vicks, where the child applied balm to his mother when she fell sick. It was thus apparent that children’s movement towards ‘adult-like’ nurturing roles and being in positions to provide were also elicited in the selected advertisements. In addition, children were illustrated as responsible, generous and independent.

This is not to generalise that the child-adult binary ceased to exist in the representations. The Ponds age miracle (anti-aging cream) advertisement highlighted ageing as a worrisome experience. After applying the product however, the model supposedly ‘got younger’ and played with children, who were playing a game in the street. This reinstated ‘being young’ with child-like playfulness, spontaneity and free-spirit. Children themselves were shown to appreciate this in the adult woman. This brought attention to continuity as well as discontinuity between childhood and adulthood. Childhood continued to be a state that an adult outgrows yet it remains as a past memory and relic within each one of us. We may seem to enjoy it occasionally. This theme reverberated through the advertisements of Maggie noodles (where both children as well as adults seemed to enjoy them) and Chocolairs and Kit Kat chocolate (where adults were shown eating and relishing children’s commodities). Burman (1994) states that these products evoke in adult purchasers a nostalgic recollection of consumption of this product from when they were themselves children and also relive the romanticised version of their childhood by providing it for their children's consumption.

**Child within the Units of Family and Society: Parents as Providers, Children as Investment for Future**

There is a strong connection between the idea of childhood and the idea of family. Hence, in order to understand the representations of childhood, it is important to locate a child within the unit of family and in Indian society, in particular, also within the broader network of extended family. Aries’ (1962) book rests on the assumption that ‘family’ needs to be studied as an ‘idea’. He
argues that demographic changes in the structure of family owing to decline of marital and paternal authority, industrialisation and so forth may have seemingly weakened the reality of family but the 'idea' of a family did not weaken or decline.

This claim stood true in a number of advertisements, where children were seen situated within a family unit often in the company of mother, father, siblings and grandparents. Events such as the entire family sitting and eating together, taking children out on vacations and family outings made routine visuals for the Indian advertising industry. To validate, Amul and Rupa body warmers depicted the entire family constituted by young parents and one or two children. In addition, Rupa thermals supplemented this with the punch line, “Poore parivar ke liye” (for the entire family). Thus, children's presence deemed significant in completing the picture of a family. In addition to that where extended family was picturised, grandparents and cousins of all ages appeared together in one frame thus establishing family traditions, sense of connectedness and continuity within generations.

It is evident that in Indian culture family as a unit is considered almost incomplete without the presence of children. It is almost obligatory and 'natural' for married couples to have children. It is considered the logical next step in any marriage (Trawick, 2003). Couples almost automatically assume roles as parents and parenting (with emphasis on mothering) seems to flow naturally to them (Kakkar, 1997). Feminine identity is seen as incomplete without 'motherhood' and it is presented as a women’s ultimate fulfilment. The mother-child bond is epitomized as the most significant and strong bond (Kakkar, 1979). The image of the mother as depicted in the Alpenliebe toffee advertisement stood in sharp contrast to the above mentioned image of an Indian mother. In this advertisement, the mother attempted to steal away a toffee from her child and hence appears ill-intentioned.

Misra and Srivastava (2003) elucidate that socialization in India is a collective responsibility of the entire family. Children are regarded as family assets (Saraswathi, 1999) and children’s achievements are considered
collective family achievements. The grandparent-grandchild relationship also forms an important piece of the social-familial rubric. In a Vasan eye care advertisement, a grandfather underwent eye treatment and drew great sources of joy upon seeing his grandchild after the operation. Further to this, a Surf Excel washing detergent advertisement asserted a two-way bond of affection between a grandchild and a grandfather, where the grandchild polished his grandfather’s shoes only to get soiled himself. Such advertisements thus established family as an important site and unit for children to grow up into.

Parents were represented as providers and primary caretakers of children. The task bestowed upon them appeared to be of taking care of children’s needs of all kinds and especially those which were financial and emotional, so that children would grow without deprivation. As stated earlier, Huggies (nappies), Johnson’s and Dabur lal tail (massage oil) depicted mothers taking care of the needs of the child. Providing for the young child is not just a physical event; for provision of food in the Indian sentimentality is connected with a sense of care, affection and fulfilment. A Tata Motors’ advertisement featured a mother offering milk to her girl child, who refused to drink it initially. The voiceover claimed that she (read mother as well as the promotional vehicle) made a journey to the state of Gujarat to get milk for the child. Whether it was Tata Motors or the Britannia biscuits’ trucker that ‘accidently’ dropped two packets of biscuits each day for the children, emotions such as joy, pain and effort put in providing for children were woven into the messages pertaining to the reliability and genuineness of the brand.

In terms of providing financial security, the role of fathers came to the forefront. Fathering came out synonymous with providing financial assistance for education, marriage and so forth. Insurance advertisements especially work on this sentimentality, where the head of the family, usually the father in the Indian patriarchal society was lured to get insured so that in the case of his untimely death, his children and ‘family’ would be well taken care of. Similarly, Tata Capital home loans displayed a change of residence due to tenancy, not just as a physical event but also as disruption and apparent loss
of memories associated with the ‘home’ left behind. In the advertisements, a
girl child innocently raised concern over who would feed the squirrel when
they move home and the boy children commented over their loss of
playmates and nanny from the change of residence. The emotional
attachment developed with the place of residence was used to gear young
parents into investing and owing one’s own house so that their children can
sustain continuing relationships with those (one’s playmates, the aged
neighbours and even animals) who live in the vicinity of their ‘permanent’
residence. According to Erikson (1950) being able to provide for the family
and especially children brings with it a sense of ‘generating’, and failing to
provide, makes one feels a sense of ‘stagnation’. In the above mentioned
advertisements, feelings of generating were depicted by providing security,
both financial and emotional, and were associated with fathering.

The advertisements also reflect a societal context where parents
nurture an almost permanent relationship with one’s children. In the Tanishq
jewellery advertisement depicting a second marriage, the bride’s child from
her first marriage addressed the groom as ‘father’, which brought out the
longevity of parent-child relationships. This sustained relationship with
children, which continues even in case of change of spouse, is intended to
capture the audience. This longevity and continued relationship with the child
stood out in a Berger Weather Coat wall-paint and other exterior paint
advertisements also. The symbolic use of a child reverberated an idea that
one-time investment in the paint (symbolically referring to ones child) for the
exterior of the house would have long-term benefits and would continue to be
a ‘profitable’ investment in the future. Likewise, Indian parents tend to invest
in their children, financially as well as emotionally, assuming that the children
will reciprocate the same in parent’s old age (Srivastava, 1997). In India,
children continue to reside with parents even after getting married and taking
care of ageing parents is almost obligatory.

The depictions of children as future assets were not only restricted to
family situations but also spilled over to children as future investments for the
nation and the planet. A Havells electricals advertisement focused on a child
building the National flag, symbolically depicting the future of the country resting in children’s hands. The safety provided by Havells electrical was figuratively equated with security in investing in children, which may lead to dividends for the parents as well as the country. The idea of children as future investment was taken a step further in a Syska lights advertisement, where children save power for ‘the planet’ thus representing them as custodians of the planet.

There also appeared to be an intricate relationship between children as future assets and children’s vulnerability, which was encashed by some of the advertisements which claimed to invest certain amounts of the profit they make by the sale of their commodity into children’s education. Social responsibility woven together with the charity model further made the case for buying these products strong. Idea communication network, Nihar Shanti Aawla oil and some others also, operated on this sentiment. In these advertisements, the projected child ‘looked poor’ and ‘inhabited poor surroundings’ unlike the middle class, ‘provided’, ‘schooled’ child and thus stood in need of help. Contributions in helping victimised children reassures protecting and securing what childhood ought to be (Burman, 1994).

Thus multiple gradients of childhood representations emerged in advertising and using children in advertisements seemed driven by interests of all kinds. An interface of the ever changing, urbanizing and globalizing scenario, together with forces that may be economic in nature, along with the recognition of children’s needs as distinct from adults perhaps played an instrumental role in creating a separate material culture for children. This includes toys, clothes, books and other material artifacts produced specifically with children as target audience in the mind (Hunt, 2001). These material artifacts were also marketed through television advertisements.

**Locating Children within the Consumer Culture**

In the Indian television advertisements children were commodified, adultified and their innocence was capitalised to sell products. According to Fernandes and Sahgal (2009), children are utilised to sell products in Indian advertising.
Their ‘angelic’ smile and ‘cute’ demeanour was embraced across a range of products for example, cola, chocolates, insurance policies, mobile phones etc. Their images were used by advertisers to bring freshness to old ideas and make their products look ‘pure’ and thereby mask profit making behind children’s apparent innocence and vulnerability. This was noticeable in IDBI bank’s advertisement where children’s innocent friendships were projected as the envisioned relationship between the bank and its clients. It is noteworthy to mention that there were products that were beneficial and consumed by everyone in a family, yet the image of the healthy child was often used to symbolise and depict a healthy family. For example, a ‘healthy’ child playing in the field showcased by Seacod liver oil projected a child to market increases in immunity.

Buckingham (2000) argues that children’s and adults’ exposure to similar content on television and through other forms of media homogenises their experiences. The boundary between childhood and adulthood are blurred within many of the adverts, where children are seen as potential consumers and a whole range of products are specifically targeted at this growing population group (Buckingham, 2000). Advertisers have identified children as a very big target group and capitalise on this potential through advertisements for numerous products. Hunt (2001) claims that creating children as a special category of people creates a need for cultural products and practices that set children apart from adults. Toys, books and artefacts made specifically for children are often referred to as the material culture of childhood. This material culture found expression in baby products, food items, energy supplements, children’s clothing brands and so forth customised especially for children. This has commodified childhood in more than one way.

Children however are a vulnerable audience group which can be influenced and exploited more readily than adults. They tend to believe the product and fail to recognise the risk from all sorts of commercial interests. Clavert (2008) comments that children younger than eight fail to understand marketing strategies and are especially vulnerable because they lack the
cognitive skills necessary to understand the persuasive intent of advertisements. Due to the advent of technology children are exposed to adultified content very early in life but they do not fully understand the commerce and economics around it. An Oreo cookies advertisement depicted a girl child dressed in a duppata pretending to serve tea upon her father’s return from office and make ‘adult’ like conversation. It was apparent that the girl child was imitating and modelling her mother, in a bid to master adult roles (Bandura, 1977). It is not objectionable to prepare children for entry into adult life but over exposure and passing through a hurried childhood (Elkind, 1981) may have long term implications for both children as well as adults. Buckingham (2000) claims that children are expected to behave in ‘grown-up’ ways too early, leaving lesser time for induction into co-operative, tactful, social skills which characterize adult world. Drawing on the paragraph above, it is feared that this spirit of ‘lost-childhood’ and lack of age-appropriate activities may affect their later social adjustment and decision-making life skills.

Concluding Discussion and Implications

The article brought to fore the varying representations of children and childhood as depicted in advertisements intended for children and adults on Indian television. On one hand the representations celebrated childhood innocence, spontaneity and natural propensity to learn and on other hand depicted the necessity of socialising children into the supposed ‘right’ path charted out by the society. The child-adult discontinuity versus continuity debate found expression in a number of advertisements. Here, childhood was represented as separate from adulthood but also certain continuities between the stages could be observed. Children held subordinate positions to adults in tune with the ‘becoming’ model, but they were also represented as active, knowledgeable, reciprocative and creative social agents. The importance of children within families came to light, while positioning children into families and the larger social context. Finally, children as potential consumers, also vulnerable to commodification and adultification found articulation in the selected Indian television advertisements.
An important point that needs to be elicited from these media representations is the need to situate children’s relationships with the media in the texture of everyday lives and relationships. These representations when understood in isolation can only give a glimpse of childhood but to have an in-depth insight; one needs to take into account the broader economic and political forces that are at stake. The character of contemporary childhood is changing and owing to this, there is a need to represent, look and understand children and childhood in new ways. These apparent diversities in representations may be accounted to the changes in the social and economic conditions that produce varying childhood contexts. The social, cultural and economic conditions within which children live and grow up are increasingly diversified and themselves undergoing significant flux. This article reflects an attempt to establish how contrasting and diversified images of childhood concur with diversified socio-economic-historical context of the times. On the one hand Indian media sticks to the traditional sentimentality of children as angelic and on the other hand is driven by market forces which do not shy away from using children for commercial benefits. Market forces operate heavily upon all products and consumption patterns and influence all individuals including children. These conditions thus play an instrumental role in producing experiences of childhood.

The dominant models of childhood as depicted in the media inform the academic imagery and endeavours of educationists and other people working with children and families. This article concludes by highlighting the fact that there is a need to understand multiple contours of childhood contexts and experiences and this diversity needs to be sensitively portrayed in and by media. This is of practical importance to understanding and appreciating children’s unique positions in society and their own realities. This article further opens arenas for revisiting and debating the nature of childhood(s) in India.

Notes:
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*** The article was written as part of an academic exercise and the names of the Products and references to specific advertisements are made only for academic purposes. Endorsement or defamation of any of the products is not intended.

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