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## ADVERTISEMENTS SHOWING CHILDREN: AN ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

*Advertisements that portray children influence market very highly. Marketers are using children in their commercial advertisements to push their sales. Children are forcing the adults buy. So, grabbing adult's attention through children has become a sound strategy for majority of manufacturers. Advertisements targeted at children are considered unethical as children are not capable of processing the given information. Consumption of unhealthy products like fast food and tobacco products lead to bad health. Most of the advertisements are viewed as offensive, indecent, vulgar, repulsive, and against public decency. More particularly, it affects children negatively. The present paper makes an attempt to study ethical issues pertaining to use of children in advertisements and authors have also proposed a model, may be very useful for Advertising Industry, Marketers, Corporate sector organizations fighting for protecting children's causes and other stakeholders of the society, to deal with such a sensitive issue in future times.*

### KEYWORDS

advertising, ethics, products, psychology, children.

### JEL CODE

M10, M31, M37.

### INTRODUCTION

**E**thics denotes a system of accepted beliefs based on morals that control behaviour. Thus, advertising ethics require that (a) advertising is truthful, (b) agencies and advertisers provide substantiation of claims made, (c) advertising is in good taste, and the generally accepted standards of public decency are followed, (d) advertisers refrain from attacking competitors unfairly, (e) guarantees and warranties are explicit, (f) advertisements are not false or misleading, (g) claims are not exaggerated, and that (h) testimonials are genuine. Unethical advertising promises something that cannot be delivered like a bubblegum advertisement that advertises that after chewing it a child can be as powerful as superman.

Advertising has been considered as a capitalistic virtue, an engine of free market economy, and a promoter of consumer welfare. Advertising is seen by many as a threat to the cultural identity and self realization as it harms ethical values; it affects and may deform ways of life and lifestyles. Advertisements are regarded to be in degraded form when they offend people. Stereotyping refers to portraying men or women in a particular role, with a negative image. Advertisers and creative directors realize the positive psychological effect children have on their audiences.

Children play key role in manufacturing, financial services, automobiles, real estate and consumer durables advertisements. Featuring children enables companies to get rid of boring and cliché methods, especially when the products sometimes carry nonuser appeals. Portraying children in the advertisements can affect advertising in three ways-First, many young children have spending 'pocket' money of their own. Secondly, they can also tell their parents what they want and many are able to get exactly what they request. And finally, children are the most open to advertising campaigns irrespective of user or nonuser category.

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Haefner (1991) conducted a study which addressed the values of those advertisers who purposely or inadvertently target children. Conna et al. (1994) highlighted that the content of advertisements directed at children was in serious need of regulation. Tamburro et al. (2004) studied the depiction of violence and other unsafe behavior in ads directed at children. Chatterji (2005) pointed out that extreme stereotypes of gender were presented in ads, which perpetuated a lifestyle oppressive to women. Jaspal Singh and Namrata Sandhu (2011) suggested measures for building ethical considerations into contemporary advertising practices. The present paper makes an attempt to study ethical issues pertaining to advertisements and corporate response. Mehta and Mehta (2013) stated that Advertisements targeted at children are considered unethical as children are not capable of processing the given information.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper is based upon review of literature and secondary data collected from various websites, journals, magazines, newspapers and reference books. Informal discussions with library, professionals, parents/children community and observations have also been incorporated. Literature review has shown prior research work done in this area. Secondary data have been studied and analyzed by the researchers.

### PORTRAYAL OF CHILDREN IN ADVERTISEMENTS

According to a recent research survey (2013), it was revealed that children between the age of 2 and 11 watch an average of 21.5 hours of TV a week and may see between 22,000 and 25,000 commercials a year. And its impact on children cannot be ignored. Children are like a clean slate. They are an innocent audience; they can be highly influenced by advertising of all kinds. They are exposed to numerous advertisements from the very little age and are most likely to accept the ideas advertising promotes.

It is generally regarded that advertisers have the moral duty to "tell the truth" about the product or service advertised. Unethical advertising degrades or underestimates the substitute or the competitive products. It gives false promises or misleading information about the value of the product. It fails to give information about the side effects. It could be advertisements that are obscene or immoral. Children are breaking new grounds in advertising. Multi-brand commercial products manufacturer Ingersoll Rand, financial services company Tata Capital, real estate player Housing Development and Infrastructure Limited and air-conditioner

maker Voltas are all using children as storytellers in their advertisements. Life Insurance Corporation too shows children choosing between different flavours of ice candies to reflect different premium options under its “Jeevan Saral policy”.

As marketers are using children in their commercial advertisements, it influences children to push their parents for particular products. Some of the advertisements are very relevant to children, where marketers are using children to promote their products for instance, advertisements of Horlicks, Johnson & Johnson etc. But there are many commercial advertisements where marketers use children even the products are not for children like, Super Nirma, Surf Excel etc. People can't afford certain products but children force them to buy those products which may affect their economic level. Pepsodent portrays some children relishing snacks, confectionery and sweets, while others are scolded by their mothers for having done the same thing. This advertisement makes children believe that consumers who use Pepsodent are protected to any tooth decay because of the superior quality of the product but this claim is unauthenticated and mislead children. Organization also portrays children in junk-food product as the children are special targets of the junk-food industry. The market knows that fast food is addictive and once young people get used to having their fat, salts and sugar rich food, they will become their consumers for life.

Similarly, McDonalds is advertising the “McAloo Tikki” burger in what has become a popular and controversial advertising campaign in India. The campaign features two young children sitting on a bench. The girl asks the boy if he would consider them boyfriend and girlfriend. He is not keen, saying that girlfriends demand too much. He changes his mind when she says that she'd be satisfied with a McAloo Tikki Burger (India). It certainly shows trivial relationships. Vodafone ads also lead children thinking that every girl wants their attention. Vodafone and McDonalds exploit children in their advertisements at the cost of their health and well-being. Research studies have found that children do not perceive the selling intent of commercials, and cannot distinguish between reality and fantasy. Some parents might even rethink giving their children mobile phones for fear that it will be used for ‘romance’ talk at a very tender age.

One current television commercial shows a young boy advertising Dish Network. His age is about 12 years and all of his friends come over to watch their special shows with him because they either don't have cable or their cable isn't working. He tapes everyone's show and feels superior and self-satisfied because he can help his friends. Such advertisements are damaging imaginary world of children to a large extent.

It appears to be quite unethical to use children in television commercials because they are too emotionally undeveloped to handle the pressures of the adult world. Children don't have the capacity to know the difference between advertising and marketing gimmicks, and real promises.

Children are mostly depicted as adventurous, which is objectionable. In some product ads, it is claimed that kids become clever, brave etc. after consuming some drinks, biscuits etc., which is not acceptable. The role of children in ads should be specifically determined and any misuse curtailed appropriately. The children are the most interesting tool to attract consumers of all ages. Since the product manufacturers need to pay a less amount for greater reach, they prefer children.

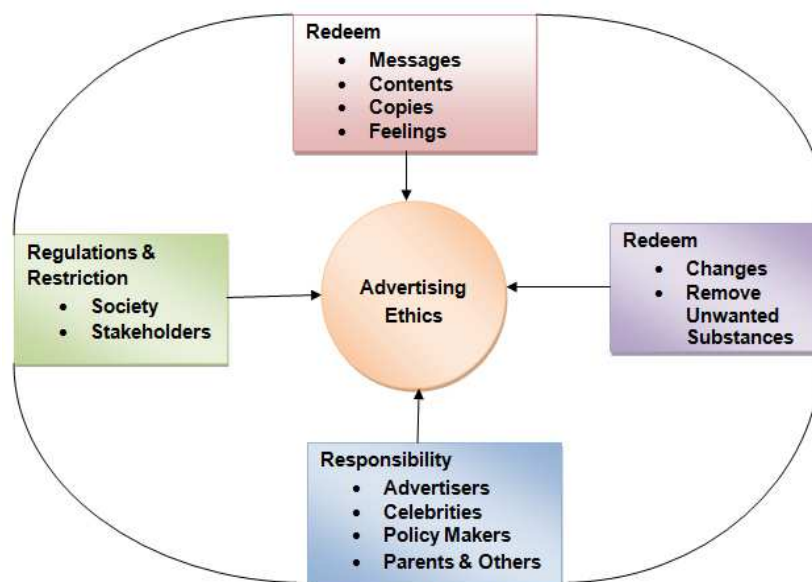
**CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS**

Advertisements through various media have much to teach but some of what these advertisements teach may not be what we want our children to learn. Younger children feel delighted while watching television advertisements and like to remember and recite their jingles and dialogues. Advertisements are regarded to be in degraded form when they offend people. Consumption of unhealthy products like fast food and tobacco products lead to bad health. Most of the advertisements are viewed as offensive, indecent, vulgar, repulsive, and against public decency. More particularly, it affects children negatively. Featuring children in advertisements aimed at grownups could be the change in the social patterns and lifestyles, with people in their twenties and thirties controlling the economy and consumer markets, making all key decisions both at home and at work. Such advertisements like Aamir Khan's “Kuposhan Bharat Chodo” need appreciation and wider social acceptance.

Children are especially vulnerable to advertising because they lack the experience and knowledge to understand and evaluate critically the purpose of persuasive advertising appeals. The self-regulation and social control measures bear importance. From this point of view, the Advertising Standards Council of India has a significant role to play. Advertisement Standards Council of India should protect the rights of children from exploitation through ads. The role of consumer organizations, human rights activists and media is also very important to keep away business interests eroding children's welfare. When children play a happy mind act in ads, it boosts their level of confidence and bring to the fore their potentials. But, if they are forced to act for the sake of money, then it can lead to behavioural and emotional disorders and the saleability of the product will no longer have the same impact.

The responsibility for ethics in advertising is, however, on all people of this country in different capacities—as advertisers, media persons, agency people, celebrities, models, photographers, filmmakers, business leaders, owners of business houses, consumers, traders, policy makers and the public at large. It is suggested that the advertisements for harmful products like soft drinks, junk food, tobacco etc., ads which may not be watched with children and elders due to their objectionable content, overt use of sex/sexual appeals in ads and ads aimed at children be completely banned. Marketers must communicate accurately and truthfully knowing that children may learn practices from advertising that can affect their health or well-being.

FIG. 1: M&M'S 4R MODEL ON ADVERTISING ETHICS W.R.T. PORTRAYING CHILDREN



Source: Developed by Authors (Mehta & Mehta-2013)

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