

## ASCI study finds Gen Alpha living in a seamless world of content and commerce

ASCI's 'What the Sigma?' study reveals how Gen Alpha navigates – and is shaped by – a world where advertising, entertainment and identity are increasingly indistinguishable

- Gen Alpha's cultural codes, aesthetics and language are globally synchronised, but largely invisible to adults
- For this generation, online and offline are not two worlds but one; the phone is not a device but where they live their lives
- Younger children (7-12) can spot overt ads but miss hidden commercial intent; older children (13-15) are more ad-literate but remain vulnerable to passion-driven and narrative-integrated brand messaging
- Study calls for principle-based, ecosystem-wide response – involving platforms, creators, advertisers, parents, schools – to ensure a responsible approach to marketing to Gen Alpha

**Mumbai, March 17, 2026:** Shorts blended into vlogs, which dissolve into gameplay, which give way to sponsored content that feels like a friend's recommendation. The screen never goes dark. Gen Alpha doesn't watch the digital stream, it lives inside it. It is this reality – immersive and commercially active – that the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) Academy set out to understand. In collaboration with Futurebrands Consulting, ASCI Academy has released 'What the Sigma?', a pioneering ethnographic research study examining how children aged 7 to 15 years (belonging to Generation Alpha) interact with media and content, and identify, classify and interpret commercial messaging in a hyper-digital environment.

Unveiled at the inaugural ASCI AdTrust Summit 2026, the study draws on immersive ethnographic research across six Indian cities, including in-home interviews, sibling and peer discussions, and conversations with parents, teachers, counsellors, psychologists, marketers and kidfluencers.

The study explores diverse aspects of children's engagement with content and advertising, as well as the role of parents, teachers, advertisers and algorithms in shaping their exposure to digital media.

"ASCI Academy's study, 'What the Sigma?', is an investigation into the content life of Generation Alpha – not to judge them but to understand them. Their cultural reference points seem disjointed from those of earlier generations. Insights on how they perceive advertising is the first step towards building more responsible engagement frameworks, given that they are the youngest media consumers in our country right now. Our goal is to spark informed and collaborative dialogue that balances creativity with responsibility among the stakeholders," said Manisha Kapoor, CEO and Secretary General, ASCI.

**Five key themes emerged in the study:**

### 1. The Discontinuous Generation

Gen Alpha is not growing up alongside the internet – they are growing up inside it. Their cultural codes, aesthetic sensibilities and linguistic universe are synchronised globally in real time, evolving at a speed that has left adults functionally illiterate in their children’s worlds. The references are unfamiliar. The humour is opaque. And yet for a child in Mumbai or Vizag, these touchstones are as immediate and shared as a playground game once was.

## 2. The Authority Vacuum

As parents and teachers lose cultural fluency in children’s digital worlds, the algorithm has stepped in. Responsive, inexhaustible and exquisitely attuned to viewer preferences, the feed has become the most attentive presence in many children’s daily lives. Parents find themselves in a constant state of revision – setting rules around screen time and digital consumption they are no longer sure how to enforce, uncertain of what constitutes harmful content in a landscape they cannot fully see.

## 3. Digital as Society

Gen Alpha lives online; online and offline are not separate worlds – they form one continuous reality. Content is increasingly becoming a significant influencer. The phone is not a device they pick up. It is the space they inhabit.

## 4. The Great Media Mukbang

Content has become an amorphous, ambient, multi-sensorial and boundary-less universe. Advertising, entertainment and commerce merge into a single, undifferentiated stream of shorts, memes, vlogs, gameplay, ads and ‘kid-ified’ adult content. Gen Alpha is not choosing what to watch – they are inhabiting feeds. The distinction between active choice and passive absorption has significantly collapsed.

## 5. Blurred Ad Recognition

Younger children (7-12 years) recognise only the most overt advertising; influencer promotions, gaming integrations and vlog sponsorships register as entertainment. Older children (13-15 years) have developed greater ad literacy, yet remain susceptible to passion-driven and narrative-integrated brand messaging. In a non-stop media stream, discernment is low across the board.

“While earlier generations have been exposed to digital media, for this generation it is the world they inhabit. They have a one-to-one relationship with content, which parents and authority figures may not fully understand. This report explores what they watch but also how they are being shaped by algorithms, content and advertising. It tries to build an understanding of Gen Alpha and their realities, with a view to think about what guardrails the advertising ecosystem needs to build,” said Santosh Desai, Founder and Director, Futurebrands Consulting.

### From diagnosis to pathways:

The report proposes an adaptive, principles-led approach that enlists every actor in the ecosystem, including schools, around four pathways:

- **Universal signposting:** The ecosystem must work on ways to signpost commercial intent, using universal design principles that allow young audiences to recognise what may be currently invisible.
- **Ecosystem-wide responsibility:** Roles for advertisers, platforms, creators, schools and parents because no single actor can protect children alone.
- **Future-ready safeguards:** Integrating safety and wellbeing tools such as parental controls directly into children’s content experiences rather than as background choices.

- Media and Advertising literacy in schools:** Building age-appropriate media literacy and understanding of persuasion and commercial intent through formal education. This can be part of a larger effort on content and media literacy.

The full report is available here: [LINK]

**About the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI)**

The ASCI, established in 1985, is committed to the cause of self-regulation in advertising, ensuring the protection of consumer interests. ASCI seeks to ensure that advertisements conform to its Code for Self-Regulation, which requires advertisements to be legal, decent, honest, and truthful and not hazardous or harmful while observing fairness in competition. ASCI looks into complaints across all media, such as print, TV, radio, hoardings, SMS, emailers, internet/website, product packaging, brochures, promotional material, point of sale material, etc. ASCI has collaboratively worked with various government bodies, including the Department of Consumer Affairs (DoCA), the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), the Ministry of AYUSH, and the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MIB). In August 2023, the ASCI Academy, a flagship program of ASCI, was launched to build the capacity of all stakeholders to create responsible and progressive advertising. ASCI Academy aims to raise standards of advertising content through training, education, outreach, and research on the preventive aspects of advertising self-regulation.

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