

Analysis of Parents' Posts Using the Innocent Child Hashtag on Social Media: Representations, Meanings, and Ethical Issues

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Öz

Çocuklar günümüzde sosyal medyada doğrudan aktif olmasalar bile, ebeveynlerinin ürettiği görüntüler ve anlatılar yoluyla dijital platformlarda görünür hâle gelmektedir. Bu araştırmada ebeveynlerin Instagram'da masum çocuk etiketiyle yaptıkları paylaşımlar içerik analiziyle incelenmiştir. Analiz sonucunda çocukların estetik bir nesne, mağdur bir figür, eksik bir birey ve küçük bir erişkin olarak temsil edildiği temalar ortaya çıkmıştır. Ayrıca paylaşımlarda ciddi etik sorunlar da tespit edilmiştir. Bulgular, sosyal medyadaki çocuk temsillerinin çocuğun öznelliğini geri planda bırakarak çok katmanlı ve karmaşık bir masum çocuk anlayışına dayandığını göstermektedir. Bu nedenle sosyal medya paylaşımlarında çocukların bireysel hakları, gelişimsel özellikleri ve öznellikleri dikkate alınarak etik bir bilinç geliştirilmelidir.

Abstract

Children today may not be directly active on social media, yet they become visible on digital platforms through the images and narratives produced by their parents. This study analyzed Instagram posts by parents using the hashtag innocent child through content analysis. The analysis revealed themes representing children as aesthetic objects, victimized figures, incomplete individuals, and little adults. Additionally, serious ethical issues were identified in these posts. The findings show that children's representations on social media often overlook their subjectivity, relying on a complex and multi-layered notion of innocence. Therefore, social media content involving children should be approached with ethical awareness that respects their individual rights, developmental characteristics, and subjectivity.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Çocukluk, Sosyal medya, Instagram, Paylaşan anababalık, Masum çocuk, Etik sorunlar

Keywords: Childhood, Social media, Instagram, Sharenting, Innocent child, Ethical issues

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1. Introduction

The concept of childhood is shaped by the sociocultural context formed by various factors such as culture, history, and belief systems. This understanding reflects the value a society attributes to its children and finds expression not only in everyday life, media, literary and historical works, but also in

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today's digital environments. One of the conceptualizations of childhood frequently classified in the literature is the notion of the innocent child. This study explores the innocent child concept in the context of Instagram posts. The research is significant in that it describes the visual characteristics of posts reflecting this notion, identifies the reasons for labeling children as innocent, and reveals the ethical concerns embedded in such representations. In this section, the term innocent is first examined etymologically, followed by a review of the literature on the innocent child concept, and finally, studies investigating digital constructions of childhood are discussed to highlight the relevance and necessity of the present research. This study holds particular significance as it offers a multidimensional analysis of how the notion of the innocent child is reconstructed in digital environments dominated by visual culture. Unlike previous research primarily concerned with parental sharing motivations or digital safety risks, the present study situates childhood within a visual and culturally grounded framework that foregrounds issues of representation and ethics

1.1. The Concept of Innocence

In the social sciences, abstract concepts are often difficult to define universally. Although the term innocent has linguistic equivalents in many languages, its meaning is shaped by the social and cultural context in which it appears (Aslan, 2001). The Turkish word *masum*, derived from Arabic, conveys ideas of protection, freedom from error, and purity (Develioğlu, 2013, p. 675; Mutçalı, 2012, p. 621; TDK, 2020). In literature, innocence has been interpreted differently across contexts. Developmentally, children's immaturity is seen to render them cognitively and morally innocent, as they are considered too young to be responsible for crimes or moral faults (Akyüz, 2016; Alacakaptan, 1975; Çam, Çavdar, Seydooğulları, & Çok, 2012; McNair et al., 2019; Santrock, 2018, p. 247). Thus, children are viewed as not fully accountable because they cannot yet understand the link between intention and consequence. In legal terms, innocence denotes the absence of guilt or the state of not having committed a crime (Değirmencioğlu, 2019; Ormanoğlu, 2016). Philosophically and pedagogically, it reflects the belief, advocated by Rousseau and Locke, that children are born inherently good and sinless (Ezell, 1983). This view aligns with contemporary empirical findings showing prosocial behaviors such as helping and sharing even in infancy (Bloom, 2015; Gopnik, 2016). Innocence is also associated with physical qualities like purity or sweetness, though such depictions may obscure individuality (Holt, 1975). Overall, these interpretations show that innocence is closely tied to childhood in both positive and restrictive ways and is often used interchangeably in everyday life. The notion of the innocent child therefore needs to be reconsidered in light of ethical, social, and developmental perspectives to assess whether it truly serves the best interests of the child.

1.2. Understanding the Innocent Child

The understanding of childhood has evolved alongside cultural and social changes. Early literature often traces this evolution chronologically. Childhood was vague in antiquity, viewed as property in the Middle Ages, and redefined with modernity. Postman (1995) and İnal (1999) describe the twentieth century as the period when childhood was discovered. Today, ongoing social transformations have increased the significance of childhood, prompting studies across education, psychology, and sociology. These developments led to various classifications, most commonly the innocent and bad child (Smith, 2012; Sorin, 2005). Jenks (2005) links the bad child to Christian notions of original sin, while the innocent child reflects modern Western ideas of innate goodness and protection (as cited in Smith, 2012). Sorin (2005) expands this framework with additional types such as savior, rapidly growing, out of control, small adult, continuing education, participant, property, victim, and innocent child.

The innocent child concept, central to this study, remains widespread across cultures. Rooted in Locke's blank slate theory and Rousseau's belief in natural goodness (Ezell, 1983), it replaced earlier views linking innocence to baptism (Frijhoff, 2012). This notion shapes everyday and educational practices, from romanticized images of childhood to media protection and selective content (Sorin, 2005a, 2005b). Within this framework, children are portrayed as passive, pure, and distinct from adults. Sorin's (2007) interviews show that parents often view children as good, carefree, and vulnerable. Although modern theories depict children as active and competent, the innocent child image endures, partly due to its overlap with developmental psychology's emphasis on environment and parenting (Berk, 2015, p. 13). It also reinforces parental responsibility to preserve innocence (Smith, 2012). In Türkiye, Kağıtçıbaşı's research (Kağıtçıbaşı, 1980; Kağıtçıbaşı & Ataca, 2017) shows the rising psychological value of childhood. Conceptions of childhood are shaped by welfare and socioeconomic factors: lower-status parents stress physical needs, while higher-status ones value psychological traits like curiosity and self-regulation (Berk, 2015, p. 72). Increasing education, fewer children, and changing family structures further influence these perceptions. In this context, it is essential to clarify the theoretical stance from which the present study approaches the concept of childhood. The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in contemporary childhood theories, particularly the new sociology of childhood, which redefines the child as an active social agent rather than a passive recipient of adult norms (James & Prout, 2003; Uprichard, 2008). This perspective emphasizes children's agency, competence, and capacity to contribute to cultural meaning-making within their lived contexts (Hartung, 2017). Within this framework, childhood is not viewed as a preparatory stage for adulthood but as a socially constructed and context-dependent period with its own intrinsic value. This approach challenges traditional developmentalist views that equate childhood with deficiency or immaturity and instead focuses on how social, cultural, and digital environments shape the meanings attributed to being a child (Jans, 2004). Accordingly, the present study interprets the innocent child not as a universal or natural category but as a socially produced image that reflects adults' moral, emotional, and cultural constructions of childhood. This theoretical stance aligns with the contemporary paradigm emphasizing children's agency and rights in social and digital contexts.

1.3. The Presentation of Childhood in the Digital World

Since the mid-1990s, the internet has become both a valuable research resource and a site for methodological development in the social sciences. Although initially met with skepticism, online interactions soon proved meaningful, establishing the internet as a legitimate field of study (Snee, Hine, Morey, Roberts, & Watson, 2020). Social networking sites allow users to connect and socialize (Arnett, 1995; Highfield & Leaver, 2015). Presenting oneself on these platforms has become an essential human experience, providing researchers with data to explore social structures and perceptions (Hine, 2005). Social media offers important opportunities to study conceptions of childhood through adults' voluntary sharing. Research in this area has grown as parents, who are among the main figures interacting with children, use these platforms widely (Choi & Lewallen, 2018). The frequent sharing of children has led to the concept of sharenting (Maraşlı, Er, Yılmaztürk, & Çok, 2016). Couples share many aspects of their lives on Instagram, from marriage to childbirth (Karaçelik, 2019), and children's developmental stages can often be followed through their mothers' posts (Birol & Bakır, 2019).

Those expressing conceptions of childhood online are not limited to parents. Educators, health professionals, institutions, and associations also share content related to children. Because of age restrictions, most studies examine adults' representations of children rather than children's own posts

(Doub, Small, & Birch, 2016; Güzel, 2019; Harris, Moreland-Russell, Tabak, Ruhr, & Maier, 2014; Yılmaz, 2019). These representations often label children by categories such as race, gender, and emotion, reflecting adult understandings of childhood (Choi & Lewallen, 2018). Güzel (2019) found that tween children are portrayed as consumer objects, while Karahisar (2017) showed that mothers use children's images for recognition and affection. Similarly, Kunt-Bulut and Avcı (2016) identified common descriptors of childhood such as innocence, happiness, joy, and peace, with innocence as the most frequent. Other studies focus on ethical concerns, especially cases where mothers gain popularity and income through their children's identities and privacy (Bostan, Kocaman, & Altınok, 2017). Many adults maintain an online presence primarily because of their children, highlighting the importance of examining childhood representations, digital ethics, and literacy (Choi & Lewallen, 2018). Although recent studies have explored parental sharing practices and children's visibility online (e.g., Choi & Lewallen, 2018; Maraşlı et al., 2016; Omur & Uyar, 2022), few have specifically examined how the symbolic notion of the innocent child operates within these representations. Thus, there remains a significant gap in understanding how innocence, as a moral and aesthetic category, is mobilized in digital media to construct images of childhood.

1.4. Current Study

This study holds significance for several reasons. First, since it is conducted in Turkish, the findings specifically reflect the Turkish context. This is important because Türkiye, a culturally diverse country bridging Europe and the East, remains underrepresented in intercultural research. Thus, examining the notion of the innocent child within Türkiye is crucial. Second, studies on conceptions of childhood, especially the innocent child, have a relatively recent history in the international literature. The concept, central to many understandings of childhood, still requires deeper analysis (Sorin, 2007). This research aims to contribute to that gap. Third, parents increasingly share child-related content online. The rise in parental social media activity has introduced the concept of sharenting (Karataş & Aydoğan, 2024; Kılınç, 2024; Saygılı & Top, 2025). Parents often post detailed photos, videos, and updates about their children, displaying not only daily life but also personal aspects of parenting. This trend increases children's exposure in digital spaces and raises ethical concerns about privacy (Omur & Uyar, 2022). Such sharing practices may have negative effects on children (Baştemur, Borucu, & Bulut, 2021). This study contributes to the literature by focusing on the potential harms of labeling and portraying children as innocent in digital spaces. It emphasizes the need for adults to consider children's rights, including privacy and confidentiality, before sharing content (Choi & Lewallen, 2018). In conclusion, research on the notion of the innocent child remains limited, with definitions still vague and empirical testing across contexts lacking. A review of the literature revealed no studies examining this concept specifically within digital environments. Therefore, this study aims to analyze Instagram posts tagged as representing the innocent child. Accordingly, this study addresses the following central problem: How is the concept of the innocent child constructed, represented, and ethically negotiated in digital spaces such as Instagram? By focusing on the Turkish socio-cultural context, the research contributes both theoretically and methodologically. Theoretically, it extends existing debates on childhood representations by integrating the notion of innocence as a moral and aesthetic discourse. Methodologically, it demonstrates how visual content analysis can be used to reveal underlying cultural meanings and ethical dilemmas in parental sharenting practices.

2. Method

In this study, a qualitative research design using the case study method was employed. In line with Stake's (2005) classification, this study adopts an instrumental case study design because the case,

which consists of parents' Instagram posts using the innocent child hashtag, was examined not for its own sake but to provide a deeper understanding of a broader phenomenon, namely how the notion of the innocent child is constructed and represented in digital environments. According to Yin (2017), a case study enables an in-depth investigation of a bounded system defined by time, context, and platform characteristics, ensuring methodological rigor and contextual specificity. Although multiple qualitative techniques such as observation, document analysis, and visual examination were employed, the defining feature that qualifies this research as a case study is its focus on a single, context-bound phenomenon within its real-life setting rather than on the methods themselves (Merriam, 1998; Subaşı & Okumuş, 2017). This design allows for a contextualized understanding rather than a generalizable conclusion.

2.1. Research Material

The study material used in the research was determined by purposive sampling. Accordingly, a search was conducted using the hashtags identified within the scope of the research. Instagram does not provide an exact total number of hashtags and only gives an average estimate. The search showed that there were a total of six hundred and twenty-seven posts with the hashtag #masumçocuklar or #masumçocuk. However, posts that included only animals, adults, adults' personal memories, nostalgic photos, as well as posts containing only texts, poems, songs, drawings, books, or images from movies or cartoons totaling 518 posts were excluded from the study. Only posts featuring children were examined. By analyzing profile characteristics, a total of 109 posts identified as belonging to parents were examined. A total of 86 posts belong to mothers and 23 posts belong to fathers. Moreover, these parents were not only present on Instagram in their roles as caregivers. They also held positions as marketers, teachers, doctors, politicians, or content creators. These posts could be about their own children or other children.

2.2. Data Analysis

This study was designed with an epistemological approach aimed at understanding and interpreting a phenomenon, and the data analysis employed descriptive and causal coding methods as proposed by Saldana (2019, p. 70). This coding approach is effective for investigating motivations, beliefs, worldviews, and the complexity of influences within the study. In the first stage of analysis, visual materials were briefly summarized and labeled (Saldana, 2019, p. 103). At this stage, images shared with the innocent tag were examined to answer the question, "What is considered innocent?" In the second stage, causal coding was applied with the aim of "revealing not only what the data are but also why the beliefs underlying them emerged." During this phase, the question "Why is the post labeled as innocent considered innocent?" was addressed. In the third stage, themes, categories, and codes were developed (Saldana, 2019, p. 186). Accordingly, posts tagged with innocent were descriptively coded based on their visual characteristics, and causal coding was additionally employed to uncover the reasons these posts were characterized as innocent. Subsequently, these codes were classified based on their similarities to form categories. Finally, the results were reported. The analyses were conducted collaboratively by the author and a second researcher experienced in qualitative research, and consensus was reached.

2.3. Ethical Considerations

The visibility of posts on social media platforms is determined by users' privacy settings. Posts made publicly are generally considered part of the public domain (Highfield & Leaver, 2015). However, as stated in the AoIR Ethical Guidelines (2019), public accessibility does not automatically imply that such data can be used without ethical reflection. Researchers must carefully assess the potential risks of harm, traceability, and identifiability, particularly when dealing with sensitive groups such as children or parents. From this perspective, although the analyzed posts were publicly available, the study prioritized ethical caution and participant protection over technical accessibility. Therefore, as the data were derived from publicly available online sources, the study did not require formal ethics committee approval, in line with existing practices for research utilizing publicly accessible online data (Beninger, 2017; Townsend & Wallace, 2016). However, to adhere to AoIR's principle of contextual integrity (Markham & Buchanan, 2012; Li et al., 2024; AoIR, 2019), the research design integrated several protective strategies. Specifically, in presenting the data obtained, no visuals (such as photographs) or direct quotations that could reveal users' identities were included. This approach acknowledges that, even when data are publicly visible, individuals may not expect their content to be extracted, analyzed, and published in academic contexts (AoIR, 2019). Moreover, as social media content can be easily traced back to its source through text or image searches, the inclusion of direct data could expose users to risks of re-identification. Therefore, to protect participant confidentiality and digital privacy, all data were anonymized and paraphrased before presentation. This approach aligns with the AoIR (2019) framework, which emphasizes that ethical responsibility in digital research lies not only in formal approval processes but also in the researcher's ongoing, reflexive decision-making. Accordingly, this study adhered to the principle of "do no harm" and treated all digital traces as contextually sensitive, regardless of their public or private status.

3. Findings

This section presents the findings obtained from the analysis of posts tagged with innocent child on Instagram.

Table 1. Distribution of Themes, Categories, and Codes Related to Posts Tagged "Innocent Child" on Instagram

Theme	Category	Example Codes
Aesthetic Object	Child's physical appearance	Eyes, face shape, sleeping state, picture of feet
	Child-specific behaviors	Playing games, singing, doing activities, drawing
	Having special needs	Autism, Down syndrome
Victimized Figure	Poverty	Wearing old clothes, living on the street, wearing oversized adult clothes, working as laborer
	Migration	Death, injury, homelessness
	War, massacre	Crying, injury, death etc.
	Abuse	Sexual and physical abuse
Incomplete individual	Self-care skills	Not acquiring toilet habits
	Social-emotional skills	Inability to express oneself
	Cognitive-language skills	Helping a statue, thinking one is hiding when eyes are closed
A little adult	Sexualized behaviors	Kissing on the lips, exchanging gifts while making eye contact, holding hands
	Performing unexpected tasks	Showing prosocial behaviors such as fetching water, carrying plates
Ethical Issues	Violation of privacy	Using children's photographs

Using the child as a comedy tool	Adults laughing at the child while they experience negative emotions
Undermining child's development	Behaviors related to the deficient individual theme
Using as a means of communication with other users	Saying good morning, good evening, celebrating days

Table 1 shows that the analyzed posts are grouped under five themes: the innocent child understanding as visual aesthetics and representation of innocence, the innocent child understanding within vulnerability and victimization, the innocent child understanding as a representation of deficiency, the innocent child understanding as adultification, and ethical issues in the innocent child understanding.

3.1. The Understanding of the Innocent Child as an Aesthetic Object

Posts within this theme emphasize representations focused on the child's physical and visual image. These representations foreground the child's physical appearance, such as the eyes, face shape, sleeping state, and images of feet; child-specific behaviors such as playing games, singing, engaging in activities, and drawing; as well as the physical appearances of children with special needs, including those with autism and Down syndrome. In such representations, the child is not seen as an individual but rather as an image that provides comfort to adults, serving as a "moment" or an object of tranquility. This understanding sidelines the child's emotions, needs, and personality.

3.2. The Understanding of the Innocent Child as a Victimized Figure

This theme focuses on presenting the child as a victim of social injustices, encompassing victimization, neglect, and abuse, as well as traumatic and socially at-risk childhood experiences. Poverty is reflected through images of wearing old clothes, living on the streets, wearing oversized adult clothes, and working as laborers; migration is associated with death, homelessness, and injury; war is depicted through crying, injury, and death; and physical and sexual abuse are also part of the innocent child representation. This perspective emphasizes the child's suffering from adverse consequences of situations or events for which they are not responsible. While this understanding of the innocent child brings social problems to visibility, it may simultaneously stigmatize the child as a perpetually suffering and helpless figure. Additionally, such visuals can sometimes be exploited for "emotional manipulation," especially considering the follower- and customer-attracting dynamics of social media. This interpretation is reinforced particularly when politicians, who are responsible for providing solutions, fail to act. This perspective also appeals to the conscience of society, portraying the child as a being to be rescued. However, this can also diminish the child's subjectivity.

3.3. The Understanding of the Innocent Child as an Incomplete Individual

This theme emphasizes children's developmental deficiencies and needs. Developmental deficiencies often manifest in areas of self-care skills, socio-emotional skills, and cognitive-linguistic abilities, which are generally considered simple and natural for adults. In terms of self-care skills, examples include children not acquiring toilet habits, being unable to dress themselves, or failing to meet basic hygiene needs. In socio-emotional development, difficulties may include struggling to express emotions, inability to communicate appropriately with others, or an underdeveloped capacity for empathy. Regarding cognitive and language skills, children may have trouble understanding

complex instructions, misuse words, or fail to grasp abstract concepts. Cognitive and perceptual examples include a child trying to help a statue or believing they become invisible when closing their eyes.

3.4. The Understanding of the Innocent Child as a Little Adult

This theme involves children imitating adult roles and behaviors. This imitation goes beyond ordinary mimicry and includes behaviors with sexual connotations as well as actions unexpected from children. Examples such as kissing on the lips, making eye contact while exchanging gifts, holding hands, offering water, and helping to carry a plate indicate that children are imitating adult behaviors or assuming adult roles. It includes age-inappropriate actions like sexualized behaviors or domestic responsibilities that exceed the child's developmental stage. These posts portray situations where children act as if they are small adults.

3.5. Ethical Issues in the Understanding of the Innocent Child

These issues are generally based on the idea that adults adopt the notion of the innocent child as a tool for their own digital presence. These ethical concerns include violations of privacy by directly using the child's name or image; using moments when the child is experiencing negative emotions as a source of comedy; belittling the child in the context of developmental limitations; and using the child as a means to communicate with other users, such as having them say "Good morning" or "Good evening."

4. Conclusion

Today, even if children are not direct users or viewers of social media, they become visible in digital environments through the content shared by parents. Within the scope of this study, Instagram posts tagged with "innocent child" were examined, revealing that these representations are multidimensional and often disregard the subjectivity of children. The data obtained through content analysis were grouped under five themes: the understanding of the innocent child as an aesthetic object, a victimized figure, an incomplete individual, a little adult, and ethical issues in the understanding of the innocent child. Under the theme of the aesthetic object, children were represented through their physical appearance, child-specific behaviors, and special needs, emphasizing visual and emotional appeal. The victimized figure theme included representations related to poverty, migration, war and massacre, and abuse, reflecting children's vulnerability and suffering. The incomplete individual theme highlighted portrayals focusing on children's limited self-care, social-emotional, and cognitive-language skills, depicting them as unfinished beings. The little adult theme involved representations of children displaying sexualized behaviors or performing unexpected adult-like tasks, blurring age boundaries. Finally, the ethical issues theme covered concerns such as violation of privacy, using children as comedy tools, undermining their development, and using them as a means of communication with other users, all pointing to the moral challenges of children's visibility in digital spaces. These findings highlight the need for a more careful, ethical, and child rights-based perspective regarding the ways in which children are represented on social media. The digital representations of children are not merely individual choices but reflect a complex domain shaped by social norms, digital culture, conceptions of privacy, and ideologies of childhood. Therefore, in social media content involving children, it is essential to consider the child's individuality, developmental characteristics, subjectivity, and most importantly, their rights. Digital content should serve the child's dignity and well-being rather than fulfilling the emotional or social performances of adults. The discussion of these findings is elaborated below.

5. Discussion

The sharing of children on social media through images of “innocence” within the context of the innocent child as an aesthetic object may at first glance appear to be a cute and harmless adult behavior. However, the underlying dynamics of this phenomenon point to a multilayered structure in which personal desires, social value judgments, and digital culture are intertwined. Especially on visually oriented platforms like Instagram, the physical and emotional representations of children are often reproduced with aesthetic concerns, and a form of identity is constructed through these representations. At this point, children are not only situated within their own developmental context but also become instrumental in the adult’s pursuit of self-realization. There are several reasons for this. *First*, it reflects the desire to present one’s identity in the digital space. Photos of children serve as a way for individuals to portray themselves to the world as “good, caring, sensitive, and attentive” people. In such images, the child becomes an element that enhances the social capital of parents, relatives, or professionals. The *second* reason is the reproduction of an idealized notion of childhood within society. Especially in modern societies, childhood is associated with purity, innocence, cleanliness, and untouchedness. This aligns with Philippe Ariès’ thesis that “childhood is an invention,” suggesting that childhood is less a biological reality and more a product of cultural construction (Düzcan, 2020). Social media is the contemporary showcase of this construction. On Instagram, children are presented in aesthetically curated poses, with specific lighting and filters, an exact digital reflection of the cultural construction of childhood. In this sense, the child is valued not for who they are, but for the symbolic meanings attached to the idea of “childhood.” *Third*, the transformation of digital culture into a society of spectacle encourages such posts. Contemporary individuals do not merely live their lives; they want to display and validate them through others. Children become part of this performance. A photo showing a sleeping baby’s foot is not just a memory but a tool for garnering likes and approval. Digital platforms constantly reinforce this cycle: likes, shares, and comments all indirectly respond to the narcissistic needs of the adult. Consequently, the child becomes part of the adult’s digital identity. The *fourth* reason is the symbolic meaning production through emotional manipulation. This is particularly evident in posts involving children with special needs. Photos of children with autism or Down syndrome are often shared not only to raise awareness, but also to gain followers, create emotional impact, and appear ethical (Korkunç & Aydemir, 2025). At this point, the child ceases to be an individual with unique traits and needs, and instead becomes a “theme” used to generate emotional response. This is highly problematic from the perspective of children’s rights, subjectivity, and privacy. *Finally*, one of the reasons for the prevalence of such posts is social normativity. Environmental influence and cultural approval cause individuals to repeat such behaviors. A mother who does not share her child may be labeled as an “uncaring parent.” This normative pressure may lead parents to post images of their children even if they do not wish to. In this sense, the behavior is not purely individual, but a reproduction of the social structure.

Some posts shared on Instagram place children at the center of the “innocent child” narrative by portraying them *as victims* of social injustices. Traumatic or socially risky life events such as poverty, migration, war, abuse, and neglect are represented through images like worn or oversized clothes, living on the streets, being forced to work, crying, and injury. These visuals are intended to evoke an emotional response in the viewer (Kılıç & Seçilmiş, 2022) but also position children as passive, helpless figures in need of rescue. While such representations hold the potential to make social issues more visible, they also raise serious ethical concerns. This perspective may overshadow the child’s individuality, subjectivity, and resilience. When a child is depicted only as a suffering being in need of

help, they are reduced to an image designed to appeal to public conscience. Furthermore, such visuals are often used as tools of emotional exploitation within the social media environment, which is centered on likes, shares, and follower gains (Fidan & Şentürk, 2016), resulting in digital profit or validation gained through children's suffering (Ergül & Yıldız, 2021). These contents are not only produced and shared by parents but also by individuals, NGOs, media accounts, and politicians. Particularly when political figures use such images not to develop solutions but to display symbolic stances, they instrumentalize children's realities and obscure public responsibilities. This approach, which appeals to the moral conscience of society, turns the child into a compelling victim figure while simultaneously silencing their own voice. Ultimately, the representation of children in the context of social injustice requires careful ethical reflection. Making the problems children face visible is undoubtedly important, but this visibility should not undermine their right to be subjects, nor harm their identity and privacy, nor reproduce narratives that equate childhood solely with pain and victimhood.

In the notion of the *innocent child as an incomplete individual*, childhood is perceived both as a state of deficiency and merely as a preparatory phase for adulthood. However, contemporary theories of childhood regard childhood as a valuable and holistic period in its own right. From a developmental psychology perspective, children's competencies should be interpreted not as deficiencies but as age-appropriate characteristics (Aksoy-Kumru & Yılmaz, 2024; Uslu, 2020). This theme defines the child not as who they are, but as who they ought to be. Such representations portray the child solely as someone preparing for adulthood, as an unfinished individual. As a result, childhood is not recognized as an intrinsically meaningful and valuable period but is instead understood as a temporary phase of lack. In contrast, contemporary childhood theories conceptualize childhood not as a precursor to adulthood, but as a distinct period with its own individual, social, and cultural dimensions. Representations constructed through the image of the innocent child measure the child not as they are, but against an idealized model of what they should become. This weakens pedagogical approaches and shapes the child's self-worth according to societal expectations. Therefore, while this theme glorifies innocence, it ultimately produces a framework that may harm the developmental nature and subjectivity of the child (Gündoğdu, 2025).

In the understanding of the *innocent child as a little adult* the child either behaves like an adult or is forced to do so by adults. In this view gender roles beauty standards and domestic responsibilities are emphasized. Within the context of children's rights the process of adultification which can harm the developmental integrity of the child is frequently criticized especially in social media posts. This situation may also represent an intrusion into the protected spheres of the child. Representations of adultified children are shaped through the imitation or encouragement of roles and behaviors that exceed the child's developmental boundaries (Bal & Onay 2020). Examples of such representations include children kissing each other on the lips holding hands exchanging gifts resembling romantic relationships or taking on domestic responsibilities behaviors frequently seen on social media. These depictions expose children to age inappropriate gender roles beauty norms and adult like representations. Sometimes children imitate these roles voluntarily other times they are directly guided by adults to behave in such ways (Sorin 2005). However from a children's rights perspective these representations may damage a child's developmental integrity and constitute an invasion of their protected spaces. Adultification often disguised as the glorification of innocence obscures the naturalness and subjectivity of the child and must be critically questioned.

Social media posts that appear to celebrate or protect the child often conceal ethical issues rooted in the innocent child concept. At the core of these problems lies the use of children not as individuals but as instruments to enhance adults' digital visibility and social approval. A common violation is the open sharing of identifiable information such as a child's name or face, which breaches the child's right to privacy and creates digital traces that may circulate without consent in the future (Dursun, 2019; Duygulu, 2019). Likewise, transforming children's emotional moments or developmental challenges into humorous or performative content devalues their experiences and undermines their dignity. Beyond these immediate ethical risks, recent scholarship highlights the importance of considering the child's right to digital privacy and the principle of future consent, which refers to the right to decide later in life about the visibility and permanence of one's digital data (Buckingham, 2007; Livingstone & Third, 2017). Children's online visibility today is not merely a cultural construct but a datafied identity shaped by surveillance capitalism and platform algorithms (Wells, 2017). Such representations generate enduring digital footprints that can affect children's future autonomy, reputation, and participation (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017; Pugh, 2014). Safeguarding children's rights in digital environments therefore requires moving beyond parental consent toward a rights-based and temporally aware approach that respects children's evolving capacities and ensures that consent is reconsidered as they mature.

6. Recommendations

Studies that examine children's digital representations from multidisciplinary perspectives need to be increased. Ethical awareness training regarding the sharing of children on social media should be widely implemented. Educational modules guiding parents on children's rights, digital privacy, and representation should be developed. Awareness-raising activities should be carried out to prevent parents from using their children as objects of consumption. Awareness initiatives involving the representation of children with special needs, vulnerable children, or those perceived as developmentally "insufficient" must be carefully reconsidered; in these posts, the child's consent, privacy, and dignity should be prioritized. Legal regulations concerning the digital representation of children should be updated, and clear, binding rules should be established on social media platforms regarding the sharing of children's images. Türkiye currently lacks comprehensive legislation that directly protects children's digital privacy. Social media companies should review their algorithms and content policies concerning child-related content and implement measures to limit the spread of content involving aesthetic and emotional manipulation that could facilitate child exploitation. Furthermore, technical monitoring mechanisms should be developed to prevent anonymous accounts from sharing images of children.

Statement of Research and Publication Ethics

The study does not require ethics committee approval.

Authors' Contributions to the Article

Author 1 contributed 100% to the article.

Conflict of Interest Statement

There is no conflict of interest between the authors.

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Extended Summary

This study examines parents' Instagram posts shared with the hashtag #innocentchild, exploring how the concept of childhood is represented in digital environments, how the notion of the "innocent child" is reproduced across multiple layers of meaning, and what kinds of ethical issues emerge within these representations. Although children are not direct active users of social media, they become visible through their parents' posts, offering important insights into how the idea of childhood is being redefined in the digital age. In this context, the study questions how children's visual and emotional representations are constructed by adults, what social and cultural foundations underlie the discourse of "innocence," and what kinds of risks these representations pose in terms of children's rights and ethical principles.

The study employed a qualitative case study design, which allows for an in-depth examination of a particular phenomenon within its natural context. Using purposive sampling, Instagram posts shared under the hashtags #innocentchild and #innocentchildren were analyzed. Initially, posts were identified, but only 109 posts featuring children were included in the analysis. Among these, 86 posts belonged to mothers and 23 to fathers. The data were summarized through short descriptive notes of the visual content, followed by causal coding to understand why these posts were labeled as "innocent." The coding process was conducted collaboratively by two researchers, and consensus was reached. Ethically, the study prioritized participant privacy and digital confidentiality, even though the analyzed posts were publicly accessible. No visuals or quotations that could reveal user identities were included, and all data were anonymized to maintain a balance between digital visibility and ethical responsibility.

The analysis revealed five main themes: the child as an aesthetic object, the child as a victimized figure, the child as an incomplete individual, the child as a little adult, and ethical issues. In the theme of the "aesthetic object," children's physical appearances such as facial expressions, eyes, or feet, as well as childhood activities like playing or drawing, were emphasized. Here, the child is portrayed not as an individual subject but as a visual image that evokes feelings of comfort and affection. Such posts reduce childhood to an emotional object of relief and overlook children's individuality. In the "victimized figure" theme, children are portrayed as symbols of poverty, migration, war, abuse, and neglect. Images of children crying, wearing old clothes, or appearing injured appeal to the moral conscience of society, but they also frame children as passive beings in need of rescue. This representation weakens their subjectivity and at times serves as a tool of emotional manipulation to gain likes or followers. The theme of the incomplete individual depicts children as developmentally deficient, unfinished, or merely in preparation for adulthood. Behaviors such as not being toilet trained, inability to express emotions, or difficulty in abstract thinking are presented not as natural aspects of development but as deficiencies. This perspective reproduces a traditional understanding of childhood as a preparatory stage rather than a valuable life period in its own right. In the "little adult" theme, children are represented in age-inappropriate, sexualized, romantic, or adult-like roles. Images of holding hands, kissing on the lips, or exchanging gifts reflect an adultification process that imposes gender roles and social expectations on children prematurely, threatening their developmental integrity. The final theme, ethical issues, focuses on the instrumentalization of children in digital contexts. The unauthorized sharing of children's photographs, the use of their emotional reactions as humor, the exposure of developmental limitations, and the use of children as tools for greetings or celebrations were identified as major ethical violations. These cases illustrate how

children's digital identities are employed to enhance adults' social visibility and performance. The findings indicate that representations of children on social media predominantly serve adults' needs for social approval, recognition, and identity construction. Content aesthetically framed through the notion of innocence reflects a cultural practice in which the child becomes an object rather than a subject. This confirms Philippe Ariès' argument that childhood is an invention, with social media functioning as its modern showcase.

In the discussion, the study reveals that the innocent child notion is reproduced across both cultural and digital dimensions. This understanding encourages parents to portray their children as cute, pure, or suffering figures, thereby obscuring the child's subjective experiences, rights, and privacy. Aesthetic concerns, social approval, and digital identity performances blur the child's authentic existence. The sharing of children with special needs, often under the pretext of raising awareness, can in practice turn into an act of emotional exploitation rather than genuine advocacy. The study emphasizes the need to develop ethical awareness and a child rights-based digital consciousness to counter such practices. Educational programs targeting parents, teachers, and public institutions should address digital privacy, child consent, and the right to future identity. Moreover, social media platforms should implement clearer and more binding regulations regarding the use of children's images. The absence of a comprehensive legal framework protecting children's digital privacy in Türkiye represents a significant gap. Therefore, both legal and cultural measures must be taken to safeguard children's digital presence through multi-stakeholder policies. In conclusion, posts shared with the hashtag innocent child reveal the complex relationship between social values, parental identity, and digital culture. However, this visibility carries the potential to undermine children's individual rights and subject positions. Children's digital representations should not cater to adults' aesthetic or emotional needs but should instead be approached through an ethical awareness that prioritizes the child's dignity, development, and rights.