Woven in Memory: Netnographic Insights on Nostalgia-Based Branding in South Indian Fashion

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Abstract: ***Purpose***: In an era of emotion-driven consumerism, nostalgia has emerged as a powerful strategic asset in branding, particularly in culturally rich and memory-anchored markets like South India. This study investigates how regional fashion and lifestyle brands employ nostalgic storytelling to engage consumers and shape brand perceptions. ***Design/ Methodology/ Approach***: Adopting a qualitative netnographic approach, the research analyzes 100 user-generated Instagram comments drawn from 11 verified South Indian brands. Thematic coding was conducted across five pre-established categories: Personal nostalgia, Collective nostalgia, emotional engagement, brand love and purchase intention based on the literature reviews taken from scholarly publication. ***Findings***: The findings reveal a frequent overlap between personal and collective nostalgia with both forms serves as a catalyst for emotional engagement and subsequently brand attachment. Notably purchase intention was less frequently expressed, emotional resonance consistently merged as a precursor to consumer intent. This study also extends Affect Theory by showing that affect is culturally co-constructed, and refines ELM by positioning nostalgia as a hybrid persuasion mechanism in collectivist digital contexts. ***Originality/ Value***: This study contributes to the existing literature by extending the application of nostalgia marketing to regional, non-Western brand contexts and by demonstrating the methodological value of netnography for capturing affective consumer behavior in digital environments. By illuminating the emotional dynamics of consumer-brand relationships in South India, this paper offers timely insights into the evolving future of marketing in emerging markets.

Keywords: Nostalgia marketing, Emotional branding, Netnography, Digital storytelling, Affect theory, ELM.

INTRODUCTION
BACKGROUND

We are living in an increasingly experience-driven marketplace and so brands forge emotional bonds with consumers by turning nostalgia as a strategic tool (Muehling & Sprott, 2004). Nostalgic marketing is defined as the use of familiar and emotionally meaning cues from the past which in turn enhance brand attachment, emotional engagement and consumer loyalty (Pascal, Sprott & Muehling, 2002; Sedikides et al., 2008).

Familial memory, cultural rituals and regional identity makes India culturally rich especially the South and nostalgia takes a bigger hand in connecting it. Brands that are rich in traditional categories and products such as sarees & jewelry have begun to incorporate these memory triggers into their digital storytelling (Raj, Aithal & Bhat, 2021). The evolution of digital platforms such as Instagram, Pinterest and YouTube has further improved these brands to strategize nostalgia visually and emotionally, creating compelling consumer touchpoints (Marchegiani & Phau, 2011; Belk, 2013).

RESEARCH GAP

In recent times, research in nostalgia marketing have been well established in Western and urban contexts yet the examination in regional branding especially in fashion and lifestyle categories remain limited (Ravindran & Nayar, 2022). And there is a distinguish gap when it comes to researching personal and collective nostalgia in influencing emotional and behavioral responses to branding (Zhou et al., 2012; Holbrook & Schindler, 2003). Very few have explored how nostalgia operates in the Indian cultural context using digital media. Very few have adopted netnographic methods to capture consumer emotion in natural settings (Kozinets, 2010), where nostalgia is expressed through comments, regional language, emojis and memory-based storytelling.

As brands increasingly shift toward emotion-led storytelling, there is an urgent need to understand how cultural identity, memory and emotional resonance affects digital brand engagement particularly in South India.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

To explore how South Indian brands predominantly fashion brands use nostalgia in digital branding strategies.

To identify how personal and collective nostalgia manifest in consumer comments on digital media.

Examine how nostalgic branding influences consumer engagement, brand love and purchase intention.

To evaluate the role of nostalgia as a persuasion route within the Elaboration Likelihood Model in collectivist cultural contexts.

To contribute insights on emotion-led branding strategies in emerging Indian markets.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY
This significance of this research appears both ways in theory and in practice. Theoretically, it expands literature on emotional branding and nostalgia in Non-western markets (Huang, Yen & Liu, 2014). Methodologically, using netnography to interpret real-time emotional expression through comments of the audiences, stands to be an underutilized approach in regional Indian marketing studies. It provides marketers and brand owners with a roadmap for using memory, emotion and cultural cues to strengthen brand relationships in emerging markets.

LITERATURE REVIEW
UNDERSTANDING NOSTALGIA IN MARKETING
Nostalgia, originally studied as a medical or psychological condition, has evolved into a potent tool in marketing specially for evoking emotional connection and brand attachment (Holak & Havlena, 1998). Nostalgia is defined as a sentimental longing for the past, a homesickness and it can be personal (based on individual memories) or collective (shared cultural memory) (Zhou et al., 2008; Sedikides et al., 2008)

In branding, Nostalgia has taken a peripheral route cue in the Elaboration Likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), influencing consumers through affective responses rather than logical persuasion.

PERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE NOSTALGIA
Personal nostalgia related to autobiographical memory and individual life experiences such as childhood days, school routines or family traditions (Muehling & Sprott, 2004). Collective nostalgia, on the other hand, is greatly tied to shared identity, culture and generational belonging (Zhou et al., 2012).

Studies show that both types can positively influence emotional engagement, brand love and purchase intention (Marchegiani & Phau, 2011), but few explore how they coexist, particularly in non-Western or regional brand contexts.

EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT AND BRANDING
Emotion plays a major role in consumer- brand relationships. According to Affect theory (Tomkins, 1962; Izard, 1997), emotional expressions like joy, nostalgia and warmth are not just by products but also the drivers of behavior.

Emotional branding, when layered with nostalgic cues, enhances brand authenticity, trust and consumer loyalty (Thompson et al., 2006; Merchant & Rose, 2013). This is particularly important in emerging markets, where brands often rely on cultural memory with consumers in emotionally resonant ways.

NOSTALGIA BRANDING IN EMERGING MARKETS
In culturally rich regions like South India, nostalgia is embedded in daily aesthetics that included rituals, dress, language and even media. Yet, academic exploration of nostalgia branding in regional Indian fashion and lifestyle branding remains scarce. Most studies have focused on global or urban Indian contexts leaving a gap in understanding how regional identity and emotional memory interact in digital branding.

This study addresses that gap by examining heritage-rooted South Indian brands through the lens of emotional and nostalgia discourse on social media.

NETNOGRAPHY AND CULTURAL EMOTION MAPPING
Netnography is a qualitative method designed to understand online communities and consumer behavior in natural digital settings (Kozinets, 2010). It is increasingly used in emotional and cultural branding studies (Tuncay Zayer & Coleman, 2015; Belk et al., 2013).

In this study, netnography allows for authentic observation of emotional and nostalgic expressions, enabling the capture of raw, unfiltered consumer sentiment, It also addresses limitations of traditional surveys by analyzing naturally occurring data, which is especially valuable in regional branding contexts where cultural nuances matter.

AFFECT THEORY IN CONSUMER RESEARCH
Affect Theory, originally formulated by Tomkins (1962) and subsequently elaborated upon by Izard (1977), highlights the point that emotions are not end products but first-order motivational systems that energize human action. For Tomkins, specific affects like joy, shame, interest, and nostalgia serve as genetically programmed activators of thought and action. Izard (1997) went on to demonstrate that emotions play a central role in personality development, social interaction, and decision-making.

In advertising, Affect Theory has been extensively used to prove that emotional displays (for example, joy, pride, or nostalgia) serve as drivers of consumer-brand relationships and not secondary by-products (Holbrook & Schindler, 2003; Thompson, Rindfleisch & Arsel, 2006). Research indicates that affective stimuli can boost perceived brand authenticity, consumer trust, and long-term loyalty (Merchant & Rose, 2013).

Nostalgia, in turn, has been theorized as an affective experience with warmth, yearning, and bittersweet reminiscence (Sedikides et al., 2008). It not just deepens emotional involvement but also maintains self-continuity and cultural identity (Wildschut et al., 2006). Affect Theory thus offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how nostalgia acts as an emotional mover in branding scenarios.

ELABORATION LIKELIHOOD MODEL (ELM) AND NOSTALGIA IN PERSUASION
The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) of Petty and

Cacioppo (1986) is among the most popular dual-process theories of persuasion. According to it, persuasion can result from:

Central Route: Logical processing, high elaboration, argument quality.

Peripheral Route: Relying on cues like visuals, emotions, or source credibility, low elaboration.

In consumer research, ELM has also been widely used to advertising and brand situations. Peripheral cues like humor, nostalgia, or music tend to shape attitudes when consumers are less intrinsically motivated to process information at a deep level (Muehling & Sprott, 2004). Nostalgia, for instance, is used as a peripheral affective cue that directs consumer responses on the basis of emotional congruence rather than rational consideration (Pascal, Sprott & Muehling, 2002).

Nonetheless, newer studies indicate that nostalgia might not be a passive peripheral cue anymore; rather, it can activate active elaboration, like storytelling, remembering, and social telling (Marchegiani & Phau, 2011). This implies that nostalgia could exist on a continuum between central and peripheral processing, as influenced by cultural context, level of involvement, and message framing.

Thus, ELM offers a useful framework to analyze how brand messages that become nostalgic engage consumers on an emotional and cognitive level, yet it also calls for further modification within culturally situated, digital environments such as South India.

METHODOLOGY
RESEARCH DESIGN
This research adopts a qualitative netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2010) to delve how South Indian fashion and lifestyle brands recall emotional and nostalgic responses through digital branding. Netnography is found to be the strongest suitable method for this study since it analyzes naturally occurring consumer expressions in online communities, especially in platforms like Instagram, Quora and YouTube where identity, emotion and memory are publicly performed.

DATA COLLECTION
Data were collected from Instagram posts of 11 verified South Indian Fashion and lifestyle brands, including RMKV, Tulsi.Madras, Saaramati, Ammas drape, Drapery silk, Mookuthi, Madharsha, Instore fashions, House of Tulip, Souled story, Nerige.story.

Comments were taken from posts that explicitly used nostalgic visuals, culturally rooted language or heritage storytelling. A total number of 100 user comments were manually compiled, anonymized and organized in a structured spreadsheet. Only organic, user-generated comments were taken for the study and brand captions, or paid influencer content were excluded from the study.

DATA ANALYSIS
The comments of the users were analyzed thematically using a codebook developed on nostalgia marketing (Zhou et al., 2008; Sedikides et al., 2015; Muehling & Sprott, 2004).

The five codes used were:

CODE	DESCRIPTION
Personal Nostalgia	Comments referencing individual memories
Collective Nostalgia	Comments referring shared cultural heritage, regional pride or generational memory
Emotional Engagement	Expressions of warmth, longing, happiness or emotional resonance
Brand Love	Affectionate language toward brand or its aesthetic philosophy
Purchase Intention	Direct or indirect expressions of desire to buy or repurchase

TABLE I: Thematic codes used in the study

SOURCE: Author's own

Each comment was coded manually, and multiple codes could be applied to a single comment if applicable. Comments were analyzed independently for emotional tone, memory-based language, cultural references and action-oriented language.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION
All data used in this study were publicly available and did not require any authentication to proceed. Usernames and identifying information were removed to ensure anonymity. This study followed the ethical standards of qualitative online research as outlined by Kozinets (2015), respecting the context and visibility of online content.

RESULTS
THEMATIC FREQUENCY SUMMARY

CODE	% OF TOTAL COMMENTS
PERSONAL NOSTALGIA	79
COLLECTIVE NOSTALGIA	44

EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT	51
BRAND LOVE	30
PURCHASE INTENTION	18

Table II: Thematic Frequency distribution of user comments

Source: Author's own

PERSONAL NOSTALGIA IS THE STRONGEST EMOTIONAL DRIVER

With 79% of comments reflecting personal memories of paati, amma, school and weddings, these traditional products like sarees and uniforms acted as autobiographical memory cues which was supported by Muehling & Sprott (2004); Holbrook & Schindler (2003).

"I can still remember the comforting smell of Paati's house, Cousins sleeping over... slow beautiful days" (Saaramati, IG).

"This scooter brings back so many childhood memories" (Nerige.story, IG).

"My mother had similar diamond nose rings and earrings, remembering my Amma" (Mookuthi, IG).

This research demonstrates how South Indian fashion branding activates deep, emotion-rooted memory recall, making personal nostalgia an anchor for consumer-brand relationships.

COLLECTIVE NOSTALGIA AMPLIFIES CULTURAL PRIDE AND BELONGING

As shown in the table II, 44% of comments referenced shared cultural identity, such as Tamil Aesthetics, 80s Madras visuals, Vintage Bangalore aesthetics and temples. "Just got too nostalgic seeing our old Bengaluru…I still remember our Malleshwaram circle where horses were plying for carrying goods" (Nerige.story, IG).

"The retro kannada vibes is on spot" (Nerige.story, IG).
"Reminds me of our Nondi game, Pandi game with my cousins" (RKV, IG).

Brands like RMKV and Nerige.story are not just positioned themselves as fashion providers but as cultural memory keepers, reinforcing group belonging and tradition in modern digital spaces.

EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT IS THE BRIDGE TO BRAND LOVE

As shown in the table II, 51% of comments expressed emotion using emojis, longing or warm metaphors.

"Waves of emotions rolling!" (RMKV, IG).

"Your page is a time machine…teleport us to the bygone days" (Nerige.story).

"You and the warmth you give through this brand" (Saaramati, IG).
"Grace and elegance personified! Look at the shine of the mookuthis. My inspiration to pick up the besari from you!"

(Mookuthi, IG).

Brand love followed in 30% of comments showing a sequential emotional buildup which further proves that in digital branding, emotional resonance often precedes rational loyalty, affirming affect theory in emerging market contexts.

PURCHASE INTENT IS EMOTION-LED, NOT PRODUCT-LED

Only 18% of comments included explicit buying signals, but these were mostly paired with personal memory and emotional language.

"What a classic piece! Price please" (Saaramati, IG)

"Omg love this! WANT THIS ASAP!" (Nerige.story, IG).

It is very evident that emotion is the driver and not the by-product. This challenges rational persuasion models and validates the peripheral route in Elaboration Likelihood Model in South Indian Consumer psychology.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research study was conducted to investigate how South Indian fashion and lifestyle brands evoke emotional and nostalgic responses through digital branding. User comments across saree, jewelry, school uniforms were analyzed based on Netnography. The findings reinforce the strategic potential of nostalgia-based branding, particularly in culturally rooted and emotionally loaded markets like South India.

NOSTALGIA AS A CROSS-CATEGORICAL BRANDING TOOL

The results clearly demonstrate that nostalgia is not limited to one product type. While sarees and uniforms triggered rich personal memories of mothers, grandmothers, school days and weddings, jewelry and T-shirts sparked collective nostalgia tied to regional culture, cinematic history and familial rituals. This greatly supports Mueling & Sprott's (2004) assertion that nostalgic cues enhance emotional resonance and extends it by showing that multiple categories can act as nostalgic stimuli.

PERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE NOSTALGIA CO-EXIST AND INFORCE EMOTIONAL IMPACT

The interplay between personal and collective nostalgia was especially evident. Comments often blended individual recollections with shared generational and regional pride. This finding echoes Sedikides et al. (2008) and Zhou et al. (2012), who differentiated personal from collective nostalgia, but this study reveals that in South Indian digital branding, the two are often intertwined, especially when brands deploy culturally specific symbols.

EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT AS THE GATEWAY TO PURCHASE INTENT

Comments were emotionally rich, filled with warmth, longing, tears, pride and joy. These reactions are consistent with Affect Theory, which posits that emotions are primary motivators of human behavior and precede cognitive evaluation (Izard, 1977; Tomkins, 1962). While direct purchase intent was less frequently stated, emotional engagement was a strong precursor to brand love and loyalty, supporting the principles of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Within this framework, nostalgia functions as a peripheral cue, evoking emotional resonance rather than logical argument, and guiding consumers into a state of emotional affinity that may eventually influence purchasing behavior (Muehling, Sprott, 2004)

CULTTURAL CONTEXT DEEPENS NOSTALGIC BRANDING'S EFFECTIVENESS

This study adds to the emerging body of research emphasizing cultural memory in branding. The emotional impact of these brands is amplified by regional aesthetics, language and ritual association and that acts as a reminder that Nostalgia is not universal but highly localized. Brands like RMKV, Mookuthi are not just simply evoking the past but also activating a culturally grounded sense of belonging. This is especially relevant in emerging markets where tradition and modernity co-exist dynamically.

NOSTALGIA IS NOT AGE-LOCKED

Wildschut et al. (2006) argue that nostalgia is a universal emotion, though its triggers vary by life stage. This research reveals that even younger users engage with 'secondhand nostalgia' that are drawn to memories they never lived but emotionally relate to through parents, pop culture or digital storytelling.

RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS
THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Affect Theory argues that feelings of joy, nostalgia, and warmth are key drivers of human action (Tomkins, 1962; Izard, 1997). Our research expands this tradition by illustrating that affect for South Indian branding is co-constituted not just at the individual level but at the cultural level as well. Consumers often intertwine personal and communal nostalgia by blending autobiographic memories with communal cultural identity. This implies that affective reactions are heightened within regional memory systems to which they are embedded and points to cultural contextualization as a determinant of emotional drivers for brand engagement.

Previous work mostly situates nostalgia as a peripheral cue to the ELM model, where it affects consumers via affect rather than cognitive elaboration (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Muehling & Sprott, 2004). Our results dislodge this binary by showing that nostalgia in online contexts tends to elicit active narrative elaboration (e.g., users narrating family histories, rituals, or group histories). Therefore, nostalgia could act as a hybrid persuasion path, being at once peripheral (affective) and central (cognitively elaborative),

especially in collectivist cultures. This theoretical shift broadens the applicability of ELM beyond its conventional Western, rational–affective dichotomies.

Placing Netnography as a Theory-Building Frame Aside from methodological contribution, this study situates netnography as a theoretical frame for analyzing memory and affect in consumer-brand relationships. Compared to surveys or experiments that gauge nostalgia post hoc, netnographic observation exposes naturally occurring, digitally enacted nostalgia in real time. This adds to Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) as it demonstrates how emotions and identities get co-constructed online, where nostalgia is collectively performed through language, emojis, and storytelling.

Prior research generally places nostalgia within Western or metropolitan markets and tends to view nostalgia as a kind of universal affective stimulus. Our research contributes to the literature through demonstration of the fact that nostalgia is culturally inscribed and not universal. Nostalgia in South India tends to be anchored in ritual, family structures, and linguistic signs, and younger audiences experience "second-hand nostalgia"—emotional engagement with memories never experienced firsthand. We propose that such dynamics are potentially more prominent in collectivist cultures, providing a route for future cross-cultural theorizing in nostalgia studies.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

For brand managers and marketers in emerging markets like South India, the findings underscore the power of:

- Memory-driven marketing: Brands can effectively anchor identity and warmth by invoking cultural aesthetics and generational symbols.
- Visual and linguistic cues: Use of regional language motifs and colour palettes can evoke strong emotions.
- Emotional storytelling: Comments show that audiences connect more with emotionally authentic content that product selling.
- Multi-generational marketing: Campaigns need not target one age bracket. Nostalgia- based content naturally resonates across family systems and shared memory cultures. This serves as a roadmap for heritage brands to reimagine their identity without sacrificing tradition.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Like every other research, this study also has some limitations. Consumers' age, gender and regional identity could not be confirmed. Future research could combine netnography with surveys or profile analysis for stronger demographic clarity. Only Instagram-based content was analyzed. Broader exploration across YouTube, Threads, Quora might reveal platform-specific differences in emotional tone. Saree brands dominated the data set. Future work could explore similar patterns in food nostalgia, childhood toys or Mass media content. Future research could be conducted on comparative nostalgia studies like North vs South or Gen Y vs Gen Z using a combination of

qualitative and experimental design.

In a world speeding toward the future, this research shows that brands hold emotional power especially when they speak not just to the consumer's need, but to their memory and identity.

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