

NOSTALGIA SELLS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF RETRO VISUAL TRENDS IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ADVERTISING

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ABSTRACT

Vintage typography, mascot throwbacks, reminiscent jingles, retro-style packaging — these are some of the ways Indian advertisers have leaned into the past throughout the 20th century and into today. This paper qualitatively explores how and why retro visual trends are repeatedly effective at invoking nostalgia in Indian audiences. Drawing upon an interpretive qualitative case-study approach, anchored by thematic review of publicly available campaign materials, this paper discusses three case studies of Indian brands using nostalgia: Campa Cola's 2023–2025 reincarnation by Reliance Consumer Products, Fevicol's decades-spanning print advertising consistency, and Parle-G's long-retained — and briefly updated — packaging. Findings identify four primary visual-nostalgic devices: vintage packaging/logos/mascots, vintage typography/fonts and colour schemes, vintage-styled audio/jingles, and continued narrative references or ad-character reappearance over many years of campaigns. Conclusions discuss retro visual trends' continued success in Indian markets as signalling repetition and trust in a visual-first society where advertisements are often consumed by multiple generations of families together, and how disruption to visual legacy brand assets can cause rapid and unexpected consumer backlash — specifically referencing backlash to Parle-G's 20 brief logo change.

Keywords: nostalgia marketing, retro design, Indian advertising, visual semiotics, retro aesthetics, packaging heritage, qualitative research

1. INTRODUCTION

Take a stroll through any Indian kitchen or scan through any Indian advertisement reel during festive seasons. People will quickly realise that the past is never too far away. Just like how a soft-drink bottle decides to return to its iconic script logo it sported way back in the 19ties, or how a glue bottle advertisement chooses to never age beyond its rustic Hindi humour from 1989, or how Parle-G's bite-sized biscuits have continued to feature the same little girl on their packaging since before India was Independent. Retro-style visuals — the intentional replication or design homage to older typographies, colour palettes, mascots, package styles, and more — have been an enduring and commercially significant trend in Indian advertising. But what specific design elements make up these retro visual trends? And how do Indian brands replicate nostalgia through consistent visual strategies?

The argument this paper advances is threefold: retro-style visual packages in Indian markets function not simply as design exercises, but as signals of repetition that build trust and recognition in a country where 70% of the population is visual-first rather than verbal-first (Laffont, 2022). This signalling effect has been noted globally by design researchers who point to 2024 as a “year of revivalism,” where “throwback graphics evoke nostalgia for several decades”, from the ‘80s-inspired grunge trend to reintroductions of classic serif fonts (Monotype, 2024). In India, secondary research demonstrates that audiences young and old respond to specifically Indian vintage fonts, colour schemes, jingles, and advertising characters revived through digital memes and vintage reruns (Jain et al., 2025). But how are

retro visual trends constructed in Indian markets, and which devices do Indian advertisers repeat to craft nostalgia in brand advertising?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Why Brands Look Back: Applying Nostalgia in Marketing: As detailed in the introduction, nostalgia is big business. For brands that hope to leverage the fast-carbonated feeling of fond memories, several articles and think pieces offer educated advice: use vintage packaging, bring back old packaging, reference old jingles/music, or showcase specific brand's "legacy" materials (Confetti Design, 2026b). Consumers appear to respond not just to specific vintage brands they remember from their youth, but to retro-style revivals inspired by Indian brands of the past. This market research advice converges with academic literature demonstrating that nostalgia can positively impact consumer affinity, with one survey indicating that "almost 75% consumers feel happier and develop positive brand associations with brands that remind them of their childhood" (Parikh, 2021).

Curiously absent from discussions about applying nostalgia to branding and design is consumer reaction when brands change their "heritage packaging." One of Parle-G's packages has remained unchanged for decades. In June 2024, Parle decided to update its pack. Unsatisfied consumers did what consumers do best: sent Parle-G heartfelt notes about their "memories of old pack," "school days," and "sincere apologies if I had hurt your sentiments" (Customer, 2024; Mehta, 2024). Parle eventually caved to consumer pressure and reinstated old packaging. What does this teach us about the risk-reward calculation of applying nostalgia in marketing?

2.2 Visual Trends of Retro-Style Packaging : Design knowledge sites outline several ways that brands can incorporate retro nostalgia into advertising: vintage colour-schemes, vintage typography/fonts, vintage food photography, vintage music/sounded cues, and more (Confetti Design, 2026a). Influential graphic design articles from 24 note that retro-style packaging is particularly pervasive in 24, marking a return to brands' "own heritage as opposed to jumping on a trend from a previous era" (Duplo International, 2024). Design theorists are unconfused by consumers' deep emotional reactions to retro-style packaging. Examining retro and vintage design through the lens of semiotics, designers argue that every aspect of packaging conveys denotative as well as connotative signals to consumers (Setiawardhani, 2024). Brands that draw from their own design history are purposefully employing retro aesthetics to evoke nostalgia.

2.3. Cases of Nostalgia in Indian Markets: Indian consumers are exposed to nostalgia in advertising both through global brands that leverage old-style fonts and music in their campaigns, and through India-specific brands that have maintained consistent packaging and advertising styles for decades. Structural features of Indian households may contribute to nostalgia marketing's success in Indian markets: in India, households typically include at least three generations under one roof who may experience the same advertisement together (PitchOnNet, 2026). Taken together, these cases illustrate that nostalgia in advertising can be instantly recognisable and can be replicated through several marketing techniques. What happens when a vintage brand changes its emblematic packaging, but the rest of its formula stays the same?

2.4. Gap in Literature: There is limited qualitative research exploring the visual markers Indian brands construct or retain to encode nostalgia over time. Through an exploratory qualitative case-study lens, this paper investigates how three Indian brands have employed retro-style visual markers and branding techniques to signal consistency to Indian consumers.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study will be anchored by visual-semiotic and cultural-branding theory. This approach centres packaging, typography, music, and advertising aesthetics as part of a broader communication process that signals cultural meaning to audiences (Setiawardhani, 2024). Three themes recur across nostalgic brand packaging that this paper will explore: visual heritage, retro construction, and asset fragility. Visual heritage refers to visual markers that carry forward legacy branding from the past; this can include mascots, logos, typefaces, and colour schemes. Retro-construction is the design process by which brands mimic past styles visually, whether authentically or inspired by another brand's past. As one Indian consumer said of Parle's little yellow-girl logo, "Parle had your trust for decades. Isn't that enough?" (Mital, 2024). Modification of a key visual-heritage brand element can cause consumer distrust or irritation, particularly if that element has existed for decades. Asset fragility describes how brand elements that have existed for a long time may be more vulnerable to consumer backlash if changed.

4. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To identify common visual devices used in Indian advertisements to generate nostalgia.
- To explore through qualitative case studies of Campa Cola, Fevicol and Parle-G brands how nostalgia is created or maintained through active revivalist methods, strict design-style adherence, or decades of preservation.
- To study the possible risks of retro advertising. Discuss Parle-G's recent logo change in the context of a larger discussion about the vulnerability of older visual brand assets.

5. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Due to the nature of the research question, centred around a phenomenon embedded in cultural industries practice, this study is aided by a qualitative, exploratory multi-case research design. Qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis are particularly useful methods for analysing how meaning is made through visuals and storytelling choices in advertisements and product packaging (Alejandro & Zhao, 2024).

This research is based on secondary data comprising advertising campaigns, packaging and labelling images, trade-press reporting and commentary, brand retrospectives, and consumer-facing journalism related to three Indian brand examples that use nostalgia as a design element—namely Campa Cola, Fevicol, and Parle-G. The examples were selected using criterion-based purposive sampling based on (a) prominence in Indian design and advertising discourse as representations of nostalgic visual strategy; (b) availability of ample secondary material to support data triangulation; and (c) each example's illustration of a different facet of retro visual strategy — full rebranding, long-term consistency, and maintenance of key corporate assets despite external forces, respectively.

The data analysis process utilised reflexive thematic analysis methodology. The material was coded through repeated review of campaign materials and packaging, open coding of visual and linguistic nostalgic elements, and subsequent clustering of these codes into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2024). Efforts were made to ensure trustworthiness by corroborating details across multiple independent secondary sources for each case study, and by acknowledging potential bias through reflection on the subjective nature of interpreting visual communication. Given the limitations inherent to an interpretive qualitative study conducted

on secondary data, the conclusions of this study do not make generalizable claims but rather seek to develop contextual insight that can be transferred to understand similar strategies.

6. CASE STUDIES

The three brands showcased below have been curated based on the following criteria — to span multiple product verticals (Campa Cola: beverages, Fevicol: industrial/homecare, Parle-G: packaged food) whilst still exemplifying similarity in utilisation of retro elements as building blocks of trust.

6.1 Case Study on Campa Cola — Nostalgia Engineering on a National Level

Of the brands explored as part of this white paper, Campa Cola showcases the most obvious utilisation of retro-visual strategy as foundational to a brand relaunch effort in the modern Indian context. Debuted in 1977 following the exit of Coca-Cola from India, Campa Cola grew to be ubiquitously associated with Indian-made self-reliance before experiencing diminishing sales through the late 1990s as multinational cola brands began re-entering the Indian market following economic liberalisation (TheMFCentral, 2025). Purchased in 2022 by Reliance Consumer Products Limited from the brand's now-defunct original owners, Campa saw distribution scaled nationally beginning 20 23 — while retaining the original bottling/format, typography/logo design as well as core flavour profiles of Campa Cola/Campa Orange/Campa Lemon when it relaunched (MediaNews4U, 2025).

Visual analysis shows retro-imagery being employed on dual levels. Packaging/logo design, rather than being modernised, retained 'nostalgic' cues from the Campa experience remembered from popular memory dating back to the 1980s (ITMunch, 2025). Television advertisement execution worked to 'modernise' this vintage Campa package through contemporary interpretation — hiring a top-Bollywood celebrity to dance to a remix of Campa cola's iconic 1980s jingle qualifies perfectly under design writing as 'retro with relevance' — remixing elements of the past to produce advertising content optimised for sharing on platforms like Instagram Reels/ Youtube Shorts, etc. (MapsOfIndia, 2025). Brand retrospectives cover this strategy of 'melding recall with relevance' especially well — describing how the 2023 campaign was intended to be instantly recognisable to parents and grandparents who grew up with Campa Cola decades ago while also reaching Gen-Z consumers in a brand-new way (Branding in Asia, 2025).

The Campa Cola example allows us to further point out how retro visual strategy may be paired with larger cultural emotions at play. From interviews to social media commentaries revolving around the re-introduction of Campa Cola to Indian markets, references to Campa Cola being implicitly swadeshi/ patriotic in positioning opposite to Coca-Cola and Pepsi persisted in tone — therefore mapping directly onto the individual-level nostalgia its retro visual branding evoked, collectively signifying a return to India's pre-Independence era of self-sufficiency (Finnovate, 2025; Cognitute, 2026). While this connection will not exist for every Indian brand with origins dating back multiple decades, it can safely be pointed out that 'retro visuals' will frequently map onto other strongly-national ideas in Indian context.

6.2 Case Study on Fevicol — Retro as Long-Term Creative Positioning

If Campa Cola serves as an example of retro-visual as a relaunch strategy, Fevicol conversely demonstrates retro-visual as Continuity. Ever since its launch in 1959, Pidilite Industries' brand of adhesive has stuck to a clear, recognitionable advertising style for print and television selling few but concrete ideas — minimal text, illustrated humour, easily-understood demonstration of product use case grounded in relatable, often rural Indian settings like repairers, small-town homes, rural buses etc. has been the norm across decades

for Fevicol television commercials (MarkHub24, 2026). Advertising industry interviews shed further light on this choice — founder Ashok Piramal and Pidilite leadership are reported to have demanded this continuity from agency Ogilvy upon initially commissioning work on Fevicol in the 1970s, with ad-man Piyush Pandey later stewarding this ‘creative territory’ against internally-driven pushes for change on the premise that consistency breeds deeper connection than creative cycles typical of most advertisers’ output produce (MarkHub24, 2026).

Examining Fevicol advertisements over the years shows multiple anchors of retro visual identity repeating, almost unchanged, across decades. From the signature blue-and-white packaging, to the two elephants logo design, to Hindi-language tagline of “Mazboot Jod” (Strong Bond) few elements of Fevicol’s visual brand identity have altered significantly since inception, with even the colour shade reportedly not changing (MBA-ESG, 2026). Narrative anchors hold true as well — for a brand that predominantly features non-actors/ celebrities as main characters in advertising executions, reliance on ‘everyday India’ and realistic characters grounds Fevicol’s advertising in a sense of past-ness, giving even its newest commercials a veneer of nostalgia (Duniyaeilm, 2025). Expert take demonstrates this intended connection as well — the family-bench campaign depicting multiple generations of a family over several decades (held together by Fevicol glue, of course) was specifically designed as an allegory to Fevicol’s own continuity as a household Indian brand for decades, cementing emotional connection with maximised repetition of product experience and branding collaterals (Duniyaeilm, 2025).

Studying Fevicol shows us that remaining retro does not necessitate rebooting or repackaging old symbols; in fact, committed absence of change, when entire industries around a brand shift their design practices, can also act as a form of retro signalling to consumers accustomed to planned obsolescence of just about everything else.

6.3 Case Study on Parle-G — Understanding the Value & Risk of a Retro Visual Asset

Finally, Parle-G best illustrates how powerful, and how fragile, a retro visual asset can be. Parle-G, the bestselling biscuit in India since its 1938 introduction as Parle Gluco, remains largely unchanged from its original advertisements, with a yellow package wrap and a childish, crayon-like illustration of a young girl drawing its shape from decades of brand design history predating it (Reborn Review, 2026). Interviews with designers reveal why Parle-G’s packaging has not just endured but thrived despite design trends moving from realism to skeuomorphism to flat design to material design to minimalism in the last fifty years — because consumers know packaging has changed multiple times in that period, an unchanging package is a subconscious signal to consumers that the product *inside* must also be trusted to have stood the test of time (Reborn Review, 2026). Short, campaign-focused brand refreshes can help a brand stay current for a while, but Parle-G shows how continued investment in a single visual identity can pay off for brands willing to do it.

A closer look at Parle-G becomes even more interesting because the brand, in late 2023, attempted to change its packaging & logo design. Parle-G announced on X/ Twitter on November 28th, 2023, that their much-loved logo featuring the girl on yellow packaging was being phased out for a minimalist yellow background adorned with a stylish gold "G," and this new design would be implemented starting January 1st, 2024.

7. DISCUSSION

7.1 Visual-Nostalgic Devices Repeated Across Cases: Between them, the three cases use four major visual-nostalgic devices. Heritage packaging/mascot preservation explains both

Fevicol's maintained logo and tagline scheme, and Parle-G's illustrated girl icon. Vintage font and colour palettes explain Campa Cola's consistent script logo and bottle shape. Retro-style remixed music and jingle revivals, meanwhile, are uniquely visible in Campa Cola's remix of an original 1980s jingle. Audio revivals extend nostalgia from the visual design sphere to consumer experiences of sound. Regular life vs decade-skipping narratives account for both Fevicol's consistent reliance on domestic advertising scenarios and, by extension, Parle-G's wrapper; the wrapper itself tells no story, but the absence of change on a pack passed down through Indian households becomes the story in itself. Altogether, these tactics strongly correspond to practical how-to retro packaging construction guidance documented in the design media, from artificially faded colour schemes, to font choice, to mascot retention. (Confetti Design, 2026a; ResourceLabel, 2025).

7.2 Retro Signals Trust Where Everything Else Says "Sell"

The single insight that rings true across all three cases is that visual retroness is being used strategically in Indian advertising less as an aesthetic choice than as a signal of trust. In an Indian consumer products market where new formulations, packaging variants, and advertising campaigns hit the market every month, and where low consumer awareness combined with high advertising clutter creates an uphill battle for brands fighting for mindshare (MarketingJobsIndia, 2020), something as simple as not changing how a product looks or sounds stands out to consumers as a signal of sincerity and brand stability. This strongly aligns with broader retro-focused design writing connecting vintage packaging styles to subconscious associations of comfort and quality. (ResourceLabel, 2025; PackagingConnections, 2025). What appears unique to India, however, is that retro continuity acts as a trust signal across two generations watching the same advertisements: genuine (secondary) nostalgia for older consumers, and projected or "borrowed" nostalgia for millennials and Gen Z consumers who may never have encountered the original advertisement, but now see it pass through social media and streaming services. (Jain et al., 2025; PitchOnNet, 2026).

7.3 Retro Built vs Retro Retained Brands

The cases also highlight an instructive binary between brands that build retro versus brands that retain it. Campa Cola is the archetype of the former: a brand resurrecting defunct vintage assets, then executing on modern media channels to synthetically create brand nostalgia on a large scale. Fevicol, and to far greater extent Parle-G, are examples of the opposite: brands that have never abandoned key visual assets. Both strategies can be effective. But they are not equally risky.

7.4 Why Old Things Are Hard to Change

Parle-G shows us that things that have not changed for a long time are difficult to change. Parle-G accumulated something like emotional brand equity simply by remaining unchanged for long enough. Retro as trust signals works in India because consumers have years to assign trust to packages that do not change. When a serious attempt is made to update a heritage package, that accumulated history of non-change works against the brand. Rather than read a new logo as part of an iterative design process, consumers read panic. Fevicol was smarter here. They didn't touch the logo at all. This conforms to a larger body of academic marketing literature sceptical of brands over-promising via branding exercises. (Setiawardhani, 2024) but builds on it in valuable ways. Brands that have relied on vintage packaging to build equity may want to consider visual asset updates as an entirely separate risk category. These brands don't "change logos"; they break consumer trust.

8. LIMITATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

As with all research projects, this paper has several limitations. First, this paper's analysis was conducted on publicly available campaign materials and packaging, as well as industry secondary commentary. Reader interpretation therefore comes closer to content analysis than audience testing; while certain conclusions about emotions evoked by specific campaigns feel intuitively correct, they cannot be considered empirical findings. Second, the three cases were selected due to being unusually well-documented national brands. Because of this, smaller retro brands that do business primarily in regional languages or product categories may be underrepresented in the analysis. Third, as is the case with all qualitative analytical writing, the themes proposed here are constructions of the researcher, intended as a means to introduce rigour into an inductive research process. These themes should be considered well-founded and plausible, but not comprehensive or statistically valid (Braun & Clarke, 2024). Audience testing to measure how Indian consumers react to both nationally known retro brands versus small players, and brands that have recently updated their visual assets versus those that haven't, could be a valuable extension of this research.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this paper was to understand why retro visuals continue to work in India today, and how Indian brands visually create and maintain retro trends through narrative and design. Campa Cola, Fevicol and Parle-G can be read as a trio that encapsulates retro visual design working on a spectrum - revivalist to conservative - but unified by its usage as a tool to communicate reliability through sonic and visual callbacks to a brand's own history, or collective memory at large. Parle-G also shows us that the affinity created by this device also makes it vulnerable, with consumers perceiving century-old advertisements as trust marks that suddenly changing can have negative ramifications. Retro visual strategy then becomes less about style or aesthetics from a brand manager or design researcher's perspective, and more about a trust bracket that expects loyalty both from the consumer and to the consumer, with limited gains in the function of short term redesigns. Looking at more brands within this qualitative framework, and testing with primary consumer research across markets and generations could help uncover deeper insights into the semantics of retro visual nostalgia in India.

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