

# An Investigation of the Effect of Nostalgia Proneness and Consumer Innovativeness on Acceptance of Retro Products



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**Abstract** Retro products are reinterpretations of products from the past complying with contemporary standards of performance, functioning, or taste. This paper explores consumers' acceptance of retro products by investigating their inherent paradox of being old and new at the same time. The effect of nostalgia proneness and consumer innovativeness on acceptance of a retro product is assessed and compared to their effect on acceptance of (1) the original version of the retro product and (2) a product which is similarly modern. Results of an empirical study ( $N = 262$ ) indicate that nostalgia proneness has a positive effect on consumers' acceptance of the original product, this effect being mediated by positive emotions. However, this effect is not observed for the retro product. In addition, consumer innovativeness has a positive effect on consumers' acceptance of the retro product and of the similarly modern product, this effect being mediated by perceived newness. These results suggest that consumer innovativeness is a better driver of acceptance of retro products than nostalgia proneness. Theoretical and managerial implications of these findings are discussed.

## Introduction

Evidence from the Volkswagen New Beetle or, more recently, from the Adidas Stan Smith suggests that retro is doing well in boosting sales. Retro products combine forms from the past with updated standards of performance and function (Brown 1999; Brown et al. 2003). From the perspective of consumers, the most frequently posited cause explaining the success of retro products is nostalgia proneness (Brown 1999; Brown et al. 2003; Cattaneo and Guerini 2012), while the key feature of a retro product is the element of updating (Brown et al. 2003; Cattaneo and Guerini

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2012; Fort-Rioche and Ackermann 2013). This is stressing the paradox of retro products, i.e., the simultaneous presence of old and new (Brown et al. 2003).

Is retro marketing detrimental to innovation, revealing the lack of creativity of marketers who make easy money by playing the nostalgia card (Fort-Rioche and Ackermann 2013)? Or is it a creative approach whereby products from the past are used as sources of inspiration to develop appealing new products? Or is it a way to offer a balance between past and future and therefore to meet at the same time consumers' needs to be bound to their past and to experience novelty? Understanding why consumers like retro products is important because it raises the question of whether marketers should consider products from the past as efficient tools to evoke nostalgic feelings or as sources of inspiration for the development of novel and original products.

The objective of this paper is to explore this apparent paradox, and from this, we specifically investigate attitudes toward a retro product versus its original version versus a similarly modern product. We firstly review the literature on retro marketing, nostalgia, and innovativeness. From this, we develop a series of hypotheses to test the impact of nostalgia proneness and consumer innovativeness on attitudes toward original vs. retro versus similarly modern products. In the following section, we develop a methodology for testing our hypotheses. Finally, we analyze the results, discuss their implications, and conclude with suggestions for further research.

## Retro Marketing

Retro marketing is a generic term used to describe marketing strategies capitalizing on the past to sell in the present (Brown 1999). The retro approach covers a large spectrum of marketing, as it can be about promotion (e.g., use of old advertisements), place (e.g., retail outlets inspired from the past), products, and brands (e.g., products whose design is inspired by the past, revival of old brands) (Brown 1999; Fort-Rioche and Ackermann 2013).

Nostalgia has been noted as an explanation for the success of retro products as they would bind consumers with former selves or former times when "things were better" (Brown 1999; Brown et al. 2003). Nostalgic feelings evoked by retro products would provide consumers with a sense of comfort (Brown et al. 2003). However, the signature of retro marketing is that it manages "to bring into line the past with the present" (Cattaneo and Guerini 2012, p 685). The "simultaneous presence of old and new, tradition and technology, primitivism and progress, same and different" is the inherent paradox of retro marketing (Brown et al. 2003, p 21).

Even if "no definitions of retro are extant" (Brown 1999, p 365), past research suggests different categories of retro products or brands in relation with the creative work that underlines their development (Brown 1999; Fort-Rioche and Ackermann 2013). For example, Fort-Rioche and Ackermann (2013) suggest three categories of products implying different levels of creativity. Whatever the category, all retro

products incorporate up-to-date technology and/or materials. However, “repro” retro products are “mere” reproductions of products from the past, which implies an absence of creative work. Creativity and innovation are the key features of “made-up” and “revamped” retro products, which differentiate from one another on the basis of the existence of a past referential product for “revamped” retro products but not for “made-up” retro products (Fort-Rioche and Ackermann 2013).

To further investigate the inherent paradox of retro products of being old and new at the same time, Cattaneo and Guerini (2012) empirically checked the effect of leveraging nostalgic brand associations on consumer preferences for retro brands relative to new options. They found that consumers prefer updated brands with nostalgic associations to pure retro brands. Newness was also at the heart of the study conducted by Fort-Rioche and Ackermann (2013) who found out that consumers perceived more newness in retro-looking headphones than in modern-looking headphones, the two headphones being marketed by the same brand and incorporating the same latest technology. The authors argue that, perceived newness being a relative concept, consumers refer to what they consider as the standard design for the category of products when evaluating the newness of a product. Thus, when considering a retro-looking product and a modern-looking product, they will perceive more newness in the former because it breaks with present standards, whereas the latter complies with them.

## Development of Hypotheses

### *Impact of Nostalgia Proneness*

It is now almost three decades that nostalgia attracted the attention of marketing researchers (Holbrook and Schindler 1989). Stern (1992), for example, investigated the advent of nostalgic advertising; Sierra and McQuitty (2007) investigated the determinants of nostalgia purchase. Nostalgia is conceptualized as an emotion (Sedikides et al. 2008; Sierra and McQuitty 2007). Identified triggers of nostalgia include negative affect, suggesting that nostalgic emotions may be used as mood repair but also social interactions and sensory inputs (Wildschut et al. 2006). The latter is consistent with the *Madeleine de Proust* phenomenon, by which tastes, odors, and music can trigger vivid affect-laden memories (Chu and Downes 2002; Barrett et al. 2010). The signature of the nostalgic emotional reaction is its ambivalence (Wildschut et al. 2006): nostalgic emotions are simultaneously positive and negative and are often described as “bittersweet” (Sedikides et al. 2008; Wildschut et al. 2006).

In addition, by distinguishing communal from individual nostalgia, academics recognize that nostalgia can be evoked not only by former selves but also by former idealized epochs (Brown et al. 2003; Davis 1979). Thus, insofar as a product from the past is sufficiently relevant to the individual to evoke a former self or a former

idealized era, being exposed to a product from the past (i.e., the *original product*) or to its reinterpretation (i.e., the *retro product*) may evoke positive and negative emotions. In both cases, i.e., for the *original* and *retro* products, these evoked emotions may have in turn a positive effect on their evaluation, affective reactions being one of the antecedents of attitude.

Furthermore, the psychology and marketing literature suggests that individuals respond differently to nostalgic stimuli (Holbrook and Schindler 1989; Routledge et al. 2008). Individuals differ in their proneness to feel nostalgic, and nostalgia proneness refers to the frequency at which individuals feel nostalgic and to the importance they attach to nostalgic experiences (Routledge et al. 2008). Consumers show evidence of nostalgic attachment to products from the past for many types of products, including movies, music, but also automobiles, which make nostalgia proneness a potential segmentation variable in many markets (Schindler and Holbrook 2003).

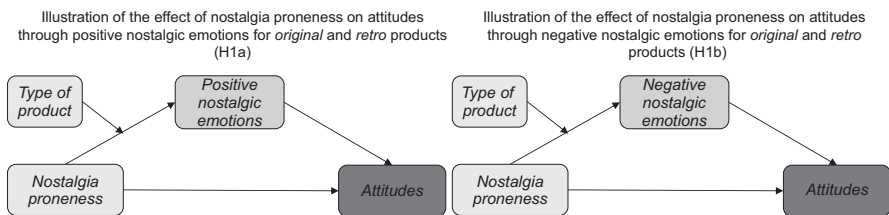
Thus, it may be suggested that the positive and negative emotions evoked when exposed to a product from the past (i.e., the *original product*) or to its reinterpretation (i.e., the *retro product*) may be stronger for individuals high in nostalgia proneness, subsequently generating ambivalent attitudes. Stated formally, we believe that positive and negative emotions represent the mediational pathway for the ambivalent effect of nostalgia proneness on attitudes toward both original and retro products (see Fig. 1). Thus, it is hypothesized that:

*H1a* : Positive nostalgic emotions mediate the positive effect of nostalgia proneness on the attitude towards the product for both original and retro products.

*H1b* : Negative nostalgic emotions mediate the negative effect of nostalgia proneness on the attitude towards the product for both original and retro products.

### Impact of Consumer Innovativeness

In his seminal work, Rogers (2003, p 12) defines an innovation as an “idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption.” In other words, a product may be considered an innovation provided that consumers perceive newness in it. Perceived newness is a subjective characteristic attributed to



**Fig. 1** Effect of nostalgia proneness on attitudes for *original* vs. *retro* products

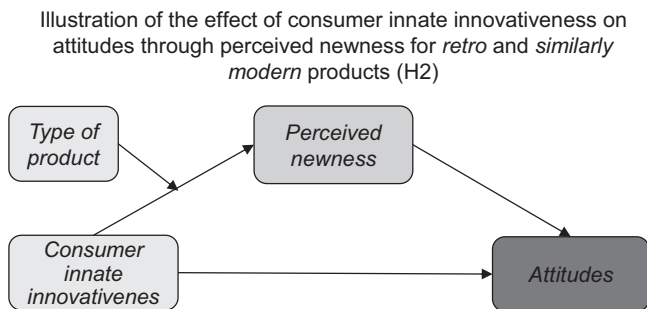
a product by a consumer (Radford and Bloch 2011): it refers to the perceived discrepancy between the characteristics of the specific product and the characteristics of (1) the typical product in that class (Blake et al. 1970) or (2) previous versions in the same or proximal categories (Radford and Bloch 2011). Thus, perceived newness depends on the extent to which the product is actually different from other products in the same category. Furthermore, research has established that consumers tend to have positive reactions toward products they perceive as new (Gielens and Steenkamp 2007).

As long as it is not a mere reproduction from a product from the past (i.e., “repro” retro products, Fort-Rioche and Ackermann 2013) but a reinterpretation of a product or of design codes from the past (i.e., “made-up” and “revamped” retro products; Fort-Rioche and Ackermann 2013), a retro product supposes an important creative work. Thus, a retro product may be sufficiently different from other products in the same category to be perceived as new (Fort-Rioche and Ackermann 2013). Being exposed to a new product that is a reinterpretation of a product of the past (i.e., the *retro product*) or to a new product that wouldn’t be inspired from the past but which would be similar in terms of modernity (i.e., the *similarly modern product*) may generate a feeling of newness. In both cases, i.e., for the *retro* and *similarly modern* products, perceived newness may have in turn a positive effect on their evaluation.

Furthermore, the innovation literature suggests that individuals respond differently to innovative products and that innovative consumers would be more able than others to detect novelty when they are exposed to new products (Rogers 2003). Consumer innovativeness refers to one’s predisposition to adopt innovative offers earlier than other members of a community (Rogers 2003). It is conceptualized as a trait normally distributed among consumers (Midgley and Dowling 1978). Innovativeness is an expression of novelty seeking which translates in a series of activities aiming at acquiring information about new products and adopting new products (Roehrich 2004). Because innovators are well-informed consumers, they are more able than others to detect newness when exposed to a new product (Rogers 2003). This is why perceived newness may mediate the effect of innovativeness on the attitude toward the new product.

Thus, it may be suggested that innovators will be more able to detect novelty in a new product, be it a *retro* or a *similarly modern* product, than less innovative individuals, subsequently leading to more positive attitudes. Stated formally, we believe that perceived newness represents the mediational pathway for the effect of consumer innovativeness on attitudes toward both *retro* and *similarly modern* products (see Fig. 2). Thus, it is hypothesized that:

*H2 : Perceived newness mediates the positive effect of consumer innovativeness on the attitude towards the new product for both retro and similarly modern products.*



**Fig. 2** Effect of nostalgia proneness/consumer innovativeness on attitudes for *original*, *retro* and *similarly modern* products

## Method

### Research Approach

The specific product category used to test the hypotheses is the category of songs. We chose songs because sensory inputs are identified triggers of nostalgia (Wildschut et al. 2006) and past research suggests that taste, smell, and hearing can trigger vivid affect-laden memories (Chu and Downes 2002; Barrett et al. 2010). Thus, we preferred hearing (i.e., listening to a song) to sight (e.g., being exposed to a product).

Furthermore, cover songs have been in vogue in the world of popular music for many decades. A cover song is “the recording of a song that had been recorded previously by another artist” (Zak III 2001, p 222). If covering a song means making something new out of something old, it is a clear case of retro marketing. In addition, songs may be performed in multiple versions, but their identity is always fixed by the original recording that made it known: a musical cover cannot be separated from its original version. More precisely, the cover performance resonates with the memory, and, regardless of how different it is from the original, the meaning given by the original recording comes through (Zak III 2001). Therefore, we decided to specifically investigate consumers’ reactions to a song from the past (i.e., the *original product*), its cover version (i.e., the *retro product*), and a *similarly modern* song. Technically speaking, any cover song could be considered a “revamped” retro product (Fort-Rioche and Ackermann 2013) in the sense that it is a song from the past which is reinterpreted in line with current trends. Thus, it may both generate nostalgic feelings, as it resonates in memory with the original song, and evoke newness, as it is both different from its original version and complies with up to date musical standards.

We tested the hypotheses with a sample of adults living in France. Participants were invited to take part in an online study about music. Song type was a between-subjects factor with three treatment groups: (1) original song, (2) cover song, and (3) similarly modern song. Subjects had first to listen to the song and then answered questions about the focal constructs.

## *Stimuli and Sample*

Products that best qualify for a retro-marketing approach are those that are sufficiently iconic for a given cohort such as to resonate in memory (Brown et al. 2003). This is why we chose “Time of My life” by Bill Medley and Jennifer Warnes as the original product. This song was originally released in 1987. We believed it would resonate in listener’s minds as it is one song from the movie “Dirty Dancing” original soundtrack, which was a big box-office success in 1987.

“Time of My Life” was covered by the Black Eyed Peas in 2010: “The Time (Dirty Bit)” is a “sample” of the original song, and it uses the theme and the chorus of the original songs, but the rest of the song is totally modified. We believe, it is sufficiently close to the original song to guarantee that listeners will recognize it as a cover song of “Time of My Life” and sufficiently different to comply with contemporary musical standards. Thus, we chose “The Time (Dirty Bit)” by the Black Eyed Peas as the retro product.

The similarly modern product is “Don’t Stop the Party” by The Black Eyed Peas, also released in 2010. We chose a song released by the same band in the same album to guarantee that it would be similar to the cover song in terms of style and recency. It should be stressed here that we were not looking for a retro product and a similarly modern product that would be objectively new in terms of recency but similar in terms of perceived newness, which was confirmed by an independent sample T-test ( $\bar{x}_{\text{group 2}} = 2.62, \bar{x}_{\text{group 3}} = 2.71, t(174) = -.437, \text{ns}$ ).

We assembled a sample of 302 subjects residing in France. They were randomly assigned to any of the three groups. We retained 262 observation for data analysis ( $N_{\text{group 1}} = 86; N_{\text{group 2}} = 77; N_{\text{group 3}} = 99$ ) after eliminating answers of participants who (1) hadn’t recognized the original song in group 1 and (2) were not able to determine that the song was a cover in group 2. Significant differences in likability were found between the three songs ( $F(2, 260) = 28.55, p < .001$ ), the original song ( $M = 5.39, SD = 1.36$ ) being preferred to the cover song ( $M = 4.10, SD = 1.46$ ) and the cover song being preferred to the similarly modern song ( $M = 3.90, SD = 1.45$ ). This is in line with the well-established “We like what we know” effect (Zajonc 1968) and was somehow expected as data retained for analysis in group 1 were those of participants who had recognized the original song and data retained for analysis in group 2 were those of participants who had recognized the song as being a cover song, thus favoring some degree of familiarity.

There was an overrepresentation of females and of young people. We carried out regression analyses to assess possible implications of this bias for inference to the population as a whole. Gender (male = 1; female = 2) was found to influence attitude toward the song ( $\beta = .413, t = 4.010, p < .001$ ), positive emotions ( $\beta = .349, t = 3.273, p = .002$ ), and negative emotions ( $\beta = -.770, t = -.306, p = .007$ ) in group 1 but not in groups 2 and 3. This is suggesting that the song Time of My Life and the movie to which it is related—Dirty Dancing—are more iconic for women than for men. In addition, age was found to have a negative effect on nostalgia proneness ( $\beta = -.331, t = -5.578, p < .001$ ) suggesting that younger people were more prone



to experience nostalgic emotions than older people. Similarly, females were found to be more prone to experience nostalgic emotions than males ( $\beta = .489$ ,  $t = 2.671$ ,  $p = .008$ ).

## Measures

We used scales from the literature to measure *nostalgia proneness* (Southampton Nostalgia Scale, *SNS*; from Routledge et al. 2008) and *consumer innovativeness* (Consumer Novelty Seeking scale, *CNS*; from Manning, Bearden, and Madden 1995). *Perceived newness (PN)* was measured with three semantic differential items (novel, original, innovative). *Attitude toward the song (ATT)* was measured with three semantic differential items (negative/positive, bad/good, unattractive/attractive). *Emotions* were measured with the measurement tool developed by Palmer and Koenig-Lewis (2010) to assess emotions evoked by listening to music. It includes five items for positive emotions (happy, excited, relaxed, energetic, surprised) and five items for negative emotions (angry, annoyed, sleepy, bored, disappointed). A principal components analysis with varimax rotation confirmed the distinction between positive and negative emotions. However, the item “sleepy” was deleted due to low factor-loading estimates. The five positive items were averaged into one measure of positive emotions (*POS*), and the four negative items were averaged into one measure of negative emotions (*NEG*). Cronbach’s alpha coefficients were calculated, and principal-components factor analyses were conducted to check for reliability and convergent validity of our measurement tools.

## Results

To test our hypotheses, we used Preacher and Hayes (2008) method for testing moderated mediation and 5000 bootstrapped samples to determine whether our hypothesized indirect effects were (1) significant and (2) not varying according to the type of product (H1a and H1b, *original* vs. *retro*; H2, *retro* vs. *similarly modern*). We used Hayes’ (2013) Process macro for SPSS which provides coefficients for the different paths in the moderated mediation model (model 7). In the model, *X* is the independent variable, *Y* is the dependent variable, and *M* is the proposed mediator *M*. The type of product was entered as a moderator *W* of the effect of *X* on *M*. Age and gender were entered as covariates. A 95% confidence level was chosen to apply a *p* value of 0.05. Table 1 shows the results of the moderated mediation analyses.

As regards H1a, contrary to our expectations, the moderated mediation effect is significant as the moderated mediation index confidence interval excludes zero (95% CI [.0936, .5629]). The moderating effect of the type of product (*original* vs. *retro*) on the mediating relation between SNS and POS is significant (coeff = .38,  $p = .005$ ). The conditional indirect effect of SNS on ATT through POS differs



**Table 1** Results of moderated mediation analyses

	M = POS		M = NEG		M = PN		Y = ATT	
	Coeff	t	Coeff	t	Coeff	t	Coeff	t
X = SNS	-.42*	-1.98	-.24	-.97				
X = CNS					.15	.68		
W = type of product	-.82	-1.35	.38	.55	-.29	-.54		
X × W	.38*	2.84	.20	1.29	.09	.69		
M = POS							.86**	13.30
M = NEG							-.70**	-11.92
M = PN							.44**	5.48
Age	.05	.58	.16	1.82	.06	.91		
Gender	.64*	2.92	-.54*	-2.15	-.04	-.18		
Conditional indirect effect of SNS on ATT through POS for <i>original</i> vs. <i>retro</i> products								
			Effect		[Lower–Upper CI]			
<i>Original</i> product			.29		[.1434, .4678]			
<i>Retro</i> product			-.03		[-.1993, .1701]			
Moderated mediation index			.33		[.0936, .5629]			
Conditional indirect effect of SNS on ATT through NEG for <i>original</i> vs. <i>retro</i> products								
			Effect		[Lower–Upper CI]			
<i>Original</i> product			-.11		[-.3090, .0621]			
<i>Retro</i> product			.03		[-.0948, .1701]			
Moderated mediation index			-.14		[-.3618, .0873]			
Conditional indirect effect of CNS on ATT through PN for <i>retro</i> vs. <i>similarly modern</i> products								
			Effect		[Lower–Upper CI]			
<i>Retro</i> product			.11		[.0235, .2379]			
<i>Similarly modern</i> product			.15		[.0803, .2311]			
Moderated mediation index			.04		[-.0648, .1573]			

\**p* < .05, \*\**p* < .001

according to the type of product to which participants are exposed: the conditional indirect effect is significant for the *original* product (coeff = .29, 95% CI [.1434, .4678]) but not for the *retro* product (coeff = -.03, 95% CI [-.1993, .1701]). Thus, **H1a** (positive nostalgic emotions mediate the positive effect of nostalgia proneness on the attitude toward the product for both original and retro products) is partially supported as the hypothesized indirect effect is observed only for the original product.

As regards **H1b**, as expected, the moderated mediation effect is nonsignificant as the moderated mediation index confidence interval includes zero (95% CI [-.3618, .0873]). The moderating effect of the type of product (*original* vs. *retro*) on the mediating relation between SNS and NEG is not significant (coeff = .20, ns). However, there is no conditional indirect effect of SNS on ATT through NEG for either of the two products (*original* product (coeff = -.11, 95% CI [-.3090, .0621]) and *retro* product (coeff = .03, 95% CI [-.0948, .1701])). Thus, **H1b** (negative nostalgic emotions mediate the negative effect of nostalgia proneness on the attitude towards the product for both original and retro products) is rejected as the hypothesized indirect effect is observed for neither of the two products.

As regards H2, as expected, the moderated mediation effect is nonsignificant as the moderated mediation index confidence interval includes zero (95% CI [−.0648, .1573]). The moderating effect of the type of product (*retro* vs. *similarly modern*) on the mediating relation between CNS and PN is not significant (coeff = .09, ns). In addition, as hypothesized, the conditional indirect effect of CNS on ATT through PN doesn't differ according to the type of product to which participants are exposed: the conditional indirect effect is significant for the *retro* product (coeff = .11, 95% CI [.0235, .2379]) and for the *similarly modern* product (coeff = .15, 95% CI [.0803, .2311]).

## Discussion, Implications, Limitation, and Future Research

This study has sought to investigate consumer's acceptance of retro products by investigating their inherent paradox of being old and new at the same time. We were particularly interested in the effect of a retro product on consumers' acceptance in comparison with the effect of (1) its original version and (2) a similarly modern product. We made the assumption that retro products would at the same time appeal to nostalgic individuals—because of their ability to evoke former selves or former idealized epochs, thus generating positive emotions—and to innovative individuals—because of the novelty they perceive in them. In this sense, retro products would combine the benefits of products from the past and new products. We further argued that the effect of nostalgia proneness may however be ambivalent as it may also involve negative emotions.

Our results don't support this view, and suggest that products from the past are better to evoke nostalgic positive emotions than their reinterpretation. In addition, nostalgia proneness didn't favor the development of ambivalent attitudes as the hypothesized mediating effect of negative emotions was not observed for neither of the two products. This result confirms prior research that had stressed that nostalgia, although bittersweet, is mostly a positively toned emotion (Wildschut et al. 2006).

These results were unexpected as the most frequently posited explanation for the success of retro products is nostalgia proneness (Brown 1999; Brown et al. 2003). However, no empirical support for this assumption exists, and our study has attempted to fill a gap in the research by bringing more quantitative insights into existing empirical knowledge. On the opposite, our empirical findings confirm previous research that had suggested that the success of retro products may be due to their newness (Cattaneo and Guerini 2012; Fort-Rioche and Ackermann 2013). Very paradoxically, it may be therefore suggested that consumers appreciate retro products for their intrinsic novelty, and not for their ability to evoke nostalgic feelings. Thus, retro marketing should be clearly differentiated from nostalgia marketing.

This has clear implications for managers. Designers' and marketers' lack of creativity has been repeatedly pointed out in parallel to retro trend emergence (Fort-Rioche and Ackermann 2013). One main implication of this paper is to show that a retro product approach is not detrimental to perceived newness. Moreover, reaching

innovators is a key determinant of the diffusion of innovative products (Rogers 2003). Consequently, by showing that consumer innovativeness is positively related to attitude toward retro products, this research stresses that a retro strategy can also be appropriated to target these segments.

The main limitation of our study is that it was undertaken in the context of one product category and in a specific cultural context. Further replication studies would be useful with other product categories, in particular with tangible products. In addition, it may be argued that the absence of support for H1a may be due to the fact that the retro product we chose as a stimulus for our study differed too much from the original product. If the retro product had been more similar to the original product, it may have been more likely to evoke nostalgic emotions. Thus, replication may be undertaken in manipulating the level of reinterpretation of the retro product as retro products vary with respect to the creative work that underlie their design (Fort-Rioche and Ackermann 2013). Finally, the scale we used to measure consumer innovativeness falls into the broad category of innate innovativeness scales (Bartels and Reinders 2011). Innate innovativeness is a general propensity to seek new information, stimuli, or experiences (Hirschman 1980). But the innovativeness construct can also be conceptualized at two other levels: domain-specific innovativeness and innovativeness as actualized behavior (Bartels and Reinders 2011). Domain-specific innovativeness refers to the tendency to learn about and try new products within a specific area of interest (Goldsmith and Hofacker 1991), whereas innovativeness as actualized behavior refers to early adoption, in the form of actual purchase or actual information seeking (Hirschman 1980; Midgley and Dowling 1978). Different forms of consumer innovativeness may impact perceived newness differently. For example, domain-specific innovators are very knowledgeable in their field of interest and expertise. Thus, they may be more knowledgeable about products from the past in their domain of interest and therefore be more reluctant to attribute newness to products which are inspired from the past. Thus, future research may investigate whether the mediational effect that was observed in H2 is also observed for domain-specific innovators.

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