

How Context Can Make Advertising More Effective

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Editors' Note

There is a rich body of scholarship—nearly 60 years' worth—on context effects in advertising, yet significant gaps remain. Most of the literature involves television, but with the digital marketplace in constant flux, advertisers and marketers risk missing key opportunities to be more effective at promoting their products and services across a variety of media. In 2017, in response to renewed interest among its members—and as part of its ongoing How Advertising Works initiative—the Advertising Research Foundation (ARF) addressed context effects by first reviewing the literature to date and then conducting its own original experiments with partnering firms. Around that time, other research also was in progress. In this essay, Horst Stipp, executive vice president of research and innovation at the ARF, describes the mixed results from the earlier body of work and explains how the more recent studies (2015–2018) provide new insights to advance theory and practice in this area. He concludes by offering suggestions for marketers on how this latest research can help them benefit from context in advertising.

INTRODUCTION

Whenever a consumer sees an advertisement, it is not in isolation but in a “context.” Context refers to the media space in which the advertisement is embedded—for example, a television program, magazine, website, or social media feed. Does this context influence consumers' perceptions of and response to the advertising, and, if so, what causes these “context effects” to take place?

In 1958, a marketer first addressed this issue and suggested that television-program genres can influence perceptions about advertisements (Schwerin, 1958). Since then, through six decades, dozens of studies have investigated the impact of factors surrounding commercial messages. As part of the Advertising Research Foundation's (ARF's) ongoing “How Advertising Works” (HAW) project, in 2017 the current author led a review of the body of research on context effects. HAW's mission is to generate new research insights that help marketers advertise more effectively (Stipp, 2016).

The literature review revealed that, although the evidence was not conclusive, most studies had found that context does indeed affect consumers' response to the advertising and that context

can help make advertisements either more or less effective. Early findings included higher recall for commercials in consumers' favorite programs (Clancy and Kweskin, 1971) and enhanced advertising impact from “program-product congruence” (Kennedy, 1971). Reviews of context-effects research have documented that those findings were replicated during the following decades (Goldberg and Gorn, 1987; Pelsmacker, Geuens, and Anckaert, 2002; Schumann and Thorson, 1990).

Although the studies overwhelmingly supported the notion that advertising context moderates advertisement effects, they did not sufficiently explain which effects are likely (e.g., more advertisement liking? better recall? more purchases? negative effects?) and under what conditions context effects occur (Bellman, Wooley, and Varan, 2016; Lynch and Stipp, 1999; Pelsmacker *et al.*, 2002). Whereas there was strong support for positive effects from context-advertisement alignment (also called “content-advertisement congruence” or “program-advertisement matching”; Kennedy, 1971), other studies found such effects only under some circumstances, depending on the interactions of mood and tone (e.g., Kamins, Marks, and Skinner, 1991).

The authors of a 2018 meta-analysis covering studies up to 2013 came to the same conclusions (Kwon, King, Nyilasy, and Reid, 2018). Despite “mixed results,” the authors recommended that “media professionals should consider media context when making media decisions” (p. 18).

The ARF’s review (Stipp, 2016) found, moreover, that much of the context-effects research was focused narrowly. Nearly all studies were done on television commercials, and only a few considered magazines or radio (Moorman, Neijens, and Smit, 2002; Norris and Colman, 1992, 1996). Very few studies, moreover, have explored the effects of other advertisements as context (Poncin and Derbaix, 2009). Finally, to the author’s knowledge, no published context-effects research had focused on return on investment (ROI) until the ARF did its own research (Bacon, Bhardwaj, and Gopalakrishnan, 2017; Bacon and Stipp, 2017).

The ARF concluded that it was important to take a fresh look at context effects because of the changing media and marketing environment and also because of shortcomings in the body of evidence on this issue. The researchers also were confident that they would be able to gain new insights that would help marketers take advantage of content effects, because they were getting access to new studies conducted in today’s environment and received sponsor support to conduct original research.

WHY CONTEXT MATTERS NOW

The ARF decided to address context-effects issues in 2017 when members expressed renewed interest in this topic. The resurgence of interest in context effects among both researchers and practitioners is primarily due to the following:

- **Growth in programmatic advertising.** Most definitions and uses of “programmatic” focus on improving targeting

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and efficiencies; the context in which the advertisement appears is seen as much less important or not considered at all. The findings of several studies that context does affect advertising performance raises the question of whether ignoring context is prudent (Loechner, 2014).

- **“Brand-safety” concerns.** Advertisers are worried about seeing their advertisements placed in inappropriate contexts that can harm their brands, especially in digital environments (Montgomery, 2017).
- **The need to optimize advertising impact.** Efficiency pressures and the need to understand how to use digital and mobile media push advertisers to find new ways to make advertisements as effective as possible and to explore which contexts produce the best results.
- **Fighting advertisement avoidance.** Growing concerns about advertisement avoidance and advertisement blocking are leading marketers to consider alternative, branded-content formats, such as native advertising, that align with content and make advertising less disruptive (Bowman, 2017).
- **New research methods.** Researchers are using innovative tools, including neuroscience-based methods such as biometrics, which provide deeper insights into consumers’ responses to both content and advertising (Marci, 2006; Stipp, 2012).

New Research and New Methods

Renewed interest in context effects stimulated studies in 2016 and 2017 that

addressed limitations of prior research by applying new research methodologies. Using neuroscience-based methods, for example, the authors of one study (Bellman *et al.*, 2016) replicated a 1991 study that analyzed congruency versus consistency effects in television commercials (Kamins *et al.*, 1991). Others explored issues that had been neglected, such as the rarely researched impact of advertisements on other advertisements (Sankey and Truss, 2017).

The ARF’s context-effects project was able to build on

- earlier HAW research on how advertising works in today’s media environment (Snyder and Garcia-Garcia, 2016);
- the ARF researchers’ review of the literature on context effects;
- published new research;
- unpublished and proprietary studies that members shared with the ARF.

The organization additionally conducted two original research projects:

- one using modeling with IRI data to assess ROI in a “real-life” digital environment (Bacon *et al.*, 2017);
- a second that included a number of lab experiments with biometrics that explored how different types of content affect response to the advertisement (Varan, Stipp, and Bellman, 2017).

The ARF researchers believe that all these new studies provide a deeper

understanding of how the context in which advertising occurs affects consumers' perceptions, processing, and response to advertisement messages, as the author explains in the next section. More research is needed, however, given the constantly changing media and marketing environment. Context effects—just like other advertising effects—are not easy to isolate, because they interact with creative factors (including advertisement formats), product and brand characteristics, the purpose of the advertising, and consumers' behavior and attitudes. In most instances, reach, targeting, and creative quality likely are more important than context (Hartnett, Kennedy, Sharp, and Greenacre, 2016; Poltrack and Wood, 2017).

CONTEXT EFFECTS IN TODAY'S MARKETING ENVIRONMENT

On the basis of the entire body of research analyzed, from the first studies in the 1960s to the most recent research (2015–2018), the author offers the following conclusions and hypotheses regarding how context can affect response to advertising today. First, the new research clearly corroborates the premise that the context in which an advertisement is placed likely will influence consumers' perceptions of and response to the advertising, and it confirms that effects and the processes that generate such effects are complex. The author also believes the new data suggest the following:

- Although most research has focused on content (*i.e.*, a television program) as “context,” there is growing evidence that other contexts, such as the media platform or brand, the device, and the time and place, can affect consumers' perceptions of and response to the advertising. The practice of seasonal advertising in November and December, for example, suggests that marketers always have found time to be an important factor.

Recent studies confirm the relevance of time as a context factor and also demonstrate the impact of place and platform (see Stipp and Snyder, 2017).

- Digital and mobile media provide important new contexts for advertisers. Although these contexts are unique and each context requires specific solutions to optimize effects, the data suggest that the processes underlying consumer response are quite similar to those in other media. Context-effects research on magazines or on radio, for example, has shown findings that are similar to those from television research (Moorman *et al.*, 2002; Norris and Colman, 1992). A recent neuroscience-based study on music-platform context effects (Degroote and Yadav, 2017) and the ARF's study on context-effect ROI (Bacon *et al.*, 2017) also support the hypothesis that key processes underlying context effects in a television environment apply to all media (see the “Key Processes that Trigger Context Effects,” right).
- Future research should focus on new advertising formats in digital media, given that nearly all of the research on context effects was done on television content and commercials.
- The advertisement environment—that is, the advertisements surrounding a given advertisement—can be an important context. The negative effects of clutter have been established well, even though creative quality might overcome such negative effects (Hammer, Riebe, and Kennedy, 2009). More recent work shows that an advertisement can be affected negatively by one that precedes it (Sankey and Truss, 2017). Because this topic rarely has been researched (see Poncin and Derbaix, 2009), more research is desirable—for example, about how advertisements can influence each other in positive ways.

Key Processes that Trigger

Context Effects

Studies applying neuroscience-based methods have furthered the field's understanding of the underlying processes, notably the role of emotions. Researchers have distinguished a variety of processes that lead to context effects and have suggested theoretical frameworks regarding the circumstances that cause such effects (Goldberg and Gorn, 1987; Pelsmacker *et al.*, 2002; Schumann and Thorson, 1990; Varan, 2015). For marketing practice, however, the author believes those processes can be summarized into two groups: attention transfer, and priming/halo effects (See Figure 1):

- **In the attention-transfer process**, other things being equal, an advertisement seen or heard in a context that a consumer pays more attention to (*i.e.*, is more involved in, excited about) more likely will be seen or heard. High correlations between attention to content and advertisement recall have been shown repeatedly (Stipp and Snyder, 2017). Indeed, the failure to find context effects in some studies can be explained by the fact that respondents were shown content in which they had no interest (Martin-Luengo, Luna, and Migueles, 2015).
- **“Priming/halo effects”** refer to various processes in the consumer's brain that have a similar result: They cause cognitive or emotional responses to the context to affect advertisement perceptions and response. The research demonstrates that such effects are likely when the consumer is engaged with the context.

Context–advertisement alignment appears to be a particularly good way to benefit from priming/halo effects. It can be achieved on all marketing platforms,

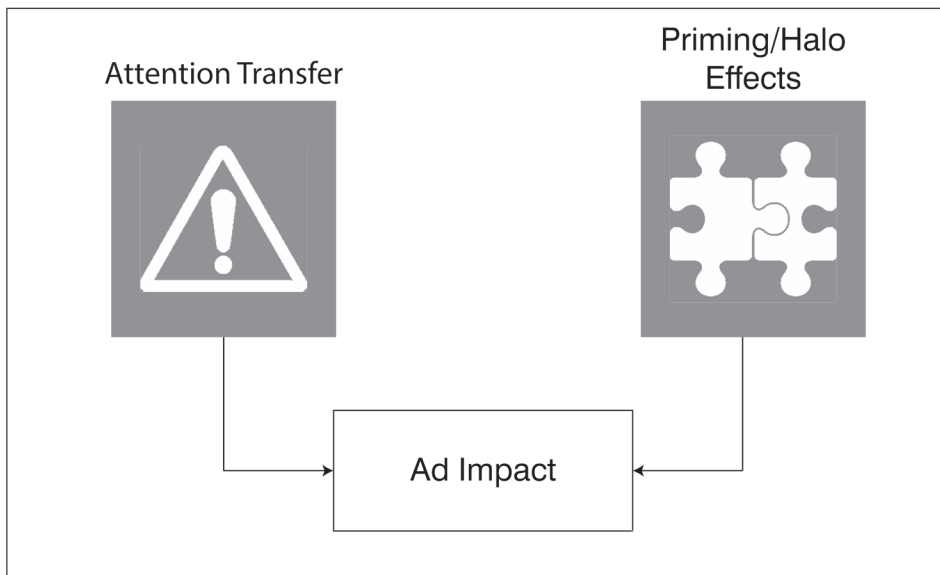


Figure 1 Context-Effects Triggers

in many ways, such as endemic advertising, “native” advertisements, product placement, advertorials, and sponsorship. The key is that the consumer experiences congruence between the context and the advertisement—on a cognitive level, emotionally, or even regarding the “energy level” in the advertisement (*e.g.*, upbeat music, quick cuts) compared with the context (Puccinelli, Wilcox, and Grewal, 2015). Alignment likely will strengthen the emotional response to the advertisement and facilitate message processing, leading to less advertisement avoidance, better recall, and greater advertisement liking. Alignment also may result in a higher ROI (Bacon *et al.*, 2017).

New studies have confirmed that context–advertisement alignment does not always have a positive impact, but they also generated new insights and hypotheses that suggest why previous studies found “mixed results” (Kwon *et al.*, 2018):

- **Alignment can distract from the brand.** If the focus of the content and the advertisement are not relevant to the consumer’s view of the product and brand, alignment benefits appear less likely. If

the consumer cannot connect the product and brand to humor, for example, a funny commercial in a sitcom might not give the brand an “alignment boost.” One study suggested that alignments that rely too much on humor might distract the consumer (Varan *et al.*, 2017).

- **Alignment on only one emotional dimension probably is not optimal.** Successful content, advertisements, and brands do not appeal to just one emotion: People do not watch sitcoms just for the jokes (*e.g.*, Ross and Rachel’s relationship in *Friends*), *Game of Thrones* is not a mega-hit just because of the sex scenes (or the beheadings), and iPhone fans can give you a hundred reasons why they love their phones.

This hypothesis—that advertisements that align with their context on several levels (one might say “multidimensional” alignments) more likely will achieve superior results—is based on evidence from studies in 2017 and 2018, including data that had not been published at the time of this writing. More research is needed, but the author considers this a very promising finding: The studies found a positive

impact not only regarding advertisement recall and purchase intention but also regarding ROI (Harvey and Shimmel, 2017; Liebman and Hoffman, 2018; see also Stipp and Snyder, 2017).

Is alignment always the right strategy to boost advertising performance? In those cases in which the consumer considers the content unpleasant or even offensive, the opposite of advertisement–content alignment might have a positive impact: Studies have found that advertisements can provide relief from unpleasant content. One such study referred to this effect as “mood repair” (Varan, 2015).

“Brand safety”—the concern that an advertisement’s proximity to inappropriate content can damage a brand—is part of this conversation, although the premise that consumers rarely choose content that they find unpleasant makes this less of an issue. One exception could be news: It appears that many marketers act on the assumption that proximity to potentially upsetting news content is not desirable. The major broadcast networks, during their evening news programs, tend to cluster advertisements around “softer” stories, for example. The ARF researchers do not know of conclusive evidence from advertisements in a news environment, however, and therefore encourage further research in this area. As discussed on the next page in “Future Research and Implications for Marketers,” studies should assess the motives that drive consumers to a specific content to achieve successful alignment or to decide that alignment is not appropriate.

Finally, although the latest research provides new insights on how context–advertisement alignment can be used to improve advertising performance, more research is required to assess the size of effects resulting from such alignments. The author has seen effects of widely differing sizes, from insignificant to about 30 percent improvement over nonaligned advertising (Harvey

and Shimmel, 2017). The size as well as the nature of such effects likely is influenced strongly by the creative content, brand, category, and other factors that determine advertising effects. At this point, therefore, it is impossible to offer an estimate of a “typical” alignment effect.

FUTURE RESEARCH AND IMPLICATIONS FOR MARKETERS

The ARF’s review of the large body of research on context effects through early 2018 concluded that there are still many open questions that require additional research. The more recent studies and new methodologies, however, have advanced our knowledge to the point that we can now make better research-based recommendations to advertisers and marketers on how to take advantage of context effects.

Recommendations for Researchers

Following are some of the issues that require more investigation, replication, and validation:

- Do context effects work similarly in digital and mobile media compared with the well-researched television effects? How do social media amplify positive and negative context effects?
- Are alignment effects stronger if there is a content–advertisement match on several emotional or cognitive levels (the multidimensional alignment suggested earlier)?
- What are the exceptions to positive alignment effects? Is there a downside to content–advertisement alignment that relies largely on humor, for example? Which kinds of advertisements work best in a news environment?
- Which advertisements benefit most from positive context effects: those with average or those with above-average creative content? On television, does first-position

placement offer more pronounced context effects? In a pod of television commercials, can “advertisement–advertisement” effects be optimized?

- More studies are needed on ROI and return on advertisement spend. (Neuroscientific and biometric research can help us gain more insights on the processes underlying various context effects, but they typically only measure upper funnel impact.)
- Finally, a first look at virtual reality and artificial reality as contexts would be valuable.

Recommendations for Marketers

Probably the most important insight from this project is that, when it comes to context effects, there are no one-size-fits-all rules. If marketers understand their specific targets’ affinity to the content with which their consumers engage, as well as the role of other contexts—such as other media platforms, time, and place—there are real opportunities to enhance the effectiveness of advertising messages.

Marketers, the author believes, benefit from investing in research that helps them place advertisements in an environment that the target consumer likes and pays attention to. Deeper knowledge can help marketers understand the target’s attitudes and emotions, which helps them identify those contexts that provide emotional connections between the advertisement and the brand in order to align with the target’s preferred content.

Advertisers typically plan campaigns and develop creative content relying on research on consumer behavior and attitudes regarding the product and the brand. The ARF researchers suggest going beyond consumer targeting and adding “emotional targeting”: Explore what drives the target’s preferences for platforms, media brands, and content and what drives interest in the product and the brand. Armed

with this knowledge, the advertiser has a good chance of increasing the advertising’s impact (Bloxham and Shimmel, 2016).

The author recommends that marketers focus on two specific steps to explore how they can take advantage of context effects:

- Explore whether the contexts that are important to the target consumer are suitable (and might be worth paying extra for) to gain that higher level of attention that advertisements likely will receive in those contexts. Content next to the advertisement, as well as the advertising environment (clutter!), is important, but other contexts (media brand, platform, time of year) also may play a role.
- Marketers and trade-press stories often refer to “premium content” when discussing evidence for superior advertising impact as a result of placing advertisements into a specific context. Although “premium” is not always defined clearly (“higher quality”) and the reasons given for the superior advertisement performance sometimes strike one as tautological (*i.e.*, it is “premium” content because the advertisements work better), the superior advertising performance appears to be largely a result of attention transfer: Advertisements are more effective because they are in an environment that a relevant consumer group values and pays attention to.
- Gaining extra attention for an advertisement in this way is the first step. As a second step to improve advertisement performance, the author recommends considering making an emotional or cognitive connection among the target consumer, the advertisement’s creative elements, and the brand. Advertisers can employ two strategies:
 - ✧ find contexts (including content) that align with the advertisement, the brand, and the campaign objectives;

- ✧ create advertisements that provide a particularly good fit with the context, the content, and the target's emotional or cognitive state.

Advertisers have been quite successful with endemic alignments, such as commercials featuring an athlete shown during a football game or food advertisements on a cooking website. We usually see this during high-rated television events and in digital environments ("native" advertisements). We now know that content-advertisement alignment can boost advertisement performance significantly and that it can diminish advertisement avoidance, but there might be opportunities to gain an additional "alignment boost." Exploring deeper emotional alignments, furthermore, may be of particular value: Tapping into several emotions that drive the interest in the content—why the consumer loves a specific sport and how he or she feels about the athletes, for example—can connect content, advertisement, and brand with consumers' emotions on a deeper level and thereby enhance the advertisement's impact.

Two examples illustrate this last point:

- P&G's award-winning "Thank You, Mom" campaign during the recent Olympics: This campaign included "Proud Sponsor of Mom" sponsorship featuring customized commercials that highlighted "Olympic moms'" emotional journeys (See Figure 2). The messages aligned with key drivers of Olympic viewing among P&G's target audience, mothers. Proprietary NBC studies had found that especially mothers identified with the parents of the young athletes, their aspirations, and their emotional reactions when their children were competing. (The author of this article worked on Olympic research while at NBC.)



Figure 2 P&G Campaign during Olympics: An Opportunity To Align with Context

- Seasonal advertising: There are opportunities to enhance advertising impact by conducting research that explores exactly which aspects of, say, the November–December holiday season are most important to the advertiser's consumer targets. Is it gift giving, family togetherness, or religious aspects? On the basis of such research, advertisers can customize creative content to optimize emotional alignments and increase the advertising's relevance for the target.

Announcements in early 2018 by major broadcasters regarding the availability of new advertising formats indicate that marketers are embracing the insights from the new studies: Most of those formats, such as a transition from an in-show moment to a commercial (*e.g.*, a character in a show could walk into a coffee shop and grab a drink, which would lead into an advertisement for that same product), are designed to facilitate alignments between content and marketing messages (Lynch, 2018; Lafayette, 2018).

The body of evidence supports the notion that ignoring the context in which advertising is seen or heard by the

consumer is risky (Kwon *et al.*, 2018). New studies have shown that advertisement context, ranging from media platforms to the content and the advertisements next to the advertisement, can affect its effectiveness—both positively or negatively. New research methods provide the tools to help marketers optimize context effects, reduce advertisement avoidance, and stand out in today's cluttered marketing environment. **JAR**

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