Context considered: the relationship between media environments and advertising effects
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Introduction

The largest part of advertising budgets is spent buying advertising space in mass media. It is estimated that in the year 2002 alone, Dutch advertisers spent more than 4 billion Euro placing their advertisements in media vehicles (BBC De Media en Reclamebank, 2002). Of course, advertisers spend their media budgets consciously, trying to be as efficient and selective as possible in choosing where to place their messages. Media placement decisions are predominantly based on three parameters: the number of people that will be reached, the composition of the audience, and the costs of placing an ad. Information on reach, audience characteristics, and placement costs for a large variety of medium outlets are incorporated in advanced media planning models, which help media planners calculate the optimal balance between expenditures and the size of the target group that will be reached.

The size and composition of the audience attracted by a medium vehicle are usually referred to as the quantitative impact of the medium context of the advertisement. It is, however, generally agreed that this quantitative impact is only part of the story. Medium vehicles allow an audience of a certain composition and size to see the advertisement, but may also influence how the advertisement will affect the audience. In the words of Norris and Colman (1992) "the same source delivering the same message to the same audience on separate occasions might produce different effects depending on the differing programming or editorial contexts in which the message appears" (p. 38). A commercial may thus have a different effect when, for example, broadcast in program A compared to program B. The influence that the medium context can have on the effects of the embedded advertisements is usually referred to as the qualitative impact (Lynch & Stipp, 1999). Although it is widely agreed that the context in which an advertisement is placed can have a quantitative as well as a
qualitative impact, the latter is less well understood and accounted for in media placement decisions. To date, there is no clear answer to the question how context influences advertising effects.

The lack of knowledge concerning the qualitative impact of the medium context may be explained by three shortcomings in the research to date. The first is that it is not clear which concepts are central to the relation between the context and the ad. Studies have concentrated on a mixture of context characteristics, varying from objective aspects such as genre and content, to subjective responses such as involvement, arousal, and mood. Furthermore, studies have investigated the influence of context on various advertising effects, ranging from short term ones such as attention and recall, to long term ones such as attitude toward the brand and purchase intention. To date, no integrated overview of findings has been provided, and therefore it is not clear which predictor variables and effects are the most important, and what the relation between them is.

The second problem is the lack of findings for media other than television. The vast majority of studies have concentrated on context effects in a television setting, and it is by no means clear that results from these studies also apply to other media types, especially non-broadcast media such as print. An important difference between broadcast and print media is the pacing of information. Broadcast media are display media, in which the medium paces the speed and moment of information transfer whereas print media are search media in which the receivers control the speed and moment of information transfer themselves. Pacing may have an important influence on how the audience processes medium content, and consequently, how this affects the advertisements carried by the medium.

The third problem stems from the methodology applied in most studies. Since almost all studies use an experimental design to investigate the influence of context on advertising effects, questions arise regarding the validity of the results. Although well-designed experiments are best suited to make causal inferences, findings may differ greatly from effects in the real world. There are three important distinctions between the use of media and advertising in artificial experimental settings compared to real-life ones.

First, in an experiment people do not have the opportunity to make their own selection of what to watch, read, or listen to. Researchers may, for
example, expose people to very boring or unpleasant television programs, to investigate the influence of various levels of program-induced involvement or program liking. It is questionable, however, if these effects occur in real life, since people will probably not choose to watch programs they find dull or dislikable.

Second, in real life people are frequently not interested in advertising and often try to avoid it. However, in experiments avoidance is not an option. Exposure to both editorial and commercial material is almost always forced, meaning that people do not have the ability to zap or tune out. Audience sizes are artificially kept constant, which may seriously distort experimental findings.

A third and final difference is that experiments control external factors in order to rule out alternative explanations for the effects. In real life, medium use is often combined with other activities (e.g., eating, talking, doing household work, using other media) and thus has to compete for attention. Controlling all external factors may create a situation that can not be compared to the way advertising is received in the real world. Experimental results may therefore be uninformative about how context influences advertising in reality.

**Purpose and Structure**

The aim of this dissertation is to identify how context influences advertising effects. The three shortcomings in present knowledge about context effects on advertising impact mentioned above are addressed in the following chapters. Chapter Two addresses the first problem, giving an overview of the literature to date. Chapter Three addresses the second gap, by discussing the findings of a context study on print advertisements instead of television commercials. Finally, Chapters Four and Five concentrate on the third problem, discussing the results of two television studies conducted in a real-life setting instead of an experimental one.

The four following chapters have either been published as individual articles or have been submitted for publication. Hence, each chapter is self-contained with its own abstract, introduction, discussion and reference list. The subject matter of each of the chapters is discussed in the following section.
Overview of the Chapters

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The second chapter presents an extensive review of the existing empirical literature on the relation between context characteristics and advertising effects (Moorman, Neijens, & Smit, 2003a). By systematically reviewing all the research to date, we wanted to assess the understanding of the context characteristics that have the strongest influence on ad effects, of the advertising effects which are most affected by the context, and, finally, of the direction of the influence. After defining context as the editorial medium environment of an advertisement, a distinction is made between objective and subjective context characteristics. Objective characteristics include contextual aspects such as genre, content and style, characteristics that can easily be recognized by every receiver and are not dependent on interpretation. Subjective characteristics, in contrast, are not experienced uniformly, but comprise the individual mental reactions that people experience when confronted with an editorial message. A whole range of subjective characteristics has been studied, and we categorize them according to intensity and valence. Intensity refers to the relative strength of the responses, including such responses as involvement and arousal. Valence indicates the evaluative direction of the response (positive or negative), and includes feelings, mood, and liking.

Our literature review indicates that the way the context influences an advertisement, depends more on the perception of the context than the characteristics of the context per se. The findings for objective characteristics are inconsistent and often not significant, while the pattern of effects for subjective characteristics is much clearer. With regard to advertising effects, the review shows that effects are predominantly established on processing measures, especially commercial recall and attitude toward the ad (A_ad).

Two important relationships between context and advertising effects emerged. First, the valence of the context-induced subjective responses was seen to be positively related to A_ad. This finding supports the notion of mood congruency, which states that affects induced by a stimulus spill over to other stimuli presented in the surroundings of this stimulus. Second, intensity of the response was seen to have a negative effect on ad recall. This finding supports
the idea of the limitations of cognitive capacity, which assumes that people have limited mental resources available for processing information. Editorial content that is experienced more intensely will be processed more elaborately. Consequently, there will be less mental storage room for ads presented within this editorial context, which will result in diminished advertising recall. This latter conclusion is questioned, however, because the negative effect is predominantly found in experimental settings, while some survey studies report positive effects. As previously mentioned, experiments have some pitfalls that may influence findings. A more detailed elaboration on this issue will be given in Chapter Four.

Chapter 3: Magazines

The third chapter deals with the effect of context on print advertisements. The study presented in this chapter investigates the influence of intensity and valence dimensions of context-induced psychological responses on recall of and attitude toward magazine advertisements (Moorman, Neijens, & Smit, 2002a). In addition to the effect of these two dimensions of context responses on ad processing, the influence of thematic congruence between magazines and advertisements is studied. Media agencies often place advertisements in titles that match the product advertised, but whether this fit actually induces better advertising effects has seldom been investigated.

In order to investigate the effects of context-induced psychological responses and thematic congruence on the processing of magazine advertisements, three test ads, either congruent or incongruent with the magazine, were placed in the regular circulation of three different titles. Psychological context responses as well as advertising effects were assessed by face-to-face interviews with a representative sample of subscribers. As an indicator of context-induced intensity, a multiple-item seven-point scale was used to measure respondents’ involvement. As an indicator of context-induced valence, a seven-point scale comprised of several feeling and liking items was used.

In line with previous research focusing on television, results showed that the valence of magazine-induced psychological responses had a positive effect on $A_{ad}$. In contrast to most television studies, the level of intensity of magazine-
induced psychological responses did not have an effect on recall. Two possible explanations for the dissimilarity in findings are discussed: First, this study was conducted in a real-life situation instead of an experimental setting; and, second, there is a difference in pacing between print and broadcast media. Unlike when watching television, people can decide the speed and moment of information transfer when reading a magazine. This may have an important impact on how context-induced psychological responses spill over to the ads. In particular, the intensity of responses may influence ad effects differently in a print setting, because people can stop reading for a moment when experiencing strong feelings and continue when the intensity of the responses has diminished.

Finally, it was observed that ads in a congruent environment were recalled significantly better than ads in an incongruent environment. This supports the notion of priming, which states that congruent information attracts more attention and is processed better, because the reader is already thinking about the subject.

Chapter 4: Program Involvement

As mentioned there are questions whether results from context experiments are valid in real life. In particular, findings on the relation between intensity and recall may be different in experiments than in situations outside the laboratory. In real life, it is unlikely that people select or pay much attention to medium content they are not interested in, and external factors can easily distract them. When people get more involved with the medium content, this encourages them to pay more attention. However, in experiments, the amount of attention paid toward medium content that induces a high level of involvement will not differ from that paid to content inducing lower levels of involvement, because of the constraints with regard to selection, exposure, and control of external factors in the artificial setting. These biasing effects may be especially strong for television experiments, because this medium is generally considered to be a low-involvement medium, indicating that people usually do not make a great effort to process information from television.

The study presented in Chapter Four investigates the relation between the level of program-induced involvement and recall in a real-life setting (Moorman, Neijens, & Smit, 2002b). This study was conducted during the 2000 European
soccer championship. This event was chosen, because it could be expected that levels of involvement would naturally vary between the different matches. People would experience higher levels of involvement with the matches in which the Dutch national team competed than with other matches. Four matches of the 2000 European soccer championship were selected based on expected varying levels of involvement. A day after, computer-assisted telephone interviews were conducted with a large sample of people who had watched the match.

Contrary to the outcomes of most experimental studies, results of this real-life study showed that measures of attention toward the ads and advertising recall were better when the commercials were embedded in a high-involvement match compared to one with a lower level of involvement.

Chapter 5: General Television Programming

The results of the Euro 2000 study show that real-life effects of program-induced intensity may differ from those observed in experimental studies. However, these findings may not be generalizable to regular television programming because they were obtained during a special event. The main aim of the study described in the fifth chapter is to investigate whether the positive effects of intensity on attention and recall also apply to general programming in everyday life (Moorman, Neijens, & Smit, 2003b). In addition to intensity, we wanted to study the effect of valence of program responses on $A_{ad}$. Finally, we wanted to investigate whether context effects are different for commercials placed at various positions.

Results of the study are based on secondary analyses of data from a large telephone survey. This database contains measures of attention to a large variety of programs broadcast during a one month period, evaluation of these program, as well as measures of attention, recall, and evaluation of commercials broadcast during program breaks. In line with the formulated hypothesis with regard to intensity, analyses showed that attention toward the program had a positive effect on measures of commercial attention and recall. In line with the valence hypothesis, we found that program evaluation had a positive effect on evaluation of the commercial. The position of the commercial within the block did not moderate the influence of either intensity or valence, which means that commercials placed at the beginning, middle, or end of the block were influenced
equally. With regard to the position of the commercial block, however, we observed that carry-over effects of valence and intensity indicators were stronger for commercial blocks interrupting a program, compared to blocks between two programs. The apparent explanation for this moderating effect of block position is that psychological responses are more prominent when people are still 'in' the program, and therefore have a stronger effect on advertising processing.

**Main Conclusions**

Central to this dissertation is the question how context influences advertising effects. Three shortcomings in previous research on context effects are identified and have been addressed in the four studies presented in this dissertation. The literature review in Chapter Two identifies which characteristics of the environment are the most important predictors of context effects, which advertising effects are influenced by context, and in which direction these effects are influenced. The magazine study described in Chapter Three gives insight into context effects in a medium other than television. Finally, the two real-life television studies discussed in Chapters Four and Five show the effects of context outside an artificial experimental setting.

Eight main conclusions can be drawn from this research. First, all four studies show that the context in which an advertisement is placed can and does affect its impact. This correlation is found for magazine advertisements as well as television commercials.

Second, the literature review shows that psychological responses induced by the context, such as involvement, feelings, and liking, are the most important predictors of context effects. The psychological responses can be classified by two dimensions, intensity and valence.

Third, the literature review shows that context has its most pronounced direct effect on advertising processing measures. Advertising processing involves the immediate reactions of the audience to the advertisements, and comprises effects such as attention, recall and $A_{ad}$.

Fourth, the valence of context-induced psychological responses has a positive effect on $A_{ad}$. The literature review discussed in Chapter Two, the
magazine study discussed in Chapter Three, and the television study described in Chapter Five all report such a positive effect.

The fifth conclusion is that the strength of program responses affects attention toward and recall of television advertisements. This conclusion is based on the significant effects found in the literature as well as the two television studies.

The sixth conclusion is that effects of program-induced intensity observed in experimental settings may not be valid in real life. This conclusion is based on the dissimilarity in findings in the literature, which are predominantly based on experimental studies and show a negative effect of intensity on commercial recall, compared with our own empirical television studies, which applied a real-life approach and which show a positive effect of intensity on recall.

Seventh, context effects may vary between different types of media. This is concluded on the basis of the magazine study, which, in contrast to the television studies, did not show a significant relation between intensity of context-induced responses and recall.

The final conclusion deals with the placement of the advertisement in relation to its surroundings. Chapter Two shows that when advertisements are placed in magazines that are thematically congruent with the ad, they are recalled better than when placed in an incongruent environment. Results reported in Chapter Five indicate that intensity and valence effects on attention, recall and $A_{ad}$ are stronger for commercial blocks interrupting a program than for those in between programs. This leads us to the eighth conclusion: context effects are dependent on the position of the advertisement in relation to its surroundings.

**Discussion**

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, it is a commonly held belief that context influences the effects of embedded advertisements. Consequently, the first conclusion, which states that the impact of an ad is influenced by its context, will not come as a surprise. The other seven conclusions are probably more interesting to the reader, because they give an answer to the more frequently debated question what effects context has on embedded
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advertisements. Although the studies presented in this dissertation provide useful insight with regard to several lacunae in previous knowledge, some questions remain. Each of the chapters finishes with a separate discussion in which the specific limitations of the study are discussed and suggestions for future research are given. Here, three interesting issues for future research appear.

The first subject on which future research might elaborate is the positive relation between intensity and ad attention and recall found in the studies described in Chapters Four and Five. This finding may have an important implication since past research has predominantly yielded negative effects of intensity on recall, which is generally attributed to cognitive capacity limitation. The present positive findings, on the other hand, indicate that this theoretical explication may not apply to real-life situations. Instead, it seems that the attention developed by the context prevents people from turning away when commercials are aired. A plausible theoretical explanation for this positive effect would be attentional inertia, which holds that the longer a viewer stays continuously focused on the television screen, the more likely it is that he or she will continue to pay attention when the content is interrupted, for example by a commercial. The findings from the studies in this dissertation support this theory indirectly, but the survey data are not sufficient to investigate the underlying mechanism. Future research, for example with the use of observations, is needed to determine whether attentional inertia is what causes the positive effects.

Another, potentially interesting subject for future research is the moderating influence of ad characteristics. The effects of context-induced psychological responses reported in this dissertation have been generalized over advertisements, without taking specific characteristics of the ads into account. It is important to recognize, however, that advertisements vary largely in style, content, and subject and may therefore induce very different effects. Hence, the effect of context may be different for different types.

Finally, context effects on advertisements in media other than television need to be clarified. The study discussed in Chapter Two shows that context effects on magazine advertisements vary from those on television commercials. A plausible explanation for this dissimilarity in effects is the difference in pacing between broadcast and print. However, as we did not directly compare the two
types of media in a single research design, attributing the dissimilar effects to pacing remains somewhat tentative. Further research is necessary to explain the differences in context effects between broadcast and print. Future studies also need to consider other types of media, for example, the Internet.

To conclude, this dissertation bears some important implications for media planning. To date, quantitative information about the size and composition of the audience has served as the basic currency in negotiations between buyers and sellers of advertising space: the higher the reach, the higher the selling price. For example, the broadcast of the Super Bowl is traditionally the most important crowd puller in the United States, which makes advertisers willing to pay 2.2 million dollars for 30-seconds of airtime. Of course, one can never be sure that people will actually pay attention to the commercials. The advertisers are only paying for the possibility that their target audience will see the commercials.

The results from this dissertation go beyond this, showing that the context of an advertisement is not merely a potential generator of an audience for the commercial, but is also a predictor of the effects that the ad will have. The same ad scheduled in a context to which the target audience responds more intensely and more favorably, can produce a greater effect. This means that media planners should consider the impact of context more systematically, by collecting information not only about media vehicles used by a certain target group, but also how these vehicles are used by these audiences. When measures of intensity and valence of context-induced responses are, for example, incorporated in media planning models, a more efficient and sophisticated way of media selection may emerge, in which not only the quantitative, but also the qualitative impact of context is considered.
References


