Whenever a consumer sees an advertisement, it is not in isolation, but in a context. “Context” usually refers to the media space in which the advertisement is embedded: for example, a commercial in a television program, an ad in a magazine or on the radio, a banner on a website, or a video in a social media feed.

Does this kind of context impact consumers’ perceptions of and response to the advertising and, if so, how does context impact advertising?

A large body of research, spanning six decades, has shown that context is likely to affect ad performance, both positively and negatively. Positive effects have been shown when ads are placed in a context that consumers are involved in and pay attention to, and also when there is an alignment between the context and the ad message. Studies have found such effects for the content next to the ad, but also for the media platform or brand, the device, and even the time at which an ad is seen.

Today, there is renewed interest in this topic due to a number of factors: one is the growth in programmatic advertising with its focus on improving targeting.

Note: This report summarizes a paper in the *Journal of Advertising Research* by Horst Stipp in the June 2018, Vol. 58(2) issue. We recommend that paper to readers who want more details on this topic.
and efficiencies, while the context in which the ad appears is regarded as relatively unimportant. At the same time, advertisers are increasingly worried about seeing their advertisements placed in inappropriate contexts that could harm their brands, especially in digital environments. Further, concerns about ad avoidance and ad blocking are leading marketers to consider alternative, branded content formats, such as native advertising, that take advantage of context: these ad formats align with the content in order to make advertising less disruptive (Bowman, 2017). Finally, researchers are able to apply innovative tools, including neuroscience-based methods, which provide deeper insights into consumers’ responses to both content and advertising (Marci, 2006). All these factors have stimulated new research being conducted under today’s marketing conditions.

The recent studies on context effects confirm the likelihood of such effects and they show marketers how research can help them take advantage of context by optimizing positive effects as well as avoid negative context effects.

**Background: 60 Years of Research**

The possible impact of context on consumers’ response to advertising has been researched for about 60 years. Most studies were done on television commercials and found that the programs surrounding the commercials did impact consumers’ response to the advertising: studies found higher recall for commercials in consumers’ favorite programs and enhanced advertising impact from “program-product congruence.” Studies on magazines and radio found similar effects.

A number of researchers have reviewed this large body of research (see Sources and Recommended Literature). Reviewers have concluded that even though the studies overwhelmingly support the notion that advertising context will impact ad effects, they did not sufficiently explain how and why effects occur. A recent meta-analysis covering studies up to 2013 describes the evidence as “mixed results” while recommending that “media professionals should consider media context when making media decisions” (Kwon, King, Nyilasy, & Reid, 2018). A review of this research by the ARF came to the same conclusion.

**New Research and New Insights**

Because of renewed interest during the last couple of years, the ARF decided to address context effects issues in 2017 as part of its “How Advertising Works” (HAW) project (see Sources and Recommended Literature). Building on earlier HAW research on how advertising works in today’s media environment effects and an extensive literature review, the ARF’s context research project analyzed published new research as well as unpublished and proprietary studies that members shared with the ARF. Additionally, the organization conducted two original research projects: one using modeling with IRI data to assess return on investment (ROI) in a “real-life” digital environment (Bacon, Bhardwaj, & Gopalakrishnan, 2017) and the other involving a number of lab experiments with biometrics that explored how
different types of content affect response to the advertisement (Varan, Stipp, & Bellman, 2017).

These studies provide a deeper understanding of how the context in which advertising occurs affects consumer perceptions, processing, and response to advertisement messages. Yet, more research is needed, given the constantly changing media and marketing environment. Further, the new data show that context effects—just like other advertising effects—are not easy to isolate, as they interact with creative factors, product, and brand characteristics; the purpose of the advertising; and consumer behavior and attitudes. In most instances, reach, targeting, and creative quality likely are more important than context (Hartnett, Kennedy, Sharp, & Greenacre, 2016; Poltrack & Wood, 2017). Still, despite these limitations, 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).

**Best Practice Recommendations**

The new research confirms that, when it comes to context effects, there are no one-size-fits-all rules, but it also shows specific strategies marketers can employ to enhance the effectiveness of advertising messages:

- An advertisement seen or heard in a context that a consumer pays more attention to (is more involved in, excited about) more likely will be seen or heard. Therefore, marketers should explore which content and media platforms their target consumer likes and pays attention to and consider placing advertisements in that environment.

- Gaining extra attention for an advertisement in this way is the first step. As a second step to improve advertisement performance, we recommend considering making an emotional and/or cognitive connection between the target consumer, the advertisement’s creative elements, and the brand.

High correlations between attention to content and advertisement recall have been shown repeatedly. If the contexts that are important to the target consumer are suitable, they may be worth paying extra for to gain the higher level of attention that advertisements likely will receive in those contexts (Poltrack & Wood, 2017; Bacon, Bhardwaj, & Gopalakrishnan, 2017).

If the consumer is engaged with the context, the ad context can impact ad response through Priming and Halo processes. A typical example would be that positive emotions aroused by the content preceding an ad “rub off” or “transfer” to the ad. Negative emotions can do the same and harm the brand. A recent study (Sankey & Truss, 2017) shows that an ad can also elicit negative feelings that impact consumer response to the ad that follows.

Advertisers can employ “alignment strategies” to take advantage of these processes: one strategy is to find contexts that align with the ad creative, the brand,
and the campaign objectives; the other is to create advertisements that provide a particularly good fit with a specific context/content and the target’s emotional or cognitive state.

Advertisers have been quite successful with endemic alignments, such as food advertisements on a cooking show or website. On TV, we see advertisements that were created to take advantage of alignment mostly during high-rated television events (such as major sports events and award shows). Those ads tend to be for major brands and part of important, large campaigns. In digital environments, it is usually easier (and less expensive) to create aligned ads and, as a result, we find more alignment formats, such as “native” advertisements, on those platforms.

We know that content-ad alignment can boost advertisement performance significantly and that it can diminish advertisement avoidance. However, the evidence also points to the importance of investing in research: marketers need to explore which alignments do and do not work for their brands. New methodologies are well suited to achieve that goal, especially by uncovering emotions that drive affinity to ad context as well as brands.

The last point is illustrated by new research that suggests opportunities to gain an additional “alignment boost.” It indicates that 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—likely brings a stronger connection between content, advertisement, and the brand with consumers’ emotions and, thereby, enhances the advertisement’s impact (Harvey & Schimmel, 2017; Liebman & Hoffman, 2018).

In sum, the new research supports the notion that ignoring the context in which advertising is seen or heard by the consumer is risky. New studies show that any advertisement context can impact its effectiveness—both positively or negatively. New research methods provide the tools to help marketers optimize context effects, reduce ad avoidance, and stand out in today’s cluttered marketing environment.

**SOURCES**


Bowman, J. (2017, April). *Beating the ad blockers and creating native advertising that works.* Presented at 2017 WARC i-Com event. Retrieved from [https://www.warc.com/Search?Sort=ContentDate|1&DVals=10785&FstEntry=false&ContentIDs=856ff1a0-3aa5-4fd2-b960-](https://www.warc.com/Search?Sort=ContentDate|1&DVals=10785&FstEntry=false&ContentIDs=856ff1a0-3aa5-4fd2-b960-)


RECOMMENDED LITERATURE

**ARF HAW - Context Effects Research:**


**Other Context Effects Research and Literature:**


*To access Journal of Advertising Research articles and ARF conference presentations

ARF members can log in with their ARF credentials at https://thearf.org/

For information on related topics
ARF members can search PowerSearch at https://powersearch.thearf.org/ or Ask a Knowledge Expert at: https://members.thearf.org/knowledge