Putting ads in context

How programme context affects television viewers’ reactions to ads

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Ad placement is attracting increasing attention from researchers, advertisers, and media planners. Recent research has shown that the programme contexts in which television advertisements are placed can have significant and sometimes surprising effects on viewers’ responses to the accompanying advertisements. Across a range of studies, highly involving programmes usually provide the most effective contexts for fostering positive attitudes towards the advertisements and positive purchasing intentions. If the criterion of advertisement effectiveness is memory for the advertisements, products, and brands among viewers who have watched the programmes, then low-involvement programmes provide the best contexts in some circumstances. New empirically validated scales for measuring programme appreciation or involvement are described in this article.
It is widely recognised nowadays that the effectiveness of a television advertisement is determined not only by the number of viewers who see it but also by their feelings towards the programmes in which it is embedded. Well-informed advertisers and media planners have known for some time that an advertisement is likely to be more effective if it is seen in some programme contexts than in others.

Although context effects are now generally acknowledged and their importance accepted, the problem is that no one is sure exactly what it is that makes one programme context ‘good’ and another ‘bad’. A famous novelist once said that ‘there are a few simple rules for writing best-sellers, but unfortunately nobody knows what they are’, and until recently much the same could be said of programme contexts. There are those who tend to regard ad placement as more an art than a science.

Recent research, however, is beginning to clarify the picture as regards favourable and unfavourable programme contexts and their implications for advertisement effectiveness.

Early research into context effects, which began more than three decades ago, yielded puzzling and frustratingly inconsistent findings. As Mallory Wober pointed out in June’s Admap (Wober, 1993), several studies suggested that programmes with high appreciation ratings are good vehicles for advertisements, whereas other studies suggested precisely the reverse, namely that an advertisement may have greater impact if viewed in crummy surroundings – the ‘billboard in the slum’ option. So why has this potentially useful area of research produced such inconsistent results? And is there any way in which we can reconcile the apparent contradictions?

**Surveys versus laboratory experiments**

Several researchers, including not only ourselves but also Esther Thorson, David Schumann, and others in the United States, have suggested that it is the differences in research methodologies used by different investigators that account for the apparently
contradictory findings (Norris & Colman, 1992; Schumann & Thorson, 1990). The usual suggestion is that the contradictory findings arise from the use of survey-type research designs in some investigations and laboratory experiments in others. Survey research has tended to show greater advertisement effectiveness in high-rated programmes, whereas laboratory research has tended to show the reverse, although not all published research fits this generalization neatly.

Why should surveys and laboratory experiments produce such different findings? It has been suggested (e.g. Schumann & Thorson, 1990) that the crucial difference revolves around the effects of selective exposure. In survey research, selective exposure is free to operate. What this means is that the participants are able, of their own free wills, to choose to watch particular programmes, to switch channels, or to engage in some other activity. Consequently, so the argument goes, since obviously high-impact programmes are more likely to sustain audience attention, viewers are more likely to watch the advertisements accompanying high-impact programmes and therefore to remember the advertising messages and their associated products and brand names.

In laboratory experiments, the situation is quite different. The subjects are effectively obliged to view whatever the experimenters choose to show them, and consequently selective exposure is virtually absent. Even low-impact programmes receive attention from subjects in laboratory experiments, and therefore what they remember about the advertisements and associated products and brands may have less to do with the programme contexts in which they were viewed.

On the face of it, this seems to explain why in survey research high-rated programmes have often been associated with greater advertisement effectiveness, at least as indexed by memory for the advertisements and their associated products and brand names, whereas in laboratory experiments this does not appear to be the case. The reason why laboratory experiments tend to report superior memory for
advertisements in low-rated programme contexts, rather than merely equal memory, is probably related to attentional processes. Crudely expressed, in laboratory experiments, high-impact programmes may distract attention from the accompanying advertisements to a greater degree than low-impact programmes. The upshot of all this is that the conflicting research findings seem to be explained by the combined effects of selective exposure and attentional factors.

If only life were that simple! There is no doubt that selective exposure and attentional processes may in part explain the inconsistent results of context research, but are they the only explanations? When we and other researchers have carried out experiments in which selective exposure and attention have been controlled, large and consistent differences have still emerged in how well the subjects have remembered advertisements, products, and brand names viewed in different programme contexts. These differences cannot be due to variations between survey and experimental methodologies, because they occur within controlled experiments; they are presumably due to psychological processes occurring whilst viewing.

In 1990, David Schumann and Esther Thorson proposed a model that distinguishes between selection and processing. According to this model, surveys measure the effects of selective exposure (viewers seeing or not seeing the advertisements) whereas experiments measure the effects of psychological processes among viewers who see the advertisements. Our own research has confirmed what Schumann and Thorson suggested, namely that selective exposure may partly explain differences in how well advertisements are remembered but may be less relevant when attitudes to the advertisements are used to measure of advertisement effectiveness.

Programme ratings and appreciation indices
There are reasons to believe that the inconsistent findings within the context literature may also be due to the use of different criteria for differentiating between the context
programmes – different predictor variables – and to disagreement over the working
definitions of these variables. Take, for example, the predictor variable *programme involvement*, the one that has most often been reported in the published research
literature to influence advertisement effectiveness. Subjects’ involvement in a
programme has been measured using a variety of rating scales labelled *absorbing*,
*interesting*, *suspenseful*, *entertaining*, *irrelevant/relevant*, *means a lot to me/means
nothing to me*, *matters to me/doesn’t matter to me*, *significant/insignificant*,
*vital/superfluous*, *essential/nonessential*, *It touched my feelings*, and *I learnt
something from it*. Other researchers have studied involvement in terms of *enjoyment
value* or *perceived quality* of programmes, and some have used double-barrelled
scales such as those included in the broadcasters’ ‘official’ BARB Appreciation Index
or AI, which measures *enjoyment* and *interest*.

There is no convincing reason to believe that all of these rating scales should be
able to measure the same thing, still less that this thing should necessarily be
programme involvement. There would seem to be a need for empirically determined
definitions for research within this area. Without empirically determined definitions,
terms such as ‘entertainment’ or ‘enjoyment’ ought not to be used interchangeably
with ‘involvement’. They are different concepts and, when used in rating scales, may
measure different viewer responses.

In a large-scale study at Leicester University (Norris, 1992) members of the
general public were asked what they understood by an involving programme or one
they would describe as entertaining or enjoyable. The aim was to pin down
empirically the psychological meanings of these concepts and also to see whether the
terms could be used interchangeably as has been done so many times before in the
literature. Using a multivariate statistical method of cluster analysis, the following
empirical definitions of these concepts were established:
Exhibit 1. Empirical definitions of predictor variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target Concept</th>
<th>Defining Elements</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Entertaining</td>
<td>Exciting</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Enjoyable</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Pleasurable</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Happy</td>
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<td>Cheerful</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enjoyable</td>
<td>Humorous</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Exciting</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Fun</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Amusing</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Funny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involving</td>
<td>Challenging</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interesting</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thought-provoking</td>
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<td>Absorbing</td>
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<td>Stimulating</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Engrossing</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Concentrated</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Immersed</td>
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Not only did this procedure produce empirical definitions of the concepts involvement, entertainment, and enjoyment which can be used by context researchers, advertisers, and media planners, but it also suggested that such terms cannot be used interchangeably. A brief look at the table shows that involvement is quite distinct from entertainment and enjoyment, although these latter two show a degree of overlap.

**Are predictor variables interchangeable?**

In a further pair of studies we found corroborative evidence. In the second study we investigated context effects using programmes that differed only in terms of their involvement value, and in a the third we used programmes that differed only in terms of enjoyment (using the empirical definitions given in the table). Both were experiments and used the same advertisements. Programme involvement turned out to be strongly related to advertisement effectiveness – the higher the programme involvement, the more positive were the subjects’ attitudes towards the advertisements and rated purchasing intentions, but the less they remembered the accompanying advertisements, products, and brand names. On the other hand, programme entertainment/enjoyment showed no relationship to advertisement effectiveness whatsoever.

Taken together, the results of these three studies suggest that programme predictor variables should never be used interchangeably. This is particularly worrying because there has been a tendency within reviews of the literature on context effects to use these scales interchangeably, with the tacit assumption that all of the variables are likely to have a similar effect on the psychological processing of advertisements. This is particularly so for articles focusing on the survey-experimental dichotomy and the effects of selective exposure.

It is clearly misleading to equate predictor variables. What is more, it is possible
that differences observed between survey and experimental studies may in fact be due to the use of different predictor variables as well as selective exposure. The reason for this is that in survey research there has been a tendency to use predictor variables such as liking, mood, and attitudes, whereas in experimental research involvement (or arousal) has more often been used as a predictor variable. Those experiments that have found a positive relationship between programme ratings and advertisement effectiveness have tended to use predictor variables such as mood or liking rather than programme-induced involvement.

What emerges from all this is that the inconsistencies in the published research findings may be more easily explained if the context in which an advertisement appears is recognised as being multi-faceted. In other words, different researchers have found different results not only because their research designs have allowed differing amounts of selective exposure to operate, but also because they have measured different aspects of the programme context. Survey and experimental studies have differed not only in the amount of selective exposure taking place, but also in terms of the predictor variables investigated.

**Practical implications**

Despite numerous published investigations over the past three decades, this area of research is, in many respects, in its infancy as regards methodology. What everyone is concerned about, in the last analysis, is advertisement effectiveness, but there is not even any consensus on how this should be measured. Measures of advertisement effectiveness have ranged from simple measures of memory for the advertisements to sophisticated scales, such as the ones we have used, to measure recall and recognition of advertisements, products, and brands, purchasing intentions, and attitudes towards advertisements. This further complicates any comparison between studies and makes it difficult to produce a unifying model to predict the effects of different programme
variables on advertising effectiveness.

The picture is more complicated, but also more interesting, than has been assumed in the past. There is compelling evidence to show that the programme within which an advertisement is placed is likely to affect its success – that much is uncontroversial. The effects of programme contexts are robust and significant, but they are by no means simple or straightforward. Properly validated empirical definitions are needed for predictor variables such as liking and audience relevance that have not yet been rigorously investigated.

If AI scores were sold to advertisers, as Mallory Wober suggested in June’s *Admap*, this would certainly represent a step in the right direction in so far as context effects are coming to be recognised as important influences on advertising effectiveness. But it is not entirely clear what advertisers would be getting for their money. AI scores are derived from a double-barrelled scale, one barrel being *enjoyment*, and the other *interest*. The evidence that we have discussed suggests that these two scales tap quite different variables, and that the first, if it is related to advertisement effectiveness at all (which is debatable since the evidence shows that it is not a component of viewer involvement), operates in quite a different way from the second.

A further complication arises from possible interaction effects. The mechanical placement of advertisements on the basis of the programmes’ AI scores implies that all advertisements react in a similar way in similar environments. We think that the qualities of the advertisement itself are likely to interact with qualities of the programme to influence the advertisement’s effectiveness, although we acknowledge that this is a woefully under-researched issue. Advertisers may place their advertisements in programmes with high AI scores only to find that a particular advertisement is not as effective as it could be because some element of it clashes with some element of the programme context.
In the light of current research evidence, advertisers and media planners who wish to optimize viewers’ attitudes towards an advertisement and stated purchasing intentions should, in our view, choose programme contexts that are highly involving according to the empirical definitions shown in Exhibit 1. If, on the other hand, the overriding goal is to maximize memory for the advertisement, product, or brand among viewers who see the ad, then placement in a low-involvement programme context should be seriously considered. Details of the empirically validated rating scales used to measure involvement, and also enjoyment and entertainment, can be obtained from the first author.

References
Norris, C E and Colman, A M (In press), ‘Context effects on memory for television advertisements’, *Social Behavior and Personality*, 21(4).

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context effects supported by the Independent Television Commission; he has authored and edited many books, the latest of which is a two-volume Companion Encyclopedia of Psychology, published by Routledge in January 1994. Drs Norris and Colman are currently collaborating on research funded by the market research company BEM. Details of the specific rating scales used to measure involvement, enjoyment, and entertainment can be obtained from Dr Claire Norris, Department of Human Communication, School of Health and Life Sciences, De Montfort University, Scraptoft Campus, Leicester LE7 9SU.