Does a Medium Context Have a Priming Or an Interference Effect? It Depends on How You Look At It.

Wim Janssens, University of Antwerp, Belgium
Patrick De Pelsmacker, University of Antwerp, Belgium
Maggie Geuens, Ghent University, Belgium

Previous medium context research focused on the impact of a context on a subsequent ad. However, context and ad can also be watched in the opposite order or even simultaneously. This paper focused on the order of the ad (after, simultaneously with or before the context) and the type of the context (ad-congruent or incongruent). The results indicated a congruency effect for the context-ad sequence, but a contrast effect for the ad-context sequence. For simultaneous exposure, eye tracking revealed a decreasing congruency effect which turned into a contrast effect the more respondents switched from context to ad and vice versa.

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Previous literature has found that a medium context can have an effect on the responses to an embedded ad (e.g., Moorman et al. 2005). Some authors find a congruency effect between context and embedded ad (priming effect, e.g. Yi 1990a) and others find no effect or even opposing effects and this latter is attributed to the interference and/or contrast theory (Bryant and Zillman 1994). In case readers follow the page lay-out, the medium context is processed first and subsequently the embedded ad. However, most often no formal check for this is done, i.e. how people really read the magazine or newspaper pages is not traced. Hence, several questions can be raised: did people read the context first and subsequently the ad, did the ad attract so much attention that the ad was read first and subsequently the context, did people switch from medium context to ad and vice versa a number of times, and do these different reading sequences have an impact on whether congruency or contrast effects occur? If these reading sequences do matter, they could perhaps explain why previous results in mainly print setting were not robust with respect to the congruency and contrast effects that were found. Indeed, whether priming (a context serves as a primer, resulting in more positive ad responses) or interference (the target ad ‘melts down’ in the medium context, resulting in less positive ad responses) occurs may depend on the context-ad sequence (Furnham, Bergland, and Gunter 2002).

In this paper, by means of three studies, the priming as well as interference effects are studied. By means of eye-tracking we specifically focus on the attention path that respondents have when there is simultaneous exposure (i.e., context and ad are shown at the same time). The studies were operationalized in a medium in which different presentation orders of the stimuli (ad and medium context) are realistic, namely the web. More precisely, a computer ad was combined with a congruent computer web page or an incongruent car web page. Impact was measured by attitude towards the ad (four items) and click intention.

In the first study, we found that in a pure priming setting (a prime, followed by the web ad) the expected congruency effect was present for both attitude towards the ad and click intention. When the web ad and prime (web page) were shown simultaneously after the prime, this congruency effect vanished and for click intention, it even turned into a contrast effect. This finding warrants further research into the effect of context after an ad as well as the effect of context on the number of switches between web site and web ad. In the third study it was indeed shown that the number of switches is a moderating factor. In this study, respondents were only exposed to the ‘continuous simultaneous exposure to web ad and web page’ condition. Our results indicated that when the number of switches was low, congruency effects were found, while as the number of switches increased, this congruency effect diminished and even reversed into a contrast effect. A possible explanation for this finding is that the number of switches between ad and medium context can be seen as a reverse indicator of attentive processing. Hence, the way people look at the medium context and the ad (even when simultaneously exposed) may impact the type of ‘medium context-ad’ effect that will occur.

These findings are relevant because the type of medium context effect may depend on the way people watch medium context and ad. For example, our results suggest that banner ads may not be the most appropriate advertising strategy as it depends on the number of switches between medium context and ad (which is difficult to know a priori), whether a congruent or a contrasting medium context is recommended. A thematically congruent context is recommended in case of a pop-under or a pop-up (which people look at and subsequently close).

With respect to the discussion on the viewing behaviour influencing the type of medium context effect that occurs, further research could try to focus on the suggested ‘backward priming the prime’ principle in order to study the possible effect of the time that the last prime is seen. Such a study may be operationalized in a real-life study, where exposure times to medium context and ad are not forced. Hence, a clickable version of the experiment is recommended to find robustness for our results, although possible confounding effects must be taken care of. Further research could also examine the moderating role of context liking and context-evoked arousal, in websites as well as in other media (e.g., television).

REFERENCES


EXTENDED ABSTRACT

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