

## 5. The Context of Advertising: Contextual Cues, Assimilation and Contrast Effects

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### INTRODUCTION

*Advertising is such a powerful mechanism of meaning transfer that virtually any product can be made to take virtually any meaning* (McCracken, 1989, p. 314).

This provocative assertion by Grant McCracken refers to the contextual 'power' of advertising. It strongly puts forward the notion that advertising has the ability to change both the denotative and connotative meaning of consumer products in almost any direction. By varying the context within which a product is displayed, advertising can change the perceptions not only of the product's uses and affiliations but also of its identity. From a psychological perspective this proposal raises the following question: *how* do advertising messages affect the ways in which people categorize and evaluate consumer products?

Recent research in cognitive and social psychology on category accessibility effects provides some clues. These investigations demonstrate that unobtrusive exposure to (prototypical members of) a cognitive category can increase the accessibility of that category (Higgins, Rholes and Jones, 1977; Higgins, 1989) when evaluating a subsequently presented category-relevant ambiguous stimulus. This increased accessibility is reflected in two general judgmental effects.

First, when a target object is ambiguous it can be categorized as an instance of the accessible category when that accessible category is relevant to the dimension on which the target is ambiguous. For example, Higgins, Rholes and Jones (1977) unobtrusively exposed subjects to either positive or negative trait adjectives, with both sets being relevant to an ambiguous description of a target person's behavior. Later, in an ostensibly unrelated experiment investigating reading comprehension, the subjects who had been primed with the positive traits formed a significantly more favorable impression of the target person

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than did the subjects who had been primed with negative traits. Such outcomes are generally referred to as *assimilation*—there is a positive relationship between the value people place on a target stimulus and the value they place on the accessible information that accompanies the target (Martin, Seta and Crelia, 1990; Yi, 1990).

Second, certain studies of category accessibility suggest that accessible information can also be used as a comparison anchor with which target stimulus information is compared. Such comparison processes often result in judgments inconsistent with the primed category. For example, Herr (1989) showed that when primed with extreme exemplars of a category, subjects judged stimuli in the opposite direction from the primed category. To be more specific, subjects primed with exemplars of expensive cars (e.g. Mercedes-Benz, Ferrari), subsequently judged a fictitious unfamiliar car as relatively less expensive than subjects primed with cheap cars (e.g. Ford Pinto, Chevette). This negative relationship between the value people place on the information that is made accessible by the context and the value they place on the target is generally referred to as a *contrast* effect (Martin, Seta and Crelia, 1990).

Although many factors have recently been considered in explanations of assimilation and contrast effects in social perception, it seems to be of particular importance whether accessible information is 'included' in the representation of the target stimulus or 'excluded' from that representation (see Schwarz and Bless, 1992). Higgins and Stangor's (1988) formulation of 'context-as-foreground' and 'context-as-background' effects suggests that assimilation effects found in traditional priming studies (e.g. Higgins, Rholes and Jones, 1977) can be conceptualized as involving the impact of accessible information as 'background' variable in the sense that impact on subsequent interpretation of the stimulus information results from passive influences of accessibility that automatically affect the representation of target information. Context can, however, also function as a 'foreground' variable in the sense that the perceiver can purposely take it into account when processing the stimulus information. That is, people may perceive the target stimulus and the accessible information as two distinct entities that can be purposely contrasted with each other (Higgins and Stangor, 1988). Translated to the case of advertising effects, this means that when the context in which an advertised product is embedded serves as background when consumers form an impression of the product, assimilation is more likely and the advertising context will color the evaluation of the product. When, on the other hand, the advertising context functions as a foreground variable and induces active comparisons with the target product, contrast is more likely to result. In other words, we propose that assimilation effects are more likely when contextual cues are used to interpret ambiguous product categories, whereas contrast effects are more likely to occur when these contextual cues are sufficiently specific and distinct to be used as comparison standard in the judgment stage.

Thus, it is important to distinguish variables that determine whether accessible information is used as a background variable and used during interpretation or as a foreground variable and used during judgment. In the present research we argue that one important determinant is whether the primed information only has 'interpretation- applicability' or also 'comparison- applicability'. When accessible information has interpretation- applicability it activates

a certain 'concept' in terms of which the ambiguous target stimulus can easily be interpreted.

When a contextual cue not only activates the abstract, non-specific representation of a category (e.g. 'hostility'), but also a particular, specific 'exemplar' (or prototype) of that category (e.g. 'Hitler'), such accessible information could have both interpretation-applicability and comparison-applicability. When a primed exemplar is a member of the same category as the stimulus target, accessible exemplar information can be used as a comparison standard when evaluating the target stimulus. When the accessible exemplar is an extreme category member, such comparison processes can lead to contrast effects. As Herr (1989) has shown, priming subjects with exemplars of very expensive cars resulted in subjects judging a hypothetical car as less expensive.

We thus propose that contexts can activate 'concept accessibility' or 'exemplar accessibility'. Concepts are abstract representations of a particular category that can affect interpretation of the target stimulus. Exemplars are concrete or prototypical representations of a particular category that can affect interpretation of the target stimulus, but may also enhance comparison processes in which the accessible exemplar can be purposely contrasted with the target.

The above argument suggests that exemplar information can serve as a background variable when it has interpretation-applicability (and activates a relevant concept) but has no comparison-applicability (the activated exemplars do not belong to the same category as the stimulus target). Thus, for subjects who are primed with exemplars of hostile *persons* (e.g. Hitler, Dracula) these extreme exemplars will have comparison-applicability and function as foreground variable, as comparison standard and will be contrasted with the impression of a *person* whose behaviors are ambiguous concerning the trait 'hostility'. For subjects primed with hostile *animals* (e.g. shark, tiger), however, these extreme exemplars cannot function as comparison standard because they do not have comparison-applicability: when judging persons one does this in comparison with *other* persons, not in comparison with animals. However, because of their extreme hostility the primed animals will activate this concept as a background variable and color the perception of the stimulus person in relatively more hostility-congruent terms, which results in an assimilation effect (cf. Stapel, Koomen and Van der Pligt, 1994).

In the present research, we attempt to extend the above analysis to the study of context effects in advertising. This research was largely inspired by a recent paper by Meyers-Levy and Sternthal (1993) who presented subjects with an advertising message for a new restaurant and studied their evaluations of this restaurant while varying certain contextual cues in the advertising message. In the two studies discussed here, the target advertising message and the dependent measures used, are similar to the ones reported by Meyers-Levy and Sternthal (1993). First we discuss a study in which we tested the hypothesis that the distinction between concept and exemplar accessibility is important for the emergence of assimilation and contrast effects. In this study we presented people with contextual exemplar cues that either have or have no comparison-applicability and either are or are not accompanied with explicit concept terms. In the second study we compare our analysis of context effects and the results we found in the first study with Meyers-Levy and Sternthal's (1993) interpretations of their findings.

## STUDY 1: CONCEPT AND EXEMPLAR ACCESSIBILITY

In this study we investigated under what conditions the categorical similarity between accessible exemplars and the advertised target influences whether the accessibility of these exemplars leads to assimilation or contrast effects in judgments of the target stimulus in the ad. This issue was examined by presenting subjects with an advertising message for a new restaurant (the target stimulus) that they would later evaluate. The message described various features of the restaurant, such as simple and general characterizations of the establishment's food and ambiance (see Meyers-Levy and Sternthal, 1993). *Before* subjects were presented with this advertising message they read a general introduction in which subtle mention was made of the names of either three clothing stores or three restaurants. Exemplars that possessed different types of associations were used to enable assimilation and contrast effects to be detected. Specifically, the valence of contextual exemplar cues varied according to whether they represented a casual (unfavorable) or an elegant (favorable) establishment. Evidence for assimilation would occur if judgments of the target restaurant reflected more elegant/positive associations when the contextual exemplar cue was elegant rather than casual, whereas the reverse outcome would imply contrast.

The extent to which the contextual exemplar cues belonged to the same category as the target stimulus was varied as follows. In applicable-category conditions the exemplars represented elegant or casual restaurants. In non-applicable-category conditions the exemplars were elegant or casual clothing stores.

Previous research (Philippot et al., 1991) has demonstrated that contrast effects due to extreme exemplar priming can be attenuated when these exemplars are accompanied with the concepts they exemplify. Philippot et al. (1991) report that priming subjects with names that exemplify hostility (e.g. Hitler) results in contrast effects of an ambiguous target, whereas priming of exemplars *and* an applicable concept (e.g. 'hostile') results in assimilation effects. In terms of the present analysis of context effects, Philippot's et al.'s (1991) findings indicate that when accessible information consists of both extreme exemplars of a certain category and an adjective that describes this category, concept accessibility overshadows exemplar accessibility, 'backgrounds' the specific exemplars and makes comparison-based contrast more difficult. Thus, exposing subjects to both exemplars and concepts decreases the specificity of the primed exemplars and makes it unlikely that they are used as specific comparison standard in the judgment stage.

In other words, one could assume that priming of a particular concept (e.g. Higgins, Rholes and Jones, 1977) has a stronger assimilation effect than priming of an extreme exemplar has a contrast effect. In line with this assertion a variable was introduced to investigate the influence of accompanying contextual exemplar cues with concept cues. It was hypothesized that in concept-mentioned conditions the contextual cues would result in assimilation effects because then the primed information is not sufficiently specific to serve as scale anchor.

Our background/foreground analysis of context effects assumes that assimilation reflects the use of accessible concepts in the *interpretation* of ambiguous stimuli, whereas contrast

reflects a *comparison* process in the *judgment* stage in which the target stimulus is contrasted with accessible exemplars. This implies that assimilation effects should only be obtained when judging the target stimulus requires the interpretation of new information, whereas contrast effects can occur independently of whether the interpretation of new information is required or not. To explore this implication, subjects were asked to evaluate the new and *ambiguous* restaurant that was presented in the advertising message as well as a known average-rated restaurant. In line with Herr (1989) and Philippot et al. (1991), it is predicted that when presented with contextual exemplar cues, subjects' judgments of the known and *unambiguous* restaurant would show contrast effects, given that these exemplars belonged to the same category.

Several predictions followed from the above analysis. When the target restaurant and the contextual exemplar cues were both restaurants and thus belonged to the same category, subjects' judgments of the *ambiguous* restaurant were expected to exhibit contrast effects. Specifically, exemplars of elegant restaurants should foster comparison-based contrast and result in less elegant/favorable judgments of the new restaurant than exemplars of casual restaurants. When the target restaurant and contextual exemplar cues did not belong to the same category, subjects' judgments of the ambiguous target restaurant were expected to show assimilation. Assimilation was also predicted for all conditions in which the contextual exemplar cues were accompanied with the trait terms they exemplified. Together, these predictions mean that for judgments of the ambiguous target restaurant a three-way interaction was predicted between the effects of 'valence of contextual cue', 'category similarity of contextual cue', and 'concept accessibility'.

Since it was hypothesized that judgments of the *unambiguous* target restaurant would only be affected by accessible exemplars that belonged to the same category, it was predicted for these judgments that the contextual cues would have no effect when they were exemplars of clothing stores. When the contextual cues were restaurants it was predicted that exemplars of elegant restaurants should foster comparison-based contrast and result in less elegant/favorable judgments of the known restaurant than exemplars of casual restaurants. This effect was also predicted for the conditions in which the restaurant exemplars were accompanied with the concepts they exemplify. It was anticipated that these 'concept accessibility' conditions only influenced the interpretation of the new restaurant target. For judgments of the known restaurant concept accessibility should have no effect, because interpretation is not necessary any more and because 'concepts are too abstract to serve as specific scale anchor in the judgment stage'. Thus, an interaction was anticipated between the effects of 'valence of contextual cue' and 'category similarity of contextual cue'.

## Method

### *Participants and design*

In the study in which we tested the above expectations, participants were students who thought they were in a short 'psychology of advertising' study. Subjects were randomly assigned to cells in a balanced 2 (valence of contextual cue: elegant, casual) by 2 (category similarity contextual cue: similar, different) by 2 (concept accessibility: concept mentioned, concept not mentioned) between subjects (factorial) design.

### *Procedure and measures*

After arrival in the room where the study took place the experimenter handed out the questionnaire and explained that participants' opinions were sought about a new venture that would be described in an ad that followed. Then subjects read the introduction which asserted that in 'the information society we live in, we are confronted with all possible forms of information. Sometimes this information is specific and succinct'. Then an example of 'succinct' information was given. This example represented the contextual cue. In the similar-category conditions the cue consisted of the names of three elegant or three casual restaurants (Hilton Hotel Restaurant De Kersentuin, Okura Hotel Restaurant Yamazato, Amstel Hotel Restaurant La Rive vs. MacDonalds, Febo, Burger King). In the different-category the cued exemplars were elegant or casual clothing stores (Frank Govers Design, Maison De Bonneterie, The Society Shop vs. Zeeman, Scholten, Wibra). All these exemplars were pretested in a pilot study. In the conditions in which the concept these exemplars exemplified was explicitly mentioned, the names of elegant exemplars were followed by the words 'exclusive, elegant, distinguished'. Casual exemplars were accompanied with the adjectives 'casual, simple, normal'. After the example of succinct information, subjects read the target ad for 'Valenton Restaurant' as an 'example of more elaborate information'.

After reading the ad, subjects completed several judgment measures on 7-point scales. Their views about the nature of the target restaurant were examined on five items (e.g. casual-intimate ambiance, friendly-unfriendly service). Then five items were administered to assess subjects' overall evaluations of the target restaurant (e.g. bad-good, inferior-superior). After subjects had rated the new restaurant similar questions were asked for the known restaurant (AC restaurants). Because each of these sets of five items formed reliable scales, each set was averaged to form separate 'new restaurant establishment', 'new restaurant evaluation', 'known restaurant establishment', 'known restaurant evaluation' indices. To check whether all subjects were familiar with AC restaurants, at the end of the questionnaire subjects were asked whether had ever 'heard' of AC Restaurants before the experiment started. Virtually all subjects (98%) said they had heard of AC Restaurant before. Exclusion of subjects who said they had not heard of AC Restaurant before did not change the results in any significant fashion. Upon completion, the questionnaires were collected, subjects were thanked and debriefed.

## Results

Treatment means for the new restaurant establishment judgment and evaluation indices and the known restaurant establishment judgment and evaluation indices are presented in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1 Treatment means (Study 1) of the establishment and the evaluation indices for new ambiguous restaurant and known unambiguous restaurant

Measure	Construct mentioned with contextual cue		Construct not mentioned		Construct mentioned			
	Valence contextual cue		Casual		Elegant			
	Similar	Differ	Similar	Differ	Similar	Differ	Similar	Differ
New restaurant establishment judgment index	3.6	4.0	4.1	3.7	4.0	3.9	3.7	3.5
New restaurant evaluation index	4.0	4.5	4.6	4.0	4.5	4.5	4.2	3.9
Known restaurant establishment judgment index	1.8	2.0	2.0	1.9	1.8	2.1	2.3	2.1
Known restaurant evaluation index	3.0	3.5	3.5	3.1	2.9	3.1	3.5	3.0

### *Judgments of new, ambiguous restaurant*

Multivariate analyses of variance<sup>2</sup> performed on the new restaurant indices revealed the predicted three-way interaction of valence of contextual cue, category similarity contextual cue, concept accessibility. This predicted interaction was significant and in the right direction for both the establishment and the evaluation indices. As can be seen in Table 5.1 these interactions indicated that within 'concept not mentioned' conditions the anticipated assimilation effect was found when the contextual cues and the new

<sup>2</sup> To simplify the presentation of our findings, we report only higher order effects observed on these measures.

restaurant represented different categories. That is, the new restaurant was rated more favorably overall ( $M = 4.5$ ) and more intimate ( $M = 5.2$ ) when the contextual cues were elegant clothing stores and less favorably ( $M = 4.0$ ) and less intimate ( $M = 4.5$ ) when they were casual clothing stores ( $p < 0.05$ ). However, when the target and the contextual cues belonged to the same category contrast effects were found within the 'concept not mentioned' conditions. That is, the new restaurant was rated less favorably overall ( $M = 4.0$ ) and less intimate ( $M = 4.7$ ) when the contextual cues were elegant restaurants, whereas they were rated more favorably ( $M = 4.7$ ) and more elegant ( $M = 5.3$ ) when the contextual cues were casual restaurants ( $p < 0.01$ ).

Within the 'concept mentioned' conditions assimilation was found in both similar-category and different-category conditions. That is, when contextual cues were elegant restaurants judgments of the new restaurant were more favorable ( $M = 4.5$ ) and more elegant ( $M = 5.1$ ) than when the contextual cues were casual restaurants ( $M = 4.1$ ,  $M = 4.8$ , respectively). Similarly, when elegant clothing stores were primed judgments of the new restaurant were more favorable ( $M = 4.5$ ) and more elegant ( $M = 5.0$ ), whereas when casual clothing stores were primed, these judgments were less favorable ( $M = 3.9$ ) and less elegant ( $M = 4.5$ ) ( $p < 0.10$ ).

#### *Judgments of known, unambiguous restaurant*

Analyses performed on the known restaurant indices revealed the expected two-way interaction of valence of contextual cue, category similarity contextual cue. This interaction was significant for both the establishment and the evaluation indices. As can be seen in Table 5.1 these interactions showed the expected contrast effects within 'concept not mentioned' conditions. That is, the known restaurant was rated less favorably overall ( $M = 3.0$ ) and less intimate ( $M = 2.5$ ) when the contextual cues were more elegant restaurants and more favorably ( $M = 3.5$ ) and more elegant ( $M = 3.2$ ) ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Within 'concept mentioned' conditions for the known restaurant no judgment effects were found when the contextual cues either represented restaurants or clothing stores.

## **Discussion**

This study validated our analysis of some important determinants of assimilation and contrast effects in a marketing context. Exposure to exemplars of elegant restaurants resulted in judgments of the target restaurant as less elegant/favorable, whereas cued exemplars of casual restaurants resulted in more elegant/favorable judgments. When the target restaurant and contextual exemplar cues did not belong to the same category and the latter thus could not be used as comparison standard, subjects' judgments of the target restaurant showed assimilation effects. The accessibility of elegant (casual) clothing stores fostered interpretation of the advertised restaurant in similar terms. Independent of exemplar-applicability assimilation effects were found in all conditions in which the elegant or casual exemplar cues were accompanied by the trait terms they exemplified. As predicted, the accessibility of abstract concepts results in stronger inter-

pretation and 'background' effects than the subtle comparison processes prompted by the single accessibility of extreme and applicable exemplars. Further, the contextual cues had the predicted effect on judgments of the known target when they represented applicable exemplars. Specifically, judgments of the known restaurant were only contrasted when accessible exemplar cues constituted an applicable comparison standard.

## STUDY 2: INTRINSIC AND EXTRINSIC CONTEXTUAL CUES

Although the results of the first study seem to be promising evidence for our foreground/background perspective, they are opposite to the findings of Meyers-Levy and Sternthal (1993) who used similar measures, similar contextual cues, and a similar advertising message. Specifically, Meyers-Levy and Sternthal (1993) found that a contextual cue representing an elegant clothing store resulted in less elegant/favorable ratings of the advertised restaurant than a cue representing a casual clothing store, whereas in the study discussed above, assimilation in different-category conditions was found. Meyers-Levy and Sternthal (1993) also report findings showing that when the contextual cue was an elegant (casual) restaurant, subjects' judgments of the new restaurant were relatively more elegant (casual), thus demonstrating assimilation effects, whereas in our study contrast was found in similar-category conditions.

Although these results contradict our findings of contextual effects, there is one aspect in Meyers-Levy and Sternthal's (1993) study that makes it difficult to generalize their results. Traditional studies of context-effects, category accessibility or priming-induced categorization, such as the study reported before (see also Herr, 1989; Higgins, 1989; Martin, Seta and Crelia, 1990), investigate the effect of *extrinsic* priming events on judgments of an (un)ambiguous target. These studies first prime subjects with a particular cognitive category and then (often in an ostensibly unrelated experiment) ask subjects to form impressions of the target stimulus. In contrast, Meyers-Levy and Sternthal investigated the effect of *intrinsic* contextual cues on judgment. They provided subjects with a target stimulus within which a relationship was established between stimulus and contextual cue. The restaurant-ad subjects read specified the previous occupant (MacDonald's or Le Francais vs. The Gap or Gucci) of the building that currently housed the restaurant. This *intrinsic* information—and not an independent contextual cue that was presented to subjects before they read the ad (as in our study)—represented the contextual cue. The difference between extrinsic and intrinsic contextual cues is important because the intrinsic contextual cues Meyers-Levy and Sternthal (1993) used activate knowledge about the previous occupant of the building in which the advertised restaurant is housed that could be relevant and informative when forming an impression. For example, when one knows that the previous occupant was an elegant restaurant one could infer that the building is relatively expensive (or located in a rich neighborhood) and thus the new restaurant also must be exclusive. Knowledge that the previous occupant was an elegant clothing store is not very diagnostic for evaluations of a restaurant because the clothing stores and restaurants belong to disparate categories. When this is the case, information about the previous occupant may motivate

people to suppress associations to the contextual cues and to interpret the target object in terms of context-distinct, antithetic associations, thereby encouraging a contrast effect. This analysis of the meaning of intrinsic cues suggests that the contextual cues Meyers-Levy and Sternthal used did not merely increase the cognitive accessibility of certain elegant or casual establishments. In their study, subjects' judgments of the target restaurant seem to be affected by their knowledge about the previous occupant of the building in which the target restaurant is housed.

This interpretation may explain why Meyers-Levy and Sternthal only found contrast effects when the previous occupant was a clothing store, but that only for subjects who scored high on a cognitive style index that measured 'motivation to use cognitive resources to examine discrepant elements' (see Meyers-Levy and Sternthal, 1993). Highly motivated subjects, 'clarifiers', used the cognitive resources necessary to note that the former occupant was an elegant or a casual 'comparable' *restaurant* or a 'non-comparable' *clothing store*. These subjects assimilated their judgments of the target restaurant towards their evaluation of the previous occupant when this previous occupant was comparable to the target. They, however, tried to avoid using the information about the previous occupant in their evaluations of the target and contrasted their judgments with their evaluation of the previous occupant when it was non-comparable. 'Simplifiers', on the other hand, did not expend their resources to note whether the previous occupant belonged to the same or a different category as the target restaurant. These subjects only attended to the fact that the restaurant was housed in a building formerly occupied by either an elegant or a casual *establishment* and assimilated their evaluations of the target restaurant towards their evaluation of the previous occupant (cf. Martin, Seta and Crelia, 1990; Meyers-Levy and Sternthal, 1993).

This analysis of Meyers-Levy and Sternthal's findings suggests that when the impact of intrinsic contextual cues on target judgments is investigated, the way in which these cues are presented within the target stimulus is often *meaningful* and relevant to the evaluation of the target. The judgmental impact of such meaningful cues is dependent on whether subjects expend relatively more (clarifiers) or less effort (simplifiers) in attending to these cues. This argument is in contrast to Meyers-Levy and Sternthal's, who appear to neglect the potential diagnostic meaning of contextual cue when presented within the target.

In the present study, we attempt to empirically validate our interpretation of the Meyers-Levy and Sternthal study by adding conditions to Meyers-Levy's design in which the statement that the new restaurant 'is in a building that was formerly occupied by [contextual cue]' is replaced by 'is in a building that is owned by [contextual cue]'. We assumed that although the contextual cues were similar in both conditions, 'previous occupant' cues have a different meaning than 'owner' cues. Whereas the knowledge that the previous occupant of the building in which the advertised restaurant is housed was a clothing store will prompt 'clarifiers' to avoid using this knowledge in their evaluations of the new restaurant because it is inappropriate, knowledge that the building is 'owned' by a clothing store does not necessarily induce such correction processes. It is not unusual that well-known chains of clothing stores own buildings that are used for other purposes, such as running a restaurant. We thus predicted that when contextual cues were presented as 'owners'

assimilation effects for both 'clarifiers' and 'simplifiers' in both 'similar-category' and 'different-category' would be found. Contrast effects were only predicted for 'clarifiers' in the different-category conditions in the 'occupant' part of the design. Together, these predictions mean that for judgments of the new restaurant a four-way interaction was predicted between the effects of 'valence of contextual cue', 'category similarity of contextual cue', 'meaning of contextual cue', and 'cognitive style'. As an exploratory variable, similar to Study 1, judgments of the known restaurant were also measured.

## **Method**

### *Participants and design*

Participants were students who participated in a short psychology study at the beginning of lectures. The design consisted of a balanced 2(valence of contextual cue: elegant, casual) by 2(category similarity contextual cue: similar, different) by 2(meaning of contextual cue: occupant, owner) by 2(cognitive style: clarifiers, simplifiers) between subjects (factorial) design.

### *Procedure*

The procedure and dependent variables were similar to those used in Study 1. However, the contextual cue represented (similar to the Meyers-Levy and Sternthal study) one elegant/casual restaurant (Hilton Hotel Restaurant de Kersentuin vs. MacDonald's) or clothing store (Maison de Bonneterie vs. Zeeman) that was presented in the advertising message as either 'previous occupant' or 'owner' of the building in which the advertised restaurant was housed. Cognitive style was measured by presenting subjects with a Dutch translation (Cratylus, 1993) of the short version of the 'Need for Closure' (Webster and Kruglanski, 1993) that measures the desire for definite structure, decisiveness, close-mindedness and ambiguity-aversion (cf. 'simplifiers') as opposed to ambiguity, openmindedness and objectivity (cf. 'clarifiers'). Using a median split, subjects were classified as high need for closure (simplifiers) or low need for closure (clarifiers). Upon completion, the questionnaires were collected and subjects were thanked and debriefed.

## **Results**

Treatment means for the new restaurant establishment judgment and evaluation indices and the known restaurant establishment judgment and evaluation indices are presented in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2 Treatment means of the establishment and the evaluation indices for the new ambiguous restaurant and the known unambiguous restaurant

Measure	Meaning contextual cue	Occupant		Owner					
		Valence contextual cue		Valence contextual cue					
		Elegant	Casual	Elegant	Casual				
	Category similarity contextual cue	Similar	Differ	Similar	Differ				
		Similar	Differ	Similar	Differ				
New restaurant establishment judgment index	NCL Low	4.4	3.6	3.6	4.3	4.4	4.4	3.6	3.9
	NCL High	4.3	4.3	3.7	3.6	4.4	4.3	3.6	3.7
New restaurant evaluation index	NCL Low	5.0	4.2	4.2	5.0	5.0	4.9	4.1	4.1
	NCL High	4.9	4.9	4.1	4.1	4.9	5.0	4.0	4.2
Known restaurant establishment judgment index	NCL Low	2.1	2.1	2.2	2.0	2.1	2.2	2.0	2.2
	NCL High	2.4	2.3	2.0	1.8	2.4	2.5	1.9	1.9
Known restaurant evaluation index	NCL Low	3.3	3.3	3.3	3.1	3.2	3.3	3.3	3.3
	NCL High	3.5	3.4	2.9	2.9	3.6	3.6	2.9	2.9

NCL = 'need for closure'. Low scores represent 'clarifiers'. High scores represent 'simplifiers'.

Analyses performed on the new restaurant indices revealed, although marginally significant, the predicted four-way interaction of valence of contextual cue, category similarity contextual cue, meaning of contextual cue, cognitive style for both the establishment and the evaluation indices.

As is suggested by the patterns of scores in Table 5.2, planned contrasts<sup>3</sup> performed on these interactions indicated that, as predicted, within 'occupant' conditions of the design Meyers-Levy and Sternthal results were replicated for judgments of the new, ambiguous target. Low need for closure subjects exhibited the anticipated contrast effect when the contextual cue and the advertised restaurant belonged to different categories (higher scores when casual contextual cues were primed, lower scores when elegant contextual cues were primed), whereas assimilation was found in all other conditions (higher scores when elegant contextual cues were primed, lower scores when casual contextual cues were primed) ( $p < 0.05$ ). However, as predicted, within the 'owner' conditions

<sup>3</sup> Because of space limitations we do not report these planned contrasts.

this effect for low need for closure subjects disappeared. When the contextual cue was the 'owner' of the building in which the new restaurant was housed, assimilation effects were found in all conditions for both High and Low Need for Closure subjects ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Analyses on the known restaurant indices revealed a two-way interaction of valence of contextual cue and cognitive style. This interaction was significant for both the establishment and the evaluation indices. As can be seen in Table 5.2, only assimilation effects were found for high need for closure subjects ( $p < 0.05$ ). No context effects were found for low need for closure subjects.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results of the second study suggest that the effects of contextual cues that are presented within the target stimulus and that are related to this stimulus are dependent on how relevant they are for the interpretation of that stimulus. The present extension of Meyers-Levy and Sternthal's (1993) investigation of the effects of intrinsic contextual cues suggests that the way in which such cues are presented ('owner' vs. 'occupant' conditions) is important for the effect they will exert. We found that similar contextual cues led to different effects when the statements in which they were presented to subjects implied different consequences. Whereas clarifiers attempted to 'partial out' (Martin, Seta and Crelia, 1990) and avoid using knowledge that the previous occupant of the building in which an advertised restaurant is housed had been a elegant (casual) clothing store in their evaluations of the new restaurant, knowledge that the building was 'owned' by a clothing store did not seem to prompt such correction processes.

Together, the two studies discussed in this chapter demonstrate the importance of the distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic primes. Intrinsic contextual cues derive their meaning from the way they are presented within the ad and, dependent on this, may result in either assimilation or contrast. Extrinsic priming events seem to be theoretically more pliable. They can either function as 'background' and color the interpretation of a target or as 'foreground' that enhances their use as comparison standard. The analysis of context effects in terms of the foreground/background distinction captures the essence of a comparative process (which is more likely to result in contrast) and a contextual embellishment (which is more likely to result in assimilation).

Further research should establish whether the distinctions between two types of cognitive accessibility (concept and exemplar accessibility) and two types of applicability (interpretation and comparison applicability) are important for the understanding of social cognition and judgment effects, as this first analysis of context effects in the domain of advertising effects has suggested (see also Table 5.3). These findings have a number of practical implications for the use of advertising context in marketing settings. Further research might follow up some of these.

Table 5.3 Types of cognitive accessibility and direction of judgment effect

	Direction of judgment effects	
	Assimilation (+ relation target/context)	Contrast (-relation target/context)
Types of cognitive accessibility	concept accessibility context-as-background interpretation applicability	exemplar accessibility context-as-foreground comparison applicability

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