

Dimensional Range Overlap and Context Effects in Consumer Judgments

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What is it about context that determines whether a target will be assimilated to the context or contrasted away from it? We suggest that it is the dimensional overlap in the range of values that contextual and target stimuli might take. Four experiments demonstrate that overlap or lack thereof between context and target ranges determines context effects. Assimilation occurs when the context and target ranges overlap, but contrast occurs when the ranges do not overlap. Furthermore, perceptions of amount of overlap or lack thereof determine the amount of assimilation or contrast. These results occur regardless of whether research participants are asked to explicitly consider ranges or not prior to judgment, whether the context consists of attributes or exemplars, and whether the target is novel or familiar.

Consumers evaluate products every day. Although they generally think their judgments reflect the true quality of the products, many irrelevant contextual factors, from the weather to another product brand, can influence consumers' evaluations. In many settings, target judgments are assimilated toward some context (i.e., the target is judged as more like the contextual stimuli than it would be without the context). Assimilation effects can occur, for example, when the context activates concepts that are used to interpret what the qualities of the target are (Stapel, Koomen, and Velthuisen 1998; Yi 1993). In other settings, target judgments are contrasted away from the context (i.e., people judge the target as less like the context than it otherwise would be; Sherman, Ahlm, and Berman 1978). Contrast can occur when the context sets up a relatively extreme standard of comparison (Herr 1986; Stapel and Winkielman 1998).

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A number of theories of assimilation and contrast have been developed. In general, current theories suggest that assimilation is most likely to occur when global, similarity-oriented processing is occurring, whereas contrast is more likely when local, dissimilarity-oriented, or comparative processing is occurring (Förster, Liberman, and Kuschel 2008; Mussweiler 2003). When engaging in global processing, the person is likely to assess the similarities of different stimuli and could use characteristics of the contextual stimuli to interpret the target (Mussweiler and Damisch 2008; Stapel et al. 1998) or could include the context and target in the same overarching category (Schwarz and Bless 1992, 2007). However, when engaging in local processing, the person is likely to assess the dissimilarities among stimuli and compare or distinguish the context and target, often excluding the target from the context category (Schwarz and Bless 1992; Stapel et al. 1998). In general, these models assume a type of biased hypothesis testing (Mussweiler 2003) in which, if one tests for similarity, similarities will be found but if one tests for differences, differences will be found.

It is clear that specific circumstances can instigate global processing (Förster et al. 2008), similarity testing (Mussweiler and Damisch 2008), or interpretation mind-set (Stapel and Koomen 2001) to create assimilation. The same research has also shown that direct manipulations to create local processing, dissimilarity testing, or comparison mind-set bring about contrast in judgments. However, many context effects have been produced without explicitly incorporating any situational factors other than the particular context and target stimuli themselves. What about those stimuli might lead people to spontaneously adopt a global/similarity-testing/interpretation/

inclusion mind-set or a local/dissimilarity-testing/comparison/exclusion mind-set? Many specific variables predict which contexts or targets are likely to produce assimilation or contrast. These include the distance between the context-free ratings of context and target stimuli (context extremity; Herr, Sherman, and Fazio 1983; Sherif and Hovland 1961), the ambiguity of the target (Herr et al. 1983; Philippot et al. 1991), and whether the context consists of traits (attributes) or exemplars (Stapel et al. 1998; Stapel and Winkielman 1998).

In this article, we argue that many qualities of contexts and targets that influence context effects do so because, at their core, they represent the “dimensional range overlap” that they create between the context and target. This idea of range overlap is implicit in many of the context effect theories, and researchers have used specific contexts that might have inadvertently created overlap (or lack of overlap) between the context and target ranges. However, in the current work, we make the role of these ranges explicit, and we test the influence of these ranges directly by manipulating and measuring the amount of overlap or lack thereof between the context and target stimuli.

DIMENSIONAL RANGE OVERLAP AND CONTEXT EFFECTS

The current research focuses on the degree of overlap in the dimensional ranges of plausible values that could be taken on by the context and the target in consumer judgment settings. That is, for any given contextual stimulus, we believe that a key part of whether that context produces assimilation or contrast is the extent to which the plausible values for the context overlap with the plausible values of the target. By dimensional range, we simply mean the diversity of ways that the target or context can be interpreted or categorized along a specific judgment dimension. For example, the possible range of interpretations for the prestige of the General Motors automobile company might vary from extremely low prestige to moderately high prestige, because the company produces a variety of product lines covering diverse prestige segments (stretching all the way from top-end Cadillac models associated with moderately high prestige down to subcompact/low-prestige models from other lines, such as Chevrolet or Geo). In contrast, the possible range of interpretations for the prestige of Hyundai is more narrow, spanning only from moderate prestige to low prestige. These different ranges would have different implications for how judgments of General Motors or Hyundai would be influenced by considering the same high-prestige context brand (e.g., Mercedes-Benz).

We hypothesize that assimilation occurs when the context’s range overlaps substantially with the target’s range on the relevant judgment dimension. Thus, for example, if there is overlap in prestige between the context (e.g., Kia) and a target (e.g., General Motors), we predict assimilation of target judgments toward the context. We assume that people often consider an interpretation range for an encountered stimulus. Which judgment dimension(s) people consider are determined by their goals at the time. For example, consumers might

assess product quality or price if a purchase is imminent but might instead assess the level of prestige or social standing of an object if comparing their possessions to a neighbor’s possessions. Of course, if a consumer is asked a specific question about a target product, that question would also influence which dimension(s) are salient about the target and context. There are also likely to be stimulus effects on dimension salience. Some dimensions are simply more relevant for certain stimuli.

Initially, all the positions within the range of a context or a target stimulus may be viewed by the consumer as a relatively appropriate interpretation of the product’s qualities. When there is no biasing context, positions centering on a central tendency within the range could seem more appropriate than other positions (such as the values near the upper or lower boundary of the range). However, when there is a biasing context, overlap between the context and target ranges could focus people’s attention on features that center on or surround the range overlap. As noted in Mussweiler’s (2003) Selective Accessibility Model, social perceivers might make an initial holistic assessment (Smith, Shoben, and Rips 1974) of whether context (or other comparison standards) and target stimuli are generally similar or dissimilar. If the initial assessment suggests that the stimuli are similar, the perceiver further tests a similarity hypothesis, but if the initial assessment suggests that the stimuli are different, the perceiver tests a difference hypothesis. We suggest that overlap in the ranges of potential values for the context and target stimuli would influence this initial holistic assessment and make similarity testing more likely if there is overlap (especially substantial overlap) but difference testing more likely if there is lack of overlap (especially substantial lack of overlap). All else being equal, Mussweiler (2001, 2003) suggests that similarity testing may be the default, which may be a reason for similarity testing (and assimilation) to occur even if the overlapping portion of the context and target ranges is smaller than the nonoverlapping portion of the ranges.

Förster et al. (2008) used a helpful analogy when they described context and target as two ink blots. Consistent with the inclusion/exclusion model (Schwarz and Bless 1992) and our dimensional range overlap approach, as the ink blots overlap to a greater extent, the two blots are more likely to be viewed as comprising a single blot (a single category in the inclusion/exclusion approach). This is another reason to suspect that substantial overlap might be necessary for assimilation effects to occur, because two blots that overlap little or not at all would appear to be two blots rather than one. Each of these perspectives is also consistent with past theories of context effects that attribute assimilation effects to “feature matches” (Herr et al. 1983; Meyers-Levy and Sternthal 1993). In each case, enhanced focus on features centered on the overlapping (shared) area of the dimension would receive greater weight in forming one’s perception of the target, leading to assimilation (Tversky 1977).

However, when the dimensional ranges of contexts and targets do not overlap, shared features are simply not available. The perceptual attention is inevitably turned to distinc-

tive (nonoverlapping) features. The context might then best be considered as an anchor (Sherif and Hovland 1961) or a comparison standard (Schwarz and Bless 1992; Stapel et al. 1998; Stapel and Winkielman 1998). As shown in many previous studies, extreme standards of comparison tend to lead to contrast away from the standard (Herr et al. 1983; Sherman et al. 1978). From the perspective of dimensional range overlap, it may actually be the extent to which the plausible ranges of contexts and targets differ that plays a key role in the extent to which contrast is observed, above and beyond the extremity of the context per se (in terms of its central tendency, which is the common method for identifying extreme contexts).

Dimensional Range Overlap in Existing Theories

To date, context effect models have not directly incorporated dimensional range overlap, but they have used concepts that seem similar. For example, social judgment theory (Sherif and Hovland 1961) described latitudes of acceptance and rejection for judgment targets (Sherif, Taub, and Hovland 1958). As mentioned earlier, various researchers have used the term "feature match" to describe why assimilation of a target to a context is likely to occur, with lack of such matches leading to contrast (Herr et al. 1983; Herr 1986; Meyers-Levy and Sternthal 1993). The inclusion/exclusion approach suggested that contexts and targets that could be categorized together would lead to assimilation but excluding the target from the category of the context would lead to contrast (Schwarz and Bless 1992). And the interpretation and comparison approach stated that contexts would lead to assimilation when they were "nondistinct" from the target but to contrast when they were "distinct" from the target (Stapel et al. 1998).

In tests of these models, however, the role of range overlap has often been rather implicit, if it is there at all. For example, in many experiments, extreme contexts have been used to create comparison standards against which targets have been contrasted. Perhaps extremity was assumed to result in contrast because of lack of overlap in potential values for the context and target stimuli. However, no previous studies have measured context and target ranges to verify that the extreme contexts result in gaps between the ranges. One could imagine that extreme stimuli might be viewed as "distinct" from more moderate stimuli (or "from a different category" or "mismatching features") simply because of the difference in "location" (central tendency) even if perceivers did not consider ranges of values for the context and target stimuli. Similarly, some researchers have characterized exemplar targets as naturally distinct from exemplar contexts because they are different people and cannot be categorized as being the same person (Schwarz and Bless 2007; Stapel et al. 1998). However, as we demonstrate later, exemplars that overlap with the target might create different context effects than exemplars that do not overlap with the target.

In some past experiments, interpretive ranges might have played a role in creating the context effects even though other factors formed the focus of the explanations for the research results. For example, Stapel et al. (1998) exposed

research participants to either exemplar restaurants or to attributes of restaurants before they encountered and rated a target restaurant. Stapel et al. (1998) predicted that the exemplar context would be perceived as more distinct from the target, producing a comparative mind-set and resulting in contrast, but the attribute context would be perceived as less distinct, producing an interpretive mind-set and resulting in assimilation. The judgment effects occurred as predicted. To us at least, it seems possible that the attributes (e.g., "casual") might have been associated with wider ranges of possible implications than the specific exemplars (e.g., "McDonalds") and it might have been these differing range sizes that created the sense of distinctness or the comparative versus interpretive mind-sets. But the possible role of interpretive ranges was not addressed by Stapel and colleagues. As in most context effect research, the overall extremity of the contextual stimuli was pretested by averaging ratings of the contextual stimuli but not by assessing the ranges of possible values that could be taken on by those stimuli (Stapel, Koomen, and Van der Pligt 1997).

The Current Research

In the current research, we sought to make the role of dimensional range overlap explicit. In order to do so, we introduced two key ways to directly incorporate interpretive ranges for contexts and targets into our studies of context effects. In three of the reported experiments, we specified context or target ranges for research participants in order to ensure that the desired overlap or lack thereof was represented, and in all four experiments we asked research participants to go back and report ranges of possible values that can be taken on by the context and target so that the role of range overlap could be assessed statistically.

The amount of overlap or lack thereof between context and target ranges is determined by three factors: width of the context range, width of the target range, and distance between the central tendencies of the context and target. To illustrate how these three factors influence overlap of context and target ranges, in each of our first three experiments, we focus on the effects of one factor while holding the other two factors constant. Given the same context range width and the same relative distance between the central tendencies of the context and target, assimilation should occur when the target range is broad enough to overlap with the context range, but contrast should occur when the target range is too narrow to overlap with the context range (experiment 1). Given the same target and context range width, assimilation should occur when the distance between the context and target central tendencies is small enough to create an overlap between the context and target ranges, but contrast should occur when the distance is large enough to remove the overlap between the context and target ranges (experiment 2). Given the same target range width and the same relative distance between the central tendencies of the context and target, assimilation should occur when the context range is broad enough to overlap with the target range,

but contrast should occur when the context range is too narrow to overlap with the target range (experiment 3). In our final experiment, we use context exemplars pretested to have relatively wide or narrow ranges.

Across experiments, we also varied the type of target and context (i.e., attribute vs. exemplar contexts and familiar vs. unfamiliar targets), because some past perspectives have predicted that, in the absence of activation of particular processing sets, particular types of contexts or targets would tend to produce particular context effects (e.g., contrast with exemplar contexts, Stapel and Koomen [1998]; Stapel et al. [1997]; or with familiar targets, Herr et al. [1983]). However, we expected that, no matter which type of target and context is used, assimilation effects would occur when there is substantial overlap between the context and target ranges but that contrast effects would occur when there is substantial lack of overlap.

EXPERIMENT 1

The main purpose of experiment 1 was to test the effect of context/target range overlap on occurrence of assimilation and contrast. Using the same context range width and the same relative distance between the central tendencies of the context and target, the target's range was manipulated to be either sufficiently wide that it overlapped with the context range or sufficiently narrow that there was no overlap with the context range. The study is conceptually similar to portions of Herr et al. (1983), in which participants either received a relatively unfamiliar (ambiguous) or familiar (unambiguous) target. In the current case, the target was always unfamiliar, but we varied the range of plausible values for the target. The key should not be the familiarity or unfamiliarity of the target per se but rather whether the context and target ranges overlap. Similarly, although exemplar contexts might often produce contrast (Stapel et al. 1998), exemplar contexts should be capable of creating either assimilation or contrast depending on the overlap in the ranges of plausible values for the context and target.

Hypotheses

Each of the reported experiments tests two key hypotheses focusing on dimensional range overlap:

- H1:** When the context and target ranges overlap substantially, the target ratings will be assimilated toward the context. That is, target ratings on the judgment dimension will be higher following the positive rather than negative context.
- H2:** When there is a substantial lack of overlap between the context and target ranges, the target ratings will be contrasted away from the context. That is, target ratings on the judgment dimension will be lower following the positive rather than negative context.

Participants and Design

Experiment 1 involved a 2 (range overlap: overlap/non-overlap) \times 2 (context valence: positive/negative) between-participants factorial design. Sixty college students participated in this experiment and were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions.

Procedure

In the experiment, participants were asked to complete several surveys designed to investigate college students' attitudes toward some products. Participants were given a booklet. In the first part, participants received an advertisement that introduced a new car—the Creata (i.e., the target brand). The Creata was described as targeting either diverse prestige segments (to create a target with a wide range of plausible values) or limited prestige segments (to create a target with a narrow range of plausible values). In a second section of the booklet, participants were asked to write down three cars that they thought were associated with a specific prestige range. The three cars served as the context for later ratings of the target. In a third section of the booklet, participants were asked to evaluate some products. The first to-be-evaluated product was the Creata. In the last part of the booklet, participants were asked to report the prestige range for each of the cars that they had listed in the second portion (i.e., the context task) and for the Creata. These ratings provided a means to create an index of perceived overlap in order to verify creation of the desired overlap or lack thereof between the context and target stimuli. Finally, participants were thanked, debriefed, and dismissed.

Independent Variables

Range Overlap (Target Range Width). Participants read an initial advertisement for a new car—the Creata—which served as the target brand. In the overlap (wide target range) condition, participants were told that the Creata brand contained many product lines focusing on a large variety of customers. Participants were also told that, according to the data from a marketing research firm, Creata's prestige range was perceived as very wide (from 2 to 8 on a 0–10 prestige scale). Thus, the target's range was manipulated to overlap with the specified context range (see description of the context valence manipulation). In the nonoverlap (narrow target range) condition, participants were told that the Creata's target customers were those who looked for only moderate-prestige cars. Participants were also told that, according to the data from a marketing research firm, Creata's prestige range was perceived as narrow and moderate (from 4.5 to 5.5 on a 0–10 prestige scale). Thus, the target's range was manipulated so that the context and target range did not overlap with each other.

Context Valence. Before evaluating the target brand, participants were asked to list three cars associated with a specific high- or low-prestige range. The three cars served as the context for later target ratings. In the positive context

condition, participants were asked to list three cars that they thought were associated with a prestige range of 7–8 on a scale ranging from 0 (low prestige) to 10 (high prestige). There was little consensus on specific cars generated. However, example cars generated included Jaguar and Maxima. In the negative context condition, participants were asked to list three cars that they thought were associated with a prestige range of 2–3. Example cars generated included Geo Metro and Plymouth Neon.

Participants were told that, if they could not generate cars with exactly the same prestige range as specified, they could generate cars that came as close to the specified criteria as possible. In order to reinforce the context manipulation, participants were also asked to write down the characteristics of the customers that they thought were likely to buy the cars they had listed. The purpose behind this self-generated context was to test the role of context/target range overlap more directly and accurately by minimizing the range variation across participants. Ten additional participants could only generate one or no cars that fit the prescribed range. Inclusion of these participants does not change any of the observed context effects or later mediational results, though, as one would expect, they weaken the overlap manipulation checks.

Dependent Variables

Target Evaluation. After context generation, participants were asked to evaluate some products. The first to-be-evaluated product was the Crea. Participants were asked to indicate how prestigious they thought Crea would be on a scale ranging from 0 (low prestige) to 10 (high prestige). This was followed by the same evaluation of some unrelated products and brands.

Range Overlap Manipulation Check. On the last page of the experimental booklet, participants were asked to go back to the survey in which they were asked to list three cars (i.e., the context cars). They were asked to write down those three cars again and to circle a prestige range for each car on a scale ranging from 0 (low prestige) to 10 (high prestige). They were also asked to circle a prestige range for the target using the same scale. Amount of context/target overlap or lack thereof was indexed by averaging the context boundaries closest to the target for the three context cars and creating a difference score between the context and target boundaries. This difference score was positive when there was overlap (when the low positive context boundary was lower than the high target boundary and when the high negative context boundary was higher than the low target boundary); it was negative when there was lack of overlap (when the low positive context boundary was higher than the high target boundary and when the high negative context boundary was lower than the low target boundary).

Results and Discussion

Range Overlap Manipulation Check. The context/target overlap check was analyzed by a 2 (range overlap:

overlap/nonoverlap) \times 2 (context valence: positive/negative) between-participants analysis of variance (ANOVA). A main effect of range overlap ($F(1, 56) = 27.29, p < .001$) showed that the wide and narrow targets created different levels of overlap. When the target had a wide range, there was overlap (i.e., overlap index significantly greater than zero; $M = .99; t(29) = 3.04, p < .005$). However, when the target had a narrow range, there was significant lack of overlap (i.e., overlap index significantly lower than zero, $M = -1.13; t(29) = -4.67, p < .001$). The amount of overlap or lack thereof was constant across valence of context, as no other effects approached significance (F 's < 1.87).

Target Evaluation. Of greatest relevance for the current predictions, a 2 (range overlap) \times 2 (context valence) between-participants ANOVA indicated that the range overlap \times context valence interaction was significant ($F(1, 56) = 52.47, p < .001$). No other effects were reliable (F 's < 1.3). With a wide (overlapping) target range, target ratings were assimilated to the context, with the positive context generating higher prestige ratings of the target ($M = 6.10$) than the negative context ($M = 4.13; F(1, 56) = 35.11, p < .001$). However, with a narrow (nonoverlapping) target range, target ratings were contrasted from the context, with the positive context leading to lower prestige ratings of the target ($M = 4.57$) than the negative context ($M = 6.00; F(1, 56) = 18.65, p < .001$). Thus, hypotheses 1 and 2 were supported.

The results of experiment 1 were consistent with a key role for dimensional range overlap between the context and target. When there was substantial lack of overlap between the context and target ranges, the target ratings were contrasted away from the context, but when the context and target ranges overlapped substantially, the target ratings were assimilated toward the context. These results occurred even though the context consisted of relatively extreme exemplars (that often produce contrast [Stapel et al. 1998], even with unfamiliar targets [Herr et al. 1983]). Thus, the results of experiment 1 set the stage for alternative means of altering the amount of overlap or lack of overlap between the context and target interpretive ranges.

EXPERIMENT 2

In experiment 2, we created overlap between the context and target ranges by manipulating the relative distance between the central tendencies of the context and target (holding the width of the context and target ranges constant across conditions). Thus, we expected assimilation when the distance between context and target was low and contrast when the distance between context and target was high (compare with the unfamiliar target results in Herr et al. [1983] and with Sherif et al. [1958]). In order to generalize the role of range overlap across different context and target stimuli, we used attributes as the context (which have tended to produce assimilation in past research; Stapel et al. 1998) and an existing/familiar brand as the target (which has tended to produce contrast from both moderate and extreme contexts

in past research; Herr et al. 1983). Thus, experiment 2 tested the same two hypotheses as experiment 1 but used a different means of creating range overlap and different types of context and target stimuli.

Pretest for Experiment 2

The purpose of the pretest was to select an existing, moderate-prestige target brand. Forty participants were asked to evaluate a list of 44 car brands in terms of their prestige. Participants were asked to rate the prestige status and range for each car on a scale ranging from 0 (low prestige) to 10 (high prestige). We chose the brand that fell closest to the midpoint of the prestige scale with the smallest boundary standard deviations (low bound SD = 1.47; high bound SD = 1.40). Honda Civic was selected as the target brand. It had an average prestige rating of 5 (SD = 1.29) and a prestige range of 4–6 (average range width = 2.00).

Participants and Design

Experiment 2 involved a 2 (range overlap: overlap/nonoverlap) \times 2 (context valence: positive/negative) between-participants factorial design. Sixty college students participated and were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions.

Procedure

Participants were asked to complete several surveys designed to investigate college students' attitudes toward products. Participants were given a booklet. In the first survey, participants were asked to write down three adjectives that they thought could best describe a product associated with a specific prestige range. The three adjectives served as the context. In the second survey, participants were asked to evaluate some products. The first product to be evaluated was the target brand (i.e., Honda Civic). Participants were asked to evaluate its prestige. In the third survey, participants were asked to report the prestige range of a product described by each of the adjectives that they had listed in the first survey (i.e., the context) and the prestige range of the target. Finally, participants were thanked, debriefed, and dismissed.

Independent Variables

Context Valence and Range Overlap (Relative Distance). Participants were asked to list three adjectives that they thought could best describe a product associated with a specific prestige range. In overlap conditions, participants were asked to list three adjectives with a relatively small relative distance between the context and target central tendencies. For the positive context, participants were asked to list adjectives associated with a prestige range of 5–7, and for the negative context, participants were asked to list adjectives associated with a prestige range of 3–5 on a scale ranging from 0 (low prestige) to 10 (high prestige). Participants listed adjectives such as “recognized,” “noticeable,”

and “noteworthy” when the positive context was associated with a prestige range of 5–7, but they listed adjectives such as “ordinary,” “mediocre,” and “insignificant” when the negative context was associated with a prestige range of 3–5. Thus, when the relative distance between context and target was relatively small, the target's range (i.e., Honda Civic range = 4–6) and the context's range overlapped with each other.

In nonoverlap conditions, participants were asked to list three adjectives associated with a larger distance between the context and target central tendencies. That is, they were asked to generate adjectives with either a prestige range of 8–10 (positive context) or a prestige range of 0–2 (negative context), which would not overlap with the target's range. Participants listed adjectives such as “outstanding” and “prominent” with a prestige range of 8–10, but they listed adjectives such as “shabby” and “poor” with a prestige range of 0–2. Eleven additional participants generated one or no adjectives that fit the prescribed range. Inclusion of these participants does not change any of the observed context effects or later mediational results.

Dependent Variables

Target Evaluation. After context generation, participants were asked to evaluate some products. The first to-be-evaluated product was the target brand—Honda Civic. Participants were asked to indicate how prestigious they thought a Honda Civic would be on a scale ranging from 0 (low prestige) to 10 (high prestige). This was followed by evaluation of some unrelated products and brands.

Range Overlap Manipulation Check. On the last page of the experimental booklet, participants were asked to evaluate a product described by each adjective that they had listed in the first survey (i.e., the context) in terms of its prestige range. Similar to experiment 1, they were asked to write down the three adjectives and to circle a prestige range for a product described by each of the adjectives on a scale ranging from 0 (low prestige) to 10 (high prestige). They also circled a prestige range for the target (Honda Civic). The amount of context/target overlap was indexed as in experiment 1, with positive values indicating range overlap and negative values indicating lack of overlap.

Results and Discussion

Range Overlap Manipulation Check. The 2 (range overlap) \times 2 (context valence) between-participants ANOVA showed the expected main effect of range overlap ($F(1, 56) = 69.64, p < .0001$). When context adjectives were close to the target, there was overlap in the perceived ranges ($M = 2.98$; $t(29) = 9.76, p < .001$). However, when the context adjectives were farther from the target, there was lack of overlap ($M = -.71$; $t(29) = -1.90, p < .069$). There was a weaker, but significant, main effect of context valence ($F(1, 56) = 9.10, p < .005$), with greater overlap for positive than for negative contexts, and a range overlap \times context valence

interaction ($F(1, 56) = 4.25, p < .05$), with larger difference between large and small relative distance for negative than for positive contexts. However, consistent with the strong main effect of range overlap, there was always significantly greater overlap with small than with large relative distance.

Target Evaluation. In the 2 (range overlap) \times 2 (context valence) between-participants ANOVA, the range overlap \times context valence interaction was significant ($F(1, 56) = 23.76, p < .001$). No other effects were reliable (F 's < 1.30). The range overlap \times context valence interaction supported our predictions. With a small relative distance between the context and target central tendencies (i.e., when there was substantial overlap of the context and target ranges), target ratings were assimilated to the context. The positive context generated higher prestige ratings of the target ($M = 6.70$) than the negative context ($M = 4.90; F(1, 56) = 12.10, p < .001$). However, with a large relative distance between context and target central tendencies (when the context and target ranges did not overlap), target ratings were contrasted from the context. The positive context led to lower prestige ratings of the target ($M = 5.33$) than the negative context ($M = 7.10; F(1, 56) = 11.66, p < .001$). Thus, experiment 2 provided additional support for hypotheses 1 and 2.

Like experiment 1, the results of experiment 2 were consistent with a key role for dimensional range overlap between the context and target. When there was distance between the context and target ranges, the target ratings were contrasted away from the context, but when the context and target ranges overlapped significantly, the target ratings were assimilated toward the context. These results occurred even though the context consisted of attributes (that often produce assimilation; Stapel et al. 1998) and with a familiar target (that has sometimes led to contrast from both moderate and extreme contexts; Herr et al. 1983). Thus, the results of experiment 2 substantially strengthen the direct support for the role of dimensional range overlap in context effects and do so while generalizing across the types of contexts and targets used to create overlap or lack thereof between the context and target interpretive ranges.

EXPERIMENT 3

Experiment 3 examined the effects of range overlap created by changes in the context range width (holding constant the width of the target range and the relative distance between context and target central tendencies). We tested conditions in which the context range was manipulated to be either so wide as to produce an overlap between the context and target ranges or so narrow that there was no overlap in the context and target ranges. We expected assimilation effects to occur in the former condition and contrast effects to occur in the latter condition.

Participants and Design

Experiment 3 involved a 2 (range overlap: overlap/nonoverlap) \times 2 (context valence: positive/negative) between-participants factorial design. Sixty college students participated in the experiment and were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions.

Procedure

The procedure for experiment 3 was identical to that of experiment 2 except that participants generated three cars (instead of three attributes) that matched a specified prestige range to serve as the context for the Honda Civic target ratings.

Independent Variables

Context Valence and Range Overlap (Context Range Width). In the beginning of the experiment, participants were asked to list three cars that they thought were associated with a specific prestige range. In the overlap conditions, participants were asked to list three cars that they thought were associated with relatively wide context ranges. That is, participants were asked to list cars with a prestige range of 5–10 (positive context), or a prestige range of 0–5 (negative context) on a scale ranging from 0 (low prestige) to 10 (high prestige). Thus, in these conditions, the specified context range overlapped with the target's range (i.e., Honda Civic's pretested range was 4–6; see pretest for experiment 2). No specific cars were consistently generated as the exemplars for their respective categories, but participants generated cars that they individually considered as fitting the requested category. Example cars generated for the positive/wide context conditions included Cadillac and Audi; in the negative/wide context conditions, they included Mercury Tracer and Kia.

In the nonoverlap conditions, participants were asked to list three cars that they thought were associated with either a prestige range of 7–8 (positive context) or a prestige range of 2–3 (negative context), on a scale ranging from 0 (low prestige) to 10 (high prestige). Thus, the specified context range did not overlap with the target's pretested range. Although there was much variability in the specific cars listed, examples for the positive/narrow context conditions included Infinity and Land Rover; in the negative/narrow context conditions, they included Dodge Neon and Aspire.

As in experiment 1, participants were told that, if they could not generate cars with exactly the specified prestige range, they could generate cars as close to the specified criteria as possible, and participants were asked to write down the characteristics of the customers that were most likely to buy the listed cars. Eleven additional participants could only generate one or no cars that fit the prescribed range. Inclusion of these participants does not change any of the observed context effects or later mediational results.

Dependent Variables

The target evaluations were the same as in experiment 2. The context/target range overlap measures were the same as in experiment 1.

Results and Discussion

Range Overlap Manipulation Check. The 2 (range overlap) \times 2 (context valence) between-participants ANOVA showed the expected main effect of range overlap ($F(1, 56) = 91.99, p < .001$). When the range of context cars was wide, there was significant overlap in the perceived prestige ranges of the context and target ($M = 2.39; t(29) = 8.68, p < .001$). However, when the range of context cars was narrow, there was significant lack of overlap ($M = -1.47; t(29) = 4.93, p < .001$). The amount of overlap or lack thereof was constant across valence of context (range overlap \times context valence, $F < 1$).

Target Evaluation. The range overlap \times context valence interaction was significant ($F(1, 56) = 74.61, p < .001$). With a wide (overlapping) context range, target ratings were assimilated to the context. The positive context generated higher prestige ratings of the target ($M = 6.50$) than the negative context ($M = 4.30; F(1, 56) = 27.41, p < .001$). However, with a narrow (nonoverlapping) context range, target ratings were contrasted from the context. The positive context led to lower prestige ratings of the target ($M = 3.73$) than the negative context ($M = 6.67; F(1, 56) = 48.73, p < .001$). Thus, the results of experiment 3 supported the two key hypotheses. No other effects approached significance (F 's < 1.52).

Like the first two experiments, the results of experiment 3 suggest that dimensional range overlap between the context and target has a potent influence on context effects. When the context and target ranges overlapped, the target ratings were assimilated toward the context, but when the context and target ranges failed to overlap, the target ratings were contrasted away from the context. These results occurred even though the context consisted of equally extreme exemplars (at least in terms of the central tendency of the context stimuli, which is the typical way of determining the extremity of the context). But the differences in overlap of the context and target ranges produced differences not only in the size but also in the direction of the context effects produced. Thus, the results of experiment 3 provided additional direct support for the role of dimensional range overlap in context effects. The results of experiment 3 also emphasized that exemplar contexts do not necessarily put people into a comparative mind-set that produces contrast effects (Stapel et al. 1998). Instead, the effects of these exemplar contexts depended on whether they were associated with a range of possible values that overlaps or fails to overlap with the range of possible values for the target. In experiment 3, we also produced these results using a very familiar target (i.e., the Honda Civic) even though familiar

targets have produced contrast away from both moderate and extreme contexts in past research (Herr et al. 1983).

MEDIATION BY DIMENSIONAL RANGE OVERLAP

In each experiment, we manipulated the amount of overlap between context and target ranges and examined the effects of that manipulation on context effects. Although the manipulations were successful overall, research participants' perceptions of that overlap also varied somewhat from person to person. If dimensional range overlap plays the hypothesized role in context effects, then these variations across people should predict the amount of assimilation or contrast that occurs on target ratings. In order to further document a key role for dimensional range overlap, we conducted mediational analyses in which the effects of the manipulation of overlap on context effects was potentially accounted for by the mediator of individuals' perceptions of overlap (used as manipulation checks in each of the experiments). In order to present these analyses succinctly, we combined the data from our first three experiments into one analysis. The results of each individual study paralleled the combined analyses.

The perception of range overlap (PRO) was the overlap manipulation check from each experiment (a subtraction of the context low bound from the target high bound when the context was positive and a subtraction of the target low bound from the context high bound when the context was negative). Therefore, PRO was positive when there was an overlap and negative when there was a lack of overlap. Initial target assessments were transformed by subtracting the average pretest (context-free) value for the target from the target rating when the context was positive and by subtracting the target rating from the average pretest value for the target when the context was negative. Thus, the transformed target ratings (TR) would be positive when the target impressions were assimilated toward the context and negative when the target impressions were contrasted away from the context, irrespective of the valence of the context.

The potential role of PRO in mediating the relation between the manipulation of range overlap (i.e., RO, a dichotomous variable) and the target ratings (TR) was analyzed using three ordinary least squares regression equations (Baron and Kenny 1986; Preacher and Hayes 2004). The manipulation of overlap (i.e., RO) was a significant predictor of the target ratings (TR) in equation 1 ($\beta = .60, p < .001$) and of participants' perception of the range overlap in equation 2 (PRO, $\beta = .67, p < .001$). When RO and PRO simultaneously predicted TR in equation 3, the effect of RO was reduced ($\beta = .28, p < .001$) and the influence of PRO remained significant ($\beta = .48, p < .001$). This combination of effects resulted in a significant Sobel test of mediation by PRO ($z = 5.78, p < .001$). Thus, it appears that differences across participants in the perceived extent of context/target overlap accounted for the context effects that were

observed on the basis of our manipulations intended to create such perceptions.

In addition to overlap or lack thereof, these ratings of perceived overlap also allowed us to examine whether the extent of overlap or the extent of nonoverlap (i.e., the size of the gap between ranges) also served to predict context effects. We did this by examining relations between PRO and TR within the overlap conditions (to examine effects of size of overlap on extent of assimilation) and within the nonoverlap conditions (to examine effects of size of the gap between ranges on the extent of contrast). When the context and target were manipulated to overlap, PRO significantly predicted TR ($\beta = .25, p < .05$). This suggests that, as the amount of perceived overlap increased, so did the amount of assimilation. Therefore, it could be that the more overlap between context and target ranges, the more likely it is for people to spontaneously adopt a similarity-testing orientation or to think of the context and target as representing the same category of stimulus. In other words, at least in the absence of prompts to engage in global/similarity-based processing, it may take substantial overlap between the context and target to instigate similarity testing and the resulting assimilation.

When the context and target ranges were manipulated to lack overlap, PRO also significantly predicted TR ($\beta = .64, p < .001$). Thus, as the amount of distance between the context and target ranges increased, so did the contrast effect. This could be the underlying (though generally untested) reason that extreme contexts produce contrast effects. In this context, it is interesting to note that this gap-in-the-ranges effect continues to predict the size of contrast effects when one controls for the perceived extremity of the context (coded as the distance between the central tendency of the context range and the average pretest ratings of the target; PRO $\beta = .67, p < .001$). Thus, there seems to be an important role for lack of dimensional range overlap in producing contrast effects above and beyond context extremity per se.

EXPERIMENT 4

In experiments 1–3, the research procedure included specification of the context range or both the target and context ranges prior to target ratings. One might reasonably wonder whether consumers would spontaneously consider and use range information. Some consideration of target ranges might be suggested by the context effects in experiments 2 and 3 when assimilation occurred if the context range overlapped with the pretested target range but contrast occurred if the context range failed to overlap with the pretested target range (because target range was not mentioned prior to target ratings). However, in each of those studies, the research procedures alerted research participants specifically to the interpretive range of the context stimuli. This might have induced research participants to consider the ranges of both contexts and targets even if they would not have spontaneously done so. Thus, in experiment 4, we removed any mention of context and target ranges until after

target ratings were complete and exposed research participants to equally extreme contexts (in terms of central tendency) that had been pretested to be associated with a relatively wide or narrow interpretive range (that overlapped or failed to overlap with the pretested interpretive range for the target).

If research participants spontaneously consider only the location (central tendency) of the context or target stimuli, then both contexts in experiment 4 should produce the same context effects on target judgments and there should be no difference in judgments across the narrow- and wide-range contexts. However, if research participants spontaneously consider context and target ranges, then the wide-range context (that overlaps with the target range) should lead to more positive (assimilated) target judgments than the narrow-range context (that fails to overlap with the target range and should result in contrast).

Pretest for Experiment 4

Fifteen students were asked to rate the prestige status and the corresponding ranges for a list of 18 apparel brands on a scale from 0 (low prestige) to 10 (high prestige). Lee was selected as the target brand (mean rating = 5.47 [SD = 1.28], mean low bound = 3.93 [SD = 1.54], and mean high bound = 6.70 [SD = 1.56]). Tommy and DKNY were selected as the context brands. Tommy had a mean rating of 7.20 (SD = 1.57), mean low bound of 5.47 (SD = 1.57), and mean high bound of 8.37 (SD = 1.32), and DKNY had a mean rating of 7.57 (SD = 1.57), mean low bound of 6.83 (SD = 1.71), and mean high bound of 8.60 (SD = 1.32). The mean ratings for Tommy and DKNY were not different (paired $t(14) = .66, p = .52$), but their range widths differed significantly (2.90 vs. 1.77; paired $t(14) = 3.24, p < .01$). Tommy's range was wide enough to overlap with Lee's range, but there was no overlap between DKNY and Lee.

Participants and Design

A total of 40 college students participated in the experiment for partial credit in a marketing course. They were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (i.e., overlapping [wide-range] context vs. nonoverlapping [narrow-range] context).

Procedure

Participants were told that the purpose of the survey was to investigate college students' general impressions of popular brands in the market. Half of the participants judged the wide-range context brand (Tommy), the target brand (Lee), and three other brands (i.e., McDonalds, Ford, and HP) on the same prestige scale as in the previous experiments. The other participants encountered the narrow-range context brand (DKNY), the target brand, and the same filler brands. Immediately after rating the target, all participants were asked to reveal on the same prestige scale the possible interpretive ranges applicable to whichever context item they

had previously received as well as the target. Thus, no mention of context or target ranges was made until after target ratings were complete.

Results and Discussion

Range Overlap Manipulation Check. Tommy ($M = 7.35$) and DKNY ($M = 7.78$) provided equally extreme contexts in terms of their central tendencies ($F(1, 38) = .67, p = .42$), but Tommy's range ($M = 3.00$) was significantly wider than that of DKNY ($M = 2.13; F(1, 38) = 8.10, p < .01$). Therefore, as one would expect, there was greater overlap between context and target ranges when participants encountered the wide-range rather than narrow-range context brand ($F(1, 38) = 11.14, p < .005$). That is, there was significant overlap when the context was Tommy ($M = .90; t(19) = 2.09, p = .05$), but there was significant lack of overlap when the context was DKNY ($M = -1.18; t(19) = -2.63, p < .05$).

Target Evaluation. Prestige ratings of the target (i.e., Lee) were significantly higher ($M = 5.98$) when preceded by Tommy (the wide-range, overlapping context) than when preceded by DKNY (the narrow-range, nonoverlapping context ($M = 4.88; F(1, 38) = 4.25, p < .05$)). Thus, target ratings differed depending on whether the context range was wide or narrow even when no mention of ranges was made until after target ratings. When comparing the means with the average pretest (no context) mean, target evaluations were in the direction of assimilation toward the Tommy context but in the direction of contrast away from the DKNY context.

Mediational Analyses

Similar to the mediational analyses conducted on the experiments 1–3 data, manipulated overlap (RO) significantly predicted target ratings (TR, $\beta = .32, p < .05$) and the perceived magnitude of range overlap (PRO, $\beta = .48, p < .01$). However, when RO and PRO simultaneously predicted TR, the effect of RO was substantially reduced and became nonsignificant ($\beta = -.07, p > .52$), but the impact of PRO remained significant ($\beta = .82, p < .001$). This pattern resulted in a significant Sobel test of mediation by PRO ($z = 3.03, p < .005$).

As in the previous experiments, there were also individual differences in the perceptions of overlap amount. However, unlike the earlier experiments, there was variation in experiment 4 regarding whether overlap was perceived at all. That is, 14 out of 20 participants perceived overlapped ranges between Tommy and Lee, and four out of 20 participants perceived overlapped ranges between DKNY and Lee. Conversely, six participants perceived lack of overlap between Tommy and Lee, and 16 participants perceived lack of overlap between DKNY and Lee. Within each of these groups, perceived amount of overlap or lack thereof again predicted the amount of assimilation or contrast. For participants who perceived overlap between the context and target, greater per-

ceived overlap resulted in larger assimilation effects ($\beta = .57, p < .05$). Also, when there was perceived lack of range overlap, a larger gap between ranges resulted in larger contrast effects ($\beta = .76, p < .001$), and this continued to hold true when controlling for the perceived extremity of the context (in terms of its central tendency; $\beta = .59, p < .05$). Therefore, similar to the previous experiments, when there was a perceived context/target overlap, the target ratings were assimilated toward the context (and to a greater extent as the perceived overlap in ranges increased). However, when the context and the target ranges were perceived as lacking overlap, target ratings were contrasted away from the context (and to a greater extent as the perceived gap between context and target ranges increased).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

As demonstrated in the current research, context effects depend at least in part on the overlap between the range of possible values for the context and target stimuli (i.e., stores, brands, products). When there is substantial overlap between the context and target ranges on the relevant judgment dimension, assimilation is likely. However, when there is substantial lack of overlap between the context and target ranges, contrast effects are likely. The results of all four of our experiments supported this general notion. Thus, impact of dimensional range overlap was shown to generalize across the use of exemplar and attribute contexts, novel and familiar targets, and settings in which range information is made salient or not prior to target judgments.

As a reviewer pointed out, any one of our experiments might be open to alternative explanations. For example, when we manipulated overlap by creating a wide context or target range, it could be that the wide range per se might prime global processing and produce assimilation separate from dimensional range overlap per se (or that narrow ranges would directly prime local processing and produce contrast). However, across experiments, no single explanation accounts for the data as well as dimensional range overlap. In the case of wide contexts or targets potentially creating assimilation separate from range overlap (experiments 1, 3, and 4), we conducted regression analyses for each experiment that pitted manipulated overlap between the context and target ranges with sheer size of the context range (or, in separate analyses, the size of the target range). In each regression, the manipulation of overlap continued to predict context effects, whereas the size of the context or target range did not. Similarly, although context/target overlap was manipulated through a manipulation of context extremity in experiment 2, the contexts in the other experiments were all equally extreme in terms of their central tendencies (and lack of overlap continued to predict contrast effects even when context extremity per se was controlled). More generally, important support for our dimensional range overlap predictions come from the fact that, within the cells of our factorial designs, reports of differing amounts of overlap predict the size of assimilation effects, and reports of differing amounts of lack of overlap predict the size of contrast

effects. Thus, the evidence suggests that range overlap is a plausible explanation not only for between-cell differences but also for within-cell differences across participants. The mediation analyses are consistent with this conclusion in that between-cell effects are reduced or eliminated when controlling for perceptions of range overlap, whereas the mediating overlap indices continue to predict context effects above and beyond the between-cell differences.

Much theoretical work on context effects relates assimilation to global processing, similarity testing, or interpretive mind-sets and contrast to local processing, dissimilarity testing, or comparative mind-sets. In a number of these theories, use of concepts like “distinctiveness,” “inclusion,” or “feature match” implies that overlap or lack of overlap between the context and target might be a key determinant of the processes that lead to context effects. The current research provides the most direct evidence that dimensional range overlap per se is an important quality of the context and target that determines whether (and how much) assimilation or contrast is observed. The current research also highlights the possibility that at least some of the past research on factors such as context extremity or target familiarity might be usefully conceptualized using the general principle of dimensional range overlap.

Nothing is so practical as a good theory (Lewin 1945; Van de Ven 1989). Thus, we would fully expect insights about the operation of context effects to have implications for marketing practice. Consumer judgments routinely depend on the surrounding context. For example, when consumers shop in a mall, impressions of one store can be influenced by perceptions of the surrounding stores. Or, when consumers browse the print ads in a magazine, perceptions of one brand could be influenced by the brands in the surrounding ads. Therefore, when marketers decide to advertise their products in particular contexts, they would benefit from considering the following questions: How diversely might consumers interpret the target product on the relevant judgment dimension (target range width)? How diversely might consumers interpret the contextual stimuli on the relevant judgment dimension (context range width)? How different is the position of the target product from the position of the contextual stimuli on the relevant judgment dimension when judged independently (relative distance)? Depending on different combinations of target range width, context range width, and relative distance, consumers may either perceive the target product as more like the context (assimilation) or perceive the target product as less like the context (contrast).

Our focus on dimensional range overlap does not mean that other factors are unimportant in influencing context effects. For example, given a particular level of overlap between context and target ranges, researchers could shift the obtained context effects by inducing global, similarity-oriented, interpretive processing rather than local, difference-oriented, comparative processing of context and target stimuli (compare with Förster et al. 2008; Mussweiler 2003; Stapel and Koomen 2001). When thinking in global, similarity-oriented ways,

assimilation might be achieved even with lower levels of overlap than were present in our research, and when thinking in local, difference-oriented ways, contrast might be achieved even with smaller distance between ranges (or possibly even with some overlap in the ranges). As noted earlier, however, the existence of overlap or the lack thereof may be an important factor in determining whether consumers spontaneously consider similarities or differences. The relations between the amount of perceived overlap and the amount of assimilation (within overlap conditions) suggests that substantial overlap may have been necessary in the current setting for similarity testing to spontaneously occur. Indeed, in our regressions, an overlap of zero led to slight but significant contrast effects ($\beta = -.25, p < .01$), so lack of any context effect occurred with slight overlap between the context and target ranges. The point of this inflection between assimilation and contrast, however, should be influenced by other features of the judgment setting.

Of course, our conceptualization of dimensional range overlap also suggests that accessible contexts will not always produce context effects. In many settings, the context is not related (or applicable) to the salient judgmental dimension along which the social perceiver is thinking of the target. For example, if the context is a clothing brand and the target is a car brand, when people are asked to judge the target in terms of its controllability, the context would likely fail to produce context effects on judgments of the target. That is, the spontaneous consideration of interpretative values of the context and the target may not guarantee the occurrence of context effects. However, keeping the same context-target duo, if people are asked to judge the target in terms of its prestige status or a more general dimension, such as how good or bad the target is, then the context is likely to bring out either assimilation or contrast effects. The context and target can both be easily conceptualized along the evaluative dimension, so, to the extent that the context and target evaluations overlap, assimilation would be more likely, and to the extent that the context and target evaluations fail to overlap, contrast would be more likely.

Also, the extent of overlap might provide an important limiting condition on the effects of different mind-sets. For example, if engaging in global processing (in an interpretive, similarity-seeking mind-set), substantial lack of overlap between context and target ranges might sometimes mean that only differences, rather than similarities, are found, leading to contrast rather than the typical assimilation. However, if the context and target ranges overlap quite a lot, then even local processing (a comparative, difference-seeking mind-set) might result in perceptions of similarity rather than difference, leading to assimilation rather than the typical contrast.

There are also likely to be limits of the effects of overlap. For example, with extreme overlap, the overlapping portions of the context and target would include part of the target range that is in the direction opposite to the central tendency of the context. This kind of overlap might have the interesting result of making the context appear closer to the target, but it might work against movement of the target in

the direction of the context. Such limits to effects of overlap may represent an asymmetry between assimilation and contrast. Greater lack of overlap may just keep producing more contrast, but greater overlap may only increase assimilation to a point.

In the current experiments, we attempted to create symmetrical ranges centered on the mean (or median) of the distribution of potential values. However, the perceived range of a stimulus (i.e., target or context) might not always be symmetrical. For example, a brand may have several product lines covering from low- to high-end markets but most of its products may concentrate on the high price segments. When the range distributions are skewed, consumers might focus more on median differences than on mean differences when asked about relative distance or when making overall ratings of stimuli. In such cases, the effect of sheer amount of overlap on the dimension of interest might be shifted based on the relative “density” of products that fall in that part of the distribution. Regardless of whether the distribution is symmetric or asymmetric, however, overlap might still tend to encourage assimilation and lack of overlap might still tend to encourage contrast. But the amount of each might shift based on the shape of the distribution.

A focus on dimensional range overlap also does not mean that people ignore the rest of the qualities of the target or context when forming their views of the target. For example, in addition to overlap between the context and target ranges, there could be effects of the amount of each range that is not overlapping. Because we conducted the current experiments by holding two of the three crucial factors constant, variation in overlap across conditions also necessarily varied the proportion of the context and target ranges that were overlapping. If constructed differently, one could easily imagine conditions in which the sheer amount of overlap of the ranges is kept constant, but the context range, target range, or both are expanded or contracted across conditions. We did not include such manipulations in our initial studies, because the manipulations would confound range variation with relative distances between context and target central tendencies. Nonetheless, this type of study would be informative about whether range overlap alone is the key rather than some function of the proportion of the total ranges across context and target that is shared versus unshared. These questions await future research.

Other factors external to the context and target stimuli are also likely to affect whether contrast or assimilation occurs. For example, consumers can sometimes realize that a context effect is likely and attempt to correct their perceptions of the target (Meyers-Levy and Sternthal 1993; see Wegener and Petty [1997, 2001] for additional discussion). For example, consumers could have persuasion knowledge (Friestad and Wright 1994) that makes them want to avoid unwanted influences of previous ads for the same product or of previous ads for other products. Also, some elements of ads themselves might prompt consumers to consider certain features of ads as potentially biasing. For example, when Sprite ads claimed that “Image is nothing . . . Obey your

thirst,” the ads told consumers to ignore or try not to be influenced by the flashy, celebrity-driven ads used by their competitors.

We look forward to future research that extends work on the role of context and target ranges both in default (uncorrected) context effects and in situations where consumers attempt to avoid context effects. Attention to interpretive ranges of contexts and targets may prove to be potent determinants of which contexts will help and which will hurt marketing efforts.

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