

How does context affect consumer judgment?

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Research into why people look favorably on a product shows that—as in real life—everything is relative. According to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, what we think of a product or brand, or how positively or negatively we assess it, depends on the context in which it is viewed.

"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," write authors Yi-Wen Chien (National Taiwan University), Duane T. Wegener (Purdue University), Chung-Chiang Hsiao (National Taiwan Normal University), and Richard E. Petty (Ohio State University).

The authors constructed an elaborate set of four experiments that shed light on how consumers compare and contrast products and brands and what it takes to get them to positively or negatively evaluate them. Their research suggests that marketers have to carefully construct and consider the context to get the desired results.

In their experiments, they manipulated the context in various ways so that participants would eventually place a rating on a product or brand. The results measured the "distance" between the context and target ranges.

They looked at the way the context and the product (target) overlap determine consumer reactions to the targeted product.

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 how it measures up in terms of its context.

"Consumers routinely encounter and consider products within a surrounding context, whether that context consists of other [products](#) in a shopping mall or from media or personal experience," the authors write. "When the marketer can anticipate the context (such as when placing ads in a themed magazine), he or she would be well-served by considering aspects of the context and target that influence range overlap."

More information: Yi-Wen Chien, Duane T. Wegener, Chung-Chiang Hsiao, and Richard E. Petty. "Dimensional Range Overlap and Context Effects in Consumer Judgments." *Journal of Consumer Research*: April 2010. A preprint of this article (to be officially published online soon) can be found at journals.uchicago.edu/jcr

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