

Monkey See, Monkey Do

How watching entertainment together with people you love increases the impact of advertising.

According to Forbes.com, people are exposed to 4.000 to 10.000 advertisements on a daily basis (Simpson, 2017). Think about the number of ads people encounter when browsing the internet, when walking the streets, when watching TV, reading magazines and newspapers or visiting venues such as cinema halls or shopping malls. Since people cannot pay attention to everything that is communicated, physical reach does not guarantee mental reach (Pilotta & Schultz, 2005). It is thus no surprise that companies invest a lot in order to win the competition over the attention of consumers and, as a result, knowledge about the factors that can increase or decrease this attention becomes very valuable.

In this document we want to discuss and summarize scientific findings about the role of the social context when attending to entertaining content and advertisements. Does the mere presence of strangers, our friends, family and our children affect the attention to advertising? Does the presence of others generally decrease or maybe increase active attention to advertising and what are the potential mechanisms that are underlying the influence of the social context?

Involvement is key for increased ad impact by social context

There is no doubt that the consumption of entertainment in group is a social process that is rich in interactions and emotional exchanges and is a more engaging and fun experience than solo viewing (Csikszentmihalyi & Kubey, 1981). Amongst marketers, however, there is quite some debate if watching advertising in the physical presence of others has a *positive* or *negative* effect on the impact of the advertising. Intriguingly, in the literature you can find evidence for both views.

In an interesting study in 2012, the team of Christine Moorman at Duke University investigated during the FIFA World Cup the direct relation between social context and ad attention by Dutch soccer fans. They found that watching the match outside their homes and in the company of others had a beneficial effect on the attention to the advertisements. Their explanation was that watching in these circumstances, made people more expressive and thus more involved in the context. This finding supported earlier findings that social factors can enhance situational and program involvement (Andrews, Durvasula, & Akhter, 1990; De

Pelsmacker, Geuens, & Anckaert 2002; MacInnis, Moorman, & Jaworski, 1991). However, there is also evidence that the social environment can have a negative effect on advertising effectiveness. Studies have shown that social exchanges can cause distraction and a reduction of attention directed to ads (Jayasinghe & Ritson, 2013; Krugman, Cameron, & White, 1995; Mora, 2015).

How can we explain this, at-first-sight, contradictory evidence? When diving deeper into the study of Moorman and colleagues, we found some possible explanations. In this study, the *involvement* of the viewers for the content, namely the soccer game, was already high and was even more enforced by the other soccer fans in the venue. As we know that high content involvement lead to a spill-over of attention from the entertaining content to the advertising content, the positive influence of social context could work through that mechanism (Moorman et al., 2012). However, when involvement is low, the presence of others can lead to more intense social interactions during advertising and thus directing attention away from the advertisements and consequently, reducing attention to advertising.

So, to summarize this paragraph. *When others are highly involved in a particular context, this involvement has the potential to contaminate you and will make you not only more attentive to the entertaining content but also to advertising.*

“Monkey see, monkey do”

This spill-over of involvement and engagement of others can be linked to the automatic human tendency to imitate others. The most influential view on imitation argues that behavioral mimicry enhances liking and strengthens the bonds between people (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999). It is crucial in positive social interactions and enhances pro-social behavior (Van Baaren et al., 2003). Imitation or behavioral mimicry was also referred to as the Chameleon Effect by Chartrand and Bargh (1999) as people cannot withhold to imitate the behavior of other people, just as a chameleon cannot control the ability to take the colors of the environment. People tend to imitate all kinds of behaviors, from the way you hold your hand (Goldenberg, 2001), to what language you use (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999), where you are looking at (Guterstam et al., 2019), which emotional reactions you express (Frith, 2009; Lee et al., 2006) and what mood you experience (Neumann & Strack, 2000). Interestingly, academic research has shown that, although mimicry exists amongst total strangers, closeness to others boosts imitation behavior (e.g. Van Baaren, Maddux, Chartrand, De Bouter, & Van Knibbenberg, 2003). Romantic partners are imitated more than close friends (Maister & Tsakiris, 2016) and imitation plays is

crucial in the parent-child relation (Preston & de Waal, 2001). In addition, people not only tend to imitate people they are emotionally close with, but also people with whom they share a group membership with. For example, this effect was observed between basketball fans vs. non-basketball fans (Bourgeois & Hess, 2008) and psychology students vs. economy students (van der Schalk et al., 2011). Finally, it has also been shown that the larger the crowd around you, the stronger the copying behavior can be (Gallup et al., 2012, Wilson & Suh, 2017).

It thus seems that watching entertainment together with a large group of people you are close with or share a group membership with (such as being fan of the same sports, music genre, movie genre, etc.), will affect your behavior. The involvement, enthusiasm and gaze direction of those people will affect you, even when you are not aware of it and you do not intend to do it. However, be careful. Linking back to advertising, from the literature we also learned that involvement in the context or content is crucial. When your family or friends are not bothered by the content or ad, they can become a very strong distraction.

Experiencing something together means more fun

As mentioned before, Csikszentmihalyi and Kubey (1981) found heightened positive affect in individuals watching entertainment with their families, as compared to solo viewers. From fundamental research in cognitive psychology we learn that such emotional reactions can facilitate the storage of events in long-term memory (Anderson, Wais & Gabrieli, 2006) and from applied advertising research we learn that emotional responses to ads positively affect several measures of ad effectiveness, such as attention to ads, recall, recognition, brand attitude and purchase intentions (Aaker, Stayman & Hagerty, 1986; Ambler & Burne, 1999; Edell & Burke, 1987; Lang et al., 1995; Morris, Woo, Gaeson & Kim, 2002; for more studies see Poels & Dewitte, 2006).

Most likely, the positive impact of others can also be related to the finding that being in the proximity of somebody you love results in the release of oxytocin in the brain (e.g. Gordon et al., 2010), which in turn makes you more receptive to positive emotions (e.g. Marsh et al., 2010). Interestingly, Zak (2016) found that people with higher levels of oxytocin were more likely to donate money to related charities afterward (see also Barraza et al., 2015). Based on that finding Zak argued that oxytocin can make people more susceptible to advertising.

Linking back to the above we can argue that watching entertainment together with family or somebody you are emotionally close with, will be a positive and emotional experience. This can have the power to increase ad effectiveness. You will be more susceptible to ads, will attend more to them and will remember them better.

Conclusion

In this document we summarized the scientific findings about the role of the social context when attending to entertaining content and advertisements. We found that the presence of others can *enhance the attention to advertising*, and we found that this effect depends on various factors. First of all, we discovered that watching entertainment in the company of others has a positive effect on the attention to advertising in a context where involvement in the entertaining content is higher. When involvement is lower, others can become a strong distractor. Second, we found evidence that the relation you have with the others play an important role. When others are emotionally closer to you (e.g. family and friends) or when you can identify with the others (e.g. fans of the same team), the involvement, engagement and enthusiasm of your company will affect your behavior even stronger. This imitation behavior will also be stronger when there are more “highly involved group members” around (e.g. in a bar watching a sports event). Third, we found evidence that experiencing something together with others you love is a positive emotional experience which has the side-effect that people are *more open to advertising, dedicate more attention to advertising and will remember them better*.

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About the author

Prof. Demanet started his professional career as a PhD student at the Department of Experimental psychology of Ghent University. His PhD project focused on the fundamental principles of decision making. During his post-doc of 6 years at Ghent University he mastered various research techniques such as fMRI, fNIRS, EEG, biometrics and eye tracking. In 2014, he had the opportunity to go on research stay to Berlin in the Bernstein Center for Computational Neuroscience and to master the use of machine learning techniques to understand complex brain activity patterns.

His work resulted in multiple publications in high-ranked peer reviewed scientific journals such as Journal of Neuroscience, Neuroimage and Cognition and was presented on various international conferences.

Currently, Prof. Demanet also holds the position of R&D Manager at Profacts where he, together with his team, develops new methods, based on his experience in fundamental psychology and neuroscience, that can be applied in the various aspects of market research, such as media research, advertising research, UX, pricing, etc.

Next to his position at Profacts, he is visiting professor at Ghent University where he advises PhD students in their research projects.