



## Why the context overcomes your personality – and you don't even realise it

I find the power of contexts to be increasingly fascinating. I recently became aware of the book by the multiple award-winning psychology professor, Sam Sommers<sup>1</sup>. Sommers has rehashed the many well-known experiments in the field of Behavioural Economics. He is not so much interested in the frequently entertaining human behavioural antics, as in the shared principles behind them. Namely, that the situations in which we take decisions have a far greater influence on our behaviour than our personality and our individuality do. We ourselves firmly believe that our character guides our behaviour, however.

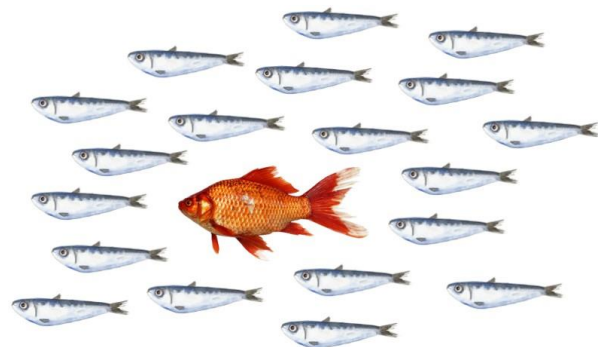
Sommers confronts us with unpleasant truths, but truths that are packed with humour. He has been rewarded with many 5-star reviews. Please now allow me to discuss the findings I found to be the most interesting, without referring to the experimental evidence, otherwise this wouldn't be a BrainCandy but a brain blocker.

Your personality, and unfortunately mine as well, aren't as stable as we like to think. We are more influenced by those around us than we like to believe. Even our personal self-image is very much context-dependent. We fail to recognise the influence that the situation has on our innermost thoughts and instincts. In this respect, the context is of considerable importance.

We limit ourselves to the visible part of the context and draw extensive interpretations from it. It is a phenomenon that can be also described with WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get). We look at the behaviour of others – and directly deduce that their behaviour is able to give us a very good insight into the true character and the true inner drivers of the protagonists. As an example: talk shows are popular. In this respect, the talk show hosts play the leading role in terms of the show

concept. And thanks to WYSIWYG, they are considered by the viewers to be much more intelligent than the participants! They are thought to be more knowledgeable, almost regardless of the topic. The viewers don't see the context, and don't realise that the presenters are exceptionally well prepared. They "see" stable, intelligent personalities who are able to behave consistently in any future situation.

That is the only reason why advertising with celebrities works so well. We only see the actor who is so satisfied with his shave, for instance, that he warmly recommends his razor to us. We don't embark on a contextual interpretation, "hey, he's getting paid for it", but take an internal interpretation "hey, he really likes his razor". Advertisers can rely on us to completely overlook the actual context.



People are easy to observe, but context is much harder to see and is abstract, and even nebulous. The context is a background that remains largely invisible, even when lit up in headlights. One could say that our social lens is only superficially adjusted.

This is exactly why, in the world of marketing, we like to believe in all of those fancy personality models, because that is what we perceive, after all.



Not, of course, when it comes to ourselves, after all, we are individualists and don't allow ourselves to be defined in terms of one of the models. In our market research, however, we can see that people behave differently when the context changes slightly, which couldn't be expected if a stable personality were the real driving force.

It is precisely because situations are so difficult to perceive that it takes a particular level of effort to perceive the influence. You have probably heard of crimes in which innocent bystanders at the crime scene failed to come to the help of the victims. Our WYSIWYG world view judges things very quickly: they must have been bad people. It wouldn't have happened to us. The bystanders were the wrong kind of people. Countless studies have addressed this phenomenon. In short, there was nothing wrong with the bystanders. It has always been the specific contexts that have determined the behaviour of those present. When we know that we are around other people, our sense of responsibility evaporates like water in the desert. The "others" instinctively relieve us of this task. When we see others failing to act, our brain makes the interpretation that there is no threat. If people in test situations are just asked to imagine that they are currently in a crowd of people, their willingness to provide help decreases swiftly.

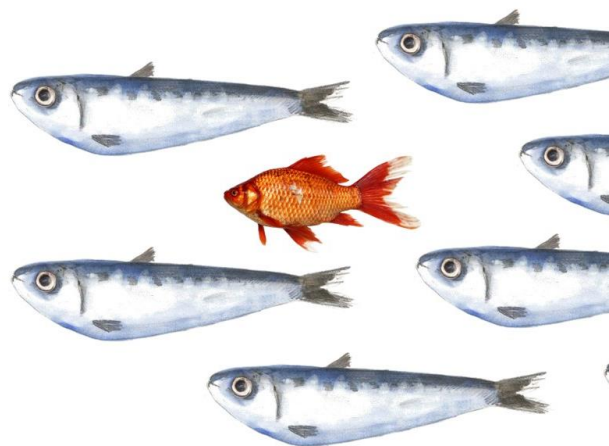
If we ourselves are caught for behaving wrongly, do we apply WYSIWYG? No, of course not! After all, our character is, of course, beyond any doubt. We then see the context and we then recognise or invent outside influences on our behaviour. Only with the other people do we diagnose their personality in their behaviour straight away, completely overlooking the context.

But when it comes to helpful behaviour on the part of the individual, personality still counts, doesn't it? On the contrary. On the way to their talk about the Good Samaritan (!) theology (!) students from Princeton University walked past a person who obviously needed help. What were

the determining factors as to whether the person was helped? The only thing was the time pressure under which the individual students had been previously put by the researchers. Character didn't play an important role.

Do you need some change for the parking machine? The best place to ask is in front of a bakery, where your chances of finding someone helpful are three times better than they are in front of a clothing store. Sweet smells make people happy, and happy people are more helpful.

Despite the lack of personality differences, there are still gender differences though, right? Once again, no. The more important thing is the number of other people in the situation and how they behave. In crowds, emergencies turn into everyday events right before our eyes. Regardless of whether it is a man or woman. Men are more aggressive though, aren't they? We're talking testosterone. Not so fast! If the context is configured in such a way that social norms have no influence, women behave equally as aggressively as men. They would torture alleged villains with the biggest electric shocks if a "scientist" in a crisp white apron asks them to do so.





Do you want to avoid the queue at the airport because you're in a hurry? Or you don't feel like waiting? Then giving a reason helps, and you'll usually be allowed through. Incidentally, it makes no difference whether the reasoning makes sense "otherwise I'll miss my flight" or it is meaningless "can I go ahead because I have to make some photocopies". Compliance and conformity are strong human tendencies that affect behaviour.

Like Nick Chater<sup>2</sup> (The mind is flat, BrainCandy 51), Sommers argues that we are unable to achieve reliable self-knowledge through introspection. Our self-knowledge is based on our current situation and therefore undergoes considerable changes over time and in different contexts. That is why forecasting elections is so difficult: because we have little insight into what will guide our feelings on election day and the context in which we will then decide. That's something that Trump is counting on. And that the fires in California will have been extinguished in November and the tropical storms will also have gone. Promises on protecting the climate made by Biden will then lack context.

The following experiment is recommended to marketing professionals who attribute high relevance to consumer statements on product quality: four nylon stockings are to be tested for quality and classified from best to worst. There was a clear winner and a frequent classification. The test persons expressed a high degree of certainty in their judgement. And they naturally overlooked the context as an influencing factor. The judgements went up from left to right in the reading direction. The product on the far right was usually considered the best, with the second best on the left. By the way – the stockings were identical.

WYSIWYG also explains why some image of nature on the yoghurt label makes us feel good, and why we overlook the addition of artificial flavourings.

Why we experience Beyond Meat creations as an actually comparable food, and not as a laboratory-made, highly processed food with lower amount of nutrients. As long as it looks like a meatball, it is a meatball.

Our self-perception doesn't just depend on our friends, our teachers, our parents and our colleagues who form our self-esteem, but also on the stranger in the bus or the woman sitting two rows away from us in the theatre. Your emotions, your identity, your feeling of how you are progressing in life – none of this self-knowledge arises solely in private internal processes. Everything is influenced by information that we draw from those in our midst. We perceive ourselves relative to the situational environment – without realising it. Who we think we are depends as much on the context as it does on the behaviour of those around us.

On the other hand, we have a whole toolbox of strategies with which we stroke our ego and positively mould our self-perception. Ask a hundred students in a room if they consider themselves to be above-average students. 85% will consider themselves to be above-average. This is similar to us as motorists: 75% of us consider ourselves above-average. Does that ring true? We like to hear about ourselves, who we are and how things are going. We just don't want to hear the truth and nothing but the truth. We prefer to see the world in a self-aggrandising light.

Why do you love your partner? I assume that you've become cautious now and you don't want to answer me? I can understand that. Believe me, any form of introspection is fluid. The result depends on the current phase of your life, your mood and who is asking you. And you certainly won't think about the context in which you met your partner. We tend to create a temporary status report instead. In fact, it is the straightforward



physical proximity to our potential partner that has the greatest influence on whether or not we fall in love. The more often students saw a fellow student in their lectures, the more attractive they found her to be. In a world in which many people spend money on partnership tests, simply seeing someone on a regular basis, even without talking to them, is enough to fan our interest. It is the same with advertising. The straightforward contact with the offer (mere exposure effect) creates the attraction. While we all “know” what we find attractive, we overlook the role played by familiarity. Not to mention other contextual factors, such as the appropriate levels of attractiveness, power, social status and earning potential. Contexts are the lubricants that can even create great love in adverse environments. Doesn't it feel reassuring, not to have to look for a needle in a haystack?

To conclude: If you ever find yourself needing urgent help: approach a stranger and absolve them of their anonymity. Take the power of the context away from them. You don't need to wait around for a better person.

And don't allow coaches to reduce you to a true inner core. We have the ability to develop ourselves, and not to stagnate in the “here and now” but to move forwards in the “there and then”.

From now on, you should pay particular attention to the influence of contexts. And that is why I can't help but make one last remark on popular group discussions. The studio context has nothing to do with either the buying or use situation. The context is exceptional for all participants, and isn't able to culminate in everyday behaviour. And any kind of introspection delivers context-dependent results, even with the best moderator. Groups aren't real life, and the results aren't realistic.

### Sources:

1. Sommers, Sam: Situations Matter: Understanding How Context Transforms Your World
2. Chater, Nick: The Mind is Flat: The Illusion of Mental Depth and The Improvised-Mind, 2019



## Buchempfehlungen

Von Ralph Ohnemus:

**Markenerleben.** Die Strategie im Hyperwettbewerb und Informationstsunami [> hier bestellen](#)

**Markenstaunen.** Gewinnen im Informationstsunami [> hier bestellen](#)



**Feedback, Anregungen oder Kritik zu diesem Artikel:**  
[braincandy@ka-brandresearch.com](mailto:braincandy@ka-brandresearch.com)

Der Autor

**Ralph Ohnemus, CEO.** Seit 2001 Vorstand und Hauptanteilseigner von K&A BrandResearch. Vorher war er 15 Jahre Kunde von K&A BrandResearch. Nationale und internationale Marketing- und Vertriebserfahrung in Senior Management Positionen, darunter FMCG, Mode, Medien und Telekommunikation – zuletzt als SVP Consumer Sales verantwortlich für Marketing, Vertrieb und Filialketten bei Viag Interkom O2.

Kontakt: [r.ohnemus@ka-brandresearch.com](mailto:r.ohnemus@ka-brandresearch.com)

