

# The Context Influence Model (CIM). Context cues in commercials make the difference

*El Modelo de Influencia del Contexto (CIM). Las referencias de contexto en los anuncios marcan la diferencia*




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### Abstract:

The COVID-19 pandemic modified consumers' lives, but advertising did not reflect this change. Preliminary studies have found that commercials do not show anti-COVID measures, and this lack of pandemic references in advertising could affect the consumers' response. However, no empirical research has examined this aspect. Hence, this study analyzes how including COVID references in commercials affects consumers' attitude toward the ad, purchase intention, and brand commitment. Other variables, such as the modality of the ad and the involvement with the pandemic, are also considered. A 3x2 online experiment was conducted with 1050 consumers. Results showed that including COVID references improved the attitude toward the ad, increased the perception of brand commitment to the pandemic and purchase intentions, although, in the last case, with no significant differences. The results suggest that ads should include references to the current context to enhance consumer response. Therefore, the implication of the study extends beyond the pandemic context in which it is conducted.

### Keywords:

COVID-19; attitude toward the ad; purchase intentions; brand commitment context; involvement context.

### Resumen:

*La pandemia de COVID-19 cambió la vida de los consumidores, pero la publicidad no pareció haber reflejado este cambio. Algunos estudios preliminares han demostrado que los anuncios no incluían medidas contra el COVID-19, lo que podría afectar la respuesta de los consumidores. Este estudio analiza cómo incluir referencias al COVID-19 en los comerciales afecta la actitud hacia el anuncio, la intención de compra y el compromiso con la marca. También se consideran variables como la modalidad del anuncio y el grado de implicación con la pandemia. Se realizó un experimento en línea con un diseño 3x2 y con 1050 consumidores. Los resultados mostraron que incluir referencias al COVID-19 mejoró la actitud hacia el anuncio, aumentó la percepción del compromiso de la marca e incrementó las intenciones de compra, aunque sin diferencias significativas. Los resultados sugieren que los anuncios deben incluir referencias al contexto actual para mejorar la respuesta del consumidor, con implicaciones más allá del contexto de pandemia.*

### Palabras clave:

*COVID-19; actitud hacia el anuncio; intenciones de compra; contexto de compromiso de la marca; contexto de implicación.*

## 1. Introduction

The decisive role of advertising in society is evident in moments of crisis, especially during health emergencies (Jenyns, 2021; Vaughan & Tinker, 2019). How the brands respond and what type of advertising messages are conveyed to consumers in times of uncertainty influence their perception of the crisis and their behavior (Blanco-Herrero *et al.*, 2021; Gong & Liu, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic offered a unique scenario to analyze advertising strategies in crises. But how must companies act in such challenging situations? According to some studies, people believe that brands should take an active position, bear in mind the context, and adapt their messages to the changing environment (Taylor, 2020a, 2020b). In a survey, 68% of American consumers believed companies must take a stand on social issues (Just Capital, 2020). Kantar's COVID Barometer (2020)

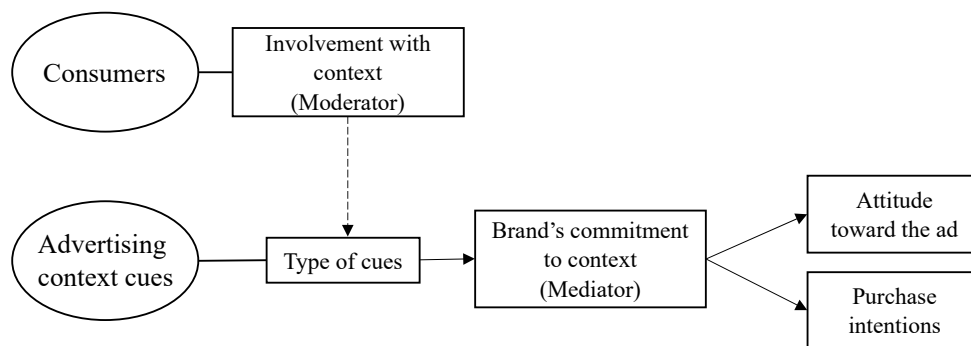
concluded that consumers think brands should adapt their strategies to the new social and economic context. The study by Cameron and Perksy (Faw, 2020) showed that 43% of millennials think brands must play an essential role in the situation. Half of them believe that the pandemic must be reflected in advertisements. Along the same line, a study about radio consumption showed that listeners think commercials should reflect reality by referencing the COVID-19 pandemic (Rodero, 2020).

However, this strategy did not occur in advertising. A study found that only 9% of the ads showed face masks, and fewer than 3% handwashing or practicing social distancing (Deng *et al.*, 2020). For the authors of this study, the fact that only a few ads show face masks is surprising and can provoke a reality distortion with significant implications for audience behaviors and health habits. Therefore, our research question is if commercials reflect the situation showing some anti-COVID measures, could these context-related cues influence consumers' attitude and purchase intentions? As far as we know, no studies have analyzed if this indirect strategy of including some context-related cues in commercials only to reflect the crisis (such as face masks or references to the pandemic in the case of COVID-19) may affect the consumers' response. Therefore, this study aims to test what we call the Context Influence Model (CIM). We analyze the influence of context cues in commercials on consumers' attitude toward the ad and purchase intention, the mediating role of the brand's commitment to context, and the moderating role of consumers' involvement with the context. To do so, we use the COVID pandemic as an example, examining the effect of including context-related cues in commercials.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Context cues are not conceived in this study in the traditional literature manner, related to the context where the commercial is exposed (Stipp, 2018). In this study, they are conceived as the references used in different advertising actions that denote the situation (i.e., characteristics of the crisis context). These context cues can be of different types or modalities. In the concrete case of the pandemic, these context cues are references to anti-COVID measures. This study will use two types of context cues (visual and verbal references) in two different commercials. The brand's commitment to context is the connection of a brand with the situation that the consumers perceive. In the COVID-19 crisis, it represents how consumers think that brands are committed to the pandemic. Finally, the involvement with context is assessed through consumers' personal affectation and the degree of concern with the crisis. In the COVID-19 crisis, this concept represents the consumers' involvement with the pandemic. Figure 1 shows the model.

**Figure 1. The Context Influence Mode**



Source: Own elaboration

Figure 1 illustrates the Context Influence Model (CIM) with two initial independent variables represented by the consumers and the context cues in commercials and two final dependent variables—attitude toward the ad and purchase intentions. Consumers' involvement is a moderator, and the brand's commitment is a mediator. The model represents that the presence of the context will affect consumers' attitude toward the ad and purchase intentions, but this influence will be moderated by consumers' involvement with the context and mediated by the perceived brand's commitment to the context. Therefore, if consumers are involved with the context, including context cues in the commercials that reflect this situation will improve the perception of brand commitment to context. In turn, attitude toward the ads and purchase intentions will be higher.

To test our model, we build on the Heuristic Systematic Model of Information Processing (HSM) (Chaiken 1980). This theory postulates two types of message processing – heuristic and systematic. Heuristic processing is based on simple rules (heuristics or knowledge structures) learned and stored in memory to rapidly evaluate and process the message content. Three main principles guide the heuristic processing: availability (the heuristic stored in memory for potential and future use), accessibility (the ability of the heuristic to be retrieved from memory for using it), and applicability (relevancy according to the subject's goals). However, systematic processing uses comprehensible and analytic cognitive processing to evaluate judgment-relevant information. Therefore, individuals process the information carefully to decide if the message is determinant for them. This kind of processing implies effort, while the heuristic is much simpler and faster with minimal cognitive load. The processing mode determines the level of recipients' persuasion and, therefore, their attitudes and purchase intention (Gardner, 1985).

### 2.1. Advertising context cues

In this theoretical model, we propose to test in this study, advertising context cues are the references used in different advertising actions to reflect the situation. These context cues can be of different modalities. This study used a visual (print commercial) and a verbal message (radio commercial). These two modalities have different processing manners. Lang et al.

(1999) showed that visual processing is an automatic process (heuristic processing), and verbal processing is a controlled process (systematic processing). Consequently, visual or nonverbal cues, for example, in our study, a commercial with the image of someone wearing a face mask should be effortless and automatically processed. This ease of image processing, with no effort, can, in turn, facilitate understanding. Chaiken and Eagly (1976), comparing persuasive messages in three versions (print, videotape, and audio), showed that the most effective messages were in the print version when those were difficult to understand.

In contrast, if the message is verbal – for instance, an audio commercial – the processing mode will be based on more elaborate and comprehensive reasoning with more effort than processing an image (Schneider & Chein, 2003). Some studies have shown that, when the audience is highly motivated, radio (verbal message) achieves more brand recall and recollection of the content than television (audiovisual), as radio establishes a link between the personal experiences and the message's content that improves the message effectiveness (Buchholz and Smith, 1991). Audio stimulates imagery and creates a powerful emotional connection with a more favorable perception and cognitive processing (Bolls, 2002; Rodero, 2012). A neuroscientific study concluded that radio commercials elicit more potent emotional activation (arousal) and engagement than television ads (Peacock *et al.*, 2011). Accordingly, processed with more effort, verbal cues could lead to a more resistant attitude change than images.

## 2.2. Attitude toward the ad and purchase intentions

The type of processing influences the degree of persuasion and attitude change. When the cognitive processing is heuristic, the attitude change will be less stable and resistant. In a health crisis like the COVID pandemic, business communication strategies are crucial to make people aware of the situation and change their attitudes. Attitudes have been a concept profoundly studied in advertising (Bagozzi & Warshaw, 1990; Bergkvist & Zhou, 2019). MacKenzie and Lutz (1989) conceive the attitude toward the ad as the predisposition to respond favorably or unfavorably to a particular advertising stimulus; thus, it is an evaluative or affective response to the commercial that does not imply a behavior.

HSM allows systematic and/or heuristic processing to occur, depending on the level of an individual's involvement with the message content and its features. According to this idea, the amount of arousal or interest the recipient experiences determines the degree of attention devoted to an advertisement and influences the processing strategy. Highly motivated consumers are more likely to engage in systematic processing, making an effort to understand relevant information. Less motivated consumers will instead engage in heuristic processing based on simple decision rules and usually generate a better attitude towards the ad influenced by cues that trigger heuristic processing (MacKenzie & Spreng 1992). In a study conducted to explore the effect of using animals in advertising on constructs such as attitude toward the ad, their authors found that the presence of the dog in the ad suppresses systematic processing and increased heuristic processing, ultimately leading to increased attitude toward the ad (Lancendorfer *et al.*, 2008).

Previous research has established a relationship between consumers' attitude toward the ad and their purchase intention (Das, 2014; Mitchell & Olson, 1981). Lutz et al. (1983) define purchase intentions as the likelihood of purchasing the brand

in the future. Therefore, while attitudes represent the ad's evaluation, intentions are related to people's motivation to act or change their behavior.

Pham et al. (2020) found that the social impact on consumers' lives leads to people's views and perceptions about the disease directly affecting their daily routines and activities, such as decision-making or, for instance, purchase intention during shopping. Grimmer and Bingham (2013) showed that environmentally conscious consumers are expected to generate higher purchase intentions toward companies with superior environmental performance and are more likely to support high environmentally performing companies. Bang et al. (2000) concluded that attitudes toward renewable energy mediate the effect of environmental concern on purchase intention. Therefore, we can deduce that attitude toward the ad and purchase intentions will be more favorable if the commercials somehow reflect the pandemic situation with context cues, especially in the verbal ad, due to the explained different kinds of processing. We suggest that these context-related cues reflecting the pandemic in commercials should be processed using heuristics more than systematic processing, as they are mere references and not strong arguments supporting the anti-COVID measures. This idea allows us to posit the following hypothesis:

**H1:** The commercial with a verbal cue will attain a more favorable attitude toward the ad (H1a) and higher purchase intentions (H1b) than the ad with a visual cue.

### 2.3. *Brand's commitment to context*

Including context cues in commercials generates the perception that brands are committed to the context. In this study, the brand's commitment to context is understood as the psychological connection consumers perceive between the situation and the brands. Indeed, marketers strive to develop strategies that favor this perception of their commitment, and communicating it accordingly is critical to their success. How a brand expresses dedication or pledge to a cause, a context, or a crisis defines its essential values and impacts consumer perception and evaluation of the brand. In the same manner that consumers choose brands that connect with their values, this connection will influence their attitude and behavior (Eisingerich & Rubera, 2010; Lee, 2017; Sprott *et al.*, 2009), and they will have a more positive disposition to brands committed to the pandemic. Therefore, a brand's commitment to the context may also affect attitudes and purchase intentions.

Lately, scholars have pointed out that commitment as a new mediator needs to be considered (Amani, 2015; Hasnizam *et al.*, 2012). Context brand's commitment has been shown in some studies as a mediating variable that can affect the individuals' attitude and behavior and is explained by the process of identification with the brand (Evanschitzky *et al.*, 2006; Lee & Yoon, 2018; Ramírez *et al.*, 2017). Hayes et al. (2020) found that the consumer-brand relationship influences attitudes and purchase intention. Recent research by He and Harris (2020) argued that companies' genuine efforts would be compensated if consumer ethical decision-making shifts during the COVID-19 pandemic. The brands' conduct will be evaluated and, hence, influence consumer perception (Das *et al.*, 2018; Palihawadana *et al.*, 2016; Sudbury-Riley & Kohlbacher, 2016). Finally, the study by Adkins (1999) showed that, on equal price and quality, over 80 percent of consumers would change brands if they linked with a cause, so the brand's commitment would make the difference. Seen from the side of the brand, the opportunities to build the business while making a real positive difference to the broader community are, therefore, significant, providing a win-win. What seems clear is that consumers make purchase decisions based on a company's contribution to society (Marin *et al.*, 2009;

McEachern *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, a high level of consumers' perception of the brand's commitment to the context (i.e., the pandemic) should be a decisive factor in consumer evaluation of the ads, as we posit in the following hypothesis:

**H2:** Brand's commitment to the context will mediate the effect of context cues on attitude toward the ad (H2a) and purchase intention (H2b).

Along with the context cues, the consumer's involvement is another central variable in this model. It is not enough to perceive brand's commitment; consumers need to be involved in the specific context. Moreover, involvement can affect the processing mode and is a central concept of HSM (Chaiken, 1980).

#### *2.4. Involvement with the context*

In this study, consumers' involvement with the context is linked to their personal concern with the situation. Involvement shows the personal relevance and interest that a person gives to a situation (Celsi & Olson, 1998; Kiesler *et al.*, 1969; Lee & Yoon, 2018). In crises, this concept is explained as how individuals perceive the crisis as personally relevant to them (Choi & Lin, 2009). The more activated by the stimuli an individual is on a topic, the more likely to be persuaded, get action, or raise a positive attitude towards that information or products aligned with their beliefs, needs, and motivations (Rubin *et al.*, 2020). Involvement was a relevant mediating factor for consumers to engage in conservation behaviors, according to the study by Hartmann and Apaolaza-Ibáñez (2012) about consumer attitudes and purchase intention toward green energy brands in the context of environmental campaigns. They concluded that concern for the natural environment plays a significant role in purchasing green energy.

Research has found that highly involved individuals are mainly persuaded by the content of a message, such as the strength of the arguments, while low-involved individuals rely more on heuristics to be persuaded (Chaiken 1980; Reinhard & Sporer 2010). Therefore, systematic processing will be more likely when the issue is significant for individuals, that is, when they have high involvement with the situation.

Finally, if consumers are highly involved with the situation and brands reflect this context, it is logical to think they will have a stronger connection with this company. As far as we know, consumers' beliefs and values influence their brand choices. This behavior shows that individuals prefer some aspects of any cognitive system to be internally consistent with themselves (Sirgy, 1985). Following this rationale, consumers choose brands that connect with their values and align with their beliefs (Eisingerich & Rubera, 2010). Therefore, while we expect that the brand's commitment to the context will mediate the effect of context cues on attitude toward the ad and purchase intention, we also suggest that consumer involvement will moderate the effect of such cues on the brand's commitment. The indirect effect of context cues on attitude and purchase intention explained by the perception of the brand's commitment will be moderated by the consumer's involvement, as we posit in this moderated mediation hypothesis:

**H3:** Consumer's involvement with the context will moderate the indirect effect of context cues on attitudes toward the ad (H3a) and purchase intention (H3b) through the brand's commitment.

### 3. Methodology

A 2 (COVID mention: with COVID context cues and without) by 2 (modalities: visual and verbal content) online experiment was conducted to test the hypothesis. The online survey applied for this study was conducted over two weeks (December 14-27, 2020) through a Qualtrics panel.

#### 3.1. Hypotheses

These are the hypotheses of the study:

H1: The commercial with a verbal cue will attain a more favorable attitude toward the ad (H1a) and higher purchase intentions (H1b) than the ad with a visual cue.

H2: Brand's commitment to the context will mediate the effect of context cues on attitude toward the ad (H2a) and purchase intention (H2b).

H3: Consumer's involvement with the context will moderate the indirect effect of context cues on attitudes toward the ad (H3a) and purchase intention (H3b) through the brand's commitment.

#### 3.2. Stimuli

Two different commercials were prepared for this study. The goal was to examine how two different types of context cues –visual (nonverbal) and verbal content– could affect attitudes toward the ad and purchase intentions. To achieve this, we employed a graphic advertisement to represent visual content and an audio commercial for verbal content. This design allowed us to examine the distinct impacts of each modality without the confounding influence of combined audiovisual elements. The decision to exclude audiovisual stimuli was intentional, as integrating both visual and verbal components could introduce complexities that might obscure the individual effects we aimed to study.

The commercials were standard ads with the inclusion of COVID context cues. The brand's name was invented in the commercials to avoid easy recognition and preconceived attitudes, which influence message processing and evaluation (Anand & Sternthal, 1990). The first commercial was an ad with a picture. The product was a gym. The pictures in the two conditions (with or without COVID context cues) were the same, but the female protagonist wore a mask in the first condition, while she was without the mask in the second. In the case of the audio modality, it was a radio ad with a female announcer. Both conditions were the same, but we added the sentence: “complying with all the anti-COVID protocols.” Figure 2 shows the visual commercials.

**Figure 2. Picture of the Commercials**



**Source: Own elaboration**

### *3.3. Sample*

This study was conducted in Spain, a European country significantly affected by COVID-19, with a sample of 1,050 consumers in December 2020. This sample was gender-balanced ( $N = 1050$ ); 52.8% were female, and 47.2% were male, aged between 18 and 68 ( $M = 37$ ,  $SD = 10.53$ ). The participants' political ideology was progressive-leaning 28%, center-leaning 48%, and conservative-leaning 23%. The selection of the sample was made employing a panel. All participants lived in the same country.

### *3.4. Dependent, mediating, and moderator variables*

#### *3.3.1. Attitude toward the ad and purchase intention*

The ad's evaluation scales were the attitude toward the ad and purchase intention. As we use a no real brand name, we analyzed the attitude toward the ad and not toward the brand. Both measures were based on the Tucker and colleagues (2012) scales, adapted from MacKenzie and Lutz's (1989). Three 7-point Likert scales formed the attitude toward the ad. The first was whether the attitude was bad or good, the second was unpleasant or pleasant, and the third was unfavorable or favorable ( $M = 5.10$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ). The Cronbach Alpha coefficient for this scale was .95; thus, a high coefficient in the reliability tests. The purchase intention was composed of two 7-point scales: to what extent would you consider that you will consume this product, and to what extent is your willingness to buy the product (Cronbach  $\alpha = .94$ ,  $M = 4.62$ ,  $SD = 1.65$ ).

### 3.3.2. Brand's commitment to context

To measure the mediator, the brand's commitment, consumers answered the following question on a 7-point scale: to what extent do you think this brand is committed to the pandemic ( $M= 4.76$ ,  $SD= 1.56$ ).

### 3.3.3. Involvement with the context

The moderator, consumers' involvement, was operationalized by measuring the consumers' level of affectation (To what extent are you affected by the crisis?) and the degree of concern (What is your level of concern about the effects of the pandemic on people?) on two 7-point scales. With these two scales, we formed the level of involvement.

### 3.3.4. Sociodemographic variables

This study included several sociodemographic variables as control variables (gender, age, ideology, and home city), as they might provide alternative explanations for the effects. These variables were used as covariates in the analyses.

Finally, at the end of the questionnaire, the study included the question: Have you had trouble understanding the questions? and a final open space to comment on any aspect of the survey. All the participants answered that they understood the questions, and there was no comment.

## 4. Results

Table 1 shows the main variables' means, standard deviations, and correlation matrix.

**Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlation matrix of variables**

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Attitude toward the ad	5.10	1.35	1.00						
2. Purchase intention	4.62	1.65	.709***	1.00					
3. Brand's commitment	4.76	1.56	.709***	.685***	1.00				
4. Involvement	5.06	.97	.074***	-.001	.024	1.00			
5. Gender	.53	.50	-.048**	-.027	-.104**	-.104***	1.00		

6. Age	37.17	10.53	.017	-.079***	-.006	.092***	.259***	1.00	
7. Ideology	4.97	2.21	.112***	.127***	.125***	-.116***	.052**	.006	1.00
<i>Note.</i> Gender was coded as a dummy variable (0 = female, 1 = male). * $p < .05$ , ** $p < .01$ , *** $p < .001$ .									

**Source: Own elaboration**

#### 4.1. Hypotheses testing

We used the PROCESS macro to test the hypothesized model (Hayes, 2013). Two mediation models (model 4) and two moderated mediation models (model 10) were estimated, two for each dependent variable. Bootstrapping procedures were employed (10,000 bootstrap samples), and the 95% confidence interval (CI) was computed. Sociodemographic variables (gender, age, and ideology) were introduced as covariates in the analyses.

#### 4.2. Type of COVID context cues in attitude toward the ad and purchase intention

Hypothesis 1 predicted that the commercial with a verbal cue would attain a more favorable attitude toward the ad (H1a) and higher purchase intentions (H1b) than the ad with a visual cue. The type of cue did not directly affect the attitude toward the ad ( $B = -.03$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $t = -.76$ ,  $p = .444$ ), but it had a significant direct effect on the purchase intention. The verbal cue obtained a higher purchase intention than the visual cue ( $B = -.26$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $t = -4.96$ ,  $p < .001$ ). These results reject H1a and support H1b.

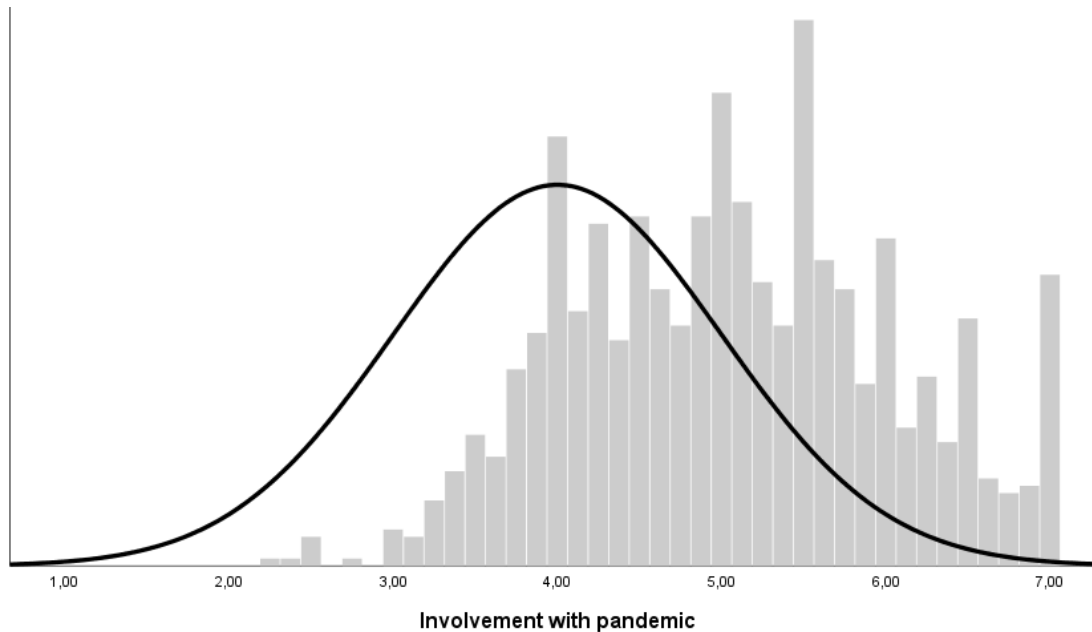
For exploratory purposes only, we tested the effect of the mere presence of context-related cues. As expected, COVID-related cues did not have a direct effect on the attitude toward the ad ( $B = .01$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $t = .54$ ,  $p = .590$ ) nor on the purchase intention ( $B = -.09$ ,  $SE = .07$ ,  $t = -1.33$ ,  $p = .181$ ). There were also no interaction effects between context-related cues and modality on attitude toward the ad ( $B = .10$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $t = 1.73$ ,  $p = .084$ ), neither purchase intention ( $B = .01$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $t = .54$ ,  $p = .590$ ).

#### 4.3. Brand's commitment as a mediator and involvement as a moderator

Hypothesis 2 predicted an indirect effect of COVID-related cues on attitude toward the ad (H2a) and purchase intention (H2b) through the brand's commitment. There was an indirect effect of context-related cues on attitude toward the ad through brand's commitment ( $B = .11$ ,  $SE = .03$ , 95% CI [.05, .17]). Likewise, context cues indirectly affected purchase intention through the brand's commitment ( $B = .13$ ,  $SE = .03$ , 95% CI [.06, .19]). These results support H2.

Finally, Hypothesis 3 predicted that consumer involvement would moderate the indirect effect of context-related cues on attitude toward the ad (H3a) and purchase intention (H3b) through the brand's commitment. An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) revealed that the five items related to the involvement variable had factor loadings above .60 on one latent factor,  $EV = 67\%$ ;  $\alpha = .83$ ;  $M = 5.06$ ,  $SD = .97$ . The distribution of the responses is reflected in Figure 3.

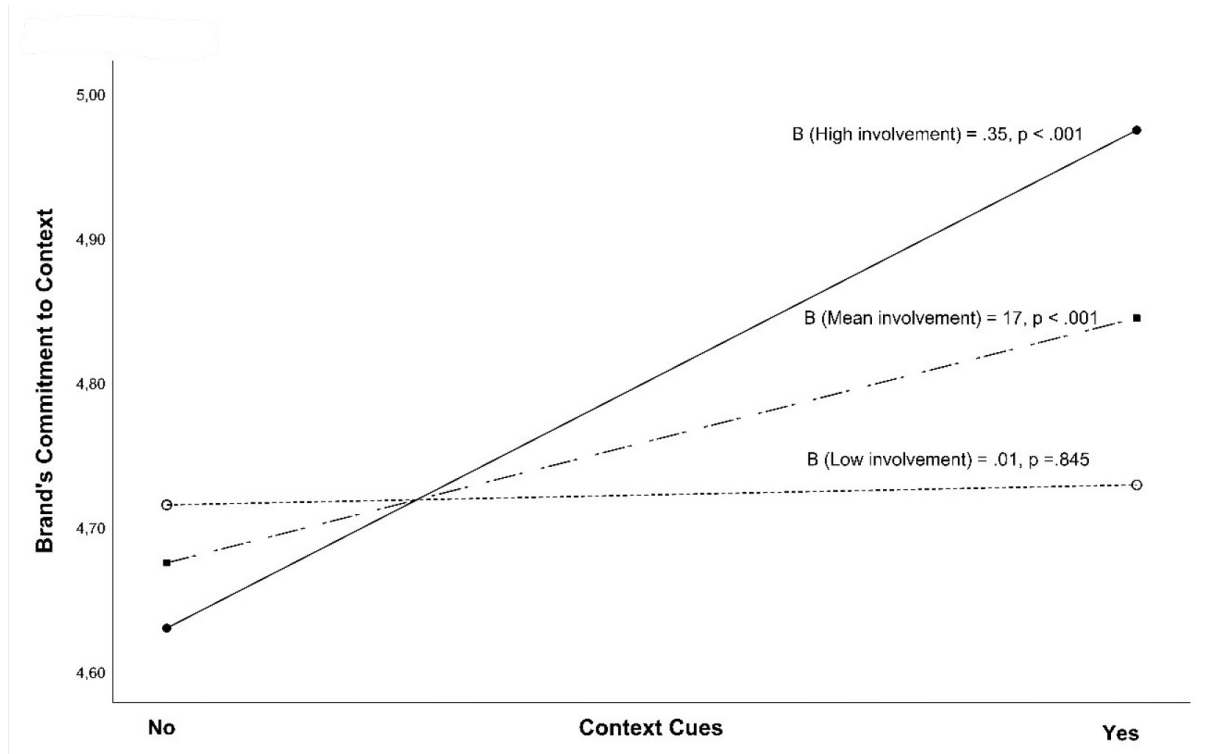
Figure 3. Histogram of the distribution of involvement with a normal curve



Source: Own elaboration

Regarding the results, there was a significant interaction effect between context-related cues and consumers' involvement in brand's commitment ( $B = .16, SE = .05, t = 3.16, p = .002$ ). Moreover, a significant indirect effect of context cues on attitude toward the ad through brand's commitment moderated by the level of consumer involvement ( $B = .09, SE = .03, 95\% CI [.03, .16]$ ). Likewise, there was a significant indirect effect on purchase intention moderated by consumer's involvement ( $B = .11, SE = .04, 95\% CI [.04, .19]$ ). Therefore, Hypothesis 3 is supported. Figure 4 shows the relationship between brand's commitment to context and consumers' involvement with context.

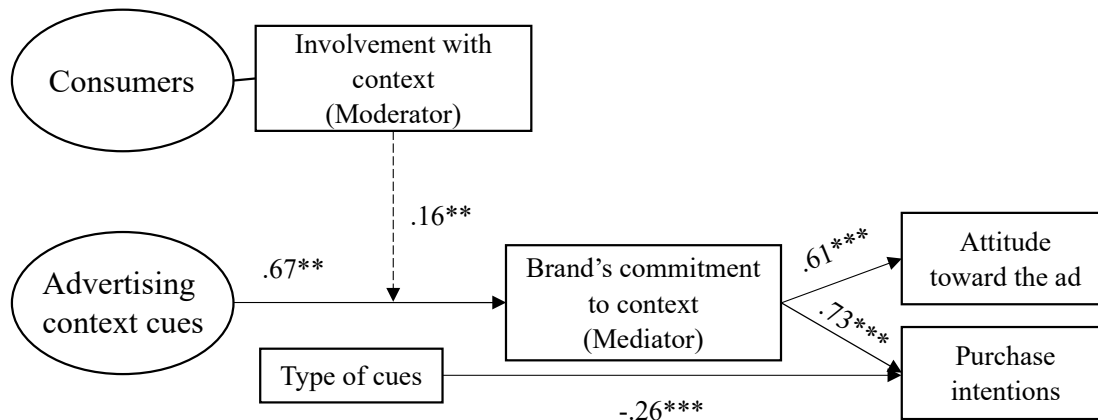
**Figure 4. Conditional effect of context cues on brand commitment depending on the level of involvement**



Source: Own elaboration

As shown in Figure 4, COVID-related cues in commercials increased the perception of the brand's commitment, but only among individuals with medium and high involvement. Moreover, the higher the consumers' involvement, the higher the perception of the brand's commitment when context-related cues are included in commercials. Therefore, this type of cue indirectly enhanced attitude toward the ad and purchase intention by perceiving the brand's commitment to context. The final structural model with non-standardized regression coefficients ( $B$ ) is shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5. The Context Influence Model



Source: Own elaboration

## 5. Discussion

This study aimed to examine the effect of including context-related cues, referring to the COVID-19 pandemic, in commercials on consumers' attitude toward the ad and purchase intention explained by the brand's commitment to the context and moderated by consumers' involvement with the context. We also tested the so-called Context Influence Model (CIM).

This research found that commercials with COVID-related cues, compared to those without reference to the context situation, achieved a more favorable attitude toward the ad and a higher purchase intention by increasing the perception of brand commitment. The effect of these cues on attitude toward the ad and purchase intention was mediated by the perception of the brand's commitment as a significant effect. Moreover, results indicated that the influence of context-related cues on brand's commitment was moderated by the level of consumers' involvement with the context, so the effect was more significant for consumers who were medium or highly involved. All in all, the results showed that including context cues in ads positively affected the perception of the brand's commitment to the pandemic for consumers who were medium or highly involved with the COVID-19 situation. In turn, this perception of the brand's commitment enhanced the attitude toward the ad and purchase intention.

The results are in line with recent research supporting the critical and active role of brands during a crisis (Das *et al.*, 2018; Palihawadana *et al.*, 2016; Sudbury-Riley & Kohlbacher, 2016), even defended by consumers (Just Capital, 2020; Kantar's COVID Barometer, 2020; Rodero, 2020; Taylor, 2020a). The types of commercials launched in uncertain times can influence the consumers' perception of the brand. In this study, the brand's commitment to the crisis was so important that

consumers defended that companies must be proactive in crises, in part, with commercials reflecting somehow the context they are experiencing. This result also supports the relevance of the Context Influence Model (CIM) proposed in this study. If the consumer is worried by a specific context, commercials must reflect this situation to achieve a higher perception of commitment, which in turn impacts attitudes and purchase intentions.

The findings can be interpreted according to the Heuristic Systematic Model of Information Processing (HSM) (Chaiken 1980), on which we based the model (CIM). Introducing COVID-related cues increased the perceived brand's commitment to the context and attitudes toward the ad and purchase intention. The effect of such cues on attitude and purchase intention was mediated by the perception of the brand's commitment, as context-related cues are mere references that reflect the situation and are not strong arguments supporting the measures. Therefore, we believe consumers engaged in rapid information processing by association: "I am very concerned about the pandemic," "everyone is worried and talking about this crisis." Thus, if a brand reflects the situation, consumers understand that this company is also worried about the context, and this perceived commitment changes consumers' attitude and increases their purchase intentions.

Regarding consumers' involvement with context, previous studies have shown that the more interested, concerned, or aware an individual is on a topic, the more likely to be persuaded or raise a positive attitude toward that information or products aligned with their beliefs, needs, and motivations. This idea might lead us to deduce that medium and highly involved consumers' processing could have been systematic. However, the effect of the context-related cues in attitude and purchase intention was not direct but mediated by the brand's commitment. Therefore, we are inclined to attribute this indirect effect to a heuristic more than systematic processing or both processes co-occurring in different parts. HSM considers that both types of processing can happen simultaneously, or one mode can dominate. Previous empirical research has reported the role of both systematic and heuristic processing as a mediator of advertising's effect on attitudes (MacKenzie & Spreng 1992). We suggest that, in a crisis context, heuristic processing could dominate when the message is only based on basic cues aligned with an individual's beliefs and proven to be congruent with the context they are living in, such as when individuals have a high involvement with the COVID context, as in our study. Therefore, our results confirm that consumers' involvement with the context should be considered when analyzing the influence of commercials on brand's commitment, attitudes toward the ad, and purchasing.

Finally, regarding the type of context-related cue (visual vs. verbal), there were no direct effects on attitude or indirect through the brand's commitment. However, the verbal message had a direct influence on purchase intentions. Although previous studies about modality were inconclusive, some showed that print ads were the most understood and effective (Chaiken & Eagly, 1976; Jacoby *et al.*, 1983). In our study, the ad with the image of a woman wearing a face mask could have directly impacted the participants, mainly as images are automatically processed, thus, with little effort (Schneider & Chein, 2003). However, our results show that a visual cue did not improve the attitude toward the ad more than a verbal cue. This variable had no significant results between the visual and verbal cues. The verbal cue had a significant effect on purchase intentions. Considering the known emotional activation of the audio modality on the receiver, we suggest that this commercial stimulated a concrete mental image of the complex situation that many consumers were living in and, therefore, created a powerful emotional connection, according to previous studies (Bolls, 2002; Rodero, 2012). In the form of a COVID-related cue, this emotional activation could have led to a concurrency of types of processing, systematic and heuristic.

This study has some limitations that must be considered when interpreting the results. Although we produced the commercials trying to avoid many differences, finding some is logical, as they were elaborated in two different modalities with various elements. The picture was a static image portraying one concrete moment in the gym. However, there were no images in the audio version, just a voice explaining the product. This female voice could also affect the results. Therefore, future research should explore other types of cues (visual, sound, text...) and test the effect of different strategies to explore their influence on the model.

## 6. Conclusions

Three major conclusions can be drawn from the study's results. First, commercials with context-related cues achieved the most favorable attitude toward the ad and purchase intentions mediated by the perception of the brand's commitment. Thus, brand's commitment to context is an essential variable to consider when creating commercials in times of uncertainty. Secondly, consumers' involvement with the context is a determinant variable in deciding consumers' response to advertising. Those highly worried about the pandemic assessed the brand's commitment with the highest level and subsequently reported more positive attitudes toward the ad and purchase intention. Overall, consumers think that brands must be implicated in crises and contribute to finding possible solutions to reduce their impact, and thus, commercials must reflect the current situation. Thus, introducing some context-related cues to the pandemic in commercials is effective and improves the consumers' response to current advertising. Finally, the commercial with verbal cues obtained the highest purchase intentions, but there were no differences in the attitude toward the ad.

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## 8. Specific contributions of each author

	Name and Surname
Conception and design of the work	Emma Rodero, Sara Vinyals
Methodology	Emma Rodero, Sara Vinyals
Data collection and analysis	Isabel Rodríguez-de-Dios
Discussion and conclusions	Olatz Larrea
Drafting, formatting, version review and approval	Emma Rodero, Sara Vinyals, Isabel Rodríguez-de-Dios, Olatz Larrea

## 9. Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest contained in this article.

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