Contextual Influences on the Meanings Ascribed to Ordinary Consumption Objects

ROBERT E. KLEINE III
JEROME B. KERNAN*

Although the perception of contextualized objects pervades our everyday experiences, the literature provides little insight into how consumers ascribe meaning to contextualized products, or indeed into what meaning is. We address this gap in the literature by providing a conceptualization of consumption-object meaning and an a priori model for measuring it. An experiment tested several hypotheses concerning how the kind and amount of context affects the meanings people ascribe to ordinary consumption objects (and the labels that they use to identify those meanings). Overall, the findings support the proposed conceptualization.

Grant McCracken (1989, p. 314) proposes that "advertising is such a powerful mechanism of meaning transfer that virtually any product can be made to take virtually any meaning." Furthermore, advertising performs this meaning transfer in a "deceptively simple manner"—through the arrangement of cultural units so that they suggest an intended meaning to the viewer. This is a seductive proposition as long as it is couched in an anthropological perspective. From a psychological perspective, however, it raises several questions. For example, what is "meaning"? And what is it about the things with which an object is displayed (its context) that influences the meaning individuals ascribe to it? *How* do individuals ascribe meaning to an object? In short, how does context influence individuals' object-meaning perceptions?

These are central questions for at least two reasons. First, behavior toward objects is based on the meaning that individuals ascribe to those objects. For example, putty knives and sandwich spreaders share many physical characteristics. Yet one is stored in the workshop and rinsed in the utility sink after it is used. The other is kept in the kitchen and placed in the dishwasher for cleaning. Second, objects are virtually always contextualized; they occur with other objects. Consumer researchers have examined situational influences on choice intention (Belk 1975) and the influences of context on person perception (e.g., Belk, Bahn, and Mayer 1982; Holman 1980; Solomon and Assael 1987). However, how context influences what an object is perceived to be—its meaning—remains underspecified (Antes, Penland, and Metzger 1981; Boyce, Pollatsek, and Rayner 1989; Rotter 1955) in spite of the obvious fact that the perception of contextualized objects pervades consumers' everyday experiences. As has been observed, all meaning is "meaning in context" (Bransford and McCarrell 1974; Olson 1986). In fact, Sidney Levy (1959, p. 121) pointed out to the marketing research community some 30 years ago, in the course of describing some advertising research, that "in a recent study of two cheese advertisements . . . one wedge of cheese was shown in a setting of a brown cutting board, dark bread, and a glimpse of a chess game. . . . Although no people were shown, consumers interpreted the ad as part of a masculine scene, with men playing a game, being served a snack. The same cheese was also shown in another setting with lighter colors, a suggestion of a floral bowl. . . . This was interpreted . . . as a feminine scene, probably with ladies lunching in the vicinity." Unfortunately, the import of Levy's finding was blunted in the academic research community by a quantitative imperative that prevailed for some 20 years. Only in recent years have we begun to rediscover the significance of such early qualitative efforts.

This article offers a social-psychological paradigm for studying how individuals ascribe meaning to a contextualized object when they encounter it. Our approach differs from much of the consumer research (e.g., brand

*Robert E. Kleine III is an assistant professor of marketing, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85287-4106. Jerome B. Kernan is the GMU Foundation Professor of Behavioral Analysis, Department of Marketing, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA 22030-4444. This article is based on R.E.K.'s Ph.D. dissertation (University of Cincinnati, 1987), which the second author supervised. Chris T. Allen and Donald Schumsky substantially influenced this project as dissertation committee members, and their contributions are gratefully acknowledged. The authors would like to thank Susan Schultz-Kleine and Peter Reingen for their many helpful comments. This research was partially supported by the Arizona State University College of Business Research Support Grant Program. Finally, the presentation of this material has been improved greatly by the helpful and incisive comments of Richard J. Lutz, Kent B. Monroe, and the three anonymous reviewers.

identification, multiattribute attitude models, and most categorization studies) that focuses on information about categories of objects that individuals already have stored in memory. It also suggests that typical product-perception studies (i.e., attitude research, conjoint analysis, and even aesthetics research [Holbrook 1986]) might be incomplete to the extent that they assume subjects "correctly" ascribe meaning to stimulus products. This article examines this assumption and explores how consumers ascribe meanings to products. We begin with a perspective on object meaning. Then we report on an experiment that tests how context influences individuals' object-meaning perceptions as well as the labels people apply to those perceptions, that is, how individuals identify or communicate those meanings.

A PERSPECTIVE ON OBJECT MEANING

Any inquiry into individuals' object-meaning perceptions must, implicitly or explicitly, address three questions: (1) What is object meaning? (2) How do individuals ascribe meaning to objects? and (3) What is the distinction between an object's meaning and the word (label) used to symbolize (identify) that object? We address these questions in the setting of a person encountering an ordinary consumption object, for example, when a consumer sees a product displayed on a shelf or depicted in an advertisement.

What Is Object Meaning?

In our view, meaning is a perception or interpretation of an object. Meaning is not inherent in the object itself; rather it arises from the interaction of individual, object, and context (see, e.g., Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Friedmann 1986; Golden, Alpert, and Betak 1989; Warner 1959), and it is inherently symbolic, subjective, psychological, and perceptual. Individuals always respond to their interpretation of an object (i.e., its meaning) and not to the literal "objective" object.[1] Thus, meaning perceptions of an object may differ across individuals and across situations for the same individual.

We formalize these themes as follows. A consumption object's meaning for an individual is that person's aggregate perception of the object. One's perception, in turn, consists of two dimensions: an interpretation of the object's attributes (the attribute dimension) and of its action potential (the performance dimension). These perceptual dimensions vary in salience among objects and among individuals and according to the context in which the object is perceived (Kernan and Sommers 1967; Kleine and Kernan 1988).

Conceptualizing meaning as an individual's interpretation of an object's attribute and performance characteristics recognizes that objects, as stimuli, evidence both form and function. Attribute and performance perceptions are fundamental and necessary to characterize an object uniquely (Miller 1977). Most research on meaning, including that couched in a consumption context (e.g., Belk 1988), emphasizes performance characteristics (how things are used symbolically or instrumentally; cf. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981, ch. 2). Conversely, much object-perception research (e.g., conjoint analysis and categorization research) focuses on an object's physical properties only (i.e., attribute characteristics). Individuals' object-meaning perceptions are underdetermined in both research traditions (e.g., Bransford and McCarrell 1974; Labov 1972; Miller 1977).

Recall the sandwich spreader and putty knife example. These two objects appear to be almost identical. However, most people will agree that they "mean" different things. Only by considering their respective performance characteristics can the objects be distinguished from one another. Attribute and performance characteristics must be considered jointly to discern spreaders and putty knives from table knives or teddy bears, for example. Finally, individuals' object meanings are derived from those attribute and performance characteristics they *perceive* the object to possess.

How Is Meaning Ascribed? Labels versus Meanings

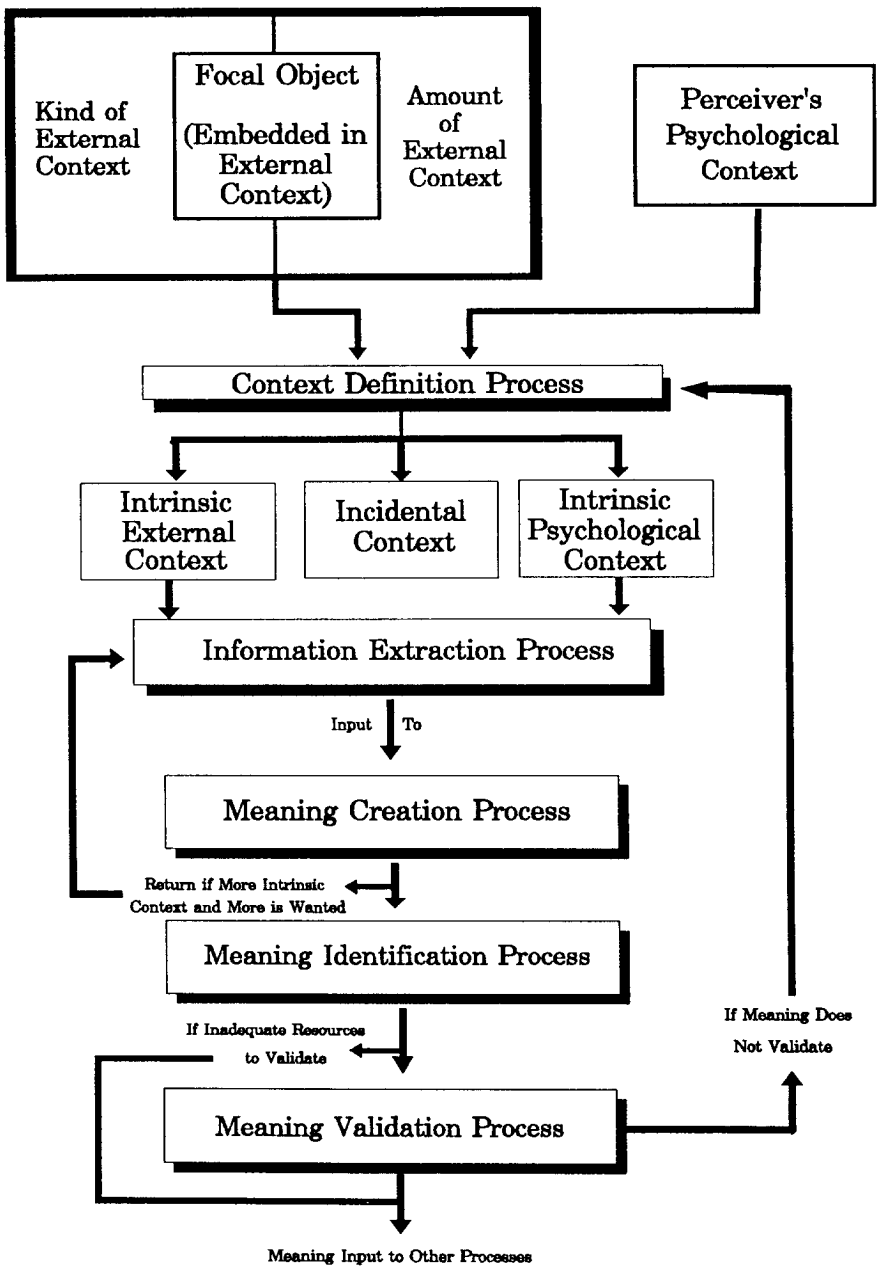
The consumption-object meaning ascription process (COMAP) is our attempt to answer the question of how meaning is ascribed, and one of its subprocesses, meaning identification, addresses the distinction of meaning versus label. We developed our a priori model to organize the literature and to guide the development of a theory of how individuals ascribe meaning to objects. The COMAP model (see Fig. 1) is thus a synthesis of conceptual thinking.

The COMAP model assumes that individuals' object-meaning perceptions are influenced by the object's perceived context. Not all researchers who study meaning accept this assumption (Clark 1978). Those adhering to the "independence" view (e.g., Katz and Postal 1964) argue that context does not influence meaning. "Constructivists" (e.g., Olson 1970), in contrast, assume that meaning is totally context dependent. We adopt the intentional view (e.g., Clark 1978; Grice 1975; Ogden

[1] Most consumer and social-psychological research traditions, with the exception of symbolic interactionism, assume that subjects interpret stimuli as intended by the researcher. Such an assumption seems of dubious validity. A more tenable position paralleling Lakoff's (1987) experiential realist view suggests that what are commonly called "objective" object characteristics are merely features for which there is consensus among perceivers. Such consensus fosters a tendency for experiences to be objectified (Sless 1986). The fact that "everyone knows" (high consensus) that cheese is for eating says nothing about the perceived object. This inference does reveal, however, something about which perceptions are common among a group of individuals. Similarly, object qualities commonly labeled "subjective" are, in our view, features for which interindividual consensus is relatively low.

FIGURE 1

AN A PRIORI MODEL OF THE CONSUMPTION OBJECT-MEANING ASCRIPTION PROCESS (COMAP)



and Richards 1953) that bridges these two perspectives by assuming that people strive to determine the interpretation that was intended by the object's displayer. If no displayer is manifest, the perceiver will project one to constrain possible interpretations (Sless 1986).

The meaning-ascription process is assumed to be initiated by multisensory input from the perceiver's environment—specifically, from a focal object and other environmental features—and, once initiated, the process proceeds uninterrupted. Meaning ascription involves five subprocesses: context definition, information extraction, meaning creation, meaning identification, and meaning validation.

Conceptualization of Context. Context is that information available to a particular person, on a particular occasion, for use in the meaning-ascription process (Clark and Carlson 1981). Context is differentiated by

whether it is available to the individual externally (the external context) or internally (the psychological context; see Fig. 1). All features of the object's environment constitute its external context. Psychological context represents the perceiver's store of experiences with the focal object (Ogden and Richards 1953). This internal information might be stored in the form of frames (Minsky 1977), scripts (Abelson 1976), or knowledge structures (Olson 1986).

We propose that an object's external context varies along two dimensions: its kind and amount.[2] The kind of context (cf. Rotter 1955) is a qualitative dimension that specifies a category of meaning (cf. Kernan and Sommers's [1967] role-related product clusters or McCracken's [1988] Diderot unity).[3] A small, flat, triangular object surrounded by three crackers and a wineglass, for example, might represent one kind of context. The amount of context specifies how much external information about a category of meaning is available to the perceiver and is conceptualized as a continuum that ranges from low (e.g., the small, triangular object by itself) to high (e.g., the small, triangular object plus the crackers and the wineglass; cf. Bransford and McCarrell 1974, p. 196). Our initial (and very general) hypothesis follows from this conceptualization.

H1: For a given focal object, both the kind and amount of external context (independent of the object) influence the meanings ascribed to the object.

Context-Definition Process. The context-definition process delimits the intrinsic external and intrinsic psychological contexts (see Fig. 1). Intrinsic contexts are those contexts that the perceiver believes are useful for meaning ascription. Incidental context, in contrast, includes those contextual elements that the individual considers unnecessary for meaning ascription (Clark and Carlson 1981). Thus the intrinsic external context represents the environmental elements in which the focal object is embedded and that are perceived to be relevant for the meaning-creation task. The intrinsic psychological context is that set of the individual's experiences that s/he believes are relevant for meaning ascription. These two intrinsic contexts constitute a perceiver's "context for comprehension" (Clark and Carlson 1981), which is used in the information-extraction process.

The distinction between intrinsic versus incidental context is essential. The external and psychological contexts generally contain information that the perceiver will deem unnecessary for meaning ascription, just as a consumer's well-stocked refrigerator holds many items that s/he will deem to be irrelevant in preparing tonight's dinner. One must distinguish, perhaps by removing from the refrigerator, those refrigerated items believed to be useful for preparing the night's meal (i.e., the intrinsic context) from those items believed to be unnecessary for meal preparation (i.e., the incidental context). Finally, the intrinsic contexts are readied to facilitate subsequent use in the information-extraction process, much as one might arrange items to aid in meal preparation (e.g., by placing all salad items together).

Little is known about how individuals define and represent intrinsic contexts. Evidence concerning the contents of intrinsic contexts shows that they contain both idiosyncratic and cultural knowledge. Cultural (or shared) knowledge is essential for inferring the meaning that is intended by the object's displayer (Clark, Schreuder, and Buttrick 1983). Intrinsic context content can also be characterized as either context independent or context dependent (Barsalou 1982). Because certain functional characteristics are relevant only within certain contexts, those performance-dimension characteristics that individuals represent in their intrinsic contexts will be context dependent:

H1A: Both the kind and amount of a focal object's external context influence perceptions of the object's performance dimension of meaning.

In contrast, because an object's palpable characteristics remain essentially constant across contexts, we propose that attribute-dimension information in intrinsic contexts is context independent.

H1B: Neither the kind nor amount of a focal object's external context influences perceptions of the object's attribute dimension of meaning.

Thus, as a general proposition, we hypothesize that both the kind and amount of external context within which a focal object is embedded influence the meanings ascribed to the object (Hypothesis 1). When meaning perceptions are disaggregated into their component dimensions, however, we specify that context affects the performance dimension (Hypothesis 1A) but not the attribute dimension (Hypothesis 1B). In other words, varying an object's context changes its meaning, specifically by affecting perceptions of what the object "is for" rather than what the object "is."

Information-Extraction Process. The individual extracts information from intrinsic contexts in the order of its salience (most salient first) and passes it to the meaning-creation process. The conditions under which the psychological versus the external context dominates this process is not well understood.

[2]Context coherence is a possible third dimension of context (Boyce et al. 1989).

[3]A category is class of objects that are perceived to have similar meanings. Such meaning-based categories may arise from perceived attribute-dimension similarities (the objects appear similar), perceived performance-dimension similarities (the objects do similar things), or perceived attribute- and performance-dimension similarities. Categorization research that uses objects as stimuli usually construes categories as being formed only by attribute characteristics that the objects "objectively" possess.

Meaning-Creation Process. This extracted information—the focal object, embedded in its intrinsic external context and filtered through the perceiver's intrinsic psychological context—is now perceived along its attribute and performance dimensions. A meaning is created. At this initial stage, it may be only a tentative or "working" meaning, but it becomes available for input into the meaning-identification process where it will be labeled. (Later, under certain conditions, it can be validated.) We assume that the information-extraction and meaning-creation cycle continues until the perceiver exhausts the intrinsic contexts (e.g., all foods placed on the counter have been used) or concludes that additional information is unnecessary (see Fig. 1). At this point, the working meaning (e.g., meal) is ready for identification and labeling.

Meaning-Identification Process. The perceiver's working meaning of the contextualized object must somehow be encapsulated before it can be validated, and this occurs in the meaning-identification process. Meaning, because it results from perception, is inherently idiosyncratic. Yet there is a need to know, for example, whether two consumers are talking about "the same" focal object. So we identify our perceptions of the object with a label (usually a word name) and use this shorthand to represent our cognitions to other people. Labels are imperfect ways of conveying meanings, but they are necessary because we are dependent on language to communicate. When two people say something "means the same thing to them," their agreement is likely to be based on nothing more than the equivalence between the labels that they use to identify their respective meanings.

We should remember, therefore, that object meaning and meaning identification are distinct constructs. Miller and Johnson-Laird's (1976) tripartite notion of a concept (its meaning, its label, and its syntax) emphasizes the distinction. Meaning (one's interpretation of a contextualized object) relates a person to his/her environment (McNamara and Miller 1989), and its study is one of pragmatics. A label, on the other hand, is a word (or other identity) that social convention dictates should be applied to a particular region of meaning, and its study is one of semantics. Labels run the gamut from being very precise to very ambiguous, but they are inherently more polysemous than the meanings they represent. The same label (say, "cup") can be applied to a variety of meanings (Labov 1972; Rosch et al. 1976). Yet labels have sets of rules governing their use. Indeed, concept-attainment research studies subjects' development of and strategies for using these rules (Bruner, Goodnow, and Austin 1956). Perceivers' use of these rules in labeling their meaning forms the identification process (Armstrong, Gleitman, and Gleitman 1983).[4] Meaning identification thus bridges object-specific perceptions and semantic memory (Jolicoeur, Gluck, and Kosslyn 1984). Brand identification (Howard 1977), in contrast, focuses on knowledge about categories of objects that individuals already have stored in memory. In summary, meanings are ascribed to objects, and then labels are used to identify those meanings.

This conceptualization explains the everyday experience of perceiving an object yet having "no idea" what it is. Such a failure in identification may result from insufficient meaning or lack of an appropriate label. Failure might also result when one encounters a word (e.g., "zelglig") that one cannot apply to meanings (i.e., no label-application rules). As more external context becomes available, however, the individual can ascribe more refined attribute and performance characteristics to the object. Consequently, individuals will be more likely to assign the label that was intended by the object's displayer.

H2: The proportion of individuals who assign the displayer-intended label to a focal object's meaning increases monotonically as the amount of the object's external context increases.

Since perceptions of an object's meaning also differ according to the kind of context in which it is embedded (cf. the two cheese ads described by Levy [1959]) it follows that perceivers will assign identifying labels to those meanings that distinguish the differences. Thus, our third hypothesis is as below.

H3: The labels individuals attach to a focal object's meaning vary according to the kind of context in which the object is displayed.

Finally, in an attempt to shed some light on the comparative roles of the psychological versus external context (see Information-Extraction Process above), we propose the commonsense notion that familiarity moderates context reliance. Specifically, the more familiar an object is to a perceiver, the greater will be his/her reliance on past experience (i.e., on psychological context) to recognize, interpret, identify, and label it. Meaning, in such a "familiar" case, should be comparatively refined and its associated identification should be reasonably "accurate" (displayer intended). Conversely, for an unfamiliar object, external context is likely to dominate; meaning is less likely to be refined and identification is less likely to be accurate.

H4: The proportion of individuals who assign the displayer-intended label to a focal object's meaning is higher when the object is presented in familiar contexts than when it is presented in unfamiliar contexts.

Meaning-Validation Process. The meaning-validation process entails assessing the isomorphism between one's created meaning (at this point labeled) and

[4]These label-application rules are what researchers commonly call a word's "meaning."

the meaning intended by the object's displayer (Clark et al. 1983; Ogden and Richards 1953). One way of regarding a meaning as "valid" is by reference to the name, label, or identification that the perceiver assigns to the meaning. If the object's displayer agrees with the label, the assumption follows that the associated meaning was the one that the displayer intended. Meaning validation will occur if resources (e.g., information, cognitive capacity) are available; otherwise, the "working" meaning will remain unvalidated. Because one can never be certain of another's intentions, the validation process is inherently inferential. Hence, one can increase confidence in, but not unequivocally validate, one's ascribed meaning. Ogden and Richards (1953) suggest that individuals rely on external context when forming this inference. Thus, the more external context that is available, the greater should be an individual's confidence in his/her ascribed meaning.

If the perceiver deems that his/her created meaning is "not true," s/he will redefine the intrinsic contexts and restart the information-extraction and meaning-creation cycle. Processing returns to the context-definition process because, although the individual is likely to have exhausted the intrinsic contexts (or extracted all the information perceived to be useful) prior to initiating the meaning-validation process, an "incorrect" meaning can result because the intrinsic contexts were improperly defined. That is, the individual supplied the wrong raw materials to the information-extraction and meaning-creation processes (e.g., removed items inappropriate for creating tonight's dinner from the refrigerator). Only through intrinsic context redefinition (e.g., retrieving different objects from the refrigerator) can new information be introduced into the system.

METHOD

We conducted an experiment to test the hypothesized effects of context on individuals' object-meaning perceptions and on the labels that they apply to those meanings. First we discuss how we operationalized the kind and amount of external context, followed by a discussion of study methodology and results.

Operationalizing External Context

Focal Object Selection. Although, strictly speaking, one contextually ambiguous object is sufficient to test our hypotheses, we included a second one. Results (see below) are partitioned by stimulus object. We selected focal stimuli for which subjects were likely to have differing levels of personal experience (psychological context): a 12-inch × 14-inch × 7-inch plastic tub (familiar) and a 1.5-inch × .5-inch-thick triangular sponge (unfamiliar).

Kind of External Context. The kind of context was distinguished operationally by the identification (label) intended for the focal object and differed in subject familiarity (see pretest below). Intended identifications were "babybath" (unfamiliar) and "dishpan" (familiar) for the tub stimulus and "cheese" (familiar) and "applicator" (unfamiliar) for the sponge stimulus.

Amount of External Context. The amount of external context was operationalized by placing near the focal object additional objects believed a priori to suggest the intended identifications (e.g., a wineglass and crackers afford information relevant to "cheese"). We do not contend that each additional object contributes an equal quantity of information. We assume only that each additional object makes "more" external information available.

Stimulus Pretesting

We conducted a pretest to assess the external context operationalizations and our a priori kind-of-context familiarity designations. This pretest's design was a 2 (tub and sponge) × 2 (kind of context) × 4 (amount of external context) mixed factorial. Focal object was a within-subjects factor. Kind and amount of context were between-subjects factors. The focal stimuli were represented via photographic slides (i.e., subjects were provided with visual information only) that depicted either the focal object alone (low amount of context), the focal object with one or the other of two additional consumption objects (two levels of medium amount of context), or the focal object with both additional consumption objects (high amount of context). The tub-stimuli, babybath conditions included the tub only, the tub plus a washcloth, the tub plus an unmarked powder container, and the tub plus the washcloth and powder container. The dishpan-condition stimuli were the tub only, the tub plus a plate, the tub plus an unmarked soap container, and the tub plus the plate and the soap container. The sponge-stimuli, cheese conditions included the sponge only, the sponge plus a wineglass, the sponge plus three crackers, and the sponge plus a wineglass and three crackers. The applicator-condition stimuli were the sponge only, the sponge plus a penny loafer, the sponge plus an unmarked shoe-polish tin, and the sponge plus the shoe and the tin.

We randomly assigned 228 undergraduate student subjects to one presentation condition for each stimulus object (tub and sponge). On stimulus presentation (a 35-millimeter slide of the focal object and its context, projected on a screen in a classroom setting), the experimenter pointed to the focal object and stated, "This is the object."

An open-ended question, "What is the object?" measured meaning identification, the criterion. Two judges coded each identifying label as correct, incorrect but correct for the other kind of context, or incorrect.[5] The

[5]Original versions of all coder instructions are available from the first author.

applicator condition's label was modified as only one subject labeled the object as an applicator. Subjects preferred the label "sponge" and, using that label, intercoder agreement was 94.3 percent over the 456 judgments.

These data (Table 1) were examined for the kind and amount of context effects on the proportion of subjects providing the intended identification (label). Tub-stimulus subjects in the familiar dishpan condition identified the focal object more readily than subjects in the less familiar babybath condition did ($\chi^2(1) = 5.55, p < .05$). Our a priori familiarity designations thus were supported.

For the amount of context effects, we expected the following ordering: low < medium$_1$ ≈ medium$_2$ < high. Within the babybath condition, the proportion of intended identifications was greater at medium$_2$ (0.37) than at the low (0.00; $p < .05$) amount of context. The expected order of effects was obtained in the dishpan condition; however, the only significant contrast was between the high (0.59) and low (0.15) amounts of context. Finally, an effect for the kind of context was evidenced. Subjects in the babybath condition used the "babybath" label more often than subjects in the dishpan condition did ($\chi^2(1) = 19.78, p < .05$). Similarly, subjects in the dishpan condition used the label "dishpan" more often than did subjects in the babybath condition ($\chi^2(1) = 13.35, p < .05$).

For the sponge stimulus, subjects in the cheese condition identified the focal object more readily than did subjects in the applicator condition ($\chi^2(1) = 73.3, p < .05$). This result and subject debriefing support the notion that cheese consumption is a more familiar kind of context for our subjects than is shoe polishing.

For the cheese condition, a larger proportion ($p < .05$) of subjects labeled the focal object as "cheese" in the high (1.0) and medium$_2$ (0.93) amounts of context than in the low (0.59) amount of context. No contrasts were significant within the sponge condition; however, when both the high (0.40) and medium$_1$ (0.40) amounts of context are contrasted with the low (.04) amount of context, the tests approach significance. An effect for the kind of context was also evidenced for the sponge stimulus. Subjects in the cheese condition used the label "cheese" more often than did subjects in the sponge condition ($\chi^2(1) = 36.26, p < .05$). Similarly, subjects in the sponge condition used the label "sponge" more often than did subjects in the cheese condition ($\chi^2(1) = 35.4, p < .05$).

In summary, the pretest results consistently supported our a priori familiarity designations for the kind of context.[6] We also demonstrated that the label assigned to an object varies across the kind of context. Inadequate manipulations (not "enough" context) and an insensitive identification measure are two explanations for the weak amount-of-context effects. Thus, three stimuli were bolstered for the main experiment by including more contextual objects (Exhibit 1). The identification measure's insensitivity stems from the

TABLE 1

PRETEST SUMMARY OF PROPORTIONS OF INTENDED IDENTIFICATIONS

Stimulus object, kind of context, and label applied	Amount of context			
	Low	Medium$_1$	Medium$_2$	High
Tub (S_1):				
Babybath (K_1):				
Babybath:	.000	.080	.367	.207
Upper[a]	.143	.260	.561	.397
Lower[a]	.000	.010	.199	.079
Dishpan[b]	.292	.120	.000	.069
N	24	25	30	29
Dishpan (K_2):				
Dishpan:	.154	.244	.261	.586
Upper	.351	.403	.491	.767
Lower	.044	.124	.102	.389
Babybath	.000	.000	.043	.000
N	26	41	23	29
Sponge (S_2):				
Cheese (K_1):				
Cheese:	.586	.900	.931	1.000
Upper	.763	.979	.992	1.000
Lower	.379	.723	.771	.884
Sponge	.034	.000	.000	.000
N	29	30	29	26
Sponge (K_2):[c]				
Sponge:	043	.400	.293	.400
Upper	221	.614	.455	.614
Lower	.001	.210	.161	.210
Cheese	.435	.480	.463	.520
N	23	25	41	25

[a] "Upper" and "Lower" delineate the boundaries of an $\alpha = .05$ exact-*F* confidence interval about the observed proportion of intended identifications.

[b] This row reports the proportion of identifications that were "incorrect—but correct for the other kind of context" (e.g., babybath-condition subjects who identified the focal object as dishpan).

[c] This identification was changed from "applicator" to "sponge" for reasons described in the text.

[6] At the suggestion of a reviewer, we did an additional study to verify our a priori assumptions regarding the object/context familiarity to undergraduate students. Thirty-one subjects, drawn from a population similar to the one used for the pretest and main experiment, responded to a three-item familiarity measure for each kind-of-context manipulation. The items were (for the cheese condition) as follows: (1) cheese is something with which I personally am very familiar/not at all familiar; (2) cheese is something with which I personally have lots of experience/very little experience; (3) cheese is something I personally have used (eaten) many times/very few times. Each item was measured on a seven-point bipolar scale. For the sponge stimulus, summing and averaging across scales yielded $\bar{X} = 5.80, \sigma = 0.85$ for cheese (a priori familiar); $\bar{X} = 3.15, \sigma = 1.63$ for applicator (a priori unfamiliar); $p < .01$; for the tub stimulus, $\bar{X} = 4.73, \sigma = 1.90$ for dishpan (a priori familiar); $\bar{X} = 2.24, \sigma = 1.25$ for babybath (a priori unfamiliar); $p < .05$. For both object stimuli, therefore, the mean differences are significant and in the anticipated direction. This result, coupled with our pretest, seems to support our assertions regarding context familiarity.

EXHIBIT 1

MAIN EXPERIMENT STIMULI: INTENDED IDENTIFICATIONS AND DESCRIPTIONS

Stimulus object and kind of context	Amount of context: Low (A_1)	Medium (A_2)	High (A_3)
Tub (S_1):			
Babybath (K_1)	Tub only	Powder container (unmarked)	Washcloth, powder container, rattle
Dishpan (K_2)	Tub only	Dish and dish soap container (unmarked)	Dish stack, dish soap container, saucepan
Sponge (S_2):			
Cheese (K_1)	Sponge only	Wineglass	Wineglass, crackers
Applicator (K_2)	Sponge only	Shoe and unmarked polish tin	Shoe, shoe-polish tin, boot brush, and buffing cloth

NOTE.—The medium (A_2) and high (A_3) amount-of-context levels contain the object(s) listed plus the focal (low: A_1) object. Intended meaning identifications are given beside the kind-of-context level designator.

inherent polysemy of words. Many subjects in the dishpan condition, for example, labeled the object ("incorrectly") as "tub." Correct identification required a qualifier (e.g., "to wash dishes in"). Accordingly, the identification measure was modified for the main experiment (see below).

Subjects and Experimental Design

We conducted a laboratory experiment to examine the effects of external context on the meanings individuals assign to consumption objects and the labels that they use to identify those meanings. A $2 \times 2 \times 3$ mixed-factorial design was used. Stimulus object (tub or sponge) was a within-subjects factor. Between-subjects factors were a familiar ("dishpan" for the tub, "cheese" for the sponge) or unfamiliar ("babybath" and "applicator") kind of context (assessed by the labels that subjects used to identify their assigned meanings) and the amount of context (low, medium, and high). Thus, the experiment provided a set of focal stimuli that ranged from an ambiguous object (the sponge) presented in a context that was unfamiliar to subjects (as a shoe-polish applicator) to an apparent object (the tub) presented in a familiar way (as a dishpan). We used these stimuli to assess how varying amounts of contextual information affect meaning assignments.

Dependent Measures

Meaning Measure. Subjects' focal object-meaning perceptions were operationalized via the measure of consumption object meaning (MOCOM; Kleine and Kernan 1988). This procedure adduces the attribute and performance dimensions that individuals ascribe to an object and reveals the salience of those dimensions. Because MOCOM is built on individuals' word associations, it can render rich qualitative content and quantitative indices that are amenable to empirical tests. Although the sample size necessary for stable MOCOM indices is unknown, an n of 25 individuals seems adequate (Kleine and Kernan 1988).

Meaning Identification. The modified identification measure included two open-ended questions: "What is the object?" and "How do you think the object will be used?" In effect, subjects were asked to explicate the rule they used to label their meaning. We used responses to both questions to determine identification accuracy.

Procedure

The 198 (total) subjects were processed in 13 intact undergraduate classes. Each group responded to two stimuli (Exhibit 1), one from each object stimulus. Presentation order was alternated across groups to permit detection of exposure-order effects.[7]

Subjects were told that the study concerned object meaning. They received a packet containing directions and dependent measures. Subjects first read the directions and then produced continued associations for a test slide. The first experimental stimulus was then projected. The experimenter pointed to the focal object and stated, "This is the object." Subjects produced continued associations for the first 60 seconds of stimulus exposure. They then identified (labeled) the focal object and responded to some other measures. This sequence was repeated for the second stimulus. Subjects were then debriefed and thanked.

RESULTS

Tub Stimulus

Meaning Perceptions. Our initial hypothesis (Hypothesis 1) asserted that both the kind and amount of

[7]Because no exposure-order effects were observed in the data reported, we make no further mention of this feature of the experimental design.

external context influence the meaning that individuals ascribe to an object. Specifically, we predicted that context's effect would occur along subjects' performance-dimension perceptions (Hypothesis 1A) but not along their attribute-dimension perceptions (Hypothesis 1B).

To test these hypotheses, we operationalized meaning's attribute and performance dimensions via Kleine and Kernan's (1988) MOCOM procedure. In this procedure shared-meaning elements are characterized as indicants of meaning's attribute or performance dimensions, and the saliency of those dimensions is ascertained. We also modified Kleine and Kernan's original procedure to reveal the contextual appropriateness of subjects' perceptions along each meaning dimension.

Meaning indices were derived from continued-association data as follows. First, salience scores were assigned to each subject's continued-association meaning elements (see Szalay and Deese 1978): 6 was assigned to a subject's first association, 5 to the second, 4 to the third, 3 to the fourth through seventh associations, 2 to the eighth and ninth associations, and 1 to each subsequent association. The steps were then repeated for each cell of the experimental design. Common responses (associations produced by two or more subjects) were identified and retained for further analysis. Salience scores were summed across subjects for each common response. Two judges then coded each common response as an indicant of a meaning's attribute or performance dimension (a rarely used "other" category also was provided).[8] Intercoder agreement (71.25 percent) was lower than desired.[9] Disparities were settled through coder conferences. A meaning-dimension salience score was obtained by summing the salience scores of those common responses that were designated as manifestations of each attribute and performance meaning dimension (see Table 2).

A second pair of judges (who, unlike the initial ones, saw the contextualized stimuli) then determined the "contextual propriety" of subjects' object-meaning perceptions (e.g., whether the perceptions were cheese appropriate or applicator appropriate). They coded each common response according to these guidelines (for the sponge-stimulus data): "Enclosed are several word lists. Assign each word on each list to one of these four categories: a) The word could be used to describe, or be associated with, an off-white triangular piece of cheese. b) The word could be used to describe, or be associated with, an off-white triangular sponge for applying shoe polish. c) Both a and b. d) Neither a nor b." Intercoder agreement was 82 percent across the 334 judgments (both stimuli). Disparities were settled by selecting the more general code (e.g., if one judge coded "cheese appropriate" and the other "appropriate to both," the latter was chosen) or by coder conference. Salience scores were then summed within each category (e.g., cheese appropriate) and divided by the dimensional salience

TABLE 2

TUB STIMULUS (S_1): PERCENTAGE OF CONTEXTUALLY APPROPRIATE OBJECT-MEANING PERCEPTIONS

Kind of context and contextual appropriateness	Amount of context		
	Low	Medium	High
Babybath (K_1):			
Performance dimension:			
A (%)[a]	9.0	23.0	20.2
B (%)	7.5	.0	3.9
C (%)	70.6	74.2	76.0
D (%)	13.0	2.8	.0
Meaning dimension salience score	469	283	233
Attribute dimension:			
A (%)	.0	.0	.0
B (%)	.0	.0	.0
C (%)	100.0	100.0	100.0
D (%)	.0	.0	.0
Meaning dimension salience score	131	139	172
N	34	31	29
Dishpan (K_2):			
Performance dimension:			
A (%)	10.0	.0	.0
B (%)	6.7	11.8	15.4
C (%)	76.6	85.7	82.5
D (%)	6.7	2.4	2.1
Meaning dimension salience score	209	287	422
Attribute dimension:			
A (%)	.0	.0	.0
B (%)	.0	.0	.0
C (%)	100.0	100.0	100.0
D (%)	.0	.0	.0
Meaning dimension salience score	239	175	415
N	30	31	43

NOTE.—Meaning dimension salience scores are the bases on which the meaning perception contextual appropriateness percentages were computed. These scores are not directly interpretable unless standardized by dividing by cell size.

[a] A = Babybath-appropriate perception, B = dishpan-appropriate perception, C = perception appropriate to either babybath or dishpan, D = perception appropriate to neither babybath nor dishpan.

[8]Attribute and performance were operationalized for the coders as follows: attribute characterizes associations that describe physical characteristics of the stimulus object (e.g., size, color, shape, weight, and flavor) that is presented to the individual. Note that the common name for the object (e.g., "car" in response to an automobile) is not an attribute. Performance characterizes associations that describe functional characteristics of the stimulus object. Performance is conceptualized as associations that provide answers to the following questions (Kleine and Kernan 1988). "What does one do with the object? How does the object go about doing what it does? What does the object do for or to an individual who consumes it? Who uses or might use the object? In what circumstances or situations might one use or encounter the object? What other objects are likely to be encountered with or used with the object?" (Kleine and Kernan 1988).

[9]Coder debriefing revealed that their lack of awareness regarding the focal object's context (coders were shown only the focal object prior to coding the data) led to puzzlement over some responses that, when contextualized, they easily categorized.

score for that treatment condition (Table 2). Consider, for example, the upper left-hand entry in Table 2 (9.0). This entry indicates that, in the babybath condition's low-amount-of-context cell, 9.0 percent of the performance-dimension perceptions were appropriate to a babybath.

Hypothesis 1A proposes that subjects' perceptions of a focal object's performance dimension are influenced by both the kind and amount of context. For the tub stimulus, the contextual propriety of subjects' performance-dimension perceptions differed across the kind of context ($\chi^2(3) = 145.5, p < .001$; data were collapsed across amount of context). Subjects ascribed babybath-appropriate responses in the babybath condition and dishpan-appropriate responses in the dishpan condition (Table 2). The amount of context also influenced performance-dimension perceptions within both the babybath ($\chi^2(6) = 96.6, p < .01$) and the dishpan ($\chi^2(6) = 91.0, p < .01$) conditions. The largest shift in performance-dimension perceptions occurred between the low and medium amounts of context. Performance perceptions are relatively stable between medium and high amounts of context. Hypothesis 1A was supported by the tub stimulus.

Attribute-dimension perceptions, in contrast, did not differ across either the kind ($\chi^2(2) = .00$) or amount of context ($\chi^2(2) = .00$). Subjects' perceptions of the focal object's physical characteristics evidenced absolutely no sensitivity to external context variations. The tub stimulus thus supports Hypothesis 1B as well.

Meaning Identification. We proposed that the label (name) applied to a focal object's meaning would differ across both the amount (Hypothesis 2) and the kind (Hypothesis 3) of context and that subjects' ability to label their focal object's meaning as intended would vary across the kind of context (Hypothesis 4). To address these hypotheses, subjects' responses to the two questions "What is the object?" and "How do you think the object will be used?" were used jointly to code each identification as "kind 1 intended" (e.g., babybath), "kind 2 intended" (e.g., dishpan), or "other." The intended identifications (Exhibit 1) were the two coders' criteria. They agreed on 97.1 percent of the 396 judgments (for both object stimuli).

Effects for the amount of context are evident in the babybath condition ($\chi^2(4) = 32.8, p < .001$; Fig. 2*A*). The proportion of intended identifications increases monotonically from low (8.8 percent) to medium (58.1 percent; $z = 4.24, p < .001$) to high (72.4 percent; $z = 1.16, p < .12$) context. The dishpan condition also evidences an amount-of-context effect ($\chi^2(2) = 30.2, p < .001$; Fig. 2*B*). The proportion of intended identifications increases between low (26.7 percent) and medium (87.1 percent; $z = 4.76, p < .001$) contexts before plateauing at high context (79.1 percent). Hypothesis 2 seems to be supported, although the anticipated monotonic increase occurred only in the babybath condition.

The labels that tub-stimulus subjects assigned differed across the kind of context. The "babybath" label occurred more often in the babybath condition and "dishpan" occurred more often in the dishpan condition ($\chi^2(2) = 91.1, p < .001$; see Fig. 2*A, B*). Thus, Hypothesis 3 is supported.

Finally, Hypothesis 4 predicts that subjects' ability to label a focal object as intended by its displayer varies by context familiarity, that is, the extent to which subjects rely on their psychological context. Subjects in the dishpan condition labeled the focal object as intended more readily than did subjects in the less familiar babybath condition ($\chi^2(2) = 91.1, p < .001$; cf. Fig. 2*A, B*). Hypothesis 4 is thus supported.

Sponge Stimulus

Meaning Perceptions. The sponge-stimulus data (Table 3) offer clear evidence that subjects' focal-object performance-dimension perceptions differed across the kind of context ($\chi^2(3) = 452.5, p < .001$). Subjects generally perceived that the focal object performed cheese-appropriate functions within the cheese condition and applicator-appropriate functions within the applicator condition. The amount of context influenced the contextual propriety of subjects' performance-dimension perceptions in both the cheese ($\chi^2(2) = 16.9, p < .001$; the "applicator," "both," and "neither" categories were collapsed) and the applicator ($\chi^2(6) = 718.7, p < .001$) conditions. The low-context conditions reveal that individuals' performance-dimension perceptions were largely appropriate to cheese (88.5 and 100.0 for the cheese and applicator conditions, respectively). The applicator condition evidences no cheese-appropriate performance perceptions at medium- or high-context levels.

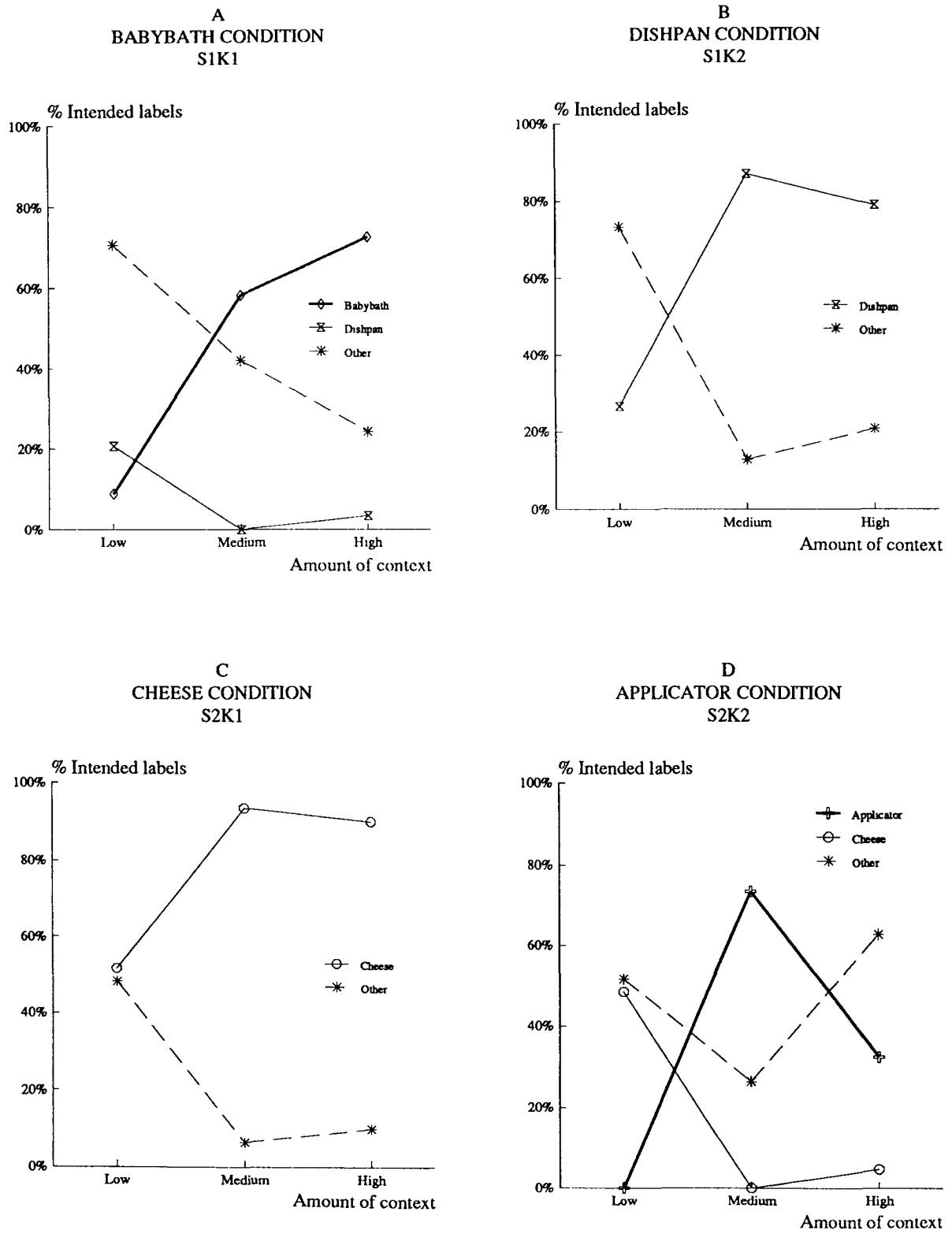
The applicator's high-context condition, however, is anomalous: the proportion of performance perceptions appropriate to applicators drops significantly (from 94.8 to 15.0; $z = -14.35, p < .001$). This occurs despite increased external context. Performance perceptions appear to be dominated by uses appropriate to an applicator or a piece of cheese (e.g., helpful, inexpensive). Unclassifiable perceptions (category D) also increased significantly. Subjects appear to have had difficulty in perceiving the object's functional characteristics, despite the additional external context. In summary, subjects' perceptions of the focal object's functional characteristics were influenced by both the kind and amount of external context. Hypothesis 1A is supported.

In contrast to the tub stimulus, the sponge's attribute-dimension data reveal effects for both the kind ($\chi^2(3) = 150.3, p < .001$) and amount of context (for cheese, $\chi^2(2) = 18.6$; for the applicator, $\chi^2(6) = 233.9, p < .001$). The external context influenced subjects' attribute-dimension perceptions, and thus Hypothesis 1B is not supported by the sponge-stimulus data.

The applicator condition's high-context level is again of note. Relative to the medium condition, the focal

FIGURE 2

MEANING IDENTIFICATION RESULTS BY KIND OF CONTEXT



NOTE —In the dishpan condition, *B*, no subjects labeled the focal object as a babybath. In the cheese condition, *C*, no subjects labeled the focal object as an applicator.

TABLE 3

SPONGE STIMULUS (S_2): PERCENTAGE OF CONTEXTUALLY APPROPRIATE OBJECT-MEANING PERCEPTIONS

Kind of context and contextual appropriateness	Amount of context		
	Low	Medium	High
Cheese (K_1):			
Performance dimension:			
A (%)[a]	88.5	100.0	91.6
B (%)	11.5	.0	.0
C (%)	.0	.0	8.4
D (%)	.0	.0	.0
Meaning dimension salience score	52	166	154
Attribute dimension:			
A (%)	23.3	10.1	11.4
B (%)	.0	.0	.0
C (%)	76.7	89.9	88.6
D (%)	.0	.0	.0
Meaning dimension salience score	253	189	210
N	28	31	30
Applicator (K_2):			
Performance dimension:			
A (%)	100.0	.0	.0
B (%)	.0	94.8	15.0
C (%)	.0	2.4	75.0
D (%)	.0	2.8	10.0
Meaning dimension salience score	92	288	60
Attribute dimension:			
A (%)	.0	.0	18.1
B (%)	3.1	26.1	4.8
C (%)	91.1	73.9	63.7
D (%)	5.8	.0	13.4
Meaning dimension salience score	257	238	473
N	31	34	43

NOTE.—Meaning dimension salience scores are the bases on which the meaning perception contextual appropriateness percentages were computed. These scores are not directly interpretable unless standardized by dividing by cell size.

[a] A = Cheese-appropriate perception, B = applicator-appropriate perception, C = perception appropriate to either cheese or applicator, D = perception appropriate to neither cheese nor applicator.

object was perceived to have more cheese-appropriate (18.1 vs. 0.0), fewer applicator-appropriate (4.8 vs. 26.1), and more uncodable (13.4 vs. 0.0) attribute traits. Subjects seem to have had difficulty in discerning the object's physical properties. It is interesting that applicator-appropriate attribute and performance qualities were ascribed to the sponge. So, too, were cheese appropriate physical characteristics. There were no corresponding cheese-appropriate performance perceptions, however. Thus, cheeselike appearance does not imply cheeselike functions. This supports the view that attributes and performance are independent dimensions of meaning.

Meaning Identification. Subjects' label usage was influenced by the amount of external context but not in the pattern predicted by Hypothesis 2. In the cheese condition ($\chi^2(2) = 19.1$, $p < .001$; see Fig. 2*C*), more subjects used the label "cheese" at medium (93.5 percent) and high (90.0 percent) levels of context than at low context (51.7 percent; $z = 3.25$ and $z = 3.66$, respectively; $p < .05$). Label usage also differed across the amount of context within the applicator condition ($\chi^2(4) = 59.5$, $p < .001$; Fig. 2*D*). The proportion of intended labelings increased between the low (0.0 percent) and medium levels of context (73.5 percent; $z = 6.08$, $p < .001$). It then decreased between medium (73.5 percent) and high context (32.6 percent; $z = -3.57$, $p < .001$). This decline, despite increased external context, parallels that observed in the meaning data (see Table 3).

The sponge-stimulus data support Hypothesis 3. Subjects in the cheese condition labeled their meaning as "cheese" whereas subjects in the applicator condition were more likely to label their meaning as "applicator" ($\chi^2(2) = 87.4$, $p < .001$; see Fig. 2*C, D*).

Finally, sponge-stimulus subjects' ability to label the focal object as intended by its displayer differed by context familiarity ($\chi^2(2) = 86.6$, $p < .001$; data collapsed across amount of context). Subjects in the cheese condition labeled the focal object as intended more readily than did subjects in the less familiar applicator condition (cf. Fig. 2*C, D*). Hypothesis 4 is thus supported.

DISCUSSION

We hypothesized that the meaning people ascribe to a consumption object is influenced by both its kind and amount of external context. We further predicted that such induced variability in meaning occurs along a performance dimension (what the object "is for") rather than along an attribute dimension (what the object "is"). The tub-stimulus data support these predictions. The sponge-stimulus data, in contrast, display contextual variability along both meaning dimensions. Thus, we obtained consistent evidence that external context influences individuals' perceptions of what an object is for (the performance dimension), but we also discovered that it can, but does not always, influence individuals' perceptions of what the object is (the attribute dimension). Finally, the most substantial shift in individuals' object-meaning perceptions occurred between the low and medium amounts of context. Perceptions generally stabilized between the medium and high levels, although the applicator condition was a notable exception.

We argued that identification entails applying a label to a meaning. This implies that individuals should label dissimilar meanings differently, and our results support this. The meaning data evidenced a consistent shift across the kind of context. We also observed dependable shifts toward the intended meaning between low and medium amounts of context. With the exception of the applicator condition, subjects' meaning perceptions exhibited less shift between medium and high contexts.

The labeling data mirror this pattern. The proportion of intended identifications consistently increased between low and medium contexts and then plateaued between the medium and high contexts in which we also observed a decrease in subjects' tendency to apply labels other than the experimenter-intended ones. Also, the meaning and labeling data performed as expected in the applicator, high-context condition. The decline in applicator-appropriate meaning perceptions is accompanied by fewer experimenter-intended identifications. This identification failure likely resulted from subjects' degraded meaning perceptions, which afforded them insufficient data for applying labeling rules. These identification data are consistent with our contention that words are labels that people apply to their meaning perceptions.

In sum, this study, which is subject to all the caveats normally applied to experimental research using student subjects, has demonstrated how context can influence individuals' object-meaning perceptions. The stimuli were presented in the form of photographic slides, and subjects' perceptions were limited to the sense of sight, yet we demonstrated that individuals can perceive an ordinary consumption object to mean two very different things, depending on how it is presented contextually. In the case of the sponge, for example, individuals perceived this simple object to be either something to eat or to use for applying shoe polish. Our COMAP procedure explicated both the kind and amount of external context, and, given our experimental results, we are encouraged with regard to the model's validity as a way of conceptualizing and measuring meaning ascription.

The provocative assertion of McCracken (1989) with which we began this article is likely to engender initial thoughts of product associations—how, through advertising, a product can be made to relate to some aspect of the cultural mileau. The contextual "power" of advertising thus seems centered on its ability to change the so-called connotative meaning of products. We have no doubt that this is accurate but, on the basis of our experimental results, we think it is also clear that so-called denotative meaning is subject to such variability. Our results indicate that, by varying the context within which an object is displayed, it is possible to change perceptions not only of the object's uses and affiliations (as one would expect) but also of its identity (the semantic category to which it belongs). The latter strikes us both as a remarkable finding and a very powerful test of McCracken's hypothesis. Indeed, to the extent that our stimulus presentations resemble print ads, his proposition that through advertising "virtually any product can take virtually any meaning" certainly seems supported.[10] Finally, we are intrigued by how little contextual variation is necessary to influence people's meaning perceptions. In part, of course, this is a function of the focal object's familiarity to perceivers, but, at a minimum, it suggests that meaning ascription is neither a top-down nor a bottom-up but rather a "middle-out" process (Kinchla and Wolfe 1979).

[*Received August 1989. Revised May 1990.*]

REFERENCES

Abelson, Robert P. (1976), "Script Processing in Attitude Formation and Decision Making," in *Cognition and Social Behavior,* ed. J. Carroll and T. Payne, Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 33–45.

Antes, James R., James G. Penland, and Richard L. Metzger (1981), "Processing Global Information in Briefly Presented Pictures," *Psychological Research,* 43 (November), 277–292.

Armstrong, Sharon Lee, Lila R. Gleitman, and Henry Gleitman (1983), "What Some Concepts Might Not Be," *Cognition,* 13 (May), 263–308.

Barsalou, Lawrence W. (1982), "Context-independent and Context-dependent Information in Concepts," *Memory and Cognition,* 10 (January), 82–93.

Belk, Russell W. (1975), "An Exploratory Assessment of Situational Effects in Buyer Behavior," *Journal of Marketing Research,* 11 (May), 156–163.

——— (1988), "Possessions and the Extended Self," *Journal of Consumer Research,* 15 (September), 139–168.

———, Kenneth D. Bahn, and Robert N. Mayer (1982), "Developmental Recognition of Consumption Symbolism," *Journal of Consumer Research,* 9 (June), 4–17.

Boyce, Susan J., Alexander Pollatsek, and Keith Rayner (1989), "Effect of Background Information on Object Identification," *Journal of Experimental Psychology,* 15 (3), 556–566.

Bransford, John D. and Nancy S. McCarrell (1974), "A Sketch of a Cognitive Approach to Comprehension: Some Thoughts about Understanding What It Means to Comprehend," in *Cognition and the Symbolic Process,* ed.

[10]Wells's (1987) notion of contextual variation among the world's cultures suggests a practical limit to this process, however. Inasmuch as people in low-context cultures (e.g., Western Europe and North America) tend to perceive objects alone (largely in the absence of their surroundings), adding context is not likely to facilitate interpretation significantly; low-context consumers would remain literal minded and focused. In high-context cultures (e.g., Asia and South America), on the other hand, the opposite is likely to occur (cf. our results, however). We should note one other point, at the suggestion of a reviewer, concerning the external validity of our study. We acknowledge that our student subjects probably did not regard their experimental task as one of decoding messages (as would be the focus in advertising research). Nevertheless, the process of meaning ascription works essentially the same way, whether one is confronted with real-life advertising or an experimental presentation. In the intentional view of meaning ascription (Clark 1978; Grice 1975), a displayer's or source's intentions are either known or inferred by the perceiver, who strives to interpret them. This notion also is a tenant of both semiotics (Sless 1986) and symbolic interactionism (Solomon 1983). Thus, it matters little whether the source is a palpable one or the cultural mileau—which is the point McCracken (1989) makes so forcefully. Although our experimental subjects may not have been consciously aware that they were decoding messages, such nonsensitivity does not seem critical with regard to external validity because, if for no other reason, it occurs regularly in daily life (cf. the "couch potato" and low-involvement television).

Walter B. Weimer and David S. Palermo, Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 189–229.
Bruner, Jerome S., Jacqueline J. Goodnow, and George A. Austin (1956), *A Study of Thinking,* New York: Wiley.
Clark, Herbert H. (1978), "Inferring What Is Meant," in *Studies in the Perception of Language,* ed. W. J. M. Levelt and G. B. Flores D'Arcais, New York: Wiley, 295–322.
——— and Thomas B. Carlson (1981), "Context for Comprehension," in *Attention and Performance,* Vol. 9, ed. J. Long and A. Baddeley, Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 313–330.
———, Robert Schreuder, and Samuel Buttrick (1983), "Common Ground and the Understanding of Demonstrative Reference," *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior,* 22 (April), 245–258.
Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly and Eugene Rochberg-Halton (1981), *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self,* New York: Cambridge University Press.
Friedmann, Roberto (1986), "Psychological Meaning of Products: Identification and Marketing Applications," *Psychology and Marketing,* 3 (Spring), 1–16.
Golden, Linda L., Mark I. Alpert, and John F. Betak (1989), "Psychological Meaning: Empirical Directions for Identification and Strategy Development," *Psychology and Marketing,* 6 (Spring), 33–50.
Grice, H. P. (1975), "Logic and Conversation," in *The Logic of Grammar,* ed. K. Davidson and G. Harman, Encino, CA: Dickenson, 64–75.
Holbrook, Morris B. (1986), "Aims, Concepts, and Methods for the Representation of Individual Differences in Esthetic Responses to Design Features," *Journal of Consumer Research,* 13 (December), 337–347.
Holman, Rebecca H. (1980), "Clothing as Communication: An Empirical Investigation," in *Advances in Consumer Research,* Vol. 7, ed. Jerry C. Olson, Ann Arbor, MI: Association for Consumer Research, 372–377.
Howard, John A. (1977), *Consumer Behavior: Application of Theory,* New York: McGraw-Hill.
Jolicoeur, Pierre, Mark A. Gluck, and Stephen M. Kosslyn (1984), "Pictures and Names: Making the Connection," *Cognitive Psychology,* 16 (April), 243–275.
Katz, J. J. and P. Postal (1964), *An Integrated Theory of Linguistic Descriptions,* Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press.
Kernan, Jerome B. and Montrose S. Sommers (1967), "Meaning, Value and the Theory of Promotion," *Journal of Communication,* 17 (June), 109–135.
Kinchla, R. A. and J. M. Wolfe (1979), "The Order of Visual Processing: 'Top-Down,' 'Bottom-Up,' or 'Middle-Out,' " *Perception and Psychophysics,* 25 (2), 225–231.
Kleine, Robert E., III and Jerome B. Kernan (1988), "Measuring the Meaning of Consumption Objects: An Empirical Investigation," in *Advances in Consumer Research,* Vol. 15, ed. Michael J. Houston, Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research, 498–504.
Labov, William (1972), "The Boundaries of Words and Their Meanings," in *New Ways of Analyzing Variation in English,* ed. Charles-James N. Bailey and Roger W. Shuy, Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 340–373.
Lakoff, George (1987), *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Levy, Sidney J. (1959), "Symbols for Sale," *Harvard Business Review,* 37 (July–August), 117–124.
McCracken, Grant (1988), *Culture and Consumption,* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
——— (1989), "Who is the Celebrity Endorser? Cultural Foundations of the Endorsement Process," *Journal of Consumer Research,* 16 (December), 310–321.
McNamara, Timothy P. and Diana L. Miller (1989), "Attributes of Theories of Meaning," *Psychological Bulletin,* 106 (3), 355–376.
Miller, George A. (1977), "Practical and Lexical Knowledge," in *Thinking: Readings in Cognitive Science,* ed. P. N. Johnson-Laird and P. C. Wason, New York: Cambridge University Press, 400–410.
——— and Philip N. Johnson-Laird (1976), *Language and Perception,* Cambridge, MA: Belknap, Harvard University Press.
Minsky, Marvin (1977), "Frame System Theory," in *Thinking: Readings in Cognitive Science,* ed. P. N. Johnson-Laird and P. C. Wason, New York: Cambridge University Press, 355–376.
Ogden, C. K. and I. A. Richards (1953), *The Meaning of Meaning,* New York: Harcourt, Brace.
Olson, D. R. (1970), "Language and Thought: Aspects of a Cognitive Theory of Semantics," *Psychological Review,* 77 (July), 257–273.
Olson, Jerry C. (1986), "Meaning Analysis in Advertising Research," in *Advertising and Consumer Psychology,* ed. Jerry C. Olson and Keith Sentis, New York: Praeger, 275–283.
Rosch, Eleanor, Carolyn B. Mervis, Wayne Gray, David Johnson, and Penny Boyes-Braem (1976), "Basic Objects in Natural Categories," *Cognitive Psychology,* 8 (July), 382–439.
Rotter, Julian B. (1955), "The Role of the Psychological Situation in Determining the Direction of Human Behavior," in *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation,* ed. Marshall R. Jones, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 245–268.
Sless, David (1986), *In Search of Semiotics,* London: Croom Helm.
Solomon, Michael R. (1983), "The Role of Products as Social Stimuli: A Symbolic Interaction Perspective," *Journal of Consumer Research,* 10 (December), 319–329.
——— and Henry Assael (1987), "The Forest or the Trees? A Gestalt Approach to Symbolic Consumption," in *Marketing and Semiotics: New Directions in the Study of Signs for Sale,* ed. Jean Umiker-Sebeok, New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 189–217.
Szalay, Lorand B. and James Deese (1978), *Subjective Meaning and Culture: An Assessment through Word Associations,* Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
Warner, W. Lloyd (1959), *The Living and the Dead: A Study of the Symbolic Life of Americans,* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
Wells, William D. (1987), "Global Advertisers Should Pay Heed to Contextual Variations," *Marketing News,* 21 (February), 18.