Display repetitions do not improve search efficiency in parallel search tasks

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TODO:

* CITE
* Fill in XXX
* Effect sizes
* Figure and table captions
* Better figures (?)

**Introduction**

Contextual cueing is a phenomenon in visual search tasks whereby response times are faster in displays where contextual information is repeated compared to novel displays. As the name suggests, there are two elements in contextual cueing. *Context* refers to information that co-occurs with the target, such as the spatial layout (CITE), identity (CITE), or motion trajectory (CITE) of the stimuli in the search display. *Cueing* refers to the guidance of attention. Contextual cueing thus refers to situations in which attention is guided by the contextual information that has been learned (CITE). Most often, the context is the spatial layout of the stimuli in the search display (e.g. CITE). In these experiments, half of the search displays are repeated (i.e. the spatial layout of the search stimuli remains identical throughout the experiment), while the other half would be novel (i.e. the spatial layout is randomly generated each time). Response times to repeated displays are faster than to novel displays, suggesting that observers learn the context, which allows their attention to rapidly move to the target location.

Selective attention is thought to be necessary for the development of contextual cueing (Jiang & Chun, 2001 CITE). In a series of experiments, observers were tasked to search for a target with a pre-defined color among distractors of the same color (“candidates”) or a very different color (“lures”)[[1]](#footnote-1). When the spatial layout of the candidates was repeated and that of the lures was random, contextual cueing was observed even though only half the context was repeated. Furthermore, in the reverse scenario when the spatial layout of the candidates was random, evidence for contextual cueing was mixed. Specifically, in one experiment (Experiment 2), they found no contextual cueing by the repeated lure configuration, whereas in Experiment 3, they found a small effect. Finally, in Experiment 4 when the search was made harder, repeating the lure context once again failed to produce a contextual cueing effect. Note that there is some evidence that contextual cueing is observed in lure-only displays (e.g. Kunar, Flusberg, Horowitz, & Wolfe, 2007 CITE; Remington??, Muller CITE); the evidence is thus mixed. Chun and Jiang (CITE 2003 book) thus argued that contextual cueing is dependent on selective attention. Importantly, the authors argued that the attentional process in these tasks with both candidates and lures is markedly different from the standard contextual cueing paradigm where all distractors are candidates. They argued that in candidate-only displays, candidates are first attended to by selective attention before being rejected (e.g. Duncan & Humphreys, 1989; Treisman & Sato, 1990; Book CITE). On the other hand, in mixed displays, lures are first filtered by a preattentive process (e.g. Palmer, 1995) since they differ from the target on at least one salient feature (CITE Book). Selective attention then evaluates and rejects the candidates. This process of selection and rejection, which does not take place for lures, is proposed to be the locus of the contextual cueing effect.

However, there is recent evidence that the rejection of lures is not a preattentive process of filtering, but instead an active process of rejection (CITE). The Target Contrast Signal Theory emphasizes how parallel, peripheral processing aids search. Processing of a scene begins with a parallel accumulation of evidence at all locations across the display. This evidence is a contrast signal between each location and the target template, and evidence is accumulated toward a ‘non-target’ threshold. Locations that reach this threshold are rejected in parallel; these items will not be selected by attention for further processing. The evidence accumulation process is stochastic, and results in a logarithmic increase in response times as a function of set size (CITE Buetti and Townsend etc.). Note that this is in contrast to a preattentive filtering process as suggested by Jiang and Chun (CITE, Palmer 1995), which is associated with no meaningful increase in response times as a function of set size (CITE). Focused attention (and/or an eye movement) is directed towards locations that have not reached the non-target threshold after a certain period of time has passed without any accumulators reaching threshold. In sum, according to Target Contrast Signal Theory, lures do not get filtered out en masse by a preattentive process (e.g. CITE). Rather, all items in a search display, including lures, are processed in parallel, producing significant and systematic processing costs.

The goal of the present study is to re-examine the role of lure-context repetition on contextual cueing, given the somewhat mixed results in Jiang and Chun’s (2001) study, as well as the conflicting evidence from other studies (e.g. CITE). One difficulty in their design arises from the fact that when lure-context was repeated, displays also contained candidates whose locations were not repeating. Thus, the entire display context was varying from block to block. Further, because candidates attract focused attention (and lures do not), varying the locations of the candidates might overwhelm whatever guiding influence the lure-context might be exerting on attention. This might explain why in their Experiment 3, Jiang and Chun found the greatest contextual cueing effect in a condition where *both* candidate- and lure-context repeated. Another difficulty of the design was the use of lures that were letter-like (Ls). While it is tempting to say that Ls of a non-target color are unattended, there is strong evidence that letters are compulsory stimuli (REFE), and as such, focused attention to these stimuli might be stronger than to lures that are not letters. Furthermore, no direct evidence was provided that the lures were unattended and in fact, by their shape, the letter lures were very similar to the candidates and the target. Finally, Jiang and Chun’s result that lure-repetition did not impact contextual cueing in their Experiment 4 when the search was hard is not conclusive because such a null result is consistent with the idea that the region of the display that is processed in parallel is reduced to a small region around fixation (Hulleman & Olivers, 2017; Lleras et al., submitted). In sum, it is difficult to make strong conclusions at this point regarding the possible contribution of repeating lure-contexts to reaction time.

**Experiment 1**

The goal of this experiment was to identify what is a small number of candidates that, when repeated, can produce reliable contextual cueing effects. This is necessary because when lures are introduced into the displays in subsequent experiments, the set size of lures will be varied across a wide range. The manipulation of lure set size across a wide range of values is necessary to observe the logarithmic increase in RT as a function of set size that indexes parallel evidence accumulation processes (see Buetti et al., 2016 for details CITE).

**Methods**

**Participants**

All participants were recruited from the subject pool from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Participants were given course credit for taking part in the experiment. All participants were tested with the Ishihara color plates (CITE) and determined to be non-colorblind. All participants also had normal or corrected-to-normal vision. We aimed to collect 20 participants per experiment.

**Stimuli and apparatus**

The target was a red letter T that was rotated 90 degrees either clockwise or anti-clockwise. Participants had to respond to the target orientation. The distractor stimuli were red letter ‘L’s rotated either 0, 90, 190, or 270 degrees clockwise. The experiment was programmed and ran in MATLAB using the Psychophysics Toolbox (CITE).

In each search display, the stimuli were distributed across a 6-by-6 grid. This grid subtended xxx degrees of visual angle horizontally and xxx degrees vertically. There was a total of 12 displays (six for set size 4 and six for set size 8) that were repeated throughout the entire experiment. Each of these 12 repeated displays had unique target locations. A separate set of 12 target locations, which did not overlap with those in the repeated displays, was randomly selected and served as the target locations for the novel displays. This was done to equate target location probability between the repeated and novel displays. The novel displays were never repeated and were checked against the repeated displays to ensure that there were also no repeats. All stimuli were presented against a 1024 x 768 pixel black background on a 22-inch (400mm x 300mm) cathode ray tube monitor with a refresh rate of 85Hz. Participants viewed the display, unrestrained, from a distance of approximately 59cm.

**Design and procedure**

There were two within-subject independent variables: display type (repeat or novel) and set size (4 or 8). Participants viewed 25 blocks of 24 trials each, for a total of 600 trials. In each block, half the trials were repeated while the other half was novel. Within the repeated and novel trials, half were set size 4 while the other were set size 8. There was thus a total of 4 cells, with 150 trials in each cell. Trial order was randomized.

Before the start of the experiment, participants were presented with the following instructions:

*The best strategy for this task, and the one that we want you to use in this study, is to be as receptive as possible and let the unique item "pop" into your mind as you look at the screen. The idea is to let the display and your intuition determine your response. Sometimes people find it difficult or strange to tune into their “gut feelings”, but we would like you to try your best. Try to respond as quickly and accurately as you can while using this strategy. Remember, it is very critical for this experiment that you let the unique item just ‘pop’ into your mind.*

These instructions were obtained from CITE. Passive search has been shown to increase the magnitude of contextual cueing.

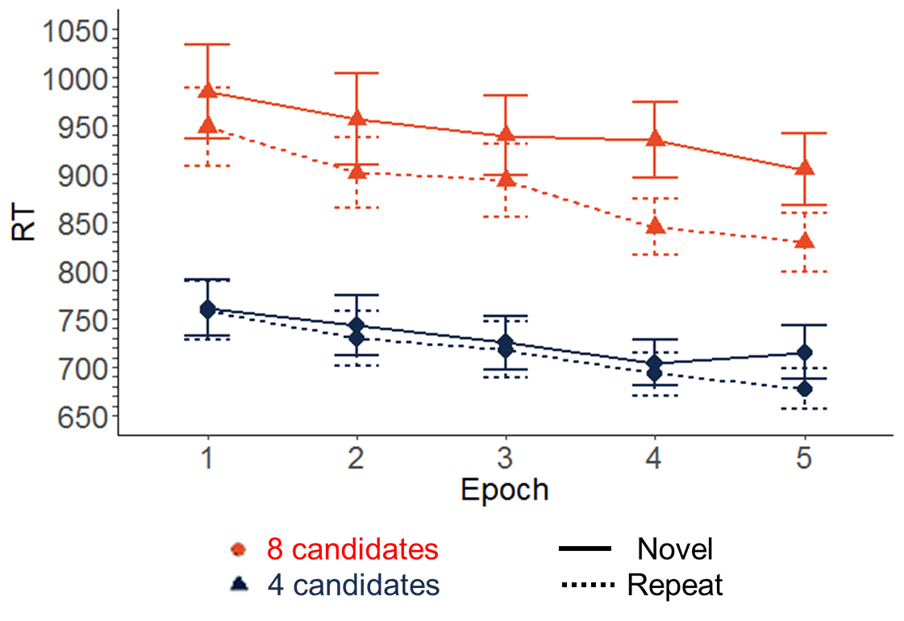
The experiment began with a block of six practice trials to familiarize the participant with the experiment and to emphasize the passive instructions. Recording of experimental data began after the practice block after the participant acknowledged that they were ready to begin by pressing the left or right arrow key. Each trial began with a fixation cross that lasted 1000ms, after which the search display appeared. Participants had 5 seconds to respond to the identity of the target by pressing the left arrow when the T was rotated to the left (90 degrees anti-clockwise), or the right arrow when the T was rotated to the right (90 degrees clockwise). A loud beep was provided when an incorrect response was made or when no response was made after 5 seconds; no feedback was provided for correct responses. Each trial terminated when a response was made, or when 5 seconds passed without any response. A blank screen was then presented for 1 second before the next trial.

At the end of the experiment, participants were presented with two questions. They were first asked: “Some of the trials had the same arrangement of objects in the display. Did you notice?”. Participants responded either “yes” or “no”. After which, the next question was presented: “'What proportion of trials do you think had repeated spatial arrangements?”. Participants responded by entering a number between 0 and 100 on the keyboard.

**Results**

Analyses for all experiments were conducted in R (CITE). For each participant, response times (RTs) beyond 2.5 standard deviations of each condition were excluded from analyses. Trials on which participants made an error were also excluded. This led to the removal of 4.4% of trials. No participants had to be replaced in this experiment (all participants had mean RTs within 2.5 standard deviations of the group mean).

To increase the signal-to-noise ratio, the data was split into 5 epochs of 5 blocks each, with a total of 30 trials per cell per epoch (e.g. CITE). A 2 (display type) by 2 (set size) by 5 (epoch) repeated measures ANOVA on RT was performed. RTs were slower for novel (*M* = 837ms, *SD* = 192ms) compared to repeated (*M* = 799ms, *SD* = 164ms) displays, *F*(1, 19) = 5.09, *p* = .0361, ωp² = xxx. RTs were faster with four (*M* = 723ms, *SD* = 121ms) compared to eight (*M* = 914ms, *SD* = 178ms) candidates, *F*(1, 19) = 126.81, *p* <.001, ωp² = xxx. Lastly, RTs decreased as a function of epoch (from epoch 1 to 5: *M* = 863, 832, 819, 794, 782 ms, *SD* = 197, 188, 180, 164, 158 ms), *F*(4, 76) = 10.48, *pc* = .0033, ε = 0.472, ωp² = xxx. Three interactions were marginally significant, suggesting that the design could be under-powered to detect these more subtle effects: display by epoch, *F*(4, 76) = 2.38, *p* = .0593, ωp² = xxx; set size by display, *F*(1, 19) = 3.47, *p* = .0779, ωp² = xxx; and the three-way interaction between set size, display, and epoch, *F*(4, 76) = 0.55, *p* = .0702, ωp² = xxx. The interaction of set size by epoch was not significant, *F*(4, 76) = 1.66, *p* = .169, ωp² = xxx;



*Figure 1.* Response times for novel displays (solid lines) were significantly longer than for repeated displays (dashed lines), for both set size 8 (orange circles) and set size 4 (black triangles). The average magnitude of the contextual cueing effect was larger in set size 8 (61ms) compared to set size 4 (15ms).

25% of the participants responded “yes” when they were asked whether they noticed that some displays were repeated throughout the search experiment. On average, these participants indicated that they thought that 32.4% of the displays were repeated.

**Experiment 2**

The goal of Experiment 2 was to examine the effect of lure-context repetition on contextual cueing. Experiment 1 showed that while the contextual cueing effect was observed both with 4 and 8 candidates, the effect was greater with 8 candidates (61ms on average) compared to 4 candidates (15ms on average). Thus, in this experiment we used 8 candidates on every display, while varying the number of lures. In contrast to Jiang and Chun (2001 CITE), the lure stimuli we used were simple geometric shapes (orange diamonds) that were neither letter-like nor similar in shape to the candidates. Buetti et al. (2016) showed that these lures are rejected in parallel when searching for a T target amongst L candidates (in novel displays). Importantly, in old displays, both candidate and lure stimuli were repeated. If lures are processed in parallel in repeated displays, as proposed by the Target Contrast Signal Theory, response times should increase logarithmically as a function of lure set size (CITE). In contrast, if lures are filtered out by a preattentive process, then there should be no effect of lure set size on response times (e.g. CITE).

From the perspective of the Target Contrast Signal Theory, it is unclear what the fate of lures that are rejected in parallel is with regard to contextual cueing. On the one hand, since they undergo an active process of evidence accumulation, their locations might be implicitly learned and form part of the spatial context that determines contextual cueing. If this is the case, searching through repeated contexts should be faster (more efficient) than searching through novel displays, and thus search should be more efficient in repeated displays (leading to smaller search slopes). That is to say that contextual cueing would be determined by the entire list of locations where evidence initially accumulated. On the other hand, since lures are discarded prior to attentional scrutiny of individual items, it is also possible that they will not contribute to contextual cueing. That is to say that what determines the “context” in contextual cueing might be the list of candidate locations only (where accumulators did not reach the non-target threshold).

**Method**

Twenty participants were recruited from the same subject pool as Experiment 1. These participants did not take part in any of the other experiments in this paper. All methods are identical to Experiment 1, except for the following changes: in addition to the candidate Ls, there were symmetric orange diamonds (lures). Each display always contained 8 candidates. There were 4 different lure set sizes: 0, 5, 10, 20. As such, there were 3 repeated displays per set size and a total of 12 repeated displays throughout the entire experiment. In the repeated displays, both lures and candidates, as well as the target, was always in the same location.

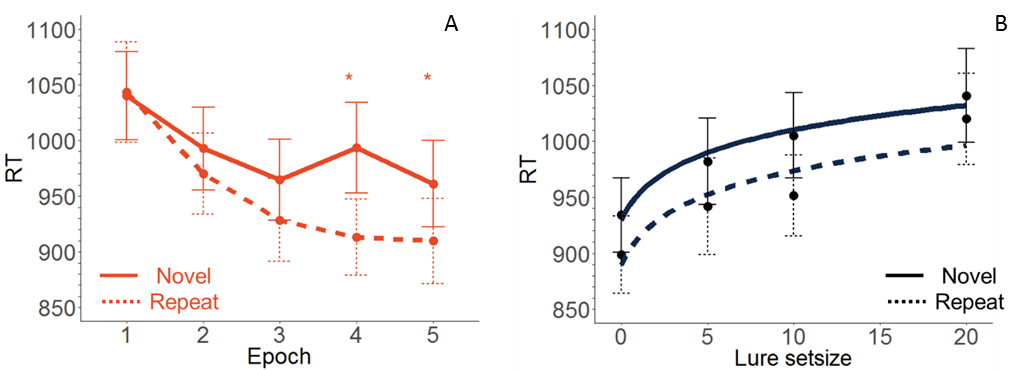
**Results**

For each participant, response times beyond 2.5 standard deviations of each condition were excluded from analyses. Trials on which participants made an error were also excluded. This led to the removal of 3.4% of trials. No participants had to be replaced in this experiment (all participants had mean RTs within 2.5 standard deviations of the group mean).

A 2 (display type) by 4 (lure set size) by 5 (epoch) fully within ANOVA was performed. RTs for novel (*M* = 990ms, *SD =* 174ms) displays were slower than repeated (*M* = 953ms, *SD* = 178ms) displays, *F*(1, 19) = 4.64, *p* = .0443, ωp² = xxx . RTs increased with lure set size (set size 0, 5, 10, 20, respectively: *M* = 916, 962, 978, 1030 ms, *SD* = 152, 183, 167, 185 ms), *F*(3, 57) = 9.68, *p* <.001, ωp² = xxx, RTs decreased as a function of epoch (from epoch 1 to 5: *M* = 1042, 981, 947, 953, 935 ms, *SD =* 189, 164, 165, 172, 174 ms), *F*(4, 76) = 12.17, *pc* < .001, ωp² = xxx, ωp² = xxx. The main effects were qualified by a significant display type by epoch interaction, *F*(4, 76) = 6.80, *p* < .001, ωp² = xxx. Follow-up t-tests revealed that RTs for repeated displays were faster than for novel displays only in the last two epochs (Table 1), after adjusting the p-value to .01 (= .05/5, Bonferroni correction). The interactions between set size and display and between set size and epoch were not significant, *F*(3, 57) = 0.24, *p* = .868, ωp² = xxx; and, *F*(12, 228) = 1.12, *p* = .341, ωp² = xxx, respectively. Importantly, the three-way interaction between display type, set size and epoch was not significant, *F*(12, 228) = 1.34, *p* = .198, ωp² = xxx.

*Table 1.* XXXXX. Asterisks indicate statistical significance at p < .01 (after Bonferroni correction).

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Epoch | *t*(79) | *P* | *M* (SD) | Effect size |
| 1 | -0.16 | .877 | - 3 (191) |  |
| 2 | 1.42 | .161 | 23 (142) |  |
| 3 | 2.01 | .0482 | 36 (162) |  |
| 4 | 4.65 | <.001 \* | 80 (154) |  |
| 5 | 2.88 | .00507 \* | 51 (160) |  |



*Figure 2. (A)* Response times for novel displays (solid lines) were significantly longer than for repeated displays (dashed lines) in Epochs 4 and 5. *(B)* There was no significant difference in logarithmic slopes between novel (solid lines) and repeated (dashed lines) displays, indicating that there was no difference in search efficiency.

To follow up on the absence of a significant effect in the three-way interaction, we used a Bayes factor approach. To better characterize search efficiency, we fitted each subject’s data with a logarithmic function. To determine whether the logarithmic RT by set size slopes were meaningfully different between the novel and repeated displays, the Bayes factor was calculated for a model with display type as a predictor. Bayes factors are preferred over null hypothesis testing when the goal is to provide evidence for null effects (CITE). The analysis revealed moderate evidence (CITE) for the hypothesis that there was no meaningful difference in slopes between the novel and repeated displays, BF01 = 3.33. Search efficiency did not improve with repeated displays.

30% of the participants responded “yes” when they were asked whether they noticed that some displays were repeated throughout the search experiment. On average, these participants indicated that they thought that 32.6% of the displays were repeated (response from one participant was missing due to a keyboard error).

**Experiment 3**

Experiment 2 showed that the magnitude of the contextual cueing effect was not affected by lure set size, even though lures contributed to processing times. That is to say, lures are processed in parallel (as indexed by the logarithmic functions), and the more there are, the longer it takes to reject all of them. That rejection process did not benefit from repeating the locations were lures were presented. If it is indeed true that lures do not contribute to contextual cueing despite being processed and rejected in parallel, then we should not observe any contextual cueing with lure-only displays. Finally, we also included a more precise memory test to assess whether participants had an explicit recollection of the repeated displays. Multiple previous studies have shown that memory for candidate-repeated contexts is implicit (REFS), and we wanted to investigate whether participants had any memory traces of the repeated lure-only displays.

**Method**

Twenty-two participants were recruited from the same subject pool as previous experiments. One subject did not complete the experiment due to a computer error. One additional participant was replaced because their average RT that was more than 2.5 standard deviations higher than the group mean. The included participants did not take part in any of the other experiments in this paper. All methods are identical to Experiment 1, except for the following changes. All distractors were the orange diamond lures used in Experiment 2. There were 5 different lure set sizes (0, 3, 9, 19, 31). There were 13 instead of 12 repeated displays: an additional one was included for the target-only condition (lure set-size = 0). There were 3 repeated displays for each of the non-zero lure set sizes, and one for the target-only display (set size 0). Finally, there was also a recognition test at the end of the experiment.

The recognition test started by asking participants whether they noticed anything unusual with the experiment. If they answered ‘Yes’, they were prompted to describe it by using the keyboard. Regardless of whether they answered ‘yes’ or ‘no’, they were informed on the next screen that some of the displays were repeated, and were asked whether they had noticed this or not. After which, they were asked what percentage of the trials they thought were repeated. Participants were then informed that they would be presented with a recognition test.

The recognition test consisted of 104 trials in total. Each of the 13 repeated displays was presented 4 times, twice with the target rotated 90 degrees clockwise and twice anti-clockwise. Thirteen novel displays, which were never presented in the search task, were created. These novel displays were also presented 4 times, two with the target rotated 90 degrees clockwise and twice anti-clockwise. This was to equate for learning within the recognition task. The target location for these novel displays were the same as the target locations for the novel displays in the search task to equate for target probability. The recognition test was blocked such that each repeated and novel display was presented once before it was presented again.

On each trial, the display was presented until a response was made. Participants pressed the ‘z’ key to indicate whether they had seen the display before during the search task, and the ‘/’ key to indicate that the current display was a novel one. Upon response, a confidence rating screen was presented. Participants had to indicate their level of confidence in their response, ranging from 1 (‘completely guessing’) to 5 (‘completely confident’). Upon response, a blank screen was presented for xxx ms before the next trial began.

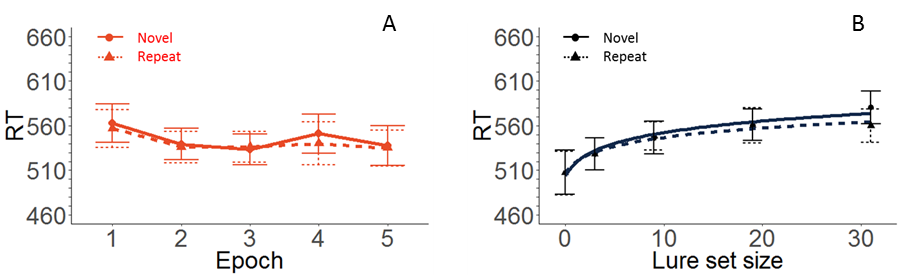
**Results**

One participant was excluded from analyses as they had a mean RT that was more than 2.5 standard deviations away from the overall group mean. An additional participant was run to replace this subject. Response times beyond 2.5 standard deviations of the mean of each participant were excluded from analyses. Trials on which participants made an error were also excluded. This led to the removal of 4.5% of trials.

A 2 (display type) by 5 (lure set size) by 5 (epoch) fully within ANOVA was performed. RTs increased with lure set size (set size 0, 3, 9, 19, 31, respectively: *M* = 507, 528, 548, 561, 570 ms, *SD* = 110, 80, 77, 84, 83 ms), *F*(4, 76) = 31.88, *p* <.001, ωp² = xxx . RTs for novel (*M* = 545ms, *SD =* 91ms) displays were not significantly different from repeated (*M* = 541ms, *SD* = 90ms) displays, *F*(1, 19) = 0.74, *p* = .401, ωp² = xxx. RTs did not differ significantly between epochs (from epoch 1 to 5: *M* = 560, 538, 535, 546, 536 ms, *SD =* 95, 79, 76, 103, 94 ms), *F*(4, 76) = 2.17, *pc* = .0798, ε = xxx, ωp² = xxx.

There was no significant interaction between set size and display, *F*(4, 76) = 0.72, *pc* = .579, ε = .554, ωp² = xxx; set size and epoch, *F*(16, 304) = 0.779, *p* = .71, ε = .279, ωp² = xxx; and epoch and display, *F*(4, 76) = 1.15, *pc* = .342, ε = .279, ωp² = xxx. The three-way interaction between display type, set size and epoch was also not significant, *F*(16, 304) = 0.553, *pc* = .917, ε = .262, ωp² = xxx

The lack of a significant difference in response times between repeated and novel displays suggest that lure processing did not contribute to contextual cueing. The Bayes factor for a model with display type as a factor indicated that there was strong evidence (CITE) that the response times for repeated and novel displays were not meaningfully different, BF01 = 13.757



*Figure 3.* Response times (in ms) as a function of lure set size. Repeated displays are represented by the solid line, while novel displays are represented by the dashed line. *(A)* Response times did not significantly differ with epoch or display type. *(B)*Although response times increased logarithmically as a function of set size, suggesting that lures were processed, there was no statistically significant contextual cueing effect.

One participant responded “yes” when asked whether they noticed anything strange about the experiment but did not give any response when prompted.10.5% (2 out of 19) of the participants responded “yes” when they were asked whether they noticed that some displays were repeated throughout the search experiment (this included the aforementioned participant). On average, these participants indicated that they thought that 26% of the displays were repeated.

We next turn to the results of the recognition test in. One-sample t-tests were conducted for each of the lure set sizes (0, 3, 9 ,19, 31) to determine whether *d’* was significantly different from zero. Table 2 shows the results. None of the comparisons were statistically significant at α = .01 (after Bonferroni correction), suggesting that participants, *on average*, did not report any conscious awareness of the repeated displays.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Lure set size | *t*(18) | p | *d’* | Effect size |
| 0 | 2.21 | .0407 | .457 |  |
| 3 | -0.725 | .478 | -0.0709 |  |
| 9 | -0.266 | .794 | -0.02 |  |
| 19 | -0.161 | .874 | -0.0168 |  |
| 31 | 2.21 | .08 | 0.127 |  |

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Lure set size | *t*(18) | p | *d’* | Effect size |
| 0 | 3.024 | .0073 | .484 |  |
| 3 | -1.422 | .172 | -0.132 |  |
| 9 | -1.18 | .253 | -.102 |  |
| 19 | -0.378 | .71 | -0.0528 |  |
| 31 | 0.039 | .969 | 0.00558 |  |

An exploratory analysis was conducted to examine the possibility that some displays could have been explicitly recognized. 56 out of 247 displays (23%) had a perfect accuracy score; participants indicated that they have seen the display in the search task on all four presentations during the recognition test. The mean confidence rating for these displays was 3.78 out of 5 (the average for all other repeated displays was 2.96. This seems to suggest that there are at least some percentage of displays were explicitly recognized by participants. The Bayes Factors were calculated for a model with accuracy score as a factor. There was strong evidence for the hypothesis that the magnitude of the contextual cueing effect was not affected by accuracy scores on the recognition test, BF01 = 11.111

**Between-experiment comparison on the awareness of repeated displays**

The noticing rate for Experiments 1,2, and 3 were 30%, 25%, and 10.5% respectively. A chi-square test of independence revealed that noticing rates were not significantly different across the three experiments, χ2(3, N= 59) = 2.283, *p* = .319.

**General discussion**

The goal of the present study was to evaluate whether repeating lure contexts over time would produce a similar contextual cueing effect to that observed when candidate contexts repeat. Experiments 2 and 3 showed converging evidence that lure-context repetition does not in fact contribute to contextual cueing. These results are consistent with the findings in Jiang and Chun (2001 CITE). That said, in spite of the fact that lure-context repetition does not produce a contextual cueing effect, what is novel in our study is that we have evidence that lures *were* indeed processed and produced significant costs on reaction time (about 50-100 ms, comparing the zero lure condition to the largest lure set size condition, see Figure 2 and 3). In terms of the mechanistic locus of contextual cueing, the results imply that contextual cueing emerges late, after lures have been discarded from a scene, in what is often referred to as the second stage of visual search (CITE). From the perspective of parallel peripheral processing, all locations in the display are processed initially, yet it is not this set of locations that produces the effect. Only the subset of locations that are not rejected during parallel processing will form the memory basis that leads to the facilitation in contextual cueing. Just as Jiang and Chun (2001 CITE) suggested, contextual information is learned only for distractors that undergo processing by selective attention.

Coupled with the fact that in typical contextual cueing experiments, memory for repeated displays is only implicit, the current results suggest that contextual cueing might be a form of procedural knowledge: given a set of locations to attend to (the list of non-rejected locations), the visual system is faced with a series of decisions regarding the order in which these locations are to be inspected by the eyes/attention. Thus, the benefit of repetition might make lessen the demands on this decision process and improve performance as the same set of contexts repeat over and over throughout the experiment. If so, this mechanism might also help explain why there is inconsistent evidence regarding the “guidance” of contextual cueing. There have only been a few studies where the set size of the candidate set is manipulated (CITE). If display repetition guided attention towards the target, then one would expect an interaction between display repetition and set size (a smaller set size effect on repeated displays than on novel displays), which has not been consistently observed (or only to a small extent). Thus, perhaps contextual cueing is less an attentional effect and more a procedural memory effect: the advantage that comes from repeating the same actions/decisions over time, just like repetition improves playing the piano.

It should be noted, though, that several studies have found evidence of contextual cueing in lure-only displays. However, it is unclear whether these studies truly reflect the influence of lures. In Geyer CITE, the search display was preceded by placeholders which previewed the spatial locations before the distractors appeared. The distractors were always green bars rotated 45 degrees to the right, while the target could be either a red bar rotated 45 degrees to the right or a green bar rotated 45 degrees to the left. The target was randomly defined on each trial. Thus, the search process in this scenario would be different from a typical contextual cueing experiment. There would not be a process by which lures are first rejected; the context that is learned in this case would be the spatial layout of the placeholders, rather than the layout of the lures. Furthermore, the search task could be considered as an oddball search, instead of search with a fixed target. We have previously shown that the processing involved in oddball search is very different from search with a fixed target (Buetti et al., CITE).

Other studies report very small contextual cueing effects in lure-only displays (12 – 33ms; CITE). In Experiment 2b in Kunar, Flusberg, Horowitz, and Wolfe (CITE), lures (either 8 or 12) were always accompanied by placeholders. The target was a letter T and was red in color, as was the placeholder it appeared in. Lures were green letter Ls placed in green placeholders. Although they reported a statistically significant contextual cueing effect with 12 lures, the contextual cueing effect for set size 8 was only marginally significant (p = .09) after collapsing across the last 3 epochs (the main effect of display repetition was not statistically significant). Thus, the lack of a significant contextual cueing effect in our experiments with lures could possibly be due to a lack of power. However, we believe that this is unlikely to be the case. Firstly, we had more than 1.5 times the number of participants (20 vs. 12). Secondly, Bayes factors analyses in our experiments revealed strong evidence for the lack of any effect of lures on contextual cueing. It is thus likely that the contextual cueing effect detected in Kunar et al. (CITE) was a false positive. Another possibility could be that some of the lures could have been candidates instead. The categorization of a stimulus as a lure or candidate is determined by whether the visual system can differentiate it from a target in the periphery. It is possible that some of the lures were instead candidates, especially when they were in the far periphery, and thus added to the noise and contributed a small contextual cueing effect.

Another important implication of our findings is that the manner in which stimuli are rejected determines whether or not they contribute to the spatial context driving contextual cueing. When items can be rejected via peripheral vision through parallel processing, the locations of these items do not form part of that context. Those items that cannot be rejected in parallel in the periphery probably do contribute to that context. In other words, it is not the stimulus per se that matters, but the interaction between a stimulus and its location on the visual field: a stimulus that is somewhat similar to the target might *act* as a lure in the near periphery (where resolution is somewhat high), but it might act as a candidate farther in the periphery. In addition, this might aggravated by other peripheral constraints like crowding. This hypothesis should be tested in future experiments.

Future experiments should also explore the possibility that lure locations are in fact stored in memory but are too slow to emerge or too weak to have an impact on efficient search. Suppose it takes 500 ms to recognize a repeated context (irrespective of whether it is composed of lures or candidates). When the repeated display only contains lures, by the time the context has been implicitly recognized by the visual system, the target has already been found. When the repeated display contains candidates, it takes longer to find the target; the recollection of the context thus has time to impact the deployment of attention and therefore facilitate search, producing a contextual cueing effect. That said, we doubt this account as it is inconsistent with the data of Jiang and Chun (2001), where the slower search task eliminated (rather than increased) the lure-context repetition effect.

Finally, our exploratory analyses showed that a substantial proportion of the repeated displays were recognized with perfect accuracy and high confidence. This seems to suggest that the contextual cueing effect could be driven by the explicit recognition of a few displays (see CITE), rather than being an implicit effect. However, since we did not set out to examine explicit recognition, we refrain from making a strong statement regarding this. Nevertheless, there has been debate on whether the contextual cueing effect is truly implicit (CITE).

**Summary**

In conclusion, the results show that lure processing does not benefit from context repetition, even though lure processing incurs a significant time cost. This suggests that lure locations are not stored in memory, as initially suggested by Jiang and Chun (2001). The results are also consistent with the Target Contrast Signal Theory, which proposes that locations containing lures are rejected early on during parallel processing and are not considered as targets for the attention and eye movement system. Only those locations that are likely to be fixated contribute to Contextual Cueing.

1. Jiang and Chun (2001 CITE) referred to these as the “attended” and “unattended” color respectively. However, we prefer to use the term “candidate” to describe a distractor that is very similar to the target such that selective attention is required to distinguish it from the target, and the term “lure” to describe a distractor that is sufficiently different from the target such that the visual system can distinguish it from the target in peripheral vision without the need for focused selective attention (e.g. CITE Buetti and the Zelinsky). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)