



## Better together? Harnessing the power of brand placement through program sponsorship messages



Nathalie Dens<sup>a,\*</sup>, Patrick De Pelsmacker<sup>b</sup>, Yann Verhellen<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Antwerp & Antwerp Management School, Prinsstraat 13, Office B.236, 2000 Antwerp, Belgium

<sup>b</sup> University of Antwerp & Ghent University, Prinsstraat 13, Office B.235, 2000 Antwerp, Belgium

<sup>c</sup> Barco & University of Antwerp, Beneluxpark 21, 8500 Kortrijk, Belgium

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### ABSTRACT

In two field studies, this article investigates the potential benefits of combining brand placement with program sponsorship messages vis-à-vis brand placement or program sponsorship messages only in terms of brand recall and brand attitude. Study 1 presents a quasi-natural experiment in which respondents ( $n = 334$ ) are randomly exposed to a full-length episode of a television program corresponding to one of four conditions (control group, brand placement only, program sponsorship messages only, brand placement plus program sponsorship messages). Study 2 replicates the findings by measuring responses of viewers ( $n = 7629$ ) to 19 real-life campaigns for 15 brands that ran across 8 branded entertainment shows on Belgian commercial television. The results of both studies indicate a positive effect of combining brand placement with program sponsorship messages on brand recall, but not brand attitude.

### 1. Introduction

Companies are increasingly investing in brand placement, also referred to as product placement, the (paid) incorporation of brands in media content (Karrh, 1998). The global brand placement industry has achieved double-digit growth rates in the last decade and is estimated to be worth over \$21 billion by 2019 (PQMedia, 2015). Although the US still represent the largest placement market (worth \$6 billion in 2014), the practice is growing on a global scale (PQMedia, 2015).

The vast expansion of brand placement has aroused the interest of both practitioners and academics, resulting in a growing body of research on this topic. According to this research, brand placement can have beneficial effects on brand recall (e.g.: Bressoud, Lehu, & Russell, 2010), brand image (e.g., van Reijmersdal, Neijens, & Smit, 2007) and brand preference (Auty & Lewis, 2004). Recent studies demonstrate that these effects vary depending on placement characteristics (Dens, De Pelsmacker, Wouters, & Purnawirawan, 2012), consumer characteristics (e.g., Avramova, De Pelsmacker, & Dens, 2017; Lehu & Bressoud, 2008) and contextual factors (Cowley & Barron, 2008). At the same time, the practice is constantly evolving and many of its aspects remain to be explored.

One aspect that deserves further study is the combination of brand placement with other marketing communication efforts. The vast majority of extant studies on the subject treat brand placement in isolation

from other forms of marketing communications (e.g., Brennan & Babin, 2004; de Gregorio & Sung, 2010; Russell, 2002; van Reijmersdal, Smit, & Neijens, 2010). Brand placement is increasingly used as a communication tool in a broader promotional strategy (PQMedia, 2012). For example, the Dutch beer brand Heineken set up a promotional campaign around its appearance in the 2012 James Bond film *Skyfall*. Heineken broadcasted commercials featuring Bond and hosted sponsored events both before and after the movie premiered. Another example is Coca-Cola's long standing promotional agreement with *American Idols*, which combines in-program placements with program sponsorship messages. The findings of previous brand placement research cannot be fully representative of the effect of actual placements as long as the impact of other promotional tools that are added to the communication mix is neglected.

Recently, a few studies have started to explore the separate and joint effect of advertising and brand placement on consumer responses. van Reijmersdal (2011) shows that a combination of brand placement and a radio commercial evokes higher brand recall than exposure to a commercial alone. Uribe (2016), on the other hand, finds no increase in either brand recall, brand attitude or purchase intention through the combination of brand placement and advertising. These two studies were laboratory experiments, which offer a number of methodological shortcomings (Bressoud et al., 2010). Davtyan and Cunningham (2017) offer a quasi-natural experiment, but also conclude that a combination

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [nathalie.dens@uantwerp.be](mailto:nathalie.dens@uantwerp.be) (N. Dens), [patrick.depelsmacker@uantwerp.be](mailto:patrick.depelsmacker@uantwerp.be) (P. De Pelsmacker).

of a brand placement and a commercial within one program does not significantly increase brand attitudes and purchase intentions compared with sole exposure conditions. In the present research, we focus on a combination of brand placement with program sponsorship messages, i.e., brief trailers coupled to the program that explicitly link the brand to the program. This is a more “natural” combination of promotional tools than the combination of radio or television ads, which is explicitly promoted by television networks. We investigate the effects of combining brand placement with these program sponsorship messages vis à vis brand placement or program sponsorship messages only on both brand recall and brand attitude. This allows us to contribute to the debate by differentiating between possible effects on brand recall and brand attitude, where van Reijmersdal (2011) measured only brand recall, and Davtyan and Cunningham (2017) focus solely on brand attitude (and purchase intention).

Importantly, we present two studies that are designed to ensure high degrees of ecological validity. Apart from a few noteworthy exceptions (e.g., Davtyan & Cunningham, 2017; Dens et al., 2012; Russell, 2002; Wilson & Till, 2011), most previous studies were conducted in laboratory settings that are not representative of real-life exposure to brand placement (e.g., Homer, 2009). Second, many studies are based on forced exposure to unrealistically short and edited stimuli (e.g., Yang & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2007). In comparison to viewing a full-length movie or program, these short videos probably lead to higher memory for the placed brands (Bressoud et al., 2010). Lastly, a large majority of placement studies rely on student samples instead of real consumers (Gupta & Gould, 2007).

Our collaboration with a large commercial television network allows us to overcome the methodological limitations of prior research by conducting a quasi-natural experiment with real television viewers under naturalistic viewing conditions (Study 1), as well as analyzing survey data for a large set of actual viewers for eight entertainment shows (Study 2). While Study 1 provides insight into how a single exposure impacts viewers' responses to placed brands, program sponsorship messages and their combination, Study 2 gauges the effects of 19 real-life brand placement and sponsorship campaigns on a large sample of viewers after actually having watched the show under normal circumstances. Therefore, especially the second study allows us to eliminate the aforementioned limitations of laboratory research, and allows us to assess brand placement and program sponsorship messages as they operate in the real world.

The present studies add to the growing body of literature on brand placement and contribute to a more complete understanding of brand placement effectiveness within the contemporary multi-format marketing communications environment. The studies also inform advertising managers on the effectiveness of combining brand placement with program sponsorship in real-life, providing them with insights on how to optimize their multi-format placement campaigns.

## 2. Literature review and hypotheses

### 2.1. The impact of television program sponsorship and brand placement on brand recall

The present research compares the impact of brand placement in televised entertainment programs, program sponsorship messages and the combination of the two on brand recall and brand attitude. In this section we will focus on brand recall effects. In the context of this paper, a program sponsorship message refers to the inclusion of a short commercial message at the beginning of a program block, identifying the brand as a sponsor of the program. This message is directly attached to the program itself and as such is clearly distinguished from the advertising blocks that surround the program. Previous research has labeled this sponsorship format as ‘promotional bumpers’ (Lardinois & Derbaix, 2001) or ‘explicit non-integrated placement’ (d’Astous & Seguin, 1999; Tiwaskul, Hackley, & Szmigin, 2005).

In contrast to brand placement, which is integrated in the content of the program, program sponsorship messages are always explicit and non-integrated (i.e., they are not part of the program itself). This format focuses the viewer's attention on the program sponsorship message for a few seconds, without any interfering elements (e.g., dialogues or actions that distract the viewer from a brand placed inside the program itself). The explicitness of program sponsorship messages increases the accessibility of the brand (the degree to which information can be retrieved from memory) (Cowley & Barron, 2008). Moreover, because of its direct and unimpeded nature, program sponsorship messages give viewers a high opportunity to process the sponsorship message and store the brand name in memory (d’Astous & Seguin, 1999). Both these aspects should benefit brand recall.

Brand placement, on the other hand, can also enhance brand recall, but in a different way. As argued by Bhatnagar, Aksoy, and Malkoc (2004), brand placements are often embedded in a meaningful context, making them a relevant piece of information to process. The relevance of the brand portrayal can increase the attention for the brand, and consequently, brand recall. Indeed, a number of studies (Dens et al., 2012; Russell, 2002) found that the degree of plot connection positively impacts brand placement recall or recognition. These results can be explained by associative network theory (Teichert & Schöntag, 2010), which considers memory as a network of nodes (stored information) and links (associations between nodes). A “spreading activation” process from node to node determines the extent of retrieval from memory. This implies that the retrieval of information that is associated with a movie or a television program will facilitate the retrieval of other information (e.g., a placed brand) that is associated with that movie or program (cfr. Meyvis & Janiszewski, 2004).

In the present research, we also investigate how combining program sponsorship messages and brand placement impacts viewers' brand recall. Although no empirical research has explored the recall of brand placements in a multi-format campaign, Balasubramanian, Karrh, and Patwardhan (2006) do theorize that the use of program sponsorship messages can semantically prime brand placements for the same brand, benefiting brand recall. This prediction is in line with the semantic priming principle (Neely, 1977) and associative network theory (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006; Teichert & Schöntag, 2010). Exposure to a program sponsorship message can serve as a prime which activates a network of associations related to the sponsorship message. Associative network theory predicts that the activation of the brand node by the program sponsorship message provides additional memory cues which facilitate the retrieval of brand information when viewers see the same brand in the form of a brand placement, resulting in a higher brand recall (DeCoster & Claypool, 2004; Teichert & Schöntag, 2010). In other words, combining brand placement and program sponsorship messages gives a boost compared to their separate effects on brand recall. As the program sponsorship messages enhance the salience of the placed brand, they may increase viewers' conceptual persuasion knowledge, i.e. the cognitive process of distinguishing editorial from commercial content. Boerman, van Reijmersdal, and Neijens (2014) showed that the presence (vs. absence) of a sponsorship disclosure at the start of a TV program makes viewers more likely to recognize the sponsored content as advertising. Similarly, Matthes and Naderer (2016) found that disclosing a placement before a music video is associated with higher awareness that brands have been intentionally inserted in the video. This should also benefit brand recall.

Additionally, combining a program sponsorship message and brand placement exposes the viewer more often to the brand than in the case of a program sponsorship message or brand placement only. A large number of studies demonstrate that brand recall increases with the number of brand exposures (Nordhielm, 2002; Pechmann & Stewart, 1988; Tellis, 1997). In line with these findings, we also expect the combination of brand placement and program sponsorship messages to have a positive effect over their individual applications. As a result, we postulate the following hypothesis:

**H1.** Brand recall will be significantly higher for respondents exposed to a combination of program sponsorship messages and brand placement than for respondents exposed to either program sponsorship messages only or brand placement only.

## 2.2. The impact of television program sponsorship and brand placement on brand attitude

A well-integrated brand placement should have a positive effect on brand attitude (Russell & Stern, 2006; van Reijmersdal, Neijens, & Smit, 2009). Product placements are intrinsically embedded in the context of the program or the movie. As proposed by Russell (1998), the integrated nature of brand placements induces a transformational process in which context related feelings and thoughts may spill over to placed brands. When the brand is placed in a program that evokes positive affect and positive thoughts, which is often the case (cfr. Ferraro & Avery, 2000), these may spill over to viewers' attitudes toward that brand. This mechanism is referred to as the 'affect-transfer principle' (D'Hooge, Hudders, & Cauberghe, 2017; van Reijmersdal et al., 2009). Its basic premise is that people unconsciously generate affective responses to the context in which advertisements (i.e., brand placements or program sponsorship messages) appear, and these context-induced responses influence subsequent judgments (Yi, 1990). The concept of affect transfer originated in psychology, where a large body of research evidences that affective responses are automatically triggered and influence subsequent perceptions and attitudes (e.g., DeCoster & Claypool, 2004; Shen & Chen, 2007; Yi, 1990). Similar findings have emerged in advertising literature. For instance, studies by Coulter (1998) and De Pelsmacker, Geuens, and Anckaert (2002) found that positive responses to a television program improved consumers' attitudes toward advertisements embedded in the program. In brand placement, Schemer, Matthes, Wirth, and Textor (2008) showed that a brand placed in a music video by a positively perceived artist positively shifts viewers' attitude toward the brand, while the reverse holds for a negatively perceived artist. Redker, Gibson, and Zimmerman (2013) found that liking of a movie's genre positively affected implicit brand attitudes for a placed brand.

The effects of program sponsorship messages on viewers' brand attitudes operate by the same underlying mechanism. Brand managers connect their brands to programs in order to transfer positive associations, generated by the program, to their brands (Meenaghan, 2001; Olson & Thjørmøe, 2012).

We argued that both brand placement and program sponsorship messages have a positive impact on brand attitude through the transfer of positive program-induced affect. But what happens if both marketing communication techniques are combined? Similar to our argumentation for brand recall, we assert that a program sponsorship message can serve as a prime for brand placement, creating a positive effect on brand attitude. As argued above, a prime (i.e., the program sponsorship message) implicitly activates a network of brand-related associations, which facilitates the storage and retrieval of the brand placement in memory. Additionally, this increased accessibility of brand-related information can benefit the formation of positive brand attitudes in two ways. First, the higher accessibility of the brand in memory makes it easier for consumers to process subsequent brand information (e.g., the brand placement). As stated by Lee and Aaker (2004) this greater ease of processing of the brand placement(s) can lead to better brand attitudes. There is evidence from both marketing and psychology that recognition of previously presented stimuli enhances the mere exposure effect and positively affects evaluation (e.g., Stafford & Grimes, 2012; Yagi, Ikoma, & Kikuchi, 2009). Second, the increased accessibility of the brand in memory also facilitates the linkage of positive program-induced affect to the brand. In other words, priming the brand through a program sponsorship message strengthens the potential of brand placement to enable the transfer of program-induced affect to consumers'

brand attitudes.

At the same time, we argued above that the priming of the placement through the explicit sponsorship disclosure triggers conceptual persuasion knowledge. A large body of research demonstrates that the activation of persuasion knowledge may result in a more critical scrutiny of the persuasive attempt. If the persuasive tactics are negatively evaluated, this can result in less favorable brand attitudes (Kirmani & Zhu, 2007; van Reijmersdal, Rozendaal, & Buijzen, 2012; Wei, Fischer, & Main, 2008). However, as pointed out by Friestad and Wright (1994), the activation of persuasion knowledge does not necessarily lead to negative counter-arguing. Recent brand placement research (Avramova, 2017; Boerman et al., 2014) explicitly distinguishes between conceptual persuasion knowledge (i.e., the recognition of the commercial intent of brand placement) and the further cognitive, affective, or behavioral responses (e.g., critical processing, irritation, counter arguing) that may, or may not, emerge as its consequence. Research on consumer attitudes toward brand placement (e.g., Gould, Gupta, & Grabner-Kräuter, 2000) and sponsorship messages (e.g., Tiwaskul et al., 2005) shows that people generally have a positive attitude toward these advertising formats. Brand placements blend in with the program content, while program sponsorship messages present relevant information, often linked to the program, in a brief way (Olson & Thjørmøe, 2012). As opposed to traditional advertisements that interrupt the viewing experience, brand placements and program sponsorship messages are seen as more natural and less obtrusive (Balasubramanian et al., 2006). This means that, even when people are aware of the placements and their commercial intent, they may lack the motivation and/or ability to correct their attitude for potential bias. In line with this view, explicit placement disclosures sometimes fail to affect (Matthes & Naderer, 2016) or even improve (Wei et al., 2008) brand evaluations. Combined with the positive priming effect as described above, we expect the overall effect on brand attitude created by combining program sponsorship messages and brand placements to be positive.

**H2.** Combining program sponsorship messages with brand placement will lead to a more positive brand attitude than the use of either program sponsorship messages or brand placement.

We test the hypotheses by means of two studies. Study 1 sets out to test our hypotheses through a controlled quasi-natural experiment that exposes viewers to different manipulated versions of a full episode of a television show. Study 2 sets out to validate the findings of Study 1 by means of a large field study that investigates consumer responses to 19 complete program sponsorship and brand placement campaigns in television programs broadcast on Belgian commercial television. This naturalistic approach and the variety of advertisers and programs allow us to shed light on how consumers respond to program sponsorship messages and brand placements in real-life. The combination of both studies allows us to gauge the effectiveness of program sponsorship messages, brand placement and their joint use in both an externally and internally valid way.

## 3. Study 1

### 3.1. Procedure and materials

We set up a between-subjects quasi-natural experiment that consists of four different experimental conditions. Although a controlled experimental setup is never fully representative of the 'natural' viewing experience, an attempt was undertaken to recreate this experience through the setting in which the exposure took place. In this respect, Study 1 already attains a higher level of ecological validity than most extant brand placement studies (i.e., Brennan & Babin, 2004; Kamleitner & Jyote, 2013), without sacrificing internal validity. Participants were invited to a studio at Belgium's leading commercial television network, which was converted to a viewing theatre, to watch a

44 min episode of the Flemish version of the reality cooking show ‘Masterchef’ (the episode was not previously aired on television). To make the experience more naturalistic, the viewing theatre was equipped with a large screen and comfortable seats. The episode was interrupted by one commercial break of 5 min, which contained 10 commercials of 30 s for brands that are not competitors of the test brand (i.e., Bosto, a brand of rice). In the first condition (program sponsorship messages plus brand placement), viewers were exposed to an episode that included a clear 5-s brand placement (i.e., a participant uses a box of the test brand’s rice to prepare a dish) plus two program sponsorship messages for the test brand, (i.e., a 5-s animated video that showed rice grains falling out of a box with the statement ‘It’s raining culinary talent with Bosto and Masterchef’), one at the start of the program and one after the commercial break, immediately before the program restarted. Viewers in the second condition were exposed to the brand placement only. The third group was exposed to the program sponsorship messages only. The fourth group was a control group that saw the episode without brand placement or program sponsorship messages.

Episodes without brand placement (i.e., conditions 3 and 4) were edited by the production department of the cooperating television network, who subtly blurred the rice package so that viewers could not derive the test brand. In the conditions that do not contain program sponsorship messages for the test brand (i.e., conditions 2 and 4), these messages were replaced by program sponsorship messages for a brand that is unrelated to the program context (i.e., Kleenex tissues). This was done to keep the exposure time constant across conditions, and to make the viewing experience as realistic as possible. All other branded products that appeared in the episode were visually blurred, so that they could not be recognized. After watching the episodes, participants completed a questionnaire measuring brand recall and brand attitude, which are discussed in more detail in the ‘Measures’-section.

3.2. Sample

The total sample consists of 334 participants (62.7% female, average age = 34.20 yrs.) who were recruited from the internal viewer database of the collaborating commercial television network. Participants were invited to watch an episode of the 2012 Flemish Masterchef season in premiere on one of four dates in exchange for a financial incentive (25 euro per person). Participants were randomly selected from the database and were contacted by telephone and/or email. They were asked whether they could be present on a specific date. This procedure yielded the following distribution of participants across the four conditions: condition 1 ( $n = 101$ ), condition 2 ( $n = 73$ ), condition 3 ( $n = 82$ ), control group ( $n = 78$ ). Table 1 displays the distribution of respondents across gender and age categories for all experimental conditions.

In order to check for potential self-selection bias, we analyzed whether respondents’ demographical profile caused significant differences in the study outcomes, as suggested by Steyer, Gabler, von Davier, and Nachtigall (2000). The results show that gender ( $\chi^2(1) = 0.139, p = 0.709$ ) and age category ( $\chi^2(3) = 6.193, p = 0.103$ ) do not significantly affect brand recall nor brand attitude (gender:  $t(236)$

$= -0.743, p = 0.458$ ; age category:  $F(3, 236) = 0.824, p = 0.493$ ). These results indicate that there is no reason to assume that self-selection would impact our results.

3.3. Measures

Brand recall was measured using an open question (i.e., ‘Please write down which brand(s) you saw in or directly related to the episode you just watched’). We converted the answers into a dummy variable (‘1’ indicates correct recall of the test brand). Brand attitude was measured using a 4-item 5-point Likert scale (‘I like \_\_’, ‘\_\_ is a good brand’, ‘I feel good about \_\_’ and ‘My opinion on \_\_ is positive’,  $\alpha = 0.863$ ) based on Sengupta and Johar (2002).

3.4. Results

3.4.1. Brand recall

Hypothesis 1 is tested by means of a Chi-square analysis. As predicted, brand recall is the highest in the group exposed to both program sponsorship messages and brand placement (68.32%). Pairwise comparisons based on 2 by 2 contingency tables, shows that brand recall in the combined condition is significantly higher than in the brand placement only condition (36.98%) ( $\chi^2(1) = 16.818, p < 0.001$ ) and in the program sponsorship messages only condition (10.97%) ( $\chi^2(1) = 60.847, p < 0.001$ ). These findings are in support of H1. In addition, our analyses show that brand recall is significantly higher in the brand placement only condition (37.0%) than in the program sponsorship messages only condition (10.97%,  $\chi^2(1) = 14.652, p < 0.001$ ).

3.4.2. Brand attitude

Results from a one-way ANOVA indicate that there are no significant differences in brand attitude between the four conditions ( $F(3, 234) = 0.861, p = 0.462$ ). Bonferroni-corrected post-hoc analyses shows no significant pairwise differences between brand attitudes in the combination condition ( $M = 3.73$ ), the brand placement only condition ( $M = 3.67$ ), the sponsorship only condition ( $M = 3.88$ ) or the control group ( $M = 3.69, p > 0.05$ ). These results indicate that combining brand placement with program sponsorship messages, in comparison to their individual applications, and even a control group, does not significantly influence brand attitude. H2 is not supported.

3.5. Discussion

Study 1 set out to explore the effectiveness of program sponsorship messages and their combination with brand placement by means of a quasi-natural experiment. The results indicate that campaigns that combined program sponsorship messages with brand placement produces higher brand recall than campaigns that consisted of program sponsorship messages or brand placement only. With respect to brand attitude, we found that program sponsorship messages and their joint use with brand placement do not improve brand attitude compared to brand placement only or program sponsorship only. Brand attitude was not even significantly different from that in the control condition, which did not contain the brand at all. It is possible that, despite our best efforts in exposing respondents to a full-length episode, a single episode is not sufficient to substantially change brand attitude toward an established brand. In this experiment, we also tested only a single brand and a single program, and we cannot rule out that the result may be brand or context specific.

To validate the research findings of Study 1, we collected viewer brand responses to 19 different campaigns in eight different television programs. This allows us to further increase the ecological validity of the study, because we can measure actual program viewers’ responses after being able to watch (as they saw fit) an entire season of a show.

Table 1  
Sample composition (Study 1).

|              |                | Total        |
|--------------|----------------|--------------|
| Age category | – 25 years     | 97 (29.22%)  |
|              | 25 to 35 years | 89 (26.80%)  |
|              | 36 to 50 years | 101 (30.42%) |
|              | + 50 years     | 45 (13.56%)  |
| Gender       | Male           | 214 (37.3%)  |
|              | Female         | 208 (62.7%)  |
|              | Total          | 332 (100%)   |

**Table 2**  
Overview of campaigns, advertisers and campaign type per program.

| Program                              | Brand    | Product category     | Sample | Campaign type                       | Brand recall |
|--------------------------------------|----------|----------------------|--------|-------------------------------------|--------------|
| 1. Idol (2011)                       | Brand 1  | Consumer electronics | 405    | Sponsorship mess. + brand placement | 53.6%        |
|                                      | Brand 2  | FMCG (candy)         | 403    | Sponsorship messages only           | 17.5%        |
|                                      | Brand 3  | OTC vitamins         | 403    | Sponsorship messages only           | 2.7%         |
|                                      | Brand 4  | Retail (fashion)     | 400    | Sponsorship mess. + brand placement | 22.5%        |
| 2. My Restaurant Rules (2011)        | Brand 5  | FMCG (food)          | 400    | Sponsorship messages only           | 5.0%         |
|                                      | Brand 6  | FMCG (food)          | 403    | Sponsorship messages only           | 3.5%         |
| 3. So You Think You Can Dance (2011) | Brand 7  | FMCG (candy)         | 394    | Sponsorship mess. + brand placement | 8.2%         |
|                                      | Brand 8  | FMCG (personal care) | 400    | Sponsorship mess. + brand placement | 10.0%        |
|                                      | Brand 9  | OTC cream            | 404    | Sponsorship messages only           | 19.4%        |
| 4. The Voice (of Flanders) (2012)    | Brand 10 | Retail (phones)      | 405    | Sponsorship mess. + brand placement | 3.9%         |
|                                      | Brand 1  | Consumer electronics | 400    | Sponsorship mess. + brand placement | 12.0%        |
|                                      | Brand 11 | FMCG (personal care) | 405    | Sponsorship mess. + brand placement | 1.0%         |
|                                      | Brand 12 | FMCG (personal care) | 403    | Sponsorship mess. + brand placement | 5.9%         |
|                                      | Brand 13 | Automotive           | 404    | Sponsorship mess. + brand placement | 10.3%        |
| 5. Belgium's Got Talent (2012)       | Brand 3  | OTC vitamins         | 401    | Sponsorship messages only           | 1.0%         |
| 6. So You Think You Can Dance (2012) | Brand 4  | Retail (fashion)     | 400    | Sponsorship messages only           | 5.0%         |
|                                      | Brand 7  | FMCG (candy)         | 400    | Sponsorship mess. + brand placement | 17.3%        |
| 7. Masterchef (2012)                 | Brand 14 | Household appliances | 400    | Sponsorship mess. + brand placement | 5.5%         |
| 8. Sofie's Kitchen                   | Brand 15 | Retail (supermarket) | 399    | Sponsorship mess. + brand placement | 6.5%         |

Note: The information concerning the sponsoring brands is bound by a confidentiality agreement that does not allow the disclosure of the actual brand names.

## 4. Study 2

### 4.1. Procedure

For Study 2, we used online surveys to measure consumers' responses to 19 different brand placement and/or sponsorship campaigns for 15 brands that ran in 8 reality entertainment programs on Flemish commercial television (see Table 2 for an overview). The majority of the programs are local talent competitions (singing, cooking, dancing contests), with the exception of “Sofie's Kitchen”, which is an instructive cooking show (cfr. “Nigella's Kitchen”). The brands were mostly established consumer brands in different product categories (Table 2). Four brands invested in multiple programs, and as a result, are included in the analyses twice. The data were collected in cooperation with the largest Flemish commercial television network. The surveys are post-tests which are administered after the course of an entire season of each of the investigated programs.

The program sponsorship messages were short trailers (5–30 s) aired either immediately before or immediately after the program at the start of the program, the end of the program, and at each commercial break. While the message was different for each brand, all program sponsorship messages explicitly linked the brand to the program (e.g., for Idols (2011): “Step through the auditions in style with (fashion retailer)”). The brand placements included a variety of both audio and visual placements either as props (branded products put on display without active person-product interaction), interactive placements (e.g., a cook adding a branded ingredient to a dish, mentioning the brand as the prize for a competition, ...) or ‘look and feel’ placements (brand identifiers incorporated in the scenery of the program, such that the scenery represents the “look and feel” of the brand) (Dens, De Pelsmacker, Goos, & Aleksandrovs, 2016).

The present study does not include any ‘brand placement only’ occurrences, as brand placements for these programs are always included in a package deal with program sponsorship messages. Thus, advertising brands can choose between either program sponsorship messages only or a combination of program sponsorship messages and brand placement. Consequently, Study 2 only allows a comparison between these two formats.

### 4.2. Sample

For each of the 19 campaigns, a quota sample was collected from the consumer panel of a Belgian market research agency. Respondents

were contacted one day after the final episode of a certain show was broadcast, and given a week to complete the survey. Each sample was collected using a quota sampling procedure, in order to be representative of the television network's viewer profile. Quotas were set on gender (50% men, 50% women), age (equal distribution across 4 age categories between 15 and 55 years) and viewing of the program in question (40% non-viewers, 60% viewers). The outcome of this procedure yielded a total sample of  $N = 7629$  respondents. Individual sample sizes per campaign range between  $n = 394$  and  $n = 405$ . Further details regarding sample composition can be found in Table 3. The total sample contains 60.90% viewers and 39.10% non-viewers (i.e., people who did not watch the program, and thus were not exposed to the campaign). These proportions were largely equivalent across all 19 samples. Non-viewers were used as a baseline comparison measure of existing brand attitudes for the researched brands. They completed a shorter version of the questionnaire without any measures that were specific to the programs or the campaigns (such as brand recall).

### 4.3. Measures

Brand recall was measured using an open ended question (i.e., ‘Please write down which brand(s) you saw in the program’). The answers were converted into a dummy variable (‘1’ indicates correct recall of the brand). Brand attitude was measured using the same 4-item 5-point Likert scale as in Study 1 ( $\alpha = 0.919$ ). In order to discriminate between viewers and non-viewers, we included a yes/no question that measured whether respondents had watched at least part of one episode of the program.

**Table 3**  
Sample composition (Study 2).

|              | Total          |               |
|--------------|----------------|---------------|
| Age category | – 25 years     | 1503 (19.72%) |
|              | 25 to 34 years | 1834 (24.04%) |
|              | 35 to 45 years | 2080 (28.99%) |
|              | + 45 years     | 2212 (28.99%) |
| Gender       | Male           | 3201 (41.96%) |
|              | Female         | 4428 (58.04%) |
|              | Total          | 7629 (100%)   |

4.4. Results

4.4.1. Brand recall

We used a logistic regression model to assess the difference in brand recall between the campaigns that consisted of only program sponsorship messages and the campaigns that consisted of a combination of program sponsorship messages and brand placement. This technique was chosen because it allows the inclusion of covariates (i.e., product category and campaign investments). In order to control for the effect of the product category, this variable was indicator coded using the SPSS procedure for categorical covariates. The product category ‘Cars’ was used as the reference category. To account for a potential bias due to differences in campaign investment size between the brands under study, we standardized and included the invested amounts (in euro) invested in each campaign as a covariate (these data were provided by the television network, and only include the commercial investment paid to the network, and exclude potential production costs of program sponsorship messages or other additional costs). The two treatments under scrutiny (i.e., “program sponsorship messages only” and the combined condition) were defined in a dummy variable with the “program sponsorship messages only” condition was used as the reference category. This implies that the obtained regression coefficient of the treatment variable expresses the magnitude of the effect of adding brand placement to the promotional mix. The results of this analysis (Table 4) showed a significant impact of both the product category (Wald  $\chi^2(4) = 179.491, p < 0.001$ ) and campaign investment size ( $B = 0.354, Wald \chi^2(1) = 9.262, p < 0.001$ ) on brand recall. More importantly, the analysis indicated that using a combination of sponsorship and brand placement has a significantly stronger impact on brand recall than using only program sponsorship messages ( $B = 0.364, Wald \chi^2(1) = 9.262, p = 0.002$ ). H1 is thus confirmed.

4.4.2. Brand attitude

This analysis compares respondents’ brand attitudes for campaigns that consist of either a combination of brand placement and program sponsorship messages versus program sponsorship messages only, with brand attitudes of non-viewers serving as a control group. Comparing the brand attitudes of respondents who were exposed to either the sponsorship only or combined campaigns, with brand attitudes of a control group consisting of respondents who did not watch the respective programs, allows us to gauge the shift in brand attitudes caused by the exposures. To allow for a comparison between the three groups (i.e., sponsorship only, combined and the control group) information on group membership of the control group or one of the treatment groups was recorded in a three-level categorical variable. This categorical variable served as the independent variable in the analysis. As aforementioned, our analysis includes two covariates: product category and the standardized campaign investments. To test the hypothesis, an ANCOVA model was used. The product category significantly affects brand attitude ( $F(1, 2683) = 25.171, p < 0.001$ ), while campaign investments do not exert a significant influence on brand attitude ( $F(1, 2683) = 0.240, p = 0.624$ ). The results show a significant main effect of group membership ( $F(2, 2683) = 3.904,$

$p = 0.020$ ). Inspection of the means shows that exposure to sponsorship only ( $M = 3.458$ ) and combined campaigns ( $M = 3.413$ ) leads to an increase in brand attitude compared to the baseline brand attitudes of the non-viewers ( $M = 3.346$ ). Pairwise comparison tests of these mean differences in brand attitude show that both sponsorship only campaigns ( $p = 0.017$ ) and campaigns that combine sponsorship and brand placement ( $p = 0.038$ ) significantly increase brand attitude as compared to the control group. The difference between the brand attitude for campaigns in the sponsorship only group and campaigns in the combined group is not significant ( $p = 0.353$ ). Thus, there is no (positive or negative) effect on brand attitude of combining program sponsorship messages with brand placement, compared to program sponsorship messages only. H2 is thus again not supported.

5. Discussion and conclusion

To our knowledge, this is the first research that investigates how combining program sponsorship messages and brand placement impacts brand recall and brand attitude. Answering the call of Balasubramanian et al. (2006) for more ecologically valid brand placement research, these effects were examined through field studies with real television viewers who watched (an entire episode or season of) real programs. The results of the present studies demonstrate that combining program sponsorship messages and brand placements can boost brand recall compared to either program sponsorship messages or brand placement only. This result is partly consistent with the findings of van Reijmersdal (2011), who showed that combining brand placements with a radio commercial increases brand recall compared to a radio commercial only (but not to a brand placement only). Consistent with academic knowledge on semantic priming (DeCoster & Claypool, 2004) and associative network theory (Teichert & Schöntag, 2010), exposure to program sponsorship messages can function as a prime which increases brand recall for subsequent brand placements. In addition, subjects in the combined condition are likely exposed to a higher amount of brand cues, which may also benefit brand recall (Tellis, 1997). Study 1 shows that brand recall is significantly higher for brand placements than for program sponsorship messages. That, too, is consistent with the findings of van Reijmersdal (2011). This can be attributed to the increased relevance brand placements benefit from by being embedded in a meaningful context (Bhatnagar et al., 2004). It is also interesting to see that the brand recall percentages in Study 1 are substantially higher than in Study 2. In Study 1, brand recall was measured almost immediately after exposure, which is the case in most brand placement research. In Study 2, viewers would generally have been exposed to the brand a higher number of times (as they could see multiple episodes containing multiple sponsorship messages and placements). The contrast with Study 1 suggests that previous experimental studies could greatly overestimate the effects of brand placement on brand recall, which is something researchers and practitioners should be aware of when reviewing these studies’ results. This draws attention to the need for a higher level of rigor in future studies to discern more relevant findings as our understanding in this context evolves.

Contrary to effects for brand recall, we do not find evidence of any effect on brand attitude when program sponsorship messages and brand placement are combined, either positive or negative. Both Uribe (2016) and Davtyan and Cunningham (2017) also do not find significant differences in brand attitude between combining brand placement with advertising, brand placement only and advertising only. As mentioned in the literature review, the literature provides support both for positive effects of combining brand placement with program sponsorship messages through priming, as well as for negative effects through the activation of persuasion knowledge resulting in critical processing. While there is substantial evidence that persuasion knowledge is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for critical processing and counter arguing, especially in the context of brand placement (Avramova, 2017) and we

Table 4  
Binary Logistic regression model for hypothesis 1.

|                   | $\beta$ | Std. Err | Wald $\chi^2$ | df | Sig.    | Exp(B) |
|-------------------|---------|----------|---------------|----|---------|--------|
| Constant          | - 3.086 | 0.255    | 146.153       | 1  | < 0.001 | 0.046  |
| Campaign type     | 0.364   | 0.120    | 9.262         | 1  | 0.002   | 1.439  |
| Investments       | 0.354   | 0.052    | 46.589        | 1  | < 0.001 | 1.424  |
| Product category  |         |          | 179.491       | 4  | < 0.001 |        |
| - Electronics     | 1.852   | 0.251    | 54.245        | 1  | < 0.001 | 6.374  |
| - FMCG            | 0.601   | 0.250    | 5.788         | 1  | 0.016   | 1.825  |
| - Health & Beauty | 0.332   | 0.266    | 1.559         | 1  | 0.212   | 1.393  |
| - Retail          | 0.833   | 0.256    | 10.599        | 1  | 0.001   | 2.300  |

therefore expected an overall positive effect on brand attitude, there is also a fair amount of research documenting negative attitudinal effects (e.g., Campbell, Mohr, & Verlegh, 2013; Dens et al., 2012). It is therefore possible that the positive effects of combining brand placements with sponsorship messages due to priming are offset by the fact that the sponsorship messages also explicitly disclose the commercial intent of the placements and may therefore result in attempt by viewers to resist the persuasion.

In Study 1, brand attitude did not even improve significantly over the control condition, in which the brand was not shown. This could be due to the fact that the participants were only exposed to a single episode of a branded entertainment television program. In Study 2, however, brand attitudes did improve with program sponsorship messages and program sponsorship messages + brand placement campaigns, compared to that of the control group (non-viewers). Here, viewers were repeatedly exposed to the program sponsorship messages and brand placements across an entire season of the program, allowing for a potentially greater effect. Because the brand is embedded into distracting media content, brand placement in a single episode may remain unnoticed. Repetition of the placements and/or sponsorship messages across several episodes may strengthen mere exposure effects (Matthes, Wirth, Schemer, & Pachoud, 2012) as well as affect-transfer effects. At the same time, the increased repetition could allow for more extensive cognitive processing of the placements and sponsorship messages and may result in tedium and counter arguing. The fact that attitudes increase compared to the control group (and do not decrease), does seem to suggest that, with multiple exposures under natural viewing conditions, the positive effects of affect transfer seem to outweigh the negative effects of potential critical processing. This is again in line with the idea that conceptual persuasion knowledge does not automatically imply critical processing and negative evaluative effects.

In general, it should be noted that brand attitudes did not improve very much over the control group. A potential reason for this could be that most of the brands included are well-established brands. Other brand placement studies also report little or no attitudinal effects for highly familiar brands (Avramova et al., 2017; Verhellen, Dens, & De Pelsmacker, 2016). For established brands, it is harder to boost brand attitude than for unestablished brands, even by a season-long campaign in an entertainment program. Therefore, even a minor improvement may be considered a substantive and meaningful campaign result.

## 6. Managerial implications

The present research offers useful insights to advertising practitioners and managers. First of all, our results show that some consumers can actively recall brands after watching only one episode of an entertainment program that contains either program sponsorship messages or brand placement. However, brand managers seeking to boost their brand awareness are strongly advised to invest in a campaign which contains both brand placements and program sponsorship messages, as their combination generates a more positive effect than exposure to either brand placement or program sponsorship messages. Even though the recall scores after a time delay in Study 2 are much lower than the immediate measures in the experimental setting of Study 1, this positive effect subsides.

Moreover, it is important to note that this increase in awareness is not accompanied by a decrease in brand attitude. Departing from the findings of previous research, one could argue that the increased prominence inherent to a combined campaign could have adverse attitudinal effects due to the activation of viewers' persuasion knowledge, or tedium with increased repetition (Cowley & Barron, 2008; Dens et al., 2012). However, the results of both our studies indicate there is no negative attitudinal impact of combining program sponsorship with brand placement. Advertising managers concerned with stimulating awareness of their brand can thus be advised to invest in campaigns that combine brand placement with program sponsorship, without

having to worry about potential deterioration of their brand's reputation.

On the other hand, our research also shows that, for established brands, little can be gained in terms of brand attitude by investing in both brand placement plus sponsorship campaigns. Therefore, brand managers interested in attitudinal effects could choose the cheapest option, as brand placement only, sponsorship only and brand placement combined with sponsorship campaigns engender no significant differences in brand attitude. In any case, it does seem important to invest in longer-term campaigns. The results of Study 1 indicate that brand attitude is not boosted for viewers watching a single episode. However, after an entire season, we do see a positive effect for program sponsorship messages and their combination with brand placements for program viewers, compared to non-viewers. Again, however, there is no beneficial effect of additionally investing in brand placement, over a sponsorship only campaign.

Our findings are also relevant to managers in the television production industry. As mentioned in academic inquiries into the managerial structure of the placement industry, creative professionals and producers of audiovisual media content are often reluctant to include brands into their work (e.g., Russell & Belch, 2005). The results of both our studies show that television networks could more strongly promote program sponsorship packages without actual brand placements, as program sponsorship messages only do not lead to a lower brand attitude than brand placements or packages combining brand placement and program sponsorship messages.

## 7. Limitations and suggestions for further research

The research reported in this article holds a few limitations that can be of importance to researchers pursuing further interest in this matter. A first limitation is the limited amount of placement -and audience-related measures. Placement characteristics such as prominence (i.e., the explicitness of the placement) and plot connection (i.e., how the brand is related to the plot of a movie, program, etc.) have been shown to influence consumers' cognitive and attitudinal responses (Bressoud et al., 2010; Cowley & Barron, 2008; Dens et al., 2012). With respect to audience characteristics, for instance, previous research has demonstrated that the attitude toward the program influences viewers' attitudes toward brands that are placed in that program (Cowley & Barron, 2008). Another potentially influential factor is viewers' degree of parasocial connectedness to the program. As shown by Russell, Norman, and Heckler (2004), this factor impacts both consumers' brand recall and brand attitude. Future researchers should attempt to include more audience placement characteristics and viewers' perceptions relating to the context they are studying. On a related string, we would argue for the inclusion of measures of both conceptual persuasion knowledge and critical processing or advertising skepticism in future research (cfr. Avramova, 2017; Boerman et al., 2014). Our results on brand recall suggest that consumers indeed develop more conceptual persuasion knowledge. Consumers who are aware of the persuasive attempt tend to adopt a more skeptical attitude toward the advertisement, which can negatively reflect on their brand attitude (Wei et al., 2008). Such effects could be at play in the present study as well, but because we did not measure consumer skepticism or persuasion knowledge, we have no way of quantifying them.

Second, while Study 2 benefits from a very high degree of ecological validity and is therefore crucial in advancing the knowledge in the field, the chosen methodology also entails a number of limitations. One weakness of Study 2 was that it only allowed for a comparison between two formats, and did not include a 'brand placement only' condition. In Study 1, we found a significantly higher brand recall in the brand placement only condition than in the program sponsorship messages only condition. It would have been interesting to see if this replicates in the context of Study 2, where we found lower recall scores overall. As mentioned, the network we collaborated with did not offer 'brand

placement only' packages for commercial reasons, but this may be the case for other networks and/or other countries. Given the knowledge that prominence and especially plot connection strongly influences viewer responses to brand placements (e.g., Chan, Lowe, & Petrovici, 2016; Dens et al., 2012; D'Hooge et al., 2017), carefully selecting brands and making well integrated placements is vital. Weaving brands into a program in a "natural" way is often difficult and costly and cannot always be done for just any brand. Poorly executed brand placements that become too blatant could also hurt the program itself and its viewership. The network therefore wanted to limit the number of brands appearing in its shows, where there was no limit to the number of brands buying sponsorship messages, as these are relatively easy and cheap to produce and less likely to affect viewership. Brand placement was therefore only offered as an add-on for brands already paying for sponsorship messages. The reason why it was included in Study 1, is that the network does get requests from advertisers for "brand placement only" contracts, and was interested in knowing the effects it could have, compared to the current offering.

The control group in Study 2 consisted of non-viewers, where "viewers" were defined as having (reportedly) watched at least 10 min of an episode. This is because viewers are likely to have encountered at least one brand placement when they have watched 10 min of a show (Wouters & De Pelsmacker, 2011). The choice of the definition of "viewers" only has a limited impact, as we were especially interested in the difference between the two conditions, and viewership was defined identically in both conditions. However, it would be interesting in further research to use a more fine-grained distinction of viewing frequency or brand exposure to assess whether stronger effects might occur for more frequent viewers, or to establish the point when priming and persuasion knowledge occur and may perhaps cancel each other out. Doing so would likely also require a measure of actual viewing behavior as a more detailed self-report measure is more prone to biases.

Also, in Study 2, an aggregated analysis of brand recall and brand attitude is conducted, without distinguishing between the different types of brands in our sample. Prior research demonstrates that advertising effectiveness is impacted by product type, product category and brand familiarity (Brennan & Babin, 2004; Campbell & Keller, 2003). Although we controlled for product category effects, because of the relatively limited scope of different brands and products under scrutiny, the present research does not account for specific brand and product type characteristics. Future research should attempt to incorporate these factors in order to gain insight into the effectiveness of program sponsorship messages, placement and their combination for different types of products and brands.

Another potential limitation relates to the type of programs that were used in both studies. Despite the variation of different types of program formats, they are mostly successful talent contests. Although these programs are very popular (e.g., "Belgium's Got Talent" averaged 1.044.497 viewers in October 2013, representing a market share of 17.7%) and take up a substantial amount of prime-time broadcasting time, they all belong to the same genre. This limits the generalizability of the study findings to this genre of commercial entertainment programs. Future research could attempt to extend our findings to other program formats such as television fiction.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning that most brands used in this study are well-established brands that have attained a substantial market share in their respective product categories. Although this reflects the reality (these were the actual brands that appeared), it is possible that consumers' pre-existing attitudes toward these brands could have caused ceiling effects, especially in terms of brand attitude. Indeed, attitudes toward unfamiliar brands are more easily influenced than attitudes toward familiar brands (Brown & Stayman, 1992). Future research should try and include a larger sample of less familiar brands, to test whether stronger attitudinal effects could be uncovered. Also, the finding that brand attitude is not increased through brand placement when watching a single episode in Study 1, yet the increase was significant in

Study 2 after an entire season points to the need for future study to determine when the main effect occurs.

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**Nathalie Dens** (Ph.D., University of Antwerp) is associate professor of marketing at the University of Antwerp, Faculty of Applied Economics, Marketing Department and at Antwerp Management School. Her research focuses on consumer responses to different marketing communication formats. She has published in several journals including *Health Communication*, *International Journal of Advertising*, *International Marketing Review*, *Journal of Advertising*, *Journal of Advertising Research*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, *Journal of Service Management*, and *Marketing Letters*. She serves as a member of the editorial board of the *International Journal of Advertising* and of the *Journal of Business Research*.

**Patrick De Pelsmacker** (Ph.D., Ghent University) is full professor of marketing at the University of Antwerp, Faculty of Applied Economics, Marketing Department and at Ghent University, Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Marketing Department. His research interests include advertising effectiveness, advertising in new media, consumer behavior, branding and ethical marketing. His publications have appeared in, amongst others: *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, *Journal of Advertising*, *International Journal of Advertising*, *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, *Psychology & Marketing*, *Marketing Letters*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, *Cyberpsychology & Behavior*, *Health Communication* and *Journal of Health Communication*. He is currently an associate editor of *Journal of Advertising* and *Journal of Marketing Communications*, and he is also on the editorial board of *International Journal of Advertising* and *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*.

**Yann Verhellen** (Ph.D., University of Antwerp) is product manager services at Barco. He obtained his Ph.D. in 2015 on “Consumers' Responses to Brand Placement in Online and Offline Media”. His research has been published in *International Journal of Advertising*, *International Journal of Market Research*, *Journal of Consumer Policy*, *Journal of Electronic Commerce Research*, *Journal of Marketing Communications* and *Marketing Letters*.