



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



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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

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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’ (Lardinoit & 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:

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