The Immediate and Delayed Effect of an Advertiser Funded Program on Consumers' Brand Attitudes: A Field Study

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1 Introduction

As marketers are looking for new, more effective ways to promote their brand, hybrid advertising formats that merge commercial content with media content (e.g., brand placement) are becoming increasingly important (Pqmedia, 2012; Verhellen et al., 2013). As the practice of hybrid advertising is maturing, branded products are no longer just 'placed'; but are deliberately woven into entertainment content. The outcome is a concept the advertising industry has coined branded entertainment, or more recently, content marketing, a convergence of advertising and entertainment content (Hudson and Hudson, 2006; Rose, 2013). The purpose of a branded entertainment program is to give a brand (henceforth referred to as the sponsoring brand) the opportunity to communicate its image to its target audience in an original way, by creating positive links between the brand and the program. The global expenditure on branded entertainment amounted up to $54.58 billion in 2009, and is forecasted to grow with 9.2% in 2014 (Pqmedia, 2010). Yet, beyond "regular" brand placement, there is surprisingly little research on the workings and the effectiveness of more sophisticated and elaborate branded entertainment strategies. Furthermore, existing research on hybrid advertising strategies is often based on a single forced exposure to the message in a laboratory setting (e.g., Roehm et al., 2004), thus limiting the ecological validity of research results. As expressed in the field studies of Russell and Stern (2006), Wilson and Till (2011) and Dens et al. (2012), more naturalistic research designs are needed in order to understand the true effects of hybrid advertising as it operates in real life. Moreover, extant research on hybrid advertising is exclusively cross-sectional (Kamleitner and Jyote, 2013), thus ignoring the long-standing call for more academic research on the long-term impact of commercial communication (Vakratsas and Ambler, 1999; Wiles and Danielova, 2009). Apart from these methodological shortcomings, research is yet to empirically establish a firm explanatory framework of the effects of hybrid advertising. Theoretically, the impact of hybrid advertising on brand attitudes has been explained by its fit or connectedness with the message content (Russell, 2002; Russell and Stern, 2006). However, as noted by Wiles and Danielova (2009) the specific nature of this link, or how a brand fits the message (e.g., a movie or a television program)

P. Verlegh et al. (eds.), *Advances in Advertising Research (Vol. VI),* European Advertising Academy,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-658-10558-7_18,

is yet to be unveiled. The present study wishes to address these knowledge gaps by conducting a longitudinal field study on the short-term and longer-term effects on brand attitude of a real-life branded entertainment television show, and specifically explore the role of brand-program fit for the development of brand attitude.

2 Literature Review and Hypotheses

Existing research on hybrid advertising has mainly focused on the phenomenon of brand placement, i.e., the paid inclusion of brands or brand identifiers in media content (Balasubramanian, 1994). As Mccarty (2004) theorizes, brand placement can create a connection between the brand and the context (the movie or program they are placed in). Consumers learn to attach meaning to brands by observing their relationship with the context (Cooper et al., 2010). As proposed by Russell (1998), this induces a transformational process in which context-related feelings and thoughts spill over to placed brands. The transfer of context-induced affect to attitudes toward advertised brands has been well established in traditional advertising literature (e.g., De Pelsmacker et al., 2002; Moorman et al., 2002; Moorman et al., 2006) and literature on brand placement (Russell et al., 2004). As branded entertainment can also be considered as a type of brand placement that is deliberately built around a brand, we expect that if the branded entertainment program evokes positive affect and positive thoughts, these may spill over to viewers' attitudes toward that brand.

H1: Program liking has a positive effect on the attitude towards the sponsoring brand.

Weaving the brand into the program content can have beneficial effects on brand attitude, but these effects are likely to vary depending on the strength and nature of the connection that is forged. Russell (2002) demonstrates that plot connection, the degree to which a brand is connected to the plot of a sitcom, positively impacts brand attitude. Similar findings emerge from studies by D'astous and Seguin (1999) and Dens et al. (2012). Plot connection can be regarded as a component of the more general concept of 'fit' between the brand and the program. Literature on source and context effects in advertising suggests that a good perceived fit between the brand and the source/context is a vital condition for positive attitudinal effects (Till and Busler, 2000). Schema congruity theory (for an overview, see Meyers-Levy and Tybout, 1989) can explain this phenomenon. Through branded entertainment, brand managers highlight the congruity of their brand with the sponsored program. Schema congruity theory predicts more favorable attitudinal responses if the associated

attitude objects are congruent. For instance, Kamins et al. (1991) show that brand attitudes and purchase intention improve when a television program and an embedded advertisement elicit consistent moods.(Kamins et al., 1991). Russell (2002) found that brand placements that are perceived as incongruent with a television program are perceived as out of place and result in lower brand attitude. In summary, branded entertainment should lead to a perceived congruity between a brand and a program. Congruity theory then predicts that viewers will more easily assimilate the brand with the program and develop more favorable brand attitudes.

H2: The perceived fit between the brand and the branded entertainment program positively impacts brand attitude.

Furthermore, we expect the perceived fit between the branded entertainment show and the sponsoring brand to moderate the effect of program liking on brand attitude. This assumption is also grounded in schema congruity and associative network theory (Gawronski and Bodenhausen, 2006). As argued above, we expect program liking to spill over to viewers' attitude toward the sponsoring brand. Research on celebrity endorsement and source effects shows that the attitudinal spillover between two objects is driven by how well they fit together in the mind of the consumer (Till and Busler, 2000). A strong perceived fit implies that the associative networks of both objects converge to the extent that congruence is achieved (Till and Busler, 2000; Till et al., 2008). Congruent objects are strongly connected through shared associations (i.e., nodes in their respective associative networks), which facilitates the process of forming attitudes about one object (i.e., the integrated brand) based on attitudes toward the other object (i.e., the entertainment program) (Gawronski and Bodenhausen, 2006; Gawronski and Bodenhausen, 2007). Consequently, the spillover of positive program related attitudes will be stronger when there is high perceived fit between the branded entertainment show and the sponsoring brand. Adversely, when a brand is perceived as less fitting with the program, it is unlikely that program related attitudes will influence brand attitudes. In this case there is no inherent connection between the schemas of the brand and the program, meaning that attitudinal spillover is less likely to occur. We expect:

H3: The effect of program liking on brand attitude will be reinforced by viewers' levels of perceived fit between the sponsoring brand and the program.

The focus of the present study is not solely on explaining the short term effects of a branded entertainment program on brand attitude, but also on explaining its longer-term effects. Existing studies investigating longer-term

advertising effects have mostly used market response data (e.g., Moschis and Moore, 1982). According to Vakratsas and Ambler (1999) there is a distinct need of studies based on individual-level data, in order to truly understand the long term impact of advertising campaigns on brand attitude. As aforementioned, the perceived convergence between the cognitive schemas of the brand and the program will impact brand attitude formation in the short run. Cognitive schemas, however, are not robust to temporal variation or even extinction. Even when stored in longer-term memory, certain associations in cognitive schemas weaken or disappear over time (Gawronski and Bodenhausen, 2007). For instance, consumers may simply forget learned links between the brand and the program, thus diminishing the impact of both program-related perceptions and perceived fit on brand attitude.

H4: The effects of program liking and perceived fit on brand attitude for the sponsoring brand will diminish over time.

3 Method

3.1 Procedure

A field study was set up for the Flemish version of 'Project Runway', a 10-episode branded entertainment fashion designer competition, aired on commercial television and sponsored by the Belgian fashion retailer JBC. The winner of the competition got to design his/her own clothes collection, which would be sold in JBC stores. As such, the brand was an essential part of the competition and the program. The brand was also given a lot of visibility throughout the program (i.e., brand placements, company visits and sponsorship disclaimers). Short-term and longer-term program effects were measured through an online questionnaire using a two-wave design, one week (N = 717) and one month (N = 456) after the program finale was broadcast. Both samples were collected by a Belgian market research agency to be representative of the program's audience profile. Only consumers who had viewed at least 10 minutes of the program were considered. Both samples are unique, meaning that wave 2 does not contain respondents from wave 1 and vice versa. Tables 1 and 2 provide a socio-demographic description of the two samples.

Table 1: Sample characteristics (wave 1)

	Gender		
Age category	Male	Female	Total
-20 yrs.	12 (7.9%)	124 (21.9%)	136 (19%)
21 – 30 yrs.	60 (39.7%)	237 (41.9%)	297 (41.1%)
31 – 40 yrs.	26 (17.2%)	100 (17.7%)	126 (17.6%)
41 – 50 yrs.	29 (19.2%)	73 (12.9%)	102 (14.2%)
51 – 60 yrs.	15 (9.9%)	26 (4.6%)	41 (5.7%)
+ 60 yrs.	9 (6%)	6 (1.1%)	15 (2.1%)
Total	151	566	717 (100%)

Table 2: Sample characteristics (wave 2)

	Gender		
Age category	Male	Female	Total
-20 yrs.	3 (2.7%)	27 (7.9%)	30 (6.6%)
21 – 30 yrs.	35 (31.0%)	108 (31.5%)	143 (31.4%)
31 – 40 yrs.	28 (24.8%)	100 (29.9%)	128 (28.1%)
41 – 50 yrs.	24 (21.2%)	72 (21.0%)	96 (21.1%)
51 – 60 yrs.	16 (14.2%)	31 (9.0%)	47 (10.3%)
+ 60 yrs.	7 (6.2%)	5 (1.5%)	12 (2.6%)
Total	113	343	456 (100%)

3.2 Measures

In order to build in a statistical control for exposure frequency, the online questionnaire first measured 'viewing frequency' (how many episodes of the program respondents had seen, between 1 and 10).. Secondly, respondents' liking of the program was measured on a 6-item, 5-point Likert scale (e.g., 'I really enjoyed watching De Designers' $\alpha_{wave\ 1} = .912$, $\alpha_{wave\ 2} = .922$). Afterwards, respondents had to indicate their attitude toward the sponsor brand on a 6-item, 5-point Likert scale (e.g., '… is a good brand', $\alpha_{wave\ 1} = .968$, $\alpha_{wave\ 2} = .964$).. Subsequently, respondents indicated their perceived fit between the sponsoring brand and the program on a 4-item, 5-point Likert scale (e.g., '… matches De Designers', $\alpha_{wave\ 1} = .944$, $\alpha_{wave\ 2} = .914$)

4 Results

Before running the analyses, the impact of age and gender on brand attitude were checked in order to identify potential biasing effects. Brand attitude is significantly higher for women than for men (wave 1: $t(703) = -3.735$, $p < .001$; wave 2: $t(703) = 1.885$, $p = .060$). In addition, respondents' age category significantly impacts brand attitude in both waves (wave 1: $F(5, 704) = 4.934$, $p < .001$; wave 2: $F(5, 704) = 3.805$, $p = .002$). In order to control for these effects, age and gender were included as controls in subsequent analyses.

The hypotheses were tested separately on the data from wave 1 and wave 2. Two multiple OLS regression model were estimated with the attitude towards the brand as the dependent. Gender, age category and viewing frequency were entered as control variables. Gender was included as a dummy variable (1 = female). Age category was indicator coded into 4 dummy variables, according to the procedure prescribed by Aguinis (2003), using the youngest age group as a reference category. Viewing frequency was a continuous variable. The independent variables were program liking, perceived brand-program fit and their interaction. These variables were mean-centered. The model for wave 1 explains a significant amount of variance in the dependent variable ($R^2 = .355$, $F(10, 531) = 30.183$, $p < .001$). Variance Inflation Factor scores demonstrate good discriminant validity (range: 1.040 – 1.918). As shown in Table 3, viewing frequency did not impact brand attitude, while gender and one of the age categories (31-40) did. The regression model was also tested using data collected in wave 2, one month after the program finale. The model explains a significant amount of variance in brand attitude ($R^2 = .293$, $F(10, 256) = 10.195$, $p < .001$). Variance Inflation Factor scores demonstrate good discriminant validity (range: 1.045 – 3.082). Table 5 shows that viewing frequency, again, does not impact brand attitude, but gender and several age categories do.

Program liking has a significant positive influence on brand attitude in wave 1 ($b = .180$, $t = 3.733$, $p < .001$), but not in wave 2 ($b = .103$, $t = 1.453$, $p = .148$). H1 is thus supported only for wave 1. Perceived fit between the brand and the program has a significant positive impact on brand attitude in wave 1 ($b = .469$, $t = 12.192$, $p < .001$) and wave 2 ($b = .315$, $t = 5.437$, $p < .001$), which confirms H2. The interaction effect between program liking and perceived fit is also significant in wave 1 ($b = .114$, $t = 3.089$, $p = .002$) and wave 2 ($b = .194$, $t = 3.539$, $p < .001$). As shown in Figures 1 and 2, the positive main effect of program liking on brand attitude is indeed reinforced by perceived fit. Further analyses of the conditional effects of program liking at different values of perceived fit were conducted using PROCESS (Hayes, 2012). This procedure tests the effect of program liking at values plus and minus one standard deviation from the mean of perceived fit by generating asymmetric bootstrap confidence intervals for statistical inference (see Preacher and Hayes, 2008 for discussion).

For the data of wave 1, as shown in table 4, these tests reveal that program liking does not significantly impact brand attitudes when perceived fit is low (b = .062, t = 1.270, p = .205). The impact of program liking on brand attitude is, however, significant at the mean level of perceived fit (b = .157, t = 3.702, p < .001) and when perceived fit is high (b = .253, t = 4.494, p < .001). These findings are shown in Figure 1, and are in full support of H3.

Table 3: Model for wave 1 (H1, H2 and H3)

	Unstandardized coefficients		**Standardized coefficients**		
	B	Std. Error	β	*t*	Sig.
Constant	3.066	.176			
Program liking	.159	.030	.180	3.733	< .001
Perceived fit	.364	.043	.469	12.192	< .001
Program liking x fit	.086	.028	.114	3.089	.002
Gender	.205	.088	.084	2.324	.021
Age [21-30]	-.010	.079	-.006	-.122	.903
Age [31-40]	.248	.099	.108	2.511	.012
Age [41-50]	.162	.105	.062	1.536	.125
Age [51-60]	.244	.176	.051	1.387	.166
Age [+60]	.202	.290	.025	.696	.487
Viewing frequency	-.011	.014	-.037	-.789	.431

For the data from wave 2, analysis of the conditional effects show that program liking only exerts a significant effect on brand attitude when perceived fit is high (b = .251, t = 3.031 , p = .001, see Table 6 and figure 2 for overview of conditional effects). These results indicate that program liking only impacts long term brand attitude when the perceived fit between the brand and the program is high, whereas in the short term, a moderate level of perceived fit suffices. Findings from wave 2 also support H3.

Table 4: Conditional effects of program liking on brand attitude at different levels of perceived fit (wave 1)

	Effect size	**Std. Err.**	**t**	**Sig.**
Low fit (- 1SD)	.062	.049	1.270	.205
Medium fit (Mean)	.157	.043	3.702	< .001
High fit (+1 SD)	.253	.056	4.494	< .001

Table 5: Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression model for wave 2 (H4)

	Unstandardized coefficients		**Standardized coefficients**		
	B	Std. Error	β	*t*	Sig.
Constant	2.916	.373			
Program liking	.088	.061	.103	1.453	.148
Perceived fit	.258	.047	.315	5.437	<.001
Program liking x fit	.162	.046	.194	3.539	<.001
Gender	.289	.118	.137	2.442	.301
Age [21-30]	.301	.301	.176	1.875	.015
Age [31-40]	.658	.658	.347	3.905	.062
Age [41-50]	.323	.323	.178	1.982	<.001
Age [51-60]	.500	.500	.187	2.513	.049
Age [+60]	.503	.503	.068	2.513	.013
Viewing frequency	-.114	.110	-.072	-1.037	.240

H4 is supported for program liking, as this factor is no longer significant in wave 2. For perceived fit, which had a significant impact on brand attitude in both waves, the drop in effect size was tested by comparing the regression coefficients of both waves using the z-test procedure recommended by Paternoster et al. (1998). Although there is a decrease in the effect size of perceived fit (0,364 vs. 0,258), this drop is not significant ($Z = 1.664$, $p = .096$). As the effect size of the interaction effect increases over time, H4 is not supported for perceived fit and its interaction with program liking.

Table 6: Conditional effects of program liking on brand attitude at different levels of perceived fit (wave 2)

	Effect size	**Std. Err.**	**t**	**Sig.**
Low fit (- 1SD)	-.064	.075	-.8536	.394
Medium fit (Mean)	.094	.061	1.540	.125
High fit (+1 SD)	.251	.076	3.309	.001

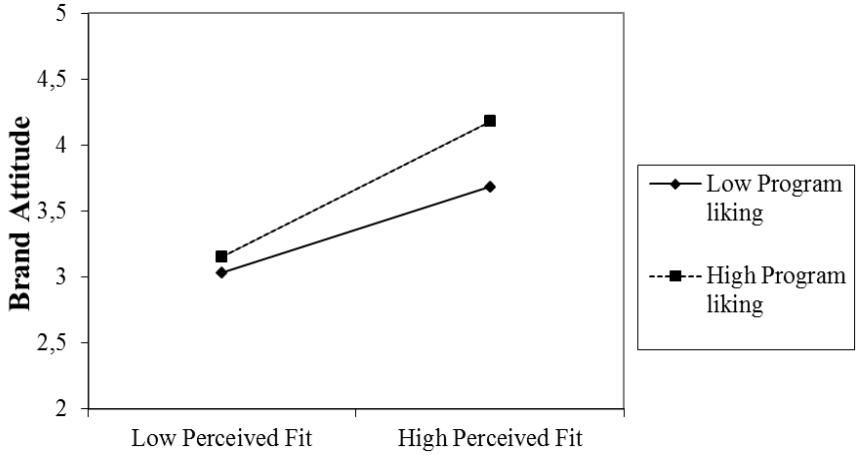

Figure 1: Interaction plot showing the effect of program liking on brand attitude at different levels of perceived fit (wave 1).

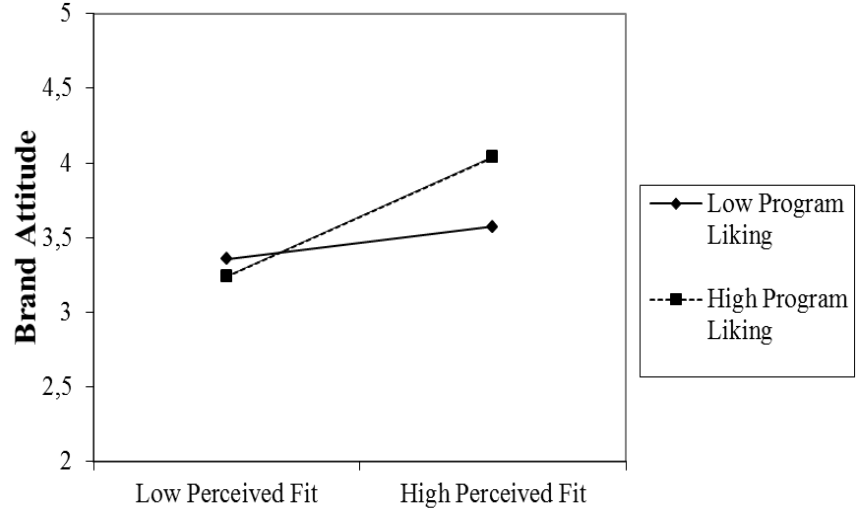

Figure 2: Interaction plot showing the effect of program liking on brand attitude at different levels of perceived fit (wave 2).

5 Discussion, Limitations and Managerial Implications

The results demonstrate the crucial role of perceived fit between a branded entertainment program and its sponsor brand. Embedding brands in well-liked entertainment content is not enough. In accordance with prior research (e.g., Van Reijmersdal et al., 2010), we find that liking for the context spills over to attitudes for embedded brands only if there is a good perceived match-up between the program and the brand. If not, program related attitudes do not influence brand attitude. These findings support the notion that congruence between the cognitive schemas of the integrated brand and the branded entertainment program is a vital prerequisite for spillover to take place. Indeed, a higher degree of perceived fit implies a higher level of convergence and connectedness between the schemas of the brand and the program, which facilitates the process of brand attitude formation through program relevant associations (Gawronski and Bodenhausen, 2006; Till and Busler, 2000). Moreover, data collected one month after the end of the program show that the importance of perceived fit may increase over time. The main effect of program liking on brand attitude dissipates one month after the show. However, program liking still exerts a positive influence on brand attitude for respondents who perceive a good fit between the brand and the program. As perceived fit ties both attitude objects together through convergent schemas (Teichert and Schöntag, 2010) and strengthens their linkage, it makes this link more robust to temporal deterioration. This means that creating a high perceived fit between the brand and the program is crucial to warrant long term effects of program liking an brand attitude.

The present research has a number of limitations that can be taken into account by future researchers. First, only one form of branded entertainment is explored, which limits its generalizability. Branded entertainment and content marketing incorporate a large diversity of content types with their own idiosyncratic characteristics and contextual background, e.g., company videos, exclusive online content for customers, etc… (Rose, 2013). Further exploration of other branded entertainment formats is necessary. Another limitation relates to the selected methodology. Field research is characterized by a trade-off between enhanced external validity and lower internal validity. While the present study has higher ecologically validity than a laboratory experiment, it is limited in the amount of control it has over external variables. For instance, we had no way of controlling for exposure to other brand communications for the sponsoring brand, outside of the program.

Finally, this study offers several managerial implications for practitioners involved in the production or management of branded entertainment content. Although building entertaining content around a brand is beneficial by itself, a good match-up between the brand and the content is vital in order for the brand

to benefit from the entertaining character of the content. Managers should pay close attention to matching their product to the right type of content before investing in a branded entertainment campaign. This particularly holds true when looking at the longer-term impact of branded entertainment. In the long run, the beneficial effect of program induced liking on brand attitude dampens, unless consumers perceive the brand as a good fit with the program.

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