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## Can negative characters in soap operas be positive for product placement?☆

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is twofold: (1) to test how the consumer's attitude toward product placements in a television soap opera is affected by the use of different types of character: positive versus negative; and (2) to determine the circumstance in which a negative character can be appropriated in product placement. The conceptual model proposes that the attitude toward product placement in general has a direct and indirect impact on the attitude toward the placed product, while the (negative or positive) nature of the television characters interacting with the placed product works as a moderator. Experimental data test the model. The stimuli were original product placements in a soap opera broadcast. Results from a structural equation model show that negative characters can be effective vehicles for product placement as long as viewers meet two conditions: they manifest general acceptance of product placement and have a parasocial relationship with the character.

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## 1. Introduction

Product placement - also known as brand placement, brand integration or in-program sponsoring (Marchand et al., 2015) - is a communication technique characterized by the subtle integration of brands, products or concepts within audio visual content as paid messages (Balasubramanian, 1994; Karrh, 1998). It has emerged as a viable alternative to traditional advertising (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001) and is an increasingly important tool in the communication strategy of brands (Karniouchina et al., 2011; Wiles & Danielova, 2009). A reason for the growth of product placement is the skepticism about traditional television advertising (Fransen et al., 2015; Paço & Reis, 2012). Audiences are more likely to counter-argue in response to advertising than to product placement as they perceive the explicit persuasive intention of advertising (Balasubramanian et al., 2014). Therefore, informed consumers look at advertising as a partial and less credible source of information and tend to resist strong advertising pressure (Ries & Ries, 2002). Additionally, marketers express concern about advertising clutter, the proliferation of television channels, and the availability of zapping mechanisms to avoid advertising viewing (Kotler, 2005; Uribe, 2016). For these reasons, investment in product placement has steadily increased and the subject has received greater attention from the academic community (van Reijmersdal et al., 2009). This interest is likely to continue as

product placement is currently considered a hot topic in the field of communication research (Taylor, 2013).

Product placement is also beneficial from the point of view of audiovisual production because the inclusion of brands adds realism to fictional action, helps identify the time period in which the action takes place, and contributes to defining the character's role (Balasubramanian et al., 2006). It also shows the viewers something (e.g. brands) that they use in their daily lives (DeLorme & Reid, 1999) thereby enhancing viewer involvement with the program (Balasubramanian et al., 2014). Finally, the interaction between characters and brands in fictional television programs or movies provides the audience with clues about the character's personality and lifestyle (Russell & Stern, 2006).

The relationship between brands and characters is seen in a range of television programs. The regularity, duration and narrative features of soap operas make them particularly suitable for creating this connection between character and viewer; the story and characters are designed to appeal to viewers' fantasies about an exciting life full of emotions so as to boost the link with the viewer. This link benefits from the soap opera structure as it encompasses an array of plots with intertwining stories (Stern et al., 2007) and the viewer experiences a strong emotional release, personal gratuity, companionship, and escape from reality (Stern et al., 2005). Similarly, viewers discover the characters' interrelationships (La Pastina, 2001) and develop strong and lasting bonds with their favorite characters (Stern et al., 2007).

Different types of character are commonly portrayed in soap operas, and they are frequently stereotyped and polarized: either positive or negative, heroes or villains (Stern et al., 2007). One can expect asymmetry in the way viewers relate to them since positive and negative events evoke different patterns of psychological, affective, cognitive, and

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behavioral activity in consumers (Fazio et al., 2015). The lack of studies on the impact of using different types of characters in product placement situations may explain the fact that, in most cases, marketers still prefer their brands to appear in positive storylines with positive characters linked to them (Knoll et al., 2015; Redondo, 2012). This gap in the literature is the main motivation for the current study, which asks the following research questions: can negative characters be used for successful product placement? In what circumstances can a negative character be an appropriate product placement vehicle?

To respond to these questions, the paper presents an experimental study that tests the use of product placement linked with different types of soap opera characters. All characters use the same brand in product placement situations with similar valence and prominence. In order to investigate this topic, we define six hypotheses in the study using the parasocial relationship as the mediator and type of character as moderator.

The article makes the following contributions to the literature. First, we further extend the use of the concept of the parasocial relationship – a unilateral psychological connection between viewer and character or media celebrity (Yuan et al., 2016) – by connecting it with the attitude toward product placement in general, namely by analyzing the direct and indirect effect on the attitude toward the placed product. Second, we highlight the moderator effect of the type of character in the conceptual model. Third, we find that negative characters can also be used in product placement as long as viewers meet two conditions: they manifest general product placement acceptance and have a parasocial attachment to the character.

This paper is structured as follows. The next section introduces the main concepts, constructs, hypotheses, and proposed model. Section 3 describes the methodology, measures, and variables. Section 4 presents the results. Section 5 provides the discussion and main conclusions.

## 2. Viewers, characters, and product placement

### 2.1. The effect of attitude toward product placement in general

Consumers generally accept product placement; this has been shown in cross-cultural comparative studies (Gould et al., 2000) in the USA and Germany (DeLorme et al., 2000), Austria and France (Gould et al., 2000), Australia (Brennan et al., 2004), Singapore (Karrh et al., 2001), and the USA, Finland and Italy (Sabour et al., 2016). Overall, consumers seem to understand that product placement is part of brand communication strategy; they do not consider it either unethical or misleading and accept its incorporation in the fictional world (Sung et al., 2009). Even more skeptical segments of the population in relation to advertising such as adolescents tend to perceive product placement as a natural part of their daily lives (Mangleburg & Bristol, 1998).

Despite this general acceptance, some researchers question the ethics of product placement because no explicit reference is made to the presence of brands in the audiovisual content. Some viewers may consider that product placement invades their privacy and denies them the ability to choose and the right to be informed (Nebenzahl & Jaffe, 1998). These ethical and deontological concerns are particularly relevant in the case of sensitive products like tobacco that cannot legally use traditional advertising (Gould et al., 2000). These concerns are also important to brands because consumers' attitudes and beliefs about product placement are linked to subsequent intentions of product usage (Friestad & Wright, 1994; Morton & Friedman, 2002). In fact, it is recognized that the attitude toward product placement in general is an important antecedent to consumer attitudes toward brands used in product placement (Balasubramanian et al., 2006); and positive attitudes toward product placement are usually connected with a positive attitude toward the placed products (Eisend, 2009; Gupta & Gould, 1997).

For these reasons, our first hypothesis is:

**H1.** The attitude toward product placement in general positively influences the consumer's attitude toward the placed product.

### 2.2. Parasocial relationship – fictional character as a close friend

People are fascinated by the world of fictional characters and of celebrities portrayed in the mass media. According to transportation theory, they can be transported into a fictional narrative world which impacts their beliefs (Green & Brock, 2000). As a result and regardless of the media used, viewers often care about the characters and their involvement in the story; this is an example of the so-called paradox of fiction (Livingston & Mele, 1997); they become absorbed by the fictional story and interact virtually with fictional characters as if they were real people (Russell & Stern, 2005). In particular, televised fictional programs like soap operas give the audience the feeling they are closely following everything that happens in the daily life of the fictional characters. Soap opera audiences often immerse themselves in exciting narrative worlds; they tend to perceive fictional stories and characters as realistic situations and persons and fill in eventual perceptual gaps with reliable assumptions based on their real-world experience (Levin & Simons, 2000).

In some cases, viewers want to be like the character (identification) and tend to experience what happens to the character as if it had happened to them (Cohen et al., 2006); in other situations viewers keep their self-identity and relate to fictional characters as though they were acquaintances or even friends, in a parasocial way (Cohen, 2001). A parasocial attachment is one-sided, mediated by media, and not a reciprocal relationship. It happens when the viewer has the illusion of a face-to-face relationship with a fictional character or a celebrity (real person) and therefore feels part of a close, intimate relationship (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Stephens et al., 1996).

The repetition of parasocial interactions allows the viewer to accumulate knowledge about the characters and make a mental representation of their parasocial relationship (Klimmt et al., 2006). While parasocial connections can undoubtedly occur in isolated situations (e.g. a movie), this kind of relationship is more likely to develop when the viewer sees a character over a long period of time (Balasubramanian et al., 2014).

The parasocial relationship applies both to fictional characters and real celebrities. People can connect strongly to a celebrity (real person), follow her/his career closely and join fan clubs; but may also react strongly against negative celebrity behaviors by making no parasocial link or rapidly withdrawing from it, distinguishing between reality and fiction (Schemer et al., 2008; Zhou & Whitla, 2013). In contrast, it is easier for the audience to accept fictional characters with dubious moral principles, because there are no real-life consequences attached (Konijn & Hoorn, 2005). For instance, in the TV show 'Dexter' the protagonist depicts a character who is loyal to his beloved and friends but at the same time is a serial killer. Viewer's parasocial relationship may be plausible, because his vicious behavior belongs to the world of fiction. However, the same behavior by a celebrity would be totally unacceptable and would not result in any parasocial relationship (Knoll et al., 2015).

According to the balance theory, people tend to seek balance, order and harmony in their lives; in the absence of equilibrium, they change their attitudes and/or behavior in order to restore balance (Dalakas & Levin, 2005). Hence, if a viewer has a parasocial connection with a fictional character, and realizes that this character uses or likes a product that he dislikes, it creates a state of imbalance and produces tension for change (Woodside & Chebat, 2001); and they will tend to adjust their attitude toward the placed product in order to achieve psychological balance (Russell & Stern, 2006).

For the above reasons, we hypothesize that:

**H2.** The parasocial relationship positively influences the consumer's attitude toward the placed product.

### 2.3. General beliefs about product placement and parasocial relationship

The overall attitude toward product placement is a general belief that is embedded in the role of communication in society (general level). It comes beforehand and determines the specific context of interaction of characters in the context of a soap opera (specific level).<sup>1</sup> Based on the theory of planned behavior, normative beliefs are prior to subjective norms and “concerned with the likelihood that important referent individuals or groups approve or disapprove of performing a given behavior” (Ajzen, 1991, p. 191). Within the context of television consumption, normative social norms toward a particular behavior (e.g., product placement approval) might work as a motivator or constrainer of acting upon one's attitudes (e.g., toward characters involved in that product placement) (Noguti & Russell, 2015).

According to uncertainty reduction theory, people tend to establish active, interactive or passive strategies to reduce uncertainty in their relationship with others (Rubin et al., 2001). In terms of parasocial interaction, this reduced uncertainty creates conditions of attraction and results in a stronger bond between the viewer and media character (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). On the other hand, previous research indicates that viewers are more likely to develop a parasocial relationship with characters that share their attributes and beliefs (Schiappa et al., 2007). Hence, homophily (real similarity) between viewer and character is a predictor of a parasocial relationship (Eyal & Rubin, 2003; Turner, 1993).

This sharing of beliefs (e.g., viewers' acceptance of product placement and a character using a brand inside media content) is the basis for our third hypothesis:

**H3.** The attitude toward product placement in general positively influences the parasocial relationship.

### 2.4. Positive-negative asymmetry

Positive-negative asymmetry occurs whenever there are different effects in the presence of positive or negative events in fields of human interaction (Baumeister et al., 2001; Redondo, 2012). These events can range from negative to positive valence and assume different forms such as “appetitive or aversive, hostile or hospitable, threatening or nurturing, pleasant or unpleasant. As a response to these stimuli, the behavioral response can be approach or withdraw, advancement or retreat, movement toward or away, attack or avoidance, nurturance or defense, acceptance or rejection” (Cacioppo et al., 2012, p. 43). Therefore, organizations and brand managers tend to use celebrities associated with positive values as spokespersons in the belief that these positive values will transfer to the brand (Schemer et al., 2008). Inversely, people tend to react strongly when a celebrity's behavior reveals a negative trait, and this can negatively affect the image of any brand the celebrity represents (Till & Shimp, 1998; Zhou & Whitla, 2013). Moreover, this negative information about celebrities is usually amplified by media, and has a dramatic public impact (Zhou & Whitla, 2013). Nonetheless, the negative behavior of fictional characters in movies or television programs might not receive the same negative assessment, and viewers sometimes bond with unpleasant characters. Hugh Laurie's appeal as ‘Dr. House’ is an example of audience attraction to an unpleasant character (Pickett, 2012) and shows that a parasocial process between consumers and characters can occur regardless of their positive or negative

valence. Viewers of a soap opera form their opinion and categorize the characters based on the observation of their behavior. After processing this information, they choose between two categories related to the character's behavior (honest vs. dishonest, good vs. bad, positive vs. negative) (Lupfer et al., 2000). In our study, characters are defined in a stereotypical manner, which facilitates their classification into positive or negative personality traits throughout the soap opera.

Previous research has shown that in isolated situations (e.g., a movie), characters that viewers perceive to be negative do not lead to positive parasocial interaction. For example, Schemer et al. (2008) and Knoll et al. (2015) manipulated the attitude toward the characters, describing them as bad guys before respondents watched the communicational stimuli. It appears that viewers need many episodes (e.g., of a soap opera) to establish a sense of familiarity and intimacy with characters before they develop a parasocial relationship with them (Myers et al., 2014; Russell & Stern, 2006); when this happens, viewers may engage in a parasocial relationship regardless of the characters' valence (Cohen, 2004), or may even prefer negative characters in the case of strong viewer involvement (Konijn & Hoorn, 2005).<sup>2</sup> The type of character is added to the conceptual model as a qualitative moderator (Baron & Kenny, 1986). This dichotomous positive-negative asymmetry has been used in many studies as moderating the effect of the independent variables' influence on the dependent variable (Blanz et al., 1997; Nicolao et al., 2009). Thus, the sample is divided into two sub-groups representing the two levels of the variable (positive vs. negative) and the main model examined in each sub-group. In this moderated mediation, we expect to find change in the mediation pattern as a function of the moderation by type of character (Edwards & Lambert, 2007). This dichotomy does not necessarily translate into a positive impact of positive characters and negative impact of negative characters. When the consumer establishes relationships and interacts with a negative character, he/she recognizes some attractive and rewarding elements that transform the valence of the stimulus. Therefore, a positive effect is expected, regardless of the type of character (Hsee et al., 2015). This idea is consistent with previous research, which has shown that both negative and positive stimuli have a positive impact on memory (Chipchase & Chapman, 2013) and therefore our expectation is that the moderation of type of character maintains the direction of causal effects among the variables of the conceptual model. Hence, different types of characters might be expected to influence the way in which the parasocial relationship and attitude toward product placement in general affect the consumer's attitudes toward a placed product; that is, the type of character has a moderator effect in the model. Thus, we build on the earlier hypotheses and test three additional hypotheses that now include the moderator effect of type of character:

**H4.** The type of character (positive or negative) moderates the relationship between attitude toward product placement in general and the consumer's attitude toward the placed product.

**H5.** The type of character (positive or negative) moderates the relationship between attitude toward product placement in general and the parasocial relationship.

**H6.** The type of character (positive or negative) moderates the relationship between the parasocial relationship and the consumer's attitude toward the placed product.

The conceptual model is given in Fig. 1. It shows the direct and indirect effects of the attitude toward product placement in general on the consumer's attitude toward the placed product, the mediator effect of the parasocial relationship and the moderator effect of the type of character.

<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for raising the issue on the relationship between these two constructs; this allowed us to improve the theoretical support underlying the conceptual model of this study.

<sup>2</sup> Konijn & Hoorn (2005) use the term “involvement” as a broader concept that includes identification, empathy, and parasocial relationship.

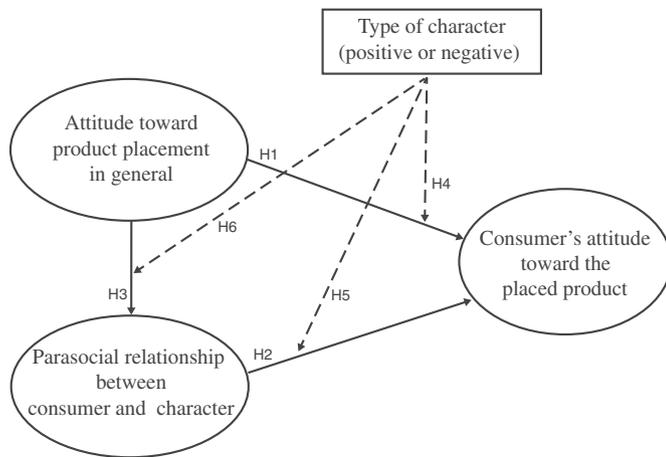


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Study design

The study sets out an experimental design to test the model. The stimuli used in this test were original product placement clips included in a soap opera broadcast in prime time free-to-air television. All situations of product placement showed a positive relationship between the character and the brand. The setting was a prime time television soap opera in which four characters (two negative and two positive) used the same brand (Ambre Solaire sun protector by Garnier) in different product placements.

To ensure internal validity, a preliminary qualitative study was conducted that consisted of six individual in-depth interviews with professional experts in product placement. The participants watched four video segments during the interviews in order to determine the similarity of scenes in terms of the prominence and length of brand exposure, and the scene's outcome and emotions. In the interview script, we used the dimensions of the scales of Scene's Outcome (Brewer & Ohtsuka, 1988) and Arousal and Emotions (Feldman, 1995).<sup>3</sup> The study concluded that all scenes are similar in terms of brand prominence and plot integration. The four different stimuli were also similar in terms of arousal, emotional environment (Feldman, 1995) and scene outcome (Brewer & Ohtsuka, 1988). Therefore, the characters were the most evident source of differences between the scenes used as communication stimuli.

#### 3.2. Subjects

The study was conducted online using a professional web-based company to survey and collect the data. The sample comprises 309 individuals living in Portugal (Female: 58.3%/Male: 41.7%) aged from 18 to 56 years, generally coinciding with the audience of television soap opera viewers (Female: 63.6%/Male: 36.4%) and consumers of the product category (sun protectors) used in this study (Female: 53.9%/Male: 46.1%). In terms of age groups, 91.5% of respondents are aged between 18 and 44 years old and 97.5% between 18 and 54. These values are consistent with the profile of the internet user in Portugal (80.4% in the

group 15–44 years old and 92.3% 15–54 years). The 18–54 year age group is predominant in the sample and corresponds to age groups with the highest solar protection consumption. Overall, the sample represents the population aged from 15 to 54 years old across the different regions of Portugal.

#### 3.3. Research instrument

The stimuli were four video segments from the prime time soap opera 'Floribella' aired on SIC (one of the leading free-to-air television channels). They showed four characters interacting with the product (sun protector) in four different scenes (see Fig. 2). The video segments (average length: 2 min 22 s) were uploaded on YouTube and each one served as a different stimulus for each sub-sample.

Each participant watched only one video segment on YouTube before answering the questionnaire, which contains the variables present in our conceptual model.

#### 3.4. Measures and variables

##### 3.4.1. Constructs

The attitude toward product placement in general was assessed using a five-point Likert scale (ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree) with four items (adapted from Morton and Friedman (2002)). A confirmatory factor analysis (for ordinal variables) showed a good fit ( $\chi^2(2) = 6.805, p < 0.05$ ; CFI = 0.993; SRMR = 0.002), according to conventional cutoff criteria for fit indexes (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

In order to study the mediating construct parasocial relationship between consumer and character, a five-point Likert scale was used (ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree) with four items adapted from Russell and Stern (2006). A confirmatory factor analysis (for ordinal variables) showed a good fit ( $\chi^2(2) = 12.909, p < 0.05$ ; CFI = 0.989; SRMR = 0.002).

The dependent construct of consumer's attitude toward the placed product assesses the predisposition to respond favorably or unfavorably to a determined stimulus of communication during a specific exposure (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989). The scale measuring this construct includes three items used in earlier studies (Cline et al., 2003; MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989; Russell & Stern, 2006). A confirmatory factor analysis (for ordinal variables) performed showed an excellent fit ( $\chi^2(1) = 0.129, p > 0.05$ ; CFI = 0.999; SRMR = 0.021).

Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE) were computed to measure the reliability and validity of the constructs. Appendix A provides these indicators and the items included in the scales. CR and AVE were evaluated as described by Fornell and Larcker (1981). A good consistency, acceptable consistency, and weaker consistency is reached for a Cronbach's alpha greater than 0.80, between 0.60 and 0.80, and below 0.6, respectively (Hair et al., 2009). All constructs have a high consistency. CR and AVE values are well above 0.5 and therefore good for all constructs. This shows the internal consistency among multiple indicators of each variable, and demonstrates that in fact they measure the same construct and substantially explain their respective latent variables (Appendix A). Following a confirmatory factor model of these constructs, the correlation between these constructs is: 0.217 between attitude toward product placement in general and consumer's attitude toward the placed product; 0.360 between attitude toward product placement in general and consumer's parasocial relationship with the character; and 0.326 between consumer's parasocial relationship with the character and consumer's attitude toward the placed product. The null hypothesis that correlation between the constructs is one (no discriminant validation) is tested by the Wald's test of parameter constraints. We reject the null hypothesis for these three correlations ( $p < 0.001$ ). Thus, the discriminant validity is ensured given that the overlap of constructs is small (correlation values far below 1).

<sup>3</sup> The script of our qualitative interviews included the adaptation of two scales to measure Scene's Outcome and Arousal and Emotions. Scene's Outcome Scale, adapted from Brewer and Ohtsuka (1988), was used to assess the viewing outcome on the following dimensions: liking, interested, outcome satisfaction, completeness, arrangement, and empathy. The Arousal and Emotions Scale, adapted from Feldman (1995), was used to measure the feelings or emotions felt after watching each scene, using the following opposite poles: tense – calm, nervous – relaxed, stressed – serene, upset – contented, sad – happy, depressed – elated, bored – excited, and fatigued – alert.

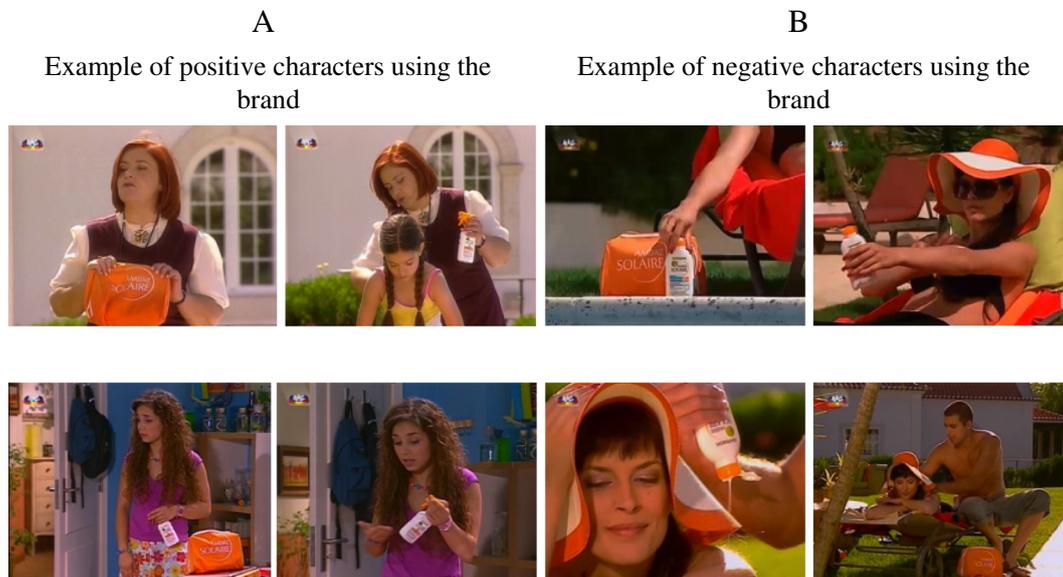


Fig. 2. Snapshots of product placement scenes.

3.4.2. Observed variables

Type of character – The study uses four product placement scenes with positive or negative characters. This classification by type of character was confirmed with a semantic differential scale and validated previously (Russell & Stern, 2006), with three items (bad/good character; dislike/like the character; unpleasant/pleasant character). This allowed us to sort data into mutually exclusive categories (positive versus negative) and to operationalize the moderator effect.

3.5. Statistical methods

Structural equation modeling is chosen due to the need to make a comprehensive investigation of the effects of constructs in their multiple layers via direct and indirect paths of influence (Baumgartner & Homburg, 1996). The research was conducted in the two following phases. Model 1 is a structural equation model (SEM for ordinal variables) that studies the relationship between key constructs. The three constructs are measured by adapting previously developed and tested scales. Model 2 extends the previous model by adding the moderator effect of type of character to the model, that is, it studies the impact of positive or negative characters on the relationship between predictor variables and the dependent variable. Direct and indirect effects are computed taking the moderator effect into account. All models are estimated using the statistical package MPlus 6.0.

4. Results

First, structural equation models test the direct effect of attitude toward product placement in general on the dependent variable consumer’s attitude toward the placed product, as well as the indirect effect through the mediation of the parasocial relationship. The fit of the structural equation model is checked using the chi-square test. As

it is sample size sensitive, the following fit indices were also applied (Lages et al., 2005): Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and Standardized Root Mean Residual (SRMR). The chi-square test for this model is significant ( $\chi^2(41) = 66.551, p < 0.05$ ). CFI is 0.990, well above the threshold of 0.95; SRMR is 0.004, below the threshold of 0.08 to be considered a good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). All of these relationships present significant results that support H1, H2, and H3 (Table 1).

Second, we add the moderator effect, splitting by type of character, either negative or positive ( $\chi^2(227) = 449.675, p < 0.05$ ; CFI = 0.878; SRMR = 0.019). The results in Table 2 show the impact of this variable in the model: whereas all relations are significant for the group of positive characters, the relation between attitude toward product placement in general and parasocial relationship is not significant for negative characters.

In order to further study the moderator effect of the type of character on the mediation, we also estimated the total and direct effects of attitude toward product placement in general on the consumer’s attitude toward the placed product, as well as the total and specific indirect effects through the parasocial relationship. Results in Table 3 are consistent with those in Table 2 and show that all relationships are significant for the group of positive characters, supporting H4, H5 and H6. For the group of negative characters, the direct effect of the parasocial relationship and attitude toward product placement on the consumer’s attitude toward the placed product is significant, confirming H4 and H5. The effect of the attitude toward product placement in general on the parasocial relationship is not significant and therefore H6 is not supported for this type of characters.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The moderator role of the type of character (positive or negative) is the key finding of this study. In particular, we investigate whether negative characters can be used in product placement.

Table 1 Results for the structural equation model.

Hypotheses	Estimate (standardized)	Standard Error	p-value
H1 Attitude toward ppl in general → Attitude toward the placed product	0.303	0.054	0.000
H2 Parasocial relationship → Attitude toward the placed product	0.260	0.054	0.000
H3 Attitude toward ppl in general → Parasocial relationship	0.217	0.057	0.000

Note: ppl = product placement.

**Table 2**  
Results for structural equation model with moderator effects.

Hypotheses		Estimate (standardized)	Standard error	p-Value
<b>Group A (positive characters)</b>				
H4	Attitude toward ppl in general → Attitude toward the placed product	0.363	0.071	0.000
H5	Parasocial relationship → Attitude toward the placed product	0.253	0.076	0.001
H6	Attitude toward ppl in general → Parasocial relationship	0.331	0.087	0.000
<b>Group B (negative characters)</b>				
H4	Attitude toward ppl in general → Attitude toward the placed product	0.245	0.092	0.005
H5	Parasocial relationship → Attitude toward the placed product	0.246	0.083	0.003
H6	Attitude toward ppl in general → Parasocial relationship	0.122	0.080	0.129 (n.s.)

Note: ppl = product placement.

We argue that audiences distinguish between fiction and reality, and they might react differently to celebrities and fictional characters. Audiences tend to develop a negative attitude when celebrities are associated with negative traits (Schemer et al., 2008). Or they may not establish parasocial interaction with an unknown fictional character they initially perceive as negative (Knoll et al., 2015). But in regular fictional programs like soap operas, our study shows that a parasocial relationship can be developed between consumers and negative leading characters. In this case, and provided that the consumers generally accept product placement as a communication technique, negative characters can be used by marketers as a product placement vehicle. This approach to product placement has not previously been mentioned in the literature (van Reijmersdal et al., 2009).

This paper develops a theoretical framework that improves our understanding of the importance of two predictors of the attitude toward the placed products: parasocial relationship and attitude toward product placement in general. Although previous research had already investigated the role of the consumer's parasocial relationship (Russell & Stern, 2006), this study offers new insights. In addition to the direct effect of a parasocial relationship between consumer and character on attitude toward the placed product, our study finds that the relationship between attitude toward product placement in general and attitude toward the placed product has a significant mediator role (indirect effect). Additionally, we find that this mediation depends on the moderator effect of the type of character. Specifically, the study reveals that for negative characters, the parasocial relationship and attitude toward product placement in general has a direct and statistically significant effect on consumers' attitudes toward the placed product. In contrast, for positive characters both direct and indirect effects of attitude toward product

**Table 3**  
Mediation effects.

Effects of Attitude toward product placement on Attitude toward the placed product	Estimate	Standard error	p-Value
<b>Group A (positive characters)</b>			
Total effect	0.517	0.092	0.000
Specific indirect effect			
Attitude toward ppl in general → Parasocial relationship → Attitude toward the placed product	0.097	0.042	0.022
Direct effect			
Attitude toward ppl in general → Attitude toward the placed product	0.420	0.092	0.000
<b>Group B (negative characters)</b>			
Total effect	0.296	0.106	0.005
Specific indirect effect			
Attitude toward ppl in general → Parasocial relationship → Attitude toward the placed product	0.032	0.024	0.188 (n.s.)
Direct effect			
Attitude toward ppl in general → Attitude toward the placed product	0.264	0.105	0.012

Note: ppl = product placement

placement in general on attitude toward the placed product are found to be statistically significant as well as the effect of attitude toward product placement in general on consumers' attitudes toward the placed product. The moderation (by type of character) therefore reveals a positive-negative asymmetry; this is consistent with studies in the field of psychology in which negative and positive stimuli have different salience, potency and dominance (Eby et al., 2010; Rozin & Royzman, 2001). These findings make a contribution to the literature and have relevant managerial implications. They extend our understanding about product placement by revealing that negative characters can be appropriate as product placement vehicles where there is a positive attitude toward product placement and a strong parasocial relationship. This can change the way marketers consider opportunities for product placement as they have previously used positive characters almost exclusively (Hsee et al., 2015). The findings also inform audiovisual content producers (e.g., television channels) of the opportunity to expand their communication supply by incorporating this variable into their commercial offer.

Despite the promising outlook of the study, we note some practical difficulties. Decisions on product placement are often made before the regular broadcasting of the program starts so it is difficult to predict its success or failure in the media world (Bressoud, 2007). Therefore, the inclusion of the parasocial relationship in the commercial supply, especially through the use of negative characters, implies a relationship of great trust among all players: advertisers, agencies, producers, screenwriters, and content providers.

Some other limitations are also acknowledged. Previous research showed that product placement as well as other communication techniques increase spontaneous brand recall among consumers (Uribe, 2016). The experimental setting used video segments, which do not replicate real life situations precisely and probably lead to greater recall than would result from watching the full program. However, we believe that this aspect is mitigated in the study because participants watched the program at least once a week, and so this new screening could help the recall of product placement (Auty & Lewis, 2004; Etienne et al., 2010). As our study does not focus on recall, we do not believe it represents a problem for the internal validity of the study. On the other hand, the sample used in our research included only internet users. We recognize this limitation but believe the advantages of this type of research, namely the widespread geographical sampling and the use of individuals outside the academic environment, represent an acceptable trade-off. Finally, all characters used in this study were highly stereotyped; this is typical of soap operas with bad guys tending to be dangerous villains and good guys very often fantastic heroes (Stern et al., 2007). Nonetheless, future research can include more complex traits in order to capture the multiple facets of a character (Bodkin et al., 2009) and also focus on explaining why a parasocial relationship is more likely to be developed with certain characters. Replicating this study with celebrities would allow the differences vis-à-vis fictional characters to be evaluated. Future research could draw on the main conclusions of this study by extending the model to other types of products and programs thus shedding light on its implications for product placement in other contexts.

## Appendix A. Operationalization and validity of constructs

Constructs	Items	Cronbach's alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Consumer's attitude toward the placed product <sup>a</sup>	This is good way to present the brand.	0.919	0.921	0.796
	I liked the way the brand appeared in the program			
	The way the brand appeared in the program was pleasant.			
Consumer's parasocial relationship with the character <sup>b</sup>	I think (the character) is like an old friend.	0.902	0.907	0.713
	(The character) makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with friends.			
	(The character) seems to understand the things I want to know.			
	I find (the character) attractive.			
Attitude toward product placement in general <sup>c</sup>	When a character that I like uses a product in a TV program, I am more likely to remember the product.	0.874	0.876	0.718
	I have looked for a product in the store after seeing it in a TV program.			
	I have started using a brand after seeing it in a TV program.			
	I wanted to try a brand after seeing it in a TV program.			

<sup>a</sup> Adapted from MacKenzie and Lutz (1989).

<sup>b</sup> Adapted from Russell and Stern (2006).

<sup>c</sup> Adapted from Morton and Friedman (2002).

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