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# Does information about the underdog biography of company founders affect brand evaluations?



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Kommunikation, Underdog, Anthropomorphismus, Gerechtigkeit, Gründerbiographie, Produktbewertung

*Market Communication, Underdog, Anthropomorphism, Justice, Founder biography, Product Evaluation*



Viele Unternehmerpersönlichkeiten, die ihre Firma vor Jahrzehnten gegründet haben, weisen eine Underdog-Biographie auf. Sie starteten mit wenigen Ressourcen und hatten eine Reihe von Schwierigkeiten zu überwinden. Manche dieser Firmen sind heute wirtschaftlich erfolgreich. Wir untersuchen, ob Konsumenten Marken positiver bewerten, wenn in der Marktkommunikation auf die Underdog-Biographie der Gründergeneration Bezug genommen wird. Insgesamt zeigt die Studie einen positiven Effekt, wenn diese historische Begebenheit thematisiert wird. Die Befunde verdeutlichen, dass der Underdog-Effekt darauf basiert, dass Konsumenten meinen, das betreffende Unternehmen würde es verdienen, erfolgreich zu sein, und darauf gründet, dass eine stärkere Beziehung zwischen Marke und Konsument entsteht.

*Many famous people who founded companies either recently or decades ago are associated with an underdog biography. Although they began with few resources and had to undertake strong efforts to overcome impediments, these companies are currently successful. We investigated whether references to the underdog biographies of company founders affected evaluations of these brands. We found an overall positive effect of referring to an underdog biography of founders in market communications. Our results indicate that the underdog effect results from sensations of deservingness and a strengthened customer-brand relationship.*

## 1. Introduction

In this section, we give a definition for underdogs and provide examples for this phenomenon. Next, we present an overview of prior research on underdog effects in the field of brands; this survey shows that a reference to a company founder's underdog biography affects brand evaluations positively if certain conditions are met. However, there is also research on the underdog effect in further areas such as sports teams, politicians, and job candidates, and this stream of research indicated the relevance of an additional factor that determines the appearance of a positive underdog effect: the single-cue versus the multiple-cue environment. The authors found an underdog effect when the test persons participating in experiments received no information except the information about the

underdog/top dog status of one of the options (single-cue environment). When additional information for these options was provided (multiple-cue environment), the underdog effect turned out to be marginal. From these findings, we derive our main research question about whether the underdog effect that was found for brands is an artificial finding because the respective findings were also derived from single-cue studies.

### 1.1 Definition

Underdogs have been defined “as individuals or groups who are at a disadvantage and are expected to lose” (Vandello *et al.* 2007, 1603). In this way, the underdog effect was characterized as the “people’s tendency to support or root for an entity that is perceived as attempting to accomplish a difficult task and that is not expected to succeed against an explicit or implicit advantaged opponent” (Kim *et al.* 2008, 2551). Paharia *et al.* (2011) suggested a slightly different definition. They define underdogs as individuals or groups who are externally disadvantaged in comparison with others but passionately attempt to overcome the odds; we adopt this later conceptualization. Kim *et al.* (2008) and Goldschmied/Vandello (2009) denoted David versus the Giant Goliath and Robin Hood versus the Sheriff of Nottingham as classic examples of underdogs. In notable movies, characters such as Rocky (a fictional boxer) and Erin Brockovich (a single mother) have been presented as underdogs who succeeded.

### 1.2 Presence of underdogs

People can realize underdogs in different areas. For instance, in matches of the soccer champion league, sometimes top teams meet underdog teams that are disadvantaged due to their resources. In the field of politics, sometimes candidates or parties with different financial resources compete for votes. Employers may decide among job candidates consisting of top dogs and underdogs due to their different socioeconomic backgrounds. Moreover, there are underdogs in the field of brands. In this case, the underdog biography of company founders can be noticed by consumers. Consumers are aware of movies highlighting the underdog biography of company founders such as Coco Chanel (Coco before Chanel, 2009), Margarete Steiff (Margarete Steiff, 2005), and Steve Jobs (Jobs, 2013). Bill Gates, one of the founders of Microsoft, is another person with a well-known underdog biography. On the front page of the current German version of the website of the Nestlé brand (nestle-marktplatz.de), the biography of its founder Heinrich Nestle is presented. It shows the humble origin of the company. At the beginning of a current TV commercial for the Maggi brand, Heinrich Nestle is introduced to the audience as the brand’s founder who had to overcome obstacles. Steiff, a manufacturer of stuffed animals, operates a museum where the humble origin of the company is shown as a promotional tool. These examples indicate that founders of companies, especially founders with an underdog biography, are used in advertising and promotional activities.

### 1.3 Prior research on the underdog effect on brand evaluations

There are already few studies that investigated the underdog effect in the field of brands (Avery *et al.* 2010; Paharia *et al.* 2011; Tezer *et al.* 2014; for details see *Table 1A* in the *Appendix*). In general, this stream of research found that highlighting the underdog biography of the company’s founder can improve brand evaluations. For instance, Avery *et al.*

(2010) tested whether providing or not providing underdog information (“The founders of company A started in a garage with very few resources but had a dream and struggled to succeed. They overcame the odds to bring their products to market”) influences consumer affect toward this company. Each of these studies revealed a distinct condition under which the positive underdog effect was present.

*Avery et al.* (2010) reported that information about an underdog biography of a company founder is only effective for large companies and ineffective for small companies. They argue that a reference to an underdog biography is effective for improving evaluations of large companies and their brands because it reduces negative thoughts that are associated with large company size.

*Paharia et al.* (2011) found a positive underdog effect on brand evaluations when the test persons imagined purchasing products for their own usage. When they were instructed to imagine purchasing products as a gift for friends, the underdog effect disappeared. They argue that people generally like to identify with underdogs; moreover, they posit that people are likely to believe that they themselves are more underdog-prone than others. Hence, when products are purchased for one’s own usage, consumers are presumed to prefer brands that are highly identity-relevant. On the opposite, when products are bought as a gift for friends, consumers are expected to rely on a lower underdog proneness of their friends and, thus, neglect underdog biographies of company founders.

*Tezer et al.* (2014) reported that the presence of a positive underdog effect is contingent on the source of the information. They revealed a positive underdog effect on brand evaluations when the company itself had made the information about the underdog biography of its founder available on its website (internal source of information). When a magazine article informed consumers about the company founder’s underdog biography (external source of information), the positive underdog effect disappeared. Although the authors did not provide explanations for this finding, one could argue that consumers who read magazine articles are primarily seeking for pleasure and, thus, are not ready for spending the cognitive effort that is necessary to link underdog information to the respective brands. On the opposite, when they are deliberately in contact with advertisements or company websites, they focus on receiving brand information and, thus, are willing to add the underdog information to their brand knowledge.

#### 1.4 Prior research on the underdog effect in further areas

The underdog effect was also investigated in the fields of sports (*Frazier/Snyder* 1991; *Vandello et al.* 2007; *Kim et al.* 2008), politicians (*Fleitas* 1971; *Goldschmied/Vandello* 2009), and job candidates (*Avery et al.* 2010). For instance, *Frazier/Snyder* (1991) asked students to imagine two sports teams (from an unknown discipline) where one was highly favored to win the match and asked them to indicate the team that they would prefer to win; 81.1% voted for the less favored team. The findings are mixed. While *Fleitas* (1971), *Frazier/Snyder* (1991), *Vandello et al.* (2007), *Kim et al.* (2008), and *Avery et al.* (2010) found strong positive underdog effects, *Goldschmied/Vandello* (2009) were only able to report a marginal effect. The main difference of the latter experiment compared to the remaining experiments was the way of how the options were described. *Goldschmied/Vandello* (2009) used well-known options when they asked test participants to vote for Barack Obama versus Hilary Clinton as presidential candidates for the Democratic Party depending on whether either Obama or Clinton was described as the underdog. In all oth-

er studies, fictitious or highly unknown options (e.g., “team A” versus “team B”) had to be evaluated in single-cue studies, i.e., without any additional information besides the underdog status of one of the options (e.g., “team A” is expected to win and “team B” is expected to lose”).

### 1.5 Research gap

As indicated above, prior research found a positive effect of information about a company founder’s underdog biography on brand evaluations if certain conditions are met (large companies, purchase of the product for one’s own use, and internal source of information). However, all of these studies (Avery *et al.* 2010; Paharia *et al.* 2011; Tezer *et al.* 2014) considered fictitious companies and brand names and produced the findings by the means of single-cue studies. This means that the authors abstained from providing any additional information about the features of the products or the company that had to be evaluated.

The look at the findings on the underdog effect in further areas revealed that there might be an important additional condition that provokes the underdog effect: the absence of any additional information besides the mere notion that one option has an underdog status. It is well documented in the existing academic literature that making only one single piece of information available for evaluations motivates people to rely on this information for evaluations. If additional information is present, the effect may disappear. For instance, Jacoby *et al.* (1971) investigated the effect of product price on quality perceptions. The test participants used the price information for quality evaluations when it was the only piece of information (single-cue study). When the brand name was additionally mentioned, the effect of the price became insignificant. In this sense, single-cue experiments cannot clarify whether a single cue has an effect due to its content or merely because it is the only piece of information that disappears when it is accompanied with additional cues. As a consequence, the single-cue design experiments used to investigate the underdog effect for brands may have led to an erroneous conclusion.

Thus, we question the existence of a positive underdog effect on brand evaluations even for the favorable conditions found in prior research (large company size, products bought for one’s own use, and internal source of information) if further information such as a well-known brand name, technical product features, or an image of the product is available. Because advertising practice always uses actual brand names and provides additional information the question of whether the underdog effect also exists under this condition obviously is a crucial point.

### 1.6 Contribution to prior research

We contribute to prior research by aiming to answer the following questions:

*Is there an underdog effect on brand evaluations in multiple-cue environments?* At first, we investigate whether there is or is no underdog effect on brand evaluations when additional information about the brand (e.g., the name of an actual company’s founder, product information, or product images) is present. Because previous literature consistently reported an underdog effect in the additional-information-absent condition, we will only focus on the additional-information-present condition.

*Which mediating processes underlie the underdog effect?* Possibly, the underdog effect does not completely disappear in the additional-information-present condition and marketers may consider including underdog information in their advertisements and websites. Then, the question arises about how the underdog effect could be enhanced. Therefore, we look at the mental processes that mediate the effect of underdog information on brand evaluations. We consider sensations of deservingness and the strength of the customer-brand relationship as mediators; we will explain these concepts in the subsequent section.

*Are there additional moderators that affect the strength of the underdog effect?* Thirdly, we look at an additional determinant of the strength of the underdog effect that has not been investigated or discussed thus far. We presume that presenting images that facilitate the process of narrative transportation could foster the underdog effect. We will also explain this concept in the next section.

Evidently, variables such as brand positioning (e.g., prestige vs. value-for-money) or the answer to the question of whether competitors of the brand are also referring to underdog biographies of their founders might also affect the strength of the underdog effect. Note that we abstain from including a more extensive set of moderating variables into our framework because our main focus is investigating the presence or absence of the underdog effect on brand evaluations when additional information about the brand is available. In *Figure 1*, we highlight the aspects we aim to investigate in our research.

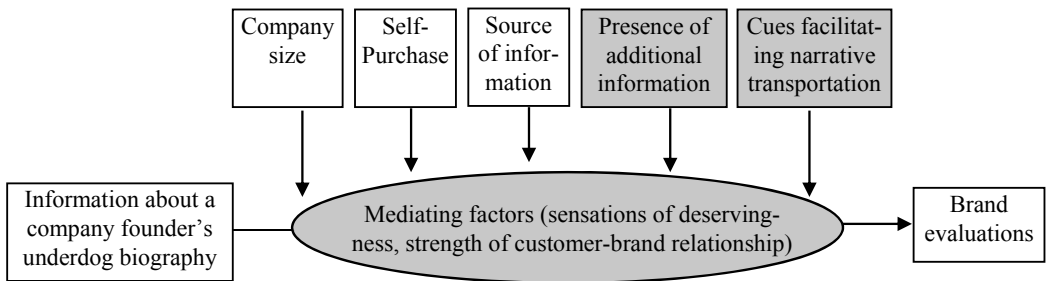


Figure 1: Conceptual model of our research

## 2. Theoretical background

This section explains reasons for the existence of an underdog effect for brands that are associated with underdog biographies of their founders.

### 2.1 Sensations of deservingness

Some researchers on underdog effects refer to the deservingness theory originally developed by *Feather* (1999), who argued that people have a general understanding of deservingness. He illustrated the theory with the following example: If a pupil worked hard (this is a positively evaluated action) to successfully pass an examination (this is a positively evaluated outcome), then people believe that this pupil deserved a high grade. *Feather* (1999) referred to *Heider's* (1946, 1958) balance theory to provide a reason for this expectation. Applying *Heider's* model of triads of relationships to the case of the pupil creates a positive pupil-effort relationship. If this relationship is complemented by positive ef-

fort-grade and pupil-grade relationships, then the relationship structure is “balanced” and favorably viewed.

*Vandello et al.* (2007) used this general approach to predict positive responses to underdog biographies in the field of sports. They posited that underdogs deserve to be viewed in a positive light because they have strived to be successful. When people come into contact with underdogs, they are likely to compare the underdogs with their privileged counterparts. Under these conditions, people are expected to feel the desire to restore justice or equality (*Goldschmied/Vandello* 2009). By supporting the underdog, they can contribute to reducing the inequality between the underdog and their counterpart and enhance the perceived fairness of the competition (*Vandello et al.* 2007; *Kim et al.* 2008). As *Frazier/Snyder* (1991, 382) states: “In the underdog world view, inequalities are seen as unjust and needing correction.”

*Feather’s* example of the pupil who worked very hard and thus deserved a high grade can also be transferred to the case of brands whose founders have an underdog biography. Because the underdog founders had to overcome numerous obstacles compared with their competitors, their brands may deserve to be economically successful. Admittedly, numerous company founders with underdog biographies lived a long time ago. Although these founders began from an underdog position, these companies are no longer underdogs compared with their competitors. However, according to the deservingness theory, one might expect that consumers still wish to see these companies succeed today and in the future to honor their founders’ efforts in overcoming obstacles. Therefore, consumers may feel sensations of justice and deservingness if they prefer the brand of a founder with an underdog biography.

## 2.2 Customer-brand relationship

Another argument that can be used to predict an underdog effect on brand evaluations is called anthropomorphism, which is based on animism. This concept can be applied to interactions and evaluations of inanimate objects such as brands.

Animism is the general belief that humans, dead people, and superhuman powers have souls (*Gilmore* 1919). Numerous theories posit that people expand this vision to animals and even to inanimate objects, thus “anthropomorphizing” (i.e., “humanizing”) inanimate entities and phenomena. The existing literature posits that people tend to attribute human characteristics to non-humans to facilitate interactions with them (e.g., *Fournier* 1998; *Epley et al.* 2007). Products and brands are obviously inanimate objects.

In some instances, marketers deliberately aim to humanize brands and products. *Aggarwal/McGill* (2007, 2012) stated that anthropomorphized brands encouraged consumers to imagine that a brand can be “born” and has a life as an actual person. The most prominent example of a humanized presentation of a product can be found in ads and show-windows that present wristwatches. Retailers set the time at 10:10 to make the watches “smile.” There is plentiful research in existing academic literature on the effect of humanized product features. For instance, *Aggarwal/McGill* (2007) compared the response of consumers to a “smiling car” (due to the shape of the car’s radiator grill) with their response to a “sad” car. In another experiment, they presented beverage bottles that either appeared family-like (father, two children, and the mother) or as a regular range of products. *Landwehr et al.* (2011) varied the smile of a cell phone’s design by arranging the buttons into a laughing or sad-looking human mouth. *Kim/McGill* (2011) manipulated the

design of a slot machine. The anthropomorphized design contained rectangles that mirrored a human face. Celebrities, mascots (e.g., the characters of M&M's chocolate candies), and personalized brand names (e.g., Mr. Proper) are additional tools that are used to anthropomorphize products. Thus, the consumer is more likely to “see the human in the nonhuman” (Aggarwal/McGill 2012, 308) and more easily finds commonalities between the characters of the brand and their own person (Aaker 1997; Chandler/Schwarz 2010), thus facilitating the interaction with the products and the brands. Empirical research in the field of anthropomorphizing products and brands has mostly found a positive effect on consumer responses to these products and brands. Consumers tend to add a preference bonus to products and brands if they reflect favorable or neutral human characteristics.

Highlighting the company founder's biography may be considered another form of brand humanization (Fournier 1998; Avery et al. 2010). Because the brand is associated with the human characteristics of the founder, consumers may recognize similarities between the brand as an abstract entity and their own person (e.g., generate thoughts such as “the brand is like me”). This phenomenon is denoted as a consumer-brand relationship (Chang/Chieng 2006) or synonymous brand identification (Paharia et al. 2011).

Based on these arguments, we derive the following hypotheses:

- H1: Brands whose founders have an underdog biography are evaluated more favorably if information about this biography is provided in advertisements.*
- H2: The underdog effect postulated in H1 results from sensations of deservingness and the strength of the customer-brand relationship.*

### 2.3 Narrative transportation

Information on the underdog biography of a brand's founder may distract consumers from processing product-related information (e.g., technical features). We presume that information about an underdog biography may activate a distinct mode of information processing that denotes narrative transportation.

Green/Brock (2000, 702) originally described the phenomenon of narrative transportation. They argued that people experience a mental state of “transportation” when they are immersed in a text, i.e., when they “become lost in a story.” Escalas (2004a) referred to this approach and posited that advertising cues can place consumers into a state of “transportation” if they are immersed in a self-generated story that is evoked by externally provided ad cues. For instance, Escalas (2004a) showed that this process could be induced by instructing consumers to envision using the advertised product in a certain situation (e.g., by imagining oneself running through a park with the promoted sports shoes). This approach suggests that consumers spend their cognitive resources on creating imaginations. They are thus prevented from generating negative responses to the advertised product because this process distracts them from less favorable product features and from developing counter-arguments against the product. The studies by *Sujan et al.* (1993) and *Escalas* (2007) provide further evidence of this phenomenon.

*Avery et al.* (2010, 215) transferred these concepts to brand biographies. Information about company founders who began from an underdog position may evoke self-generated stories in consumers. Because consumers are likely to remember certain underdog aspects and periods in their own life, they can easily place themselves in the role of the founder and mentally simulate their historical past. Due to this process of mental simulation

(Fiedler/Garcia 1987), they are distracted from generating counter-arguments against the product. We posit that images showing motifs of the founding process facilitate this process of narrative transportation. If pictures show how the founder successfully overcame obstacles, the consumer could more easily place herself/himself in the role of the founder and relive the past. We therefore test the following hypothesis:

*H3: The underdog effect postulated in H1 is stronger if images showing some scenes from the founding process are included in the advertisement.*

### 3. Study

This section describes the experiment that investigated the effect of information about the company founder's underdog biography on brand evaluations and reports the results. The experiment was conducted in Germany. We paid attention to the fact that our setting is in line with the conditions found in prior research that provoke the underdog effect (large company size, self-purchase, and internal source of information).

#### 3.1 Experimental design

We exposed each test participant to two advertisements. The ads promoted two different competing well-known brands. One option was the target brand, and the other was a competitor brand. For the target brand, we created three versions of a print ad. The first version did not contain any biographical information ( $T_1$ ). The second version contained a text that provided some details from the underdog period of the company's founder ( $T_2$ ). In the third version, the biographical information was accompanied by images showing the founder's activities ( $T_3$ ). For the competitor brand, we developed a print ad that did not contain biographical information about the founder of the company (C). We compare the findings from three experimental conditions ( $T_1$  and C,  $T_2$  and C, and  $T_3$  and C). As it will be explained below, we used twelve different pairs of brands as a replicate factor. The combination of both factors resulted in a  $3 \times 12$  factorial between-subjects design.

#### 3.2 Test objects

We conducted this experiment for twelve pairs of brands that cover a wide range of consumer goods. For brands with an underdog background, we used Adidas, Ben & Jerry's (ice cream), Bionade (soft drink), Chanel (in comparison with two different competitor brands), Fischer (ski), Ford, Levi's, McDonald's, mymuesli (a brand of cereals that customers can mix individually and buy in an online store), Steiff (stuffed animals), and Suchard (chocolate).

#### 3.3 Test stimuli

We use the Levi's brand to describe our manipulations. We created three versions of an ad that promoted blue jeans of the target brand ( $T = \text{Levi's}$ ) and one ad version that promoted blue jeans of a competitor brand ( $C = \text{Diesel}$ ). All ad versions showed a female model who was different for the brands and the brand name. The first ad version of the target brand did not contain biographical information of the founder ( $T_1$ ). In the second ad version, the following text (translated) was included: "Levi Strauss – a poor textile retailer of the Wild West who became the inventor of the legendary blue jeans. He had a dream and

defied all odds” ( $T_2$ ). In the third ad version, this biographical text was accompanied by pictures that illustrated Levi Strauss’s biography ( $T_3$ ). We show these ad versions in the *Appendix (Figure 1A)*. The same technique was used to manipulate ad versions for all other pairs of brands.

### 3.4 Pretest

From the sample of twelve pairs of brands, we selected two pairs of brands and examined whether the reference to the company founder’s underdog biography that is included in the test stimuli for the target brand evokes thoughts about this phenomenon. Thus, the experimental design of the pretest was a 3 (experimental conditions:  $T_1$  and C,  $T_2$  and C, and  $T_3$  and C)  $\times$  2 (pairs of brands: Adidas/Nike and Fischer/Head) factorial between-subjects design. In total, 134 students ( $M_{\text{age}} = 22.17$  years; 56.7% female) participated in this pretest. They were randomly assigned to the resulting six conditions. Following *Paharia et al. (2011)*, we assessed two components of the underdog concept: the perceptions of the founder’s external disadvantages while starting his business and the perceptions of the founder’s passion and determination to overcome these impediments. Note, that we assessed perceptions of external disadvantages and passion for both the target and the competitor brand. In line with *Paharia et al. (2011, 778)*, we assessed perceptions of external disadvantages by asking the test participants to agree or disagree with “Compared to competing brands, the founder of (brand) had to struggle more than other founders” and “Compared to competing brands, the founder of (brand) had less resources” on a seven-point scale. Perceptions of passion and determination were assessed by indicating agreement with “Compared to competing brands, the founder of (brand) was more passionate about his goals” and “Compared to competing brands, the founder of (brand) built his brand through sheer will and determination.”

In *Table 1*, we show the results for these two variables. The founders of the target brands (Adi Dassler and Josef Fischer) were associated with stronger perceptions of external disadvantage and passion when information about their underdog biography was included in the print advertisements (see cells marked with grey color in *Table 1*) compared to the biography-absent condition. Moreover, the reference to the target company founder’s underdog biography did not affect underdog perceptions of the founders of the competitor companies. Thus, the manipulation worked as intended.

Brand (company)	External disadvantage of the company's founder		Passion and determination of the company's founder	
	Biography of the target company founders absent	Verbal biography of the target company founders	Biography of the target company founders absent	Verbal biography of the target company founders
Adidas (target)	3.33	3.90 $F_{2;56} = 2.400, p < .10$	3.77	5.00 $F_{2;56} = 5.056, p < .01$
Nike (competitor)	3.20	3.48 $F_{2;56} = .220, NS$	3.93	4.10 $F_{2;56} = .079, NS$
Fischer (target)	3.31	4.22 $F_{2;72} = 4.696, p < .05$	3.77	4.43 $F_{2;72} = 6.230, p < .01$
Head (competitor)	3.38	3.57 $F_{2;72} = .147, NS$	4.33	4.11 $F_{2;72} = .814, NS$

Notes. The figures indicate mean values.

The scale ranges from 1 (low disadvantage/passion) to 7 (high disadvantage/passion).

In neither condition, information about the competitor company's founder was provided.

Table 1: Effect of verbal and visual information about the target company founder's underdog biography on perceptions of external disadvantage and passion

For three additional pairs of brands, we applied a thought-listing task to analyze if the test stimuli that included underdog biography information actually evoked thoughts about this phenomenon (target = mymuesli/competitor = Seitenbacher, target = Steiff/competitor = Sigikid, and target = Suchard/competitor = Ritter Sport). In these studies, we also found support for the presumption that providing a text about or images of the company founder's underdog biography affects perceptions of the founder's external disadvantages and his passion.

### 3.5 Sample of the main study

The data were collected in 2011 and 2012 ( $N = 2,275$ ). The respondents' ages ranged from 16 to 50 years ( $M_{\text{age}} = 23.71$  years); 73.9% of the participants were female. The higher portion of females in the sample resulted from the fact that only females were asked to evaluate brands in the cases of Chanel perfumes, Steiff teddy bears, Levi's jeans, and Suchard chocolate. In addition, 71.0% of the participants were students.

### 3.6 Procedure and measures

The interviewers conducted face-to-face interviews. Each test participant was exposed to two print advertisements: one was the ad promoting the competitor brand, and the other was a version of the ad for the target brand. One half of the sample of the test participants was exposed to the ad for the target brand prior to the exposure to the ad for the competitor brand; the other half had contact with the ads in reversed order. They could view the ads for as long as they wished.

They were then asked to indicate their attitude toward the target brand and the competitor brand by agreeing or disagreeing with the terms "interesting," "appealing," "likeable," and "attractive" (seven-point scale, target brand:  $\alpha = .928$ , competitor brand:  $\alpha = .930$ ). They were subsequently asked to indicate whether they preferred the target or the competitor brand. In accordance with *Feather/Dawson* (1998, 371), we assessed sensations of deservingness by asking the test participants to agree or disagree with "I feel that products of (brand) deserve to be bought." The strength of the customer-brand relationship was assessed by asking the test participants to agree or disagree with "This brand reminds me of how I am" and "This brand says a lot about the person who I am or who I want to be" (seven-point scale,  $R = .776$ ). These items were adopted from prior research (*Thorbjornson et al.* 2002, 28; *Escalas/Bettman* 2003, 343; *Aaker et al.* 2004, 8; *Escalas* 2004b, 175; *Escalas/Bettman* 2005, 382; *Chang/Chieng* 2006, 941). Although these authors used more items than we did, we could not use all of the suggested items because some of them did not apply to the products we consider. For instance, "I can use (brand) to communicate who I am to others" is not suitable for assessing the strength of customer-brand relationships for goods that are not visible to others. To assess narrative transportation in the case of images illustrating the founder biography, we asked the test participants to agree or disagree with the following statements: "While thinking about the ad, I found it interesting to picture the events in it taking place" and "I liked to picture the events the founder had experienced" (seven-point scale,  $R = .805$ ). Similar items had been used by *Escalas* (2004a, 42).

Finally, the test participants indicated their interest in and their knowledge of the product category, and they reported perceptions of uncertainty about the quality in the product

category of the presented brands. Moreover, they reported their occupational status, age, and gender. We used these measures to assess whether the experimental groups were homogeneous for each pair of brands; we did not find any significant or remarkable differences for these control variables.

### 3.7 Total effect of the underdog information

In *Table 2*, we show the choice shares of the brands depending on the experimental condition. To assess the attitude variable, the results are shown in *Figure 2* on the aggregate level.

Category	Target brand	Competitor brand	Biography of the target company founders						Sample size
			Absent		Verbal		Verbal and visual		
			Target	Com- petitor	Target	Com- petitor	Target	Com- petitor	
Sports shoes	Adidas	Nike	53.1	46.9	65.6	34.4	46.9	53.1	192
Ice cream	Ben & Jerry's	Häagen Dazs	52.5	47.5	57.5	42.5	60.0	40.0	120
Soft drink	Binonade	Sinalco	76.3	23.7	84.6	15.4	82.1	17.9	116
Perfume	Chanel	Boss	38.7	61.3	54.8	45.2	67.7	32.3	186
Perfume	Chanel	Ralph Lauren	48.4	51.6	62.9	37.1	35.5	64.5	186
Ski	Fischer	Head	45.5	54.5	50.0	50.0	39.4	60.6	198
Cars	Ford	Volkswagen	55.3	44.7	53.8	46.2	61.5	38.5	116
Jeans	Levi's	Diesel	34.8	65.2	46.7	53.3	51.1	48.9	276
Burger	McDonald's	Burger King	35.7	64.3	50.0	50.0	58.6	41.4	210
Cereals	mymuesli	Seitenbacher	45.7	54.3	71.4	28.6	72.9	27.1	210
Teddy bears	Steiff	Sigikid	70.0	30.0	78.8	21.3	75.0	25.0	240
Chocolate	Suchard	Ritter Sport	8.0	92.0	28.0	72.0	38.7	61.3	225
Overall			44.9	55.1	57.6	42.4	56.4	43.6	2,275

*Note.* The figures indicate the percentages of participants who prefer either the target brand or the competitor brand.

*Table 2:* Effect of information about the target company founder's underdog biography on choice shares

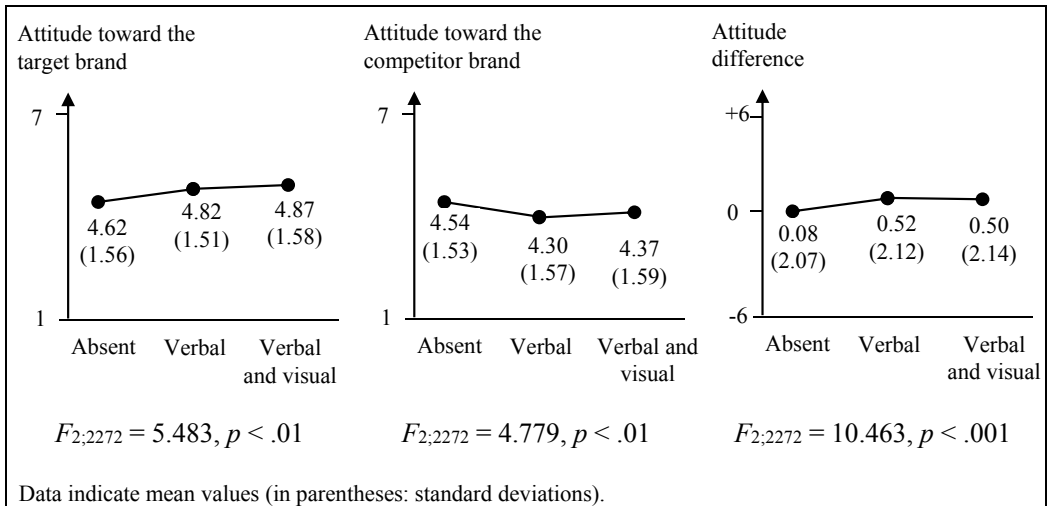


Figure 2: Effect of information about the target company founder’s underdog biography on the attitude toward the target brand, the competitor brand, and the difference of these measures

### 3.8 Hypotheses tests

*Hypothesis 1:* Table 2 shows the proportion of the test participants who reported preferring the target brand to the competitor brand. This proportion increased from 44.9% in the biography-absent condition to 57.6% in the biography-present condition when verbal information about the biography was provided ( $\chi^2 = 24.319, p < .001$ ). Figure 2 indicates that the difference score of attitudes improves when the verbal information is present ( $M_{\text{absent}} = .08, M_{\text{present}} = .52, F_{1,1514} = 16.754, p < .001$ ). We were unable to find a positive underdog effect for the Ford brand; we presume that this finding was random. Overall, the data support the hypothesis.

*Hypothesis 2:* We expected that the sensations of deservingness and the strength of the customer-brand relationship with regard to the target brand would mediate the effect of the underdog biography on brand evaluations. We applied the bootstrapping procedure developed by Preacher/Hayes (2008) to estimate the indirect paths from the presence of the underdog biography of the target brand’s founder on the difference score of the attitudes, i.e., the attitudes toward the target minus the competitor brand. Overall, the reference to an underdog biography improved the difference score of attitudes ( $M_{\text{absent}} = 0.08$  vs.  $M_{\text{present}} = 0.52, \beta_{\text{total}} = .44$ ), as observed in the graph on the right side of Figure 2, and improved the sensations of deservingness ( $M_{\text{absent}} = 5.42$  vs.  $M_{\text{present}} = 5.85, \beta_{\text{underdog} \rightarrow \text{deserv- ingness}} = .43$ ) and the strength of customer-brand relationship ( $M_{\text{absent}} = 2.96$  vs.  $M_{\text{present}} = 3.29, \beta_{\text{underdog} \rightarrow \text{schr}} = .33$ ). The mediation procedure divided the total effect into the indirect effects via the mediators and the residual direct effect that cannot be explained by the included mediators. The correlation between the two mediators was only  $R = .031$  (NS), which indicates that estimating this dual mediation model does not suffer from severe collinearity. The parameter estimates are presented in Figure 3. All of the coefficients proved to be significant at the .05 level in one-tailed tests. The 95% confidence intervals

for the indirect effects did not cover the value zero  $[-.02; .22]$  for sensations of deservingness and  $[-.02; .17]$  for the strength of the customer-brand relationship). Thus, our findings provide evidence for the hypothesis. However, it should be noted that the goodness-of-fit of the model was rather poor ( $R^2 = .194$ ).

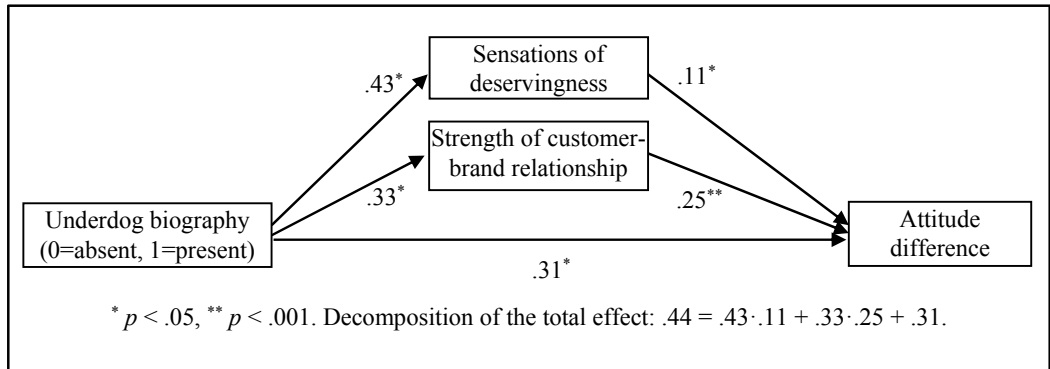


Figure 3: Estimates of mediators in the relationship between the underdog biography and the brand attitudes

*Hypothesis 3:* We had expected that the size of the total underdog effect would be higher when contact with the underdog information was more intense due to images about the company founder’s life and activities. However, we generally failed to provide empirical support for this presumption. We did not find that the proportion of test participants in the choice shares who preferred the target brand in the verbal-information-present condition could be generally further increased if the text was additionally accompanied by images (57.6% vs. 56.4%,  $\chi^2 = .218$ ,  $p = .678$ ). Similarly, the difference score of attitudes was not affected by presenting images ( $M_{\text{verbal}} = .52$  vs.  $M_{\text{verbal and visual}} = .50$ ,  $F_{1;1516} = .041$ ,  $p = .840$ ) on average. We even found examples where the target brand’s choice share was lower when detailed images about the founder’s biography were included compared with the biography-absent condition (e.g., Adidas, Chanel, and Fischer). In summation, we cannot support this hypothesis in general.

### 3.9 Interpretation

*Hypothesis 1:* Our experiment complements the research and findings of Avery et al. (2010), Paharia et al. (2011), and Tezer et al. (2014). These authors found a positive underdog effect when the underdog information was the only piece of information available for company or brand evaluations and when certain additional conditions are met. Our findings indicate that consumers use underdog information for brand evaluations, even when additional information is available (e.g., an image of the product and an actual brand name). Therefore, the underdog information is effective due to its content. The overall effect of the information about the underdog biography was rather small. Choice shares increased from .449 to .567 (Table 2), and the difference score of the attitudes increased from .08 to .52 on a scale ranging from -6 to +6 (Figure 2). We surmise that the degree of the effect was small because we used well-known brands that are associated with

stable attitudes and because we exposed the test participants to a piece of information about the founder's underdog biography on only one occasion.

*Hypothesis 2: Paharia et al.* (2011) found that the customer-brand relationship (denoted brand identification by these authors) mediates the relationship between the underdog information and brand evaluation. We also found support for this process in our study. Moreover, we identified an additional mental process: consumers experience sensations of deservingness when they decide to favor a brand with an underdog biography. However, *Figure 3* shows that there remains a residual direct effect indicating a third process. We argue below that this effect may be due to narrative transportation, which we effectively activated in certain cases.

*Hypothesis 3:* We had expected that the effect would be stronger when contact with the underdog information was more intense due to images that would likely activate a process of mentally simulating the founder's biography. We had intended to test this presumption by comparing consumer responses to ads that contained additional images about the underdog biography (third experimental condition) with their responses when these additional images were absent (second experimental condition). However, we generally failed to provide empirical support for this presumption. *Table 2* contains cases where additional images actually reduced choice shares compared to the underdog-information-absent condition. For instance, when using the Chanel brand, we found a positive effect for including additional images when Boss was used as the competitor brand and a negative effect of inserting additional images when Ralph Lauren served as the competitor brand. A detailed inspection revealed that the images had a positive effect when they showed crucial events of the founder's biography in a chronological sequence that began with humble roots and ended in a fortunate state. When the images did not indicate this type of sequence, a negative effect emerged. In the case of the Chanel/Boss-combination, where the images turned out to positively affect the evaluation of the Chanel brand, we had included a sequence of pictures showing Coco Chanel living in an orphanage, in front of her first store, and finally portrayed as a successful woman. Conversely, in the case of the Chanel/Ralph Lauren combination, the images only showed Coco Chanel sewing a dress. The measures used to assess narrative transportation are in line with this interpretation (partly additional data). In the case where story-like images illustrated Coco Chanel's biography (used in the Chanel/Boss-combination), the values of narrative transportations were higher than in the case where the images were not story-like (used in the Chanel/Ralph Lauren-combination) ( $M_{\text{story-like}} = 5.08$ ,  $M_{\text{not story-like}} = 3.30$ ,  $F_{1;122} = 12.866$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Based on these findings, we conclude that a story-like presentation of images beginning with humble origins and ending with a successful event in the underdog's biography fosters the process of narrative transportation. Under this special condition, the hypothesis could be confirmed.

#### 4. Implications

This section highlights cases in which market communications that refer to underdog biographies may be beneficial. Moreover, we provide advice on how to make this type of communication more effective. We offer recommendations on when and how to effectively use underdog biographies in market communications.

#### 4.1 Famous names of founders

We do not recommend placing famous founders of well-known brands who began from an underdog position such as Adi Dassler (Adidas), Coco Chanel, or Levi Strauss (Levi's), *in the center* of an advertising strategy for these brands (e.g., emphasizing the biography in TV commercials). However, there are numerous opportunities to refer to the biography in the market communications that accompany advertising in mass media.

First, the historical events could be shown in museum-like presentations on brand web sites or even in actual museums. For example, Steiff (stuffed animals) operates a museum that celebrates its founder. The garage where Hewlett Packard's founders began is also maintained as a museum. Audi (automobiles) refers to their brand history on its Facebook website; in a chronologically ordered sequence, Audi's founder August Horch is mentioned, although his underdog biography is not highlighted.

Second, movies that retell the biographies of company founders are occasionally run in cinemas. For instance, "Jobs" recently presented the biography of Steve Jobs as a founder of the Apple brand. During the timeframe when these movies are popular, regular advertisements for these brands may also highlight the underdog biography of the founder.

Third, the company founder's name could be used to denote special product lines. For instance, the Adidas brand offers a special "Adi Dassler edition" that reminds consumers of the brand's founder and his biography. The special coffee blend "Starbucks Pike Place" alludes to the origins of this brand.

Fourth, postal cards that portray the famous founder in a "nostalgic tone" could be added to the product (e.g., inserted into packaging or affixed to clothes).

Fifth, promotional tools can be used in stores. Large-size posters could display the founder's biography in the brand's "flagship" stores and thereby remind consumers of the underdog biography. The "1955 Burger" and informational screens in McDonald's restaurants telling the story of Ray Kroc could remind visitors of its founder and the impediments he had to overcome.

In addition to profit-oriented companies, numerous other organizations could benefit from referring to the underdog period of their founders. For instance, Mother Teresa is the founder of the Missionaries of Charity, and a reference to the underdog background of Mother Teresa may help this organization improve its fundraising. Founders of schools and educational institutions with an underdog biography (e.g., Waldorf/Rudolf Steiner and Kolpingwerk/Adolph Kolping) might also consider this strategy. Paul Potts is a famous musician with an underdog biography from Great Britain; advertisements promoting his performances might include information on his life journey.

#### 4.2 Unknown names of founders

As for other brands whose underdog biographies of their founders are relatively unknown, references to these biographies may also increase the attractiveness of these brands. For instance, there are still companies producing crystal glass and porcelain in Germany and its neighboring countries. The quality of these products is not higher than the quality of the competing products that are imported from Far East. However, these companies must command a price premium to remain viable in the marketplace. We assert that references to the underdog status of the founders of these companies (e.g., information that Lorenz Hutschenreuther was the founder of a Rosenthal sub-brand) could in-

crease the attractiveness of these brands. When market communications vividly demonstrate how difficult it was to establish these companies in the past, some consumers might feel the need to support these companies because they deserve to survive economically.

Both brands and brand-like regions may benefit from the same effect. There are vast skiing areas in the Alps that have been built up by poor farmers over many generations. Leaflets for these destinations could highlight that these founders' efforts are still the fundamental impetus enabling pleasant vacations in the present. Decades ago, handicrafts enabled inhabitants of the Erzgebirge, a region located in Saxony, to thrive. A reference to the underdog period of the "handicrafts from the Erzgebirge" may increase these products' attractiveness: buying these products preserves the heritage of these former craftsmen. We suggest considering tools such as real-world and virtual museums and postal cards to remind consumers of founder biographies. Start-up companies could depict their founders' biographies on their websites. Moreover, festivals that evoke the past could be arranged in vacation destinations that highlight underdog biographies.

#### 4.3 Increasing the effectiveness of references to underdog biographies of founders

Our study revealed that underdog biographies evoke sensations of deservingness and strengthen the customer-brand relationship. Moreover, we found support for the presumption that story-like presentations of underdog biographies can place consumers in a mental state of narrative transportation. Based on these findings, we have derived recommendations on how to increase the effectiveness of market communications that refer to underdog biographies.

We assert that sensations of deservingness can be increased if biographies not only emphasize the economic success of underdog founders but also stress their societal contributions. For instance, Coco Chanel did not only create an economically successful brand, her activities also supported female emancipation by popularizing trouser suits. Thus, communication tools could also portray Coco Chanel in this role. Sensations of deservingness could be increased from information about the existence of foundations. For instance, companies that established charity foundations could reference the founder's name. In this sense, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation may be helpful in supporting the Microsoft brand if it became economically less fortunate in the future. Sensations of deservingness may also improve when an additional reference to the cultural heritage is provided. In this sense, noting that Margarete Steiff was one of the most important inventors of modern toys who had to overcome numerous impediments may increase sensations that this brand deserves to continue.

Biographies of founders contribute to humanizing brands. In particular, the underdog aspects shown in these biographies can increase self-brand relationships due to the consumers' own underdog experiences. We assert that companies with well-known underdog founder biographies should consider enhancing this relationship by emphasizing that underdog aspects still exist. For instance, these companies could highlight that a large portion of their employees are underdogs (e.g., handicapped persons) when referring to the founder's underdog biography in market communications.

When companies decide to utilize underdog biographies, we recommend the inclusion of story-like images in the communication tools to highlight the underdog biographies of their founders from the beginning of their projects to their final achievements. In this man-

ner, consumers can be immersed in past events and partially shielded from counter-arguments against current products.

Finally, we would advise companies and non-profit organizations to consider founder biographies to be relevant information. Because these stories are rarely communicated in present marketing strategies, brands and organizations can differentiate themselves from competitors by highlighting these biographies. Some consumers are likely to be sympathetic to underdog stories; this differentiation may be helpful in attracting this special type of customers.

## 5. Limitations and suggestions for future research

Overall, we found a positive effect of providing information about a company founder's underdog biography on brand evaluations when additional information about the brand and the products was available (e.g., an actual brand name and images of the product). However, this observation might have resulted from our experimental settings.

First, the reference to underdog biographies of founders whose activities turned out to be economically successful might evoke the feeling of envy in consumers that could impair brand evaluations. In our study, we considered companies that have been founded decades ago and envy might not play a major role under this condition. However, for brands that were recently introduced into the market by founders with an underdog biography, feelings of envy due to these founders' success are likely to occur (e.g., in the case of *mymuesli*). Probably, in our laboratory experiment, the test persons could easily suppress the negative feeling of envy because they were not requested to actually buy a product. However, in purchase situations, envy might be evoked and affect behavior when underdog information is presented. In sum, our research findings may be biased by a social demand effect, meaning that envy was suppressed.

Second, the reference to underdog founders could also elicit negative thoughts. Although people may like founders who started with few resources and finally were economically successful, they may dislike the reckless manner which provoked success (at least in the case of some of the underdog founders). We did not include these negative aspects into the stimulus material. However, in cases where consumers are aware of the dark sides of these founders, the underdog effect may be negative. We did not consider this aspect.

Third, the underdog effect might depend on consumer age. We presume that young consumers respond more favorably toward underdog biographies compared to older consumers because they themselves also have few resources and have to strive hard for achieving their goals. In our study, we used young test persons. Thus, the reported underdog effect might disappear in the case of older consumers.

Fourth, our main issue was the answer to the question of whether the underdog effect still exists when additional information is available for evaluating a company or brand. However, in our study, we provided only few pieces of additional information (e.g., the brand name, one product image, and the portrayal of a testimonial, see *Figure 1A* in the *Appendix*). Thus, the effect of the presence of a higher amount of additional cues on the underdog effect remains unclear.

In future research, the impact of the aspects mentioned above (settings that are not likely to suppress envy, underdog founders with a dark side, older consumers, and a higher amount of additional information besides the underdog biography) on the underdog effect

should be investigated. Moreover, we suggest analyzing the effect of further moderating variables such as the brand positioning on the strength of the underdog effect.

**Appendix**

Authors	Test object	Underdog manipulation	Dependent variable	Conditions	Option evaluation		Underdog effect
					Underdog	Top dog	
<i>Avery et al.</i> 2010	Founder of a fictitious company working in an unknown field	Underdog founder started in a garage with a dream but few resources	Affect if the company succeeds (1 (sad) – 7 (happy))	Large company (\$ 1 billion sales)	M = 5.3	M = 4.5	Positive
				Small company (\$ 250,000 sales)	M = 5.4	M = 5.2	NS
<i>Pabaria et al.</i> 2011 (study 4)	Founder of a fictitious company producing chocolate	Underdog had to take much effort to cope with external disadvantages	Intent to purchase a product of this company (1-7)	Purchase for one's own usage	73%	27%	Positive
				Purchase for others as a gift	63%	37%	NS
<i>Tezer et al.</i> 2014 (study 1)	Founder of a fictitious company producing chocolate	Underdog had to take much effort to cope with external disadvantages	Intent to purchase a product of this company (1-7)	Information via brand website	M = 4.35	M = 3.73	Positive
				Information via magazine article	M = 4.21	M = 4.71	Negative

Table 1A: Prior research on the underdog effect on brand evaluations


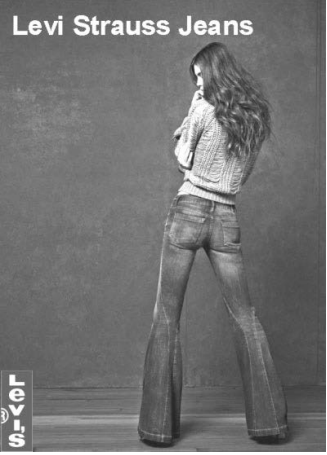




	Advertisement for the competitor brand	Advertisements for the target brand
Experimental condition 1 (Biographical information absent)		
Experimental condition 2 (verbal information about the underdog biography of the target company's founder)		
Experimental condition 3 (verbal and visual information about the underdog biography of the target company's founder)		

Figure 1A: Example of test stimuli

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