# Supporting Underdogs and a Limited Condition

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### **Abstract**

Despite consumers' high evaluation for a large wealthy company in general, the fact that consumers positively assess and support the relatively smaller and less-prosperous companies are widely prevalent. This study verifies that consumers hold their nature in supporting underdogs yet identifies a boundary condition that hinders the support of the underdog: price. Consumers stop the positive assessment of the underdog when the cost to support the underdog increases. The result proposes that the positive behavior in supporting underdogs does not necessarily stand strong when the underdog is presented with a high price tag. The greater monetary value the consumers have to pay the less the degree of support underdogs becomes. This study argues that the initial, emotion based support for underdogs diminishes eventually when consumers purchase products of the price is very high.

Keyword: Underdogs, Top Dogs, Consumer Behavior, Competition, Price

#### 1. Introduction

It is reasonable to believe majority consumers favor mostly large, nationally owned chains to a company with fewer resources for instance a small budget and lower awareness. However, numerous researches have suggested in some cases this may be reverse. Though it is logically suggested that consumers connect with winning brands since businesses with abundant resources are more able to deliver quality product extensive psychological research has shown that people find businesses with fewer resources more appealing sometimes regardless not having the means to deliver the best. Nike, for example, has been a strong performer in the sportswear industry for many years. Now, however, it fears the second most popular athletic apparel brand in America, Under

This paper complies with the ethical codes set by NRA and AJBC.

Armour, leaving Adidas behind at number three. This new company, Under Armour appeared in the market with a humble brand image that they are not the best nor the strongest but took the anti-Nike approach. The company runs marketing campaigns with athletes who were not draft in the first round, or who they would not traditionally give a prima ballerina title to, considering the brand itself as an underdog brand. The company emphasizes many obstacles and struggle these athletes face to success which has led to gaining preferences from a strong desire of consumers to support the amiable underdog.

The word, underdog, is similarly defined by most conventional dictionaries as "a competitor thought to have little chance of winning a fight or contest", or "a person, team, country, etc. that is thought to be in a weaker position than others and therefore not likely to be successful, win a competition, etc." Another describes it as "a less powerful person or thing that struggles against a more powerful person or thing such as a corporation." Particularly in business, it has been held by frequent research and literature review that people clearly support these underdogs. McGinnis and Gentry(2009)'s study based on the research about consumers' motivations and many possible reasons behind their preference for underdog provides insight as to why consumers actively support a particular non-corporate, the winning brand.

Another research suggested by Paharia et al. (2011) introduced the concept of an underdog brand biography and such a firm's biography can increase purchase intentions, real choice, and brand loyalty. The authors argue that these biographies are effective because consumers react positively when they see the underdog aspects of their own lives being reflected in branded products. Several probable views on the underdog effect studied and one explanation for the underdog support was given by Lynn and Snyder (2002) and Tian et al. (2001). They suggest that people perceive rooting for the underdog as unusual, doing so may satisfy their need for uniqueness. Others advocate that when observing underdogs succeed, many hope that they too can succeed in difficult circumstances whereas people root for underdog as just or fair serving the satisfaction for the desire for fairness or equity (Allison and Messick, 1985; Folger and Kass, 2000). Underdog consumptions exist in almost every product categories in various industries. One of the reasons so was given by Goethals and Darley (1977) that the underdog is often expected to lose thus it costs proportionally very little for consumers to support underdogs yet, the vicarious rewards of a disadvantaged character success are greater.

However, such view appears to fall rather short in explaining the support of underdogs associate with an expensive investment. To be explicit, the earlier study (Kim et al., 2008) discuss that the tendency to lean toward the underdog is restricted when the supporter's material interests are affected. Consumers may side with the underdog when

their interests are unaffected by the competitive outcome but soon they change their position once their interests are concerned. This research accordingly intrigues to investigate whether consumers converse their support for the slighter entities explicitly when their material interests are strictly at stake and bounded. Again, this paper argues that any actual behavioral support for the underdog is more likely to determine when people find themselves involved in making a decision on major purchases such as highly priced automobiles and household appliances compared with minor-purchases of coffee and laundry detergent at which mostly low priced. It is demonstrated in this study that consumption associated with underdogs declines when consumers are required to invest respectable amount of their own resources. This research shows the prevalent fact that people find underdogs more appealing may deteriorate and revoke when consumers are challenged by important economic factors specifically like price. This finding suggests that the monetary value consumers put in expressively plays as one of the most significant determinant whether they support the underdog since consumers react negatively when they evaluate the cost of supporting the underdog is high.

This article is organized as follows. First, this study examines the underdog effect in two different contexts of business competitions. Study 1 is conducted to test the preliminary hypothesis that participants display supporting for the disadvantaged entity over an advantaged one. Next, Study 2 is conducted to present a hypothesis that proposes and explains negative participant responses to supporting underdogs. Study 2 is attempted to identify an important boundary condition on supporting underdogs. Finally, this paper concludes with a discussion of managerial implications and boundary conditions that can be explored further.

# 2. Theoretical Foundations

Although there are many reasons to accept it as true that large, well-established products are purchased by majority of the consumers in most cases prior research has indicated that there are consumer motivations and preferences to support of less strong ones. Meanings of underdog consumption and various motivational bases associated with the underdog have been focused by McGinnis (2012) via their research to cover the relevant evidence. The linkage with consumption behavior and the underdog begins with the definition of underdog affection as emotional and positive feeling towards the underdog which is not directly based on functional evaluation or consumption experience.

Underdog affection is different from brand attachment, relationship commitment and satisfaction (Vandello et al., 2007). McGinnis and Gentry (2009) believe that con-

sumers show affection towards underdog entities because they identify these entities as more socially responsible and normally right rather than focus on profit or growth. Balance maintenance, which is one of their developed views on underdog motives, is defined as the extent to which people desire to prevent only certain government, business or individuals from having too much power. In the case of consumer behavior, consumers support local stores due to balance maintenance. It is necessary to keep open all opportunities for all entities to maintain the equality and fairness in society (Kahneman et al., 1986).

In support, Vandello et al. (2007) mention that supporting underdogs is motivated by equality, fairness and deservingness. In short, McGinnis et al., design conceptual model for the underdog support motives and it suggests on a deeper level of understanding of underdog consumption motives that are trying to achieve balance and equity. In addition to the fundamental motive, empathy, in supporting underdogs their research also indicates that voluntary simplicity concepts, which opposed to consumption in general, may extend to animosity to global or major brand. Top dog antipathy perception indicates the disliking of a person or lack of sympathies. Hogg and Banister (2001) explore the importance of undesired state of consumer experience and develop their conceptual model of antipathy. It emphasizes that an antipathy makes people sensitive towards the person who has some capability, but not possess a sense of dependence.

In addition, some reasons for supporting underdogs related to beliefs in equal opportunity and the assurance of freedom of choice as well as nostalgia and inspiration. According to M. B. Holbrook and Schindler (1991) nostalgia is a longing for the past and a general preference toward objects that were more common when a person was young in which, objects referred as a place, things, or people and common related to more fashionable, popular or widely circulated (McGinnis, 2012). Nostalgia can be associated with possessions of consumers, which typically related to previous glories or victories where they defeated obstacles through emotional affinity and achieved unexpected success (Belk et al., 1988). Holbrook (1993) proposes that a nostalgic proneness is associated with sympathy, in which nostalgic respond to stimuli. Also, when local business and small firms associated with individuals' past, there might be chances of emotion connection of consumers with underdog business (McGinnis, 2012). Thus, there may be a positive relationship between underdog, which is less powerful and more morally principled, and nostalgic proneness.

In terms of the need uniqueness, which is identified by Tian et al. (2001) that consumers' need to connect in counter consistency behavior by making count consistency choices, and unique choice to avoid similarities. Also, McGinnis (2012) identify that consumer support underdog brands because they want to be unique and be specifical-

ly for their purchase. Consequently, as proposed, consumers prefer to buy from local stores, as small stores have unique product and sell these products to satisfy the need of consumers with the narrow range of product (Brennan and Lundsten, 2000). Underdog effect proposed by Keinan et al. (2010) reviews the way to generate money with underdog consumption. It suggests that disadvantageous brands should position them as underdog yet being determined and passionate in order to get support from the consumers who identified themselves with the brand's underdog characteristics.

It adds that the stronger a person's own sense of struggling is, the greater the preference for the underdog brand (Keinan et al., 2010, p.32). Further research suggested by Paharia, Avery, Schor B, and Keinan extend underdog effect on brand biography in 2011. The study introduces the concept that firms author a historical account of their humble origins, lack of resources, and determined struggle against the odds. In this study, external disadvantage and passion and determination are essential dimensions to increase purchase intentions, real choice, and brand loyalty. It concludes that these biographies are effective because consumers react positively when they see underdog aspects of their own lives being reflected in branded products. Plus, it is found that the brand receive more support from the consumers when the brand is not top dog but underdog.

To validate this pervasive belief that consumers behave positively towards the comparatively disadvantaged business, it is hypothesized as followings:

# H1: Consumers will exhibit greater supportive preference to underdogs.

Further, those earlier researches which demonstrate the positive underdog supporting aspects additionally suggest a set of boundary conditions yet that may discourage and weaken such attitudes toward the underdog. Research by Kim et al. (2008), defines the underdog effect as people's tendency to support or root for an entity that is perceived as attempting to accomplish a difficult test, and that is not expected to succeed against an explicit or implicit advantaged opponent. At the same time, the study argues that the underdog effect has limited impact as a result. It is not typically predicted that the favored underdogs will actually prevail and these are not actually supported over more successful social entities in some restricted circumstances.

To identify some boundary conditions when supporting underdogs, this previous study discovers that people abandon the underdog when both self-relevance and consequences are high. In other words, it concludes that when relevance or importance is low people may be intolerant in that they allow themselves to feel good by rooting for the underdog. In conclusion, the findings suggest that supporting underdogs may not wield much force with some boundaries although its conceptual practice is widespread. In

addition, research by Keinan et al. (2010) suggests that there is product categories that may be ill suited to an underdog brand strategy. Particularly, consumers may question the quality and safety of an underdog healthcare, financial services, or security brand.

In short, consumers reject the underdog without a doubt when they believe that being externally disadvantaged jeopardizes quality and safety. Hence, this current study considers explicitly given that standing by the underdog becomes expensive in terms of merely monetary extent it will draw a boundary condition that lessens such behavior. Consequently, the present paper suspects that the price consumers are requested to pay in order to support the underdog has great bear on the propensity of their consistent assertiveness. It is believed that people give upon supporting underdogs when asked to make rather expensive purchases. Accordingly, this research predicts that the preference to support the underdog may be weakened by a limited condition in which consumers' financial stakes are high.

H2: Salient preference for underdogs will be moderated by higher price of commodities.

In this study, a set of different businesses is considered including bakeries as offering low-priced products and construction companies as to project expensive, major purchase goods. The fact that the genuine supportive feelings for underdogs are pervasive is reaffirmed and then it attempts to provide a new boundary condition of such motivations can be challenged.

# 3. Research Design and Findings

## 3.1. Study 1

First, it is to examine the occurrence of supportive inclination towards underdogs in a context of competitions of two types of businesses. Further, this will serve as a base for the successive test to identity whether participants do possess the propensity to support the underdog in an actual behavioral engagement of purchasing the items.

## **Participants**

The participants were 23 graduate students in a large university located in the south-western Korea, Jeon-Ju. They were previously informed the meaning of the term, underdog, and understood it fully as well as the difference of the opposite, top-dog.

Design and Procedure

A 2 (Domain: bakery vs. construction) x 2 (Status: underdog vs. top dog) between-subject factorial design was tested. A group of 23 participants was given two scenarios describing each competition and were requested to complete a survey. First, participants read a piece of scenario describing two bakery brands were about to compete for an upcoming bid for the local festival. The bid between these two parties presented one strong candidates and one weak opponent. The one strong bakery in scenario generates average 152,000,000 won of sales annually while the other with the sales revenue of 48,000,000 won in the area.

Also, participants read a scenario describing two construction companies, one strong candidate and one weak opponent, were also about to enter an approaching bid in the local community. In scenario, the one strong construction company has a past biding record of 16-4 while the other company with a record of 3-18.

# Dependent Measure

The main dependent measures of interest are whether participants support the underdog entity. Participants were asked to indicate their responses on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (a great deal), with higher numbers indicating a greater support.

#### Results and Discussion

In this paper, it was performed a 2 (domain: bakery vs. construction) x 2 (Statues: underdog vs. top dog) ANOVA on participants' rating of how much they were supporting the bakery or construction companies. The ANOVA disclosed only a main effect of statues, F (1, 90) = 35.67, p<.0001. Participants were significantly more likely to support for the underdog business (M=5.74) than the top dog business (M=3.41). The effect was relatively a little more for the bakery context (Mb=5.99 and 3.66, respectively) compared with the effect for the construction context (Mc=5.49 and 3.16 respectively). In summary, the result of Study 1 shows a strong support for the non-dominant parties, underdogs, in the two different contexts of bakery and construction.

## 3.2. Study 2

The goal of Study 2 is to examine how consistently participants display their preliminary proved supportive proclivity of the underdog when their material interests are at stake. This study pursues to identify an important boundary condition on supporting underdogs: price of the commodity. To assess the role of price in Study 2, participants were presented with two dispersed situations where the consequences were manipulated by a set of different prices for each business. Will participants sustain their support for

underdogs when their interests are affected? It is predicted when expenses become significant the impact of supporting underdogs will be moderated yet consequently, appear the utmost linking with the top dog.

## Participants and Design

The study continued with the same participants as the preceding test. The same wording of the questions and rating scales as in Study 1 were used with a few modifications. The participants were assigned to respond four conditions in a 2 (underdog vs. top dog) x 2 (low vs. high) between subjects factorial design.

#### Procedure

The same scenarios were used with the following additions. First, participants read the same bakery scenario with an added situation where they were required to make a purchase for a birthday party they would attend. These two bakeries offered both cookies at the lowest price of 1,000 won and the most expensive cake at 30,000 won. Participants were asked to respond a short questionnaire.

Next, in the construction company scenario, participants were again given a situation where they were required to make a decision on purchasing a 500,000,000 won apartment and a studio unit priced at 100,000,000 won offered equally by these two construction companies. Participants were asked to respond a short questionnaire afterwards.

## **Dependent Measures**

The main dependent measures of interest are first to identify whether participants support the underdog entity when they make a purchase involved in a small amount of money. Then, it investigates how likely they support the underdog over the top dog when the presented price option is substantially shifted to an upward movement. Again, it measures how likely participants change their support for the underdog when making a major purchase involved in a great deal of money. Participants indicated their responses on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (a great deal), with higher numbers indicating a greater support.

## Results and Discussion

In the bakery context, the design of the study was a 2 (Status: high vs. low) x 2 (Price: high vs. low) ANOVA on participants' rating of how likely they buy cake and cookies from each store. The ANOVA revealed that participants were significantly more likely to buy both cake and cookies from the underdog (M=5.82 and 5.75 respectively) than from the top dog (M=3.53 and 3.47 respectively). These data suggest that participants

upheld the underdog entity when the asking prices of products, cake (high price) and cookies (low price), as a whole was small thus, it is perceived as their financial interests are little affected.

Next, the design for the construction business was a 2 (Status: high vs. low) x 2 (Price: high vs. low) ANOVA on participants' rating of how likely they buy a three bedrooms apartment and a studio unit from each company. Interestingly, the ANOVA showed that participants were significantly more likely to purchase an apartment and a studio from the top dog (M=6.22 and 6.35 respectively) than from the underdog (M=2.78 and 2.91 respectively). The analysis reveals an interaction between status and price and it shows that when price is high participants support considerably more for the top dog than for the underdog. This result of Study 2 nicely suggests that participants' preliminary support for the underdog, when price was low, is soundly contradicted.

In summary, the result of Study 2, a larger proportion of participants indicated that they would choose an apartment and a studio by the top dog company over the underdog company, implies that participants readily change their position on the underdog which initially attracted their emotional support but they soon gave the top dog their financial support unhesitatingly.

## 4. General Discussion

As first step, this study focuses on various conceptual motivational bases associated with consumers' affection towards the underdog through formerly theorized models and literatures. It identifies which motives and emotional feelings the consumers relate their decision to purchase an underdog brand. Comprehensively, consumers support the underdog out of sympathy to maintain the equality in competition. Also, these underdog supporters actively and enthusiastically root for the underdog by ignoring social consequences and at the same time these underdog consumers are emotionally driven (McGinnis et al., 2008). Accordingly, by reiterated in two different business domains, this study provides a concrete addition to the pervasive conceptual findings that people are attracted to the idea of supporting underdogs.

In Study 1, the result indicates that supporting underdog, a less strong entity, is persistent. Despite of the visible disadvantages of the Chang's bakery, the underdog, it invited compassionate support and received substantial emotional support. Clearly there is a strong desire to support the affable underdog although people prefer to associate with winners. Many affirmative stories and features of underdogs are common in politics, sports, business as well as films, art, and modern literature. In business sectors, as a result, the underdog effect has been positively appealed throughout the varied industries.

Some are successfully motivate consumers to support certain brands and products by portraying themselves as the underdog facing much stronger competitors. One of the most popular examples mentioned above is when it involves a small and usually young firm taking on a much larger competitor because these underdogs usually enter a market dominated by established players (Paharia et al., 2014).

At the same time, it has been mentioned and identified by past work that there remain some boundary conditions in terms of supporting underdogs. To begin with, underdogs are only supported when the outcome of such behavior has no significant influence on the well-being and when the impact is minimal. Consequently, as the previous literature suggested, the perceivers of competition may place self-interest and considerations of consequences ahead of their usual desire to support underdogs (Kim et al., 2008). In this sense, the current research demonstrates in Study 2 with an explicit setting that affects supporting underdogs adversely. In particular, when participants were asked to make a major purchase in the construction context they displayed positive evaluation for the top dog instead, which reversed the result of Study 1 where they had shown unconditional supports for the underdog.

Moreover, interestingly enough, it was clearly observed that there was a noteworthy distinction between supporting an underdog and investing one's own resource in the underdog. In Study 2, nor was it considered the price variances of the product since the product category falls into an expensive purchase. In other words, the high price itself is so crucial a factor that it performs an important role influencing participants to switch their preference of the underdog. Whereas, participants maintained their same level of preference for the underdog in the bakery context, exhibiting the price variances has no notable influence on their decision making process.

In short, Study 2 indicates that when choosing a highly priced product, the supportive behavior toward the underdog is replaced. When a significant amount of price is hung on the line these emotive approaches die out. It can be also interpreted that there is a clear discrepancy between supports motivated by solely emotional versus financially-involved supports for an underdog. It proposes that the positive behavior in supporting underdogs does not necessarily stand strong when presented with a high price tag. The finding of current research suggests that favored underdog is undermined by a limited condition where the salient monetary engagement is surfaced.

## 5. Conclusions and Limitations

This research attempts to provide an underdog boundary condition explicitly depicting situations affected by price factor while most previous researched literatures

identify the limited conditions of supporting underdogs within the set of nonfigurative environment and psychological motives. Undoubtedly, this paper has only studied to scratch the surface in identifying the complicated variables and processes that are likely to be associated with the underdog support.

However, by understanding when underdog supports are visible and which factors are restricted to generate such supports marketing managers have several options to ensure how to utilize the concept of supporting underdogs for the highly priced products. It has been proved that the underdog supporters demonstrate a particular goal and project a message via how and why they engage with the underdog. Therefore, considering such facet in providing quite expensive goods will surely guide businesses to cope effectively. Additionally, from this point of view, companies offering high priced products should limit to broach the subject of supporting the underdog unless it is fully understood the relationship between merely supporting the underdog versus the consumers' value evaluation on purchasing expensive goods.

As this research based on a small number of Korean students, the representativeness of the sample is questionable. Also, the underdog concept may have been conveyed differently since the word, underdog, originated in the western cultural background with its own history and symbolic definition. It is typically viewed that underdog status carries a greater deal of construal meanings in the West than that of in Asian cultures. Underdog preference is stronger for westerners and they are more receptive to a struggling individual's passion and determination to achieve success regardless of the circumstance or advantaged social position (Linton, 1936).

However, in Asian culture, it may less attractive being shown as an underdog since recognized status that is status obtained through social position or family heritage is more prevalent (Oyserman et al., 2002). To improve, this research should extend the investigation with samples from the various regions of Asian countries to examine how supportive or opposed their attitudes toward an underdog reflect individual's dissimilar values and motives in purchasing a certain product. Moreover, for international marketers of smaller entities, studying the intentions and motivations of the underdog support in different parts of the globe will offer comprehensive guidance to compete successfully against these larger top dogs across cultures.

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# **Appendix**

## Study 1

[Test 1-a] The Chang's Bakery was founded by a family, native of Jeon-ju, in 2010. As a locally owned small business, it is known for its selection of fresh and bargain bread. The Chang's Bakery's main competitor is The New York Bakery, a large national corporation with significantly higher market power, and it has the ability to put small businesses, such as this Chang's bakery, out of business. Last year, New York bakery generated 152,000,000 won while Chang's sales revenue was 48,000,000 won. Chang's has been engaging various local charities and activities to establish its brand name in the market but lack of marketing resource has restricted him to become more successful than its competitor, New York Bakery. Also, Chang's products are spoken very highly by the local consumers yet New York Bakery also offers equally good quality of product to the consumers. Now, these both bakeries are bidding for an annual festival, catering various types of pastries.

Q1-a: How much do you support T	he Chang's Bakery to win the bid?
(Not at all) 1	7 (A great deal)
Q1-a: How much do you support the	he New York Bakery to win the bid?
(Not at all) 1	7 (A great deal)

[Test 1-b] You are about to buy cake for a birthday party. Both The Chang's and The New York Bakery offer the most expensive cake at a price of 30,000 won. Also, you would like some cookies along with the cake. These two bakeries sell cookies at the same price of 1,000 won a piece.

Q1-b: How likely would you buy a birthday ca	ıke at the Chang's Bakery?
(Not at all) 1	7 (A great deal)
Q1-b: How likely would you buy cookies at th	e Chang's Bakery?
(Not at all) 1	7 (A great deal)
Q1-b: How likely would you buy a birthday ca	ke at the New York's Bakery?
(Not at all) 1	7 (A great deal)
Q1-b: How likely would you buy cookies at th	e New York's Bakery?
(Not at all) 1	7 (A great deal)
Study 2	
[Test 2-a] The Chang's Construction Company ju, in 2010. As a locally owned small business, and apartment buildings. Chang's main complarge national corporation with significantly he to put small businesses, such as this Chang's Construction has a won-lost bidding record or record of 3-18. Chang's has been engaging vertablish its brand name in the market but lack company to become more successful than its Also, Chang's works have been spoken very he York construction also offers equally good qual both companies are bidding for building a netown project.	it is known for its best customized houses petitor is The New York Construction, a ligher market power, and it has the ability construction, out of business. New York of 16-4 while Chang's construction has a arious local charities and activities to estof marketing resource has restricted the competitor, the New York Construction highly by the local home buyers yet New lity of apartments to the consumers. Now
Q2-a: How much do you support The Chang's (Not at all) 1	- ·
Q2-a: How much do you support The New Yor	
(Not at all) 1	7 (A great deal)
[Test 2-b] Hypothetically, you are looking fo choose an apartment built by The Chang's C tries to establish itself in the market with m York Construction which is a large successful	Construction, a new, small company and erely 3 years of experience, or The New

in business for over 20 years, yet again these two company are equal in quality of their work. Currently, both offer a three-bedroom apartment for 500,000,000 won as the

most expensive unit. Also, you would like an extra studio unit as a study along with the apartment. These two companies sell a studio unit at the same price of 100,000,000 won which is the lowest price they offer.

Q2-b: How likely would you buy a th	ree-bedroom apartment from the Chang's con-
struction company?	
(Not at all) 1	7 (A great deal)
Q2-b: How likely would you buy a st	tudio apartment from the Chang's construction
company?	
(Not at all) 1	7 (A great deal)
Q2-b: How likely would you buy a three	ee-bedroom apartment from the New York's con-
struction company? (Not at all) 1	7 (A great deal)
Q2-b: How likely would you buy a stud	dio apartment from the New York's construction
company?	
(Not at all) 1	7 (A great deal)