

# Underdog consumption: An exploration into meanings and motives

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## Abstract

Marketers frequently position business concerns – whether brands, teams, or stores – as the non market-dominant entity (or the “underdog”). This article examines the motives for underdog support through in-depth interviews and a focus group. Findings suggest that underdog consumers support underdogs out of empathy, as a way to ensure the maintenance of equal opportunity in competition, and as a way to provide personal inspiration. Some motives for underdog support can be interpreted to be anti-consumption (or, at least, anti-corporate) in nature. On the other hand, many underdog consumers support and identify with underdogs not necessarily as a way to keep the top dog down, but as a means to keep the little guy competing. Rather than solely “vote-against” behavior, “vote-for” behavior is very evident as well.

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## 1. Introduction

Many sports fans and non-sports fans alike frequently root for and/or support the underdog. Several of Hollywood’s most popular movies have told inspiring underdog stories; for example Rudy, Rocky, Sea Biscuit, and Million Dollar Baby. Many popular sports teams have been successful as underdogs, including the loveable losers, the Chicago Cubs. The fascination Americans have with underdogs extends to famous personalities including Abraham Lincoln, Ronald Reagan, Oprah Winfrey, and Bill Clinton. These individuals represent people who have overcome underdog status to become successful. Marketers such as Avis with “We try harder” and Volkswagen with self-deprecating headlines (e.g., “Ugly is only skin deep”) have used underdog-type appeals in establishing effective positioning strategies, the latter example using what Holt (2004) describes as irony and reflexive acknowledgment.

Consumers may identify with “underdog” brands as a possible show of anti-consumptive behavior for a variety of

reasons. Holt’s (2002) brand counterconformists avoid the influence of popular brands in pursuit of individual sovereignty. Kozinets’ (2002) Burning Man participants attempt to temporarily leave the market to gain sovereignty, while Kozinets’ (2001) “Trekkies” seek legitimization for their marginalized practices. O’Guinn (1991) shows how marginalized fan club members are motivated to support their chosen celebrity in hopes of touching greatness. Holt (2002) indicates that popular brands, even from those companies that have been extremely loyal to the marketing concept, are realizing anti-brand sentiment from consumers in the postmodern era.

Thompson and Arsel’s (2004) “glocalization” and Ger and Belk’s (1996) “creolization” deal with this process in a more dynamic fashion. Thompson and Arsel note that glocalization is “a needed corrective to the calamitous view of global capitalism as a culture-crushing juggernaut” (p. 631). Both glocalization and creolization note the attraction of global brands, especially when they first become available in areas which formerly did not have them. Over time, consumers may choose to repurchase their former favorite brands or return to their formerly preferred local retailers. Both glocalization and creolization note that this occurrence is often a blending process, rather than just an either/or decision. Glocalization, at least as discussed in

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the findings of Thompson and Arsel's study of consumers of Starbucks' local competitors in Madison Wisconsin, has a strong "anti-corporate" element, as their *café flâneurs* noted that they would be embarrassed to be seen in a Starbucks. Ger and Belk's creolization is more an acknowledgment of strong attraction to the old familiar entity. To use a political metaphor, glocalization would involve more the voting *against* the market-dominant entity, whereas creolization involves more the voting *for* the less well-known entity. This study of the underdog will try to tease out both elements involving anti-top dog attitudes and those involving a more pro-active favoring of the underdog.

The studies discussed previously [e.g., Holt (2002)] cover underdog consumption, but appear to fall somewhat short in explaining why some people continuously support underdog brands, people, stores, and other objects across domains when concerns such as quality, variety, price, and even one's "face" may be compromised. In this study, the authors explore the motives and meanings of underdog consumption and how underdog consumers negotiate their self-identities even when confronted with alternatives of higher quality, wider variety, and/or cheaper prices.

## 2. Literature review

Identity studies from the sports fan literature suggest that people who identify with an underdog sports team or athlete do so to fulfill some kind of a social role and are demonstrating group-derived behavior (Fisher and Wakefield, 1998). These people may either support a team due to perceived performance or other factors such as attractiveness of the group's members, team personalities, proximity, or a love for the game. This group downplays the importance of winning because they do not want the negative connotations associated with a losing team to be connected to them. Findings suggest that associating positively with losing is not only unlikely but also highly undesirable and nonproductive.

Basking in reflected glory or BIRGing studies (Cialdini et al., 1976) suggest that when people's identities become susceptible to public scrutiny, people will most likely try to identify with a positive entity. Further research in this area suggests that sports fans internalize the attribute of winning and externalize the attribute of losing, with the former more inclined to say "we won" and the latter inclined to say "they lost" (Grove et al., 1991; Mann, 1974; Wann and Dolan, 1994). These findings indicate that losing and/or identifying with losers is, again, highly undesirable. Thus, BIRGing reflects attraction to global brands, and some consumers' desires to possess them. Possessing the brand can be of such importance that consumers may voluntarily purchase counterfeit versions of them.

Further research suggests, though, that in order to reconcile one as being an underdog without creating dissonance (Cialdini et al., 1976), underdog status support and/or self-concept has to be framed in a positive manner. Few people, in other words, should want to view themselves or the entities they support as pure losers. This finding suggests, then, that a certain amount of teasing, or glimmers of hope (MacInnis and de Mello, 2005),

may be needed to keep supporters excited about the prospects of winning and about maintaining a positive self-image. Underdogs need to come close upon occasion or at least show flashes of potential in order to merit support; otherwise they are just losers and nobody expects anything from them. This support of entities performing poorly in general is not evident in all domains; as will be discussed in the findings, such support was not found for stocks or for politicians.

Holt's (2002) discussion of how brands are under attack by society's emerging countercultural movement addresses an anti-consumption-type motive to support underdog-type brands. For example, Holt describes how overt commercial motives hurt the images of today's brands and that postmodern consumers may use brands less as a way of establishing personal sovereignty. Holt (2004) discusses Snapple's positioning as anti-corporate and anti-elitist, attributing the brand's success in part to its resonance with the brand's audience and their desires to be free from ties to certain brands. In this sense, support for Snapple and other such brands may be driven by the need to keep the top dog brands at bay in establishing a more fair and competitive marketplace.

An underdog, by definition, cannot exist unless an alternative that is generally recognized as being superior (or at least bigger) on some dimension is present. Preference for the underdog may represent the rejection of that superior alternative, the top dog, or the possibility that trial of the top dog helped consumers crystallize their preferences for certain attributes offered uniquely by the underdog. For example, Thompson and Arsel's (2004) informants were liberal politically, and found the local coffee houses' flexibility to be active in political causes very appealing compared to the more "corporate," politically-neutral environment of a Starbucks.

Related to a consumer's motive to avoid mass appeal type products is the desire for uniqueness. Tian et al. (2001) describe three different dimensions of uniqueness. The first, creative choice counter-conformity, concerns the deliberate attempt to buy clothes and other consumer goods that are different from the established norm, but are still viewed as socially acceptable. The second dimension, unpopular choice counter-conformity, is the tendency to make consumer choices that position the individual as distinct from the group in a way that seeks social disapproval. The third, avoidance of similarity, is the intentional avoidance of commonly used products or brands, irrespective of whether these choices meet social approval. While the first two choices appear to be driven by the need to be individualistic, the latter choice appears to be driven by the need to support the less popular or well-known without concern necessarily for establishing an identity. Each one of these motives may be evident in supporting and/or identifying with the underdog; however, the second dimension should be less prevalent as unpopular choice counter-conformity hints toward antisocial behavior instead of the benign fun-lovingness associated with underdogs.

Another support motive for the underdog may be driven by the fact that people understand or empathize with the underdog's plight. Empathy is generally regarded as the ability to "know another person's inner experience" (Buie, 1981). "High-

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