

# Consumers love underdogs

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Consumers strongly relate to brands that they perceive as underdogs, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

"Across contexts, cultures, and time periods, underdog narratives have inspired people. Stories about underdogs are pervasive in sports, politics, religion, literature, and film," write authors Neeru Paharia, Anat Keinan (both Harvard University), Jill Avery (Simmons School of Management), and Juliet B. Schor (Boston College).

The authors examined the ways many contemporary brand narratives highlight companies' humble beginnings and struggles against powerful adversaries. For example, Nantucket Nectars' label says the company started "with only a blender and a dream," while Google, Clif Bar, HP, and Apple emphasize that they started in garages.

"Underdog brand biographies contain two important narrative components: a disadvantaged position versus an adversary and passion and determination to beat the odds," the authors write.

The authors found that consumers identify with underdog stories because most people have felt disadvantaged at one time or another. In a series of four experiments, the researchers found that [consumers](#) identify with underdog brands and are more likely to purchase them. They also confirmed that brand biographies that contain both external disadvantage and passion and determination generate the strongest purchase interest.

According to the authors, both Singaporean and American participants preferred underdog brands, but Americans were even more drawn to the come-from-behind stories. "The American Dream, the fabled American myth, is built on the stories of underdogs who came to the United States with virtually nothing and pulled themselves up from their bootstraps to achieve success," the authors write.

The study participants were given a choice of a chocolate bar as compensation for being in the study. They chose the underdog brand 71 percent of the time.

**More information:** Neeru Paharia, Anat Keinan, Jill Avery, and Juliet B. Schor. "The Underdog Effect: The Marketing of Disadvantage and Determination through Brand Biography." *Journal of Consumer Research*: February 2011. A preprint of this article (to be officially published online soon) can be found at [journals.uchicago.edu/jcr](http://journals.uchicago.edu/jcr)

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