

# The Impact of Underdog Positioning on Consumer Preference in Korea: Focusing on Local Service Providers

JKT 26(5)

Received 27 February 2022  
Revised 21 June 2022  
Accepted 5 August 2022

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Small independent brands from local companies often use underdog positioning to compete with established global brands. However, whether the effectiveness of underdog positioning of local businesses in the service sector remains insufficient. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the underdog effect on the preference of Korean consumers for individual service providers positioned as underdogs.

**Design/methodology** – The author examines the research question of this study using a one-way ANOVA in three different positioning (underdog vs. top dog vs. control) between-subjects design, with a group of Korean participants.

**Findings** – The experimental study shows that support for independent local (vs. global) service providers positioned as underdogs is straightforward. Using the lens of consumer identification with underdog biographies, this study found that consumers prefer small local service providers with passion and determination regardless of their disadvantages.

**Originality/value** – To the best of the author's knowledge, this is the first study to examine the effectiveness of underdog positioning in the context of individual service providers. As it competes with global service companies for domestic consumer preference in Korea, the findings have great implications for ensuring the sustainability of small local service providers.

**Keywords:** Brand Positioning, Local Service Providers, Preference of Korean Consumers, Underdog Effect

**JEL Classifications:** F23, L84, M31

## 1. Introduction

Due to the importance of internationalization in brand success, both domestic and global service companies internationalize their offerings to consumers around the world by investing huge resources into designing effective marketing strategies. Prior research suggests that internationalization is the systematic achievement of broad market coverage made by companies through interweaving and establishing a local and foreign presence (Kolbl et al., 2020; Ozsomer, 2012). Specifically, well-established global companies aiming to expand into local markets must adopt local culture and values, and maintain international recognition in local markets (Davvetas and Halkias, 2019). Under this circumstance, competition between domestic products and foreign brands is a constant issue faced by relatively small companies in many local markets. Due to the globalization of the market, local companies are constantly threatened by strong global corporate brands in the overseas market as well as in the domestic market. (Sichtmann et al., 2019). Research in the field of international business suggests that

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domestic and foreign companies can build market dominance through distinct competitive advantages of local and non-local brands, respectively (Davvetas and Halkias, 2019; Xie et al., 2015). Moreover, global consumers in today's marketplace make their purchasing decisions based on product information available globally and locally, thereby communicating their identity and value in individual purchasing behaviours (Sichtmann et al., 2019; Winit et al., 2014). In understanding brand positioning strategies motivates consumer purchase intentions, companies have focused on differentiating brand images from competitors (Keller and Lehmann, 2006). Both large and small companies create perceived brand images through brand positioning that can effectively influences individual consumers real purchase behaviors (Davvetas and Diamantopoulos, 2016). For example, positioning local (global) products with underdog (top dog) brand biography have used to develop positive brand images (Shin Legendre et al., 2018).

An underdog is an entity considered highly passionate and determined to overcome external disadvantages and lack of resources and opportunities (Paharia et al., 2011). Characteristics and perceptions of underdogs have created a positive tendency of supporting underdogs, which is referred to as the *underdog effect* (Kim et al., 2008). The underdog effect helps the disadvantaged (e.g., relatively small local brands and domestic products) compete with stronger contenders (e.g., market dominant mass global brands) as people tend to show their generosity and preference towards the underdog (McGinnis and Gentry, 2009; Paharia et al., 2014). Across the arts, sports, politics and business, this effect has been pervasive, giving the underdog a chance to fight the top dog, a resourceful and powerful opponent. Previous studies in the area of consumer behavior have also recognized the phenomenon of the underdog effect (Kirmani et al., 2017; Li and Zhao, 2018; Paharia et al., 2011). Some consumers prefer and support independent local underdog brands because they strongly identify with the challenges and difficulties that these underdog brands face. Contrary to the conventional belief that individual consumers are more likely to be connected with winners, the underdog effect can increase purchase intentions of consumers who identify themselves with the brand positioned as underdogs (Kao, 2015; Paharia et al., 2011). Furthermore, prior research has suggested that the positive consumer evaluation towards relatively small underdog brands is closely related to emotional motivations. Consumer emotions, such as empathy and compassion for those in need, and feelings of envy and anger towards top dogs influence underdog brands more favorably than top dog brands (Han and Kim, 2020; Jun et al., 2015; Kao, 2019; Kim et al., 2019). As underdog brand positioning becomes widespread in the marketing field, more related studies have scrutinized the underlying process and the boundary conditions of the underdog effect. For example, product types (hedonic vs. functional), brand status (emerging vs. established), consumption types (public vs. private) as well as psychological experiences of power, personal control, and perceived risk have been examined to confirm their mediating and moderating effects on the relationship between underdog positioning and consumer responses (Jin and Huang, 2019; Kao, 2015; Li and Zhao, 2018; Nagar, 2019; Tang and Tsang, 2020; Shirai, 2017).

Due to consumers' desire to support the relatively less known and independent underdog than the well-established top dog, underdog positioning can help domestic businesses compete with larger foreign companies (Paharia et al., 2014). However, previous studies have mostly tested the underdog effect by demonstrating the effectiveness of underdog positioning for products (He et al., 2020; Li and Zhao, 2018; Nagar, 2019; Paharia et al., 2011). Despite the high interest of marketing researchers on the phenomenon of the underdog effect, studies

exploring consumer responses to underdog positioning in the service area are still insufficient (Kirmani et al., 2017; Shirai, 2017). With the importance of investigating the impact of underdog positioning in various business domains, this paper focuses on the service area to test whether similar results of the underdog effect are predicted for small independent service providers. Previously, Kirmani et al. (2017) noted that when choosing between moral and competent service providers, underdog positioning strengthens a moral provider to overcome a deficit in competence while attenuating the dominance of competence. This further suggests that underdog positioning is more adequate for less competent yet highly moral service providers. Therefore, the current paper attempts to further analyze the underdog effect on individual service providers.

Specifically, when applying the logic of underdog effect to the context of service providers where individuals independently provide services to others (e.g., tutoring, personal fitness training, beauty and health services), will consumers similarly express support for underdog-positioned service providers? To answer this and fill the research gap, this paper examines the underdog effect on consumer preference of independent fitness trainers who position themselves as underdogs. Given that consumer demand for workout in various exercise forms has increased remarkably in Korea since the outbreak of COVID-19 (Jang, 2021), the post-pandemic market condition has created challenging but attractive opportunity for small, independent local businesses. Namely, the researcher attempts to explore the effectiveness of underdog positioning in services by measuring Korean consumers' preference for fitness personal trainers (PT). While the relevant literature has provided the well-established conception that underdogs generally receive positive responses, this paper aims to specifically examine whether underdog positioning is successful in eliciting similar reactions to individual service providers.

## 2. Literature Review

An underdog has been defined as weak and underprivileged, thus, it is less likely to be favored (Kim et al., 2008). In contrary, top dogs are defined as a person, group, or entity in a position of authority, especially through victory in competition (Merriam-Webster, 2018). However, the concept of the underdog effect takes a counterintuitive view and refers to the underdog as a positive entity who possesses passion and determination despite external disadvantages (Paharia et al., 2011). The underdog effect appears when compared to a dominant opponent, the top dog, who is confidently victorious due to a great wealth of internal and external resources. Prior studies of the underdog effect have shown that being perceived as underdogs can turn an adverse condition into an opportunity to compete with a top dog (McGinnis and Gentry, 2009; Paharia et al., 2011; Simon 1954). The struggle of the underdog in the face of overwhelming odds is considered as a positive trait, especially when accompanied by fighting spirit and determination. More importantly, despite the lack of competitive resources, underdogs separate them from mere losers to evoke the underdog effect by reflecting the never-give-up attitude and a winning mentality (Kim et al., 2008; Paharia et al., 2011).

Previous studies have investigated the underdog effect in areas ranging from politics to sports, and business with assertive evidence that individuals align themselves with underdogs. More persuasively, in the field of marketing, Paharia et al. (2011) conceptualized underdog brand biography as a company-generated brand narrative with external disadvantage, and

passion and determination. Their study suggests that the used of underdog biographies has a positive effect on consumers' purchase intentions because consumers are more likely to identify with underdogs (Paharia et al., 2011). Researchers have confirmed the value of underdog positioning that the relatively small and new brands can have a fighting chance against their larger competitors (Paharia et al. 2011; 2014).

Primarily, previous studies have investigated underdog brand positioning in terms of product types and purchasing situations. For example, Li and Zhao (2018) argue that product types moderate the relationship between brand stories (underdog vs. top dog) and consumer-brand identification. The researchers demonstrate that underdog brand stories tend to strengthen consumer identification with hedonic products, whereas top dog brand stories strengthen consumer identification with functional products. Shirai (2017) also investigates that underdog brand positioning is more effective in hedonic consumption than in utilitarian consumption. With hedonic consumption, consumers are affectively richer, less price sensitive, and greater risk taking. Consequently, this positively influences the consumer's purchase decision favorably towards less certain and less established underdog brands. Furthermore, Kao (2015) examines how the relationship between underdog positioning (explicit vs. implicit) and brand status (emerging vs. established) influences consumer preference. Although consumers initially show their support for emerging brands positioned as underdogs they later shift their support for established brands positioned as top dogs because consumers are more concerned with brand success in the marketplace. In the same vein, the impact of underdog positioning is much stronger for established brands than newer brands that have been lately introduced in the market (Nagar, 2021). Since consumers are familiar with market dominant brands, these well-established brands positioned as underdogs can create more favorable responses in the aspects of overall consumer evaluations. On the other hand, relatively less established brands usually have low levels of consumer familiarities, resulting in poor market performance. Consequently, market-dominant brands integrated with underdogs have a strong influence on consumer preferences. In addition, Han and Kim (2020) shows the relationship between purchase intentions of prosocial consumers and underdog brands in the context of product scarcity. Specifically, compared to supply-caused product scarcity, demand-caused product scarcity has a significant impact on prosocial consumers' purchase intentions of underdog brands. As demand-caused scarcity signals high product quality and popularity, the deficit of underdog brands can be redeemed. A summary of the relevant literature is displayed in Table 1.

Only a few studies on the effectiveness of underdog positioning within the service sector have been investigated. Shirai (2017) examines the existence of the underdog effect in the context of service establishments (e.g., restaurants) and crowdedness. Specifically, the underdog effect is stronger when consumers observe an adequately crowded restaurant as the underdog is perceived as riskier due to unfamiliarity, and crowded service facilities signal a sense of security. Moreover, in Kimani et al.'s (2017) study, differences in consumers' empathic responses mediate the effects of underdog positioning on consumer choice among service providers. These researchers also suggest that positioning brands as underdogs works more effectively for less competent but highly moral service providers, indicating that some consumers elicit empathic concern for underdogs as they identify with the struggles and passion of the underdog.

In summary, on the basis of the underdog effect literature, underdog positioning is more likely to achieve positive reactions from consumers because they highlight hopes and dreams, and passion and determination that consumers can related to (McGinnis and Gentry, 2009; Paharia et al., 2011). However, as many relevant studies have heavily focused the underdog

effect on products, there remains room for further research to investigate the underdog effect in the service area. In this regard, this study examines the underdog effect in the context of individual service providers who position themselves as the underdog.

**Table 1.** Selected Studies Examining the Underdog Effect Focusing on Products and Brands

Study	Journal	Antecedents(s)	Outcome(s)	The Nature of Context
Paharia et al. (2011)	Journal of Consumer Research	Brand biography (underdog/top dog)	Consumer preference Purchase intentions	Bottled juice and iced tea Chocolate
Jun et al. (2015)	International Journal of Advertising	Underdog effect	Brand attitude	Dental clinic advertisement
Kao (2015)	Journal of Consumer Behavior	Brand biography (underdog vs. top dog)	Consumer preference	Product status (emerging brand vs. established brand)
Goldschmied et al. (2017)	Journal of Marketing Behavior	Type of products (underdog/ favorite)	Real Choices	Chocolate testing Paint evaluation
Shin Legendre et al. (2017)	Cornell Hospitality Quarterly	Brand positioning (underdog/top dog)	Intent to purchase Willingness to pay premium	Food & beverage coffee shop brand
Li and Zhao (2018)	Asian Journal of Social Psychology	Brand story (underdog/top dog)	Brand identification	Product type (hedonic vs. utilitarian)
Jin and Huang (2019)	Journal of Consumer Psychology	Appeal types (underdog/top dog)	Attitude	Car rental company Dell computer
Kao (2019)	Journal of Product & Brand Management	Brand storytelling (underdog/top dog)	Brand preference	Financial service brands (Banks)
Kim et al. (2019)	Psychology & Marketing	Brand biography (underdog/ top dog)	Forgiveness intentions	Service failure vs. product failure
Nagar (2019)	Journal of Marketing Communications	Brand biography (underdog/top dog)	Attitudes Purchase intention	Existing vs. new products (shoes brands)
Han and Kim (2020)	Marketing Intelligence & Planning	Brand positioning (underdog/top dog)	Purchase intention	Café and coffee brand
He and Chen (2020)	Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin	Brand positioning (underdog/top dog)	WOM intentions and behaviors	Website brand (learning skills)
Tang and Tsang (2020)	Journal of Business Research	Brand positioning (underdog/top dog)	Consumer preference Purchase intention Willingness to pay	Hedonic products Food (chocolate)
Nagar (2021)	Journal of Marketing Communications	Brand biography (underdog/top dog)	Attitudes Purchase intention	Counterfeit products
Kim et al. (2022)	Social Behavior and Personality	Brand personality (underdog/top dog)	Consumer brand attitudes	Service delivery types (face to face vs. self-service technology)

In this study, personal trainers (PT) in the fitness industry is used as an individual service provider, which is manipulated into an underdog PT and a top dog PT according to the research of Paharia et al., (2011). In addition, this paper hypothesizes that there is a positive relationship between underdog positioning and consumer preferences of individual service providers. Namely, consumer preference for the PT positioned as underdogs is greater than the PT positioned as top dogs.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Pretest of Positioning Manipulation

This paper aims to demonstrate whether positioning individual service providers (e.g., personal trainer, PT) as underdogs generates more positive consumer responses. In doing so, an independent pre-test was conducted to validate the effectiveness of the positioning manipulation used in this study. A total of 72 participants (age = 22.19,  $SD = 1.79$ ; 45 females) were hired to read a biography of a fictitious PT positioned as either an underdog or a top dog. For the PT who was positioned as an underdog, participants read the following excerpt showing a fabricated biography:

*“The PT started his career with very few resources. He had little money or connections in the fitness industry. This PT is relatively new and less known compared to other long-time well-established trainers. Nonetheless, the PT is clearly passionate and also determines to succeed in the future despite obstacles and adversary. He is recognized as a hardworking trainer who always makes his utmost effort and competes to win new clients. This PT also serves his clients with great enthusiasm and provides quality exercise programs”.*

In contrast, the other group of participants received the following biography of a PT with the top dog condition:

*“The PT started his career with many resources. He had a lot of money and abundant connections in the fitness industry. This PT has been enjoying his solid position in the marketplace thanks to his privileged background and strong financial support. He has long been known as a well-established personal coach as he is able to sustain market performance much more successfully than any other PTs in the industry”.*

The manipulation check was to find out whether the underdog positioned biography scored higher in external disadvantages, and passion and determination than the top dog one. Adopting the underdog scale of Paharia et al., (2011), participants responded to two questions to rate their perceptions of PT biography on 7-point scales (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; “The PT came from a disadvantaged background”; “I think the PT is highly determined and very passionate”). The results revealed that participants perceived that the PT with an underdog biography had more external disadvantages than the top-dog PT ( $M_{\text{underdog}} = 6.30$ ,  $M_{\text{top dog}} = 1.49$ ,  $t(70) = 19.03$ ,  $p = 0.00$ ). Participants who read the underdog biography also indicated that the PT had more passion and determination ( $M_{\text{underdog}} = 6.49$ ,  $M_{\text{top dog}} = 4.97$ ,  $t(70) = 6.02$ ,  $p = 0.00$ ). Therefore, the constructs of the biographical manipulation were perceived as intended.

### 3.2. Design and Procedure

To test the hypothesis of this study that the underdog positioned personal trainer will generate stronger consumer preferences, a total of 212 student participants based in South Korea were invited to participate in an online experiment. Participants were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions, and eleven participants were excluded from the analysis because they failed to complete the focal measures with missing data. From the 201 qualified responses, 64% of the participants were female, and the mean age was 23.15,  $SD = 1.32$ . Table 2 presents the demographic characteristics of the sample.

This study featured a 3 (underdog vs. top dog vs. control) positioning one-factor between-subjects design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three positioning conditions, in which the personal trainer of the two test groups contains information related to either underdog or top dog biography. The PT's biographical information was not provided to those in the control condition. In fact, participants were given a questionnaire and asked to imagine that they were currently in a situation where they are hiring a personal trainer. Except for altering the two dimensions of external disadvantage, and passion and determination, other conditions such as the reasonableness of their rate and scheduling remained the same for all three personal trainers. Participants answered to questions about the biography of each personal trainer (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; From that biography, it seems that "The personal trainer came from a disadvantaged background" and "I think the personal trainer is highly determined and very passionate"). For the dependent variable, participants answered the questions about their preference of the personal trainer (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; "I am interested in working out with this PT" and "This PT is the finest for me"), and their responses were measured using the average of the two to form an index for consumer preference ( $a = .88$ ,  $M = 5.01$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ).

**Table 2.** Sample Demographic

Characteristics		Frequency	Statistics (%)
Gender	Female	128	64
	Male	73	36
Age (year)	20s	189	94
	30s	12	6
	40s and older	0	0
Education	High school diploma	2	1
	College graduate	166	83
	Master's/Doctorate	33	16
Profession	Student	195	97
	Employee	6	3
	Others	0	0
Total		201	100

### 3.3. Results

The descriptive output revealed that the cell means for personal trainer preferences, where the underdog positioned PT ( $M = 5.61$ ) were higher than the top dog PT ( $M = 4.89$ ) and the control group ( $M = 4.00$ ), were statistically significant ( $p \leq .05$ ). The assumption of homogeneity of variances was tested and found tenable using Levene's test,  $F(2, 198) = 1.53$ ,  $p = .22$ . A one-way ANOVA test was carried out to identify any differences in the mean scores of the consumer preferences among the different positioning of personal trainers. Table 3 reflects that the test scores differ significantly somewhere between the groups,  $F(2, 198) = 30.26$ ,  $p = .000$ .

**Table 3.** Consumer Preference: Cell Means and Standard Deviations

		N	Preference			
			Mean	SD	F	p
Positioning	Top dog	63	4.89	1.25	30.26	.000
	Underdog	70	5.61	1.17		
	Control	68	4.00	1.24		

After a significant ANOVA, post-hoc tests were conducted to identify between which groups differences exist. According to Table 4 and Table 5, it was found that the differences between the groups of underdog and top dog positioning, and the underdog positioning and the control group were significant in both methods Scheffe and Bonferroni for a multiple post-hoc comparison. Indicating a significant difference, the underdog positioning showed higher results in consumer preference than top dog positioning by 1.43 on average, as well as an average of 1.62 higher than the control group.

**Table 4.** Post Hoc Tests: Multiple Comparisons

	(I) Group	(J) Groups	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Scheffe	Top dog	Underdog	-1.432*	.206	.000	-1.94	-.92
		Control	.187	.208	.668	-.33	.70
	Underdog	Top dog	1.432*	.206	.000	.92	1.94
		Control	1.618*	.202	.000	1.12	2.12
	Control	Top dog	-.187	.208	.668	-.70	.33
		Underdog	-1.618*	.202	.000	-2.12	-1.12
Bonferroni	Top dog	Underdog	-1.432*	.206	.000	-1.93	-.93
		Control	.187	.208	1.000	-.31	.69
	Underdog	Top dog	1.432*	.206	.000	.93	1.93
		Control	1.618*	.202	.000	1.13	2.11
	Control	Top dog	-.187	.208	1.000	-.69	.31
		Underdog	-1.618*	.202	.000	-2.11	-1.13

\*The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

**Table 5.** Homogeneous Subsets

Condition	N	<u>Subset for alpha = 0.05</u>	
		1	2
Top dog	63	4.89	
Underdog	70	4.00	
Control	68		5.61
Sig.		.662	1.000

### 3.4. Discussion

Despite the widespread use of underdog positioning, research specifically focusing on the underdog effect on services has been somewhat limited. The current paper focused on this area by addressing a relatively unexplored issue: the context of consumer choice of independent and individual service providers in which underdog positioning is expected to be most suitable. That is, this paper demonstrated the effects of underdog positioning on consumer preference of individual service providers, personal trainers, in the fitness industry. The findings of this study suggest that the overall consumer preference score was significantly higher when consumers read the PT's description of underdog biographies than when they read the top dog description. Consistent with our predictions, more favorable choices were found for individual service providers with underdog positioning over top positioning.

## 4. Conclusion

This study discovers a positive impact of underdog positioning on the consumer preference for individual service providers and the findings of this paper add novel perspective to the relevant literature. Namely, this advances underdog effects research by examining whether the similar outcome is expected when underdog positioning is also used in service areas. It is worth noting while prior research mainly focuses on underdog product and brand positioning, there is little existing research which takes into account the context of service providers tested within the underdog (top dog) condition. While testing, the researcher discovered that passionate and determined underdog service providers were favored more in comparison with dominant and powerful top dog ones. Thereby, the current experiment contributes to the construction of underdog effects by confirming the effectiveness in the service domain. Largely, it is emphasized in the consumer behavior field that consumers prefer underdog brands because they can self-identify with and consider themselves as underdogs (Li and Zhao, 2017; Paharia, et al., 2011). Studies have confirmed that some consumers feel the struggles and obstacles that underdogs often experience, which engenders stronger consumer-brand identification (Kimani et al., 2017; Paharia et al., 2011). Accordingly, as past research has demonstrated that underdog brand positioning generates positive impact on the intend to purchase products, the current study underscores the significant implication of underdog positioning for individual service providers. If any, consumers actually align themselves with service providers positioned as underdogs attributed to greater effort than to service providers positioned as top dogs. This further confirms that attributions of underdog positions positively influence the level of consumer support (Vandello et al., 2016).

The findings of this study also provide meaningful practical implications. First, this study adds further support for the effectiveness of an underdog positioning strategy by showing that such strategy elicits the similar effect in services. As such, when positioning the underdog, individual service providers should focus on communicating their passion and determination. In particular, this is much more relevant for lesser-known small service providers and private businesses to consider. For example, according to previous studies (Kim et al., 2019; 2022), although Korean consumers tend to highly support underdog business in general, Korean consumers are less likely to express forgiveness intention towards service failure made by underdog service providers. Additionally, the underdog effect is vanished when a relational transgression occurs. In other words, Korean consumers become more intolerant when underdog service providers violate the provision in the process than when there is an error in service results. This provides a significant indicator for localized Korean service providers to build competitive strategies against global service firms entering the domestic market. Further, in Korean economy in the year of 2019, non-manufacturing industries account for nearly 75% of GDP whereas the manufacturing industry accounts for approximately 25%. More specifically, the service providing industry's share of GDP stands about 20% (classified into categories L through S under the Korean Standard Industrial Classification, 2017). Additionally, the GDP share of service industries takes up approximately 35% when covering personal service providers, and both public and private services such as rental business, restaurant, beauty and health shop, hotel, education, professional expertise. In this situation, small scale service providers in Korea face fierce competition; however, small service providers can benefit from using marketing strategies of underdog positioning to gain consumer support. That is, the underdog effect contributes to the sustainability of relatively small and new service providers who are, often with limited resources, competing with dominant global service brands in the domestic marketplace.

## 5. Future Research

The current study also needs to be considered in light of some limitations as with most studies. Findings of the present study from the scenario-based experiment may limit the generalizability of the results to the real world. A field study is thus suggested to validate and extend the findings of this study. This research focused on personal trainers who are known to be less-established in the marketplace. This could leave out situations where well-established service providers use underdog positioning to communicate with more consumers. Therefore, further studies covering both conditions should be followed to increase the reliability of the results. Finally, the underdog effect has been well understood across various domains by differing cultures and social situations (Han and Kim, 2020; Paharia et al., 2011). However, future investigations of the underdog effect, focusing on cross-cultural perspective on consumer personality and values, may lead to a new discovery in consumer responses to underdog-positioned service providers. Given that underdog positioning is more suitable for relatively small businesses, future research should guide them in leveraging their limited resources.

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