How Power States Influence the Persuasiveness of Top-Dog versus Underdog Appeals

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Although both top-dog and underdog positioning appeals are widely used in marketing and advertising, little is known about which strategy is more effective in persuading consumers. By introducing a sense of power, a social variable that is inherently relevant to the nature of the top-dog versus underdog classification, we propose that consumers’ responses to these two appeals are influenced by their psychological experience of power. Specifically, low-power consumers will respond to top-dog appeals more favorably because associating with top dogs facilitates power restoration. In contrast, high-power consumers will respond to underdog appeals more favorably because supporting underdogs facilitates power expression. In four experimental studies, we provide consistent support for our main predictions as well as the underlying processes. Studies 1 and 2 demonstrate the differential effect of consumers’ power states on their attitudes toward top-dog versus underdog appeals. Providing process evidence, Studies 3 and 4 identify boundary conditions under which the basic effect was eliminated. These findings contribute to the persuasion literature and power research and provide important implications for positioning strategy and advertisement development.

Keywords Sense of power; Underdog appeal; Top-dog appeal; Persuasion; Positioning strategy

Top-dog positioning appeals are widely used in the context of marketing and advertising. For example, large national brands (e.g., Starbucks) often distinguish themselves from small or local competitors (e.g., local coffee shops) using top-dog positioning strategies that emphasize their dominant advantages (e.g., abundant resources). Underdog positioning appeals are also prevalent in the marketplace. The potential of underdog positioning in the marketing context is evidenced by the well-known slogan of the Avis marketing campaign, “We’re number two. We try harder.” By explicitly acknowledging both its underdog status and its enduring efforts, Avis created a special appeal that successfully garnered nationwide support and helped the company excel despite its competitive disadvantage.

Theorists and marketing professionals have not reached consensus regarding whether the top-dog or underdog positioning appeal is more effective in persuading the target population in a marketing context. One school of thought suggests that consumers should prefer top-dog brands because these brands are champions in the marketplace and consumers want to associate themselves with winners (Cialdini & de Nicholas, 1989). However, recent research has found that consumers prefer brands with an underdog biography because they can better identify with a weaker but determined-to-improve brand (Kim et al., 2008; McGinnis & Gentry, 2009; Paharia, Keinan, Avery, & Schor, 2011). Although prior studies have independently emphasized the usefulness of both top-dog and underdog positioning appeals (Vandello, Goldschmied, & Richards, 2007), they provide no clear answer regarding the relative effectiveness of these appeals in persuading consumers, nor do they identify conditions under which one method of positioning may be superior to the other. This research aims to fill this gap by providing conditions under which one positioning appeal might work better than the other. More specifically, we examine the effectiveness of underdog and top-dog...
appeals from the perspective of consumers’ psychological state of power.

One important factor that distinguishes top dogs from underdogs is the dominant competitive advantage (e.g., resources and market share) possessed by the former (Paharia et al., 2011; Vandello et al., 2007). The underdog versus top-dog classification is rooted in the hierarchical structure of the market and the disparity of market power among competitors. Similarly, consumers, as individuals living in social networks, are subject to the influence of a social hierarchy that is generally defined by either chronically accumulated or situationally induced power states (French & Raven, 1959; Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Rucker & Galinsky, 2008a; Rucker, Galinsky, & Dubois, 2012). Power is by nature a hierarchical variable that involves a comparison between two or more parties (Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Rucker et al., 2012), and it has been shown to readily translate into a psychological state of mind that can have various consequences (see Galinsky, Rucker, & Magee, 2015, for a review). This hierarchical aspect of power makes it a particularly relevant construct for analyzing underdog and top-dog appeals, whose definitions are also based on hierarchical differences in the marketplace. By influencing the manner in which individuals think about and interact with their environments, a psychological experience of power should trigger different responses to top-dog versus underdog appeals.

In particular, we argue that consumers who experience a psychological state of low power respond to top-dog (vs. underdog) appeals more positively because associating with a dominant brand satisfies their motivation to restore power. In contrast, consumers who experience a high-power state tend to express their power rather than attempt to gain more of it. In this case, the consumption of top-dog brands rarely serves the goal of power expression. Indeed, the status advantage of top-dog brands may elicit feelings of competitiveness in powerful individuals (Tost, Gino, & Larick, 2012), which in turn reduces the appeal of top dogs to those who experience high power. Supporting an underdog, however, makes people who experience high power feel dominant and influential, which may better facilitate the expression of their power to others (Kim et al., 2008). As a result, consumers in a high-power state are more likely to exhibit favorable attitudes toward underdog brands than toward top-dog brands.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. First, we review prior research on underdog and top-dog appeals and develop our research hypotheses. We then test these hypotheses and the underlying mechanism through four experimental studies. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings in brand positioning and advertising.

Theoretical Framework

The Persuasive Effects of Underdog versus Top-dog Appeals

The classifications of top dogs and underdogs originate from the context of the sports arena and have been widely used in politics (Mehrabian, 1998), business competition (Frazier & Snyder, 1991; Kim et al., 2008), marketing, and advertising (Paharia et al., 2011; Vandello et al., 2007). The term “top dogs” refers to individuals or groups who are well endowed with resources and are favored to win. Conversely, “underdogs” may be defined as individuals or groups who are at a disadvantage and are expected to lose. In the marketplace, consumers often infer the top-dog versus underdog status of a brand by observing the amount of resources it can control and/or its market position compared to its competitors (Hoch & Deighton, 1989; Paharia et al., 2011). A top-dog brand is often a large and well-known national (or even international) brand (e.g., Starbucks) that dominates small and local competitors (e.g., local coffee shops), whereas underdog brands are often less resourceful and powerful. In addition to differences in control over resources, underdogs are uniquely characterized by their greater passion and determination to overcome disadvantages compared to top-dog brands (Paharia et al., 2011). Typical underdog brands include Snapchat (vs. Facebook), Southwest Airlines (vs. American and United Airlines), and Ben & Jerry’s (vs. Haagen-Dazs; Paharia et al., 2011).

However, rather than relying on consumers to infer a brand’s objective status, marketers often proactively position their brands as top dogs or underdogs. Strong competitors in a category often employ a top-dog positioning appeal that advertises their superiority in market standing and market share. In contrast, competitors that are less privileged in the marketplace but strive to improve their performance often use the underdog positioning appeal to capture consumer sympathy and support.

Which strategy is more effective for persuasion when both are frequently used in advertising? Unfortunately, there is no definite answer to this
question. Prior research on group affiliation and social identification theory provides ample evidence that individuals are motivated to identify with successful groups and to dissociate from unfavorable, unsuccessful, or stigmatized groups (Cialdini et al., 1976; Snyder, Lassègare, & Ford, 1986; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). To the extent that underdog brands represent an unsuccessful and lower-status group relative to top-dog brands, consumers should prefer top-dog brands. Indeed, prior work has shown that individuals distance themselves from underdogs to avoid being associated with someone who is expected to lose. In contrast, they identify with top dogs to share in the glory of probable winners (Cialdini et al., 1976; Cialdini & Richardson, 1980). For example, Cialdini et al. (1976) demonstrated that students are more likely to wear branded apparel displaying their university’s logo following a football victory than after a loss. Likewise, in the context of voting, individuals are more likely to vote for a candidate who is expected to win, resulting in a “bandwagon effect” (i.e., an increased tendency to vote for a leading candidate than for a trailing candidate; Ceci & Kain, 1982; Simon, 1954). To summarize, because top-dog brands are usually perceived as resourceful market leaders, it is reasonable for consumers to believe that top-dog brands are more effective in helping consumers signal their desired identity. Therefore, top-dog appeals should outperform underdog appeals in persuading target consumers.

However, in areas ranging from politics to sports and business, anecdotal evidence abounds that individuals occasionally align themselves with underdogs, a phenomenon that has been termed “the underdog effect” (Frazier & Snyder, 1991; McGinnis & Gentry, 2009; Mehrabian, 1998; Paharia et al., 2011). For example, Vandello et al. (2007) demonstrated support for underdogs in both sports and international politics. In a marketing context, Paharia et al. (2011) reported that the use of underdog brand biographies has a positive impact on consumers’ purchase intentions. Although the reasons that individuals support top dogs are relatively clear (i.e., identification with the winner), the motivation that underlies underdog support is less intuitively obvious. Some research suggests that support for underdogs is based on principles of justice, fairness and deserveness (e.g., Vandello et al., 2007), whereas other scholars argue that supporting underdogs (vs. top dogs) may make individuals feel morally righteous (Kim et al., 2008). Other plausible explanations exist for the underdog effect. For example, supporting underdogs costs very little because people expect the underdog to lose, but the rewards of the unexpected success of a disadvantaged protagonist are great (Goethals & Darley, 1977). In addition, consumers may better identify with underdog brands because they see the underdog aspects of their own life reflected in the underdog positioning (Paharia et al., 2011).

Prior studies do not provide a clear answer regarding which positioning strategy is more effective for persuasion, nor do they identify conditions that may result in one strategy becoming superior to the other. This research aims to fill this gap. Specifically, because the primary criteria to distinguish between a top dog and an underdog include whether the entity has more resources than its opponent and whether it is seen as privileged (Kim et al., 2008; Vandello et al., 2007), we argue that the classifications of top dog and underdog are inherently related to power disparity—another variable that is also defined in terms of control over resources. Therefore, the relative effectiveness of top-dog versus underdog positioning depends on consumers’ psychological experiences of power.

*Power and Attitude toward Top Dogs versus Underdogs*

Power has traditionally been defined as asymmetric control over valued resources in social relations (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003; Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) and has long been argued to be a pervasive and fundamental component of social systems and hierarchies. Society’s social stratification places consumers in various positions of power based on their economic resources and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1985). Although the theoretical relationship between power and underdog versus top-dog status stems from the fact that both constructs are characterized by hierarchical differences in control over valuable resources, prior research suggests that power can go beyond being an inherently social construct and translate directly into a psychological state that influences individuals’ attitudes and behaviors (Galinsky et al., 2015; Rucker et al., 2012). In this case, social power exerts its influences through the “sense” of power it produces, which can be thought of as the psychological state or mindset of feeling powerful (Rucker & Galinsky, 2017). For example, a psychological sense of power can be induced by episodic recall (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003) and semantic priming (e.g., the scrambled sentence task, Smith & Trope, 2006), suggesting that people can experience a psychological state of high
or low power even when an asymmetrical comparison between parties does not exist.

Prior studies of power report a variety of consequences as a function of psychological power, such as an illusionary perception of personal control (Fast, Gruenfeld, Sivanathan, & Galinsky, 2009), optimism and high self-esteem (Brunol, Petty, Valle, Rucker, & Becerra, 2007), perceptions of competitiveness (Tost et al., 2012), and a sense of entitlement (Lammers, Stapel, & Galinsky, 2010). In a consumption context, experiencing a psychological sense of high (or low) power has been demonstrated to affect compensatory consumption (Rucker & Galinsky, 2008b) and spending (Rucker, Dubois, & Galinsky, 2011). Following this stream of research, this investigation also focuses on a psychological sense of power. We investigated the influence of the sense of power on consumers’ attitudes toward top-dog versus underdog appeals. Marrying research on top dogs versus underdogs and the power literature, we argue in this thesis that low- (high-) power states lead to a more favorable attitude toward brands that use top-dog (underdog) appeals. Specifically, aligning with top-dog brands can help consumers in low-power states reduce their feelings of powerlessness because such an alignment offers a potential means of restoring power, whereas supporting an underdog brand may help consumers in high-power states, who do not need more power, to express their dominant advantages without incurring a loss of status.

Prior findings suggest that lacking power is an aversive state and that individuals may be motivated to reduce their state of powerlessness through consumption. A powerlessness-induced compensatory model of consumption asserts that the acquisition of status can increase an individual’s sense of power (French & Raven, 1959). Consequently, products that signal status are valued more by low-power consumers because they offer a potential means of restoring power. In other words, consumers in a low-power state are inclined to acquire products or brands that may help them display advantages to others and restore their power. Because top dogs are generally perceived as strong, powerful winners (Kim et al., 2008; Paharia et al., 2011), consumers in a low-power state should align themselves with top-dog brands to share in the glory of probable winners and signal their place in the social hierarchy to others, consequently restoring their sense of power. Thus, we expect consumers in a low-power state to be more likely to be persuaded by top-dog positioning appeals than by underdog positioning appeals.

However, one might also argue that consumers in a low-power state should prefer underdog brands because they either want to help weaker players or feel inspired by the underdog’s passion and determination. Indeed, recent research has suggested that lacking power can predispose individuals toward a communal orientation that focuses on others (Rucker et al., 2012), which might make consumers feel more sympathetic toward underdog brands. For example, consumers who strongly self-identify as underdogs are more likely to prefer underdog brands (Paharia et al., 2011). Nevertheless, we note that these speculations are basically driven by the “psychological propensities” of being powerless (i.e., inclinations and tendencies that are naturally triggered by being powerless), which emphasizes a communal (vs. agentic) orientation (Rucker et al., 2012). In other words, low-power consumers might identify with the underdog brand to a greater extent relative to their high-power counterparts. However, these propensities can be overridden by low-power individuals’ “psychological needs” to regain power when features of the environment call attention to opportunities that can effectively address their low-power state (which is an aversive state; Rucker et al., 2011; Rucker & Galinsky, 2008b). In our case, a top-dog brand, which is itself a strong signal of dominance, should naturally turn low-power consumers’ attention to how it can serve their needs of power restoration, consequently overwhelming their potential propensity to affiliate with underdog brands (Rucker et al., 2012).

Associating with top-dog brands, however, offers little value for consumers in a high-power state who do not need a boost in power or status. Indeed, recent studies have demonstrated that compared to consumers who lack power, those who are powerful are less swayed by products marketed solely based on status (Rucker & Galinsky, 2009; Rucker et al., 2011). Rather than restoring power, expressing power becomes a priority for power holders (Bales, 1950; Tost et al., 2012). Supporting this argument, individuals in a high-power state have been found to engage in dominant behaviors to express their power. For example, power holders speak more assertively and frequently (Bales, 1950) and are more inclined to gain influence in groups than their submissive counterparts (Fragale, Overbeck, & Neale, 2011).

Because the need for power has already been satisfied for individuals in a high-power state, the benefits of elevated status engendered by top dogs are limited. Moreover, individuals in a high-power
state might even react to top-dog appeals negatively. Experiencing high power leads to an enhanced level of competitiveness (Magee, Galinsky, & Gruenfeld, 2007), which decreases powerful individuals’ willingness to interact with those who also possess power or high status. For example, Tost et al. (2012) found that a state of high power makes individuals less amenable to adopting advice from expert advisors. This occurs because powerful decision makers feel competitive with expert advisors. This feeling of competitiveness, in turn, adversely affects the ability of powerful decision makers to maintain and express their power, which makes consumers in a high-power state less interested in interacting with top-dog brands, which are themselves power holders in the marketplace.

Conversely, consumers in a high-power state should feel much less confrontational when interacting with underdogs (vs. top dogs). If anything, they might even feel influential and dominant when showing support for or purchasing from these disadvantaged players in the marketplace. As a result, for consumers in a high-power state who wish to express their power (rather than gain more of it), underdog brands, relative to top-dog brands, offer greater instrumentality in power expression without appearing threatening. In summary, we propose the following hypotheses.

H1: Consumers who experience a low-power state will respond to top-dog appeals more favorably than underdog appeals, whereas consumers who experience a high-power state will respond to underdog appeals more favorably than top-dog appeals.

H2: Low-power consumers’ more favorable attitudes toward top-dog appeals are driven by their motivation to restore power, whereas high-power consumers’ more favorable attitudes toward underdog appeals are driven by their motivation to express power.

Boundary Conditions

It is central to our theorizing that consumers in low-power states are reluctant to be associated with underdog brands because they are in an inferior position relative to the top-dog brands. In contrast, consumers in high-power states are reluctant to interact with top-dog brands because they feel competitive with the top dogs, which are also power holders in the marketplace. If this is true, the impact of power states on consumers’ responses to top-dog versus underdog appeals (H1) should be moderated by whether the underdogs are perceived as strong challengers to the current top dogs. Although passion and determination alone cannot make underdog brands an effective instrument for power restoration because of their innate status disadvantages (resulting from a lack of resources), repositioning the underdog as a strong challenger who is likely to defeat the incumbent top-dog brands potentially elevates its status in the marketplace. As a result, this “challenger” underdog should become as appealing as top-dog brands and more appealing than the original underdog brands to low-power consumers.

In contrast, framing the underdog as a “challenger” makes consumers in high-power states feel particularly threatened because it is explicitly described as intending to challenge the superior status of a current power holder (i.e., top-dog brands). Supporting this argument, Maner and Mead (2010) found that those with high power are motivated to protect their place in the hierarchy by excluding a highly skilled group member and preventing a proficient group member from having any influence over a group task, especially when their power is tenuous due to instability within the hierarchy. Consequently, consumers in a state of high power will respond to the “challenger” underdog as favorably as toward the top dog and less favorably than toward the original underdog. We thus propose the following hypothesis.

H3: When the underdog brand is framed as a strong “challenger” to the top dogs in the marketplace, low-power consumers will like it as much as the top-dog brand and more than the original underdog brand, whereas high-power consumers will like it as much as the top-dog brand and less than the original underdog brand.

Similarly, if the status advantage associated with top-dog brands attracts low-power consumers and simultaneously repels high-power consumers, the impact of power states on consumers’ responses to top-dog versus underdog appeals (H1) should also be moderated by the expected (in) stability of top-dog brands’ status advantage. Specifically, framing top-dog brands as incumbent champions that are facing potentially devastating challenges from strong competitors endangers their status as dominant leaders. This top dog “on the ropes” will consequently become less attractive to low-power consumers who seek top-dog brands for their power restoration function. For high-power consumers, however, the same reframing should elicit a lower level of
competitiveness because top dogs that are “on the ropes” are no longer as threatening. Moreover, supporting such top dogs can satisfy high-power consumers’ need for power expression because the imminent danger of falling from the top position makes these top dogs appear weak and thus a suitable target for power expression. We therefore propose the following hypothesis.

H4: When the top-dog brand is framed as a market leader who is on the ropes (i.e., close to losing its leading position), a low-power consumer will like it as much as the underdog brand and less than the original top-dog brand, whereas a high-power consumer will like it as much as the underdog brand and more than the original top-dog brand.

In the next section, we report the empirical tests of our hypotheses. Study 1 tests our basic hypothesis that consumers in low- (high-) power states indicate a more favorable attitude toward a brand positioned as a top dog (an underdog) (H1). Study 2 replicates the results of Study 1 and further investigates the mechanisms underlying the observed effects (H2). The next two studies demonstrate boundary conditions for our effect. Specifically, Study 3 examines a condition in which the underdog brand is liked more (less) by low- (high-) power consumers (H3), whereas Study 4 examines a condition under which the top-dog brand is liked less (more) by low- (high-) power consumers (H4).

Study 1 Sense of Power and Consumer Responses to Top-Dog versus Underdog Appeals

Experiment 1 provides an initial test of our hypothesis that consumers in low- and high-power states respond differently to underdog versus top-dog appeals. We measured consumers’ chronic sense of power and predicted that consumers who scored relatively low on the sense of power would respond more positively to a brand when it was positioned as a top dog than when it was positioned as an underdog. In contrast, for consumers who scored relatively high on the sense of power, the opposite would occur.

Method

A total of 357 adult consumers (186 females, 171 males; mean age = 31.07 years old, SD = 9.36) recruited from the United States through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk participated in this study in exchange for a small amount of monetary compensation. The study employed a 2 (appeal type: top dog vs. underdog) × 2 (sense of power: high vs. low) mixed design in which the appeal type was manipulated as a between-subject factor and the sense of power was measured as an individual difference factor.

The cover story informed participants that this study was conducted in collaboration with a marketing research firm and included two independent surveys. The first survey was a “Consumer Lifestyle and Shopping Habit Survey,” which included approximately 60 questions. Among the filler questions (e.g., how often do you go shopping?), we embedded the sense of power scale (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006) in this survey. The items in this scale showed high reliability (Cronbach’s α = .80; M = 3.99, SD = 1.85) and were thus averaged to form a composite index of the sense of power for further analyses.

After completing the first survey, participants were directed to the second survey, which was presumably unrelated to the first one. Participants were told that the second study pertained to advertisements and that their task was to read a series of advertisement copies and provide feedback. Specifically, participants were presented with two print advertisement copies. The first ad copy (which served as filler) was identical across experimental conditions, whereas the second ad copy varied between the underdog and the top-dog appeal conditions. The ad copy described the biographies of a portable charger brand, Enka. In the top-dog appeal condition, Enka was described as a top-dog brand (modified from Paharia et al., 2011, Study 4), whereas it was described as an underdog brand in the underdog appeal conditions (see online Appendix S1 for the manipulations).

After reading the ad copies, participants completed a short survey. Among the filler questions (e.g., “how many portable chargers do you have?”), participants indicated their attitudes toward the advertised brand in three questions (1 = bad/unfavorable/dislike; 7 = good/favorable/like; Sengupta & Johar, 2002), which served as the main dependent measures. Finally, as a manipulation check for brand positioning, participants answered the question, “Do you think the advertised brand is more of an underdog or a top dog?” (1 = more of an underdog, 7 = more of a top dog).

Results and Discussion

Manipulation checks. The participants who read the underdog ad reported that the advertised brand
was more of an underdog (vs. the top dog; $M = 3.74, SD = 2.06$) relative to those who read the top-dog ad ($M = 4.81, SD = 1.80$; $t(355) = 5.22, p < .001, d = .07$).

**Brand attitudes.** The three items used to measure attitude toward the advertised brand showed high reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .84$) and thus were averaged to form a composite index for further analyses. We conducted a linear regression with brand attitude as the dependent variable and sense of power, appeal type ($-1 =$ top dog, $1 =$ underdog) and their interaction term as predictors. The analysis yielded the predicted sense of power and appeal type interaction ($\beta = -.37$, $t(357) = -4.42, p < .001$). No other significant effects emerged in this analysis (sense of power: $\beta = -.08$, $t(357) = -1.85$, $p = .06$; appeal type: $\beta = .26$, $t(357) = 1.67$, $p = .09$). We further decomposed this two-way interaction using Process for SPSS (Hayes, 2013) and yielded Johnson-Neyman values of 3.86 and 5.83 for the sense of power ($M = 3.99, SD = 1.85$), at which the effect of appeal type on brand attitude became significant. Specifically, participants with a lower sense of power (e.g., score of sense of power $\leq$3.86, 40.6% of the sample) indicated a more positive attitude toward the top-dog brand than toward the underdog brand ($\beta = -.30$, $t(357) = -1.97$, $p = .05$). In contrast, and consistent with our prediction, participants with a higher sense of power (e.g., a score of sense of power $\geq$5.83, 24.9% of the sample) responded to the underdog brand more positively than the top-dog brand ($\beta = .43$, $t(357) = 1.97$, $p = .05$). The effect of top-dog versus underdog positioning at the mean level of sense of power was marginally significant ($\beta = .26$, $t(357) = 1.66$, $p = .09$).

Study 1 provided initial evidence for our hypothesis that consumers in low-power (high-power) states responded to the top-dog (underdog) appeal more favorably. To better establish the causal relationship, our next study, instead of measuring the sense of power, experimentally induced a feeling of high versus low power through a role-play task. We also tested the proposed mechanism that underlies the observed effect in the next study.

**Study 2 Manipulated Power and the Underlying Mechanism**

Study 2 aimed to replicate the result of Study 1, with three major changes. First, this study used a role-play task to manipulate a momentary sense of high versus low power. Second, to test the robustness of our effect, we used a different product category and measured both attitudes and purchase intentions as dependent variables. Third, we directly tested the proposed power restoration and power expression mechanisms that underlie the observed effect. Finally, we measured perceived quality and examined whether the observed effect could be explained by differences in quality perceptions.

**Method**

We collaborated with a local home-shopping TV channel to recruit participants. One week before the experiment, we randomly drew 20,000 customers from the channel’s customer database and sent them a “Participant Recruitment” email, which informed the recipients that by participating in the study, they would have an opportunity to win a $5 voucher that could be used for the home-shopping channel along with a participation fee ($5 in cash). Within 1 week, 628 customers who had received the email signed up to participate in this experiment. One week later, among these registered customers, 344 people reported to the lab and completed the study (179 females; mean age = 31.29 years with range 18–54, $SD = 9.29$). They were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions of a 2 (power states: low vs. high) $\times$ 2 (appeal type: top dog vs. underdog) between-subjects design.

The experiment was conducted in the lab as two unrelated studies. We adopted procedures from Galinsky et al. (2003) and Jin, He, and Zhang (2014) to manipulate participants’ sense of power in the first study. Participants were asked to participate in a coordination task in which they would play the role of either a manager (high-power condition) or a subordinate (low-power condition). Participants were told that they would complete a leadership questionnaire first and would then be assigned the role of either a manager or a subordinate based on their responses to this questionnaire.

Upon completion of the leadership questionnaire, the experimenter collected the questionnaires and pretended to score them on a nearby table. Unknown to the participants, the roles of the manager and subordinate were randomly assigned in advance. The experimenter then announced the participants who were assigned the manager role and gave instructions to those participants in a different room. Specifically, the experimenter described a subsequent coordination task (building a tangram...
using Legos) and informed the participants that they were best suited for and therefore were assigned the role of a manager. Each manager was then given instructions that emphasized that he or she would have complete control over the coordination task, including work progress, the evaluation of subordinates, and the division of rewards. In contrast, participants assigned to the role of subordinate were told that they were best suited to play the subordinate and were given instructions that emphasized that they would have no control over any aspect of the coordination task. Notably, the experimenter did not inform the participants whether they performed well or poorly. This manipulation of power has been demonstrated to not affect participants’ mood (Galinsky et al., 2003; Jin et al., 2014; Rucker et al., 2011). Upon completion of the role assignment, participants were asked to answer a series of questions. Among the filler questions, such as “experiences and skills of playing Legos,” we again used the sense of power scale (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006) as a power manipulation check. The scale showed high reliability (Cronbach’s α = .88). The participants then were informed that the experimenter needed some time to prepare the materials for the coordination task and that they could proceed to the “second study” to save time.

The second study was described to the participants as a marketing survey pertaining to advertisements. The participants were presented with three print advertisement copies. The first two advertisement copies (filler ads) were identical across all experimental conditions, but the third copy varied between the underdog and the top-dog appeal conditions. Specifically, the participants were presented with a print advertisement of a car rental company featuring either a top-dog appeal or an underdog appeal depending on the conditions. In the top-dog appeal conditions, the advertisement presented a top-dog biography of the rental car company, whereas in the underdog appeal conditions, the brand was described as an underdog (modified from Paharia et al., 2011, Study 4, see Appendix S2).

After reading the advertisement copies, the participants completed a short survey. Among the filler questions (e.g., “Do you have a driver’s license?”), we asked participants to indicate their attitude toward the advertised brand using the same three items used in Study 1. In addition, we used three items to measure purchase intention (Kozup, Creyer, & Burton, 2003): “Given the information shown: (a) would you be more likely or less likely to use the advertised brand? (1 = less likely, 7 = more likely); “(b) how probable is it that you would consider using the advertised brand? (1 = very improbable, 7 = very probable);” and “(c) how likely is it that you would use the advertised brand’s service? (1 = very unlikely, 7 = very likely).” We also included three questions to measure the perceived quality of the brand (Sprott & Shimp, 2004): “(a) I would say this company has (1 = poor quality 7 = excellent quality); “(b) the service quality offered by the advertised brand is (1 = very unreliable, 7 = very reliable); “(c) Overall, the quality is (1 = extremely low, 7 = extremely high).”

Next, to capture the underlying mechanisms, we asked the participants to report their perceived instrumentality of the advertised brand in terms of power expression by answering the following three questions: “(a) How much do you think that the advertised brand enables you to express your dominant advantage?,” “(b) How much do you think that the advertised brand enables you to signal your superiority?” and “(c) How much do you think the advertised brand would be helpful to demonstrate your power?” (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). For the perceived instrumentality of power restoration, participants answered the following questions: “(a) How much do you think that the advertised brand could reduce your feelings of powerlessness?,” “(b) How much do you think that the advertised brand could restore your power?,” and “(c) How much do you think that the advertised brand could help you regain power?” (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). Finally, as a manipulation check for brand positioning, participants answered the question, “Do you think the advertised brand is more of an underdog or a top dog?” (1 = more of an underdog, 7 = more of a top dog).

As we planned, the participants did not actually complete the coordination task. After completing the survey, the participants were debriefed and thanked.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation checks. An ANOVA performed on the participants’ sense of power yielded only a main effect of power such that the participants who were assigned to play the role of a manager reported feeling more powerful (M = 5.04, SD = 1.23) than those who were assigned to play the role of a subordinate (M = 3.20, SD = 2.01), F(1, 340) = 104.80, p < .001, η² = .24. None of the other effects were significant (ps > .34). Another ANOVA
performed on participants’ brand perception confirmed that the participants who read the underdog brand biography considered the advertised brand more of an underdog (vs. top dog; $M = 3.14, SD = 1.78$) relative to those who read the top-dog brand biography ($M = 5.12, SD = 1.25$), $F(1,340) = 143.13, p < .001, \eta^2 = .30$. None of the other effects were significant ($ps > .12$) (see Table 1).

**Brand attitudes and purchase intentions.** The three items used for attitude toward the advertised brand and the three used for purchase intention showed high reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha$ for attitude toward the brand = .92; Cronbach’s $\alpha$ for purchase intention = .87). We thus averaged each set of three items to form two composite indexes for further analyses. As predicted, an ANOVA performed on the attitude score yielded a significant interaction between power state and appeal type $F(1,340) = 11.59, p < .001, \eta^2 = .03$ and no other effects ($Fs < .25$). High-power participants reported more positive attitudes when the brand was described as an underdog ($M = 4.60, SD = 1.31$) than when it was described as a top dog ($M = 4.14, SD = 1.64$; $t(169) = 2.07, p = .04, d = .03$), whereas low-power participants displayed the opposite pattern: they reported more favorable attitudes when the brand was framed as a top dog ($M = 4.91, SD = 1.36$) than when it was described as an underdog ($M = 4.32, SD = 1.44$; $t(171) = 2.77, p = .006, d = .04$) (see Figure 1). The pattern of purchase intention was very similar (see Table 2). Although power manipulation shifted participants’ attitudes toward the target brand that featured either a top-dog or an underdog appeal, it had no influence on participants’ evaluations of the two filler advertisements ($Fs < .54$).

**Quality perceptions.** An ANOVA on the perceived quality of the advertised brand (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .89$) revealed no significant difference between the underdog ($M_{\text{underdog}} = 4.78, SD = 1.51$) and top-dog conditions ($M_{\text{top-dog}} = 5.04, SD = 1.27$), $F(1,340) = 2.97, p = .08, \eta^2 = .01$. Although perceived quality positively correlated with attitude toward the brand ($r = .28, p < .001$) and purchase intention ($r = .17, p = .001$), the interactive effect between power state and appeal type on consumer responses was unlikely to be explained by low-power (vs. high-power) participants perceiving the top-dog (vs. underdog) brand as having higher quality.

**Mediation analyses.** The three items used for perceived instrumentality in power expression and the three used for power restoration also showed high reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha$ for perceived instrumentality in power expression = .81; Cronbach’s $\alpha$ for perceived instrumentality in power restoration = .84). We thus averaged each set of three items to form two composite indexes for further analyses. An ANOVA conducted on perceived instrumentality in power expression yielded a main effect of power state $F(1,340) = 25.17, p = .001$,

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**Table 1**

The Results of Manipulation Checks Across Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sense of power</th>
<th>Top dog vs. underdog perception</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Underdog</td>
<td>5.10a (1.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top dog</td>
<td>4.98a (1.30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Underdog</td>
<td>4.60a (1.56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top dog</td>
<td>4.59a (1.82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenger underdog</td>
<td>4.81a (1.47)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Underdog</td>
<td>4.55a (1.60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top dog</td>
<td>4.68a (1.83)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top dog on the ropes</td>
<td>4.65a (1.56)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Within the “sense of power” conditions, means in the same row with different subscripts are significantly different. Within the “top dog vs. underdog perception” conditions, means in the same column with different subscripts are significantly different. Standard deviations are indicated in parentheses.
\( \eta^2 = .07 \) and an interaction between power state and appeal type \( F(1,340) = 5.48, p = .02, \eta^2 = .02 \). Further contrast analyses revealed that participants in the low-power conditions perceived the underdog brand \( (M = 3.31, SD = 1.23) \) and the top dog \( (M = 3.45, SD = 1.42; t(171) = .71, p = .48, d = .003) \) as equally instrumental in expressing power. However, participants in the high-power conditions perceived the underdog brand as more instrumental in expressing their power \( (M = 4.36, SD = 1.28) \) than the top-dog brand \( (M = 3.84, SD = 1.35; t(169) = 2.61, p = .01, d = .04) \).

The ANOVA on the perceived instrumentality in power restoration yielded a main effect of appeal type \( F(1,340) = 10.93, p = .001, \eta^2 = .03 \) and an interaction between power state and appeal type \( F(1,340) = 6.24, p = .01, \eta^2 = .02 \). Subsequent contrast analyses revealed that participants in high-power conditions perceived the underdog brand \( (M = 3.42, SD = 1.30) \) and the top-dog brand \( (M = 3.53, SD = 1.22; t(169) = .58, p = .57, d = .002) \) as equally instrumental in restoring power. However, participants in the low-power conditions perceived the top-dog brand as more instrumental in restoring their power \( (M = 4.12, SD = 1.32) \) than the underdog brand \( (M = 3.32, SD = 1.23; t(171) = 4.08, p < .001, d = .09) \).

Furthermore, to test the mediating role played by power restoration and power expression, we conducted a bias-corrected moderated mediation analysis with both power restoration and power expression entered as simultaneous mediators (model 8, bootstrapping sample size = 5,000; Preacher & Hayes, 2008). In this moderated mediation model, appeal type predicted the perceived instrumentality in power restoration and power expression, and power state moderated the effects of these two proposed mediators on brand attitudes.

The results supported our predictions (see Figure 2). Both the perceived instrumentality in power restoration \( (\beta = -.68, t(344) = -2.50, p = .01) \) and the perceived instrumentality in power expression \( (\beta = -.67, t(344) = -2.34, p = .02) \) were predicted by the interaction between power state and appeal type in the mediator model. In the dependent-variable model, both the perceived instrumentality in power restoration \( (\beta = .56, t(344) = 12.36, p < .001) \) and the perceived instrumentality in power expression \( (\beta = .43, t(344) = 9.76, p < .001) \)

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**Table 2**

**Main Results Across Studies 2, 3 & 4**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brand attitudes</th>
<th>Purchase intention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Underdog</td>
<td>4.60a (1.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top dog</td>
<td>4.14b (1.64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Underdog</td>
<td>4.10a (1.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top dog</td>
<td>3.63b (1.33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenger underdog</td>
<td>3.24a (1.34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Underdog</td>
<td>4.13a (1.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top dog</td>
<td>3.29b (1.38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top dog on the ropes</td>
<td>4.00b (1.76)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Within the “high power” conditions, means in the same column with different subscripts are significantly different. Within the “low power” conditions, means in the same column with different subscripts are significantly different. Standard deviations are indicated in parentheses.
predicted participants’ attitudes toward the advertised brand, whereas the interaction between power state and appeal type was no longer significant ($\beta = -.39$, $t(344) = -1.77$, $p = .08$). Furthermore, the conditional indirect effect of the perceived instrumentality in power restoration was significant in the low-power condition ($\beta = .45$; 95% CI = .23 to .70) but not in the high-power condition ($\beta = .06$; 95% CI = -.14 to .28), whereas the conditional indirect effect of the perceived instrumentality in power expression was significant in the high-power condition ($\beta = -.22$; 95% CI = -.42 to -.06) but not in the low-power condition ($\beta = .06$; 95% CI = -.11 to .23).

These results demonstrated that for low-power participants, the influence of underdog versus top-dog appeals on brand attitudes was mediated by the greater power restoration function associated with the latter. However, for high-power participants, the greater power expression function associated with the underdog (vs. top-dog) appeal mediated the effect of appeal type on brand attitudes.

In the next two studies, we aimed to explore two boundary conditions of the proposed effect of power states on consumers’ differential attitudes toward top-dog versus underdog appeals. If low-power consumers’ favorable responses toward the top-dog appeal are indeed driven by its power restoration function, it should be expected that when an underdog brand is framed as a strong challenger to the top-dog brand in market competition, the process of which leads to a gain in power, consumers in low-power states should show as much interest in this “challenger” underdog brand as in the top-dog brand. By comparison, for consumers in high-power states, the “challenger” framing would make the underdog brand appear more like an opponent, which would induce a feeling of being threatened. As a result, high-power consumers’ favorable response to underdog (vs. top-dog) brands should be attenuated. Our next study tests these possibilities (H3).

### Study 3 Framing the Underdog as a Strong Challenger

In Study 3, we framed the underdog brand as a strong challenger to the top-dog brand in market competition. Specifically, we emphasized that the underdog brand was implementing an aggressive plan to beat the top-dog brands in the industry. Moreover, we made it clear that it was very likely that the plan would seriously hurt the top-dog brands. We predicted that this reframing of the underdog brand as a challenger would attenuate both high-power consumers’ positive responses and low-power consumers’ negative responses to the underdog brand relative to the top-dog brand (H3).

#### Method

A total of 432 undergraduate and MBA students from a public university participated in this study (225 undergraduate students, 207 MBA students; 249 females, 183 males; mean age = 27.53, SD = 9.26, ranging from 19 to 42 years old) in exchange for monetary compensation. Participants were randomly assigned to one condition of a 2 (power state: low vs. high) × 3 (appeal type: top dog vs. underdog vs. underdog as a challenger) between-subjects design.
The procedure was similar to that of Study 2. We first manipulated power states using the same role-play task as in Study 2. After the role assignment, we measured the sense of power (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006; Rucker & Galinsky, 2009) as a manipulation check (Cronbach’s α = .85). Then, participants again proceeded to the second study, during which the experimenter was presumably preparing the materials for the coordination task.

The participants were then presented with three print advertisement copies. As in the previous experiments, the first two advertisement copies (e.g., filler advertisements) were identical across all experimental conditions. The third copy, however, varied depending on the conditions. Specifically, participants were presented with a print advertisement for mountaineering wear featuring a top-dog appeal, an underdog appeal, or an underdog framed as a challenger appeal (see Appendix S3 for details). In the underdog-as-a-challenger condition, in addition to the underdog biography, the participants read an additional piece of information emphasizing that

OPEY issued its challenge to the top brands in the industry last week by announcing an aggressive business plan to beat the top brands. They are confident that the implementation of this plan will inflict a fatal blow to some of the top competitors.

After reading the advertisement, the participants completed a short survey, which was very similar to the one used in Study 2. Specifically, among the filler questions (e.g., Do you like mountain climbing?), participants answered the same manipulation check questions for power and appeal type as in Study 2 and reported their attitudes toward and their purchase intentions for the advertised brand, followed by perceived quality on the same items as in Study 2. In addition, participants in the underdog and underdog-as-a-challenger condition were asked to indicate the extent to which they thought the advertised brand was a strong challenger to the top brands in the industry (1 = not at all, 7 = very much). Finally, the participants were debriefed and thanked. No participant guessed the true purpose of the experimental tasks.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation checks. An ANOVA performed on participants’ sense of power yielded only a main effect of power such that the participants who were assigned the role of a manager reported feeling more powerful ($M = 4.67$, $SD = 1.62$) than those who were assigned the role of a subordinate ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 1.85$), $F(1, 426) = 41.62, p < .001$, $d = .09$. None of the other effects were significant ($ps > .58$). Another ANOVA performed on participants’ brand perceptions confirmed that the participants in the underdog condition reported that the advertised brand was more of an underdog (vs. top dog; $M = 3.66$, $SD = 2.07$) relative to those in the top-dog condition ($M = 5.12$, $SD = 1.67$, $t(287) = 6.59, p = .001$, $d = .13$). No other effects were significant ($ps > .13$). Importantly, although participants in both the underdog condition and the underdog-as-a-challenger condition reported that the advertised brand was more of an underdog ($M_{challenger} = 3.56$, $SD = 1.67$ vs. $M_{underdog} = 3.66$, $SD = 2.07$, $t(286) = .44, p = .66$, $d = .001$), the participants in the latter condition were more likely to perceive the advertised brand as a strong challenger to the top brands ($M_{challenger} = 4.85$, $SD = 1.61$) than those in the former condition ($M_{underdog} = 3.54$, $SD = 1.93$, $t(286) = 6.29, p = .001$, $d = .122$). These results confirmed the validity of our manipulations.

Brand attitudes and purchase intentions. The three items used for attitude toward the advertised brand and the three used for purchase intention showed high reliability (Cronbach’s α for brand attitude = .90; Cronbach’s α for purchase intention = .87). An ANOVA on the attitude score yielded a main effect of appeal type $F(2, 426) = 4.70, p = .01$, $η^2 = .02$, which was qualified by the predicted interaction between power state and appeal type $F(2, 426) = 22.66, p < .001$, $η^2 = .10$. Replicating the pervious findings, low-power participants responded more positively to the top-dog appeal ($M = 4.24$, $SD = 1.40$) than to the underdog appeal ($M = 2.82$, $SD = 1.38$; $t(141) = 6.12, p < .001$, $d = .21$), whereas high-power participants responded more positively to the underdog appeal ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 1.26$) than to the top-dog appeal ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 1.33$; $t(144) = 2.17, p = .03$, $d = .03$).

Most importantly, re framing the underdog brand as a challenger increased low-power consumers’ rating of the brand relative to the original underdog ($M_{underdog} = 2.82$, $SD = 1.28$ vs. $M_{challenger} = 3.89$, $SD = 1.62$, $t(141) = 4.25, p < .001$, $d = .11$). There was no difference between the top-dog and underdog-as-challenger conditions for low-power participants ($t(140) = 1.39, p = .17$, $d = .01$). However, the same framing reduced high-power consumers’ liking of the underdog brand ($M_{underdog} = 4.10$, $SD = 1.26$ vs. $M_{challenger} = 3.24$, $SD = 1.34$, $t = 3.54$, $d = .19$).
There was no significant difference between the top-dog and underdog-as-challenger groups for high-power participants ($t(143) = 1.78, p = .08, d = .02$). The results on purchase intention followed a similar pattern (see Table 2).

An ANOVA on the perceived quality of the advertised brand (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .92$) yielded no significant effects ($F$s $< 2.59$). Although perceived quality correlated positively with the attitude toward the brand ($r = .17, p < .001$), the interactive effect of power state and appeal type on the brand attitude remained significant when perceived quality was controlled for $F(2,425) = 21.47, p = .001, \eta^2 = .09$.

These results suggest that once the underdog brand is perceived as a strong challenger to the top-dog brands in market competition, it can also function as a useful tool for low-power people to restore their power. For high-power consumers, however, the challenger reframing led to a feeling of being threatened and therefore resulted in less favorable responses. As we argued previously, compared to top-dog brands, underdog brands in the marketplace are characterized by two characteristics: resource disadvantages and passion and determination to overcome odds (Paharia et al., 2011). The findings from Study 3 indicated that although the passion and determination of a struggling underdog brand to overcome its own disadvantages do not seem adequate to inspire consumers in low-power states to purchase and do not seem to induce enough competitive feelings in consumers in a high-power state, a determined underdog declaring a challenge to the top players seems to be able to accomplish both.

If low-power consumers’ favorable responses toward top-dog appeals are indeed driven by their power restoration function whereas consumers in high-power states are reluctant to interact with top-dog brands because they feel competitive with them, a top dog whose status as the market leader is seriously challenged should appeal less to low-power consumers than the original top dog because it can no longer signal advantages or restore one’s lost power. By comparison, for consumers in high-power states, the “top dog on the ropes” framing would render the top-dog brands weaker and thus less threatening. Consequently, high-power consumers should like the top dog that is “on the ropes” more than the original top dog (H4). In our final study, we tested this boundary condition.

### Study 4 Top Dogs on the Ropes

Unlike previous studies, in Study 4, we used a well-known brand (i.e., Dell) rather than a hypothetical brand as our decision target and described it as an underdog, a top dog, or a top dog on the ropes in fictitious news articles. Specifically, in the top-dog-on-the-ropes condition, we described Dell as a market leader who was likely to lose its leading position in the near future due to both macroeconomic factors and competition. We predicted that for low-power consumers, the “top-dog-on-the-ropes” framing would result in an attitude less favorable than the original top-dog framing and equally favorable as the underdog framing. For high-power consumers, the same framing would result in an attitude more favorable than the original top-dog framing and equally favorable as the underdog framing (H4).

#### Method

A total of 409 adult consumers (217 females, 192 males; mean age = 31.59, SD = 9.31, range from 21 to 55 years old) recruited from the United States through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk participated in this study in exchange for a small amount of monetary compensation. It is worth noting that we used a well-known brand (i.e., Dell) instead of a hypothetical brand in this study to better control for confounds (e.g., price or quality) and to test the generalizability of our findings. However, we recruited only non-users of Dell to participate in this study for the following reasons: (a) According to research on attitude formation (Fazio et al., 1982; Smith & Swinyard 1983), attitudes formed through...
direct usage experiences relative to indirect experiences (e.g., advertising) tend to be more resistant to influences. To the extent that Dell products (e.g., laptops) are durable goods with which consumers normally have an extended period of experience, consumers’ attitudes are likely to be resistant to non-experiential influences such as, in our case, a news article; (b) In general, users tend to have better brand knowledge than non-users, which may result in a ceiling effect in attitude measures; and (c) In practice, non-users (vs. current users) are more likely to be the target audience of top-dog and underdog appeals. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the six conditions of a 2 (power state: low vs. high) × 3 (appeal type: top dog vs. underdog vs. top dog on the ropes) between-subjects design.

Participants completed three presumably unrelated tasks. In the first task, the participants recalled and wrote about a particular incident in which they had power over another person (high-power condition) or in which someone else had power over them (low-power condition). Upon completion of the recall task, participants answered a series of questions. Among the filler questions (e.g., “Do you have a good memory compared with your friends?”), the participants completed the same sense of power scale (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006; Rucker & Galinsky, 2009) as a manipulation check (Cronbach’s α = .84), as in previous studies.

The participants then proceeded to the second task, in which we manipulated the type of appeal. Under the pretense of evaluating the writing styles of business articles, participants were asked to read an excerpt of a business article from a news website and provide comments about it. This news article featured a real world brand, Dell, rather than a fictitious one. Using an established brand not only helped us better control for other factors (e.g., price or quality) that might correlate with manipulated appeal types (e.g., top-dog and underdog brands might differ in perceived price and quality, which make them differentially appealing to low- versus high-power consumers) but also offered a stronger test for our hypotheses in a more realistic setting.

The participants in the underdog appeal conditions read an article entitled “Dell 1984-The Humble Startup Soul,” which described Dell as an underdog and emphasized the company’s humble origins and its determination to succeed. Participants in the top-dog appeal conditions read an article entitled “Dell –Top Dog on the Move,” which described Dell as a top dog and emphasized the company’s status as a market leader. Participants in the top-dog-on-the-ropes conditions, however, read an article entitled “Dell –Top Dog on the Ropes,” which highlighted the company’s struggles with fierce competition (see Appendix S2 for all three articles).

After reading the article, participants were asked to provide comments on the article. Among the filler questions (e.g., “Do you like the writing style of this article?”), participants answered the same manipulation check question for appeal type as in previous studies (“Do you think the brand described in the article was more of an underdog or a top-dog brand?” (1 = more of an underdog, 7 = more of a top dog). In addition, participants in the top-dog and top-dog-on-the-ropes conditions indicated the extent to which they thought that the brand described in the article was currently on the ropes (1 = not at all, 7 = very much).

The participants were then directed to the third task, in which they evaluated three newly launched products. Two of the products (e.g., a pair of sneakers and a 3D printer) were filler products launched by other brands, whereas the third was our target product (i.e., a virtual reality headset) launched by Dell. Participants were presented with brief information about each of the products in random order. As DV measures, participants reported their attitudes toward, their purchase intentions for, and the perceived quality of each product using the same items as in Study 2. Finally, the participants provided demographic information.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation checks. An ANOVA performed on participants’ sense of power only revealed a main effect of power \(F(1, 403) = 34.63, p < .001\) and no other effects \((p > .73)\). The participants in the high-power conditions reported feeling more powerful \((M = 4.63, SD = 1.66)\) than those in the low-power conditions \((M = 3.63, SD = 1.76, t(407) = 5.91, p < .001, d = .08)\). An ANOVA performed on participants’ brand perception also yielded only a main effect of brand positioning \(F(2, 403) = 18.62, p < .001\) and no other effects \((p > .11)\). The participants in the underdog condition considered Dell more of an underdog \((vs. \top-dog; M = 3.79, SD = 2.07)\) relative to those in the top-dog condition \((M = 5.03, SD = 1.69, t(270) = 5.40, p = .001, d = .10)\). Although participants in both the top-dog and the top-dog-on-the-ropes conditions reported that the brand was more of a top dog \((M_{\top-dog} = \ldots)\).
Specifically, when the status advantage of the top-dog brand was undermined (i.e., when the top-dog brand was on the ropes), low-power consumers’ preference for top-dog brands was attenuated because such a top dog could no longer restore their power, thus confirming that low-power consumers’ favorable responses toward the top-dog appeal are driven by its power restoration function. In contrast, high-power consumers felt less competitive with or threatened by this top dog on the ropes and therefore indicated a more favorable attitude to it than to the original top-dog framing.

General Discussion

Underdog and top-dog positioning represent two strategies that marketing professionals often employ. Intuitively, top-dog brands should garner more favorable impressions and consequently stimulate more purchases because they signal a desired image of success and superiority. However, this intuition is challenged by the alternative marketing strategy of underdog positioning, which achieves competitiveness by linking a brand to the ordinary stories of average consumers (Paharia et al., 2011). Although prior research has investigated consumer responses toward these two types of brand positioning independently, consensus is still lacking regarding the relative effectiveness of these two seemingly contradictory positioning strategies.

Four studies were conducted and provide supportive evidence for the hypothesis that consumers in different power states respond differently to underdog and top-dog appeals. Study 1 provided evidence for the proposed underlying mechanism.
preliminary evidence that low-power (high-power) consumers were more likely to favor top-dog (underdog) brands. Study 2 confirmed these results by manipulating a sense of power and provided further evidence for the underlying mechanism that low-power consumers responded to the top-dog appeal more positively because affiliating with the top-dog brand helped restore their power. In contrast, high-power consumers responded to the underdog appeal more positively because supporting the underdog brand enabled them to express their dominant superiority. Importantly, we showed that the observed effect was unlikely to be explained by quality perceptions. By framing the underdog as a strong “challenger” that poses a prominent threat to the current top-dog competitors, Study 3 demonstrated that low-power consumers like the “challenger” underdog more than the original underdog, whereas high-power consumers like it less than the original underdog. In a similar vein, by describing the top-dog brand as a market leader whose position is in jeopardy, Study 4 showed that high-power consumers like the top-dog brand that is “on the ropes” more than the original top-dog brand, whereas low-power consumers like it less than the original top-dog brand.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Our research contributes to the literature in several ways. First, the results of this research add to our understanding of underdog and top-dog appeals. In the literature on social psychology and persuasion, conflicting results have been reported regarding the relative effectiveness of top-dog appeals compared to underdog appeals in persuading target audiences (Cialdini & de Nicholas, 1989; McGinnis & Gentry, 2009; Paharia et al., 2011). Our study addressed this issue by identifying conditions in which each appeal could be more persuasive. Specifically, we demonstrated that the relative effectiveness of underdog versus top-dog appeals depends on the audience’s psychological power states. By identifying a hierarchical-natured psychological variable (e.g., sense of power) that affects the persuasiveness of underdog versus top-dog appeals, the current research extends our understanding of top-dog and underdog positioning and presents a new approach to designing effective advertising appeals.

Second, we contribute to the theory that underlies top-dog versus underdog positioning by identifying two distinct motives for consumers to support either top-dog or underdog brands. The motive to restore power propels low-power consumers to support top-dog brands, whereas the motive to express power motivates high-power consumers to support underdog brands. Prior research on power and compensatory consumption suggests that whereas low-power consumers tend to purchase status-related products to restore their lost power (Rucker & Galinsky, 2008b), high-power consumers tend to express their power through behaviors such as discounting others’ advice (Tost et al., 2011) and aggressively complaining about a disadvantaged price (Jin et al., 2014). Consistent with prior research, we demonstrated in Study 2 that affiliating with a top-dog brand allows low-power consumers to restore their power, whereas showing support for an underdog brand enables high-power consumers to express their power. In a broader sense, affiliating with top dogs or supporting underdogs is not only a consequence of persuasion but also serves to satisfy internal psychological needs through power restoration and expression. From this perspective, underdog and top-dog positioning appeals have important social and psychological functions in addition to their intended persuasion function. For example, as we demonstrated in Study 3, by challenging the top dogs in the industry (rather than merely claiming to have the passion and determination to overcome the odds), an underdog brand can also inspire consumers who feel powerless.

The results of this study also enrich the literature on power by demonstrating that psychological power states influence not only individuals’ consumption, such as their spending preferences (Rucker et al., 2011) and their price fairness perceptions (Jin et al., 2014), but also their responses to different types of persuasive messages (Dubois, Rucker, & Galinsky, 2016; Rucker et al., 2012). For example, a recent study reported that high-power audiences are persuaded more by competence information, whereas low-power audiences are persuaded more by warmth information (Dubois et al., 2016). Our research adds to this line of research by suggesting a power-appeal matching effect. Persuasive appeals are perceived more favorably when they match a high-power or low-power individual’s psychological needs. It is noteworthy that this research focused on a psychological sense of power rather than an actual disparity in status and control over resources (i.e., structural power differences). Furthermore, the proposed effects are primarily driven by the psychological needs of power instead of the psychological propensity of power. Therefore,
readers need to be cautious when generalizing the findings from the present research to situations in which the psychological propensity of power might overwhelm the psychological needs of power. When the psychological propensity of power is dominant, such as when the decision context does not afford an opportunity to act upon low-power people’s motivation to gain power, being in a position of low power might predispose individuals to a communal orientation (Rucker et al., 2012), thus opening the door to the possibility that low-power people might turn to underdogs (in addition to the “challenger” underdog that we presented in Study 3). For example, in the context of purchasing products for others — a situation in which low-power individuals’ “psychological need” to regain power can be overridden by the psychological propensity of being powerless — low-power consumers are more likely to be guided by their greater identification with the underdog brand relative to their high-power counterparts and, as a result, indicate a greater preference for the underdog brand.

This study has several practical implications for advertisers and marketing professionals. First, our results have important marketing implications for targeting different groups of customers. Specifically, low-power consumers may need to restore their power. Therefore, these types of consumers may determine that top-dog appeals are more persuasive because affiliating with a top-dog brand fulfills this need to restore power. In addition, as demonstrated in Study 3, framing the underdog brand as a strong challenger to top-dog brands can inspire low-power consumers. In contrast, high-power consumers possess a greater need to express their power and might prefer an underdog appeal because supporting an underdog brand enables them to showcase their superiority. However, for top-dog brands whose position is in jeopardy, emphasizing the difficulties they are experiencing might even make them appear more attractive to high-power consumers (Study 4). When applying these theories to practice, marketers can perform market segmentation based on variables that are correlated with the sense of power (socio-economic status). Alternatively, marketers may provide environmental cues that may shift consumers’ current state of power.

**Future Research Directions**

This study discusses several issues that are relevant to future research on the topic. First, prior research demonstrates that consumption in public versus private (e.g., a television set in the living room vs. a television set in the bedroom) may lead to different consumer choices because the former involves more signaling to others, whereas the latter is more about signaling to the self. Thus, a promising future research topic might be to investigate whether supporting underdogs or top dogs in a private versus public setting alters the results of this research because both power restoration and power expression motives are more likely to manifest in a public (vs. private) setting. Second, there is the possibility that in some cases, consumers in a high-power state may no longer respond to underdog appeals more favorably. For example, when brands are advertised with regard to their symbolic and status aspects, high-power consumers’ favorable responses to underdog (vs. top-dog) brands may be attenuated because supporting brands that are (explicitly) inferior in status might endanger high-power consumers’ own status. Future research could explore how emphasizing the utilitarian versus symbolic aspects of a product and consumer’s power states jointly influence the effectiveness of top-dog and underdog appeals.

Third, power may originate from different sources, such as power gained through effort versus power that is given. The manner in which power is acquired might further influence whether or how power holders would like to express their superior status. For example, high-power consumers whose power was not gained through effort might feel less sure about the power they wield and, as a result, become less willing to express power. Consequently, they might no longer wish to support underdog brands relative to high-power individuals who gained power through effort. It is therefore interesting to consider whether different sources and legitimacy of power could change the impact of power states on consumers’ responses to underdog and top-dog appeals. Finally, it would be interesting to examine whether the interactive effects between power state and brand appeal are automatic or deliberate. We suspect that although consumers might be aware of their goal to restore or express their power and the way top-dog and underdog brands can fulfill these goals, as suggested by the mediation results, they are not aware that these motivational states drive their behavior to support or endorse an underdog or a top-dog brand when not explicitly asked. This suggestion is confirmed by the fact that participants did not guess the relationship between tasks. Future research could be conducted to disentangle these possibilities.
References


**Supporting Information**

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher’s website:

- **Appendix S1.** Manipulations Used in Study 1.
- **Appendix S2.** Manipulations Used in Study 2.
- **Appendix S3.** Examples of Advertisement Copies Used in Study 3.
- **Appendix S4.** Examples of Articles Used in Study 4.