

The Effect of Source in the Telling of Brand Biographies

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Abstract

Although brands increasingly disseminate their brand biographies through brand sources, this research shows that this practice can decrease brand attitudes and consumer preferences. A brand source activates consumers' persuasion knowledge, increasing negative thoughts and impeding narrative transportation into the brand biography. This research furthermore demonstrates that the negative impact of a brand source in the dissemination of brand biographies depends on self-congruence, such that a detrimental effect on consumer attitudes and preferences occurs when the brand biography is incongruent with consumer's self-concept, but is mitigated when the brand biography is self-congruent. These findings suggest that the dissemination of brand biographies by brand sources requires consideration of source and congruence effects.

Keywords: brand biographies, brand narratives, source effects, narrative transportation, brand communication, self-concept.

In 1998, Stanford students Larry Page and Sergey Brin started building an online search engine, working from their dorm rooms. They used their “passion for building technology for everyone” to develop Google by relying on what they called “intentionally unconventional” approaches. After occupying office space in their garage, Google was able to secure funding and morphed into a company with headquarters in Mountain View, California. Today, Google is an employer to over 60,000 people in more than 50 countries, reaching billions of consumers by offering a wide range of information technology solutions (www.google.com).

In 2006, world traveler and entrepreneur Blake Mycoskie started the shoe and accessory brand TOMS with few resources, paired with a passionate vision to alleviate the need for shoes, vision aids, and clean water that he witnessed when traveling in underdeveloped countries. Mycoskie’s vision developed into TOMS’s one-for-one program, which has contributed to the brand’s international reputation for philanthropic activities and its global market success over time (www.toms.com).

The stories of Google and TOMS are examples of brand biographies—narratives that trace a brand’s origin and trajectory over time (Avery et al. 2010; Paharia et al. 2011). Both are underdog brand biographies in that they emphasize that the brand prospered despite humble beginnings, due to the brand founders’ passion and determination (Paharia et al. 2011). Underdog brand biographies (i.e., brand biographies that convey a high level of passion/determination and external disadvantage, such as those of Apple, Google, or TOMS; Paharia et al. 2011) implicitly position underdog brands against topdogs (e.g., Mont Blanc or Conrad Hotels, which convey a prestigious heritage in their brand biographies). Importantly, underdog brand biographies often elicit positive consumer responses, such as increased brand preference (Paharia et al. 2011). The persuasive power of such brand biographies is not a

function of the facts they convey but arises because consumers immerse themselves into the narrative (Avery et al. 2010), relate it to their own experiences (Paharia et al. 2011), and transfer positive affective reactions to the brand (Escalas 2004). Narrative transportation has thus been proposed as a mechanism underlying the positive effect of brand biographies on consumer responses (Avery et al. 2010).

Brand biographies reach consumers in several ways. They may be disseminated by independent sources, such as newspapers, trade magazine articles, or business books (e.g., Owen Linzmeyer's *Apple Confidential 2.0: The Real Story of Apple Computer Inc*). As the examples of Google and TOMS show, however, brands increasingly disseminate brand biographies through brand sources—such as product packaging, brand websites, or advertisements (Avery et al. 2010). This affords brands the opportunity to shape and modify brand biography content strategically over time (Avery et al. 2010).

Despite the pervasive use of brand sources in the dissemination of brand biographies (e.g., by Fox Family Potato Chips, Google, The North Face, Patagonia, REI, or TOMS), this practice may be associated with unintended consequences. Although past research suggests that the narrative nature of brand biographies invites narrative processing rather than analytical processing of functional or emotional brand benefits (Avery et al. 2010), consumers may be sensitized to the brand's persuasive intent when they encounter a brand biography that is disseminated by a brand source. A brand source likely triggers persuasion knowledge, which refers to consumers' accumulated knowledge regarding persuasion tactics employed by brands (Friestad and Wright 1994). Persuasion knowledge gives rise to coping strategies, such as scrutinizing information or counter-arguing (Kirmani and Campbell 2004). When brand biographies that are conveyed by brand sources trigger persuasion knowledge, the resulting

negative elaboration may harm consumers' subsequent evaluation of and preference for the brand. This article examines whether the communication of brand biographies by brand sources is harmful, and how detrimental source effects might be mitigated.

Through four studies, this article demonstrates that brand biographies communicated by brand sources can indeed negatively impact consumer attitudes and preferences, and identify the congruence between brand biography and consumers' self-concept as a mitigating factor. Brand biography–self-concept congruence is operationalized as a match between an underdog brand biography and consumers' view of themselves as underdogs. Process evidence suggests that narrative transportation—the degree to which readers mentally experience the events taking place in a narrative (Green and Brock 2000)—and negative elaboration drive this effect: when the brand is the communication source, consumers' persuasion knowledge is activated, and a self-incongruent brand biography increases negative elaboration while inhibiting narrative transportation. As a result, a brand-communicated self-incongruent brand biography leads to less favorable brand evaluations. A brand-communicated, self-congruent brand biography, on the other hand, is associated with higher levels of narrative transportation and lower levels of negative elaboration, and consumers' brand evaluations are not negatively influenced by the use of a brand source.

This article contributes to the marketing literature in several ways: First, it highlights that brand biographies do not always elicit positive consumer responses to the brand. When brand biographies are disseminated by the brand, consumer evaluations and preferences can be harmed due to negative elaboration. This detrimental brand source effect in brand biography dissemination is contingent upon the congruence of the brand biography with consumers' self-concept and is mitigated at high levels of brand biography–self-concept congruence.

Second, from a theoretical perspective, this research contributes to the literature by integrating the persuasion knowledge model (PKM; Friestad and Wright 1994) and the narrative transportation model of persuasion (Gerrig 1993; Green and Brock 2000) in the context of consumers' processing of brand biographies. The consideration of source effects and the mediating role of both negative elaboration and narrative transportation provides new insights, as the brand biography and narrative transportation literature have not examined under what circumstances analytical elaboration interferes with consumers' generally narrative processing of brand biographies, and how this might affect brand evaluations. To the literature on the PKM, this research contributes the insight that source effects extend to brand narratives, and that they are conditional upon the level of brand biography–self-concept congruence.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows: The theoretical framework regarding the effects of brand biographies, communication source, and self-concept congruence on consumers' brand evaluations is followed by four empirical studies testing these effects and the underlying processes. The article concludes with the discussion of the theoretical and managerial implications of the findings, and directions for future research.

Theoretical framework

Brand biographies and narrative transportation

Brand biographies consist of selectively sampled events that characterize the origins and trajectory of a brand, often making references to brand founders and conveying how the brand overcame challenges along the way (Avery et al. 2010; Paharia et al. 2011). The marketing literature distinguishes between underdog and topdog brand biographies. This distinction refers to the degree of passion/determination and external disadvantages reflected in the brand's story.

Underdog brand biographies emphasize a brand's passion and determination leading to success despite external disadvantages (Paharia et al. 2011). They often mention the brand's founder(s), who struggled with scarce resources, but overcame the odds due to persistence and a strong vision (Avery et al. 2010; Paharia et al. 2011). Topdog brands, on the other hand, are well-endowed brands that compete on the basis of extensive resources or market dominance (Avery et al. 2010; Paharia et al. 2011). Although consumers may discern a brand's topdog or underdog status by considering the brand's resources and market position, brands can shape consumers' brand status perceptions through the dissemination of brand biographies (Paharia et al. 2011). The perceived topdog or underdog status of a brand is therefore to some extent influenced by means of brand biographies rather than the actual market position and resource availability associated with the brand (Paharia et al. 2011).

Underdog brand biographies have been associated with positive consumer responses including increased purchase intent and brand preference (Kao 2015; Paharia et al. 2011). Brand biographies are narratives, and differ from other types of marketing communication in terms of their content, which relates to the brand's origin and development (Avery et al. 2010). These characteristics facilitate consumer immersion into the brand's story in the form of narrative transportation (Avery et al. 2010). Narrative transportation refers to the degree to which an individual mentally experiences the events taking place in a narrative (Gerrig 1993; Green and Brock 2000). It entails becoming lost in the story (Gerrig 1993; Green and Brock 2000; Van Laer et al. 2014), experiencing the emotions reflected in the story, and narrative-consistent attitude change (Green 2004; Green and Brock 2000). A recent meta-analysis provides strong evidence for the positive effects of narrative transportation on affective responses, narrative thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, and intentions, and suggests that narrative transportation significantly reduces

negative thoughts (Van Laer et al. 2014). Previous research therefore proposes a mediating effect of narrative transportation in a brand biography context (Avery et al. 2010) and provides meta-analytic evidence of a positive effect of narrative transportation on various consumer responses in the context of narratives other than brand biographies (Van Laer et al. 2014). The current research provides new insights by empirically testing the mediating role of narrative transportation in response to brand biographies.

Source effects: Persuasion knowledge and negative elaboration

In light of the positive consumer responses associated with brand biographies (Avery et al. 2010; Paharia et al. 2011), an increasing number of brands are actively engaging in the dissemination of their brand biographies on brand websites (e.g., Google, Tom's of Maine, Patagonia, The North Face, Fox Family Potato Chips, TOMS), although brand biographies are also disseminated by independent sources, such as business publications, trade magazines, or books. The use of brand sources is an attractive alternative to independent sources, because it allows the brand to repeatedly expose consumers to the brand biography and to strategically modify the brand biography in response to changing market conditions and consumer preferences.

Although the dissemination of brand biographies through brand sources promises to elicit positive consumer responses to the brand, this practice may be associated with unintended negative consequences. Research indeed suggests that the communication source impacts the persuasive power of the communicated information (Pornpitakpan 2004; Wilson and Sherrell 1993). The Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM; Friestad and Wright 1994) proposes that self-interested communication sources (e.g., the brand's salespeople or website) can negatively affect persuasion and brand evaluations (Artz and Tybout 1999; Wiener et al. 1990; Yoon et al. 2006).

This effect is due to consumer suspicion, perceptions of manipulative intent, and the subsequent adoption of coping or avoidance strategies (Campbell and Kirmani 2008; Kirmani and Campbell 2004).

Although it does not consider brand biographies, the PKM (Friestad and Wright 1994) would suggest that the dissemination of brand biographies by brand sources has the potential to harm consumers' brand evaluations, because brand sources activate consumers' persuasion knowledge, lead to more negative thoughts regarding the brand information, and elicit more negative brand evaluations. Despite the pervasive use of brand sources in the dissemination of brand biographies, research has not applied the PKM to brand biographies, or addressed possible negative source effects in this context. This article therefore examines to what extent the source effects established within the PKM literature extend to brand biographies.

Brand biographies differ from other forms of marketing communications examined in the PKM in that they convey a story about the brand's origin and development over time (Avery et al. 2010; Paharia et al. 2011), rather than arguments in favor of specific product or brand attributes. Brand biographies therefore encourage narrative processing rather than analytic information processing (Avery et al. 2010). Given its well-documented persuasive power (Adaval and Wyer 1998; Avery et al. 2010; Escalas 2004), narrative processing is therefore considered a third route to persuasion (Avery et al. 2010; Escalas 2007), complementing the analytical/high elaboration and peripheral/low elaboration routes to persuasion proposed in the elaboration likelihood model (ELM; Petty and Cacioppo 1986). Because consumers encounter narrative-based persuasion in a variety of marketing contexts, such as advertising (e.g., Deighton et al. 1989), it is likely that consumers recognize the delivery of a brand biography by a brand source as a persuasion strategy.

Extending the PKM to brand biographies, we predict that a brand source triggers consumer suspicion regarding a brand's manipulative intent, results in critical consideration of the brand biography content, and induces negative elaboration. As negative elaboration and narrative processing are opposing processes (Escalas 2007; Van Laer et al. 2014), negative elaboration regarding a brand biography communicated by a brand source is likely associated with lower levels of narrative transportation, and more negative brand evaluations. Overall, we predict that brand biographies communicated by a brand source induce negative elaboration, curtail narrative transportation, and entail negative consequences for the brand.

The narrative nature of brand biographies may nonetheless create opportunities for the mitigation of detrimental source effects. More specifically, factors that strengthen narrative processing and reduce negative elaboration might counteract negative source effects. We propose that brand biography–self-concept congruence plays such a role.

The moderating role of brand biography–self-concept congruence

We suggest that when a brand source communicates a brand biography, it activates persuasion knowledge, which leads to negative elaboration and more negative brand evaluations. One opportunity to mitigate the negative brand source effect lies in the strengthening of narrative transportation, as increased narrative transportation is associated with fewer negative thoughts (Escalas 2007; Van Laer et al. 2014).

According to the narrative transportation model of persuasion, narrative transportation is more likely to occur when individuals perceive the protagonist described in the narrative to be of greater similarity to themselves (Andsager et al. 2006; de Graaf 2014; Van den Hende 2012). In the context of narratives, similarity is defined in two ways. First, it refers to the extent to which

readers perceive themselves to be like the character described in the narrative, and can be based on factors such as age, sex, life stage, or life circumstances (Cohen 2001; de Graaf 2014).

Second, similarity refers to the extent to which an individual believes a protagonist's portrayal realistically reflects his or her own experiences (Andsager et al. 2006). Perceived similarity increases both narrative transportation and subsequent narrative-consistent belief changes (Andsager et al. 2006; de Graaf 2014; Green 2004; Green and Brock 2000; Van den Hende et al. 2012). For instance, research shows that when new product information is presented in a narrative format, consumers evaluate the product more favorably when they perceive the protagonist in the narrative to be similar (vs. dissimilar) to themselves, and that this effect is mediated by narrative transportation (Van den Hende et al. 2012).

The brand biography literature finds that underdog (vs. topdog) brand biographies elicit more favorable consumer responses to brands among North American consumers (Paharia et al. 2011), who tend to perceive themselves as underdogs compared to others (Avery et al. 2010; Paharia et al. 2011). The individualist cultural orientation as well as the historical and social backdrop of North American culture—which is rooted in immigration and overcoming environmental and social challenges to succeed in life—have generated a strong affinity with underdogs (and underdog narratives) among North American consumers (Paharia et al. 2011). This view of the self as an underdog results in higher levels of identification with brands associated with underdog brand biographies and leads to greater subsequent purchase intentions regarding the underdog brand (Paharia et al. 2011). The phenomenon that underdog (vs. topdog) brand biographies increase brand preference is referred to as *the underdog effect* (Paharia et al. 2011), and essentially reflects a positive impact of brand biography–self-concept congruence on consumer responses to a brand.

To summarize, the narrative transportation literature suggests that a narrative's congruence with readers' self-concept results in higher levels of narrative transportation and subsequent narrative-consistent belief change, although it did not examine this relation in the context of brand biographies. The brand biography literature finds a brand biography–consumer mindset congruence effect mediated by brand identification (Paharia et al. 2011) but has not considered the effect of brand biography source, or the mediating roles of narrative transportation and elaboration.

Hypotheses

We integrate the narrative transportation and brand biography literature, and extend the current knowledge by examining the interactive effect of brand biography source and brand biography–self-concept congruence on consumers' brand evaluations, and the mediating role of narrative transportation and negative elaboration in this relation. In considering negative source effects arising for brand biographies communicated by a brand (vs. independent) source, we predict that brand biography–self-concept congruence mitigates negative brand source effects: For highly self-congruent brand biographies communicated by brand sources, consumers are more likely to experience narrative transportation and subsequent narrative-consistent belief change, because narrative transportation reduces negative thoughts (Van Laer et al. 2014). Brand biography–self-concept congruence and subsequent narrative transportation should thus enhance consumer responses to self-congruent brand biographies communicated by brand sources. We propose that brand biographies communicated by brand sources do not facilitate narrative transportation at lower levels of self-congruence. Therefore, the negative thoughts triggered by the brand source are not reduced and less favorable responses to such brand biographies emerge.

Hence, we predict that when the communication source is the brand, a self-incongruent (vs. self-congruent) brand biography induces less favorable brand evaluations.

- H1: Brand biographies communicated by a brand (vs. independent) source have a negative effect on brand evaluations and preferences, which is attenuated as brand biography–self-concept congruence increases.
- H2: The interactive effect of brand biography communication source and brand biography–self-concept congruence is mediated by narrative transportation: when a brand source communicates the brand biography and brand biography–self-concept congruence is low (vs. high), a decrease in narrative transportation results in more negative consumer responses.
- H3: The interactive effect of brand biography communication source and brand biography–self-concept congruence is mediated by negative elaboration: when a brand source communicates the brand biography and brand biography–self-concept congruence is low (vs. high), an increase in negative elaboration results in more negative consumer responses.

Study 1

Study 1 examines the interactive effect of communication source and brand biography–self-concept congruence (hereafter referred to as brand biography congruence) on consumers' brand evaluations (H1).

Pretest: Manipulation of brand biography congruence

In Study 1 (and Studies 3 and 4), the experimental manipulations of brand biography congruence consist of brand biographies previously used in the marketing literature (i.e., underdog and topdog brand biographies; Paharia et al. 2011). Brand biography congruence was manipulated by presenting North American consumers residing in the U.S. or Canada with an underdog brand biography (i.e., self-congruent biography) or a topdog biography (i.e., self-incongruent biography). This experimental manipulation is based on findings that North American consumers have a chronic underdog disposition and therefore experience greater consumer–brand identification in response to underdog (vs. topdog) brand biographies (Paharia et al. 2011).

We verified the effectiveness of this manipulation in an online pretest ($n = 70$, 33% female, median age = 30) on Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Participants were randomly assigned to an underdog self-concept activation manipulation or a control condition. Participants in the underdog condition wrote about a time in their lives when they faced external disadvantages compared to their peers but achieved success due to their passion and determination. Next, participants indicated whether they identified more with an underdog or a topdog basketball team (1 = Team A [topdog], 100 = Team B [underdog]; adapted from Vandello et al. 2007).

Identification scores in both conditions were significantly above the scale midpoint (= 50; $M_{\text{control}} = 59.80$, $M_{\text{underdog}} = 66.43$; all $t_s > 1.96$, $p_s < .05$, one-tailed). This indicates that participants in the control condition had a relatively high chronically activated underdog self-concept. In Studies 1, 3, and 4, we therefore manipulated brand biography congruence by presenting underdog (i.e., brand biography–self-concept congruent) and topdog (i.e., brand biography–self-concept incongruent) biographies to North American consumers.

Method

Study 1 employed a 2 (communication source: brand, independent) \times 2 (brand biography congruence: self-congruent [underdog brand biography], self-incongruent [topdog brand biography]) + 1 (control: brand description) between-participants design. The communication source was manipulated by presenting the brand biography either on the website of an independent food magazine (independent source condition) or on the official website of the brand (brand source condition). The brand biography congruence manipulations consisted of an underdog brand biography (self-congruent) and a topdog brand biography (self-incongruent) presented to a sample of North American consumers with a chronic underdog self-concept. The underdog and topdog brand biographies used here were validated in past research (Paharia et al. 2011, Study 4). A fictitious chocolate brand (Klesa) served as the focal brand. Appendix A shows the communication source and brand biography manipulations.

The control condition consisted of the brand description, “Klesa is a premium chocolate brand founded by Laurent Giguere and is regarded as a very high-quality chocolate brand by gourmet critics,” presented on a white background. This description was also part of the brand biographies presented in other conditions, but appeared without brand biography congruence and communication source manipulations to establish a baseline of consumers’ brand evaluations.

Three hundred and forty-six North American MTurk participants (44% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 37.76$, $SD = 12.10$) were randomly assigned to one of the experimental conditions. In the experimental conditions, participants read a brand biography (self-congruent [underdog] or self-incongruent [topdog]) presented as part of the brand’s website (brand source condition) or an independent food magazine (independent source condition). In the control condition, participants

read a brand description without source information. Participants then indicated their brand attitude (bad/good, unfavorable/favorable, negative/positive; $\alpha = .94$) on seven-point scales and provided demographic information.

Results

The predicted communication source \times brand biography congruence interaction (H1) was first examined in an ANOVA excluding the control condition. Communication source and brand biography congruence served as independent variables and brand attitude as the dependent variable. The main effect of source was significant ($F(1, 264) = 7.30, p < .01, \eta^2 = .03$), such that the participants in the independent source condition ($M = 6.25, SD = .80$) had more favorable brand attitudes than those in brand source condition ($M = 5.95, SD = 1.05$). The main effect of brand biography congruence was significant ($F(1, 264) = 6.07, p = .01, \eta^2 = .02$), such that participants expressed a more favorable brand attitude toward the self-congruent ($M = 6.24, SD = .75$) compared to a self-incongruent biography ($M = 5.92, SD = 1.11$). These main effects were qualified by a significant interaction effect ($F(1, 264) = 9.05, p < .01, \eta^2 = .03$). When the brand was the communication source, participants in the self-incongruent (vs. self-congruent) brand biography condition reported less favorable brand attitudes ($M_{\text{incongruent}} = 5.64, SD = 1.22, M_{\text{congruent}} = 6.26, SD = .72$ vs. ; $F(1, 264) = 17.16, p < .01, \eta^2 = .06$). When the communication source was independent, brand biography congruence did not influence brand attitude ($M_{\text{incongruent}} = 6.29, SD = .81, M_{\text{congruent}} = 6.22, SD = .79; F < .1$). Furthermore, brand attitude in the self-incongruent biography–brand source condition was significantly less favorable compared to two independent source conditions (both $ps < .01$) whereas brand attitude in the self-congruent

biography condition was not significantly different than the independent source conditions (both $ps > .20$).

Pairwise comparisons between the treatment conditions and the control condition ($M_{\text{control}} = 5.95$, $SD = .87$), showed that a congruent brand biography associated with a brand source ($M_{\text{congruent}} = 6.26$, $SD = .72$; $F(1, 341) = 4.37$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .01$) as well as a congruent or incongruent brand biography associated with an independent source ($M_{\text{congruent}} = 6.22$, $SD = .79$; $F(1, 341) = 3.06$, $p = .08$, $\eta^2 = .01$; $M_{\text{incongruent}} = 6.29$, $SD = .81$; $F(1, 341) = 4.38$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .01$) led to more favorable brand attitudes compared to the control condition. However, an incongruent brand biography associated with a brand source led to significantly less favorable brand attitudes compared to the control condition ($M_{\text{incongruent}} = 5.64$, $SD = 1.22$; $F(1, 341) = 4.55$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .01$). These findings support H1 and are illustrated in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Discussion

Study 1 shows that consumer responses to a brand biography disseminated by the brand are contingent upon brand biography congruence. In support of H1, when the brand communicated a self-incongruent (vs. self-congruent) biography, participants had a less favorable brand attitude. Importantly, an incongruent brand biography communicated by the brand led to significantly less favorable brand attitudes compared to all other experimental conditions, including a control condition without a brand biography. This suggests that an incongruent brand biography communicated by the brand can harm brand evaluations relative to not communicating a brand biography as a promotional tool at all. Brand biography self-congruence did not significantly

affect brand attitudes when the communication source was independent.

Study 1 replicates the positive effect of brand biography congruence (vs. incongruence) found in earlier research (Paharia et al. 2011), but only in the brand source condition. In the independent source condition, brand evaluations were not contingent upon brand congruence. The current research is thus the first to predict and demonstrate source effects in the context of brand biographies. The inclusion of both independent source and control conditions provides evidence that an incongruent brand biography communicated by a brand source is detrimental to brand evaluations, whereas a congruent brand biography helped mitigate negative brand source effects.

It is important to note that prior research did not explicitly manipulate or consider consumers' inferences with regard to the brand biography source. To reconcile the current findings with earlier research, we ran a follow-up study with North American consumers on MTurk ($n = 59$, 39% female, $M_{age} = 29.90$, $SD = 8.97$). Participants read the brand biographies used in Study 1 without source manipulation (i.e., the biographies were presented on a plain, white background). This single-factor study employed a within-participants design in which participants examined two brand biographies (underdog, topdog) corresponding to two fictitious brands (Klesa, Au Duc du Praslin). The order of brand biographies and the brand that carried the underdog brand biography were counterbalanced. Participants indicated their brand attitude toward the two brands (bad/good, unfavorable/favorable, negative/positive, on seven-point scales; $\alpha = .95$), and their agreement with the statement "I read the information about [the brand] from the brand's official website" (anchored 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The results were consistent with the *underdog effect* observed in studies in which the communication source was not identified (Paharia et al. 2011). More favourable brand attitudes emerged for the

brand associated with the self-congruent underdog brand biography ($M_{\text{underdog}} = 6.12$, $SD = .87$, $M_{\text{topdog}} = 5.86$, $SD = .85$; $F(1, 58) = 5.81$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .09$). Furthermore, regardless of the type of the biography, participants more strongly agreed with the statement that the communication source was the brand ($M_{\text{underdog}} = 4.39$, $SD = 1.69$, $M_{\text{topdog}} = 4.61$, $SD = 1.45$; both significantly higher than the scale midpoint (4), $ps < .05$). This suggests that participants in earlier studies may have assumed the brand biography originated from the brand (rather than an independent source) when no source information was provided.

Study 1 provides support for the prediction that the negative effect of brand source is mitigated at higher levels of brand biography congruence. Study 2 examines the processes underlying this interactive effect of communication source and brand biography congruence.

Study 2

Study 2 investigates the interaction of communication source and brand biography congruence (H1) in a different product category, and examines the mediating roles of narrative transportation (H2) and negative elaboration (H3), using an experimental manipulation of consumers' self-concept to manipulate brand biography congruence. It also explores the verisimilitude of the brand biography as an alternative explanation of the observed effects. Verisimilitude is defined as the "lifelikeness" of a narrative (Bruner 1986, p. 11; Van Laer et al. 2014) or the "likelihood that the story events may actually happen" (Van Laer et al. 2014, p. 802). Study 2 rules out source and brand biography congruence effects on verisimilitude and subsequent brand attitude.

Method

Study 2 employed a 2 (communication source: brand, independent) \times 2 (brand biography congruence: self-congruent [underdog self-concept activation], self-incongruent [topdog self-concept activation]) between-participants design. The focal brand was a fictitious restaurant (Ray Brown's; Appendix B) to preclude familiarity and knowledge effects. Following an experimental activation of either an underdog (i.e., brand biography congruent) or topdog (i.e., brand biography incongruent) self-concept, participants read an underdog brand biography. The communication source manipulations consisted of a food magazine website (i.e., independent source) or the brand website (i.e., brand source).

We first verified that the brand biography developed for Study 2 indeed represents an underdog brand biography in a single-factor pretest ($n = 74$, 79% females, $M_{\text{age}} = 20.79$, $SD = 2.75$). In this pretest, participants read the underdog brand biography published by an independent food magazine or the restaurant's website. In both source conditions, the brand was perceived as highly passionate and determined ($M_{\text{independent}} = 5.97$, $SD = 1.20$, $M_{\text{brand}} = 5.81$, $SD = 1.24$; $F(1, 72) < 1$; $M_{\text{grand}} = 5.89$, $SD = 1.21$; significantly higher than scale midpoint, $p < .01$) and externally disadvantaged ($M_{\text{independent}} = 4.37$, $SD = 1.24$, $M_{\text{brand}} = 4.25$, $SD = 1.34$; $F(1, 72) < .1$; $M_{\text{grand}} = 4.31$, $SD = 1.28$; significantly higher than scale midpoint, $p < .05$). The source condition did not affect consumers' perceptions of the extent to which the brand biography reflected an underdog narrative.

In Study 2, brand biography congruence was experimentally manipulated by presenting an underdog brand biography to participants whose underdog or topdog self-concept had been activated in a writing task about a time in their lives when they faced external disadvantages (competitive advantages) but achieved success due to their passion and determination (without having to resort to passion or determination; Paharia et al. 2011). We further verified this

manipulation in an online MTurk pretest ($n = 59$, 36% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 32.86$, $SD = 9.64$).

Following the self-concept manipulation in a between-participants design, pretest participants indicated whether they identified more with an underdog or a topdog basketball team (1 = Team A [topdog], 100 = Team B [underdog]; Vandello et al. 2007). Participants in the underdog self-concept activation condition identified significantly more with the underdog team ($M_{\text{underdog}} = 62.80$, $SD = 29.78$, $M_{\text{topdog}} = 40.69$, $SD = 27.85$; $F(1, 57) = 8.66$; $p < .01$; $\eta^2 = .13$). Identification scores in the topdog self-concept condition ($t(28) = -1.80$, $p < .05$, one-tailed) and underdog self-concept conditions ($t(29) = 2.35$, $p < .05$) differed significantly from scale midpoint (50).

In Study 2, 200 MTurk participants (43.2% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 34.12$, $SD = 9.93$) were randomly assigned to one of the experimental conditions. Following the self-concept activation task, participants were exposed to the underdog brand biography communicated by either the brand or an independent source. They indicated brand attitude (bad/good, unfavorable/favorable, negative/positive; $\alpha = .93$), and reported the degree of narrative transportation (e.g., “While I was reading the narrative, I could easily picture events in it taking place,” “I could picture myself in the scene of the events described in the narrative,” and “I was mentally involved in the narrative while reading it,” $\alpha = .84$; Green and Brock 2000) they experienced while reading the brand biography, all on seven-point scales. Participants also completed a thought listing task as a measure of negative elaboration (i.e., number of negative thoughts about the brand; Cacioppo and Petty 1981) and a measure of verisimilitude of the brand biography (1 = not lifelike, 7 = lifelike). The study concluded with demographic measures.

Results

Brand attitude An ANOVA with brand attitude as the dependent variable, and communication source and brand biography congruence as the independent variables revealed no significant main effects of brand biography congruence and source ($ps > .10$). The interaction was significant ($F(1, 196) = 4.84; p < .05; \eta^2 = .03$). Planned contrasts supported H1, such that when the brand was the communication source, participants in the self-incongruent (vs. self-congruent) brand biography condition reported less favorable brand attitude ($M_{\text{self-incongruent}} = 5.97, SD = 1.03, M_{\text{self-congruent}} = 6.38, SD = .73; F(1, 196) = 6.66; p < .05; \eta^2 = .03$). Brand biography congruence did not have an effect in the independent source condition ($M_{\text{self-incongruent}} = 6.41, SD = .71, M_{\text{self-congruent}} = 6.31, SD = .75; F(1, 100) < 1; p > .50$). In addition, the self-incongruent brand biography conveyed by a brand source resulted in the least favorable brand attitude ($ps < .05$), whereas the self-congruent brand biography communicated by a brand source was as effective as a brand biography communicated by an independent source. Figure 2 illustrates these findings.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Narrative transportation An ANOVA testing the effect of communication source and brand biography on narrative transportation revealed no significant main effects ($p > .16$), but a significant interaction ($F(1, 196) = 4.26; p < .05; \eta^2 = .02$). In the brand source condition, the self-incongruent (vs. self-congruent) brand biography impeded narrative transportation ($M_{\text{self-incongruent}} = 4.36, SD = .86, M_{\text{self-congruent}} = 4.83, SD = .94; F(1, 196) = 6.38; p < .05; \eta^2 = .03$). Brand biography congruence did not affect narrative transportation in the independent source condition ($M_{\text{self-incongruent}} = 4.77, SD = .90, M_{\text{self-congruent}} = 4.68, SD = 1.15; F(1, 196) < 1; p > .50$).

The self-incongruent brand biography communicated by a brand source led to the lowest level of narrative transportation (vs. independent congruent $p < .04$; vs. independent incongruent: $p < .10$). There were no significant differences among other conditions ($ps > .10$).

Negative elaboration Two independent coders coded the thoughts participants generated into positive and negative analytic thoughts. Disagreements were resolved through discussion.

Negative elaboration was operationalized as the ratio of negative thoughts to the total number of thoughts (+1). Results did not change when the absolute number of negative thoughts were included in the analysis. An ANOVA revealed a non-significant main effect of communication source ($p > .10$), a marginally significant effect of brand biography congruence ($F(1, 196) = 2.83$; $p > .09$; $\eta^2 = .01$), and a significant interaction ($F(1, 196) = 7.57$; $p < .01$; $\eta^2 = .04$). As illustrated in Figure 3, in the brand source condition, an incongruent brand biography ($M_{\text{self-incongruent}} = .10$, $SD = .22$) increased negative elaboration compared to a congruent brand biography ($M_{\text{self-congruent}} = .02$, $SD = .08$, $F(1, 196) = 10.44$; $p < .01$; $\eta^2 = .05$). Compared to the independent source conditions, an incongruent brand biography communicated by the brand also resulted in a greater degree of negative thoughts ($M_{\text{independent self-congruent}} = .04$, $SD = .13$, $F(1, 196) = 5.13$, $p < .05$; $\eta^2 = .03$; $M_{\text{independent self-incongruent}} = .02$, $SD = .09$, $F(1, 196) = 9.10$, $p < .01$; $\eta^2 = .06$).

Insert Figure 3 about here

The mediating roles of narrative transportation and negative elaboration The ANOVA results indicated that an incongruent brand biography delivered by a brand source impedes

narrative transportation and increases negative elaboration. A moderated mediation analysis with both narrative transportation and negative elaboration serving as mediators (model 8, 5,000 bootstrap samples, Hayes 2013) supported that the interactive effect of communication source and brand biography congruence on brand evaluations is driven simultaneously by the generation of negative thoughts and the interruption of narrative transportation when the brand communicates an incongruent brand biography: In support of H2 and H3, when brand biography congruence (1 = self-congruent, -1 = self-incongruent) was included as the predictor, communication source (1 = brand, -1 = independent) as the moderator, and brand attitude as the criterion, both narrative transportation ($\beta_{\text{indirect}} = .10$, SE = .05, 95% CI [.01, .21]) and negative elaboration ($\beta_{\text{indirect}} = .05$, SE = .04, 95% CI [.01, .12]) were significant mediators of the interaction of source and brand biography congruence. In the brand source condition, a self-incongruent brand biography led to more negative thoughts, which is reflected in a significant indirect effect on brand attitude through negative elaboration ($\beta_{\text{conditional indirect}} = .04$, SE = .03, 95% CI [.01, .12]), and less narrative transportation which manifests as a significant indirect effect on brand attitude through narrative transportation ($\beta_{\text{conditional indirect}} = .08$, SE = .03, 95% CI [.03, .14]). In the independent source condition, brand biography congruence did not have an indirect effect on brand attitude through negative elaboration (95% CI [-.06, .01]) or narrative transportation (95% CI [-.10, .05]). Use of number of negative thoughts as the mediator produced identical results. These results identify narrative transportation (H2) and negative elaboration (H3) as mechanisms underlying the interaction of brand biography congruence and communication source. Figure 4 illustrates the mediation.

Insert Figure 4 about here

Finally, we explored verisimilitude as an alternate explanation for the observed effects. An ANOVA with verisimilitude as the dependent variable resulted in no significant main or interaction effects of communication source and brand biography congruence ($ps > .10$). Verisimilitude did not mediate the effect of the source–brand biography congruence interaction on brand attitude in a PROCESS model. When verisimilitude, narrative transportation, and negative elaboration served as parallel mediators (PROCESS model 8), the indirect effect through narrative transportation (95% CI [.01, .13]) and negative elaboration (95% CI [.01, .13]) remained significant, whereas the indirect effect through verisimilitude did not reach significance (95% CI [-.01, .21]). These results suggest that verisimilitude does not provide an alternative explanation of the observed effects.

Discussion

Study 2 replicated the communication source–brand biography congruence interaction on brand evaluations using a different experimental manipulation of brand biography congruence (H1). It also examined the role of narrative transportation and negative elaboration in the relationship between brand biography congruence and communication source, and brand attitude (H2, H3). In support of H1, a self-incongruent (vs. congruent) brand biography led to less favorable brand evaluations when the source was the brand. Brand biography congruence did not affect brand evaluations in the independent source condition. An incongruent brand biography associated with a brand source also led to significantly less favorable brand evaluations compared to one associated with an independent source. Consistent with H2 and H3, respectively, narrative transportation and negative elaboration mediated the communication source–brand biography

congruence interaction. When consumers encountered a brand biography that was communicated by the brand and incongruent with their self-concept, narrative transportation was reduced, whereas negative elaboration was enhanced.

Overall, Study 2 supports an interactive effect of communication source and brand biography congruence and provides evidence for the mediating roles of narrative transportation and negative elaboration. Studies 1 and 2 consistently show an interactive effect of communication source and brand biography congruence on brand evaluations. Studies 3 and 4 focus on consumer preferences between brands in a multi-brand choice set.

Study 3

Study 3 demonstrates the robustness of the findings by examining the interactive effect of communication source and brand biography congruence on brand preference (H1) and by employing an adult consumer sample and a different product category.

Method

Research assistants recruited adult consumers in the downtown core of a North American metropolitan area. One hundred and sixty-eight adult consumers (66.1% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 33.92$, $SD = 13.47$) agreed to participate in a survey about a (fictitious) European dental care brand (Briotez) and its flagship product, a charcoal toothbrush. The survey was purportedly conducted to measure the brand's market expansion potential in North America. Participants were provided with the communication source (brand website, *The Economist*) and brand biography congruence (underdog biography [self-congruent], topdog biography [self-incongruent]) manipulations, followed by a product description. They then completed a series of questions regarding their

preferences between the Briotez charcoal toothbrush and charcoal toothbrushes of competing brands (one national brand: Colgate; two private label brands: Equate by Walmart, Selection by Metro).

To ensure that the expressed brand preferences were consequential for participants, participants were informed that they would be entered into a draw to win their preferred brand. Preference was measured on a 100-point sliding scale (anchored 0 = definitely [comparison brand], 100 = definitely Briotez). There were no significant within-participants effects hence the three preference ratings were averaged to create a preference index. The order of the preference questions and the placement of products on the preference scale (left vs. right) were counterbalanced and no order effects were observed. Finally, the participants provided demographic information. Appendix C shows stimuli and measures. After the conclusion of the study, a random draw determined the 10% of participants who received an electronic gift certificate equivalent to the value of the brand they had chosen (those who indicated that they preferred the fictitious brand received a gift certificate equivalent to the value of the national brand).

Results

An ANOVA tested the effects of brand biography congruence and communication source on the preference index, where higher values indicate preference for the focal brand (Briotez). There was a marginally significant main effect of brand biography congruence ($M_{\text{self-incongruent}} = 67.54$, $SD = 24.81$, $M_{\text{self-congruent}} = 72.84$, $SD = 18.46$; $F(1, 164) = 3.41$; $p = .07$; $\eta^2 = .02$) and a marginally significant main effect of communication source ($M_{\text{independent}} = 72.82$, $SD = 18.46$, $M_{\text{brand}} = 66.71$, $SD = 23.08$; $F(1, 164) = 3.11$; $p = .08$; $\eta^2 = .02$), and a significant communication

source \times brand biography congruence interaction ($F(1, 164) = 5.08; p < .05; \eta^2 = .03$). In support of H₁, planned contrasts revealed that in the brand source condition, participants were less likely to prefer Briotez when the brand was associated with a self-incongruent (vs. congruent) brand biography ($M_{\text{self-incongruent}} = 60.04, SD = 25.68, M_{\text{self-congruent}} = 73.76, SD = 17.23; F(1, 164) = 7.51; p < .01; \eta^2 = .05$). Brand biography congruence did not affect preference in the independent source condition ($M_{\text{self-incongruent}} = 73.49, SD = 22.63, M_{\text{self-congruent}} = 72.12, SD = 19.19; F(1, 164) < .1; p > .7$). Overall, the brand communicated self-incongruent biography resulted in significantly lower relative preference compared to the other three conditions ($ps < .05$). Figure 5 illustrates these results.

Insert Figure 5 about here

Discussion

Study 3 replicated the interactive effect of communication source and brand biography congruence on brand preference in a study involving a sample of adult consumers. An incongruent brand biography disseminated by a brand source was associated with the lowest relative preference for the focal brand, whereas participants expressed greater preference for an unknown brand over incumbent brands when the brand communicated biography was self-congruent (vs. incongruent) brand biography. Brand biography congruence did not affect preferences when the brand biography was communicated by an independent source. These results support H₁. To demonstrate the generalizability of these findings, Study 4 used an alternative product category and is reported next.

Study 4

Study 4 seeks to generalize the interactive effect of communication source and brand biography congruence on brand preferences (H1) to a different product category and set of brands.

Method

Study 4 was identical to Study 3 but focused on a wireless charging pad for smartphones. Two hundred and sixty-six (51.7% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 34.46$, $SD = 12.39$) adult consumers who were recruited by research assistants in the downtown core of a major North American metropolitan area agreed to participate in this study. This study purportedly served to examine consumers' opinions about a new (fictitious) consumer electronics brand (Orion). After reading the brand biography (underdog biography [self-congruent], topdog biography [self-incongruent]) from one of the communication sources (brand website, *The Economist*), participants received further information regarding the brand's flagship product (a wireless charging pad for smartphones). Participants then completed three preference ratings in which they indicated their preference between Orion and existing, competing brands (Anker, Seneo, RawTech). To increase the personal relevance of the preference ratings, participants were informed that they would be entered into a draw to win their preferred brand.

As there were no within-participants effects, we created a preference index with higher values reflecting a preference for Orion (100-point scale, 0 = definitely [comparison brand], 100 = definitely Orion). The order of preference questions and brands within each scale was counterbalanced, and no order effects were observed. The survey ended with demographic questions. Appendix D presents stimuli and measures. After the study concluded, a random draw

identified the 10% of participants who received an electronic gift certificate equivalent to the value of the existing brands.

Results

An ANOVA with communication source and brand biography congruence as independent variables, and the preference index as the dependent variable revealed no significant main effect of communication source ($p > .20$), a marginally significant main effect of brand biography congruence ($M_{\text{self-incongruent}} = 64.89$, $SD = 25.45$; $M_{\text{self-congruent}} = 70.65$, $SD = 23.44$; $F(1, 262) = 3.62$; $p = .06$; $\eta^2 = .01$), and a significant communication source \times brand biography congruence interaction ($F(1, 262) = 5.69$; $p < .05$; $\eta^2 = .02$). In the brand source condition, participants expressed less preference for the focal brand Orion when it was associated with a self-incongruent (vs. congruent) brand biography ($M_{\text{self-incongruent}} = 59.57$, $SD = 27.31$, $M_{\text{self-congruent}} = 72.32$, $SD = 23.37$; $F(1, 262) = 9.53$; $p < .01$; $\eta^2 = .04$). Brand biography congruence did not affect brand preference in the independent source condition ($M_{\text{self-incongruent}} = 70.12$, $SD = 22.49$, $M_{\text{self-congruent}} = 68.68$, $SD = 23.55$; $F(1, 262) = .11$; $p > .70$). These results support H1. The focal brand Orion was least preferred when it was communicated by a brand source and incongruent (compared to all other conditions $ps < .05$). Figure 6 summarizes the results.

Insert Figure 6 about here

Discussion

Study 4 involved an adult consumer sample and an alternative product category. It replicated the finding that a self-incongruent (vs. self-congruent) brand biography communicated by a brand

source led to a lower relative preference for the focal brand. Brand biography congruence did not affect preferences when the communication source was independent. These findings lend further support to H1.

General discussion

Brand biographies tell a story about a brand's origin and its growth. Underdog brand biographies—narratives that convey the brand's success in overcoming external disadvantage with passion and determination—in particular, have been associated with positive consumer responses to the brand (Avery et al. 2010; Paharia et al. 2011). This opportunity to elicit positive consumer responses has motivated an increasing number of brands to communicate their brand biography through brand sources, such as brand websites. This article considers the possibility that such a practice may backfire and result in more negative brand evaluations. This counterintuitive prediction is based on the literature on persuasion knowledge, which suggests that brand sources trigger consumer suspicion and enhanced scrutinizing of information. A brand biography that is incongruent with consumers' self-concept should therefore elicit negative thoughts while also decreasing narrative transportation that is usually associated with the processing of brand biographies, and subsequently leads to less favorable brand evaluations. Because self-congruent brand biographies evoke high levels of narrative transportation, they are likely to preclude negative consumer responses to brand sources.

Four studies using different manipulations of brand biography congruence and outcome measures (i.e., brand attitude, preference) consistently support these predictions. Table 1 provides a summary of the findings of these studies.

Insert Table 1 about here

Together, the four studies show that brand biographies communicated by a brand source negatively affect consumer responses if they are incongruent with consumers' self-concept. Self-congruent brand biographies mitigated the brand source effect, however. Process evidence supported that negative elaboration and reduced narrative transportation in response to a self-incongruent brand biography communicated by a brand source underlies this effect. Overall, this research is the first to document that the communication of brand biographies by brand sources can be harmful and highlights the role of both negative elaboration and narrative transportation in driving consumer responses.

It is important to note that the manipulations and the experimental paradigms employed in the presented studies rule out familiarity with the story theme (Green 2004; Van Laer et al. 2014) as an alternative account for the effects observed in this research. Familiarity is “the degree to which a story receiver has prior knowledge about or experience with the story topic or genre” (Van Laer et al. 2014, p. 803). Familiarity has been linked to a higher degree of narrative transportation, and subsequent belief-consistent belief changes (Green 2004). In the current research, familiarity occurs in the form of North American consumers' knowledge of the underdog narrative, which is widely reflected in literature and movies (Paharia et al. 2011). Study 2 presents particularly strong evidence against a familiarity account for narrative transportation and subsequent brand evaluations: participants considered an underdog brand biography after an experimental activation of an underdog or topdog self-concept. If the observed effects were driven by familiarity, brand evaluations in the self-congruent and self-incongruent conditions would have been similar (even in the brand source condition), because

the level of familiarity with the underdog narrative among the randomly assigned North American participants was presumably similar. We suggest that a certain level of familiarity is necessary for narrative transportation to occur (Green 2004; Van Laer et al. 2014), but that one's view of self (e.g., as underdog or topdog) and its congruence with the narrative influence narrative transportation above and beyond familiarity.

Relatedly, the results are more likely driven by positive outcomes of congruence between an underdog brand biography and consumers' underdog self-concept (in the brand source condition) than a negative response to a topdog brand biography. While the topdog brand biography in the brand source condition in Study 1, for example, was indeed associated with lower brand evaluations, the exclusive use of underdog brand biographies paired with an experimental manipulation of consumers' underdog self-concept to induce self-congruence used in Study 2 rules out the possibility that the incongruence effect observed in Study 1 masked a negative effect of the topdog brand biography. Taken together, the experimental manipulations used in this research rule out a number of alternative accounts for the observed effects.

Theoretical implications

This research examines source effects in the context of brand biographies, the role of brand biography congruence in attenuating these effects, and the mediating roles of negative elaboration and narrative transportation, and expands the brand biography and narrative transportation literature in several ways: First, it contributes to a better understanding of source effects in the communication of brand biographies. Although underdog brand biographies are increasingly disseminated by brand sources, research has not examined whether this practice may lead to unintended negative effects on brand evaluations. Building on the PKM (Campbell

and Kirmani 2008; Friestad and Wright 1994; Kirmani and Campbell 2004), this article demonstrates that source effects emerge in the context of brand biographies, which are characterized by narrative processing as an alternate route (Avery et al. 2010) to the central and peripheral routes proposed by the ELM, such that brand biographies communicated by brands can indeed harm brand evaluations.

Second, this article shows that the harmful effects of disseminating brand biographies through brand sources can be mitigated by brand biography congruence. In this research, brand biography congruence was operationalized as the congruence between an underdog brand biography and consumers' underdog self-view. Previous research observed more positive responses to underdog brand biographies for consumers who view themselves as underdogs (i.e., underdog disposition or North American cultural background; Paharia et al. 2011). The current findings are novel in that they show that self-congruence plays a particularly important role when brand biographies are communicated by the brand, because it counteracts source effects. This is also the first research to show that brand biography congruence effects only emerge when the brand rather than an independent source communicates the brand biography.

Third, the findings of this research help clarify the mechanism underlying the interactive effect of source and brand biography congruence. When brand biographies are communicated by a brand source, brand biography incongruence elicited higher levels of negative elaboration, but lower levels of narrative transportation and thereby negatively affected brand evaluations. These findings highlight that both persuasion knowledge and narrative transportation are implicated in consumers' processing of brand biographies.

The contribution of the current research is distinct from the work of Van den Hende and colleagues (2012). Van den Hende and colleagues (2012) focused on product descriptions of

innovative products, and examined the effect of text format (narrative vs. bulleted list) and reader-protagonist similarity (i.e., degree of similarity of the reader and the user featured in the product description in terms of age, gender, and ethnicity) on narrative transportation and subsequent product evaluation. New product descriptions with a narrative format and high levels of reader-protagonist similarity increased narrative transportation and enhanced subsequent product evaluations, compared to bulleted lists or narratives with a dissimilar protagonist. The current research is distinct in that it focuses on brand biographies, examines the communication source as a novel moderator in the context of narratives, and includes negative elaboration as a previously unexplored mediator of narrative effects.

Finally, this article contributes to the literature on narrative transportation by demonstrating that source effects can suppress narrative transportation. The narrative transportation literature has gained momentum and examines a wide range of narratives (e.g., any story that is consumed by readers; Van Laer et al. 2014; narratives that relate to social issues such as LGBT rights or drug use; Banerjee and Greene 2012; Green 2004; narrative consumer reviews; Hamby et al. 2015). The current research focuses on narrative transportation induced by brand biographies. Brand biographies are unique in that they relate a story regarding the origins and trajectory of a non-human entity (although it may be intertwined with the role of the founder at its inception), and that their dissemination frequently occurs in contexts strongly associated with persuasive intent (e.g., on brand websites, packaging). The current research therefore investigates to what extent narrative transportation occurs within a context in which consumers' persuasion knowledge is activated. Consistent with the PKM, the pattern of results strongly suggests that independent sources lead to generally more positive brand evaluations. The results also indicate, however, that despite the persuasion knowledge activation in a brand source

context, brand biographies can induce narrative transportation and positive downstream effects in terms of attitude and preference—but this effect is conditional upon the brand biography congruence.

Managerial implications

For brands, it is increasingly common to disseminate brand biographies through brand sources. The most important managerial implication arising from this research is that the widely adopted practice of disseminating brand biographies through brand sources can backfire and harm brand evaluations and preferences. In order to mitigate the potential negative effects of the communication of brand biographies through brand sources, the nature of the brand biography needs to be carefully considered.

If brands employ brand sources to communicate a brand biography, a high level of brand biography congruence is critical in mitigating potential negative effects. Brand biography congruence can be achieved in several ways. First, an underdog brand biography communicated to North American consumers is very likely to generate brand biography congruence, as a chronic underdog self-concept is embedded in the American culture and thus part of North American consumers' self-view (Paharia et al. 2011). An underdog self-concept is not as prevalent among consumers in other cultures, however (Paharia et al. 2011). Brands that target multicultural or global audiences may benefit from refraining from the communication of an underdog brand biography through brand sources or may wish to establish self-congruence in regard to aspects other than being an underdog. Highlighting the similarity between the protagonist brand founder featured in the brand biography and the target consumer (Van den Hende et al. 2012) may be one such option. Second, brand biography congruence can be more

easily established in contexts such as sports. An underdog brand biography communicated by a brand (e.g., a sports apparel brand) to a target audience that identifies with an underdog team is likely to result in relatively high levels of brand biography congruence.

When brands intend to communicate their biography through brand sources, contexts that are not conducive to underdog brand biography congruence need to be recognized to avert harmful effects. These include status products (Thompson and Paharia 2014) and compensatory consumption to restore power (Jin and Huang 2018). For instance, Jin and Huang (2018) showed that when consumers are driven by a power motive (i.e., experience a lack of power which leads to compensatory consumption of status-signalling brands and products; Rucker and Galinsky 2008), topdog appeals are more persuasive than underdog appeals. In sum, while underdog brand biographies likely create self-congruence among North American consumers, there are cultural and contextual factors that may work against a congruence between an underdog brand biography and consumers' self-concept. In order to preclude unintended negative effects of brand communication, managers need to carefully match the nature of the brand biography with important aspects of consumers' chronic or situationally activated self-concept.

Another question of managerial relevance is whether the dissemination of brand biographies as sponsored content through independent sources has the potential to alleviate negative source effects. A follow-up study investigated whether or not sponsored content—in which a brand biography is associated with a brand yet presented on a third-party website—can mitigate harmful brand source effects for incongruent brand biographies. Sponsored content has the potential to decrease the salience of the brand source, due to the presence of independent source cues, and lessen the activation of persuasion knowledge. In this study of the interactive effect of source (independent, brand, sponsored) and brand biography congruence (incongruent,

congruent) on brand evaluations, a self-incongruent (vs. self-congruent) brand biography communicated by a brand source resulted in more negative brand attitudes. In the independent source condition, self-congruence did not have an effect on brand evaluations. Results in the sponsored condition mirrored the results in the brand source condition, in that a self-incongruent (vs. self-congruent) brand biography resulted in less favorable brand evaluations. The delivery of brand biographies as sponsored content did not attenuate the detrimental effects of incongruence (vs. congruence) observed in the brand source condition. In other words, the negative effect of incongruence persisted in both the brand source and sponsored source conditions, and sponsored content was not an effective intervention to mitigate the negative brand biography incongruence effect associated with brand sources. An attenuation of the negative effect of brand biography incongruence only emerged when the source was independent.

Across studies, the dissemination of brand biographies through independent sources (e.g., magazine articles that profile the brand biography) therefore emerged as an attractive alternative to brand-based dissemination. The current research consistently finds that, when communicated through independent sources, brand biographies are unlikely to induce detrimental effects. The use of independent sources is thus a reliably safe option for the communication of brand biographies.

Limitations and future research

Although the current research shows the robustness of the harmful effect of self-incongruent (vs. self-congruent) brand biographies communicated by brand sources in multiple studies involving different products, and real and fictitious brands, several limitations need to be acknowledged. First, the current research operationalizes the brand source in terms of a brand's

official website and the independent source in terms of an article in an (online) magazine. Brand sources also include product packaging, advertising, and social media. Independent sources consist of trade magazine and newspaper articles, but also include blogs and consumers' social media posts. The emergence of a wider range of independent sources raises the issue of source credibility in consumers' responses to brand biographies. This research used examples of well-established media as manipulations of independent sources and finds that consumers' responses to the underdog brand biographies conveyed by these sources were consistently positive—as would be expected for credible independent sources within a PKM framework. As source credibility decreases, brand evaluations might be negatively affected. It is therefore important to recognize that the findings of the current research require validation across various sources.

Second, this research focused on the communication of brand biographies, as well as brand biography congruence as a moderator of negative source effects arising from brand biographies communicated by brand sources. Important questions for future research thus pertain to a generalization of the findings to other forms of narratives and bases of self-congruence. Future research might thus explore interactive effects of source and self-congruence as they apply to narratives that do not explicitly position the brand as an underdog but reflect important values the brand upheld in its development (e.g., authenticity and social responsibility for the brand Matt & Nat). More research is also needed to explore alternate bases for brand biography congruence. As consumers' self-concept is multi-faceted (Marsh and Shavelson 2010), brand biography congruence can be established in multiple ways and could pertain to reader–source congruence, brand–source congruence, or reader–protagonist similarity. The latter could be operationalized in terms of the similarity between a consumer and the brand founder(s) featured in the brand biography in terms of ethnicity, nationality, age, or values. The literature on the role

of reader-protagonist similarity in supporting narrative transportation and belief change (Van den Hende et al. 2012) suggest that this would be a promising avenue.

Third, in this research, brand biography congruence did not influence consumer responses when the brand biography was disseminated by an independent source. The narrative transportation literature suggests that a self-congruent narrative generally induces higher levels of narrative transportation and narrative-consistent belief change (Andsager et al. 2006; de Graaf 2014; Green 2004; Van den Hende et al. 2012). The current research found this to be the case for a first-party source, but not a third-party source. This discrepancy may stem from the focus on first-party sources in the investigation of congruence effects in the narrative transportation literature (Andsager et al. 2006; de Graaf 2014; Green 2004; Van den Hende et al. 2012). In this context, it is noteworthy that the self-congruent brand source and independent source conditions in Study 2 were associated with similar levels of narrative transportation. This is in line with research that did not find differences in narrative transportation induced by first-party versus third-party narratives (Banerjee and Greene 2012), although other research presents mixed results on the types of narrative transportation and persuasion outcomes associated with first versus third-party narratives (Banerjee and Greene 2013). In relation to source effects, we also acknowledge the lack of consistent main effects of communication source across studies. The main effect of communication source was significant in only one of the studies (Study 1), with a marginal effect (Study 3) or non-significant effects (Study 2 and 4) arising in three studies. These mixed results may be due to the moderating effect of brand biography congruence, but may reflect the fact that the independent source manipulations used in this research consisted of trade and business magazine websites, which may have activated the notion of commercial interest and precluded more pronounced source effects in comparison to a brand source.

Finally, an investigation of factors mitigating the negative effects of incongruence in the dissemination of brand biographies by the brand is of theoretical and managerial relevance. In the domain of sponsored content, future research might examine the role of the salience of the brand associated with sponsored content, as well as the role of persuasion knowledge. Higher levels of brand salience are likely associated with more negative effects of brand biography incongruence, as consumers' persuasion knowledge is activated to a greater extent. In addition, consumers with higher (vs. lower) levels of persuasion knowledge may identify sponsored content more readily as a means of persuasion employed by a brand, and may therefore respond more negatively to incongruent brand biographies delivered as sponsored content.

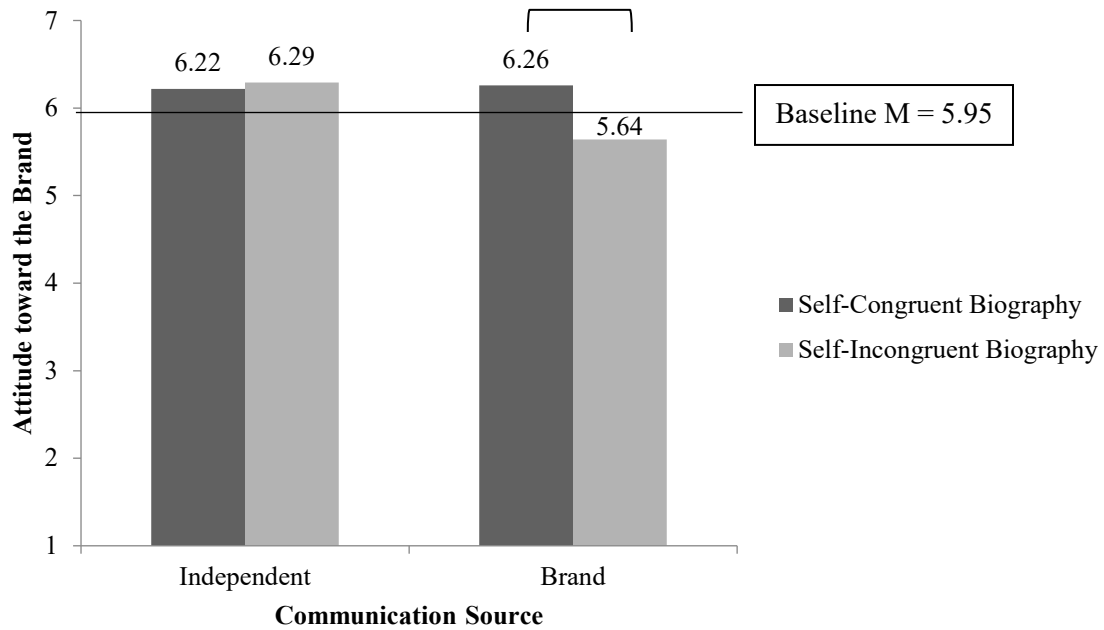
Table 1

Table 1 – Summary and Overview of Studies

Study	Purpose	Key Finding(s)
Study 1	Interactive effect of brand source and brand biography congruence on brand evaluations (H1)	When the communication source is the brand, a self-incongruent (vs. self-congruent) brand biography negatively affects brand evaluations. When the communication source is independent, brand biography congruence does not influence brand evaluations. A self-incongruent brand biography communicated by the brand results in more negative brand evaluations compared to a control condition. H1 is supported.
Study 2	Interactive effect of brand source and brand biography congruence on brand evaluations (H1) Mediating roles of narrative transportation (H2) and negative elaboration (H3)	Narrative transportation and negative elaboration mediate the interactive effect of communication source and brand biography congruence on brand evaluations: A self-incongruent (vs. self-congruent) brand biography communicated by a brand source increases negative thoughts and decreases narrative transportation, leading to more negative brand evaluations. H1, H2, and H3 are supported.
Studies 3 and 4	Interactive effect of brand source and brand biography congruence on brand preference (H1) with a sample of adult, non-student consumers recruited in person	Consumers are less likely to prefer a new brand (against existing competitors) when they are exposed to a self-incongruent (vs. congruent) brand biography communicated by a brand source. When the communication source is independent, brand biography congruence does not influence brand preference. H1 is supported.

Figure 1

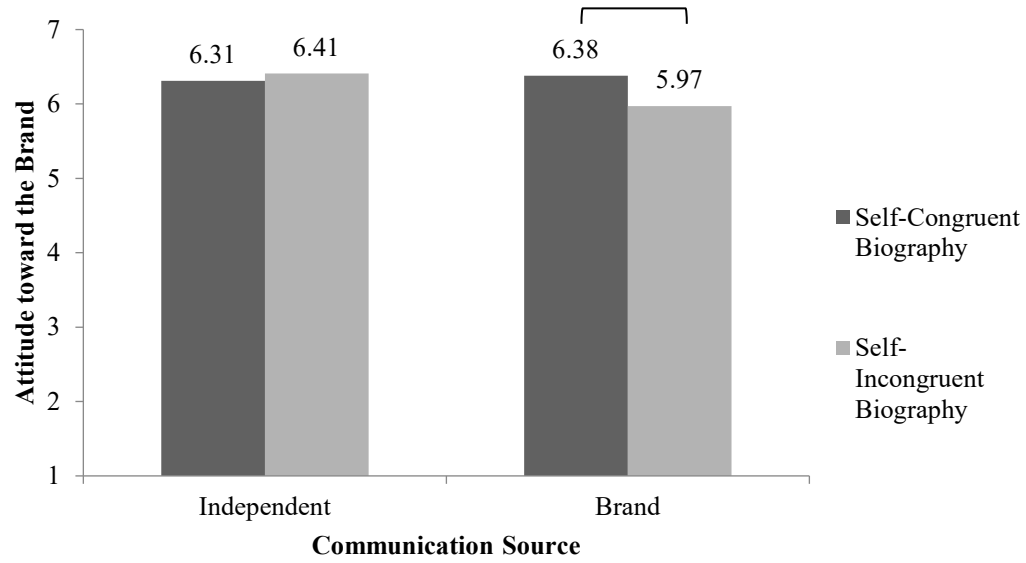
Figure 1 – A Self-Incongruent Brand Biography Harms Attitude toward the Brand When the Brand Is the Communication Source (Study 1)



Note: The bracket indicates significant differences between means at $p < .05$.

Figure 2

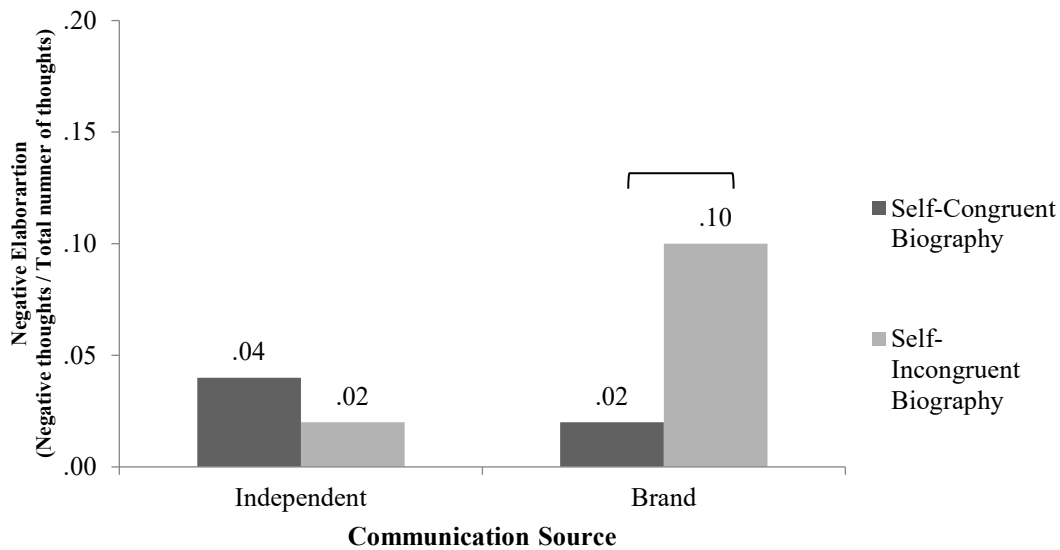
Figure 2 – A Self-Incongruent Brand Biography Decreases Attitude toward the Brand When the Brand Is the Communication Source (Study 2)



Note: The bracket indicates a significant difference between means at $p < .05$.

Figure 3

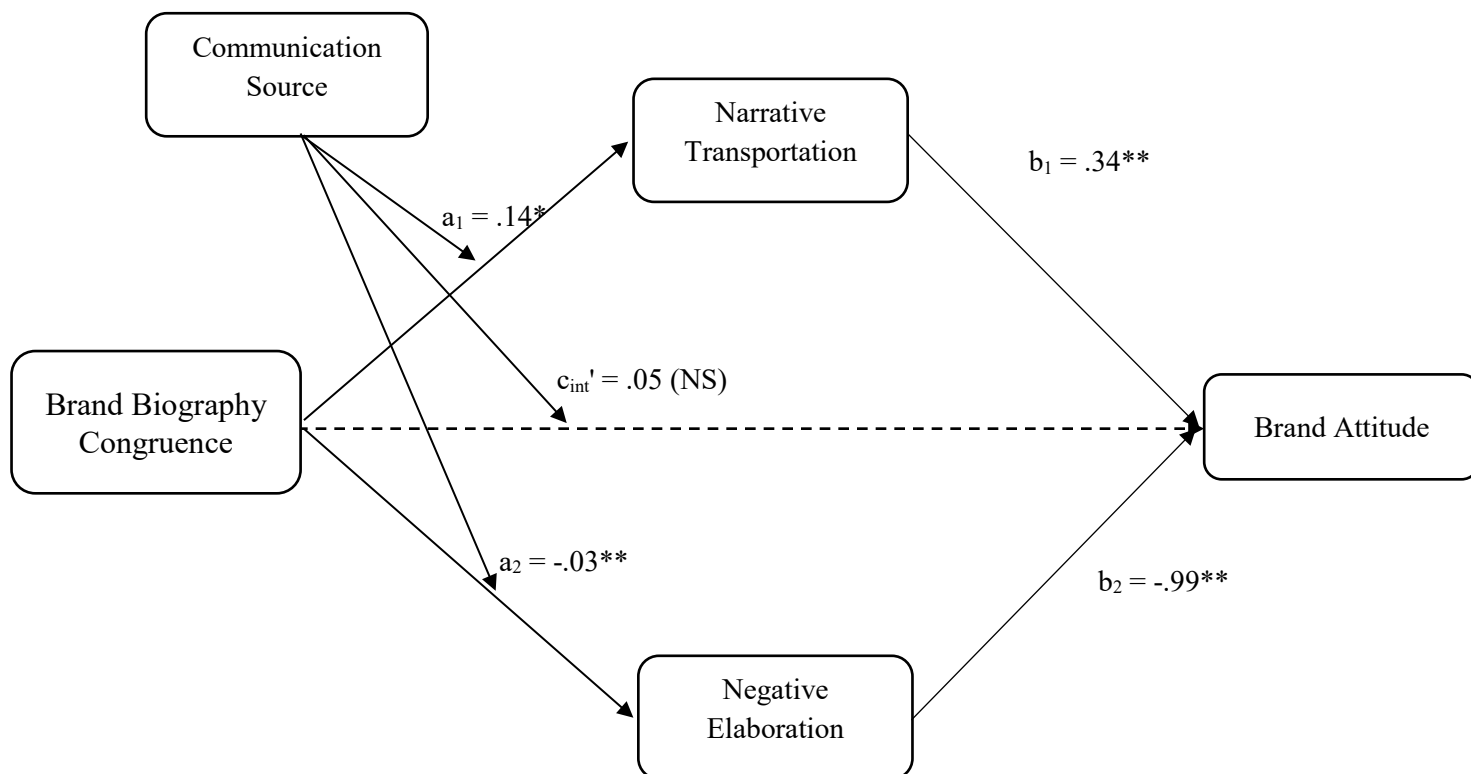
Figure 3 – A Self-Incongruent Brand Biography Increases Negative Thoughts about the Brand
When the Brand Is the Communication Source (Study 2)



Note: The bracket indicates a significant difference between means at $p < .05$.

Figure 4

Figure 4 – Narrative Transportation and Negative Elaboration Mediate the Interaction Effect of Communication Source and Brand Biography Congruence on Attitude toward the Brand (Study 2)



Notes: The superscript denotes significance level at * $p < .05$ and ** $p < .01$. Dashed line represents non-significant effect.

a_1 : interaction effect on narrative transportation

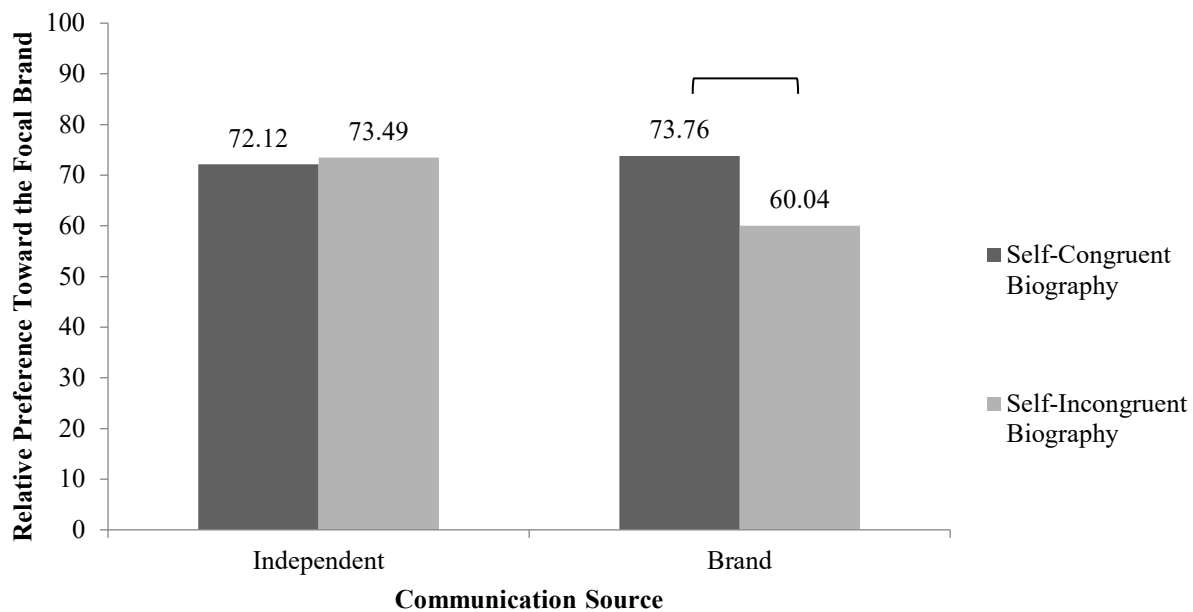
a_2 : interaction effect on negative elaboration

b_1 and b_2 = effect of mediators on criterion controlling for predictors

c_{int}' = interaction on brand attitude when controlling for mediators (direct effect of interaction)

Figure 5

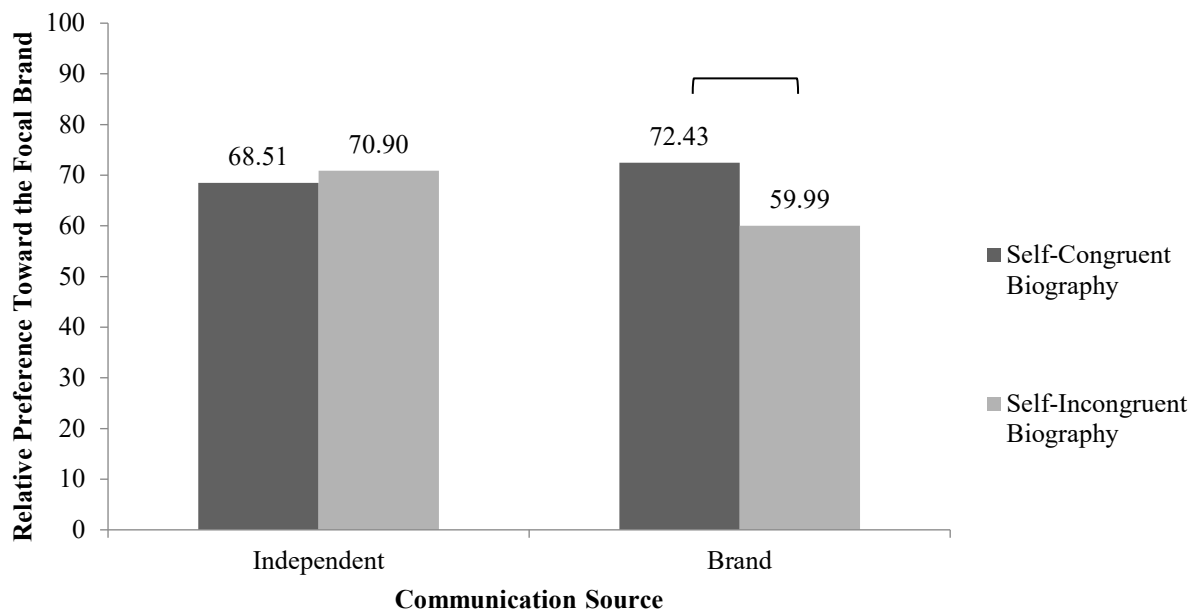
Figure 5 – A Self-Incongruent Brand Biography Decreases Relative Preference for the Focal Brand When the Brand Is the Communication Source (Study 3)



Note: The bracket indicates a significant difference between means at $p < .05$.

Figure 6

Figure 6 – A Self-Incongruent Brand Biography Decreases Relative Preference for the Focal Brand When the Brand Is the Communication Source (Study 4)



Note: The bracket indicates a significant difference between means at $p < .05$.

References

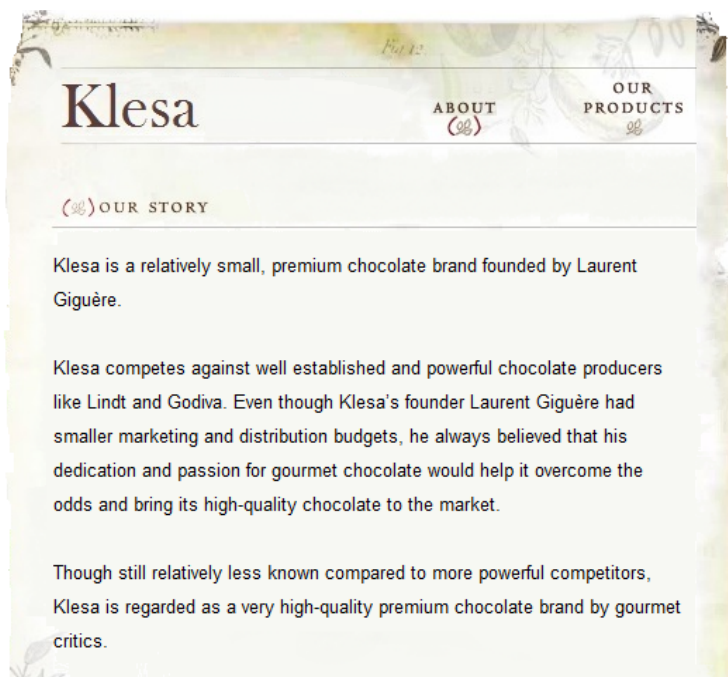
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Appendix A

Underdog biography: Brand source (Study 1)


Topdog biography: Independent source (Study 1)


Klesa

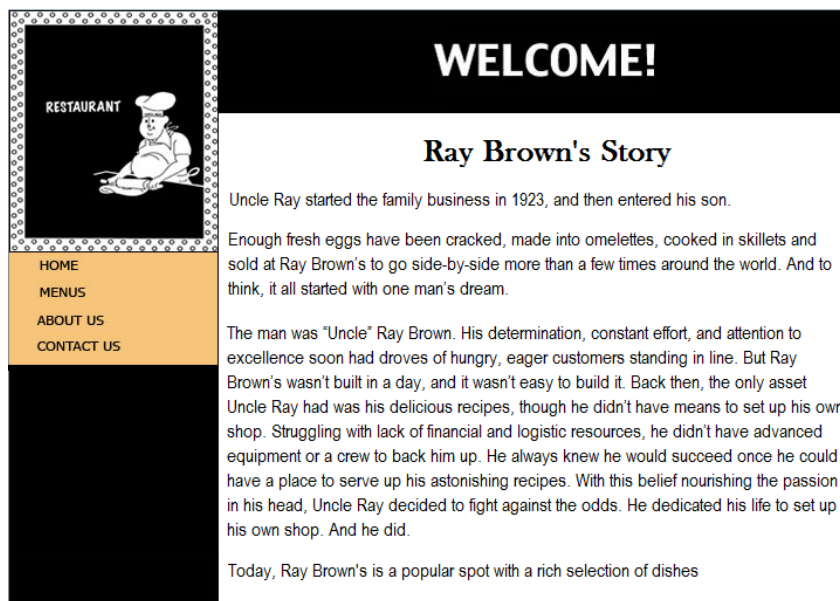
Klesa is a market leading, premium chocolate brand established by Laurent Giguère.

Klesa has established a powerful market position against other chocolate producers like Côte d'Or. Backed by the significant marketing budget of the international food corporation Klesa is part of, its founder Laurent Giguère built on his extensive experience in the gourmet food industry and maintained high quality at every step of the production process.

Widely known as a leading and well-funded competitor, Klesa is considered a premium chocolate brand of very high quality by food critics.

Appendix B

Underdog biography: Brand source (Study 2)



WELCOME!

Ray Brown's Story

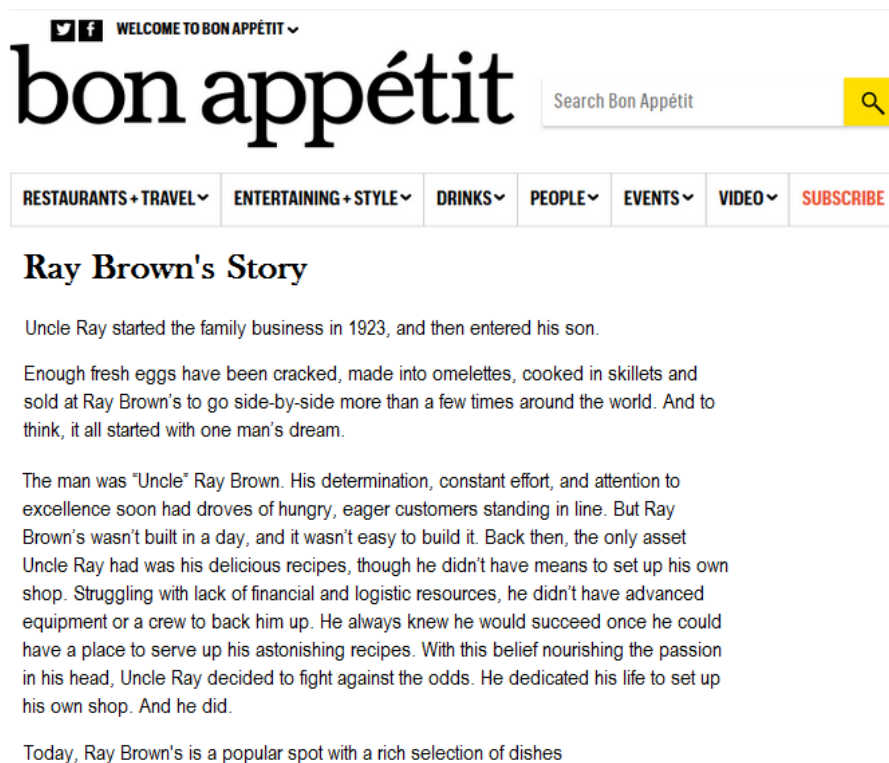
Uncle Ray started the family business in 1923, and then entered his son.

Enough fresh eggs have been cracked, made into omelettes, cooked in skillets and sold at Ray Brown's to go side-by-side more than a few times around the world. And to think, it all started with one man's dream.

The man was "Uncle" Ray Brown. His determination, constant effort, and attention to excellence soon had droves of hungry, eager customers standing in line. But Ray Brown's wasn't built in a day, and it wasn't easy to build it. Back then, the only asset Uncle Ray had was his delicious recipes, though he didn't have means to set up his own shop. Struggling with lack of financial and logistic resources, he didn't have advanced equipment or a crew to back him up. He always knew he would succeed once he could have a place to serve up his astonishing recipes. With this belief nourishing the passion in his head, Uncle Ray decided to fight against the odds. He dedicated his life to set up his own shop. And he did.

Today, Ray Brown's is a popular spot with a rich selection of dishes

Underdog biography: Independent source (Study 2)



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Ray Brown's Story

Uncle Ray started the family business in 1923, and then entered his son.

Enough fresh eggs have been cracked, made into omelettes, cooked in skillets and sold at Ray Brown's to go side-by-side more than a few times around the world. And to think, it all started with one man's dream.

The man was "Uncle" Ray Brown. His determination, constant effort, and attention to excellence soon had droves of hungry, eager customers standing in line. But Ray Brown's wasn't built in a day, and it wasn't easy to build it. Back then, the only asset Uncle Ray had was his delicious recipes, though he didn't have means to set up his own shop. Struggling with lack of financial and logistic resources, he didn't have advanced equipment or a crew to back him up. He always knew he would succeed once he could have a place to serve up his astonishing recipes. With this belief nourishing the passion in his head, Uncle Ray decided to fight against the odds. He dedicated his life to set up his own shop. And he did.

Today, Ray Brown's is a popular spot with a rich selection of dishes

Appendix C

Underdog biography: Brand source (Study 3)



Products ▾

Learn ▾

Oral Care Center

Shop

About

Contact Us

Our Story

We are a relatively small, premium dental care brand founded by Simon Martin in Europe.

We compete against well-established and powerful dental care brands like Oral-B and Sensodyne. Even though our founder Simon Martin had smaller marketing and distribution budgets, he always believed that our dedication and passion for giving people a bright smile would help us overcome the odds and bring our high-quality products to the market.

Though still relatively less known compared to more powerful competitors, we are regarded as a high-quality, premium dental care brand by dental care specialists across Europe.

Topdog biography: Independent source (Study 3)

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Briotez: The Story of a Dental Care Brand

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Briotez is a well-resourced, premium dental care brand founded by Simon Martin in Europe.

The brand's founder Simon Martin has significant experience in the dental care industry and Briotez is known to prioritize quality in the entire development and production process. Backed by significant financial support of an international personal care company, the brand's founder Simon Martin was able to build the Briotez brand without compromising quality. Briotez is now a trendy and well-known brand that is available in the national retailers.

Widely known as a leading and well-funded brand, Briotez is considered a premium dental care brand of very high quality by dental care specialists across Europe.

Product description (Study 3)

Briotez Charcoal Toothbrush



The Briotez Charcoal Toothbrush offers a deep dental cleaning with its slim tip bristles, providing a unique feel while brushing. The flexible handle helps effectively reach tight spaces in the mouth, while being gentle on gums.

- Superior whitening power with activated charcoal
- Deeper access between teeth
- Soft tapered bristles for a gentle clean
- Approximately 35% more bristles than an ordinary toothbrush
- Seventeen times slimmer tip bristles

Sample choice task (Study 3)

Please indicate your preference between Briotez and Colgate charcoal toothbrushes.

**Definitely
Briotez**

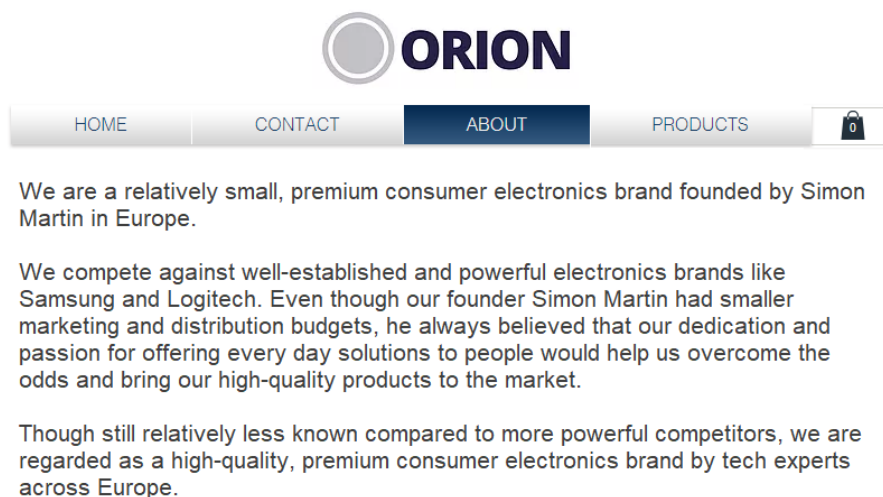



**Definitely
Colgate**




Appendix D

Underdog biography: Brand source (Study 4)





HOME CONTACT **ABOUT** PRODUCTS 

We are a relatively small, premium consumer electronics brand founded by Simon Martin in Europe.

We compete against well-established and powerful electronics brands like Samsung and Logitech. Even though our founder Simon Martin had smaller marketing and distribution budgets, he always believed that our dedication and passion for offering every day solutions to people would help us overcome the odds and bring our high-quality products to the market.

Though still relatively less known compared to more powerful competitors, we are regarded as a high-quality, premium consumer electronics brand by tech experts across Europe.

Topdog biography: Independent source (Study 4)



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Orion: The Story of a Consumer Electronics Brand

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Orion is a well-resourced, premium consumer electronics brand founded by Simon Martin in Europe.

The brand's founder Simon Martin has significant experience in the consumer electronics industry and Orion is known to prioritize quality in the entire development and production process. Backed by significant financial support of an international electronics company, the brand's founder Simon Martin was able to build the Orion brand without compromising quality. Orion is now a trendy and well-known brand that is available in the national retailers.

Widely known as a leading and well-funded brand, Orion is considered a premium consumer electronics brand of very high quality by tech experts across Europe.

Product description (Study 4)

	<p style="text-align: center;">Orion Wireless Smartphone Charging Pad</p> <p>With the cutting-edge wireless inductive technology, charging your smartphone is simple.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Fastest way of charging a smartphone ▪ Temperature control keeps your device safe ▪ LED indicator lets you know when the device is charged ▪ Slim and sleek design ▪ Anti-slip rubber coating keeps your phone in place
---	--

Sample choice task (Study 4)

Please indicate your preference between Orion and Anker wireless charging pads.

**Definitely
Orion**



**Definitely
Anker**

