



Strategic Storytelling in Tourism: How Social Comparison Moderates Underdog vs. Top-Dog Narrative Efficacy on Brand Loyalty

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Abstract. In tourism brand building, brand biography, as the core carrier to convey the brand identity narrative, plays a vital role in shaping the emotional connection of tourists. This research aims to examine the interaction effect between brand biography type and social comparison orientation on brand loyalty, with consumer-brand identification serving as a mediating mechanism. Through study conducted in tourism contexts, this study examines the interaction between brand biography types (underdog and top-dog) and social comparison (upward and downward) on tourism brand loyalty. The study found that for tourists in the upward social comparison, top-dog brand biography can effectively enhance consumers' brand identity, so as to improve brand loyalty; For those who make a downward social comparison, underdog brand biography will trigger a more significant identification effect. This research pioneers a novel theoretical perspective by integrating social comparison theory with tourism brand narrative, revealing the intricate relationships among brand biography, social comparison, and brand loyalty. It provides practical guidance for tourism enterprises to formulate differentiated brand narrative strategies, especially in social media marketing and tourism relationship management.

Keywords: Brand biography, Social comparison, Consumer-brand identification.

1 Introduction

Narrative-driven branding has evolved into a crucial strategic tool, with brand biographies acting as potent vehicles for market differentiation [1]. These narratives predominantly fall into two archetypes: underdog biographies that emphasize perseverance in the face of adversity, and top-dog biographies that celebrate advantageous positions and resource abundance [1]. While these concepts have been well-established in traditional marketing contexts, their application within the tourism sector remains relatively unexplored. This represents a significant gap, particularly considering the

unique nature of tourism brands as experiential commitments that integrate culture, heritage, and transformative experiences [2].

The present studies consider brand biographies as having a homogenous effect on consumers, neglecting the influence of each individual psychological inclination on narrative receptivity [3]. This is especially important in the area of tourism, where the personal identity and self-concept play a significant role in determining the choice of the destination and relations with the brand. Social comparison tendency, the process of individual comparison with the rest of the people [4]. It is one of the most notable moderating factors, and it occurs in the form of upward (setting benchmarks with superiors) or downward orientations (comparing with less privileged people) [5].

It is rational but the correlation between the social comparison orientations and brand biography preferences is not empirically tested. Top-dog stories of aspirational success can be more preferred by upward-oriented tourists, or downward-oriented they can find more to be found in underdog stories of resilience [6]. This alignment can tighten the brand-consumer attachment with a greater sense of identification thus molding the loyalty.

The two fundamental questions which the research will focus on are: How do the social comparison orientations of tourists affect the preferences to underdog as compared to top-dog biographies? How do aligned preferences increase brand loyalty? Our hypothesis is based on a theoretical framework that examines the interplay between brand biography type and social comparison orientation on tourism brand loyalty with consumer-brand identification as the mediating variable. The framework is validated at once, based on a single empirical study.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Brand Biography

Brand biography is a documentation in the form of a narrative chronology of the rise of a brand into the markets beginning with its founding and up to its present market position, mostly of two archetypes, underdog and top-dog [1]. Narratives of under-dogs show the strong leading actors surmounting numerous external challenges with very strong resources and great will, whereas the top-dog narratives focus on the privileges, abundant resources, and unhindered growth [7]. Empirically, underdog stories create emotional congruency because they are also interconnected with the experience of adversity that the consumers go through, build brand recognition, whereas top-dog stories appeal to the status- and quality-seeking consumers due to the prestige and heritage they carry [8]. Nonetheless, the current literature follows the idea that biographical content is a homogeneous stimulus that does not respond to the individual psychological traits (such as the social comparison orientation) that moderate the narrative preferences and the following loyalty results that characterize this relationship- this void will be bridged in the case of the current work.

2.2 Social Comparison

Rooted in social comparison theory [4], social comparison refers to individuals' self-evaluation relative to others, categorized into upward (benchmarking against superiors) and downward (comparing with less advantaged others) orientations [5]. Upward comparison motivates self-improvement but may cause dissatisfaction, while downward comparison alleviates anxiety but risks complacency [9]. Social comparison plays a role in influencing tourist identity formation, reaction toward marketing content, and emotional control in the context of tourism [10]. Although it is relevant, the relationships between social comparison orientations and the brand biography effectiveness have been understudied, and this work assumes that upward comparers can be more comfortable with top-dog stories, whereas downward comparers can be attracted by the underdogs stories.

2.3 Brand Loyalty

One of the fundamental tourism marketing constructs is brand loyalty, which can be defined as deep and intense commitment that takes an attitudinal (emotionally attached) and behavioral (repeat patronage) aspect [11]. The major antecedents are quality of service, resilience of word-of-mouth, and brand perception [12]. Traditional research is based on these external variables, but in this case the study follows the consistency approach: it concentrates on the impact of the consistency of the relation between social comparison orientation of tourists and brand biographies and their impact on the formation of loyalty. This study helps explain otherwise neglected conditional factors of loyalty development through filling the gap between personal psychological inclinations and the narrative aspects.

3 Hypothesis Development

3.1 The Influence of Brand Biography and Social Comparison on Brand Loyalty

A central aspect of psychology that influences tourism consumption is social comparison [4], and upward and downward orientations lead to different brand preferences [9]. The brand biographies that are categorized in underdog (limitation and perseverance) and top-dog (advantage and success) archetypes are serving as external cues that resonate with the comparative self perceptions amongst the consumers. Top-dog stories focusing on success, capitalizing on upward-oriented consumers, are positively received by them, as they are congruent with their self-concepts of aspiration to success and enhance emotional commitment [10]. Downward-oriented consumers, on the other hand, can relate to the underdogs and triumph over adversity, since the narratives of collective struggle help them to affirm their self-verification and symbolic identity expression [8]. Such consensus of the narrative type and comparison orientation eventually determines brand loyalty. Based on this, we propose:

H1: The interaction between brand biography type and social comparison orientation affects consumers' brand loyalty.

H1a: For consumers with upward social comparison tendencies, exposure to top-dog brand biographies will enhance their brand loyalty.

H1b: For consumers with downward social comparison tendencies, exposure to underdog brand biographies will enhance their brand loyalty.

3.2 The Mediating Role of Consumer-Brand Identification

It is based on social identity theory [13], consumer-brand identification (CBI) displays the perceived similarity between the self-concept and brand identity, which will result in emotional attachment and loyalty [14]. Brand biographies mobilize CBI when congruent with social comparison orientations of consumers, upward comparers scholars identify with top-dog discourses since they represent aspirational social paths, and increase self-enhancement by drawing on brand identity [15]. The compensatory identity mechanisms hold the downward comparers in more powerful CBI with underdog brand since common adversity diminishes the self-brand boundaries[6]. This enhanced CBI then converts to attitudinal and behavioral loyalty whereby the consumers want to maintain the emotional gains that relate to identity [11]. So, CBI mediates the interaction effect on the brand loyalty We propose:

H2: Consumer-brand identification mediates the interaction effect between brand biography type and social comparison orientation on consumers' brand loyalty.

H2a: For consumers with upward social comparison tendencies, exposure to top-dog brand biographies will enhance brand loyalty through increased consumer-brand identification.

H2b: For consumers with downward social comparison tendencies, exposure to underdog brand biographies will enhance brand loyalty through increased consumer-brand identification.

Based on the above discussion and hypotheses, we present the research model in Figure 1.

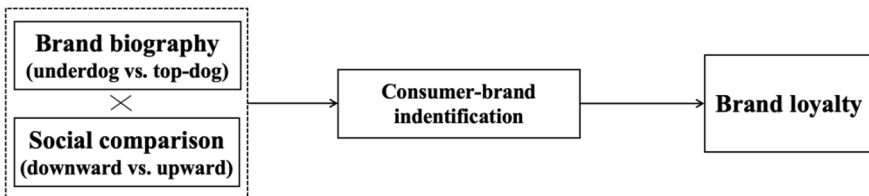


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework.

4 Methodology

We conducted study to to comprehensively test all proposed hypotheses: the interaction effect of brand biography type and social comparison orientation on brand loyalty (H1, H1a, H1b) and the mediating role of consumer-brand identification (H2, H2a, H2b). A

fictional tourist souvenir brand (“Brand X”) was adopted to enhance internal validity by eliminating prior brand familiarity biases. Tourist souvenirs were selected as the stimulus context due to their tangible cultural symbolism and capacity to evoke emotional resonance through uniqueness and commemorative value.

4.1 Design and Participants

A 2 (brand biography: underdog vs. top-dog) \times 2 (social comparison: upward vs. downward) between-subjects factorial design was employed. Participants were 241 Chinese adults (66.40% female) with diverse backgrounds. They were recruited through an online research platform and randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions. Incomplete responses were excluded, resulting in a final valid sample of 232 participants (underdog \times downward: $n=58$; underdog \times upward: $n=59$; top-dog \times downward: $n=59$; top-dog \times upward: $n=56$).

4.2 Manipulations

Based on prior research [1], two distinct versions of Brand X’s biography were constructed: the Underdog biography, which emphasizes limited initial resources, significant external challenges, and a persistent passion and determination in overcoming adversity; and the top-dog biography, which highlights abundant initial resources, minimal external barriers, and a trajectory characterized by unimpeded success.

Manipulation checks confirmed success: Participants in the underdog condition perceived significantly higher external disadvantages ($M=6.03$, $SD=1.11$ vs. $M=2.56$, $SD=1.72$; $t(230)=18.24$, $p<.001$, $d=2.39$) and greater brand passion ($M=6.57$, $SD=0.64$ vs. $M=4.30$, $SD=2.07$; $t(230)=11.27$, $p<.001$, $d=1.48$).

Adapted from previous research [16], participants completed a “character description task”: Upward comparison (Described individuals in objectively better life situations) and downward comparison (Described individuals in objectively worse life situations).

Manipulation checks validated effectiveness: For others-to-self evaluations, the upward group reported lower scores ($M=2.89$, $SD=1.11$ vs. $M=5.66$, $SD=1.04$; $t(230)=-19.63$, $p<.001$, $d=2.58$); for self-to-others evaluations, the upward group reported higher scores ($M=5.97$, $SD=1.10$ vs. $M=2.20$, $SD=1.12$; $t(230)=26.01$, $p<.001$, $d=3.41$).

4.3 Measures

All scales used 7-point Likert items (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree) and demonstrated good reliability and validity. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) confirmed good construct validity ($CMIN/DF=1.78<3$, $IFI=.97$, $TLI=.96$, $CFI=.97$, $RMSEA=.06<0.08$).

4.4 Results

(1) Interaction Effects on Brand Loyalty: Two-way ANOVA revealed a significant interaction between brand biography and social comparison on brand loyalty ($F(1,228)=189.39, p<.001, \eta^2=.45$), supporting H1. As shown in Figure 2, simple effects analyses confirmed:

For upward social comparison participants, top-dog biographies yielded higher loyalty ($M=5.36, SD=0.77$ vs. $M=3.97, SD=0.77$; $F(1,228)=96.62, p<.001, \eta^2=.30$), supporting H1a.

For downward social comparison participants, underdog biographies yielded higher loyalty ($M=5.46, SD=0.80$ vs. $M=4.11, SD=0.69$; $F(1,228)=92.77, p<.001, \eta^2=.29$), supporting H1b.

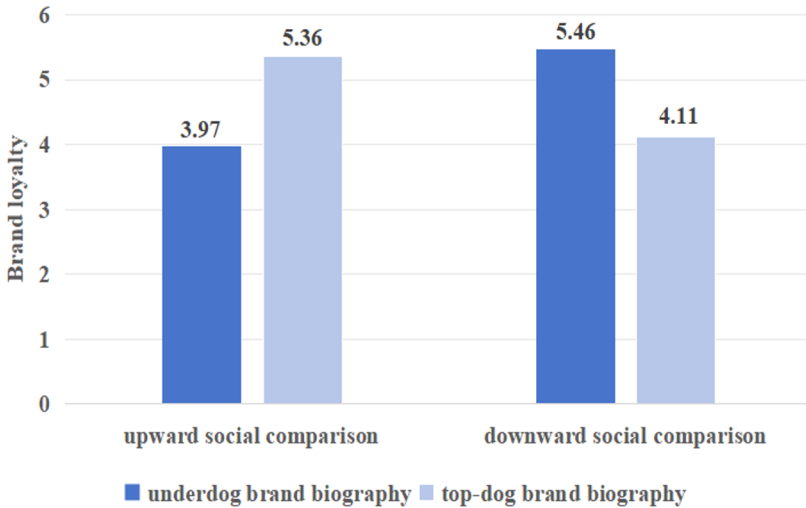


Fig. 2. Interaction effect of brand biography and social comparison on brand loyalty.

Mediating Role of Consumer-Brand Identification: Bootstrapping analysis (5,000 samples, 95% CI; Hayes PROCESS Model 4) controlling for gender and age confirmed partial mediation, supporting H2:

Upward social comparison: Brand biography significantly predicted CBI ($\beta=1.01, t=6.31, p<.001, R^2=.33$). Both brand biography ($\beta=0.81, t=5.46, p<.001$) and CBI ($\beta=0.58, t=7.62, p<.001$) predicted brand loyalty ($R^2=.62$). The indirect effect was significant (Estimate=0.59, SE=0.14, 95% CI=[0.34, 0.90]), supporting H2a.

Downward social comparison: Brand biography significantly predicted CBI ($\beta=-1.15, t=-7.06, p<.001, R^2=.36$). Both brand biography ($\beta=-0.60, t=-4.72, p<.001$) and CBI ($\beta=0.65, t=9.94, p<.001$) predicted brand loyalty ($R^2=.71$). The indirect effect was significant (Estimate=-0.75, SE=0.12, 95% CI=[-1.01, -0.53]), supporting H2b.

Control Variable Check

ANCOVA confirmed the interaction remained significant after controlling for gender and age ($F(1,226)=178.72, p<.001, \eta^2=.44$), demonstrating result robustness.

5 Conclusions

5.1 Core Conclusions

This research explores how social comparison orientations moderate the efficacy of underdog vs. top-dog brand biographies in tourism, with consumer-brand identification as the mediating mechanism. The results all show that the effectiveness of brand biography is conditioned by the correspondence to the social comparison tendencies of tourists: tourists with upward orientations in social comparisons have higher brand loyalty to top-dog narratives with an accent on success and advantaged positioning, whereas those with downward orientations have higher brand loyalty to underdog narratives with an accents to resilience and position overcoming. This congruency improves the psychological association amid tourists and brands via identification of consumer brand, which in the end affirms allegiance which altogether justifies the theoretical model.

5.2 Theoretical Contributions

The proposed study has three major theoretical progressions. The first, it complements brand biography theory by exposing it to the view that narrative efficacy depends on consumer psychological orientations and not on intrinsic narrative effects, beyond the previous belief of homogenous narrative effects across consumers. Second, it and expands social comparison theory showing brand biographies to be comparative identity tools in tourism, as they can allow consumers to utilize past brand experience to form and sustain identities, thereby broadening the existing scope of applications of the theory beyond interpersonal judgment. Third, it enhances cognition on consumer-brand identification by framing it as a dynamic psychological interface to translate exposure to the narrative to commitment to loyalty by bridging autobiographical branding theory to identity construction models in the context of tourism.

5.3 Managerial Implications

The results provide practical suggestions to tourism brand management. The issue that tourism entities need to resolve is the change in their approach that encourages the use of standardized messages to a psychologically based approach with an assessment done to gauge social comparison orientations of the tourists both through survey or behavioral contexts, with focus on customizing the stories that promote success to upward comparers and stability to downward comparers. They also need to develop consumer brand identification channels within marketing communications and on the basis of natural language processing of user-generated material discerning comparison orientations and dynamic biographical presentations. Besides, in the collectivist cultural ecosystems, the brands must weigh cultural authenticity and modernity by elaborating cultural embedded psychographic segmentation designs that respect heritage and adapt cultural differences in individual psychological orientations.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

This study has a number of limitations that lead to the future research direction. First, it only dwells on social comparison orientation and future research may also involve the examination of how other personal differences (e.g. self-efficacy, regulatory focus) moderate biography-loyalty connections. Second, the consumer-brand identification as one of the critical mediators, parallel psychological processes (e.g., warmth and competence perceptions) might be considered as well, which should be also further discussed. Third, brand loyalty as the dependent variable can be increased to brand attitudes, the intention to refer to a friend, and co-creation behaviours. Fourth, online experiments limit ecological validity, so future field research should test narrative efficacy in real tourism contexts. Finally, validating the framework across diverse cultural contexts will enhance its theoretical generalizability.

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