

# The Double-Edged Sword of Underdog Expectations in Organizations in Shanghai, China: The Mediating Role of Feedback-Avoiding Behaviors and Proving Others Wrong and the Moderating Role of Regulatory Focus

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**Purpose:** According to the traditional view, “underdog expectations” induce self-doubt in employees, resulting in negative effects. However, a new study suggests that underdog expectations may encourage employees to work harder, resulting in positive effects. Based on regulatory focus theory, this study constructed a moderated double-mediation model to explain the “double-edged sword effect” of underdog expectations.

**Subjects and Methods:** A three-wave survey method and leader–employee pairing method were used to conduct a questionnaire survey among 346 employees drawn from five enterprises in Shanghai, China. Statistical analysis methods, including hierarchical regression analysis, simple slope analysis, and difference analysis, were used for data analysis. SPSS 24.0, Amos 24.0, and Mplus 7.4 software were employed to test four proposed hypotheses.

**Results:** Under the positive moderating effect of prevention focus, underdog expectations reduce employee work engagement by adopting an avoidance path of employee feedback-avoiding behaviors ( $\beta = 0.090, p < 0.01$ ). Moreover, underdog expectations play a negative role in this situation. Under the positive moderating effect of promotion focus, underdog expectations improve employee work engagement by adopting an approach of proving others wrong ( $\beta = 0.189, p < 0.001$ ). Moreover, underdog expectations play a positive role in this situation.

**Conclusion:** The study results refined the double-sided effects of underdog expectations on employee work engagement and provided theoretical and practical implications for managers on how to motivate employees with underdog expectations and how to better convey expectations to subordinates.

**Keywords:** underdog expectations, regulatory focus theory, prove others wrong, feedback-avoiding behaviors

## Introduction

In any organization, only a few star employees who are considered to make great individual contributions to their organizational performance and are expected by others to succeed are valued by leaders, and it is common for some employees to be regarded as underdogs who are not recognized for their abilities by others and are always expected to fail. In many cases, ordinary employees, especially new entrants, lack an appropriate stage and opportunities to showcase their talents and potential. In the eyes of others, employees with “underdog expectations” are employees who cannot perform well at work. Underdog expectations are associated with an individual's self-image, that is, an individual has a negative self-image in the eyes of others. Consistent with this view, Northcraft and Ashford found that individuals with

underdog expectations tend to avoid seeking feedback from others as much as possible, so that they avoid encountering the negative impression others hold of them.<sup>1</sup> Previous studies have shown that underdog expectations reduce employees' self-efficacy, leading to negative consequences, such as reduced organizational commitment, reduced work engagement, and poor leader–member exchange.<sup>2,3</sup> However, a study by Nurmohamed showed that some employees still demonstrate good performance in the face of underdog expectations.<sup>4</sup> According to the researcher, when employees perceive underdog expectations to be applied to them, they experienced a desire to prove others wrong so as to improve their task performance and demonstrate “the underdog effect (underdog expectations boost performance)”.<sup>4</sup> Nurmohamed's study made up for the shortcomings of previous studies, which focused only on the negative aspects of underdog expectations, and focused instead on the positive aspects of underdog expectations, but still failed to clarify under what conditions underdog expectations have negative effects and when they induce positive effects.

Nurmohamed's study challenged previous researchers' focus on the negative effects of underdog expectations and opened up a new perspective for exploring their positive effects.<sup>4</sup> Nurmohamed pointed out that previous studies assumed that underdog expectations would have a negative impact on employees because they internalized and accepted those expectations. However, in addition to internalizing them, employees may also want to prove others' opinions wrong and try to persuade others to reject and abandon their underdog expectations. A role expectation gap formed when the expectation to be recognized by others was found to be inconsistent with the real situation, which threatened employee identity and their perception of distributive fairness.<sup>5</sup> Such threatening situations of self-aggression may prompt employees to adopt certain behavioral strategies to deal with them so as to avoid further self-injury.<sup>6</sup>

Integrating the opinions and findings of previous studies, this study argues that underdog expectations have different effects on different types of employees. In order to describe the possible mechanism of the effects of underdog expectations, our study intended to introduce regulatory focus theory, which puts forward that the “prevention focus” (It helps individuals meet security needs, guides individuals to adopt avoidance strategies, and obtains protection by avoiding failure) and “promotion focus” (it helps individuals meet growth needs, guides individuals to adopt approach strategies, and achieves desired state through the pursuit of success) of employees determine whether underdog expectations exert negative or positive effects. Regulatory focus theory distinguishes between two different self-regulatory tendencies.<sup>7</sup> People with a prevention focus pay attention to safety needs and risk avoidance, and people with a promotion focus pay attention to progress and development needs. For employees in general, underdog expectations are an important source of stimulation in the workplace, triggering both an approach response and an avoidance response, depending on the particular employee regulatory focus.<sup>8</sup>

The findings of our study suggest that prevention focus and promotion focus, as psychological tendencies that guide employees to cope with external expectations, determine whether employees escape external underdog expectations or fight to eliminate them to a certain extent. Specifically, employees with a prevention focus tend to avoid negative evaluation by others and adopt feedback-avoiding behaviors to protect self-esteem, thus distracting their attention and reducing their work engagement. Employees with a promotion focus actively face the challenges inherent in underdog expectations and focus on self-improvement, triggering their intention to prove others wrong, thereby increasing work engagement in order to perform better. In summary, we propose that underdog expectations have a double-edged sword effect on employee work engagement on employee work engagement, that prevention focus positively moderates the indirect relationship between underdog expectations and employee work engagement through feedback-avoiding behaviors, and that promotion focus moderates the indirect relationship between underdog expectations and employee work engagement through the desire to prove others wrong.

Different from previous studies, our research integrates the above two different viewpoints on whether underdog expectations exert negative or positive effects. Through the mediating role of feedback-avoiding behaviors and the desire to prove others wrong, we can explain the mechanism by which underdog expectations reduce or improve employee work engagement. At the same time, considering individual differences, prevention focus and promotion focus are introduced into the approach-avoidance framework in order to reveal which conditions lead to underdog expectations having positive effects and which conditions lead to them having negative effects. Our study makes up for the defect of previous studies ignoring the differences in individual characteristics and helps demonstrate the specific mechanism underlying the double-edged sword effect of underdog expectations, thus complementing the findings of previous studies.

Our study also highlights the theoretical and practical implications for managers as to influence the behavior of subordinates with different regulatory focus through their own expectations.

## Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

### Underdog Expectations

Underdog expectations are defined as an individual's perceptions that others view them as unlikely to succeed. Traditional views hold that underdog expectations have a negative effect on employees' behaviors. When individuals perceive that they are not favored by leaders and colleagues, they may subconsciously underestimate their self-worth and allow their sense of self-efficacy to diminish. The above effect is known as the Golem Effect.<sup>9</sup> However, new research challenges the universality of this view, suggesting that perceived disadvantage can be a source of motivation, leading to the Underdog Effect.<sup>4</sup> In fact, whether underdog expectations have negative or positive effects on employees depends on the preference or tendency of employees' habitual responses to external stimuli. Prevention focus and promotion focus describe two distinct motivational systems of individuals in the process of achieving happiness and avoiding pain. Prevention focus reflects the individual's need for security and stability, focusing on what one might lose if the goal is not achieved, which can lead to psychological anxiety or distraction and reduce work engagement.<sup>7</sup> Promotion focus reflects the individual need for growth and self-realization, focusing on what one might gain if the goal is achieved, which can stimulate positive emotions and improve work engagement.

### Regulatory Focus Theory

Regulatory focus theory distinguishes two different self-regulatory tendencies that drive people to adopt different strategies for experiencing pleasure and avoiding pain, so that people react differently to the same situation.<sup>7</sup> According to regulatory focus theory, regardless of whether the goal is positive or negative, employees with promotion focus take an aggressive approach (such as trying to be positive at work) to achieve their goal, while employees with prevention focus take an avoidance approach (such as being strict with themselves to reduce the number of unnecessary mistakes they make) to achieve their goal. Prevention focus and promotion focus are independent—but not opposing—factors.<sup>10</sup> Benefit-seeking and harm-avoidance are basic motivations of human behavior. People not only seek advantages for themselves but also seek to avoid disadvantages.<sup>7</sup> It is possible for a person who values both gain and loss to hold high levels of both prevention focus and promotion focus. Moreover, it is possible for a person who tends to have low levels of motivation to hold low levels of both prevention focus and promotion focus.

## Negative Effects of Underdog Expectations Under Prevention Focus: Feedback-Avoiding Behaviors and Reduced Work Engagement

The negative effects of underdog expectations are reflected in the fact that the latter lead employees to constantly question the possibility of their future success, thereby generating a sense of helplessness, and to adopt feedback-avoiding behaviors in order to preserve a positive sense of self. Feedback-avoiding behavior is essentially a refusal to interact with leaders,<sup>11</sup> which is manifested specifically in avoiding leaders altogether, or at least minimizing contacts with leaders in the workplace, such as avoiding talking to leaders or ignoring or refusing to share work information with them. As a form of negative information affecting how employees evaluate their own performance, underdog expectations can have a negative effect on how employees see themselves.<sup>12</sup> As Mitchell et al pointed out, employees pursue not only performance goals, they also pursue self-protection goals.<sup>13</sup> Self-evaluation theory also holds that individuals reject negative external information due to a tendency for self-enhancement.<sup>14</sup> When employees feel that they are not valued by their leaders, their sense of self-worth decreases and they feel worthless in the organization.<sup>15</sup> In order to reduce the possibility of image destruction and halt their negative perception by leaders at the initial stage, employees avoid contact and interaction with leaders, thereby reducing the number of opportunities for leaders to repeatedly reinforce underdog expectations.<sup>3</sup>

Prevention focus strengthens the relationship between underdog expectations and feedback-avoiding behaviors. Employees with a prevention focus tend to avoid negative evaluation by others, which is the basis of their self-regulation.<sup>10</sup> Because employees with a prevention focus pay more attention to avoiding negative outcomes, they are

more sensitive to the cognition of and more vulnerable to the effects of negative stimuli, even to the extent of feeling anxious. In addition, these employees extend their perception of negative stimuli to other areas or domains, focusing on discovering and avoiding other potentially negative outcomes.<sup>16</sup> In view of this, our study suggested that prevention focus causes underdog expectations to be interpreted as a negative stimulus, thereby triggering employee feedback-avoiding behaviors. This avoidance response is reflected mainly in avoidance of leaders, that is, reducing daily interaction and communication with leaders in order to avoid receiving negative feedback. Instead, employees do not care too much about avoiding external negative evaluation when they have a low level of prevention focus, so they are less sensitive to the potential risks of underdog expectations. In view of this, under low levels of prevention focus, underdog expectations have little effect on employee feedback-avoiding behaviors.

**Hypothesis 1a:** Prevention focus positively moderates the relationship between underdog expectations and employee feedback-avoiding behaviors. When the level of prevention focus is high, the positive effect of underdog expectations on feedback-avoiding behaviors is stronger.

Feedback-avoiding behavior is one of the negative performances of employees in the organization<sup>17</sup> which make it difficult for employees to get feedback information from others. It also makes it difficult to obtain from leaders the relevant information and resources needed to perform tasks, which readily leads to employees experiencing ambiguity about their role, and even affects their work efficiency.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, if employees focus their energy on avoiding others rather than on their own work, this reduces their work engagement.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, feedback-avoiding behaviors negatively affect employee work engagement. In conclusion, our study suggest that prevention focus can moderate the indirect effect of underdog expectations on employee work engagement through feedback-avoiding behaviors. In contrast, when the level of prevention focus is low, employees are not sensitive to negative evaluation by others, and it is not easy to engage in feedback-avoiding behaviors. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis.

**Hypothesis 1b:** Prevention focus positively moderates the indirect relationship between underdog expectations and employee work engagement through feedback-avoiding behaviors. The indirect relationship is stronger under a high level of prevention focus.

## Positive Effects of Underdog Expectations Under Promotion Focus: The Desire to Prove Others Wrong and Improved Work Engagement

The underdog effect is reflected in the fact that underdog expectations trigger employees to regard it as a challenge and development opportunity in order to improve themselves. They are, in turn, unwilling to stop there, and they have a strong desire to prove others wrong by trying to become the “top dog” (someone who is successful or dominant in their field) in order to alter their situation. This desire to prove others wrong refers to an individual’s motivation and intention to prove others’ opinions wrong. Psychological reactance theory holds that when external negative evaluation by others limits and threatens an individual’s psychological tendency to maintain a positive sense of self, the individual gain the motivation to restore that positive sense of self.<sup>20</sup> When employees perceive underdog expectations coming from the outside world, the negative evaluation information they receive threatens their psychological tendency to maintain a positive sense of self. As a result, employees develop a reverse psychology that motivates them to prove others wrong by demonstrating their abilities.<sup>4</sup>

Promotion focus strengthens the relationship between underdog expectations and the desire to prove others wrong. Employees with a promotion focus pursue positive evaluation of their own abilities by the outside world, are willing to take risks and try, and will in time adjust their behavior even if they fail after trying.<sup>10</sup> This process usually leads to a series of positive cognitive constructs, such as exploring challenging opportunities and enhancing sensitivity to success information.<sup>21</sup> Based on this, when employees have a high level of promotion focus, they regard underdog expectations as an opportunity to demonstrate their abilities and focus on changing others’ opinions through self-adjustment. In this case, underdog expectations have a positive effect. Individuals regard their current “failure reality” as a variable and transient situation and regard it as their goal to improve their value to others in an organization by proving others wrong.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast, when employees have a low level of promotion focus, they are not committed to pursuing challenging goals in order to obtain external affirmation, and the positive effect of underdog expectations is therefore weak.

**Hypothesis 2a:** Promotion focus positively moderates the relationship between underdog expectations and the desire to prove others wrong. When the level of promotion focus is high, the positive effect of underdog expectations on the desire to prove others wrong is stronger.

The desire to prove others wrong reflects the extent to which an employee wants to prove to others that they are capable of doing their job, which can inspire employee commitment to their work and increase their efforts. Vandewalle believed that when individuals focus on proving their abilities to others, they show higher work engagement.<sup>22</sup> Previous studies have shown that the basic feature of proving others wrong is to pay attention to positive results, which are conducive to improving employee cognitive and emotional investment.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the findings of our study suggest that the desire to prove others wrong positively affects employee work engagement. In conclusion, we suggest that promotion focus moderates the indirect effect of underdog expectations on work engagement through the desire to prove others wrong. Specifically, a high level of promotion focus makes employees want to improve their own performance in order to gain recognition from others, which is beneficial for exerting the positive effect of underdog expectations and improving employee work engagement. In contrast, when the level of promotion focus of employees is low, their desire to gain positive evaluation by others is low, so they are less blunt in the face of underdog expectations, which weakens the indirect impact of underdog expectations on employee work engagement through the desire to prove others wrong.

**Hypothesis 2b:** Promotion focus moderates the indirect relationship between underdog expectations and employee work engagement through the desire to prove others wrong. The indirect relationship is stronger under a high level of promotion focus.

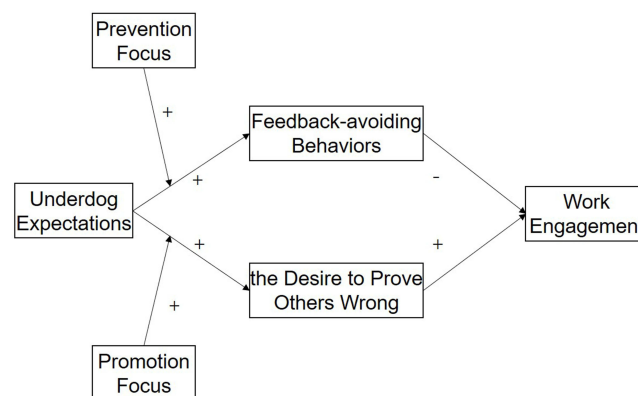
Based on regulatory focus theory, our study argues that underdog expectations have a negative effect on employees with a prevention focus and reduce work engagement through feedback-avoiding behaviors. For employees with a promotion focus, underdog expectations can produce positive effects and improve work engagement by proving others wrong. To test our hypotheses, we proposed the research model depicted in [Figure 1](#).

## Methods

### Respondents and Procedures

Our study conducted field research at five enterprises (finance, communication, and IT technology) based in Shanghai, China, and collected data through a questionnaire survey.

With the support of the senior leaders of the enterprises and the cooperation of various departments, we numbered all employees of each company and randomly selected several employees using the RANDBETWEEN (bottom, top)



**Figure 1** The theoretical model of this study.



function in Microsoft Excel in order to create a list of employees participating in the survey. In order to decrease the impact of common method biases and the causal lag effect, data were collected in three stages, with an interval of one month between each stage. In the first stage, data were obtained from employees on demographic variables and the variable data for underdog expectations, prevention focus, and promotion focus. In the second stage, the data for the desire to prove others wrong and feedback-avoiding behaviors were collected. In the third stage, the variable data for work engagement were obtained.

Based on the principle of voluntariness, approximately ten people in each group were arranged seated in a conference room, spaced widely from each other. Before filling in the questionnaire, the research assistant explained the meaning of each item in order to minimize any possibility of ambiguity. A total of 398 employees voluntarily participated in the questionnaire survey without compensation. Respondents' right to confidentiality was always considered, and they were fully informed of the purpose of the study and whether there were any associated risks. After excluding the invalid and incomplete questionnaires, 346 valid questionnaires were obtained, and the recovery rate of valid questionnaires was 86.93%.

## Measures

We controlled for the effects of demographic characteristics such as gender, age, education, and seniority. The questionnaire used the five-level Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

**Underdog Expectations.** This used the three-item scale developed by Nurmohamed.<sup>4</sup> A sample item was: "I am viewed as an underdog in doing this job by other individuals." Cronbach's alpha was 0.929.

**The Desire to Prove Others Wrong.** This used the three-item scale developed by Nurmohamed.<sup>4</sup> A sample item was: "I want to demonstrate that my observer is wrong about me." Cronbach's alpha was 0.887.

**Feedback-avoiding Behaviors.** This was measured using the six-item scale of Moss, Valenzi, and Taggart.<sup>24</sup> A sample item was: "After performing poorly, I would try to schedule outside appointments to avoid my supervisor." Cronbach's alpha was 0.913.

**Work Engagement.** We measured this variable by using the nine-item scale of Schaufeli et al.<sup>25</sup> A sample item was: "I feel happy when I am working intensely." Cronbach's alpha was 0.896.

**Promotion Focus.** This used the four-item scale developed by Makel et al.<sup>26</sup> A sample item was: "In general, I am focused on achieving positive outcomes in my life." Cronbach's alpha was 0.790.

**Prevention Focus.** This used the three-item scale developed by Makel et al.<sup>26</sup> A sample item was: "I often worry that I will fail to accomplish my work goals." Cronbach's alpha was 0.810.

## Statistical Analysis

First, we performed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using the IBM SPSS AMOS 24 software package, followed by descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and correlation matrices using IBM SPSS Statistics 24.0. Hierarchical regression analysis was then used to test the moderating effect. A simple slope analysis was carried out if the interaction had statistical significance.<sup>27</sup> Finally, based on the code provided by Edward et al<sup>28</sup> and Preacher et al,<sup>29</sup> Mplus 7.4 software (<http://www.statmodel.com>) was used for the moderated mediation test.

## Results

### Confirmatory Factor Analyses

In order to test the discriminant validity of this scale, our study conducted a set of CFAs. The results are listed in Table 1. By comparing the fitting indexes of each factor model, it was concluded that the fitting index of the six-factor model was the best (comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.939; Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) = 0.932; root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.051; standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = 0.053), indicating that the discriminant validity of the measurement scale was good. At the same time, our study used the practice of Podsakoff et al to add a common method factor to the structure of the six-factor model in order to construct a seven-factor model.<sup>30</sup> The results listed on the last line of Table 1 show that the adapted results were improved, but the degree of improvement of CFI,

**Table 1** Results of Confirmatory Factor Analyses

Model	$\chi^2$	df	$\chi^2/df$	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
1-Factor model (UE+FAB+POW+PE+PF+WE)	3675.167	434	8.468	0.473	0.435	0.147	0.153
2-Factor model (UE+FAB+POW+PE+PF, WE)	2835.374	433	6.548	0.609	0.580	0.127	0.139
3-Factor model (UE, FAB+POW+PE+PF, WE)	2404.871	431	5.580	0.679	0.654	0.115	0.143
4-Factor model (UE, FAB+POW, PE+PF, WE)	2211.295	428	5.167	0.710	0.685	0.110	0.139
5-Factor model (UE, FAB, POW, PE+PF, WE)	1242.702	424	2.931	0.867	0.854	0.075	0.090
6-Factor model (UE, FAB, POW, PE, PF, WE)	793.032	419	1.893	0.939	0.932	0.051	0.053
7-Factor model (6-factor model +CMB)	652.533	388	1.682	0.957	0.948	0.044	0.040

**Notes:** N=346. Underdog Expectations=UE, Feedback-Avoiding Behaviors=FAB, The Desire to Prove Others Wrong=POW; Work Engagement=WE, Prevention Focus=PE, Promotion Focus=PF, Common Method Bias=CMB.

RMSEA, and the other indicators was limited, not exceeding 0.02, indicating that the common method deviation does not pose a threat to the research results.

## Descriptive Statistics

Of the 346 respondents, 145 (41.91%) were male. In terms of age, 52 (15.03%) were aged between 18 and 25, 254 (73.41%) were aged between 26 and 35, 19 (5.49%) were aged between 36 and 45, 18 (5.20%) were aged between 46 and 55, and 3 (0.87%) were aged above 56. In terms of education, 257 (74.27%) had a bachelor's degree. In terms of seniority, 24 (6.93%) had worked for less than one year, 117 (33.82%) had worked for 1–3 years, 35 (10.12%) had worked for 3–5 years, 118 (34.10%) had worked for 6–10 years, and 52 (15.03%) had worked for more than 10 years.

Descriptive statistics and correlation coefficients between variables are listed in Table 2. Of these, underdog expectations were positively correlated with feedback-avoiding behaviors ( $r = 0.195$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) and feedback-avoiding

**Table 2** Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlation Matrix for Key Measures

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Gender										
2. Age	0.083									
3. Education	−0.034	0.119*								
4. Seniority	0.204***	0.671***	0.132**							
5. Underdog expectations	−0.084	0.039	−0.144*	0.015						
6. Feedback-avoiding behaviors	−0.009	−0.170**	0.001	−0.140**	0.195***					
7. The desire to prove others wrong	−0.099	0.115*	0.064	−0.050	0.297***	−0.217***				
8. Work engagement	0.031	0.273***	−0.002	0.211***	0.172**	−0.580***	0.332***			
9. Prevention focus	−0.023	−0.226***	−0.116*	−0.230***	0.180**	0.557***	0.004	−0.412***		
10. Promotion focus	0.032	0.169**	−0.061	0.023	0.206***	−0.327***	0.264***	0.573***	−0.214***	
Mean	0.420	2.030	3.020	3.160	2.718	2.097	3.983	3.854	2.235	4.090
SD	0.494	0.701	0.579	1.239	1.288	0.903	0.813	0.719	0.958	0.751

**Notes:** N=346. SD=Standard Deviation. \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

behaviors were negatively correlated with work engagement ( $r = -0.580$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Underdog expectations were positively correlated with the desire to prove others wrong ( $r = 0.297$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), while the desire to prove others wrong was positively correlated with work engagement ( $r = 0.332$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ).

## Hypothesis Testing

Test of Hypothesis 1a. Hypothesis 1a proposes that prevention focus positively moderates the relationship between underdog expectations and feedback-avoiding behaviors. We tested the moderating effect by following the hierarchical regression procedure (in the first step, we placed control variables into Model 1 and then entered the main effects into Model 2; finally, we added the interaction of a moderator and an independent into Model 3). The results for Model 3 listed in Table 3 showed that the interaction term  $\beta = 0.090$  ( $p < 0.01$ ), indicating that the moderating effect existed.

Compared with Model 2, the overall goodness of fit of Model 3 was improved by 1.5% ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.015$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). To further verify the moderating effect of prevention focus, the slope of the regression line was estimated under a high level of prevention focus ( $M+1SD$ ) and a low level of prevention focus ( $M-1SD$ ). The interaction term is presented in Figure 2, which predicts that prevention focus strengthens the positive impact of underdog expectations on feedback-avoiding behaviors at the high level.

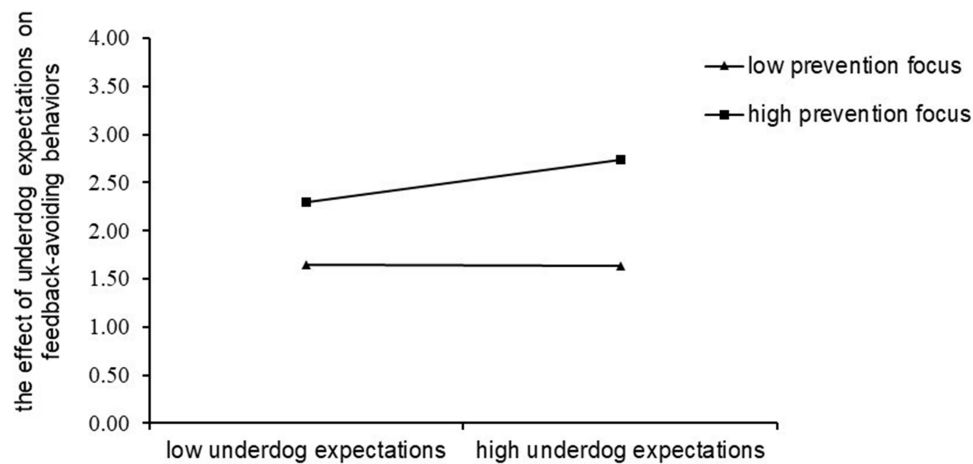
Test of Hypothesis 2a. Hypothesis 2a proposes that promotion focus positively moderates the relationship between underdog expectations and the desire to prove others wrong. Model 6 in Table 3 shows that the interaction term  $\beta = 0.189$

**Table 3** Hierarchical Regression Analysis

Variable	Feedback-Avoiding Behaviors						The Desire to Prove Others Wrong					
	Model1		Model2		Model3		Model4		Model5		Model6	
	$\beta$	s.e.	$\beta$	s.e.	$\beta$	s.e.	$\beta$	s.e.	$\beta$	s.e.	$\beta$	s.e.
Intercept	2.319***	0.278	1.834***	0.241	1.891***	0.239	3.449***	0.241	3.480***	0.237	3.415***	0.231
Gender	0.064	0.098	0.034	0.084	0.012	0.083	-0.074	0.085	-0.093	0.084	-0.072	0.082
Age	-0.192*	0.091	-0.100	0.078	-0.108	0.077	0.282***	0.079	0.221**	0.079	0.225**	0.077
Education	0.091	0.083	0.136	0.071	0.126	0.070	0.150*	0.072	0.161*	0.071	0.166*	0.069
Seniority	-0.043	0.053	0.013	0.045	0.006	0.045	-0.146**	0.046	-0.124*	0.045	-0.126**	0.044
Underdog expectations	0.149***	0.037	0.081*	0.032	0.086**	0.032	0.191***	0.032	0.167***	0.032	0.144***	0.032
Prevention focus			0.503***	0.044	0.455***	0.047					0.276***	0.056
Promotion focus									0.207***	0.056		
Underdog expectations $\times$ prevention focus					0.090**	0.033						
Underdog expectations $\times$ promotion focus											0.189***	0.041
$R^2$	0.061		0.318		0.331		0.127		0.159		0.206	
$\Delta R^2$	0.061***		0.257***		0.015***		0.127***		0.032***		0.047***	
$F$	5.488***		27.872***		25.402***		11.080***		11.844***		13.792***	

Notes: N=346. \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .



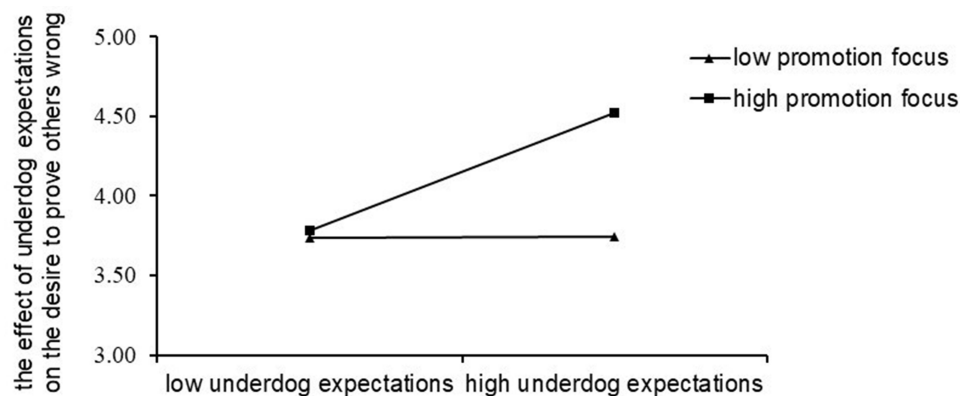


**Figure 2** The simple slope of interaction between underdog expectations and prevention focus.

( $p < 0.001$ ), indicating that the moderating effect exists. Compared with Model 5, the overall goodness of fit of Model 6 was improved by 1.5% ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.047$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). To further verify the moderating effect of promotion focus, the slope of the regression line was estimated under a high level of promotion focus ( $M+1SD$ ) and a low level of promotion focus ( $M-1SD$ ). The interaction term is presented in Figure 3, and we can conclude from it that promotion focus strengthens the positive impact of underdog expectations on the desire to prove others wrong at the high level.

**Test of Hypothesis 1b.** Hypothesis 1b proposes that prevention focus moderates the indirect relationship between underdog expectations and employee work engagement through feedback-avoiding behaviors. According to the difference analysis method proposed by Edward et al,<sup>28</sup> the moderating effect of prevention focus on the whole indirect effect was tested. As listed in Table 4, there were significant differences in indirect effects between the high and low prevention focus groups ( $b = -0.391$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). The 95% CI was  $[-0.759, -0.043]$ , not including 0. It can be seen that prevention focus moderated the indirect relationship between underdog expectations and work engagement through feedback-avoiding behaviors. Specifically, the indirect effect was significant under a high level of prevention focus, and the mediating effect value was  $-0.406$ . The 95% CI was  $[-0.760, -0.069]$ , not including 0. Under a low level of prevention focus, the indirect effect was significant, the mediating effect value was  $-0.015$ , and the 95% CI was  $[-0.047, -0.026]$ , not including 0. Hypothesis 1b was therefore supported.

**Test of Hypothesis 2b.** Hypothesis 2b proposes that promotion focus moderates the indirect relationship between underdog expectations and employee work engagement through the desire to prove others wrong. As listed in Table 4, there were significant differences in the indirect effects between the high and low promotion focus groups ( $b = 0.648$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). The 95% CI was  $[0.179, 1.207]$ , not including 0. It can be seen that prevention focus moderated the indirect relationship between underdog expectations and work engagement through the desire to prove others wrong. Specifically,



**Figure 3** The simple slope of interaction between underdog expectations and promotion focus.

**Table 4** Moderated Mediating Effect Test Results

Path	Group	Estimated Indirect Effects	S.E.	95% CI
Underdog expectations → feedback-avoiding behaviors → work engagement	High prevention focus	-0.406*	0.173	[-0.760,-0.069]
	Low prevention focus	-0.015*	0.019	[-0.047,-0.026]
	Difference	-0.391*	0.181	[-0.759,-0.043]
Underdog expectations → the desire to prove others wrong → work engagement	High promotion focus	0.747*	0.289	[0.230, 1.357]
	Low promotion focus	0.099**	0.032	[0.048, 0.180]
	Difference	0.648*	0.262	[0.179, 1.207]

**Notes:** \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ . The moderated mediating effect is tested by percentile bootstrap CI method, and the number of bootstrap samples is 5000.

**Abbreviations:** S.E, Standard Error; 95% CI, 95% Confidence Interval.

the indirect effect was significant under a high level of promotion focus, and the mediating effect value was 0.747. The 95% CI was [0.230, 1.357], not including 0. Under a low level of promotion focus, the indirect effect was significant, the mediating effect value was 0.099, and the 95% CI was [0.048, 0.180], not including 0. Hypothesis 2b was therefore supported.

## Discussion

Based on regulatory focus theory, our study constructed a moderated double-mediating model in order to explain the double-edged sword effect of underdog expectations. The results showed that under the positive moderating effect of prevention focus, underdog expectations positively affect employee feedback-avoiding behaviors. This suggested that, when employees perceive that they are not viewed favorably by others, the prevention focus leads employees to adopt avoidance strategies, such as avoiding self-damaging negative evaluations by others through feedback-avoiding behaviors. This result was consistent with previous studies that underdog expectations lead to low job adaptation and low job performance of employees.<sup>3,31</sup> The results also showed that under the positive moderating effect of promotion focus, underdog expectations positively affect the desire of employees to prove others wrong. This suggested that promotion focus can prompt employees to view underdog expectations as a challenge to improve themselves and adopt approach strategies, such as changing others' opinions by proving others wrong and expecting to obtain the affirmation and recognition of their own abilities from leading colleagues, so as to recontrol the situation and make their own development environment tend to be stable and self-controllable.<sup>32</sup> This result was consistent with previous research that people may actually work harder when they feel that others think they are less likely to succeed.<sup>33,34</sup> These results also suggested that everyone does not respond uniformly to underdog expectations, and that their responses are influenced by the regulatory focus. Van Dijk et al's<sup>35</sup> research also pointed out that people usually use two different strategies to avoid disappointment: one is to adopt avoidance strategy to reduce the expectation of obtaining the outcome, the other is to adopt approach strategy to make the outcome in line with their expectations. However, the first strategy is often easier to apply, while the second strategy is usually harder to achieve the desired results. This also explained why people tend to think that underdog expectations trigger negative behaviors of employees, but pay less attention to the positive effects of underdog expectations.

The results also showed that under the positive moderating effect of prevention focus, underdog expectations have a negative impact on employee work engagement through the avoidance path of feedback-avoiding behaviors, and under the positive moderating effect of promotion focus, underdog expectation have a positive impact on employee work engagement through the approach path of the desire to prove others wrong. Therefore, we can conclude that underdog expectations have a double-edged sword effect on employee work engagement. Different from previous studies, Nurmohamed argued that underdog expectations would motivate employees to improve task performance through the desire to prove others wrong due to the basic need of individuals to maintain a positive self.<sup>4</sup> However, the results often

depend on many different factors, some of which are beyond the control of people as subjects. Compared with taking task performance as the outcome variable, we think it is more appropriate to take employee work engagement as the outcome variable, because the latter contains a possibility that when individuals perceive underdog expectations and try to prove others wrong, they make efforts but do not get the expected results. Therefore, our study extended the study of Nurmohamed.<sup>4</sup>

## Theoretical Implications

1. The findings of this study revealed the two-sided effects of underdog expectations, extending existing theoretical perspectives on this subject, on which there are two main lines of research. The first thread assumes that employees internalize or passively accept the underdog expectations of others. Based on this assumption, researchers have found that underdog expectations reduce employees' their level of work performance and role adaptation.<sup>36,37</sup> The second thread of research denies the assumption of the first thread, arguing that employees not only do not internalize and accept underdog expectations, but instead refuse to accept the underdog expectations of others, resulting in the desire to prove others wrong and ultimately bring about an improvement in work performance.<sup>4</sup> Our study introduced the approach-avoidance framework, integrated the above two different viewpoints, and revealed from a more comprehensive perspective that the effect of underdog expectations is contingent. Aguinis & Gottfredson pointed out that, in the case of a few star employees contributing the majority of organizational performance, existing studies have generally focused on star employees who are regarded as top dogs.<sup>38</sup> In fact, underdog employees are the most valuable asset of an organization. This study challenges the findings of previous studies to reveal that the vast majority of undervalued employees in organizations have unique value.
2. The findings of this study revealed the mechanism by which underdog expectations exert different effects on employee work engagement, which improves our understanding of the different behavioral responses of employees with underdog expectations. Specifically, this study supports the fact that feedback-avoiding behavior is the core mediating mechanism by which underdog expectations lead to lower employee work engagement ( $b = -0.391$ ; 95% CI  $[-0.759, -0.043]$ ). Underdog expectations convey to employees that people around them do not trust their abilities. This threat perception causes employees to tend to avoid them, distract them, and ultimately reduce work engagement. For example, Lau et al believed that when employees perceive that they are not trusted by leaders, they feel that they are not valued by the organization.<sup>3</sup> More importantly, we find that the motivational effect of underdog expectations on employees can be explained by the mechanism of the desire to prove others wrong ( $b = 0.648$ ; 95% CI  $[0.179, 1.207]$ ). At this point, employees regard low expectations as a challenge to improve themselves, focus on changing others' opinions to prove themselves, and then increase work engagement to improve subsequent task performance, which again verifies the findings of the study by Nurmohamed.<sup>4</sup> By revealing the mediating role of feedback-avoiding behaviors and the desire to prove others wrong, this study reveals why underdog expectations can increase or decrease employee work engagement. Different from previous studies, people believe that there is another possibility that exists between internalizing and eliminating underdog expectations, that is, individuals with underdog expectations are not completely subject to passive acceptance and internalizing underdog expectations,<sup>39</sup> nor are they compelled to completely negate, refute, and eliminate them, but they may try to eliminate such expectations by others.
3. The findings of this study revealed the changeable mechanism of individual approach-avoidance responses by introducing the moderating effect of regulatory focus. Because employee behavior is affected not only by the external environment but also by the individual's own characteristics,<sup>39</sup> it has become an important trend in current management practice to integrate individual characteristics into the analysis framework of employee behavior. In view of this, we introduced prevention focus and promotion focus into the approach-avoidance framework of this study in order to examine how they moderate the positive and negative effects of underdog expectations on employee work engagement. The results showed that underdog expectations enhance their negative effects when employees adopt a prevention focus ( $\beta = 0.090$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). In this situation, employees

adopt feedback-avoiding behaviors to reduce the intake of negative information, and ultimately reduce their work engagement. Moreover, underdog expectations stimulate the motivational effect when employees adopt a promotion focus ( $\beta = 0.189$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). They expect to prove themselves to others and get positive feedback, which ultimately increases work engagement. Therefore, this study reveals that, for individuals with different goal orientations, the same stimulus may trigger different approach-avoidance behaviors.

## Practical Implications

1. When perceiving the underdog expectations of others, employees should reflect on whether their work performance reveals any shortcomings, thus affecting other people's judgments about them. If there are deficiencies in the way they cooperate with others, then employees should consciously carry out impression management to improve their image in the eyes of others. If they believe that their work performance has no shortcomings, employees can challenge underdog expectations and increase work engagement in the hope of using a high level of performance to prove others wrong, as Nurmohamed proposed.<sup>4</sup>
2. It is normal for employees in any organization to be subjected to the underdog expectations of others, and managers should pay attention to the value of employees who are not favored by their work colleagues. Most organizations fail to realize that the greatest opportunity for improving organizational performance lies with the employees at the lowest level of the organization. Managers should pay more attention to such underappreciated employees and give them more positive incentives and adopt better expectations of them. They should not evaluate a person's value through a stereotype in order to avoid missing out on the potential future benefits of the underdog effect of employee.
3. Managers should encourage employees with underdog expectations to cultivate promotion focus and encourage them to display the underdog effect in order to prove themselves. Prevention focus and promotion focus are two independent constructs, not two extremes of the same concept, which also means that employees have the opportunity to shift toward promotion focus<sup>8</sup> so as to reduce the limitations of the Golem Effect and empower the Underdog Effect. Managers should guide employees to cultivate promotion focus, regard the dilemma that they are not valued by others from the perspective of development, and shift their attention toward proving themselves to others, realizing their self-worth in the process of demonstrating their abilities to others.

## Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Our study had the following limitations, which can be remedied in future studies.

1. Although variable data were collected in advance at multiple time points in order to avoid possible common method bias, the test results showed that the effect of common method bias was not serious.<sup>40</sup> However, because all variables were psychological employee variables, it was difficult to measure them by means of other methods of evaluation or objective indicators, leading to some errors in the relationships between variables. Future studies should consider using more time points and longer time intervals for data collection.
2. Our study ignored the results of and dynamic changes in employee work engagement. In future studies, all variables should be investigated at each time point in order to obtain long-term panel data. Such panel data would not only be conducive to further more authoritative demonstrations of the causal relationship between variables but could also examine the dynamic results caused by underdog expectations from a dynamic perspective.
3. Employee reactions to underdog expectations may be manifested in different types of behavior, such as emotional exhaustion, unethical behavior, and cheating behavior.<sup>9</sup> Future studies should explore the different responses of employees to underdog expectations and further deepen our understanding of their effects.
4. Individuals are polymers exhibiting different traits.<sup>41</sup> In the future, the effect of other personality traits on the Golem Effect and the Underdog Effect should be considered. For example, employees with an approaching performance pursue positive external evaluation of their own abilities and are more sensitive to the opportunities contained in underdog expectations. Such employees are more likely to attract positive signals from others and

increase work engagement. Employees with an avoiding performance goal orientation tend to avoid negative evaluation of themselves and are more likely to avoid potential risks, resulting in reduced work engagement.

5. Studies need to be carried out in different countries and cultural backgrounds in the future in order to further test the robustness of our research conclusions.

## Conclusions

Despite some limitations, this study contributed to the research of the double-edged sword effect of underdog expectations on employee work engagement. Based on regulatory focus theory, we established a theoretical framework in which underdog expectations triggers approach-avoidance responses in employees with different regulatory focus. Our conclusions are as follows: 1) Under the positive moderating effect of prevention focus, underdog expectations reduce employee work engagement by adopting an avoidance path of employee feedback-avoiding behaviors. Moreover, underdog expectations play a negative role in this situation. 2) Under the positive moderating effect of promotion focus, underdog expectations improve employee work engagement by adopting an approach of proving others wrong. Moreover, underdog expectations play a positive role in this situation. This study integrates the two completely different viewpoints on whether underdog expectations have negative or positive effects in previous studies, and enriches the theoretical research on underdog expectations. Therefore, we propose that, first of all, when employees catch signals of underdog expectations from their leaders and colleagues at work, they should timely reflect on and summarize their own work, and correct any deficiencies. If people around do not recognize themselves because of stereotype, they can try to prove their ability by proving others wrong, so as to play the underdog effect to become a rising star. Secondly, managers should be aware of the great potential value of such underrated employees, encourage them to cultivate a promotion focus, properly view the underdog expectations of people around them, and encourage them to exert the underdog effect to enhance their work engagement.

## The Ethics Statement

This study was authorized by the Academic Ethics Committee of the School of Business Administration of Henan Polytechnic University.

## Disclosure

The authors report no conflicts of interest in this work.

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