High Tide For the Wealthy: Brand Support and Wealth

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We find that brand support, (i.e. the degree we perceive our brands are reliable, satisfying and need-fulfilling), varies across individuals based on their socio-economic-status. Those in high wealth situations tend to turn to everyday consumer package good brands for support to a much greater degree than their low SES counterparts.

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Extended Abstract

“Can’t buy me love,” and “With a little help from my friends” are two iconic songs from the legendary Beatles, which highlight that while one can rely on other people to “get by,” money cannot buy relationships or love. These heart-warming song lyrics illustrate what research has been showing for decades: social support is necessary for positive health and well-being (Cohen et al. 2008; Uchino, Cacioppo, and Glaser 1996). Not surprisingly, the need for social relationships is considered fundamental to human psychology (Baumeister and Leary 1995); and consistent research has demonstrated that having a social network is necessary for general well-being (Berkman 1995). Relatedly, social isolation is now considered a major health risk (House, Landis, and Umberson 1988).

Instead of “love,” what if the lyrics had been “money can buy me happiness”? Or, what if the lyrics had been “I get by with a little help from my brands”? Would people believe these claims? Reactions would most likely be mixed. Reliable research demonstrates that in developed countries income level predicts well-being and happiness, and, the degree to which individuals believe they would be happy with more money (Aknin, Norton, and Dunn 2009; Diener and Biswas-Diener 2002). Taken in conjunction with the support literature, it would seem that income level serves as a proxy for greater social connections and social support. However, Kraus and Keltner (2009) illustrated that relative to working or lower class individuals, upper class individuals have weaker social connections. In addition, other research has demonstrated that wealthier or upper class individuals, relative to their lower class counterparts, espouse autonomy and self-sufficiency to a greater degree (Stephens et al. 2011; Vohs, Meade, and Goode 2006). These competing theories led us to wonder: why are higher income individuals happier than lower income individuals, even though they have weaker social connections, a necessary component to happiness and well-being? We examine this question in the current research. The apparent decrease in desired or actual social connection as a function of increased relative wealth suggests that individuals may be turning toward other sources to fulfill the need for support. We suggest that brands are one of these sources. In other words, we hypothesize that instead of turning to other individuals for support, higher income or relatively wealthier individuals are turning to their brands for support.

In the present research, we explore the role of relative wealth and feelings of support from one’s brand. Consistent with past research, we suggest that lower income individuals turn to other people for support. Also, consistent with past research, we suggest that higher income or relatively more wealthy individuals are less likely to turn to others for support. However, contributing to the consumer behavior literature, we are also positing that because these individuals still need social support, they are turning to their brands instead of other people. In other words, we are theorizing a novel use of brands: for consistent social support. Since social support stemming from relationships with others is a basic human need (Deci and Ryan 1991; Myers 1999), we predict the brands relatively wealthier individuals will be seeking and finding greater support from will be brands that fulfill basic human needs. In other words, they will feel the most supported by necessity brands. It is important to note that we are suggesting relatively wealthy individuals are using their brands as alternatives to social connections with others, which may be seen as less important or necessary as relative wealth increases, and not as status signals. As such, we are also predicting that relatively wealthier individuals will have a greater connection with their brands from which they feel the most supported. This contention also adds to the consumer behavior literature as we are suggesting individuals will feel the most supported by and connected to necessity brands, which are often privately consumed.

We present five empirical studies in support of these ideas. We first examine the role of perceived wealth and relative income level in interpersonal relationships. Demonstrating that relatively wealthier individuals are less likely to rely on and feel more distant from those around them (Study 1), we suggest that they would be more likely to rely on brands for social support. We specifically examine the relationship between wealth and brand support, including the types of brands that we predict provide the most support—brands that fulfill basic needs. We extend this research to incorporate the role of self-brand connection in brand support, hypothesizing that, contrary to prior theory, individuals will report greater self-brand connection with privately consumed, non-symbolic, necessity brands. We test these predictions across the next four studies, two correlational and two experimental. We investigate whether wealthy individuals report greater feelings of support from their brands. In three of the four studies, we examine a potential mediator between wealth and brand support, self-brand connection. Finally we conclude with how these effects can contribute directly to consumer behavior in the final study.