

The Effects of Resources on Brand and Interpersonal Connection

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ABSTRACT Although social connections have long been considered a fundamental human motivation and deemed necessary for well-being, recent research has demonstrated that having greater resources is associated with weaker social connections. In the present research, we posit that individuals with greater resources still have a need to connect and are using other sources for connection, namely brands. Across five studies, we test and find support for the theory that resource level shifts the preferred source of social connection from people to brands. Specifically, we find that individuals with more resources have stronger connections and are more satisfied with their brands, suggesting that these individuals place more emphasis on these relationships. We also find that perceiving greater resources leads to greater connection, purchase intention, and willingness to pay for a new brand, demonstrating that resource level influences both existing brand relationships and the creation of new ones. In addition, we find that resource level affects how people view the importance of brand and interpersonal relationships. Finally, we find that having or perceiving greater resources is associated with a stronger preference to engage with brands over other people, highlighting that, at times, people prefer and seek out connection with brands over other people.

Imagine you are standing in line at your favorite coffee shop and, as you are waiting, you put your hands in your jacket pocket and find a \$5 bill that you had forgotten about. You may start to think about the different things you can do with this money. What you may not be thinking about is how this, albeit small, increase in your resources affects your connection with your favorite brand of coffee. Or, how might it affect your connection with the person standing in line in front of you? In the present research, we explore how *resources*, which we define as a stock or supply of money, materials, or assets that an individual possesses, affect brand and interpersonal connection.

Recent research has found that as resources increase, interpersonal social connection, and the desire for it, decrease. For example, as people become wealthier, they rely less on others and espouse autonomy to a greater degree (Vohs, Meade, and Goode 2006; Stephens, Fryberg, and Markus 2011); moreover, relative to individuals of lower socioeconomic status (SES), higher SES individuals have weaker interpersonal connections (Kraus and Keltner 2009). At the same time, however, the need for connection is con-

sidered fundamental for positive life outcomes, including life satisfaction and positive well-being (Cohen et al. 2008). Building on previous research showing that consumers have similar relationships with their brands compared to their relationships with people (e.g., they have relationships similar to marriages, flings, one-night stands, and are emotionally attached to brands; Fournier and Yao 1997; Fournier 1998, 2009; Alvarez and Fournier 2012; Batra, Ahuvia, and Bagozzi 2012), we suggest that these consumer-brand relationships can serve as an alternative source of connection for consumers. In other words, people can satisfy their need for connection by connecting with other people *or* with their preferred brands. According to this logic, connection via people and connection via brands should be substitutable for each other. We test this theory that resource level shifts the preferred source of social connection from people to brands across several studies. (Please see fig. 1 for an overview of the constructs and measurements used across the studies in the article.)

The present research makes several contributions. First, we contribute to resource theory by using a multimethod

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JACR, volume 2, number 1. Published online October 28, 2016. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/688755>
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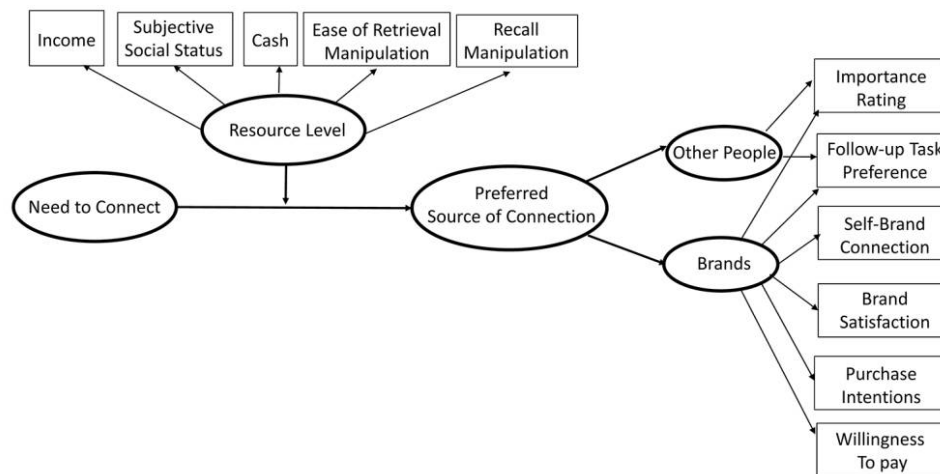


Figure 1. Proposed model: resource level shifts the preferred source of connection. Key constructs are in ovals. Scales and measurements from studies are in boxes.

approach to investigate the construct of resources. Across multiple studies, both measuring and manipulating resource level, the pattern of results remains the same. Second, we demonstrate that having or perceiving greater resources is associated with an increased connection with one’s brands. In doing so, we contribute to the literature on self-brand connection by identifying a new antecedent—namely, resource level. We also find that individuals with greater resources report greater brand satisfaction as a result of having stronger self-brand connections, suggesting a causal link between these variables. As the results remain the same for a current or a new brand, we highlight the ways in which consumers may create and maintain strong brand relationships. Finally, our studies demonstrate that level of resources influences with whom or with what people prefer to connect. In other words, we find that brands may be used to fulfill a need for social connection when interpersonal connection is not wanted or provided, thus contributing to the consumer welfare literature.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Social Connections and Resources

Past research has highlighted the importance of social connections. Having a social network is considered necessary for general well-being (Berkman 1995), and social isolation is now thought of as a major health risk (House, Landis, and Umberson 1988). Thus, needs for social connection and social support are considered fundamental to humans (Deci and Ryan 1991; Baumeister and Leary 1995; Myers 1999).

In spite of this, individuals sometimes reject the company of others or prefer to be autonomous. Past research has demonstrated that money, even the mere presence of it, can affect interpersonal dynamics, often for the worse. For example, having more money makes people feel more self-sufficient and subsequently less likely to turn to others. As resources increase, individuals are less dependent on others, spend less time socializing with others, and prefer to spend more time alone (Rusbult et al. 1991; Johnson and Krueger 2006; Bianchi and Vohs 2016). Vohs et al. (2006) found that individuals who were given play money or reminded of money worked significantly longer on a difficult task before asking for help, placed chairs farther apart in a getting-to-know-you game, and were more likely to prefer to work alone rather than with another participant, even when working with someone else presumably meant working less. In addition to wanting less help from others, participants who were reminded of money were more distant, cold, and less willing to help others (Vohs, Mead, and Goode 2008). In summary, having more money, or even the mere thought of money, makes people less likely to rely on and, subsequently, less likely to connect with other people.

The relationship between money and poorer connections with others holds at a more macro level of analysis: higher SES is associated with fewer or weaker signs of social connections relative to lower SES individuals (Kraus and Keltner 2009). One explanation for this observation is that under stress, such as financial constraint, lower SES individuals initiate *tend-and-befriend* strategies (Taylor 2006),

cooperative relationships that are theorized to contribute to greater attentiveness to the needs of others (Pickett, Gardner, and Knowles 2004). For example, Stellar and colleagues (2012) found that, compared to higher SES individuals, lower SES individuals reported greater compassion during stressful situations, or situations where compassion might be warranted (e.g., for another individual during a competitive mock job interview and while watching a compassion-inducing video). In addition, higher SES individuals have been found to be less attentive to others' emotional experiences and less accurate at reading others' emotions—known as empathic accuracy—compared with lower SES participants (Kraus, Côté, and Keltner 2010). In other words, lower SES individuals (i.e., individuals with fewer resources) generally have high levels of connection with other people relative to higher SES individuals (i.e., individuals with greater resources).

Thus, past research has demonstrated that having greater resources is associated with increased independence and weaker social connections. Given that social connection and support are fundamental for health and well-being (Fleming et al. 1982; Cohen and Syme 1985; Cohen et al. 2008), how do individuals who have or perceive greater resources balance the need for independence and autonomy with the need for social connection? We posit that instead of turning to other people for social connection, when individuals have or perceive greater resources, they may turn to other sources of social connection. We suggest that brands are one of these sources.

Brands as a Source of Social Connection

Why might brands in particular, and not products or consumption in general, serve as a source of social connection? We suggest this is because individuals can view brands as relationship partners and, specifically, as a contributing member of a dyadic relationship (e.g., Fournier 1998, 2009; Aggarwal 2004; MacInnis, Park, and Priester 2009). Several aspects of brands make them a viable source of connection. First, people tend to anthropomorphize brands (Fournier and Alvarez 2011). Research has shown that individuals not only imbue brands with human traits, but they also view brands as having human agency (Kervyn, Fiske, and Malone 2012). Second, brands have also been shown to have different personalities (Aaker 2007), which may help individuals to see brands as animated, humanized, and even personalized. Furthermore, consumers can

have strong emotions toward and attachments to brands (e.g., brand love, Carroll and Ahuvia 2006; Park et al. 2010; Park, Eisengerich, and Park 2013). Brands have also been shown to be reflective of the self and of one's social groups, which makes them an easy source of connection (Belk 1988; Escalas and Bettman 2005). Finally, specific brands can be defined as unique entities, and through their names, images, and symbols can be recognized from one context to another. The ability to recognize specific brands provides individuals with a sense of consistency and reliability, which may provide the basis for connection with particular brands. Thus, we hypothesize that because of the unique features of brands, individuals may use them as an alternate source of connection.

What might be the consequences of this stronger connection with brands? On the one hand, forming a closer connection with brands could result in negative outcomes. For example, strong connections with brands have been associated with greater materialism (Rindfleisch, Burroughs, and Wong 2009), which has been defined by Richins and Dawson (1992) as a "belief . . . about the importance of possessions in one's life" (308). Previous research has documented the many perils of materialism, including decreased life satisfaction and well-being (Richins and Dawson 1992; LaBarbera and Gurhan-Canli 1997; Burroughs and Rindfleisch 2002). However, the negative outcomes (e.g., materialism) associated with increased brand connection often stem from low self-esteem or insecurity (Chaplin and John 2007), whereby possessions are used to boost self-esteem or social standing. Having or perceiving greater resources, on the other hand, is associated with greater security, self-efficacy, and autonomy (Vohs et al. 2008). We suggest that when one has or perceives greater resources, s/he may use brands not to boost self-esteem, but rather to fulfill a need for interpersonal connection. In other words, we posit that individuals with greater resources may use brands to balance their desire for independence (Vohs et al. 2008) with their need for connection (Baumeister and Leary 1995). Therefore, we hypothesize that having or perceiving greater resources will be associated with stronger brand relationships as measured through self-brand connection and brand satisfaction.

In addition, we hypothesize that greater relative resources, and subsequently increased brand connection, will be associated with other brand relationship behaviors. We examine purchase intentions and willingness to pay, as research has highlighted that individuals with strong brand

relationships are willing to pay a price premium for their brands (Esch et al. 2006). Furthermore, we examine purchase intentions and willingness to pay for a *new* brand in order to highlight an avenue through which consumers may create strong brand relationships and to highlight that resource level affects connection with both existing and new brand relationships.

Finally, we test our prediction that resource level shifts preference for and the importance of brand over interpersonal connection. We investigate whether individuals place more or less importance on brand and interpersonal relationships as a function of resource level. We then explore whether having and perceiving greater resources is associated with an increased preference for a task involving brands compared with people, which would suggest that, at times, individuals prefer interactions with brands over other people.

CURRENT RESEARCH

We begin in studies 1A and 1B by investigating whether individuals with greater resources (as measured and manipulated) may fulfill their need for connection through brands. Specifically, we examine whether individuals with relatively more resources have greater brand connections. In addition, we explore whether greater connection with brands is associated with greater brand satisfaction. Study 2 examines whether greater resources can influence perceived connection with a *new* brand. Study 2 also investigates additional relational consequences, namely, purchase intentions and willingness to pay. Taken together, these studies highlight that individuals with greater resources place more emphasis on their brand relationships and are getting more out of these relationships. In study 3, we manipulate resource level and ask participants to rate how important either brands or other people are in their lives. In study 4, we ask people to make a decision about whether they would prefer to do a follow-up task involving either brands or other people. Because previous research has shown that people want to think about, communicate, and expend their energy on their most important relationships over ones that are less important (e.g., attachment theory: Hazan and Shaver 1994; kin selection theory: Hamilton 1964; Brown and Taylor 2009; investment model theory: Rusbult 1980), choosing a task involving one relationship over another suggests a greater preference for the chosen relationship. Through this manner, we highlight that resource level shifts the im-

portance of brand relationships and that there are times when people prefer brands over other people.

STUDY 1A

In our first study, we examine whether individuals with greater resources have stronger brand relationships and thus are placing more emphasis on these relationships. Specifically, we examine whether greater resources will be associated with greater self-brand connection and increased brand satisfaction. We operationalize resources as household income in this study and test whether a relatively higher income is associated with greater brand connection and satisfaction. In addition, we include a subjective measure of resources. Past research has demonstrated that perceived SES can be just as good, if not better, of a predictor of outcomes associated with SES, including life satisfaction and well-being (Jackman and Jackman 1973; Adler et al. 2000; Cohen et al. 2008). Therefore, in the present study, we included a measure of current subjective SES to examine whether both income level and more general perceptions of current resources influence brand connection.

Method

Participants. One hundred and three individuals (68 female) were recruited from an online US subject pool and successfully completed this study. Participants were paid in exchange for participation in the study. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 74 years and had an average age of 35.7 years ($SD_{age} = 13.8$).

Procedure and Measures. In this study and in the subsequent studies, all participants were shown this definition of a brand: "A brand is an identifying name, symbol or words that distinguishes a product or company from its competitors." They were asked to name three brands to which they are most loyal, since these brands are most analogous to close interpersonal relationships (Fournier 1998) and would be the most likely to fulfill a social connection. Participants then completed the measures described below.

Brand Satisfaction Measure. Participants completed three items for the brands they named that were designed to test brand satisfaction. These items were: "how happy does this brand make you," "how satisfied does this brand make you," and "to what extent does this brand represent your ideal." The items were rated on a 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much) scale. We asked participants to evaluate each brand independently to encourage participants to think more fully

about their brands. We then created a composite score for each of the three brands. These ratings were averaged to create an overall measure of brand satisfaction ($\alpha = .89$).

Brand Connection. In order to test whether individuals of greater resources feel more connected to their brands, participants were asked to complete the Self-Brand Connection scale (Escalas and Bettman 2003) for each of their brands, which was also then averaged to create an overall measure of brand connection ($\alpha = .96$).

Income Level, Subjective SES, and Demographics. Embedded within the demographics at the end of the survey was a question asking participants to indicate their household income level using a standard scale of family income (e.g., Adler et al. 2000; Aknin, Norton, and Dunn 2009), which we modified slightly (see appendix, available online). The average rating was 5.32 ($SD = 1.85$), which is to say, the mean income was between \$25,000 and \$49,999. The median rating was 5, which also represents an income between \$25,000 and \$49,999. In addition to asking for participants' income level, we asked participants to indicate their perceptions of their current SES using a previously established and validated measure (Griskevicius et al. 2011, 2013; $\alpha = .84$). We also asked participants for age, gender, education, and employment status.

Results and Discussion

We hypothesized that individuals with greater resources would be more likely to have stronger relationships with their brands relative to individuals with fewer resources. Specifically, we predicted that higher income individuals would report greater self-brand connection with their brands than would lower income individuals. In line with our hypothesis, income positively predicted self-brand connection ($\beta = .20$, $t(99) = 2.06$, $p = .042$). This relationship also holds, and is slightly strengthened, when controlling for gender, age, education level, and employment status ($\beta = .22$, $t(95) = 2.27$, $p = .026$). We next examined whether greater resources predict greater brand satisfaction. Indeed, we found that higher income predicted brand satisfaction ($\beta = .23$, $t(99) = 2.38$, $p = .019$). Having a greater connection with a brand predicted greater brand satisfaction ($\beta = .65$, $t(99) = 8.69$, $p < .0001$), suggesting mediation as recommended by MacKinnon et al. (2007). In order to test whether brand connection mediates the effect of income on brand satisfaction, we used a 5,000 resample bootstrapping approach (Preacher and Hayes 2008, PROCESS model 4). Supporting our hypothesis that connection with the brand mediates the relationship between income level

and brand satisfaction, the 95% confidence interval for the bootstrap analysis did not contain zero [.0017, .1140].

Previous research has highlighted the importance of mere perceptions in predicting important outcomes (e.g., Cohen et al. 2008); therefore, we tested whether current subjective SES would also predict connection with brands. In line with our hypothesis, subjective SES positively predicted self-brand connection ($\beta = .21$, $t(99) = 4.69$, $p = .033$).

One possible concern with these findings is that perhaps higher income individuals, or those with greater resources, are reporting on different types of brands than lower income individuals, and that these differences in the type of brand may explain differences in brand connection and satisfaction. For example, if individuals with greater resources are reporting a greater connection with expensive, publicly consumed goods, this might suggest a different reason for the greater connection, such as status signaling, than the one we suggest. Two independent coders rated the brands on whether the brand was publicly or privately consumed, whether it was a consumer packaged good (CPG), and the average price of the brand. We found no differences in the types of brands individuals report as a function of income level. If anything, the trends were in the opposite direction such that individuals with greater resources, as measured by income level, were more likely to report brands that are CPGs and usually privately consumed. This suggests that individuals with greater resources do not feel more connected to brands because they signal status or wealth, but rather that they feel more connected to brands in general. In other words, this study provides initial evidence that resource level affects the emphasis individuals place on their brand relationships.

STUDY 1B

In Study 1B, we manipulate resource level and investigate how greater perceptions of resources affect brand relationships. We hypothesize that perceptions with greater resources will increase individuals' connection with their brands, which will in turn increase their satisfaction with their brands. In other words, we predict that self-brand connection will again mediate the relative wealth and brand satisfaction relationship.

Method

Participants. One hundred and sixty-three individuals from an online US subject pool took part in this survey, of which 144 participants (89 women, 1 gender unknown)

successfully completed the study. Individuals received financial compensation in exchange for their participation. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 74 years, with an average age of 31.1 years ($SD_{age} = 11.3$).

Procedure and Measures. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (high vs. low resources). We manipulated perceptions of resources by asking participants the following: "People experience highs and lows in terms of resources available. Please describe a recent time when you HAD (did NOT have) the financial resources to purchase an item you really wanted."

Participants were shown the same definition of a brand as in study 1A and asked to name three brands to which they are most loyal. They completed the same Brand Satisfaction Measure ($\alpha = .81$) and the Self-Brand Connection scale (Escalas and Bettman 2003; $\alpha = .95$). Participants also completed additional information, including demographic items.

Results and Discussion

Posttest Manipulation Check. Two hundred and twenty-five participants ($N = 115$ female, $M_{age} = 35.3$) completed this study in exchange for payment. One participant entered a random string of letters in the free response and was excluded. Participants were randomized to the same resource manipulation used in the main study. They then indicated to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the following two items on a 7-point Likert scale: "I feel wealthy" and "I have more resources than the average person." We combined these items as our resource-level manipulation check measure ($\alpha = .79$). Results revealed that participants in the high-resource condition reported significantly greater resources ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 1.4$) than did individuals in the low-resource condition ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.4$; $t(222) = 2.54$, $p = .012$), suggesting our manipulation was successful.

Main Analyses. In line with our hypothesis, an ANOVA revealed that those in the high-resource condition reported significantly greater self-brand connection ($M_{high} = 4.87$, $SD = 1.0$) than did individuals in the low-resource condition ($M_{low} = 4.40$, $SD = 1.3$; $F(1, 142) = 7.36$, $p = .0075$). We also predicted that greater resources would lead to greater brand satisfaction. As hypothesized, an ANOVA revealed a significant difference between the two conditions: individuals in the high-resource condition reported greater satisfaction with their brands ($M_{high} = 6.02$, $SD =$

0.8) than did individuals in the low-resource condition ($M_{low} = 5.79$, $SD = 0.6$; $F(1, 142) = 3.78$, $p = .050$). Similar to the previous study, greater connection with brands predicted greater brand satisfaction ($\beta = .66$, $t(142) = 10.40$, $p < .0001$), suggesting mediation. To further support this hypothesis, we conducted a 5,000-sample bootstrapping analysis (Preacher and Hayes 2008, PROCESS model 4). This analysis supports mediation, as the 95% confidence interval for the bootstrap analysis did not contain zero [.0606, .3736].

We tested and found evidence for our hypothesis that greater perceived resources leads to greater brand connection, which in turn is associated with increased brand satisfaction. These results, taken in conjunction with the findings from Study 1A, highlight that greater resource level is associated with stronger brand relationships, and that measuring or manipulating resource level leads to similar results.

STUDY 2

The previous studies asked participants to think about brands with which they already have a relationship. In study 2, we introduce a new brand to participants instead of asking about brands they already use to see if perceptions of resources influence connection with a new brand. Again, we examine whether self-brand connection mediates the relationship between resources and brand satisfaction. We also extend these findings to examine the behavioral intentions of greater connection with a new brand. Specifically, we measure participants' willingness to purchase and willingness to pay for the new brand. We predict individuals who have a greater connection with the new brand will also be more willing to purchase and pay more for the new brand. In other words, in this study, we investigate whether resource level affects the creation of new brand relationships.

In addition, in this study we include a measure of materialism to test an alternative explanation: that manipulating resources increases materialism, which may create strong brand connections. Although previous research has shown that materialism is associated with strong brand connections, this research found that materialistic individuals form strong connections to brands as a result of threat or existential insecurity (Rindfleisch et al. 2009). In the current work, we build upon research that has demonstrated that having more resources makes individuals more self-sufficient and independent—in other words, secure. In accord with other research that has found that fewer family

resources is associated with greater materialism (Rindfleisch, Burroughs, and Denton 1997), we predict that stronger brand connections as a result of greater resources will not be related to materialism.

Method

Participants. One hundred and twenty-six individuals, 118 (72 females) of whom successfully completed the study, were recruited from an online US subject pool in exchange for payment. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 65, with a mean age of 34.5 years ($SD = 12.6$).

Procedure and Measures. Participants were randomly assigned to either the high-resource or low-resource condition. In this study, we used a manipulation that has been previously validated in the literature to influence perceptions (Schwartz et al. 1991; Wänke, Bohner, and Jurkowsch 1997; Winkielman, Schwartz, and Bellig 1998; Winkielman and Schwartz 2001; Gawronski and Bodenhausen 2005). Specifically, we used an ease of retrieval manipulation. Participants in the high-resource condition were instructed with the following: "Resources come in many different forms. Please describe 2 reasons how you could be described as 'wealthy.'"

Participants in the low-resource condition saw the same thing, except they were asked to describe eight reasons instead of two. Since it is harder to generate eight reasons, the logic is they would feel as though they had fewer resources compared to those in the "describe 2 reasons" condition (see Schwartz et al. 1991). Two coders rated the responses to make sure participants provided appropriate responses. Any disputes were resolved by discussion.

Participants were next shown images of a series of brands of orange juice. We chose orange juice because it is a relatively inexpensive product, often privately consumed, and is a consumer packaged good. As such, it is a product that is generally not used for signaling status or wealth and is accessible to all. The brands we used are actual brands of foreign/unknown orange juice (see appendix for stimuli). The participants were asked to select their favorite brand and then to complete a filler activity where they thought about and evaluated their top brand. They were asked to think of their chosen brand when answering the next set of questions. An image of the brand was presented at the top of the screen for all of the measures related to the selected brand.

We used the same Brand Satisfaction Measure used in previous studies, except we modified it slightly to reflect the extent to which participants believed that this brand would make them happy if they were to use it. For example, we asked participants, "How happy do you think this brand would make you?" ($\alpha = .87$). Participants were also asked to evaluate their connection with the new brand using the Self-Brand Connection scale (Escalas and Bettman 2003; $\alpha = .94$). In addition, participants indicated how much they would be willing to pay for a 32-ounce carton of the orange juice (in US dollars), and how likely they would be to purchase this brand if it were found on the shelves of their local grocery store on a 7-point scale (1 = very unlikely, to 7 = very likely). We included the Material Values Scale ($\alpha = .87$; Richins 1994) as our measure of materialism. Finally, participants completed demographic information.

Results and Discussion

First we examined the effects of resource level on connection with the new brand, and how connection with the new brand related to brand satisfaction. As expected, an ANOVA revealed that individuals in the high-resource condition reported a stronger connection with their new brand ($M_{\text{high}} = 3.62$, $SD = 1.4$) than did individuals in the low-resource condition ($M_{\text{low}} = 2.82$, $SD = 1.4$; $F(1, 116) = 10.23$, $p = .0018$). Next we examined whether resource condition would affect satisfaction with the new brand. As predicted, an ANOVA revealed that individuals in the high-resource condition reported significantly greater satisfaction with the new brand ($M_{\text{high}} = 4.42$, $SD = 1.4$) than did individuals in the low-resource condition ($M_{\text{low}} = 3.81$, $SD = 1.4$, $F(1, 116) = 5.07$, $p = .026$).

We hypothesized that connection with the new brand would mediate the effect of resource condition on perceived brand satisfaction. In line with the previous studies, greater connection with the new brand resulted in greater brand satisfaction ($\beta = .73$, $t(116) = 11.46$, $p < .0001$). To further evaluate mediation, we conducted a 5,000-sample bootstrapping analysis (Preacher and Hayes 2008, PROCESS model 4). The results supported mediation as the 95% confidence interval did not contain zero [.2510, 1.0717].

We next evaluated whether greater connection with the new brand would influence purchase intent and willingness to pay. Results revealed that individuals who reported a greater connection with the new brand indicated that they were significantly more likely to purchase the new brand from a local grocery store ($\beta = .53$, $t(116) = 6.77$, $p < .0001$).

.0001) and indicated a greater willingness to pay for the new brand ($\beta = 0.24$, $t(116) = 2.68$, $p = .0084$).

In order to rule out an alternative explanation that manipulating resources may be increasing materialism, which may be creating strong brand connections, we conducted an ANOVA with resource condition as the predictor variable and materialism as the outcome variable. Results revealed that resource condition did not affect materialism scores ($F(116) = 1.62$, $p = .21$). If anything, the low-resource condition was associated with greater materialism ($M_{\text{low}} = 4.23$ vs. $M_{\text{high}} = 3.96$). Furthermore, materialism was not related to brand connection ($\beta = .01$, $t(116) = 0.14$, $p = .89$), suggesting that stronger brand connection as a function of greater resources is *not* because of greater materialism.

As part of the resource manipulation, participants listed different types of resources. An independent coder rated the first two responses from each of the resource conditions (as each condition reported at least two resources) on whether the reason given was related to individual resources (e.g., I am smart) or interpersonal resources (e.g., I have friends and family). Results revealed a significant difference between the conditions in frequency of responses that referred to *individual* versus *interpersonal* responses ($\chi^2(1) = 4.82$, $p < .03$). Individuals in the high-resource condition listed 56% of the individual responses compared with 44% interpersonal responses, while individuals in the low-resource condition listed only 37% of the individual responses and 63% of the interpersonal responses. These results suggest that as individuals perceived more resources, they focus more on themselves and less on other people (fig. 2). In other words, perceiving greater resources leads

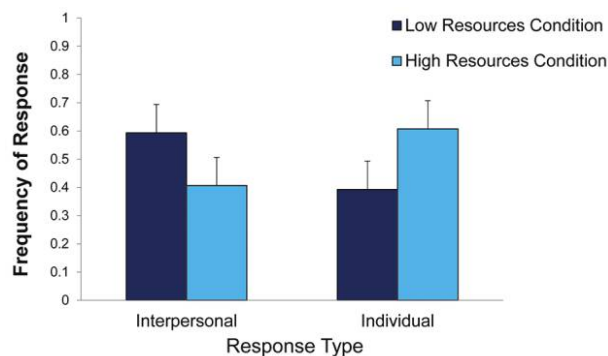


Figure 2. Study 2: response type as a function of resource level. Participants in the high-resource condition listed a greater number of individual resources compared to those in the low-resource condition. Conversely, participants in the low-resource condition listed a greater number of social resources.

individuals to be more self-focused. As brands can represent the self (Belk 1988), it suggests another reason why increased resources lead individuals to prefer brands over other people: egocentric bias.

Study 2 expands upon the results from the previous studies. First, we broaden the notion of resources to include resources other than financial ones (e.g., individual traits and assets). This is important, as it suggests that having more resources does not simply mean that individuals are more likely to buy brand names because they have more money, but that having or perceiving greater resources is associated with a greater emphasis on the self and, subsequently, brand relationships in general. In this study, we introduced a new brand to participants instead of asking about relationships with brands they already use. This design helps us to rule out some potential confounds, including biases in retrieval of brands and purchase accessibility, and suggests that perceptions of resource level directly influence how individuals initiate brand relationships. Furthermore, we used this paradigm in order to test whether connection with a *new* brand can influence other consumer outcomes, namely, behavioral intentions. We found that individuals who formed a stronger connection with the new brand indicated they were significantly more likely to purchase the brand from a local grocery store and were willing to pay more for the new brand.

STUDY 3

We propose that resource level shifts the preferred source of social connection from people to brands. In our first set of studies, we demonstrated that individuals with greater resources have stronger connection with their brands, suggesting a greater emphasis on these relationships. In the current study, we test whether the importance of brand and interpersonal relationships shifts as a function of resources. Specifically, we manipulate perceptions of wealth and then ask people to rate how important either brands or other people are in their lives. By asking people to rate these relationships in a between-subjects design, we are able to test whether there are preference shifts as a function of manipulated resource level.

Method

Participants. Two hundred and forty-seven participants (102 male) were recruited from an online US subject pool in exchange for payment. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 74, with a mean age of 34.8 years ($SD = 11.8$).

Procedure and Measures. After providing consent, participants were shown the same definition of a brand as used in previous studies and were asked to provide the names of three brands to which they are most loyal. Participants were then asked to think of three neighbors or acquaintances. We defined neighbors and acquaintances for them using the following language: “An acquaintance may be someone you see or know, but not very well. For a neighbor, you could think of someone in your neighborhood. If you live in a single family home, this could be people on your street or within a quarter mile of your home; if you live in an apartment building this would be people in your building or on your floor; if you live in a condo or duplex this would be people in your unit or next to your unit.” We asked about neighbors and acquaintances as we wanted a reference group that is common to all and not dependent on certain specific factors, such as age, relationship status, or job status (e.g., classmates or coworkers).

Next, we manipulated resource level using the same recall manipulation as in study 1B. After the manipulation, participants were told that we were going to ask them to think about how important various things are in their lives and that we would ask them about one of those items. Participants saw the following (we randomized whether “other people” or “brands” came first in the order): “Please take a moment and think about how important the following are to you: religion, other people like neighbors and acquaintances, the environment, brands, politics, race.”

Next, depending upon condition, participants were asked to rate on a 9-point Likert scale (anchored by “not at all” and “extremely important”) how important either brands or other people like neighbors and acquaintances are in their lives. This rating served as the dependent variable. Finally, participants completed additional information, including demographic items.

Results and Discussion. Four participants guessed the hypothesis of the study (how SES is related to relationships) and were excluded from the following analyses. In order to investigate whether resource level influences the importance of brand and interpersonal relationships, we conducted an ANOVA with resource condition, relationship source (brands vs. people), and their interaction as the predictor variables. Importance rating served as our dependent variable. Not surprisingly, results revealed a main effect for relationship source ($F(1,239) = 15.44, p = .0001$), such that participants rated other people as more important ($M = 5.47, SD = 3.0$) than brands ($M = 4.44, SD = 2.8$).

There was no effect of wealth condition ($F(1,239) = .14, p > .25$). Importantly, there was a significant interaction ($F(1,239) = 8.30, p = .0043$; see fig. 3). Planned contrasts revealed that individuals in the low-resource/other-people condition rated this relationship as significantly more important ($M = 5.90, SD = 4.2$) than the other three conditions (all $p < .05$), including the high-resource/other-people condition ($M = 5.05, SD = 4.1; t(239) = 2.29, p = .023$). Participants in the high-resource/brand condition ($M = 4.77, SD = 4.1$) rated this relationship as marginally significantly more important than participants in the low-resource/brand condition ($M = 4.12, SD = 4.1; t(239) = 1.78, p = .076$). These results support our hypotheses that when individuals perceive fewer resources, they place more importance on interpersonal connections, and when they perceive greater resources, they place more importance on brand connections.

STUDY 4

In study 4, we examine whether individuals with greater resources place a greater emphasis on connecting with brands over people by examining whether people would prefer to engage in a follow-up task that involves either people or brands. Individuals are motivated to think about and to devote energy to their most important relationships (Rusbult 1980; Aron, Aron, and Smollan 1992; Hazan and Shaver 1994; Baumeister and Leary 1995). Therefore, by choosing to think about one relationship over another, that is, complete a follow-up task on brands versus people, individuals are displaying the relative importance of this relationship over the other. We use this indirect method to avoid social desirability biases, whereby participants provide inaccurate or biased responses for impression manage-

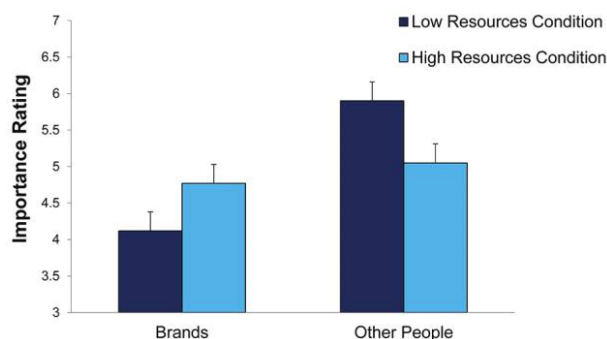


Figure 3. Study 4: importance of brands and people as a function of resource level. Other people are rated as more important in the low- versus high-resource conditions. Conversely, brands are rated as more important in the high- versus low resource conditions.

ment (e.g., Fisher 1993). When asked whether one would prefer to connect with people or brands, individuals will almost always report preferring people over brands due to fear of looking shallow or materialistic. Therefore, we ask participants which follow-up task they would prefer to do as our method of assessing the relative importance of one source of connection over the other.

In this study, we manipulate resource level by giving participants a small amount of cash (\$3). Although \$3 may seem like a trivial amount, research has shown that merely activating the concept of money by priming or using play money can have psychological consequences and change interpersonal behavior (e.g., Vohs et al. 2006, 2008). We predict that individuals who perceive greater relative resources will prefer to think about, communicate, and engage with brands over neighbors and acquaintances, demonstrating that resource level shifts the preference for the source of social connection from people to brands.

Method

Participants. Seventy-nine participants were recruited from the student center of a private, southeastern university. Seventy-four participants (36 female) successfully completed the study and are included in the analyses below (one participant was lost to technical issues with the server, two participants did not complete the manipulation successfully, and two participants correctly guessed the hypothesis). Participants were paid \$5 in cash in exchange for participation in the study. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 60 years and had an average age of 27.6 years ($SD = 10.3$).

Procedure and Measures. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: high resources or low resources. We manipulated resources as follows: participants in the high-resource condition were given \$3 halfway through the study, right before the dependent variable; participants in the low-wealth condition were not given any cash until the end of the study.

After indicating consent, all participants were told that there were two studies and that because the two studies were very short, we were running them at the same time. Participants were instructed to complete the first study. They were shown the same definition of a brand and neighbor/acquaintance as in the previous study and were asked to provide the name of a brand to which they are most loyal and the first name of a neighbor/acquaintance. All participants were told once they had completed the first study

that they should let the research assistant know in order to receive a code to start the second study. For the high-resource condition, after participants completed the first study, they were thanked for their participation and were given \$3 in cash, ostensibly as payment for completion of the first study. The low-resource-condition participants did not receive any cash but were also thanked for their participation in the first study. All participants were given the code to start the second study.

Participants were then told the following: "For the second study, we are currently collecting data on two different topics, brands and people. We could use your help on either one and would like to know if you have a preference. In the brands study, you will answer some questions about your favorite brands. In the people study, you will answer some questions about your neighbors and acquaintances."

They were asked to indicate which topic they would prefer to answer questions about on a 1 ("definitely prefer people") to 7 ("definitely prefer brands") scale. Participants answered some filler questions based on their answer to the previous question, to maintain the cover story. Once participants completed the second study, they were paid the remainder and thanked for their participation.

Results and Discussion

We hypothesized that individuals who were made to feel as though they had more resources, by having more actual cash, would prefer to engage in a task that involved brands as opposed to other people. In line with our predictions, an ANOVA revealed that individuals in the high-resource condition preferred to do the brand task over the people task ($M_{\text{high}} = 4.5$, $SD = 1.9$) to a greater extent than individuals in the low-resource condition ($M_{\text{low}} = 3.6$, $SD = 2.0$; $F(1,72) = 3.54$, $p = .064$). These results indicate that as resources increase, individuals prefer to engage with brands compared with other people.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

We posited that the decrease in desired or actual interpersonal connection among those with relatively more resources would lead them to turn toward other sources for connection. We predicted that brands are one of these alternative sources and, across our studies, found support for the hypothesis that resource level shifts preference for connection with brands over people. In addition, we found that resource level influences connection with a new brand, which in turn influences other relational outcomes such as likelihood to purchase and willingness to

pay for the new brand. These findings highlight that resource level affects existing brand relationships and the creation of new brand relationships. Finally, we demonstrated that having greater resources leads to a shift in the importance of brand and interpersonal relationships and a greater preference to engage with brands. These results illustrate that individuals do, at times, prefer and seek out brands as a source of connection.

Theoretical Contributions

One theoretical implication that our research suggests is that resource level may be thought of as similar to other pervasive social constructs (e.g., power), in that it is both a chronic variable that can be measured, but also a mindset that can be primed through common experimental techniques. Across several studies, we find evidence to support this proposition as both measuring and manipulating resource level lead to similar outcomes in terms of brand and interpersonal relationships. Specifically, we measured resource level through income and subjective social status (study 1). We manipulated resource level by using a recall manipulation, an ease of retrieval manipulation, and by giving participants a small amount of actual cash (studies 1B, 2, 3, and 4). Thus, through our multimethod approach, we highlight ways in which resource level may be operationalized.

A Gallup poll (Carroll 2004) found that individuals report having fewer friends as income increases. Furthermore, having more resources has been shown to make individuals feel more self-sufficient, autonomous, less likely to connect with other people, and to spend more time alone (Vohs et al. 2006; Stephens, Markus, and Townsend 2007; Stephens et al. 2011; Bianchi and Vohs 2016), even though social connection is necessary for general well-being (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Cohen et al. 2008). In the present research, we resolve this apparent inconsistency in the literature by demonstrating that individuals who have or perceive greater resources place a greater emphasis on brand connection than do individuals of fewer resources. Consequently, we contribute to the consumer well-being literature by providing evidence of one mechanism through which individuals are able to balance the desire for increased autonomy and independence with the fundamental need for social connection. That is, our findings suggest one avenue—brands—by which individuals may find social connection when other people are not available, or are not wanted.

We also contribute to the branding literature. Brand connection and brand satisfaction are constructs that have been linked with meaningful consumer behavior outcomes, including consumer identity, brand loyalty, brand forgiveness, and repurchase behavior (Jones and Sasser 1995; Escalas and Bettman 2003, 2005; Cheng, White, and Chaplin 2012). Fournier and Mick (1999) have gone so far as to say that “product satisfaction is invariably intertwined with *life satisfaction* and the quality of life itself” (15), which we posit should also extend to brands. By identifying another construct that influences brand connection and satisfaction—resources—our research contributes directly to the literature on these topics. In addition, our research illustrates how these key consumer variables relate to one another. We find that increased relative wealth leads to increased brand connection, which in turn is associated with increased brand satisfaction. Thus, we contribute to the consumer behavior literature by positing specific relationships between these important constructs.

Having an increased connection with a brand may be a necessary component of a strong brand relationship, or at least an initial step to forming one. Previous research has illustrated that individuals who have strong brand relationships with brands they already use are willing to pay a price premium for their brands and are more likely to engage in repeated future purchasing (e.g., Thomson, MacInnis, and Park 2005; Esch et al. 2006; Park, MacInnis, and Priester 2009). Our research demonstrated that increased brand connection, as a function of greater resources, is associated with greater purchase intention and willingness to pay for a *new* brand. Taken in conjunction, these findings suggest one avenue by which marketers can encourage consumers to create and to maintain strong brand relationships with a new brand.

Future Research

We defined resources as a supply of money, materials, or assets that an individual possesses and can be drawn upon when needed. This definition conceptualizes resources as something that can be possessed or owned and is therefore self-referential. The current findings suggest that increases in resources that are possessed are more likely to lead to a greater self-focus—as demonstrated in study 2—and stronger brand relationships. However, other definitions of resources have described the construct more broadly, for example, an asset that allows a person to function efficiently. It would be interesting for future research to more specifically tease apart whether there are differences in

consumer relationships as a function of resources, or assets, that are possessed (e.g., money, traits) versus assets that are not possessed (e.g., time).

In the present research, we find that individuals who have or perceive greater resources have stronger connections with their brands and prefer to engage with brands over people. Does this mean that brands are getting in the way of social connection, and if so, are there ways in which brands can bolster social interactions for those with greater resources? Previous research has found that, relative to individuals of lower SES, individuals of higher SES reported less compassion and reduced empathic accuracy during situations where both may be warranted (Stellar et al. 2012). Individuals of higher SES were also less attentive to others' emotional experiences. If individuals with greater resources have stronger brand relationships, maybe brands could be a means through which individuals of higher resources perceive similarity with and, ultimately, empathy toward others. One could investigate this question by examining whether resource level and perceived similarity in brand preferences influence connection with another individual. In other words, for individuals of higher resources, could brands be a way to bridge the empathy gap?

One practical marketing question that arises from this research is: Who should marketers target? Should they target individuals with greater resources in order to maintain strong brand relationships? Or should marketers target individuals with fewer resources in order to create and build brand relationships with new consumers? One approach would be to target both, but to use different advertising strategies. For consumers with greater resources, marketers could focus advertising efforts on messages that emphasize directly connecting with the brand and the benefits of the brand to the individual. For consumers with fewer resources, however, marketers could emphasize using the brand to connect with other people or in order to benefit others. More broadly, future research could examine whether different brand connection goals influence brand relationships. This idea is consistent with research suggesting that firms need to be cognizant of different types of brand relationships and to manage customer relations accordingly (e.g., Fournier and Avery 2011). Future research could test these strategies either experimentally or directly through field research.

In a similar area, marketers of charities and nonprofits could examine the effectiveness of ads based on resource level. There is research to suggest that the framing of the

ad for charities affects donation rates (e.g., Small and Loewenstein 2003; Smith, Faro, and Burson 2013). For example, Small, Loewenstein, and Slovic (2007) found that showing one identified child versus multiple children makes people more likely to donate and to donate higher amounts. Findings from the current research could be applied to research in this topic to investigate whether ads conveying other people versus the brand of nonprofit firm are more effective for consumers at different resource levels. More specifically, for individuals with lower resources, is a nonprofit ad more effective when it incorporates other people, whereas for individuals with greater resources, is the ad more effective if it highlights the brand of the charity or nonprofit?

It would be interesting to test whether people who are undergoing transitional periods due to an increase in resource level, such as moving because of a job promotion, are especially likely to prefer connection with brands. Transitional periods are generally accompanied by changes in interpersonal relationships, including increased distance between loved ones. Some research has shown that individuals lose as much as one-third of their personal networks as they transition to a new location (Bidart and Lavenu 2005). Imagine someone who has just moved across the country for a job promotion. This person is most likely feeling disconnected from the people and culture around him, particularly his new neighbors. Researchers could investigate whether connection and satisfaction with brands are stronger during transitional periods, or whether individuals who are traveling abroad feel a stronger connection with brands that are familiar. In other words, can brand relationships serve as a coping mechanism during times of change in interpersonal networks?

As described previously, having or perceiving greater resources, that is, greater wealth, is associated with increased independence and autonomy (Vohs et al. 2006) and a greater self-focus (Kraus et al. 2010; Piff et al. 2010; Stellar et al. 2012; Dubois, Rucker, and Galinsky 2015). Similar to wealth, power and control are associated with an increased self-focus, reduced tendency to incorporate the needs of others into decisions, and a reduced tendency to rely on others (Fiske 1993; Galinsky, Gruenfeld, and Magee 2003; Galinsky et al. 2006; Kay et al. 2008; Kraus, Piff, and Keltner 2009). Future research could examine how other social status variables, such as power and control, map onto one another and onto preference for social connection. Is the pattern similar across all social status variables? At a broader level, would the pattern be the same across all

countries, or would differences in individualism and collectivism interact with social status to affect the preferred source of social connection?

Conclusion

In the present research, we suggest that when individuals have or perceive greater resources, they may be turning to other sources besides people for connection. Across several studies we demonstrate brands are one of these sources and find that when having or perceiving greater resources, individuals prefer to engage with and think about brands over people. In other words, we find that resource level affects preference for connection with brands over people. We extend our results to highlight the effects of increased connection on satisfaction, purchase intention, and willingness to pay for a new brand. Finally, we demonstrate various ways resources may be measured and manipulated, all of which have implications for consumers, marketers, and brand managers.

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