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RESEARCH REPORT

Trying too hard or not hard enough: How effort shapes status

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Abstract

Is trying to earn status effective or self-defeating? We show that whether effort increases or decreases admiration and respect (i.e., status) depends on how the person is trying to earn status. Groups evaluate people along multiple status dimensions (e.g., wealth, coolness). Each dimension is associated with a different ideology, or set of beliefs, that ascribe status to behaviors that contribute to the group's goals. Whether behaviors, including effort, increase status, thus, depends on the ideologies that people use to interpret if a behavior contributes to the group. Four experiments demonstrate that people earn more status when they try to become wealthy compared to when they are effortlessly wealthy, but earn less status when they try to become cool compared to when they are effortlessly cool. Effort increases status when directed at wealth but not at coolness because contemporary ideologies suggest that people who gain wealth through effort contribute more to society, whereas people who gain coolness through effort contribute less.

KEYWORDS
contribution, cool, cultural schema theory, effort, status, wealth

People kill for status. Sometimes literally. The desire for high-status sneakers has been inspiring robbery and murder since the introduction of Air Jordans in the 1980s, if not before (Aguirre, 2022; Telander, 1990). In India, where status historically depended more on family than footwear, parents have killed daughters to prevent them from marrying lower status men (SNS, 2022). Those who do not kill for status try to acquire it by purchasing conspicuous goods (Mandel et al., 2017; Rucker et al., 2012), collecting interesting experiences (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020; Keinan & Kivetz, 2011; Weinberger et al., 2017), or curating sophisticated tastes (Arsel & Bean, 2013; Bourdieu, 1984; Holt, 1998). Consumers in developed economies spend much of their income trying to gain, or at least maintain, status (Frank, 1985; Heath & Potter, 2004).

Does this effort pay off? Specifically, are people who try to gain status more admired than people who reach a similar position without trying?

The answer is consequential. People with status are healthier, happier, and have better access to sustenance, money, and mates (Anderson et al., 2015; Sapolsky, 2004). But status is difficult to acquire. Status is defined as the relative amount of prestige, respect, admiration, and deference that a person receives from a group (Anderson et al., 2015; Bellezza, 2023). People cannot determine their own status—it can only be gained by earning the respect of others (Anderson et al., 2015; Benoit-Smullyan, 1944). Further, status is inherently scarce (Frank, 1985; Hirsch, 1976); for one person to rise in status, another must fall (Magee & Galinsky, 2008).

The answer remains also unclear. Classic research is associated high status with avoiding labor (Veblen, 1899), while contemporary research is associated increased labor with high status (Bellezza et al., 2017). As labor is effortful, these findings reveal that the relationship between effort, wealth, and status remains uncertain. And it is even less clear how effort directed elsewhere influences status.

We show that effort can either increase or decrease status, depending on the goal that a person directs their efforts toward and how observers interpret the effort.

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Specifically, people who try to be wealthy earn more esteem than people who are effortlessly wealthy, whereas people who try to be cool earn less esteem than people who are effortlessly cool. This is because observers perceive that wealthy people contribute more to the group when they tried to become wealthy, but that cool people contribute more when they did not try to become cool. Notably, these effects reverse when trying to earn wealth does not contribute to the group or when trying to be cool does contribute.

Our findings help explain why the same behavior may increase or decrease status. Status is awarded differently depending on the shared beliefs, or ideology, used to interpret whether a behavior contributes to the group. Groups can hold multiple ideologies, which they use to interpret whether different behaviors related to different goals contribute in different contexts. To keep the scope of our research manageable, we test this theory using one behavior (effort) directed at two goals (wealth, coolness) in one cultural context (21st-century United States). Note that the performance of the same behavior—effort, in our research—may vary depending on the goal towards which goal it is directed. For example, a consumer may try to become cool by wearing Vans and studying indie films but try to become wealthy by trading Bitcoin and studying economics.

HOW DO GROUPS ALLOCATE STATUS?

Status refers to the relative amount of esteem a person is awarded by others (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Although status is often conflated with factors related to wealth, including income, education, and occupational prestige (Coleman et al., 1978; Dubois & Ordabayeva, 2015), wealth is not the only path to status (Bellezza, 2023). Other paths include working 80 h/week (Bellezza et al., 2017), wearing red sneakers (Bellezza et al., 2014), giving away possessions (Mauss, 2001), and having the deadliest rooster in a cockfight (Geertz, 1972).

What makes a behavior worthy of status? According to cultural schema theory (Ridgeway, 2019), groups award status to people who contribute to the group's collective goals (see also Anderson et al., 2015; Anderson & Kilduff, 2009; Berger et al., 1972). Status thereby helps groups coordinate collective behavior by incentivizing individuals to help the group reach its goals (Davis & Moore, 1945; Ridgeway, 2019). Goals differ depending on the group but could include winning a war, following God, or producing widgets.

Groups develop shared beliefs—ideologies—about which goals are valued, the reasons that the goals are valued, and the behaviors that one should do to reach them (Holt & Cameron, 2010; Ridgeway, 2019). For example, a religious group may have an ideology that people should follow God (goal) to achieve salvation (reason) by resting on the sabbath (behavior), whereas a capitalist group might have an ideology that people should produce goods (goal) to spread economic well-being (reason) by working hard (behavior).

Importantly, a group may have multiple goals and, thus, competing ideologies explaining which goals are valued, why they are valued, and what behaviors contribute. For example, 19th-century Americans held both a goal to follow God, backed by a religious ideology, and to build wealth, backed by a capitalistic ideology (Weber, 1905). We suggest that competing ideologies prescribe distinct status hierarchies, such that a behavior esteemed in one setting may be scorned in another. For example, rest from work might have increased the status of a 19th-century American when the goal to follow God was accessible but decreased their status when the goal to produce goods was accessible. The literature has alluded to the idea that groups can develop competing ideologies (Holt & Cameron, 2010; Holt & Thompson, 2004; Saatcioglu & Ozanne, 2013) and alternative status hierarchies (Bellezza, 2023; Goor et al., 2021), but we are not aware of research testing how this can cause the same behavior to increase status in one situation but decrease it in another.

We test if one behavior (effort) can either increase or decrease status depending on whether it is directed at one of two goals, each embedded in distinct ideologies that are prevalent in the 21st-century USA. One goal is wealth, which Americans continue to pursue. A second goal is coolness, which has arguably displaced religious goals (e.g., following God) as Americans have started to spend less time in church and more money on brands (Cutright et al., 2014; Jones, 2021; Shachar et al., 2011).

Wealth

One common goal is to be wealthy. In the United States, wealth is generally interpreted through Protestant-like ideologies (Hirschman, 1990; Weber, 1905), which hold that wealth results from hard work (Cawelti, 1965). Wealth, according to these ideologies, signals that a person has contributed to the group by helping bake a larger economic pie, but only if the person earns their wealth through effort rather than inheritance or luck. Effort toward economic pursuits thereby signals that a person is valued (Bellezza et al., 2017) and has moral worth (Celniker et al., 2023). We, thus, hypothesize that people who become wealthy through effort are perceived to contribute more and earn more status than people who effortlessly become wealthy.

Coolness

A different goal is to be cool (Belk et al., 2010; Heath & Potter, 2004). Consumers spend much of their

discretionary income on stuff that they think will make them cool (Kerner & Pressman, 2007; Lasn, 1999). This goal has become so pervasive that Heath and Potter (2004, p. 191) describe cool as "the central status hierarchy in contemporary urban society."

Coolness is prescribed by an innovation-centric ideology, which holds that people contribute by defying convention to create something original (Heath & Potter, 2004; Holt & Cameron, 2010). Rather than value wealth, this ideology values coolness, a positive trait attributed to people seen as autonomous (Warren & Campbell, 2014). Coolness, and its associated ideology, potentially help explain why people earn status by breaking social norms (e.g., wearing red sneakers; Bellezza et al., 2014) and why liberals prefer nonconforming products (e.g., a mug that says, "Just Different;" Ordabayeva & Fernandes, 2018).

Importantly, because coolness evokes a different ideology than wealth, effort has a different meaning when directed at coolness. In general, effort signals that a person is cooperative and cares about approval (Celniker et al., 2023). Trying to be cool may, therefore, reveal that a person lacks autonomy and is, ironically, not cool. We, thus, hypothesize that people who become cool through effort will be perceived to contribute less and earn less status than people who effortlessly become cool.

Hypotheses

We predict that the effect of a behavior on status depends on the ideology of the observer who interprets the behavior, and this ideology depends on the goal toward which the behavior is directed. Specifically, we hypothesize effort will increase status when people try to become wealthy, but decrease status when people try to become cool (Hypothesis 1). Further, this interaction will be mediated by perceived contribution, such that observers believe that people who try to become wealthy contribute more than people who become wealthy without trying, whereas people who try to become cool contribute less than people who become cool without trying (Hypothesis 2). Because status depends on perceived contribution, effort directed at coolness should increase status when such effort is socially beneficial (Hypothesis 3), whereas effort directed at wealth should decrease status when such effort is antisocial (Hypothesis 4). See Figure 1 for conceptual model.

METHOD

Four preregistered experiments test how effort influences the extent to which a person earns status. Data and preregistrations are available in ResearchBox: https://researchbox.org/1741. The Appendix S1 includes additional information, including supplemental analyses, filtering criteria, manipulation checks, and details about the preregistrations.

Studies 1 and 2

Study 1 tests whether the effect of effort on status depends on the goal toward which the effort is directed (H1). Study 2 attempts to replicate H1 and tests whether the person's perceived contribution mediates the interaction between effort and goal on status (H2).

Procedure

Study 1 recruited Americans on CloudResearch (N=400; 45% female; M_{Age}=38.5). Study 2 recruited undergraduate students (N=352; 36% female; M_{Age}=21.4) at a university in the Southwestern USA. Both studies used a 2 (*behavior: effortful, effortless*)×2 (*goal: cool, wealthy*) between-subjects design.

The studies asked participants to describe a person, give him a name, and answer questions about him, such as "What does he do for fun?" and "What type of shoes does he wear" (adapted from Warren & Campbell, 2020). In the *cool* condition, participants described a man who "does cool things" either "through a great deal of effort" or "effortlessly" (see Figure 2). In the *wealthy* condition, participants described a man who "has a lot of money," either "through a great deal of effort" or "effortlessly".

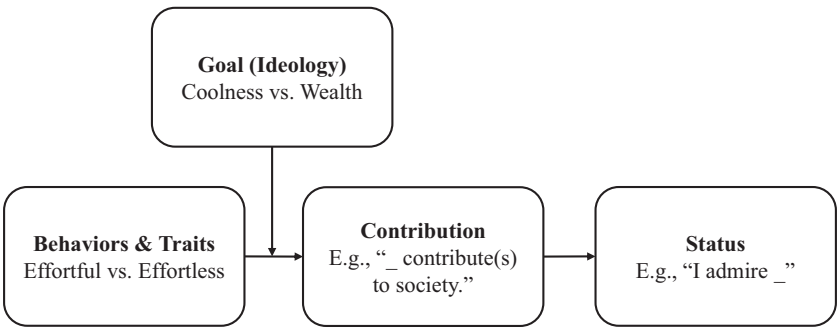

FIGURE 1 Conceptual model.

Study 1 Manipulations

COOLNESS Goal; EFFORTLESS Behavior
On the next pages you will describe a man who effortlessly does cool things. Without working hard or trying to become cool, he does things that are cool.

COOLNESS Goal; EFFORTFUL Behavior
On the next pages you will describe a man who, through a great deal of effort, does cool things. By working hard and trying to become cool, he does things that are cool.

WEALTH Goal; EFFORTLESS Behavior
On the next pages you will describe a man who effortlessly has a lot of money. Without working hard or trying to become wealthy, he does things that are financially successful.

WEALTH Goal; EFFORTFUL Behavior
On the next pages you will describe a man who, through a great deal of effort, has a lot of money. By working hard and trying to become wealthy, he does things that are financially successful.

NOTE: See Web Appendix A: Methodological Detail Appendix (MDA) for open-response directed describing questions, which were identical across conditions.

Study 2 Manipulations

COOLNESS Goal; EFFORTLESS Behavior
Think of a person you know who doesn't try to be cool, but is cool anyways. This person does not spend time, money, thought, or effort trying to be cool. Without trying, this person knows and does cool things.

COOLNESS Goal; EFFORTFUL Behavior
Think of a person you know who tries really hard to be cool. This person spends a lot of time, money, thought, and effort trying to be cool. Through a great deal of effort, this person knows how to be cool and does cool things.

WEALTH Goal; EFFORTLESS Behavior
Think of a person you know who doesn't try to be financially successful, but is financially successful anyways. This person does not spend much time, money, thought, or effort trying to make money. Without trying, this person knows and does things that make money.

WEALTH Goal; EFFORTFUL Behavior
Think of a person you know who tries really hard to be financially successful. This person spends a lot of time, money, thought, and effort trying to make money. Through a great deal of effort, this person knows and does things that make money.

FIGURE 2 Study 1 and 2 manipulations.

After, participants in both studies rated the person [P] on three disagree–agree items measuring status: "I look up to [P]", "I admire [P]", and "I want to be like [P]" ($\alpha = 0.96$; adapted from Bellezza et al., 2017). Participants in Study 2 also rated contribution by indicating whether people like [P] "contribute to society," "are important for society," and "make society better" ($\alpha = 0.94$; adapted from Tongo, 2015). Unless otherwise noted, the measures used 7-point scales.

Study 1 results

As predicted, ANOVA revealed a significant interaction between *behavior* and *goal* on status, $F(1, 396) = 11.79$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.028$. Participants awarded less status to a person who was effortfully rather than effortlessly cool, $t(396) = -2.38$, $p = 0.018$, but more status to a person who was effortfully rather than effortlessly wealthy, $t(396) = 2.48$, $p = 0.014$; see Figure 3.

Study 2 results

As predicted, ANOVA revealed a significant interaction between *behavior* and *goal* on status, $F(1, 348) = 118.43$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.24$, and contribution, $F(1, 348) = 94.97$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.21$. Replicating Study 1, participants awarded less status to a person who was effortfully rather than effortlessly cool, $t(348) = -10.34$, $p < 0.001$, but more status to a person who was effortfully rather than effortlessly wealthy, $t(348) = 5.09$, $p < 0.001$. Participants likewise believed that the effortfully cool person contributed less than the effortlessly cool person, $t(348) = -8.36$, $p < 0.001$, but believed that the effortfully wealthy person contributed more than the effortlessly wealthy person, $t(348) = 5.37$, $p < 0.001$ (see Figure 3). A moderated mediation analysis using PROCESS Model 7 (Hayes, 2018) confirmed that perceived contribution mediated the interaction between *behavior* and *goal* on status (index of moderation: $b = 2.56$, [1.96, 3.19]). See Figure 4 for details.

Discussion

Studies 1 and 2 show that the same behavior (effort) can have a different effect on status depending on whether the behavior is perceived to contribute to society. Specifically, when viewed through the ideology of cool, effort decreases status because effortfully cool people are perceived to contribute less than effortlessly

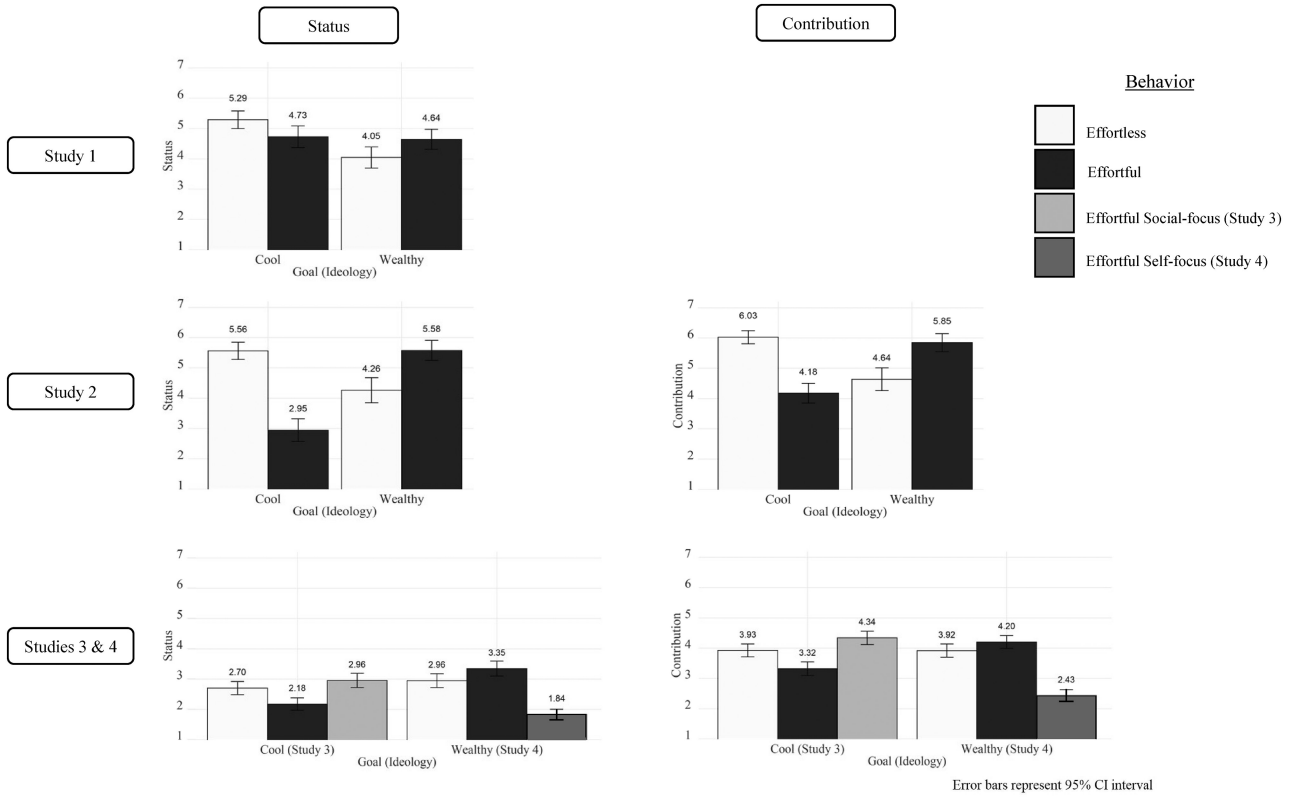

FIGURE 3 Studies 1–4: The effects of effort and goal on status, contribution, and influence.

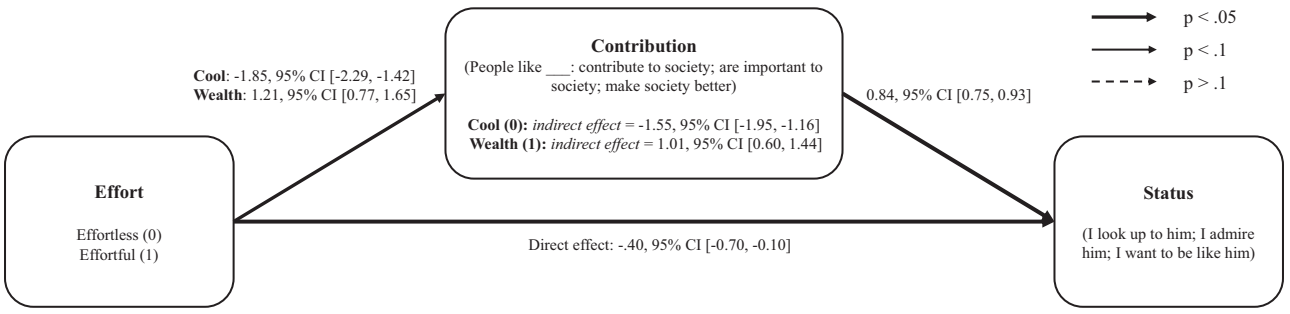

FIGURE 4 Study 2: Moderated mediation results.

cool people. In contrast, when viewed through the ideology of wealth, effort increases status because effortfully wealthy people are perceived to contribute more than effortlessly wealthy people.

Studies 3 and 4

Studies 3 and 4 test our theory by adding a condition that directly manipulates the hypothesized process: whether effort contributes to the group. If the effect depends on whether people who try are perceived to contribute, then trying to be cool should increase status when the effort helps others (Study 3), whereas trying to be wealthy should decrease status when the effort disregards others (Study 4).

Method

Study 3 (N=600; 50% female; M_{Age}=37.4) and study 4 (N=600; 49% female; M_{Age}=36.3) recruited participants in the USA from Prolific. Participants read one of three articles about an influencer named Michael Jones who gained his followers by being cool (Study 3) or wealthy (Study 4; see Figure 5).

In Study 3, the article described an influencer who became cool without effort (e.g., "Jones has never really tried to be cool"), because of effort (e.g., "Jones has always tried really hard to be cool"), or because of effort to help others (e.g., "Jones has always tried really hard to be cool so he can raise the profile of other artists").

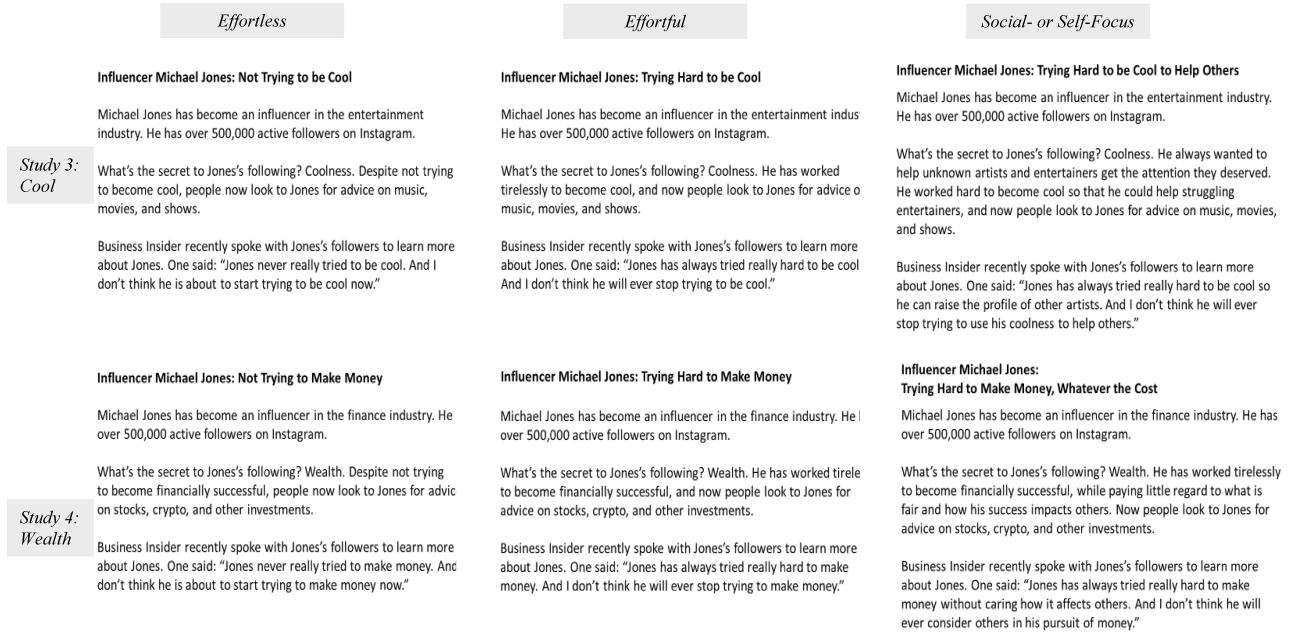

FIGURE 5 Study 3a and 3b manipulations.

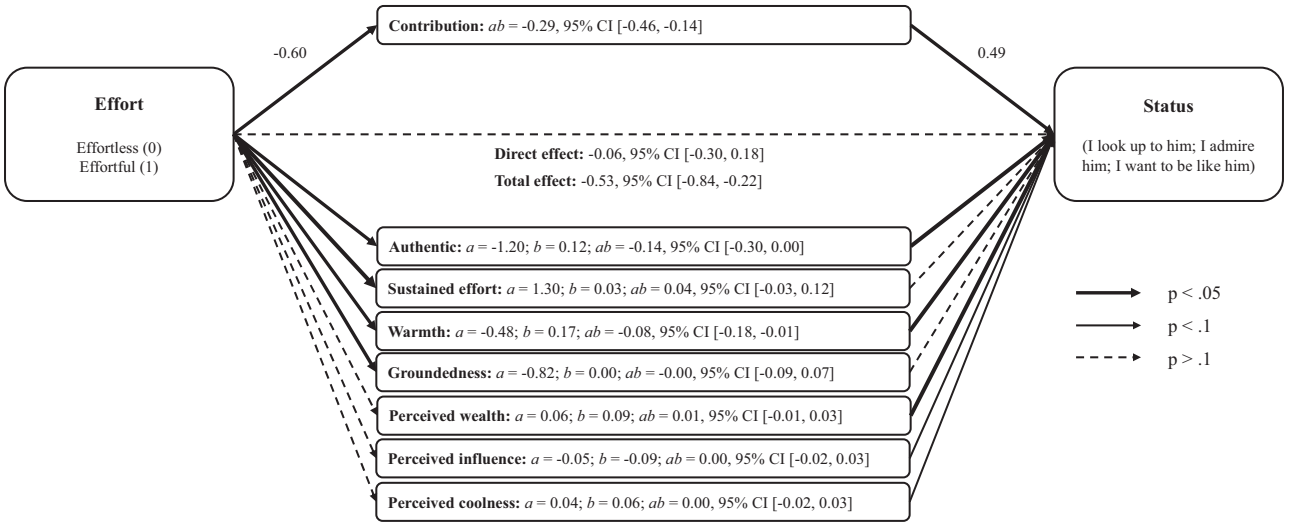

FIGURE 6 Study 3 competing mediation results.

In Study 4, the article described an influencer who became wealthy without effort (e.g., "Jones has never really tried to make money"), because of effort (e.g., "Jones has always tried really hard to make money"), or because of effort without regard for others (e.g., "Jones has always tried really hard to make money without caring how it affects others").

Participants rated Jones's contribution (α_{Study3}=0.95; α_{Study4}=0.95) and status (α_{Study3}=0.93; α_{Study4}=0.95) using the measures described before. They next completed items measuring alternative processes, including the difficulty of sustaining effort over time and the extent to which Jones seems warm (Fiske et al., 2002), authentic, grounded (Eichinger et al., 2022), influential, wealthy, and cool.

Results: Study 3

The effort manipulation significantly influenced status, $F(2, 597)=12.76$, $p<0.001$, $\eta^2=0.04$. Replicating Studies 1 and 2, the cool influencer earned less status when he tried to be cool than when he did not try, $M_{Effortless}=2.70$; $M_{Effortful}=2.18$; $t(597)=-3.34$, $p<0.001$; but effort did not reduce status when he tried to help others, $M_{Social\text{-}focus}=2.96$; $t(597)=1.62$, $p=0.11$ (see Figure 3). Consistent with the hypothesized process, the influencer earned more status when he tried to become cool to help others than when he merely tried to become cool, $t(597)=4.95$, $p<0.001$.

Results: Study 4

The effort manipulation significantly influenced status, $F(2, 597) = 49.78$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.14$. Replicating Studies 1 and 2, the wealthy influencer earned higher status when he tried to become wealthy than when he did not try, $M_{\text{Effortless}} = 2.96$; $M_{\text{Effortful}} = 3.35$; $t(597) = 2.51$, $p = 0.01$, but effort hurt status when he tried to become wealthy without regard for others, $M_{\text{Self-focus}} = 1.84$; $t(597) = -7.11$, $p < 0.001$ (see Figure 3). Consistent with the hypothesized process, the influencer earned less status when he disregarded others while trying to become wealthy than when he merely tried to become wealthy, $t(597) = -9.63$, $p < 0.001$.

Mediation: Studies 3 and 4

Studies 3 and 4 attempted to manipulate the hypothesized process directly by showing that prosocial effort to be cool increases status in Study 3 and that antisocial effort to be wealthy decreases status in Study 4. However, we were also able to examine the process in these studies by testing whether perceived contribution—or seven alternative process measures—mediated the difference in status between the effortful and effortless conditions using Hayes (2018) PROCESS Model 4 to compare the indirect effects of all potential mediators in a single model. Figure 6 shows that contribution significantly mediated the negative effect of effort to be cool on status in Study 3; Figure 7 shows that contribution marginally mediated the positive effect of effort to be wealthy on status in Study 4. In both studies, the indirect effect of contribution was stronger than the indirect effect of any alternative process measure. Appendix S1D provides further details, including models comparing the effortless and effortful conditions to the social-focused effort (Study 3) and the self-focused effort (Study 4) conditions.

Discussion

Studies 3 and 4 provide further process evidence by showing that trying to be cool increases status when the effort contributes to the group, but that trying to be wealthy decreases status when the effort does not contribute.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Is trying to earn status effective or self-defeating? It depends on the goal toward which the effort is directed. People who try to be cool are seen as contributing less and thus earn less status than people who are effortlessly cool, but people who try to be wealthy are seen as contributing more and thus earn more status than people who are effortlessly wealthy. Notably, effort that clearly contributes to the group increases status, and effort that clearly disregards the group decreases status, regardless of the goal toward which the effort is directed.

Implications

Our research contributes to practice by helping consumers—and anyone else seeking status—understand when to trumpet their effort and when to mute it. Wealthy people are admired when they attribute their success to hard work, whereas cool people are admired when they attribute their success to an effortless independence. Firms seeking high-status endorsers should pursue people who became wealthy through effort and cool without appearing to try. More generally, people

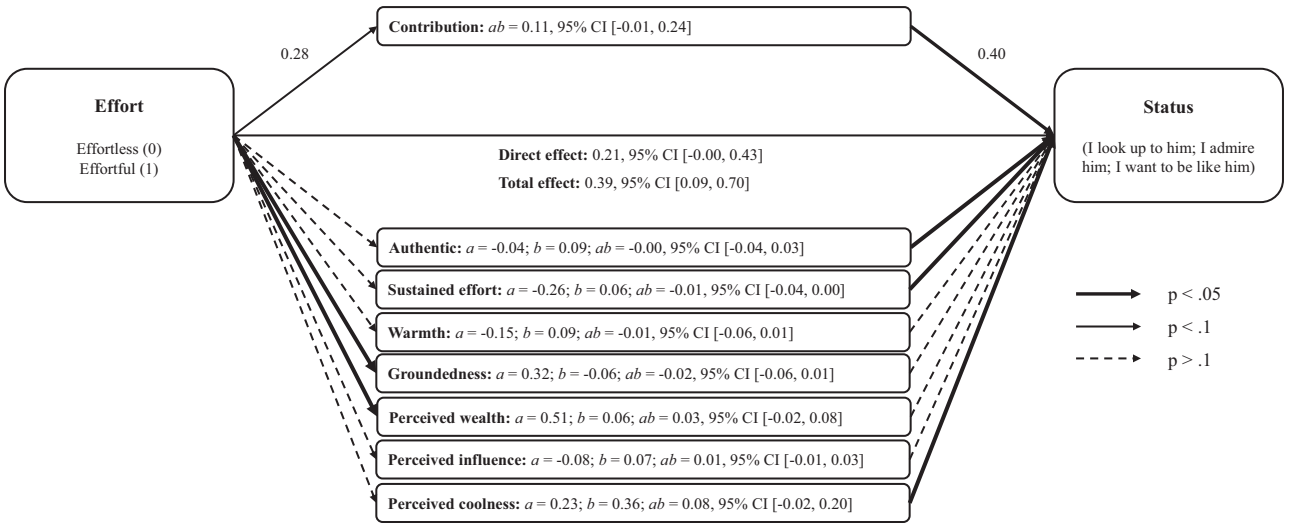

FIGURE 7 Study 4 competing mediation results.

will earn status when their behaviors are interpreted as contributing to their group's goals.

Our research contributes to theory by revealing how culture shapes whether a behavior (e.g., effort) attracts or detracts status (e.g., Ridgeway, 2019). Cultures form ideologies to interpret which behaviors, traits, and characteristics contribute to the group. Our findings suggest that these ideologies can create competing status hierarchies in which the same behavior may attract admiration in one hierarchy but scorn in another. Effort, for instance, increases status when a person tries to be wealthy because contemporary wealth ideologies suggest that people contribute to society through hard work. However, effort decreases status when a person tries to be cool because coolness ideologies suggest that people contribute by autonomously disrupting social norms. Our research, thus, extends cultural schema theory (Ridgeway, 2019), which describes how gender, race, and other stable traits influence social status. We complement this research by showing how a controllable behavior (effort) influences status and how ideologies shape when a behavior appears to contribute to the group.

We further contribute by parsimoniously explaining how different behaviors influence social status. We bridge classic research, which describes a single status hierarchy based largely on socioeconomic factors (Coleman et al., 1978; Marx & Engels, 1848; Weber, 1905), and contemporary research, which describes a diverse set of loosely connected status hierarchies (Bellezza, 2023; Goor et al., 2021; Lamont, 2012), by showing that different status hierarchies rely on a common mechanism: whether a behavior is perceived to contribute to the group. To elaborate, Bellezza (2023) discusses how some consumers signal status by displaying new products whereas others signal status with old products; similarly, some signal status by having many possessions whereas others signal status by having few. Our research suggests that the extent to which new, old, many, or few possessions earn status depends on whether others believe that the consumer's behavior (e.g., owning new products) contributes to the group, and this will depend on the ideology the group uses to interpret the behavior.

Finally, our research contributes to literature on alternative status symbols (Bellezza, 2023; Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020). Prior research had speculated that cool has become an alternative status hierarchy (Belk et al., 2010; Heath & Potter, 2004; Warren & Campbell, 2014), but had not directly linked coolness and status, nor shown how coolness differs from hierarchies based on education or wealth. We show a direct link from coolness to status, thus connecting prior literature showing that people gain status by displaying autonomy (Bellezza et al., 2014), that things (people, products, brands, etc.) become cool by showing autonomy (Warren & Campbell, 2014; Warren & Reimann, 2019), and that consumers admire cool things (Dar-Nimrod et al., 2012; Warren et al., 2018, 2019). We further show that traditional status symbols, such as wealth, are grounded in different ideologies and operate by different rules than alternative status symbols, such as coolness.

Limitations and future research

One limitation is that we do not directly operationalize ideologies. It is difficult to operationalize ideologies in experimental research because they emerge in groups rather than individuals (Eagleton, 1991) and they may not be consciously accessible (Jameson, 1981). Consumer researchers have typically examined ideologies using interpretive techniques (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007; Thompson & Üstüner, 2015; Weinberger et al., 2017). However, there is some evidence that ideologies can be measured (Warren & Campbell, 2014) and manipulated (Fernandes et al., 2021; Ordabayeva & Fernandes, 2018). We encourage scholars to further develop methods to quantify ideologies and their impact; doing so could increase our understanding of social status and promote consilience between marketing, psychology, and sociology.

A second limitation is that we investigate only one behavior (effort) and two ideologies in one culture. Future work should examine additional behaviors and ideologies, both within and across cultures and generations. For instance, do emergent ideologies promoting gender fluidity (Hoff & Bellezza, 2023) change whether men earn status for traditionally feminine behaviors, like childrearing (Coskuner-Balli & Thompson, 2013), and women earn status from traditionally masculine behaviors, like breadwinning (Holt & Thompson, 2004)? Exploring other behaviors and ideologies could further illuminate how the rules for status change across culture and time, as well as how and when consumers pivot between status hierarchies (Goor et al., 2021).

Relatedly, future research should explore how individuals vary in terms of what they believe (i.e., ideologies) and how they allocate status. For example, some people will favor status based on coolness, while others will pursue and value wealth-based status. To explore potential individual differences, we tested whether gender, age, income, education, or political affiliation influenced status in our studies. Conservative respondents tended to award wealthy people more status, regardless of effort, but none of the individual differences changed our results (see Appendix S1C).

Another question is whether and how consumers can convert status from one hierarchy to another. For instance, can consumers buy coolness or cash in on being cool? Bourdieu (1984; see also Holt, 1998) suggests that consumers convert economic status (wealth) to and from cultural status (knowledge). However, whether and how consumers convert status across competing ideologies remains unclear.

We hope that future research will advance our understanding of how people and groups compete for and award status, and how status ideologies change. Given the tight relationship between status and well-being, a better understanding of status could help make the market and society happier and healthier.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflicts of interest to report.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

De-identified data and pre-registrations are available in ResearchBox: https://researchbox.org/1741.

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