

Developing Strengths or Remediating Weaknesses? How Perceived Social Mobility Affects Parents' Purchase Preferences for Children's Educational Products

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Abstract

Does parents' status motivation affect their educational product choices for their children? Across seven studies, the authors find that when parents believe that society provides enough opportunities for individuals to achieve higher social status through hard work (i.e., high social mobility), they prioritize the status advancement goal and prefer products that help maximize a child's strengths. However, when parents believe that even if one works hard, the opportunity to climb up the social ladder is limited (i.e., low social mobility), they focus on maintaining their current status and prefer products that help remedy a child's weaknesses. Moreover, the research demonstrates that this effect diminishes when the strength and weakness are in the domains that have low relevance to status. Finally, the research shows that when parents believe that children with specialties are more likely to succeed, they prefer products for maximizing strengths, whereas when they believe that well-rounded children are more likely to succeed, they prefer products for remediating weaknesses, regardless of their perception of social mobility.

Keywords

perceived social mobility, status advancement, status maintenance, children's educational products, maximizing strengths, remediating weaknesses

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Remember that in 2019, *Desperate Housewives* actress Felicity Huffman was sentenced to 14 days in prison, 250 hours of community service, and a \$30,000 fine for her part in a college admissions scandal. She paid bribes, altered exams, and faked sports records to secure spots for her children in elite universities. Huffman accepted full responsibility for her actions, stating that "trying to be a good mother does not excuse me" (Garrison 2019).

Examples abound, showing the extraordinary efforts and expenses that parents are willing to go through to secure a promising future for their children. From the day a child is born, many parents become lavish consumers of educational products. As a result, education costs constitute one of the most significant expenses for many families. American families with children under age five spend about \$6,000 a year, on average, on child-care and early education (Leonhardt 2020). Parents' spending soars even further when a child enters elementary school, including private tutoring, musical instrument classes, and foreign language sessions. A longitudinal survey of over 3,000 parents has

found that U.S. families spent an estimated \$232 billion on private schools and education-related activities in 2020, with an increase of nearly \$20 billion or about 10% of annualized spending in the prior year (Newman, Rosbash, and Zurita 2021). In another survey of almost 1,200 parents in the United States, roughly 70% indicated they were willing to go into debt for their children's education (Perna 2022).

Despite the flourishing market and the remarkable growth, relatively little is known about factors that affect how parents make choices among a vast selection of children's educational products (Grewal, Meyer, and Mittal 2022). Notably, in an increasingly competitive society, parents' desire to prepare

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their children for a high social standing underlies their spending choices on children's education (Devine 2004; Weenink 2008). Against this backdrop, the current research explores how parents' perceived social mobility influences their status goals and, in turn, their purchase decisions with regard to children's educational products.

Perceived social mobility refers to one's belief about the extent to which society allows people to achieve higher status through personal efforts (Browman et al. 2017; Hays and Bendersky 2015). Prior research suggests that perceived social mobility plays a critical role in shaping consumer behaviors in many dimensions, such as financial decisions (Szendrey and Fiala 2018), impulsive spending (Yoon and Kim 2016), and values related to materialism (Wang et al. 2022). In the present research, we study the effect of parents' perceived social mobility on their relative preference between two types of educational purchases: strength-focused purchases and weakness-focused purchases. This proposed effect rests on the assumption that parents spontaneously think about this strength versus weakness dichotomy when making education-related choices for a child, even when unprompted. A pilot study conducted among U.S. parents ($N=245$) supported this assumption, showing that among ten factors, 70.2% of parents chose "child(ren)'s abilities" as one of the top five factors that they would consider when deciding what educational products to purchase. Importantly, among those who chose "child(ren)'s abilities," 67.2% spontaneously mentioned ability categories related to "strengths" and "weaknesses." Examples included "knowledge that he understands very well" versus "knowledge that he lacks an understanding of" and "areas where he excels" versus "areas where he struggles" (see Web Appendix A).

We propose that when parents perceive high social mobility, they are motivated to pursue higher social status and prioritize status advancement over status maintenance. As a result, they focus on a child's strengths and are more inclined to purchase educational products to enhance the child's gifts and talents. However, when parents perceive low social mobility, they shift their emphasis to status maintenance; therefore, they focus on a child's weaknesses and are more inclined to make purchases to make up for the child's relative deficiencies. Next, we describe the theory behind our propositions and investigate how, when, and why parents' perceived social mobility affects their purchases of educational products.

Theoretical Development

Strength-Focused Versus Weakness-Focused Purchases of Children's Educational Products

Given that education expenses constitute a sizeable portion of families' total spending (Newman, Rosbash, and Zurita 2021), such choices are one of the most important topics in consumer research. Although an increasing amount of research has examined how parents choose children's educational products, empirical evidence remains sparse (Grewal, Meyer, and Mittal 2022).

Extant research has shown that parents' preferences for their children's educational products are primarily shaped by their values, beliefs, and observations of the surrounding world (Durante et al. 2015; Jung and Mittal 2021; Mukhopadhyay and Yeung 2010; Nikiforidis et al. 2018; Tu, Kwon, and Gao 2021). For instance, conservative parents prefer conformance-oriented supplemental educational programs that clearly define tasks and expectations over independence-oriented ones that emphasize self-pacing, experimentation, and flexibility because they strongly desire structure (Jung and Mittal 2021). Also, parents with lower power distance belief levels, defined as one's level of acceptance of power disparity in society (Hofstede 2001), prefer educational products with affective (vs. cognitive) appeals because they focus on the process (vs. outcome) of learning (Tu, Kwon, and Gao 2021). Against this backdrop, our research examines the influence of one of the most important social beliefs—perceived social mobility—on parents' preferences between two types of educational purchases: strength-focused purchases and weakness-focused purchases.

In our definition, parents make strength-focused purchases with the intention of developing the talents and strengths of a child so that the child can excel in certain aspects. By comparison, they make weakness-focused purchases with the intention of remedying the child's weaknesses or deficiencies so that the child will not suffer because of them. Notably, we make this distinction based on parents' intentions, that is, their educational purposes when purchasing the product. We study why, in some cases, parents prefer to purchase products to enhance a child's strengths, such as genius basketball camps and math Olympiad programs, whereas in other instances, they prefer to purchase products to remedy a child's weaknesses, such as remedial math programs and ADHD treatment camps. Note that whether parents consider one aspect as the child's strength or weakness is subjective and may be affected by a variety of factors, including the benchmark of comparisons and the level of parents' own expectations. Instead of examining how parents form their perceptions of their child's strengths and weaknesses, we focus on how parents prioritize between strength-focused and weakness-focused purchases, assuming that they already have a perception of their child's strengths and weaknesses, regardless of how the perceptions are formed or whether such perceptions are accurate.

Echoing education and marketing practices, the distinction between strength-focused and weakness-focused purchases is consistent with the standard approach of diagnosing a child's abilities (e.g., Sheely-Moore and Bratton 2010; Steiner 2011; Waters 2015). This distinction is also well grounded in pedagogical theories (e.g., Lopez and Louis 2009; Waters, Loton, and Jach 2019) and is often the starting point in educational product design and positioning. For example, education experts have long debated whether strength-focused or weakness-focused education is better in different contexts (e.g., school, family) (Faigenbaum et al. 2015; Hiemstra and Yperen 2015; Hurlock 1925; Lopez and Louis 2009; Sheely-Moore and Bratton 2010; Steiner 2011). Lea Waters, a prominent education expert, authored a worldwide best-seller book titled *The Strength Switch* (Waters 2017), teaching

parents to utilize the science of strength-focused parenting to help their children flourish. By contrast, Tutor Doctor, one of the most successful online tutoring companies, advertises based on the notion that “not all minds that wander are absent” (Tutor Doctor Boulder 2018) and features tutoring programs that focus on students’ weaknesses and fill their learning gaps.

Although the strength versus weakness distinction is important for both parents and practitioners, there exists a glaring gap in our understanding of the factors that shape parents’ preferences between strength-focused and weakness-focused purchases. In the present research, we investigate whether and how parents’ beliefs about how society operates and, specifically, their perceived social mobility may impact their preferences. As a core component of one’s worldview (Lin, Hua, and Li 2022), perceived social mobility plays a critical role in individuals’ future-oriented decisions, and that certainly includes decisions related to their child’s education.

Perceived Social Mobility

Perceived social mobility refers to individuals’ beliefs about the degree to which society provides opportunities for its members to achieve higher social status through personal effort (Browman et al. 2017; Chambers, Swan, and Heesacker 2015; Davidai and Gilovich 2015; Kraus and Tan 2015). Whereas individuals with high perceived social mobility believe that higher social status is achievable through effort, those with low perceived social mobility expect that the chance of elevating social standing through effort is minimal (Browman et al. 2017; Chambers, Swan, and Heesacker 2015; Yoon and Kim 2016, 2018). Notably, while there is a distinction between social mobility, which is about social status defined by one’s social standing, and economic mobility, which is about economic status defined by one’s wealth and earnings, the two constructs are shown to be highly correlated (Marmot, Kogevinas, and Elston 1987) and are often discussed under the same umbrella of “socio-economic status” (Feinstein 1993; White 1982). Hence, the present investigation treats perceived social mobility and perceived economic mobility as interchangeable constructs. In addition, perceived social mobility, reflecting one’s belief about social mobility, is further distinct from a number of related but different constructs, such as one’s perceived equality and power distance beliefs. Specifically, while perceived social mobility is about the belief in *potential movement* within a social hierarchy, perceived equality is about the perception of the *present state* of society regarding whether there is an unequal distribution of economic resources in society (Ordabayeva and Lisjak 2022). Also, while perceived social mobility focuses on one’s *cognition* of the social hierarchy, specifically whether high social status is achievable, power distance belief is about one’s *attitude* toward the social hierarchy, specifically whether one accepts the power disparity in society (Hofstede 2001).

Perceived social mobility, as an essential component in consumers’ subjective perceptions of society, is shaped by a variety of factors, such as one’s life experiences, current social environment (Day and Fiske 2017; Kraus and Tan 2015), religious

orientation (Reynolds, May, and Xian 2019), and political ideology¹ (Chambers, Swan, and Heesacker 2015; Davidai and Gilovich 2015). The subjective and fluid nature of perceived social mobility enables researchers to alter people’s perceptions in multiple ways, such as providing new information or having them reflect on their own life experiences, to better examine the causal relationships in question.

Prior research has demonstrated that perceived social mobility can affect consumer behaviors in various domains, including self-improvement (Browman et al. 2017, 2019; Hays and Bendersky 2015), variety seeking (Yoon and Kim 2018), financial decisions (Szendrey and Fiala 2018; Yoon and Kim 2016), health behaviors (Weintraub et al. 2015), and political activities (Alesina and La Ferrara 2005; Day and Fiske 2017). An important takeaway from the literature is that consumers adjust their life goals, plans, and strategies based on their analyses and perceptions of social mobility. For example, high perceived social mobility motivates materialistic consumers to sacrifice short-term pleasure for long-term financial success and thus spend less on impulsive consumption (Yoon and Kim 2016). Because parents’ educational purchases derive from their fundamental goals and constitute a significant part of their life investment, it is reasonable to assume that perceived social mobility should also play a nontrivial goal in these choices.

Perceived Social Mobility, Status Goals, and Purchases of Children’s Educational Products

Parents invest in their child’s education with the hope that the child will achieve a desirable social standing in adulthood. Thus, how parents view society and the life that they envision for their child will jointly influence their educational decisions. Specific to this research, we propose that when parents perceive social mobility to be high (vs. low), they prioritize a status advancement goal (vs. a status maintenance goal) and, in turn, show a greater preference for strength-focused (vs. weakness-focused) purchases.

Consumers prioritize goals because resources, such as time and money, are limited (Dhar and Simonson 1999; Fernbach, Kan, and Lynch 2015), and these prioritization strategies are often based on an assessment of the surrounding opportunities and threats (Durante et al. 2015; Hays and Bendersky 2015). Perceived social mobility reflects the opportunities to move

¹ Prior work suggests that conservatives (vs. liberals) have higher perceived social mobility because they are motivated to use high perceived social mobility to justify the existence of social hierarchy and inequality (Chambers et al. 2015; Davidai and Gilovich 2015). Although there is a correlation between perceived social mobility and political ideology, they are distinct constructs. Political ideology refers to generalized *personality orientations* (Kruglanski 1996, 1999) that explain one’s beliefs about how society should function in order to achieve social justice and social order (Kidwell, Farmer, and Hardesty 2013). To demonstrate that political ideology does not have the same effect on our focal dependent variable as perceived social mobility, we measured political ideology in both Study 2c and Supplemental Study 1. We report the results of Study 2c in Web Appendix H and the results of Supplemental Study 1 in Web Appendix B.

up the social ladder. Notably, although the term “mobility” may imply movement in both upward and downward directions, studies have found that individual perceptions of social mobility are mostly unidirectional with an emphasis on *upward* mobility (e.g., Browman et al. 2017; Davidai and Gilovich 2015; Davidai and Wienk 2021). Therefore, we propose that with high perceived social mobility, consumers see opportunities to move up and, therefore, put greater emphasis on status advancement relative to status maintenance. In contrast, when perceiving low social mobility, consumers see that upward mobility is less achievable and that it would be difficult to regain their current status once they slide down to a lower tier. As consumers think about losing their current status, they shift focus from status advancement to status maintenance.

Furthermore, the prioritization of status goals would influence how parents strategically plan for their child’s education. When considering status advancement, parents focus on what will enable their child to move upward: having exceptional strengths and talents. In contrast, when thinking about status maintenance, parents focus on what may lead to a downward slide: having notable deficiencies and weaknesses. This asymmetrical attention to a child’s strength or weakness, in turn, underlies parents’ educational purchases. This logic echoes the literature on consumers’ general regulatory orientation and approaching versus avoidance strategies (Higgins 1998). Specifically, prioritizing the status advancement goal can be a manifestation of the general promotion orientation in the status domain as it is about approaching a positive outcome. Therefore, when thinking about status advancement, parents display a promotion orientation and become more sensitive to positive information related to the outcome—the child’s strengths—and tend to eagerly pursue this goal by proactive strategies (Lee and Higgins 2009). As strength-focused education better matches the proactive strategies, parents tend to prefer strength-focused purchases. In contrast, prioritizing the status maintenance goal is the manifestation of the general prevention orientation in the status domain as it is about avoiding a negative outcome (Higgins 1998). Therefore, when thinking about status maintenance, parents display a prevention orientation and are more sensitive to negative information related to this outcome—a child’s weaknesses—and tend to vigilantly pursue this goal by preferring safe and cautious strategies (Lee and Higgins 2009). Because weakness-focused education better matches the cautious strategies, parents tend to prefer weakness-focused purchases. Notably, we reason that perceived social mobility only influences parents’ regulatory orientation in the status domain but does not influence their general regulatory orientation (see empirical evidence in Supplemental Study 1 in Web Appendix B).

In sum, our theory highlights the strategic nature of parents’ educational decisions, showing that their purchases for children’s education are based on their analysis of their chances of achieving their status goals. Formally, we hypothesize:

H₁: Parents’ high (vs. low) perceived social mobility increases their preference for strength-focused purchases relative to weakness-focused purchases.

H₂: The effect in H₁ is mediated by parents’ prioritization of a status advancement goal relative to a status maintenance goal.

Moderation of Status Relevance of Abilities

Different abilities of a child are not equally important for status achievement. Some abilities are perceived to be more important than others, depending on the specific social-cultural environment. For example, in some economies, art and literature are seen as symbols of cultural capital and are highly relevant for social status. In other cultures, performance in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) subjects has a greater impact on one’s social standing. Our conceptualization focuses on how parents maximize the child’s status outcome and suggests that the status relevance of the abilities should be an important moderator for the impact of perceived social mobility. Only when the strength or weakness of the child is relevant for status-related goals are parents’ purchase preferences influenced by their perceived social mobility. This proposition echoes previous literature on goal instrumentality (e.g., Fitzsimons and Shah 2008; Labroo and Kim 2009) that emphasizes the instrumentality of the means as a precondition for the goal to affect the evaluation of the means. Following the same logic, we infer that parents’ status goals, triggered by their perceived social mobility, will affect their purchase preferences for educational products only when parents believe that improving these abilities will benefit status achievement. Formally, we hypothesize:

H₃: The effect in H₁ occurs only when the focal abilities have high relevance to status but not when the focal abilities have low relevance to status.

Moderation of a Prototype of Successful Individuals

Our conceptualization suggests that parents prioritize between strength-focused and weakness-focused purchases to develop their child into a certain type of individual to ensure success in status pursuit. While strength-focused purchases aim to help status advancement by shaping a child into a specialized individual, weakness-focused purchases aim to help status maintenance by shaping a child into a well-rounded person. The underlying assumption is that parents hold a belief that specialized individuals are more likely to succeed in advancing to a higher status and that well-rounded individuals with no glaring deficiency are less likely to fall down the social ladder. Although these specific beliefs have not been empirically tested in prior work to our knowledge, they are implied by the match between individuals’ regulatory orientation and action strategies. In particular, becoming specialized represents a riskier strategy and better matches the promotion orientation of parents with a status advancement goal, whereas becoming well-rounded represents a safer strategy and better matches the prevention orientation of parents with a status maintenance goal (Lee and Higgins 2009).

Along this line of reasoning, it is plausible to expect that directly changing parents' beliefs about which type of people are more likely to succeed, defined as the prototype of successful individuals, should attenuate the effect of perceived social mobility on education purchases. Specifically, we propose that leading parents to believe that specialized individuals are more likely to achieve status success will increase their preferences for strength-focused purchases. In contrast, leading parents to believe that well-rounded individuals are more likely to attain status success will enhance their preferences for weakness-focused purchases, regardless of their perceived social mobility. Formally, we hypothesize:

H₄: When parents believe that specialized individuals have a better chance of status success, they prefer strength-focused purchases over weakness-focused purchases, regardless of their perceived social mobility. In contrast, when parents believe that well-rounded individuals have a better chance of status success, they prefer weakness-focused purchases over strength-focused purchases, regardless of their perceived social mobility.

Overview of Studies

We use a multimethod approach to test our hypotheses and to ascertain their generalizability and robustness. Studies 1a and 1b demonstrate the causal effect of parents' perceived social mobility on their preferences for children's educational purchases (H₁). On this basis, Supplemental Study 2 (see Web Appendix C) utilizes archive data at the country level and provides additional correlational evidence for the positive relationship between parents' perceived social mobility and their focus on children's strengths. Studies 2a–2c demonstrate the underlying mechanism of the prioritization of status goals (H₂) with both incentive-compatible choice and actual expenditure measures and with samples from different countries (i.e., China and the United States). We also demonstrate the proposed effect in general and high-socioeconomic-status populations and in both correlational surveys and controlled experiments. Finally, Studies 3 and 4 examine two theory-derived moderators: the status relevance of a child's strengths and weaknesses (H₃) and successful individuals' prototypes (H₄). Taken together, these studies provide a nuanced understanding of how, why, and when perceived social mobility influences parents' purchase preferences for educational products. Table 1 summarizes all studies.

Study 1a and Study 1b: Perceived Social Mobility Affects Parents' Purchase Preferences

Studies 1a and 1b examine how parents' perceived social mobility affects their preferences for a child's educational purchases (H₁). Specifically, in Study 1a, we manipulated parents' perceived social mobility and measured their allocation of money between strength-focused versus weakness-focused purchases. In Study 1b, we utilized choice questions as dependent

measures and examined parents' preferences for purchases that are by nature either strength-focused or weakness-focused and replicated the focal effect.

Study 1a Method

Design and participants. We aimed to recruit 600 U.S. parents on Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), and 587 parents completed the study ($M_{\text{age}} = 39.07$ years, $SD = 8.53$; 54.0% female, 44.6% male, .7% nonbinary, .7% prefer not to say). We used CloudResearch prescreeners to recruit only parents of child(ren) younger than 18 years of age. The study used a 2 (perceived social mobility: high vs. low) \times 2 (purchase focus: strengths vs. weaknesses) between-subjects design.

Procedure. We informed participants that the study included two parts: The first part was to understand their general reasoning process, and the second part asked about their educational purchase preferences. We manipulated perceived social mobility in the first part. Following prior literature (Yoon and Kim 2016, 2018), participants read the statement "Everyone has a fair chance at moving up the social ladder in this society" and came up with three arguments either supporting this statement in the high perceived social mobility condition or against this statement in the low perceived social mobility condition. A pretest demonstrated the effectiveness of this manipulation (see Web Appendix D). In the second part, we measured participants' preferences for educational purchases. Specifically, we asked about their budget allocation. In the strength condition, participants answered, considering the social situation that they thought about in the first part, how much they would spend on purchases that help develop their child(ren)'s strengths when given a fixed monthly education budget of \$600. In the weakness condition, participants answered a similar question but about purchases that help remedy their child(ren)'s weaknesses. Participants indicated the number of dollars on a slider-bar scale from 0 to 600. For exploratory purposes, we also asked about parents' allocation of effort to either strength-focused education or weakness-focused education and found similar results (see Web Appendix D for the full stimuli and analyses). Finally, we collected their demographic information (see a summary of participants' demographics across all main studies in Web Appendix E).

Study 1a Results

A 2 (perceived social mobility) \times 2 (purchase focus) fixed-effect analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated a significant interaction ($F(1, 583) = 13.88, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .023$). Neither the main effect of perceived social mobility nor the main effect of purchase focus was significant (perceived social mobility: $F(1, 583) = .37, p = .543, \eta_p^2 = .001$; purchase focus: $F(1, 583) = .75, p = .388, \eta_p^2 = .001$). Decomposing the interaction, we found that when parents perceived that social mobility was high (vs. low), they allocated significantly more funds to strength-focused purchases ($M_{\text{high}} = 351.86, SD_{\text{high}} = 162.18$ vs.

Table 1. Empirical Summary.

Study	Design	Main Findings
Studies in the Main Text		
Study 1a	2 (perceived social mobility: high vs. low) \times 2 (purchase focus: strengths vs. weaknesses) between-subjects design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • H_1 was demonstrated.
Study 1b	2-cell (perceived social mobility: high vs. low) between-subjects design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • H_1 was demonstrated.
Study 2a	2-cell (perceived social mobility: high vs. low) between-subjects design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • H_1 and H_2 were demonstrated. • The focal effect (i.e., H_1) was not moderated by the parents' current social status or the child's gender (see Web Appendix F).
Study 2b	Correlational survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • H_1 and H_2 were demonstrated.
Study 2c	Correlational survey among individuals whose annual household income was above \$150,000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • H_1 and H_2 were demonstrated. • Two alternative explanations were ruled out: political ideology and power distance belief (see Web Appendix H). • The focal effect (i.e., H_1) was not moderated by the parents' current social status because the focal effect replicated with the high-socioeconomic-status population.
Study 3	2 (perceived social mobility: low vs. high) \times 2 (purchase focus: strength vs. weakness) \times 2 (status relevance: high vs. low) \times 2 (ability type: art and sports vs. academic and cognitive abilities) between-subjects design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • H_3 was demonstrated.
Study 4	2 (perceived social mobility: high vs. low) \times 3 (successful individuals' prototype: specialized vs. well-rounded vs. control) between-subjects design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • H_4 was demonstrated.
Studies in Web Appendices		
Pilot Study (Web Appendix A)	A survey including both choice and open-ended questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents spontaneously consider a child's strengths and weaknesses when purchasing educational products for the child.
Supplemental Study 1 (Web Appendix B)	2-cell (perceived social mobility: low vs. high) between-subjects design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • H_1 and H_2 were demonstrated. • Three alternative explanations were ruled out: general regulatory focus, political ideology, and power distance belief.
Supplemental Study 2 (Web Appendix C)	Compiled archive data at the country level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partial evidence was provided for H_1: there was a significant positive correlation between high social mobility and the focus on strengths.
Pretest (Web Appendix D)	2-cell (perceived social mobility: low vs. high) between-subjects design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The perceived social mobility manipulation was successful.
Supplemental Study 3 (Web Appendix I)	3-cell (status advancement vs. status maintenance vs. control) between-subjects design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compared with the status maintenance goal, the status advancement goal led parents to have stronger preferences for strength-focused purchases.
Supplemental Study 4 (Web Appendix L)	2 (perceived social mobility: low vs. high) \times 2 (effort dependence: high vs. low) between-subjects design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The focal effect (i.e., H_1) was moderated by effort dependence of the ability dimension.

$M_{low} = 292.70$, $SD_{low} = 162.68$; $F(1, 583) = 9.38$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .016$) but fewer funds to weakness-focused purchases ($M_{high} = 289.23$, $SD_{high} = 170.54$ vs. $M_{low} = 331.77$, $SD_{low} = 165.89$; $F(1, 583) = 4.86$, $p = .028$, $\eta_p^2 = .008$). These results confirm H_1 .

Study 1b Method

Design and participants. We planned to recruit 800 parents and collected complete responses from 785 parents ($M_{age} = 34.37$ years, $SD = 7.59$; 62.3% female, 37.7% male) in China on Credamo, a professional data collection platform. We used a prescreener to recruit participants who had at least one child

under 18 years of age. The study used a 2-cell (perceived social mobility: high vs. low) between-subjects design. We also counterbalanced the domain of strength and weakness of the child to control for the possible effect of a specific domain of abilities. Specifically, participants either learned that their child's strength was mathematical and logical thinking and their child's weakness was language and communication skills, or the other way around.

Procedure. Similar to Study 1a, participants read that the study included two parts. We manipulated perceived social mobility in the first part. In the high perceived social mobility condition,

participants imagined being in a society where social mobility was high, individuals could achieve higher social status by working hard, and individuals' social status was mostly decided by their abilities, effort, and opportunities rather than their family background and place of origin. In contrast, in the low perceived social mobility condition, participants imagined being in a society where social mobility was low, individuals could not easily achieve higher social status by working hard, and individuals' social status was mostly decided by their family background and place of origin rather than their abilities, effort, and opportunities. Participants wrote down how they would feel as a member of the described society.

Next, participants entered the second part, in which they continued imagining being in the described society while making choices about educational products for their child. They were told that their child's strength was either mathematical and logical thinking (weakness was language and communication skills) or language and communication skills (weakness was mathematical and logical thinking). To measure their purchase preference, we first asked them in which domain they would choose to purchase the educational product, between mathematical and logical thinking or language and communication skills. Notably, their choices were coded as 0 = "strength-related domain" and 1 = "weakness-related domain," which served as our first dependent measure. We expected that more parents in the high (vs. low) perceived social mobility condition would choose the strength (vs. weakness) domain. Then, participants were asked to choose between two products in the chosen domain: (1) a strength-focused product targeted at solving challenging problems and making breakthroughs (e.g., "Math Challenge Tour") or (2) a more weakness-focused product targeted at filling learning gaps and laying a solid foundation (e.g., "Math Easy Pass") (see Web Appendix D). Our goal was to test whether perceived social mobility would lead parents, after deciding on the focal ability domain, to choose the education product that had specific features that were more strength-focused or more weakness-focused in the chosen domain. Finally, we collected participants' demographics.

Study 1b Results

First, we analyzed the effect of perceived social mobility on which domain parents would choose. A logistic regression revealed that high (vs. low) perceived social mobility led significantly more parents to choose the strength-related domain (fewer parents to choose the weakness-related domain) (56.06% vs. 34.70%; $\chi^2(1) = 36.05$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .214$). This result provides support for H_1 . In addition, we examined the effect of perceived social mobility on the choice of the specific features of the product. Among parents who chose the math game, we found that more parents with high (vs. low) perceived social mobility chose the strength-focused math game (63.94% vs. 44.97%; $\chi^2(1) = 13.59$, $p < .001$, $\phi = .190$). Similarly, among parents who chose the language game, we found that more parents with high (vs. low) perceived social mobility chose the strength-focused language game (60.64% vs.

45.91%; $\chi^2(1) = 8.82$, $p = .003$, $\phi = .147$). Combined, these results demonstrate that high (vs. low) perceived social mobility led more parents to choose the product featuring a strength-focused (vs. weakness-focused) approach to enhance a child's strength (vs. weakness).

Studies 1a and 1b Discussion

In summary, Studies 1a and 1b supported H_1 with different forms of dependent measures. Next, we tested the mediation of prioritization of status goals (H_2) in Studies 2a–2c.

Studies 2a–2c: Prioritization of Status Goals as a Process

Studies 2a–2c test the prioritization of status goals as a psychological process. We recruited samples from both general and high-socioeconomic-status populations and used both actual spending and incentive-compatible choice measures to enhance the external validity.

We were interested in whether the socioeconomic status of parents would interfere with our focal effects. Prior work has demonstrated that individuals with different levels of socioeconomic status may react differently to status goals. For example, a status maintenance goal may be more salient for high-socioeconomic-status consumers than for low-socioeconomic-status consumers (Kim, Park, and Dubois 2018). While we acknowledge this possibility, we argue that this disparity is orthogonal to perceived social mobility, and socioeconomic status should not impact the effect of perceived social mobility on parents' prioritization of status goals. Specifically, we expect that regardless of socioeconomic status, high perceived social mobility would lead consumers to focus on status advancement, whereas low perceived social mobility would lead them to focus on status maintenance. This line of reasoning has been supported in prior findings. A survey of 4,000 millionaires confirmed that even better-off people often make upward social comparisons and associate stronger happiness with increased wealth and higher status (Donnelly et al. 2018). Similarly, with low perceived social mobility, consumers across all social rankings have less hope of moving up the social ladder and are inclined to put more effort into disassociating from lower social classes and thus focus on status maintenance (Drèze and Nunes 2009; Han, Nunes, and Drèze 2010). To empirically test whether socioeconomic status affects our focal effects, we included measures of social status in Study 2a to determine if there is any interaction. Finally, we recruited only participants with high socioeconomic status in Study 2c to determine whether the focal effects persist for this group.

Study 2a Method

Design and participants. In this study, we manipulated perceived social mobility and used an incentive-compatible dependent measure. This study had a 2-cell (perceived social mobility: high vs. low) between-subjects design. A total of 450 U.S. parents who had at least one child under 18 years of age

(prescreened using a platform filter; $M_{\text{age}} = 37.57$ years, $SD = 8.20$; 64.2% female, 35.6% male, .2% transgender, 0% other, 0% prefer not to indicate) participated on MTurk.

Procedure. First, participants completed the same reasoning task as in Study 1a, which served to manipulate perceived social mobility. Then, they answered questions about their prioritization of status goals. Specifically, they were told that the researchers were interested in their life priorities and were asked to rate the relative importance between two goals on a seven-point scale (1 = “definitely A is more important to me,” and 7 = “definitely B is more important to me”). There were two pairs of goals. The first pair was A = “I wish to maintain my current status on the social ladder and not to fall to a lower social position” and B = “I wish to move upwards to a higher status along the social ladder”; the second pair was A = “I intend to put most of my efforts into maintaining my current social status and to avoid falling to a lower social position” and B = “I intend to put most of my efforts into moving up to a higher social position.” Higher averaged ratings on these two items ($r = .80$, $p < .001$) indicated a higher emphasis on status advancement relative to status maintenance.

Next, we invited participants to enter a lottery for a thank-you gift, which served as the main dependent measure to capture their product preferences with real consequences. They were told that there would be five lottery winners, and each winner would receive a children’s educational book worth \$30. If they agreed to participate, we asked them to tell us more about the child who would use the book. They wrote the child’s first name, one aspect the child was good at (i.e., strength), and another aspect the child needed some help with (i.e., weakness). We reminded them that these aspects could be an academic subject (e.g., math), cognitive ability (e.g., sense of direction), or hobby and specialty (e.g., dancing). We report examples of what participants wrote down in Web Appendix F. There was no systematic difference in these aspects across conditions. Participants then indicated which children’s educational book they would like to receive if they won the lottery. The two options included “A book helping him/her further strengthen the aspect s/he is good at” or “A book helping him/her improve the aspect that s/he might need some help with.” This choice served as the dependent measure.

Finally, we assessed the participants’ current social status using the MacArthur scale (Adler et al. 2000; Kim, Park, and Dubois 2018; Web Appendix F), embedded among other demographic questions. After collecting the data, we randomly selected five participants as lottery winners and emailed them to give them an Amazon e-gift card worth \$30.

Study 2a Results

Educational purchases. A total of 329 participants out of 450 ($M_{\text{age}} = 37.03$ years, $SD = 7.77$; 67.8% female, 31.9% male, .3% transgender, 0% other, 0% prefer not to say) participated in the lottery, and the dropout rates did not differ across conditions (26.32% vs. 27.48%; $B = -.06$, $SE = .21$, Wald $\chi^2(1) =$

.08, $p = .781$, $OR = .943$). Logistic regression with perceived social mobility as the independent variable and choice of book as the dependent variable showed that parents with high (vs. low) perceived social mobility were significantly more likely to select a strength-focused book (less likely to select a weakness-focused book) (52.38% vs. 38.51%; $B = .56$, $SE = .22$, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 6.33$, $p = .012$, $OR = 1.756$).

Prioritization of status goals as the underlying process. Parents with high (vs. low) perceived social mobility reported a significantly greater prioritization of the status advancement goal relative to the status maintenance goal ($M_{\text{high}} = 4.19$, $SD_{\text{high}} = 1.67$ vs. $M_{\text{low}} = 3.78$, $SD_{\text{low}} = 1.71$; $F(1, 448) = 6.57$, $p = .011$, $\eta_p^2 = .014$). Further, we conducted path analyses (Hayes 2017, PROCESS Model 4) to test H_2 , the mediation of prioritization of status goals. The results showed that prioritization of status goals significantly mediated the impact of perceived social mobility on their educational book choice (indirect effect = .08, $SE = .05$, 95% $CI = [.006, .179]$). Taken together, this evidence suggests that the prioritization of status goals is the underlying process.

Current social status and child’s gender. Finally, we examined whether the parents’ current social status or the child’s gender moderated the effect of parents’ perceived social mobility on their educational purchases. The results supported neither possibility (see Web Appendix G).

Study 2b Method

In Study 2b, we collaborated with a middle school in China and surveyed parents of ninth-grade students. According to the China Education Panel Survey (2013–2014) of 17,840 Chinese parents of ninth-grade students (i.e., the highest middle school grade), a typical Chinese family spends an average of 1,270 RMB (U.S. \$200) per semester on one child’s after-school classes, easily taking up the largest portion of a family’s education budget. Therefore, the amount parents spend on strength-focused classes versus weakness-focused classes should serve as a reliable indicator of their purchase preferences.

Design and participants. To recruit participants, we contacted the teachers’ union in a middle school located in a large city in China, and the teachers distributed the survey to parents of students in their classes. Parents participated voluntarily. We aimed to recruit 200 participants and ended up with a sample of 199 parents ($M_{\text{age}} = 41.37$ years, $SD = 3.90$; 71.4% female; 28.6% male). In this survey, we measured parents’ perceived social mobility, their prioritization of status goals, and their actual expenditure on after-school classes.

Procedure. We first measured perceived social mobility using an eight-item scale (e.g., “Hard work equals success describes the way society works”; $\alpha = .78$; Yoon and Wong 2018; Web Appendix G). We then measured participants’ prioritization of

status goals using two questions. Question 1 focused on personal life goals. Participants indicated which one of the two goals was more consistent with their own goal (A = “maintaining the current social standing,” and B = “moving upwards to a higher social standing”). Question 2 focused on goals related to children’s education. Participants indicated which of the two goals better described their goal for their child’s education (A = “S/he gets a good education so s/he will have a steady job, enjoy a reasonably comfortable life, and not fall to a lower social standing,” and B = “S/he gets a good education so s/he will have a successful career, enjoy a higher quality of life, and achieve a higher social standing”). Participants’ answers to both questions on a seven-point scale were combined into a single status goal index ($r = .42, p < .001$).

Next, we asked participants to provide more information about their child. In an open-ended question, participants listed *one* domain in which their child showed obvious talent. We report examples of the domains that participants wrote in Web Appendix G. Then, participants indicated whether they had enrolled in any after-school classes for their child to develop this talent further (“yes” or “no”). If they chose “yes,” they indicated how much they spent on these classes each month, on average, in the past year. Similarly, we asked participants to list *one* domain in which the child showed relative deficiency and to answer similar questions about after-school classes that focused on this weakness. To illustrate, we asked them to list only *one* strength and *one* weakness to control the survey length, avoid attrition, and make their expenditures on strength-focused and weakness-focused classes less impacted by the actual number of strengths and weaknesses that their child had.

Study 2b Results

Educational purchase preferences. Because the reported expenditure on after-school classes was highly skewed (skewness > 1), we log-transformed the reported expenditure. Moreover, to concentrate on parents’ relative focus between strengths and weaknesses and control for their overall willingness to invest in their children’s education, we followed prior research (Kim, Park, and Dubois 2018) to calculate the difference between the log-transformed expenditure on the two types of classes as the Strength–Weakness Difference Index (SWDI). A higher SWDI represents a greater preference for strength-focused classes relative to weakness-focused classes. We then ran a regression with perceived social mobility as the independent variable and SWDI as the dependent variable. The results showed that perceived social mobility positively predicted SWDI ($\beta = .30, t(197) = 4.46, p < .001$), suggesting that the higher the perceived social mobility of parents, the more they spent on strength-focused classes relative to weakness-focused classes. Further, we found that perceived social mobility significantly positively predicted the expenditure on strength-focused classes ($\beta = .16, t(197) = 2.23, p = .027$) and negatively predicted the expenditure on weakness-focused classes ($\beta = -.26, t(197) = -3.78, p < .001$), respectively. Together, these results confirm H_1 .

Prioritization of status goals as the process. We examined whether perceived social mobility predicted parents’ prioritization of status goals. A regression analysis yielded a significant positive effect of perceived social mobility ($\beta = .38, t(197) = 5.75, p < .001$). This indicated that higher perceived social mobility of parents was associated with greater prioritization of the status advancement goal over the status maintenance goal. Finally, we tested the mediation of prioritization of status goals (Hayes 2017, PROCESS Model 4) and found it to be significant (indirect effect = .13, SE = .05, 95% CI = [.035, .241]). Thus, H_2 is confirmed.

Study 2c Method

Given that parents’ perceived social mobility influences their status goals, as demonstrated previously, one might wonder if parents’ perceived social mobility would affect their educational preferences when they already have a high social standing. In Study 2c, we aim to assess the generalizability of our findings with a high-socioeconomic-status population. We recruited participants whose annual household income was above \$150,000 because the Pew Research Center defines the upper class as those having an annual income of \$156,600 or above for a U.S. household of three (Kochhar and Sechopoulos 2022).

Design and participants. We collected data from 200 U.S. parents who had at least one child under 18 years of age and whose household income was above \$150,000 in the last 12 months on Connect (i.e., a data collection platform powered by CloudResearch) ($M_{\text{age}} = 41.30$ years, $SD = 8.20$; 43.5% female, 56.0% male, .5% nonbinary, 0% prefer not to say). As in Study 2b, parents completed measures of perceived social mobility, prioritization of status goals, and educational purchase preferences.

Procedure. Unlike Study 2b, participants completed three sets of measures (perceived social mobility, prioritization of status goals, and purchase preferences) in random order to control for any sequential effect. We adopted the same measures in Study 2b to capture perceived social mobility ($\alpha = .91$). For status goals, the measures included five items ($\alpha = .76$) on a seven-point scale. Each measure consisted of a pair of goals (e.g., “maintaining my current status/achieving higher status”; see Web Appendix H). A higher rating indicated a greater emphasis on the status advancement goal relative to the status maintenance goal. For purchase preferences, we first provided the definitions of both strength-focused purchases and weakness-focused purchases. Then, participants answered which type of purchase they preferred to make for their child(ren) and ranked, on a seven-point scale, which one they would spend more money on when given a fixed budget for their children’s education (1 = “weakness-focused,” and 7 = “strength-focused”; $r = .88, p < .001$). Finally, we measured their political ideology, power distance belief (Zhang, Winterich, and Mittal 2010), and other demographic variables.

None of the items alternatively explained the focal effects (see Web Appendix H).

Study 2c Results

First, we found that for high-socioeconomic-status parents, perceived social mobility still positively predicted both their preference for strength-focused (vs. weakness-focused) purchases ($\beta = .22$, $t(198) = 3.11$, $p = .002$) and their prioritization of the status advancement goal (vs. status maintenance goal) ($\beta = .28$, $t(198) = 4.14$, $p < .001$). Further, we used PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes 2017) to examine the mediation of prioritization of status goals. The results showed that the effect of perceived social mobility on purchase preferences was significantly mediated by prioritization of status goals even for high-socioeconomic-status parents (indirect effect = .09, SE = .04, 95% CI = [.026, .174]), confirming H₂.

Studies 2a–2c Discussion

Studies 2a–2c supported the effect of parents' perceived social mobility on their purchase preferences for children's educational products (H₁) and the mediational role of status goals (H₂) with both controlled experiments and correlational surveys. To improve external validity, this set of studies used both incentive-compatible choice and actual spending measures and both general and high-socioeconomic-status samples. We also demonstrate the effect of parents' status goals on their purchase preferences in a field study in collaboration with an art club (see Web Appendix I for details).

Study 3: Moderation of Status Relevance of Abilities

Behind our theory that status motivation lies behind parents' investment in their child's education is the assumption that the abilities that parents hope their child will develop (strengths or weaknesses) are relevant and useful for future status pursuit. When these abilities bear little relevance to success in status achievement, our proposed effect should be attenuated.

Method

Participants and design. This study adopted a 2 (perceived social mobility: low vs. high) \times 2 (purchase focus: strength vs. weakness) \times 2 (status relevance: high vs. low) \times 2 (type of ability: art and sports vs. academic and cognitive abilities) between-subjects design. We varied the ability type to be either art and sports or academic and cognitive abilities to explore whether the focal effect persists across different types of abilities. We aimed for 800 participants, and a total of 775 U.S. parents with at least one child under 18 years of age (prescreened using a platform filter; $M_{\text{age}} = 38.33$ years, $SD = 8.73$; 57.4% female, 42.1% male, .3% nonbinary, .1% prefer not to say) participated on MTurk.

Procedure. We told participants that the study included two parts: a reading task and an educational purchase preference assessment. The first part served to manipulate perceived social mobility (Yoon and Kim 2016, 2018). In the high (low) perceived social mobility condition, participants were asked to read an article that discussed recent research findings showing that Americans experienced higher (lower) social mobility than their peers in Canada and Western Europe (see Web Appendix J). The article was created based on an actual news article discussing the lower social mobility in the United States compared with that in Europe (DeParle 2012). We examined the perceived credibility of articles across conditions in a posttest study and did not find a significant difference (see Web Appendix J). We informed participants that the article was abstracted from a trusted newspaper source to increase credibility. Next, participants proceeded to a second part about their preferences for purchasing educational products, in which we manipulated purchase focus, status relevance, and type of ability. Specifically, we asked participants to imagine that they received the results of their child's ability test from a reputable educational institute and found out that their child outperformed (fell behind) in art and sports (academic and cognitive abilities) but fell behind (outperformed) in some other dimensions. In addition, in the high status relevance condition, we told them that existing research had consistently supported that all these tested abilities had a significantly positive impact on their child's future success and status achievement. In the low status relevance condition, we told them that there was no clear evidence that any of these abilities had a significant impact on their child's future success and status achievement.

Then, the same as in Study 1a, participants answered a question about their willingness to allocate funds to purchase educational products to develop their child's abilities in either art and sports or academic and cognitive abilities from a fixed budget (i.e., \$600) for all educational purchases, including those for improving other tested abilities. For exploratory purposes, we also included a similar question about their effort allocation (see Web Appendix J). Finally, we included manipulation checks of perceived social mobility and status relevance (i.e., "To what extent will these abilities have an impact on your child(ren)'s future status?"; 1 = "not at all," and 7 = "to a great extent") and demographic measures.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation checks. First, parents in the high (vs. low) perceived social mobility condition perceived that social mobility was significantly higher ($M_{\text{high}} = 4.67$, $SD_{\text{high}} = 1.16$ vs. $M_{\text{low}} = 3.31$, $SD_{\text{low}} = 1.24$; $F(1, 759) = 247.09$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .246$). In addition, parents in the high (vs. low) status relevance condition perceived that these abilities were significantly more impactful on their child's future status ($M_{\text{high}} = 5.57$, $SD_{\text{high}} = 1.27$ vs. $M_{\text{low}} = 3.11$, $SD_{\text{low}} = 1.88$; $F(1, 759) = 463.02$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .379$). Other main effects and interaction effects of the manipulation check analyses were reported in Web Appendix J.

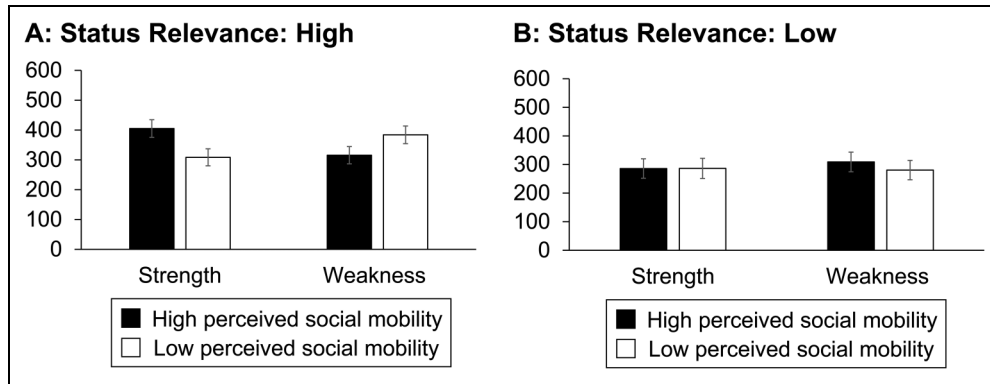


Figure 1. Fund Allocation as a Function of Perceived Social Mobility, Purchase Focus, and Status Relevance of Abilities (Study 3).

Educational purchase preference. A 2 (perceived social mobility) \times 2 (purchase focus) \times 2 (status relevance) \times 2 (type of ability) fixed-effect ANOVA revealed a significant three-way (perceived social mobility \times purchase focus \times status relevance) interaction ($F(1, 759) = 19.14, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .025$). This three-way interaction was not further moderated by the type of ability ($F(1, 759) = 1.07, p = .301, \eta_p^2 = .001$). These results suggest that the effects of perceived social mobility, purchase focus, and status relevance are consistent for both art and sports and academic and cognitive abilities. Hence, we collapsed the type of ability factor.

Then, we ran a 2 (perceived social mobility) \times 2 (purchase focus) \times 2 (status relevance) fixed-effect ANOVA and found a significant main effect of status relevance ($F(1, 767) = 29.81, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .037$) and a significant interaction between perceived social mobility and purchase focus ($F(1, 767) = 8.74, p = .003, \eta_p^2 = .011$), which were qualified by a significant three-way interaction ($F(1, 767) = 17.73, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .023$). Other effects were nonsignificant (all $ps > .100$). Further, when abilities were of high status relevance, the two-way interaction between perceived social mobility and purchase focus was significant ($F(1, 383) = 30.73, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .074$; Figure 1, Panel A). Parents with high (vs. low) perceived social mobility allocated more funds to strength-focused purchases ($M_{\text{high}} = 405.07, SD_{\text{high}} = 144.03$ vs. $M_{\text{low}} = 308.50, SD_{\text{low}} = 158.55$; $F(1, 383) = 21.24, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .053$) and fewer funds to weakness-focused purchases ($M_{\text{high}} = 315.64, SD_{\text{high}} = 148.56$ vs. $M_{\text{low}} = 383.95, SD_{\text{low}} = 131.36$; $F(1, 383) = 10.47, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .027$), confirming H_1 . However, when abilities were of low status relevance, the interaction between perceived social mobility and purchase focus was nonsignificant ($F(1, 384) = .68, p = .412, \eta_p^2 = .002$; Figure 1, Panel B). This finding suggests that when developing children's abilities cannot help with status pursuit, perceived social mobility does not influence parents' preferences for purchasing educational products.

Taken together, this study demonstrates the moderation effect of status relevance of abilities (H_3). The findings provide further support for our conceptualization that parents' status motivation lies behind their preferences for strength-focused or weakness-focused purchases.

Study 4: Moderation of the Prototype of Successful Individuals

The assumption underlying our theory is that parents invest in their children's education with the hope that their children will succeed in their pursuit of status. Thus, high perceived social mobility leads parents to prefer strength-focused purchases because they prioritize the status advancement goal and believe that a specialized person is more likely to succeed in achieving this goal. Similarly, low perceived social mobility causes parents to prefer weakness-focused purchases because they prioritize the status maintenance goal and believe that a well-rounded individual is better at achieving this goal. Thus, if our theory holds, then when we experimentally manipulate parents' beliefs of which type of individuals are more likely to succeed in status achievement, this belief should affect their education choices directly, attenuating the effect of perceived social mobility. Study 4 tests this possibility (H_4).

Method

Design and participants. Study 4 used a 2 (perceived social mobility: high vs. low) \times 3 (prototype of successful individuals: specialized vs. well-rounded vs. control) between-subjects design. We requested 600 U.S. parents with at least one child under 18 years of age (prescreened using a platform filter), and 593 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 38.33$ years, $SD = 8.73$; 58.0% female, 40.1% male, 1.2% nonbinary, .7% prefer not to say) completed the study on MTurk.

Procedure. We manipulated both perceived social mobility and the prototype of successful individuals in a description of a society and asked participants to imagine being a member of this society. In the high (low) perceived social mobility condition, participants imagined living in a society where social mobility was very high (low). Specifically, society provided enough (very few) opportunities to move up the social ladder for those who were willing to work hard. In the specialized (well-rounded) condition, participants read profiles of successful people in the society, demonstrating that successful

individuals usually have a set of unique talents and specializations (are well-rounded without obvious deficiencies), and being specialized (well-rounded) is more important for success than being well-rounded (specialized). Web Appendix K presents the full stimuli. In the control condition, participants did not read any information about a prototype of successful individuals. Next, we measured parents' preferences for purchasing children's educational products when they were a member of the described society. Three measures were taken on a seven-point scale (1 = "weakness-focused," and 7 = "strength-focused"): "Which one do you think your child(ren) needs more?"; "Which one do you prefer?"; and "Which one will you spend more money on?" ($\alpha = .94$). Finally, we measured parents' perceived social mobility as a manipulation check and obtained their demographics.

Results

Manipulation check of perceived social mobility. A 2 (perceived social mobility) \times 3 (prototype of successful individuals) fixed-effect ANOVA showed that only the main effect of perceived social mobility was significant on the perceived social mobility measures ($M_{\text{high}} = 5.18$, $SD_{\text{high}} = 1.24$ vs. $M_{\text{low}} = 3.19$, $SD_{\text{low}} = 1.40$; $F(1, 587) = 335.15$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .363$). The findings confirm the effectiveness of our perceived social mobility manipulation.

Educational purchase preferences. A 2 (perceived social mobility) \times 3 (prototype of successful individuals) fixed-effect ANOVA revealed significant main effects of perceived social mobility ($F(1, 587) = 9.04$, $p = .003$, $\eta_p^2 = .015$) and the prototype of successful individuals ($F(1, 587) = 60.78$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .172$), which were qualified by a significant interaction ($F(1, 587) = 3.83$, $p = .022$, $\eta_p^2 = .013$; Figure 2). In the control condition in which no prototype of successful individuals was manipulated, parents with high (vs. low) perceived social mobility had significantly stronger preferences for strength-focused purchases relative to weakness-focused purchases

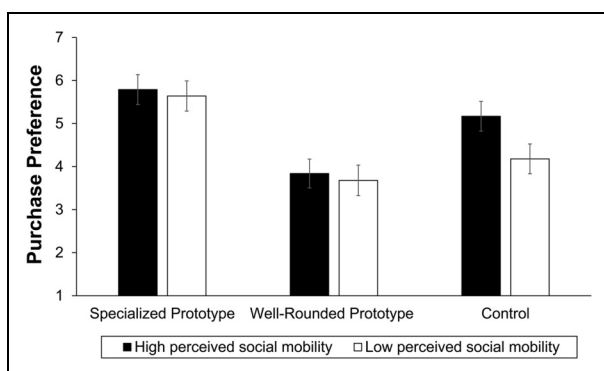


Figure 2. Purchase Preference as a Function of Perceived Social Mobility and the Prototype of Successful Individuals (Study 4). Notes: For purchase preference, 1 indicates weakness-focused purchases, and 7 indicates strength-focused purchases.

($M_{\text{high}} = 5.17$, $SD_{\text{high}} = 1.57$ vs. $M_{\text{low}} = 4.18$, $SD_{\text{low}} = 1.84$; $F(1, 587) = 16.29$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .027$), replicating our main finding (H_1). However, when the prototype of successful individuals was manipulated to be specialized individuals, parents with both high and low perceived social mobility reported similarly strong preferences for strength-focused purchases ($M_{\text{high}} = 5.79$, $SD_{\text{high}} = 1.39$ vs. $M_{\text{low}} = 5.64$, $SD_{\text{low}} = 1.53$; $F(1, 587) = .34$, $p = .559$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$), whereas when the prototype of successful individuals was manipulated to be well-rounded individuals, parents with both high and low perceived social mobility showed similarly strong preferences for weakness-focused purchases ($M_{\text{high}} = 3.84$, $SD_{\text{high}} = 2.03$ vs. $M_{\text{low}} = 3.68$, $SD_{\text{low}} = 2.02$; $F(1, 587) = .40$, $p = .526$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$).

Taken together, these results support H_4 . Our theory assumes that perceived social mobility influences how parents strategically plan for a child's education to maximize the child's chance of achieving status success. Parents believe that different types of purchases, strength-focused or weakness-focused, can help children become specialized or well-rounded individuals who are more likely to achieve status success. By directly manipulating this belief, Study 4 further demonstrates the process and clarifies the rationale of our theory.

General Discussion

Across seven studies, we provide in-depth analyses of how, why, and when parents' perceived social mobility affects their preferences for educational purchases. We then discuss our theoretical contributions, practical implications, limitations, and future research directions.

Theoretical Contributions

Contribution to the marketing literature. First, this research contributes to the growing literature on how parents choose educational products for their children (Grewal, Meyer, and Mittal 2022; Jung and Mittal 2021; Tu, Kwon, and Gao 2021). While prior research has shown the impact of parents' social beliefs and views, such as political ideology and power distance belief, the present research, for the first time, addresses the motivational component behind parents' preferences and reveals the central role that status concerns play in parents' product choices. Simply put, parents purchase educational products for their cross-generation status pursuit. Based on their perceptions of social mobility, they strategically make trade-offs between two status goals and purchase more instrumental products accordingly.

The present research also represents the first attempt to distinguish between strength-focused versus weakness-focused educational purchases. We examined when and why parents prefer one type of purchase over the other and found a significant effect of perceived social mobility and prioritization of status goals. We also examined two theoretically novel and meaningful moderators for this effect: one is about whether parents believe that their child's strengths and weaknesses are relevant to their future status pursuit, and the other is about

parents' lay belief on which type of individuals are more likely to succeed in status achievement. Our exploration of these moderators increases the conceptual clarity of our theory and highlights the strategic nature of parents' investment in their children's education.

Finally, the present research makes an important contribution to the literature on status motivation and consumption. Previous marketing work has examined status motivation as one of the most fundamental motivations influencing consumer behavior (for a review, see Dubois and Ordabayeva 2015). This stream of literature has mainly focused on how status motivation affects consumer consumption *for themselves*, such as luxury goods (e.g., Berger and Ward 2010; Lee and Shrum 2012; Nunes, Drèze, and Han 2011). In contrast, we provide a new perspective to examine how status goals influence consumption *for close others* (Liu, Dallas, and Fitzsimons 2019), specifically consumers' cross-generation status pursuit.

Contribution to other disciplines. We should note the contribution to the psychological research on regulatory orientation by demonstrating specific manifestations in the status and education domain. Our research implies that different regulatory orientations manifest as different status goals and lead to different decisional preferences. We also contribute to the education literature by shedding light on how parents choose between strength-focused and weakness-focused education. Prior education research has extensively discussed whether strength-focused education or weakness-focused education is more productive for children's school performance and mental health (e.g., Waters 2015), but little is known about factors influencing parents' preferences between these two perspectives. Finally, we contribute to sociological and economic research. Extant sociological and economic research has extensively studied the critical role of education for social mobility (e.g., Autor 2014; Chetty et al. 2014; World Economic Forum 2020). However, our research is the first to investigate the reverse causal relationship by showing how perceived social mobility can exert a significant influence on parents' education decisions. In so doing, we advance the knowledge of the dynamics between social mobility and education access and achievement.

Practical Implications

Companies. Our findings provide insights for companies to develop marketing strategies for educational products. First, we help companies understand the different motivations behind parents' educational spending. Companies may apply this knowledge to their product design and versioning. For example, when launching new products, companies may offer both a strength-focused version and a weakness-focused version to satisfy parents' different purchase preferences, such as both "struggler" and "genius" reading summer camps. In addition, companies can tailor the communication strategy to magnify the core education focus to facilitate parents' purchase decision-making process. Second, our findings provide insights into market segmentation and targeting. Specifically, companies

may utilize publicly available data sets, such as the Global Database on Intergenerational Mobility, Opportunity Insights (e.g., the social mobility map), and Global Social Mobility Index by the World Economic Forum (2020), to estimate the perceived social mobility of consumers in different countries or regions and design marketing campaigns to position their products as either "strength-focused" or "weakness-focused."

Firms' marketing communication strategies can also benefit from the insights in this study. Marketers can prompt status goals and match the status goal with the educational products being promoted. For example, when the focal product is strength-focused (weakness-focused), marketers should align the theme of their marketing campaigns with status advancement (maintenance). For example, education companies could advertise slogans such as "Help your child climb the social ladder" to trigger parents' status advancement goal. Moreover, companies may match their products with the prototypes of successful individuals to promote products better. For example, when promoting strength-focused products, it may be more effective to emphasize the specialized prototype (e.g., tell stories about how individuals with specialized abilities achieve success by being talented in one area). In contrast, when promoting weakness-focused products, marketers can emphasize the well-rounded prototype (e.g., tell stories about how well-rounded individuals achieve success by being balanced and nearly flawless).

Policy makers. The findings of the present research also provide critical insights for policy makers on how to better work with parents to improve education outcomes. Notably, our data are from both the United States (ranked No. 27 among 82 countries in terms of social mobility as researched by the World Economic Forum 2020) and China (ranked No. 45; World Economic Forum 2020). The consistent findings suggest that the implications can be generalized to countries with different levels of social mobility. Although education is a key factor in achieving upward mobility in all corners of the world (e.g., Autor 2014; Chetty et al. 2014), low social mobility has been shown to demotivate students from pursuing competitive academic performance (Browman et al. 2017, 2019). It can also deter parents from taking financial responsibility for supporting a child's education (Wen and Witteveen 2021).

Importantly, our findings seem to suggest that there may be a glaring mismatch between individuals' perceived social mobility and the common education philosophy in schools in the United States (and many other parts of the world), which could potentially hurt education outcomes. For instance, although social mobility in the United States has recently decreased (Rank and Eppard 2021), strength-focused education remains highly dominant across all states (Cornwall 2018). As the social perceptions and realities change, policy makers may consider more active involvement in resolving this conflict. For example, policy makers may wish to better communicate with parents about the benefits of maintaining a good balance between strength-focused and weakness-focused education. They may also urge schools to have open conversations with parents about providing coordinated school and family

education. In the long run, policy makers may need to work on providing more opportunities and resources to supplement parents' resources, so children have another source to rely on to fulfill their potential and attain better education outcomes.

Consumers. Our findings can make parents aware of how their status motivations shape their education focus and spending on educational products in a prominent way. This awareness may prompt parents to reconsider their educational choices and become more mindful of the influence of their perceptions of society. For instance, since strength-focused pedagogy is prevalent in U.S. education, parents with low perceived social mobility should consider that their relative focus on weaknesses may not fit with the philosophy of school education. In contrast, because Chinese culture has traditionally put more emphasis on well-rounded development, Chinese parents with high perceived social mobility may need to pay attention to the mismatch between their preference for strength-focused education and the public education system. In any case, the conflict between family education and school education may cause confusion and burden to their children. To achieve better outcomes, parents need to coordinate their education focus with the education approach in their children's schools to achieve the right balance.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Limitations. As the first marketing research distinguishing between strength-focused and weakness-focused purchases, our research leaves several puzzles unsolved. One important question is how parents assess their child's abilities and form perceptions of a child's strengths and weaknesses. This assessment could come from social comparison or a fixed inner standard. It is, therefore, possible that how parents formed these perceptions may have an impact. For example, the perceptions of strengths and weaknesses formed based on social comparison (vs. fixed inner standard) may be even more susceptible to perceived social mobility and status goals, as status and social hierarchy are built on comparative relations and are inherently social. It could also be possible that perceived social mobility may work backward and influence how parents conduct social comparisons and assess the abilities of their child. For instance, high perceived social mobility may lead parents to compare a child to peers who are much better than the child because they focus on approaching desirable goals, whereas low perceived social mobility may lead parents to compare a child with similar peers because they aim to maintain the status quo. Future research can extend our investigation by answering these questions.

Related constructs and their influences. Besides perceptions about whether society allows one to advance one's social standing, parents may also hold different beliefs about whether one can improve an ability. The concept of growth versus fixed mindset (Dweck and Leggett 1988), for example, depicts two contrasting views. With a growth (vs. fixed) mindset, parents may believe that a child's abilities are more malleable. Therefore, parents may be more willing to adjust their education

focus to help maximize the child's ability and, as a result, improve the likelihood of success. We provide evidence for this inference by testing the effect of effort dependence of strengths and weaknesses (see Web Appendix L). We found that when parents believed that these abilities *could* be enhanced by effort, perceived social mobility influenced parents' purchase preferences as predicted by our theory. However, when parents believed that these abilities were relatively fixed and were not likely to improve through effort, they became indifferent to the different types of purchases. Finally, note that we ruled out the effects of both political ideology and power distance belief by demonstrating that they did not exert a systematic influence on parents' preferences between strength-focused and weakness-focused purchases (see Web Appendix L).

What else influences parents' preference between strength-focused and weakness-focused educational purchases? We by no means see perceived social mobility as the only factor that impacts one's educational emphasis and believe that a number of other factors may also contribute to parents' relative priority. For example, parents play different roles in a family (e.g., caregiver, breadwinner). Breadwinners may care more about a child's status achievement and make educational plans based on perceived social mobility and status goals. Caregivers, by comparison, may focus more on the health and happiness of a child and be less influenced by status achievement. Similarly, parents' education styles may also vary based on their cultural backgrounds. For instance, in cultures where interdependence (vs. independence) is highly valued, maintenance (vs. attainment) goals are more salient, and thus weakness-focused (vs. strength-focused) purchases may be more prevalent (Yang, Stamatogiannakis, and Chattopadhyay 2015). Finally, parents' education focus may change as the child ages. That is, parents may view a child's future in a different light when the temporal distance to adulthood changes. Their educational focus may shift from developing the child's talents to remedying weaknesses or in the opposite direction. Further exploration of these possibilities will expand our understanding of parents' educational choices and can be highly rewarding directions for future research.

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