Wanting Success Yet Wanting to "Lie Flat": Conflict After-Effects Induced by Economic Inequality and Their Mechanisms

Authors: Mao Jiayan, Shenlong Yang, Tian Caiyu, Yang Shenlong

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Abstract

Previous research has found that economic inequality can intensify individuals' desire for wealth and status, yet whether this desire translates into actual effortful behavior remains to be elucidated. The present research, through six sub-studies, reveals the conflicting nature of the psychological consequences induced by economic inequality: while it enhances the desire for wealth and status, it simultaneously triggers a "lying flat" tendency. Studies 1 and 2, employing correlational methods, demonstrate that economic inequality predicts these conflicting consequences, with status anxiety mediating the relationship between inequality and the desire for wealth and status, and sense of control mediating the relationship between inequality and the "lying flat" tendency. Studies 3 and 4 (including 4a and 4b), utilizing experimental methods, provide causal evidence for these two consequences and their underlying mediating mechanisms. Given the detrimental nature of the "lying flat" tendency, Study 5 further investigates potential moderating variables and reveals that perceived social mobility moderates the mediated relationship whereby economic inequality predicts the "lying flat" tendency through sense of control. This research not only extends prior findings in this domain but also uncovers the conflicting consequences of economic inequality and their operative mechanisms. Additionally, it offers a novel perspective for mitigating the negative outcomes of perceived inequality, with implications for motivating individual effort and fostering unobstructed social mobility.

Full Text

Desire for Success but "Lying Flat": The Conflicting Consequences of Economic Inequality and Its Underlying Mechanisms

MAO Jia-Yan[1], YANG Shen-Long[2], TIAN Cai-Yu[3]

[1] Department of Experimental and Applied Psychology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam 1081 BT, The Netherlands
[2] School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Xi' an Jiaotong University, Xi' an 710049, China
[3] School of Psychology, University of Kent, Canterbury CT2 7NP, United Kingdom

Abstract

Previous research has demonstrated that economic inequality intensifies individuals' desire for wealth and status, yet whether this desire translates into actual effortful action remains unclear. Through six sub-studies, the present research reveals the conflicting psychological aftermath of economic inequality: while it promotes the desire for wealth and status, it simultaneously fosters a tendency toward "lying flat" (a passive, low-effort lifestyle). Studies 1 and 2, employing correlational methods, show that economic inequality predicts these conflicting outcomes, with status anxiety mediating the relationship between inequality and wealth/status desire, and perceived control mediating the relationship between inequality and lying flat tendency. Studies 3 and 4 (including 4a and 4b) provide causal evidence for these effects and their mediating mechanisms through experimental manipulations. Given the detrimental nature of lying flat tendencies, Study 5 further explores potential moderating variables, finding that perceived social mobility moderates the mediated relationship between economic inequality, perceived control, and lying flat tendency. This research not only extends previous findings in this domain but also uncovers the conflicting consequences of economic inequality and their underlying mechanisms, offering new perspectives for mitigating the negative effects of perceived inequality and providing insights for motivating individual effort and promoting unobstructed social mobility.

Keywords: economic inequality, wealth/status desire, lying flat tendency, status anxiety, perceived control, perception of social mobility

1. Introduction

In recent years, as global wealth disparities have intensified, a substantial body of research on economic inequality has emerged. Psychological studies have thoroughly documented the negative impacts of economic inequality at the individual level (e.g., Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009), group level (e.g., Jetten et al.,

2021), and societal level (e.g., Krieger & Meierrieks, 2019). Research with Chinese samples has similarly found that perceived economic inequality threatens psychological well-being (e.g., Du et al., 2023), reduces public social trust (e.g., Yang & Xin, 2020), and increases blame toward advantaged groups (e.g., Zeng et al., 2024).

However, the consequences of economic inequality are not entirely negative. Some researchers have found that perceived economic inequality also stimulates and strengthens people' s desire for wealth and status (Wang et al., 2023). This effect has some positive significance, as such desire could serve as a prerequisite for upward striving, particularly representing an endogenous motivation for wealth creation among relatively low-income individuals (Fu et al., 2020). Nevertheless, current research on how economic inequality promotes wealth/status desire remains limited, especially regarding the psychological mechanisms underlying this effect (Wang et al., 2023). Therefore, the first focus of this research is whether economic inequality influences people' s desire for wealth and status, and what underlying mechanisms might account for this relationship.

Furthermore, if economic inequality can indeed promote desire for wealth and status, can this motivation translate into actual effort, or does it remain at the level of individual imagination? Notably, behind the widespread pursuit of wealth and status, the popularity of "lying flat" tendencies represents a contemporary social reality, with some young people frequently expressing feelings of economic disadvantage combined with reluctance to strive and abandonment of ambition (Ye, 2023). This phenomenon raises another important question: Is the prevalence of lying flat tendencies also related to perceived economic inequality? If economic inequality makes people want to pursue wealth on one hand while choosing to lie flat in reality on the other, this phenomenon warrants serious attention. Therefore, this research both follows current academic frontiers by further examining the effect of economic inequality on wealth/status desire and its mechanisms, and explores the contradictory manifestation of this effect by investigating the impact of economic inequality on lying flat tendencies and its mediating processes. Finally, we examine potential moderating effects to provide theoretical and practical insights for altering these contradictory psychological consequences of economic inequality.

1.1 The Effect of Economic Inequality on Wealth/Status Desire and the Mediating Role of Status Anxiety

Economic inequality is pervasive across different social systems. Based on social identity theory, individuals form self-concepts and identity based on their group memberships, and perceived economic inequality increases the tendency to view the world through a wealth lens, making people more likely to distinguish between "rich" and "poor" groups (Jetten et al., 2022; Kraus et al., 2017; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Meanwhile, pursuing a superior identity is key to individual social identity; therefore, in unequal societies, striving for wealth and social status is likely to become a necessary pathway for individuals to actively shape their

self-identity (Jetten et al., 2017). On the other hand, inequality creates immense social comparison pressure, prompting individuals to more urgently desire upward mobility to cope with intense social competition (Sánchez-Rodríguez et al., 2019).

Based on these social identity theory derivations, researchers have examined the effect of economic inequality on people' s tendency to desire wealth and status, finding that perceiving higher levels of economic inequality intensifies individuals' desire for wealth and status (Wang et al., 2023). Other studies provide indirect support for inequality' s effect on stimulating wealth/status desire. For example, income inequality is significantly associated with higher-risk economic behavior (Payne et al., 2017) and exacerbates conspicuous consumption (Walasek & Brown, 2015). Therefore, this study hypothesizes:

H1: Economic inequality positively predicts individuals' desire for wealth and status.

If this hypothesis holds, the next question concerns the psychological mechanism through which economic inequality triggers wealth/status desire. Previous research (Wang et al., 2023) has emphasized the need for future studies to examine the mediating processes underlying this effect. While we previously analyzed how economic inequality might trigger wealth/status desire based on social identity theory, self-categorization theory—an extension of social identity theory—may be more helpful for exploring potential mediating mechanisms. From this perspective, status anxiety is a noteworthy potential mediator.

Self-categorization theory builds upon social identity theory, focusing more on explaining how individuals form cognitions about the different categories they belong to based on various situations (Turner et al., 1987). According to this theory, under conditions of perceived economic inequality, individuals become more sensitive to hierarchical distinctions with relatively significant differences between people, leading to stronger concern about their own social rank position and treating this information as a more central factor in the self-categorization process, thereby increasing status anxiety experiences (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2018). Previous research has found that economic inequality places those in disadvantaged positions in unfavorable circumstances with competitive pressures, resulting in high status anxiety (Jetten et al., 2022), while those in advantaged positions also experience anxiety about status loss due to fear of "falling from grace" (Mols & Jetten, 2017). Therefore, we can conclude that economic inequality tends to make people experience stronger status anxiety.

On the other hand, status anxiety also prompts people to more strongly pursue wealth and status. According to self-categorization theory, when wealth and social status become important markers for distinguishing individual identities, individuals' motivation to pursue wealth and status correspondingly strengthens (Turner et al., 1994). Therefore, this social comparison motivation based on status concerns prompts individuals to adopt various strategies to acquire more wealth and status, thereby gaining advantages in social competition (Walasek

& Brown, 2019). Wang et al. (2020) also found that the more individuals view wealth and status as standards for self-categorization and self-definition, the more they tend to desire wealth and status. Other research has found that imitating the consumption patterns of the wealthy makes people willing to work longer hours (Bowles & Park, 2005). Neuroscientific evidence also indicates that when individuals realize they are in disadvantaged positions, neural regions involved in achievement motivation and status threat emotional processing are activated (Zink et al., 2008). These findings collectively demonstrate the potential effect of status anxiety in stimulating wealth/status desire.

Combining these findings, on the one hand, higher perceived economic inequality tends to trigger more status anxiety in individuals, while on the other hand, status anxiety tends to enhance individuals' desire for wealth and status. Therefore, the study further hypothesizes:

H2: Economic inequality positively predicts status anxiety, status anxiety positively predicts wealth/status desire, and status anxiety mediates the positive relationship between economic inequality and wealth/status desire.

1.2 The Effect of Economic Inequality on Lying Flat Tendency and the Mediating Role of Perceived Control

Although economic inequality can stimulate individuals' desire for wealth and social status, it may also cause people to respond passively to unfair social competition or even directly choose to "lie flat" (Ye, 2023). In recent years, the term "lying flat" has gradually evolved from internet slang into a psychologically valuable concept receiving academic attention. It generally refers to the mindset and behavioral tendency of individuals, particularly young people, who under social pressure are unwilling to strive to change their circumstances, instead choosing passive avoidance, giving up effort, or even wanting to withdraw from social life (Xiong, 2022; Lu et al., 2023).

Systematic research on lying flat tendencies is still insufficient. However, from a broader perspective, different eras have often witnessed similar subcultural phenomena, such as the UK' s "NEET" (Not in Education, Employment or Training), referring to youth populations not in school, employment, or vocational training (Dai, 2022; Lu et al., 2023). NEET and lying flat tendencies are similar in behavioral manifestations, but NEET more often represents a passively formed group due to limitations in education and employment, whereas lying flat tendency reflects a kind of active silence and passive response to social competitive pressure (Dai, 2022; Lu et al., 2023). Learned helplessness theory can partially explain lying flat tendencies, suggesting that when individuals repeatedly encounter negative feedback or frustration from their environment, they come to believe that no amount of effort can change their circumstances, leading to motivational decline and behavioral stagnation (Seligman & Maier, 1967).

Thus, lying flat tendency is a specific cultural phenomenon emerging against the

backdrop of rapid social development and intensified competition (Zhang et al., 2022). Researchers examining the causes of lying flat tendencies have focused primarily on societal-level factors, noting that the emergence of lying flat tendencies is closely related to economic conditions (e.g., Wu & Sun, 2024). Generally, when individuals perceive insufficient resources and social status gaps through comparison with others, they easily experience dissatisfaction and disappointment (Smith et al., 2012). Long-term frustration gradually erodes people' s motivation to strive and move forward, prompting them to tend toward lying flat to escape reality (Ye, 2023), or to exhibit lying flat tendencies as a means of passively coping with inequality when facing unfavorable competitive environments and pressure conditions (Wang et al., 2024). Therefore, perceived economic inequality may be an important factor contributing to lying flat tendencies. Based on this, the study hypothesizes:

H3: Economic inequality positively predicts individuals' lying flat tendency.

If this hypothesis holds, perceived control likely helps explain why economic inequality leads to lying flat tendencies. Perceived control refers to the degree to which individuals feel they can control their lives and objective environments (Lachman & Weaver, 1998). Previous research indicates that economic inequality causes individuals to lose their sense of control over life (To et al., 2023), while unfavorable overall economic situations, uncertain economic prospects, and declining personal income also have effects that weaken individuals' perceived control (Fritsche et al., 2017; Kakkar & Sivanathan, 2017). These findings directly or indirectly suggest that economic inequality may lead to reduced perceived control in individuals.

On the other hand, reduced perceived control may trigger lying flat tendencies. Researchers have proposed that when facing uncontrollable competitive pressure, individuals tend to adopt avoidance strategies (Wang et al., 2024). According to learned helplessness theory, when individuals experience a series of failures and setbacks, they gradually lose the belief and ability to control and change situations, forming a helpless psychological state that manifests in various aspects of life (Maier & Seligman, 2016). This sense of helplessness aligns to some extent with lying flat tendencies. Domestic scholars examining lying flat tendencies and their causes have also frequently analyzed them from the perspective of competitive powerlessness (e.g., Zhang et al., 2022). Based on this, we can infer that economic inequality leads to reduced perceived control in individuals, which in turn predicts the emergence of lying flat tendencies. Therefore, the study further hypothesizes:

H4: Economic inequality negatively predicts perceived control, perceived control negatively predicts lying flat tendency, and perceived control mediates the positive relationship between economic inequality and lying flat tendency.

1.3 The Moderating Effect of Perceived Social Mobility on the "Economic Inequality→Perceived Control→Lying Flat" Mediation

Building on the above hypotheses, the current research also aims to examine a final question: exploring moderating effects on the potential negative consequences of economic inequality. It is worth noting that we consider the "economic inequality→status anxiety→wealth/status desire" mediation to have positive significance. However, regarding the "economic inequality→perceived control→lying flat" mediation, since the negative nature of lying flat tendencies has been well-documented in previous research (e.g., Lu et al., 2023), this outcome warrants attention. Therefore, this study will focus on examining the boundary conditions of the "economic inequality→perceived control→lying flat" mediation.

Under what conditions might this mediated pathway be attenuated? According to compensatory control theory, when individuals face external threats, their perceived control decreases. However, compensatory control theory also suggests that if individuals experiencing control threats can perceive from their objective environment information that provides order, certainty, and predictability, this can compensate for the lack of control to some extent, alleviating emotional anxiety and achieving control compensation (Landau et al., 2015). Therefore, we can reasonably speculate that under threatening conditions of economic inequality, if individuals simultaneously perceive some form of order from the social structure, their perceived control may be less affected—in other words, the mediating role of perceived control between economic inequality and lying flat tendency may be weakened.

Perceived social mobility is precisely the factor that can provide this order information. It is typically defined as individuals' subjective cognitive perceptions and judgments about the mobility possibilities of groups at different socioeconomic positions within their society (Kraus & Tan, 2015; Zhang et al., 2020). If individuals believe that relatively low-income individuals have substantial opportunities for upward mobility and wealth accumulation in the future, then even while perceiving economic inequality, this situation of "economic inequality + unobstructed social mobility" can still constitute a stable social order. Therefore, many researchers have emphasized that unobstructed social mobility represents a relatively ideal form of social order (e.g., Davidai, 2018). Combined with the above analysis of compensatory control theory, although high economic inequality conditions (vs. low inequality) may reduce individuals' perceived control, this effect may be more pronounced when perceived social mobility is low. For individuals with high perceived social mobility, the weakening effect of economic inequality on perceived control can be compensated by the orderly social mobility situation (since it provides the key element emphasized by compensatory control theory—orderliness), thus the effect of reduced perceived control may be relatively smaller. Therefore, this study further hypothesizes:

H5: Perceived social mobility moderates the mediated effect of "economic in-

equality→perceived control→lying flat tendency," such that the mediation effect holds under conditions of low perceived social mobility, but when perceived social mobility is high, the effect size of economic inequality predicting perceived control decreases, and consequently the mediated effect of "economic inequality→perceived control→lying flat tendency" also decreases.

1.4 Overview of Studies

This research will examine the conflicting consequences of economic inequality—people' s desire for wealth/status and lying flat tendencies—as well as the underlying psychological mechanisms and boundary conditions, based on two correlational studies (Studies 1 and 2) and four experimental studies (Studies 3, 4a, 4b, and 5). Studies 1 and 2 use two cross-sectional surveys with student and adult samples to test the correlational relationships between economic inequality, wealth/status desire, and lying flat tendency, providing correlational evidence for H1 through H4. Study 3 manipulates perceived economic inequality to reveal the mediating role of status anxiety between economic inequality and wealth/status desire, providing causal evidence for H1 and H2. Studies 4a and 4b focus on the other mediation relationship—the causal effect of perceived economic inequality on lying flat tendency through the mediation of perceived control—providing causal evidence for H3 and H4. Unlike the examination of wealth/status desire, the investigation of economic inequality' s effect on lying flat tendency and its mediating mechanism represents the core innovation of this research and the main focus for exploring intervention effects and promoting common prosperity. Therefore, this research uses two sub-studies (4a and 4b) with different experimental designs and different participant samples to mutually validate this issue. Finally, Study 5 manipulates perceived social mobility to test its moderating effect on the mediated relationship of "economic inequality→perceived control→lying flat tendency," providing causal evidence for H5.

All studies use mainland Chinese samples.

2. Study 1: Correlational Evidence for the Conflicting Consequences of Economic Inequality

2.1.1 Participants

Study 1 used university students as participants. Through convenience sampling, 230 university students were recruited from a university. All participants provided informed consent. Thirteen participants who failed the attention check questions (described below) were excluded, leaving a final sample of 217 participants (133 males, 84 females) with a mean age of [missing value] years.

2.1.2 Design and Measures

Study 1 used a correlational design to examine the relationships between economic inequality, wealth/status desire, and lying flat tendency. All participants completed questionnaire measures of these three variables. First, we used the Subjective Inequality Scale developed by Schmalor and Heine (2022). This scale consists of 8 items (e.g., "Except for those at the top of society, others have hardly any money," 1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree" ; $\alpha = .76$). The mean of all items was used, with higher scores indicating higher perceived economic inequality.

Wealth/status desire was measured using items developed by Wang et al. (2023), comprising 10 items (e.g., "I want to acquire more wealth than I currently have," 1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree" ; $\alpha = .93$). The mean of all items was used, with higher scores indicating higher desire for wealth and status.

Lying flat tendency was measured using the Lying Flat Tendency Scale developed by Lu et al. (2023), consisting of 6 items (e.g., "I have no life or learning goals that I want to pursue," 1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree" ; $\alpha = .83$). The mean of all items was used, with higher scores indicating higher lying flat tendency.

Two attention check items were inserted among these measures: "For this question, please directly select 'agree' " and "For this question, please directly select 'strongly disagree' ." Participants who failed to respond as instructed on either item were excluded from the valid dataset. Additionally, we measured participants' subjective socioeconomic status (SES) using two items: "Overall, where do you think your family is in society?" and "Compared to people around you, where do you think your family is among them?" Both items used 5-point scales, and the sum of the two items was used as the total subjective SES score.

Finally, participants reported their gender and age.

2.2 Results and Discussion

To control for potential common method bias, we first implemented procedural controls such as anonymous administration. After data collection, Harman' s single-factor test was used to assess common method bias. The results showed 7 factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, with the first factor explaining 25.09% of the variance, below the 40% critical threshold. Additionally, confirmatory factor analysis was conducted using Mplus 7.0 software on the four constructs of economic inequality, wealth/status desire, lying flat tendency, and subjective SES. The results showed that the four-factor model fit indices were significantly better than the single-factor model. These results indicate that common method bias was not a serious concern in this study.

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analysis results for Study 1 (N = 217). The results show that economic inequality (M = 4.59, SD = 0.96) was significantly positively correlated with wealth/status

desire (M = 5.25, SD = 1.22; r = 0.26, p < 0.001). Economic inequality was also significantly positively correlated with lying flat tendency (M = 2.08, SD = 0.95; r = 0.14, p = 0.045). However, wealth/status desire and lying flat tendency were not correlated (r = -0.06, p = 0.41). When controlling for subjective SES, the partial correlations remained: economic inequality and wealth/status desire were still significantly positively correlated (r = 0.26, p < 0.001), the positive correlation between economic inequality and lying flat tendency was marginally significant (r = 0.13, p = 0.065), and wealth/status desire and lying flat tendency remained uncorrelated (r = -0.06, p = 0.41).

These results generally support H1 and H3, showing that economic inequality can positively predict both individuals' desire for wealth/status and their lying flat tendency. This demonstrates the conflicting aftermath of high-level economic inequality perception: on one hand, it makes people hope for greater wealth accumulation and social status, but on the other hand, it weakens their actual efforts to improve themselves. However, these conclusions are based on only one sub-study and focus solely on university students. To further examine whether these effects hold across different populations, Study 2 will use a non-university student sample. Additionally, Study 2 will further investigate the psychological mechanisms underlying how economic inequality triggers these two conflicting outcomes.

3. Study 2: Mediating Mechanisms of the Conflicting Consequences of Economic Inequality

Study 2, using a correlational design, aimed to replicate the findings of Study 1 with a non-student adult sample. Additionally, Study 2 incorporated measures of status anxiety and perceived control to examine the mediating role of status anxiety in the relationship between economic inequality and wealth/status desire, and the mediating role of perceived control in the relationship between economic inequality and lying flat tendency.

3.1.1 Participants

Online participants were recruited through the Credamo platform participant pool, with a target of 600 valid responses, limited to non-student adults. Invalid responses were excluded until 600 valid responses were collected. Fourteen participants were eliminated for failing attention check questions (described below). All participants provided informed consent. The final sample included 600 participants (220 males, 380 females) with a mean age of 29.08 years (SD = 7.56).

3.1.2 Design and Measures

Study 2 used a correlational design to examine the predictive effect of economic inequality on wealth/status desire through the mediation of status anxiety, and the predictive effect of economic inequality on lying flat tendency

through the mediation of perceived control. All participants completed questionnaire measures of these variables. Study 2 used the same questionnaire as Study 1 (Schmalor & Heine, 2022) to measure perceived economic inequality ($\alpha = 0.81$); the same questionnaire as Study 1 (Wang et al., 2023) to measure wealth/status desire ($\alpha = 0.89$); and the same lying flat tendency questionnaire as Study 1 (Lu et al., 2023) to measure lying flat tendency ($\alpha = .80$).

Status anxiety was measured using the Status Anxiety Scale developed by Melita et al. (2020), consisting of 5 items (e.g., "I often worry that I will never be able to change my current position in society," 1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree"; $\alpha = 0.94$). The mean of all items was used, with higher scores indicating higher status anxiety.

We used the Chinese version of the Perceived Control Scale revised from Lachman and Weaver (1998) (Li, 2014) to measure perceived control, comprising 12 items (e.g., "I can do almost anything I really set my mind to," 1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree"; $\alpha = 0.93$). The mean of all items was used, with higher scores indicating higher perceived control.

Two attention check items were inserted: "For this question, please directly select 'somewhat agree'" and "For this question, please directly select 'disagree'." Participants who failed to respond as instructed on either item were excluded. Additionally, subjective SES was measured with one item: "Overall, where do you think your family is in society?" (options: "bottom," "lower-middle," "middle," "upper-middle," and "top"). Family income level was also measured by asking participants to select from the following options (coded 1–8): below 10,000 RMB (excluding 10,000), 10,000–20,000 RMB (excluding 20,000), 20,000–40,000 RMB (excluding 40,000), 40,000–80,000 RMB (excluding 80,000), 80,000–160,000 RMB (excluding 160,000), 160,000–320,000 RMB (excluding 320,000), 320,000–640,000 RMB (excluding 640,000), and 640,000 RMB or above. Finally, participants reported their gender and age.

3.2 Results and Discussion

To control for potential common method bias, we first implemented procedural controls such as anonymous administration and reverse-coded items. After data collection, Harman's single-factor test was used to assess common method bias. The results showed 8 factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, with the first factor explaining 25.84% of the variance, below the 40% critical threshold. Additionally, confirmatory factor analysis was conducted using Mplus 7.0 software on the five constructs of economic inequality, wealth/status desire, lying flat tendency, status anxiety, and perceived control, with fit indices compared to a single-factor model. The results showed that the five-factor model fit indices were significantly better than the single-factor model. These results indicate that common method bias was not a serious concern.

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics and correlation analysis results for Study 2 (N = 600). Economic inequality was significantly positively correlated

with both wealth/status desire ($r = 0.12$, $p = 0.003$) and lying flat tendency ($r = 0.16$, $p < 0.001$). Additionally, status anxiety was significantly positively correlated with both economic inequality ($r = 0.33$, $p < 0.001$) and wealth/status desire ($r = 0.37$, $p < 0.001$). Perceived control was significantly negatively correlated with both economic inequality ($r = -0.44$, $p < 0.001$) and lying flat tendency ($r = -0.45$, $p < 0.001$).

Next, we used the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Model 4, bootstrap samples = 5000; Hayes, 2013) to test the mediating effect of status anxiety in the relationship between economic inequality and wealth/status desire, and the mediating effect of perceived control in the relationship between economic inequality and lying flat tendency.

First, we examined H1 and H2 regarding the predictive effect of economic inequality on wealth/status desire and the mediating role of status anxiety. Controlling for gender, age, subjective SES, and income, the results showed that the total effect of economic inequality on wealth/status desire was significant ($B = 0.08$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = 0.01$), 95% CI [0.02, 0.14]. The effect of economic inequality on status anxiety was significant ($B = 0.39$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < 0.001$), 95% CI [0.28, 0.51]. When both economic inequality and status anxiety were included, the effect of economic inequality on wealth/status desire was non-significant ($B = 0.00$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = 0.92$), 95% CI [-0.06, 0.06], while the effect of status anxiety on wealth/status desire was significant ($B = 0.19$, $SE = 0.02$, $p < 0.001$), 95% CI [0.15, 0.23]. The indirect effect through status anxiety was 0.07, 95% CI [0.05, 0.11], accounting for 96.1% of the total effect. As shown in **Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper]**, these results indicate that status anxiety mediates the relationship between economic inequality and wealth/status desire, supporting H1 and H2.

Next, we examined H3 and H4 regarding the predictive effect of economic inequality on lying flat tendency and the mediating role of perceived control. Controlling for gender, age, subjective SES, and income, the results showed that the total effect of economic inequality on lying flat tendency was significant ($B = 0.08$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = 0.01$), 95% CI [0.02, 0.14]. The effect of economic inequality on perceived control was significant ($B = -0.42$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$), 95% CI [-0.50, -0.34]. When both economic inequality and perceived control were included, the effect of economic inequality on lying flat tendency was non-significant ($B = -0.05$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = 0.14$), 95% CI [-0.11, 0.01], while the effect of perceived control on lying flat tendency was significant ($B = -0.30$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < 0.001$), 95% CI [-0.36, -0.24]. The indirect effect through perceived control was 0.13, 95% CI [0.09, 0.18]. As shown in **Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper]**, these results indicate that perceived control mediates the relationship between economic inequality and lying flat tendency, supporting H3 and H4.

Study 2, using a correlational design with a non-student adult sample, not only replicated the findings of Study 1—showing that economic inequality can positively predict both wealth/status desire and lying flat tendency—but also

identified the distinct mediating mechanisms for these two effects. Economic inequality predicts wealth/status desire by triggering status anxiety, which in turn leads to greater desire for wealth and status. Meanwhile, economic inequality reduces perceived control, which increases lying flat tendency. These results provide preliminary evidence for H1 through H4. However, since both studies used correlational designs, we will subsequently employ experimental methods to replicate and further examine these results for causal evidence.

4. Study 3: Experimental Evidence for the Effect of Economic Inequality on Wealth/Status Desire and the Mediating Role of Status Anxiety

4.1.1 Participants

Based on previous research (e.g., Wang et al., 2020, 2023), we used G*Power 3.1 to calculate the required sample size. The results showed that with $\alpha \leq 0.05$ and power 1 -$\beta = 0.75$, 114 participants were needed to detect a medium effect size (d = 0.5). Therefore, 175 university students were randomly recruited from a university. All participants provided informed consent. Fifty-nine participants were excluded for failing the memory check question in the manipulation (described below). The final sample included 116 participants (75 males, 41 females) with a mean age of 18.58 years (SD = 1.01).

4.1.2 Design and Procedure

Study 3 used an experimental design to examine the causal effect of economic inequality on wealth/status desire and the mediating role of status anxiety. A single-factor two-level (economic inequality: high vs. low) between-subjects design was used, with wealth/status desire as the dependent variable and status anxiety as the mediator. Following Zeng et al. (2024) 's manipulation of economic inequality, participants were randomly assigned to high or low economic inequality priming conditions. Both groups first read a passage presenting data showing relatively equal wealth distribution in society (low inequality condition) or relatively unequal wealth distribution (high inequality condition). A reading comprehension multiple-choice question then assessed participants' understanding of the passage; those who answered incorrectly were excluded.

After completing the reading task, both groups answered two manipulation check items assessing perceived social wealth distribution equality, using 7-point scales (1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree"). The two items were significantly positively correlated (r = 0.56, $p < 0.001$). Following the manipulation check, both groups completed measures of the remaining variables. Status anxiety was measured using the same 5 items as in Study 2 (Melita et al., 2020; $\alpha = 0.90$). Wealth/status desire was measured using the same 10 items as in Study 2 (Wang et al., 2023; $\alpha = 0.92$). Subjective SES and family income were measured as in Study 2. Gender and age were also collected. An attention check

item (“For this question, please directly select ‘agree’ ”) was included; participants who failed to respond as instructed were excluded. Finally, participants were debriefed about the study’ s purpose and informed that the study content was fictional.

4.2 Results and Discussion

Independent samples t-tests were first conducted to examine the effectiveness of the manipulation, with the high economic inequality group coded as 1 and the low inequality group as 0. Potential differences between the two groups in income and subjective SES were examined. For income, the high inequality group (M = 5.29, SD = 1.35) did not differ significantly from the low inequality group (M = 5.04, SD = 1.36), t(114) = 1.00, p = 0.32, Cohen’ s d = 0.18. For subjective SES, the high inequality group (M = 2.90, SD = 0.74) differed marginally from the low inequality group (M = 2.67, SD = 0.66), t(114) = 1.78, p = 0.08, Cohen’ s d = 0.33; this variable was subsequently controlled for in statistical analyses. The manipulation check showed that participants in the high inequality group (M = 5.52, SD = 1.14) reported significantly higher perceived economic inequality than those in the low inequality group (M = 4.43, SD = 1.07), t(114) = 5.30, p < 0.001, Cohen’ s d = 0.98, indicating that the manipulation successfully induced different perceptions of economic inequality.

Next, we examined H1 and H2 regarding the effect of economic inequality on wealth/status desire and the mediating role of status anxiety. Using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Model 4, bootstrap samples = 5000; Hayes, 2013) and controlling for gender, age, subjective SES, and income, the results showed that the total effect of economic inequality on wealth/status desire was significant (B = 0.48, SE = 0.18, p = 0.01), 95% CI [0.12, 0.85]. The effect of economic inequality on status anxiety was significant (B = 0.49, SE = 0.24, p = 0.04), 95% CI [0.01, 0.96]. When both economic inequality and status anxiety were included, the effect of economic inequality on wealth/status desire was marginally significant (B = 0.34, SE = 0.17, p = 0.06), 95% CI [-0.01, 0.68], while the effect of status anxiety on wealth/status desire was significant (B = 0.30, SE = 0.07, p < 0.001), 95% CI [0.16, 0.43]. The indirect effect through status anxiety was 0.14, 95% CI [0.01, 0.34], accounting for 29.9% of the total effect. As shown in **Figure 3 [Figure 3: see original paper]**, these results indicate that status anxiety mediates the relationship between economic inequality and wealth/status desire, supporting H1 and H2.

Study 3, using an experimental design to manipulate perceived economic inequality, again found that higher economic inequality induced greater status anxiety, which in turn led to stronger desire for wealth and status. This result not only replicates the “economic inequality→status anxiety→wealth/status desire” mediation from Study 2 but also better demonstrates the causal role of economic inequality from a logical perspective, providing more robust support for H1 and H2. In the following studies, we will further test whether the causal relationship of the “economic inequality→perceived control→lying flat

tendency" mediation holds through experimental methods.

5. Study 4a: Economic Inequality' s Effect on Lying Flat Tendency and the Mediating Role of Perceived Control (Text-Based Priming)

5.1.1 Participants

Based on previous research (e.g., Zeng et al., 2024), we used G*Power 3.1 to calculate the required sample size. The results showed that with $\alpha \leq 0.05$ and power 1 -$\beta = 0.80$, 128 participants were needed to detect a medium effect size (d = 0.5). Therefore, 217 university students were randomly recruited from a university. All participants provided informed consent. Sixty-two participants were excluded for failing the memory check question in the manipulation, and 7 participants were excluded for failing the attention check (described below). The final sample included 148 participants (86 males, 62 females) with a mean age of 19.49 years (SD = 2.15).

5.1.2 Design and Procedure

Study 4a used an experimental design to examine the causal effect of economic inequality on lying flat tendency and the mediating role of perceived control. A single-factor two-level (economic inequality: high vs. low) between-subjects design was used, with lying flat tendency as the dependent variable and perceived control as the mediator. Following Zeng et al. (2024) 's design, the manipulation of economic inequality was identical to Study 3. A reading comprehension multiple-choice question then assessed participants' understanding of the passage; those who answered incorrectly were excluded. Subsequently, as in Study 3, two 7-point items measured participants' subjective perception of economic inequality (r = 0.14, p = 0.09) to check the effectiveness of the manipulation.

After the manipulation check, both groups completed measures of the remaining variables. Perceived control was measured using the same scale as in Study 2 (Lachman & Weaver, 1998; Li, 2014; $\alpha = 0.79$). Lying flat tendency was measured using the same questionnaire as in Study 2 (Lu et al., 2023; $\alpha = 0.82$). Subjective SES and family income were measured as in Study 2. Gender and age were also collected. An attention check item ("For this question, please directly select 'agree' ") was included; participants who failed to respond as instructed were excluded. Finally, participants were debriefed about the study' s purpose and informed that the study content was fictional.

5.2 Results and Discussion

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to examine the effectiveness of the manipulation, with the high economic inequality group coded as 1 and the low inequality group as 0. Potential differences between the two groups in income and subjective SES were examined. For income, the high inequality group (M

= 5.22, SD = 1.32) differed significantly from the low inequality group (M = 4.76, SD = 1.48), t(146) = 2.00, p = 0.048, Cohen' s d = 0.33; this variable was subsequently controlled for in statistical analyses. For subjective SES, the high inequality group (M = 2.82, SD = 0.67) did not differ significantly from the low inequality group (M = 2.76, SD = 0.63), t(146) = 0.58, p = 0.57, Cohen' s d = 0.09. The manipulation check showed that participants in the high inequality group (M = 5.26, SD = 1.10) reported significantly higher perceived economic inequality than those in the low inequality group (M = 4.24, SD = 1.12), t(146) = 5.59, p < 0.001, Cohen' s d = 0.92, indicating that the manipulation successfully induced different perceptions of economic inequality.

Next, we examined H3 and H4 regarding the effect of economic inequality on lying flat tendency and the mediating role of perceived control. Using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Model 4, bootstrap samples = 5000; Hayes, 2013) and controlling for gender, age, subjective SES, and income, the results showed that the total effect of economic inequality on lying flat tendency was significant (B = 0.61, SE = 0.16, p < 0.001), 95% CI [0.29, 0.94]. The effect of economic inequality on perceived control was significant (B = -0.33, SE = 0.12, p = 0.01), 95% CI [-0.56, -0.10]. When both economic inequality and perceived control were included, the effect of economic inequality on lying flat tendency remained significant (B = 0.38, SE = 0.14, p = 0.01), 95% CI [0.10, 0.67], and the effect of perceived control on lying flat tendency was significant (B = -0.71, SE = 0.10, p < 0.001), 95% CI [-0.92, -0.51]. The indirect effect through perceived control was 0.23, 95% CI [0.07, 0.43], accounting for 37.9% of the total effect. As shown in **Figure 4 [Figure 4: see original paper]**, these results indicate that perceived control mediates the relationship between economic inequality and lying flat tendency, supporting H3 and H4.

Study 4a, using an experimental design to manipulate perceived economic inequality, again found that higher economic inequality weakened individuals' perceived control, which in turn led to greater lying flat tendency. This result not only replicates the "economic inequality→perceived control→lying flat tendency" mediation from Study 2 but also better demonstrates the causal effect of economic inequality, providing more robust support for H3 and H4. Compared to examining the effect of economic inequality on wealth/status desire, investigating its effect on lying flat tendency and the underlying mechanism represents a more central concern and more innovative finding of this research. Therefore, this conclusion requires more solid evidence, which also provides the necessary foundation for subsequent intervention studies exploring moderating effects. We therefore designed Study 4b to ensure replicability, using a different manipulation paradigm and different participant sample to again examine the causal relationship of "economic inequality→perceived control→lying flat tendency."

6. Study 4b: Economic Inequality' s Effect on Lying Flat Tendency and the Mediating Role of Perceived Control (Virtual Society Priming)

6.1.1 Participants

Based on previous research (e.g., Zeng et al., 2024), we used G*Power 3.1 to calculate the required sample size. The results showed that with $\alpha \leq 0.05$ and power 1 -$\beta = 0.95$, 210 participants were needed to detect a medium effect size (d = 0.5). A total of 264 non-student adult participants were recruited through the Credamo platform. All participants provided informed consent. Two participants were excluded for failing attention check questions (same as Study 2), and 12 participants were excluded for failing the memory check question in the manipulation. Details of these exclusions are explained below. The final sample included 250 participants (125 in the high inequality group, 125 in the low inequality group; 58 males, 192 females) with a mean age of 29.02 years (SD = 7.56).

6.1.2 Design and Procedure

Study 4b used an experimental design to examine the causal effect of economic inequality on lying flat tendency and the mediating role of perceived control. A single-factor two-level (economic inequality: high vs. low) between-subjects design was used, with lying flat tendency as the dependent variable and perceived control as the mediator. Participants were first randomly assigned to high or low economic inequality priming conditions. Following previous research (e.g., Casara et al., 2022; Sprong et al., 2019; Zeng et al., 2024), we manipulated participants' perception of economic inequality in a virtual society ("Bimboola") through a reading and imagination task. Participants in the high inequality group read data and descriptions showing high economic inequality and large gaps between rich and poor in Bimboola society, while those in the low inequality group read descriptions showing small wealth gaps. A reading comprehension multiple-choice question then assessed participants'memory accuracy; those who answered incorrectly were excluded.

After the reading task, both groups answered two items ("Wealth distribution in Bimboola society is very unequal" and "Bimboola society is very equal," with the second item reverse-scored, 1 = "strongly disagree," 7 = "strongly agree" ; r = 0.83, p < 0.001) to check the effectiveness of the manipulation.

After the manipulation check, both groups completed measures of the remaining variables. Perceived control was measured using the same scale as in Study 2 (Lachman & Weaver, 1998; Li, 2014; $\alpha = 0.96$). Lying flat tendency was measured using the same questionnaire as in Study 2 (Lu et al., 2023; $\alpha = 0.89$), but to enhance immersion in the virtual society, all items were prefaced with "If I were in Bimboola society." Subjective SES and family income were measured as in Study 2. Gender and age were also collected. An attention

check item ("For this question, please directly select 'somewhat disagree' ") was included; participants who failed to respond as instructed were excluded. Finally, participants were debriefed about the study' s purpose and informed that the study content was fictional and created for research purposes.

6.2 Results and Discussion

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to examine the effectiveness of the manipulation, with the high economic inequality group coded as 1 and the low inequality group as 0. Potential differences between the two groups in income and subjective SES were examined. For income, the high inequality group (M = 5.34, SD = 1.20) did not differ significantly from the low inequality group (M = 5.42, SD = 1.40), t(248) = -0.48, p = 0.63, Cohen' s d = -0.06. For subjective SES, the high inequality group (M = 2.79, SD = 0.69) did not differ significantly from the low inequality group (M = 2.96, SD = 0.73), t(248) = -1.87, p = 0.06, Cohen' s d = -0.24. The manipulation check showed that participants in the high inequality group (M = 6.16, SD = 0.89) reported significantly higher perceived economic inequality than those in the low inequality group (M = 2.50, SD = 0.97), t(248) = 31.07, p < 0.001, Cohen' s d = 3.93, indicating that the manipulation successfully induced different perceptions of economic inequality.

Figure 5 [Figure 5: see original paper] shows the mediating role of perceived control in Study 4b (N = 250). Next, we examined H3 and H4 regarding the effect of economic inequality on lying flat tendency and the mediating role of perceived control. Using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Model 4, bootstrap samples = 5000; Hayes, 2013) and controlling for gender, age, subjective SES, and income, the results showed that the total effect of economic inequality on lying flat tendency was marginally significant (B = 0.29, SE = 0.15, p = 0.05), 95% CI [-0.01, 0.58]. The effect of economic inequality on perceived control was significant (B = -1.78, SE = 0.13, p < 0.001), 95% CI [-2.03, -1.52]. When both economic inequality and perceived control were included, the effect of economic inequality on lying flat tendency was significant (B = -0.60, SE = 0.18, p = 0.001), 95% CI [-0.95, -0.24], and the effect of perceived control on lying flat tendency was significant (B = -0.50, SE = 0.07, p < 0.001), 95% CI [-0.63, -0.37]. The indirect effect through perceived control was 0.89, 95% CI [0.61, 1.23]. These results indicate that perceived control mediates the relationship between economic inequality and lying flat tendency, supporting H3 and H4.

To examine the replicability of the effect of economic inequality on lying flat tendency through perceived control, Study 4b used another common manipulation method in economic inequality research and replicated the findings of Study 4a, again supporting the effect of economic inequality on lying flat tendency and the mediating role of perceived control. Therefore, Studies 4b and 4a together not only verify H3 and H4 but also ensure the replicability of the research conclusions from different perspectives. Of course, given the maladaptive nature of lying flat tendencies, we also wanted to examine whether there are boundaries to the "economic inequality→perceived control→lying flat tendency" mediation.

Therefore, Study 5 will further explore the moderating effect of perceived social mobility on this mediated relationship.

7. Study 5: The Moderating Effect of Perceived Social Mobility

Study 5 aimed to test H5, that perceived social mobility moderates the mediated effect of "economic inequality→perceived control→lying flat tendency." Since the causal relationship where economic inequality as an experimentally manipulated independent variable affects perceived control and lying flat tendency was already examined and yielded stable results in Studies 4a and 4b, here we focused more on the causal effect of the moderator. Therefore, we manipulated perceived social mobility level while measuring economic inequality, perceived control, and lying flat tendency as continuous variables via questionnaire. This design better captures the causal impact of perceived social mobility on the moderated mediation model.

7.1.1 Participants

Based on previous research (e.g., Zeng et al., 2024; Rao et al., 2022), we used G*Power 3.1 to calculate the required sample size. The results showed that with $\alpha \leq 0.05$ and power 1 -$\beta = 0.95$, 210 participants were needed to detect a medium effect size (d = 0.5). Therefore, we set a target of 300 valid samples on the Credamo platform, excluding invalid samples until 300 valid responses were collected. A total of 328 responses were collected, with 28 invalid samples excluded—all due to failing attention check questions. The final sample included 196 females and 104 males, with a mean age of 28.32 years (SD = 6.98). All participants voluntarily participated and provided informed consent.

7.1.2 Design and Procedure

A single-factor two-level (perceived social mobility: high vs. low) between-subjects design was used. First, participants' perceived economic inequality was measured using the same method as Study 1—the Subjective Inequality Scale developed by Schmalor and Heine (2022). In Study 5, this scale had a Cronbach' s α of 0.82, and the mean of all items was used as the score for perceived economic inequality.

Next, perceived social mobility was manipulated, with participants randomly assigned to high or low perceived social mobility conditions and receiving corresponding experimental primes. Following previous research (Rao et al., 2022), both groups were presented with fictional news materials describing either unobstructed or obstructed social mobility conditions. Participants were then asked, "Have you carefully read this news material?" (yes/no), followed by a reading comprehension question, "What do you think is the main information content of this news material?" with four options. Only participants who answered "yes"

to the first question and correctly answered the second question were retained as valid data.

After the perceived social mobility manipulation, participants completed manipulation check items measuring immediate perceived social mobility, adapted from Rao et al. (2022), comprising 6 items ($\alpha = 0.91$; e.g., "Children from poor families today can achieve upward social mobility through hard work and study"). The mean of all items was used as the score, with higher scores indicating higher perceived social mobility.

Subsequently, perceived control and lying flat tendency were measured. Perceived control was measured using the same scale as Study 2 (Lachman & Weaver, 1998; Li, 2014; $\alpha = 0.94$). Lying flat tendency was measured using the same questionnaire as Study 1 (Lu et al., 2023; $\alpha = 0.84$). An attention check item ("For this question, please directly select 'agree' ") was included; participants who failed to respond as instructed were excluded as invalid data.

Finally, subjective SES, objective family income level, gender, and age were measured using the same methods as Study 2. Participants were then debriefed about the study' s purpose and informed that the study content was fictional.

7.2 Results and Discussion

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to examine the effectiveness of the manipulation, with the high perceived social mobility group coded as 1 and the low mobility group as 0. Potential differences between the two groups in income, subjective SES, and perceived economic inequality were examined. For income, the high mobility group (M = 5.21, SD = 1.36) did not differ significantly from the low mobility group (M = 5.24, SD = 1.37), t(298) = -0.21, p = 0.83, Cohen' s d = -0.02. For subjective SES, the high mobility group (M = 2.72, SD = 0.72) did not differ significantly from the low mobility group (M = 2.61, SD = 0.73), t(298) = 1.36, p = 0.18, Cohen' s d = 0.15. For perceived economic inequality, the high mobility group (M = 4.91, SD = 0.98) did not differ significantly from the low mobility group (M = 4.94, SD = 1.03), t(298) = -0.27, p = 0.79, Cohen' s d = -0.03. The manipulation check showed that participants in the high mobility group (M = 5.20, SD = 0.87) reported significantly higher perceived social mobility than those in the low mobility group (M = 3.38, SD = 1.25), t(298) = 14.70, p < 0.001, Cohen' s d = 1.69, indicating that the manipulation of perceived social mobility was effective.

Perceived social mobility was not significantly correlated with economic inequality (r = -0.02, p = 0.79), which facilitates analysis of their interaction effect. Next, we tested H5 regarding the moderated mediation effect. Following Hayes (2013), we used the PROCESS macro in SPSS (Model 8) with 5000 bootstrap samples, controlling for gender, age, objective and subjective SES. The results are presented in **Table 3** .

First (Regression Equation 1), with lying flat tendency as the dependent vari-

able, we examined the interaction effect of economic inequality and perceived social mobility on lying flat tendency. The interaction was not significant (B = -0.10, SE = 0.10, p = 0.29), 95% CI [-0.29, 0.09]; the main effect of perceived social mobility was significant (B = -0.29, SE = 0.10, p = 0.003), 95% CI [-0.49, -0.10]. Second (Regression Equation 2), with perceived control as the dependent variable, we examined the interaction effect of economic inequality and perceived social mobility on perceived control. The interaction was significant (B = 0.23, SE = 0.11, p = 0.049), 95% CI [0.00, 0.45]. Finally, with lying flat tendency as the dependent variable, we examined the effects of economic inequality, perceived social mobility, their interaction, and perceived control. The interaction effect was not significant (B = 0.01, SE = 0.08, p = 0.91), 95% CI [-0.15, 0.16]. Importantly, the moderated mediation effect was significant, with an effect size of -0.11, SE = 0.06, 95% CI [-0.22, -0.003]. Specifically, under low perceived social mobility, the indirect effect through perceived control was 0.21, SE = 0.05, 95% CI [0.13, 0.31]; under high perceived social mobility, the indirect effect decreased to 0.10, SE = 0.04, 95% CI [0.03, 0.20]. This demonstrates that perceived social mobility moderates the mediated effect of "economic inequality→perceived control→lying flat tendency" by moderating the relationship between economic inequality and perceived control. These results provide partial support for H5.

Figure 6 [Figure 6: see original paper] shows the simple slopes analysis for Study 5 (N = 300). Simple slope tests examined the effect of economic inequality on perceived control under different levels of perceived social mobility. Under low perceived social mobility, economic inequality significantly predicted perceived control (B = -0.43, SE = 0.08, p < 0.001), 95% CI [-0.59, -0.27]. Under high perceived social mobility, economic inequality still significantly predicted perceived control, but the effect was reduced (B = -0.21, SE = 0.08, p = 0.015), 95% CI [-0.37, -0.04]. In other words, even under high economic inequality, participants with high perceived social mobility showed relatively higher perceived control.

Building on the "economic inequality→perceived control→lying flat tendency" mediation identified in previous studies as important and warranting attention, Study 5 attempted to further explore this relationship from a moderation perspective to identify conditions under which this effect might be reduced. By examining the moderating role of perceived social mobility, the results support H5. For individuals with low perceived social mobility, economic inequality indeed reduces perceived control and triggers lying flat tendency. However, for those with high perceived social mobility, the effect of economic inequality on reducing perceived control was attenuated—in other words, individuals maintained relatively higher perceived control. Consequently, the mediated effect of "economic inequality→perceived control→lying flat tendency" was also reduced. This suggests that in highly unequal societies, if social mobility is perceived as unobstructed, people' s perceived control can be maintained, indicating that social mobility can mitigate the negative effects of economic inequality.

8. General Discussion

Although economic inequality brings a series of negative social impacts (e.g., Jetten et al., 2021; Yang & Xin, 2020), recent research has proposed that perceiving higher levels of economic inequality increases people' s desire for wealth and status (e.g., Jetten et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2023). However, whether this desire for wealth and status caused by economic inequality can be genuinely transformed into substantive effort is questionable. If a person subjectively wants to pursue success but objectively remains lying flat, this seemingly conflicted mindset may constitute an authentic expression of how people cope with the social reality of economic inequality. Therefore, this article explored the conflicting aftermath of economic inequality—simultaneously stimulating people' s desire for success while leading them toward lying flat—through six progressively advanced studies. The research first found positive correlations between economic inequality and both wealth/status desire and lying flat tendency in university student (Study 1) and non-student adult (Study 2) samples, and preliminarily demonstrated through correlational evidence that status anxiety explains how economic inequality triggers wealth/status desire, while perceived control explains how it triggers lying flat tendency. Next, through experimental designs (Studies 3, 4a, and 4b), we provided causal evidence for two logical pathways: "economic inequality→status anxiety→wealth/status desire" and "economic inequality→perceived control→lying flat tendency." Finally, since the second pathway is more concerning and warrants attention, Study 5 explored the moderating effect on this pathway and found that perceived social mobility can mitigate this effect. The six sub-studies used multiple research paradigms and different participant samples to provide replicable examinations of the conclusions, ensuring robust results.

8.1 The Effect of Economic Inequality on Wealth/Status Desire and the Mediating Role of Status Anxiety

Previous research has found that economic inequality stimulates stronger desire for wealth and status (Wang et al., 2023). This study not only provides new evidence for the relationship between economic inequality and wealth/status desire but also further explores the underlying psychological mechanism, demonstrating the mediating role of status anxiety.

The findings are consistent with and extend social identity theory and self-categorization theory. Social identity theory emphasizes that individuals tend to develop self-identity based on their groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), while self-categorization theory further elaborates that individuals form cognitions about their category memberships based on different situations, triggering corresponding psychological and behavioral responses (Turner et al., 1987). This study, focusing on the specific situational perception of economic inequality, reveals the psychological tendencies individuals develop to maintain and pursue more positive social identities and self-categorizations under such conditions. The social reality of economic inequality makes individuals prone to categorize

themselves and their groups based on "rich" and "poor" distinctions and form identities accordingly (Jetten et al., 2022). This study finds that such categorization and identity further trigger stronger status anxiety at the emotional level and more urgent wealth/status desire at the motivational level. Both the anxiety about one' s current status and the desire for future status are direct manifestations of identity and categorization. Therefore, this study is grounded in social identity theory and self-categorization theory but goes beyond static identity and categorization to describe people' s potential psychological and behavioral tendencies from the perspective of economic inequality, making some theoretical extensions.

8.2 The Effect of Economic Inequality on Lying Flat Tendency and the Mediating Role of Perceived Control

Similar to the first research pathway, we examined the correlational and causal relationships between economic inequality and lying flat tendency, as well as the mediating role of perceived control. Compared to the "economic inequality→status anxiety→wealth/status desire" pathway, the results for "economic inequality→perceived control→lying flat tendency" are more concerning. Together, they reflect the psychological conflict in unequal social contexts where people both want to pursue wealth/status and are unwilling to make efforts.

Although some researchers have proposed that lying flat tendency is closely related to economic inequality (e.g., Wu & Sun, 2024) and understand it as a specific cultural phenomenon in the context of intensified social competition and rapid economic development (Wang et al., 2024), empirical research has paid relatively little attention to the relationship between economic inequality and lying flat tendency and its underlying mechanisms. This study directly examined the relationship between the two and identified the mediating role of perceived control, showing that economic inequality leads to a loss of perceived control, consistent with previous findings (e.g., To et al., 2023). The reduction in perceived control further induces people to adopt the passive coping style of lying flat, a negative psychological aftermath that aligns with previous research on the negative effects of economic inequality and loss of perceived control (e.g., Maier & Seligman, 2016).

More importantly, this study reveals the contradictory consequences of economic inequality. On one hand, it finds that economic inequality can trigger people' s desire to pursue wealth and status, developing endogenous motivation for wealth creation. In this regard, this study and previous research (Wang et al., 2023) agree on its positive significance. However, this so-called "positive" effect is limited, or rather a "double-edged sword" —while economic inequality can stimulate individuals' desire for success, it rarely translates this desire into actual effortful action. Instead, individuals may escape striving due to frustrated perceived control, potentially fostering lying flat tendencies. The desire to pursue success while simultaneously wanting to lie flat reflects to some extent the complex yet authentic psychological portrait of some young people today.

Theoretically, by revealing this "double-edged sword" conflicted aftermath of economic inequality, this study enriches current psychological understanding of the consequences of economic inequality and uncovers additional potential psychological mechanisms, providing insights for future theoretical and research development in this field.

Additionally, this study may inspire related research areas. For example, in recent years, besides lying flat tendency, another typical "internet-famous" academic concept— "involution" (Neijuan; Zhang et al., 2024)—has also received academic attention. Involution reflects people' s tendency to over-invest in competition for limited resources (Wei et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2024), which both corresponds to lying flat tendency and connects to the motivation for wealth/status desire. Could perceived economic inequality also predict involution behavior? Combining the current findings, future research might explore the potential influencing factors and mechanisms of involution behavior from the perspective of perceived inequality.

8.3 The Moderating Effect of Perceived Social Mobility

Building on the discovery of the "economic inequality→perceived control→lying flat tendency" mediation that warrants attention, this study did not stop there. The concerning issue lies not in "wanting success" but in "wanting to lie flat." Therefore, this study continued to explore how to mitigate this effect. Based on compensatory control theory, we proposed that perceived social mobility —an important source of social order in real life—could serve as a potential moderator, compensating for and protecting perceived control while it is being undermined by economic inequality, thereby altering the mediated effect of "economic inequality→perceived control→lying flat tendency." The results support the hypothesis: although the mediated effect remained significant under high perceived social mobility, the effect size was significantly smaller, demonstrating that perceived social mobility can moderate the weakening effect of economic inequality on perceived control and alleviate lying flat tendency. The study also found a significant main effect of perceived social mobility on lying flat tendency (negative), indicating it can reduce lying flat tendency to some extent.

Previous research has found that perceived social mobility has positive implications for individuals and society, such as enhancing recognition of system legitimacy (Day & Fiske, 2017) and increasing prosocial behavior (Rao et al., 2022). This study provides new perspectives and evidence for the positive value of perceived social mobility through its examination of lying flat tendency. Moreover, this study not only reveals the independent positive effect of perceived social mobility but also uncovers its interaction with economic inequality, particularly for societies with high inequality—if the public perceives social mobility as unobstructed, negative consequences can be partially avoided. This further highlights the constructive significance of perceived social mobility. Additionally, the results support and extend compensatory control theory. While the theory emphasizes that the existence of order can compensate for insufficient

personal control (Landau et al., 2015), its elaboration on what specific forms of order are needed in different social contexts to provide this effect is relatively vague. This study, grounded in this theoretical perspective, proposes and verifies that social mobility can serve as an important social order that compensates for control, thereby developing new explanatory boundaries for compensatory control theory within a new framework (economic inequality conditions). For the research field of perceived social mobility, its integration with compensatory control theory may also provide more space for theoretical extension in the future. As a source of orderliness, unobstructed social mobility can be considered a potential source of compensatory control. Therefore, it is reasonable to speculate that in other negative psychological effects caused by insufficient control, perceived social mobility may also serve as an effective intervention variable.

8.4 Theoretical and Practical Implications

In summary, the theoretical significance and contributions of this study are mainly reflected in the following aspects. First, we replicated the positive effect of economic inequality on wealth/status desire found in previous research and extended exploration of this issue by revealing the mediating role of status anxiety. Second, the innovative significance of this study also lies in discovering the conflicted aftermath of economic inequality— "wanting success but not wanting to strive" —and examining the mediating effect of perceived control between economic inequality and lying flat tendency, deeply exploring the mechanisms behind this conflicted psychology. Third, to address this negative psychological state, this study explored the potential of perceived social mobility to improve this psychological mechanism. Finally, as previously analyzed, this study provides some support and extension for social identity theory, self-categorization theory, and compensatory control theory, offering new perspectives and evidence for these theories to expand their explanatory power in different contexts. Particularly noteworthy is that this study makes innovative theoretical explorations of lying flat tendency. While previous research has discussed the causes of lying flat from different perspectives (e.g., Xiong, 2022; Ye, 2023; Zhang et al., 2022), most have remained at the level of phenomenon discussion without empirical support. This study enriches the empirical research accumulation in this field and provides heuristic value and reference significance for future in-depth research. Meanwhile, this study also finds that lying flat tendency is not unchangeable, as the "economic inequality→perceived control→lying flat tendency" pathway can be moderated by perceived social mobility, providing theoretical support for better understanding and intervening in lying flat phenomena.

This study also has practical implications. Especially grounded in the reality of contemporary social development, on one hand, China' s rapid economic and social development over the past decades has made most Chinese people aspire to pursue wealth and status, a desire that is positive and worthy of affirmation. On the other hand, the emergence of lying flat tendencies warrants reflection

and vigilance, as it not only intensifies internal conflicts among some young people but may also evolve into a potential negative social mentality, potentially harming positive expectations for social development and personal motivation for struggle, ultimately affecting the achievement of common prosperity goals. Therefore, the phenomenon revealed in this study deserves high practical attention. This study provides potential clues for changing this phenomenon from two angles. The first is to reduce perceived economic inequality, which is the antecedent of the psychological conflict revealed in this study, so making people feel greater economic equality is a direction for effort. The second is to make people experience more possibilities for social mobility, such as opportunities for low-income groups to enter middle-income or higher-income groups through struggle, because this study finally found this moderating effect of perceived social mobility, which has positive effects on changing lying flat tendencies. In summary, making individuals perceive higher levels of economic equality and social mobility can alleviate the formation of lying flat tendencies to some extent and provide stronger social psychological momentum for promoting the process of common prosperity.

8.5 Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations that need to be addressed in future research. First, the data were based on self-report measures, which may affect the validity of the research to some extent. Second, the sample was limited to China, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other cultural contexts. Therefore, future research should test the effects and model in different countries and more diverse cultural settings. Third, the attention check questions used in Studies 3 and 4a for perceived economic inequality resulted in relatively high participant exclusion rates. Although this is consistent with previous research (Zeng et al., 2024), future studies should consider improvements. Fourth, to demonstrate the psychological conflict caused by economic inequality, this study only examined the pair of contradictory variables—wealth/status desire and lying flat tendency. However, other dependent variables with practical significance, such as involution behavior, also deserve attention and exploration in future research. Fifth, the experimental causal design logic chain in this study is not yet complete; future research should also test the effects of manipulating the mediators (status anxiety, perceived control) on the dependent variables (wealth/status desire, lying flat tendency). Sixth, this study only examined the moderating effect of perceived social mobility on the "economic inequality→perceived control→lying flat tendency" pathway, without investigating the moderating effect on the "economic inequality→status anxiety→wealth/status desire" mediation. This is mainly because lying flat tendency is more negative, while legitimate wealth/status desire is a tendency worthy of affirmation with positive significance (Wang et al., 2023). However, it is also necessary to understand the boundary conditions of the "economic inequality→status anxiety→wealth/status desire" mediation from a theoretical basis, which future research could further explore. Finally, the moderating effect of perceived social

mobility on the "economic inequality→perceived control→lying flat tendency" pathway requires further replication and testing. Although perceived social mobility can affect individuals' perceived control, it did not moderate the total effect of economic inequality on lying flat tendency in this study. Additionally, this study did not simultaneously manipulate economic inequality and perceived social mobility; future research could explore new designs from this angle to replicate the findings. Moreover, how to conduct more effective psychological interventions for lying flat tendencies should be an important direction for future research. Exploring more potential moderating variables not only has important theoretical significance but also holds key practical reference value for promoting the goal of "common prosperity."

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