

Buying and building success: Perceptions of organizational strategies for improvement

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Abstract

What makes people like a team? We suggest and test here whether people's perceptions of teams and organizations differ as a function of the strategy the teams pick on their way to success. Two main strategies are compared: (1) *Development* is a strategy focused on building and enhancing the abilities of current team members; and (2) *Acquisition* is a strategy focused on buying talent from outside the organization. Does the way to success matter? In other words, will the strategy a team endorse affects how much people like the team? In five studies ($N = 1,672$) we tested whether people prefer teams that were successful by being (a) *built* through long-term *development* of team members or (b) *bought* by *acquiring* expensive personal developed elsewhere. Across the five studies, people preferred built teams over bought teams, including sport teams and law firms. Effort and group cohesion were more attributed to build than to bought teams. In a "mediators contest," effort attributions proved most robust. People like built teams more than bought ones, mostly because they value the effort and hard work that built teams represent.

KEYWORDS

ability, attributions, bought, built, cohesiveness, effort, sports teams

1 | INTRODUCTION

Whether dealing in teams from business, sports, law firms, or the entertainment industry, it is not unusual for a successful team to be a collection of stars imported from other groups and organizations. Musicians who were stars in other bands are often brought together to form a "supergroup" (e.g., Cream; Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young; The Three Tenors; Westside Connection; and Silk Road Ensemble). Supergroups often receive substantial acceptance and critical acclaim and frequently have a strong record and ticket sales (Shuker, 2016). The construction of supergroups, where team leaders "buy" and bring together the best talent available, is however not the only way teams can be developed. Teams can also be "built," when members are trained, developed, and led to team success.

The management of two NBA teams—the Miami Heat and the San Antonio Spurs—provides a real-life comparison of "bought and

"built" teams. In 2010 LeBron James, the best-known basketball player of his time, made a then-shocking announcement that he was leaving his local team, the *Cleveland Cavaliers* to join the *Miami Heat* with All-Stars Dwyane Wade and Chris Bosh, in what would create a "super team." The Heat quickly became one of the most scrutinized and openly reviled teams ever (NBA stuff, 2017). The disregard was justified with the claim that they had bought themselves a team of superstars rather than put the work and effort into building a team from scratch (see also Kevin Durant and the Warriors, Solache, 2016; and the Los Angeles Dodger MLB team from the early 2010s, Knight, 2016). This star-built team enjoyed substantial success (Wise, 2014).

The main rival of the Miami Heat at the time was the San Antonio Spurs. Each team had won one NBA title in their duel, but the Heat and James received much more criticism and negative affect (disdain, hatred) from sportswriters, analysts, and especially fans (e.g., Wise, 2014). Heat fans themselves were characterized as uncommitted and fair-weathered (Strauss, 2014). We suggest that the criticism

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was based on the perception that (1) the Spurs had built a successful team over years; whereas the Heat had merely bought stars (e.g., Texas Humor, 2014) and (2) the belief that a built team is superior to a bought one (Adande, 2014; Wise, 2014).

The differential strategies employed by the Miami Heat and the San Antonio Spurs represent two approaches that businesses and organizations utilize to acquire human capital (i.e., talented employees)—tactics that represent *acquisition* and *development* (Lepak & Snell, 1999; Lepak & Snell, 2002). Acquisition is “acquiring (i.e., buying) from the market human capital” (Lepak & Snell, 1999, p. 38), the approach taken by the Heat as they obtained (bought) several key players via free agency. Organizations like the Spurs pursued human capital development; they focused on investing time and effort to improve the skill sets of their then current players.

Although relevant to sport, decisions on whether to acquire (buy) or develop (build) skilled workers/employees are critical to the success of wide variety of organizations and businesses (Cappelli, 2008). When searching for departmental chair, college dean, and other administrative positions, colleges and universities often have a choice between developing and promoting from within or acquiring a qualified individual from outside the organization. Law firms, doctors’ offices, law enforcement agencies, and other professional businesses can invest in current members and engage in talent development, or they can use talent acquisition and hire individuals with a pre-established track record of success. Restaurants, hair salons, theme parks, and other service-based businesses can, likewise, develop their own or choose to attract and hire persons with a pre-established skill set. This question is also similar to a question in manufacturing, what to make in house versus what to buy from outside (Probert, 1996).

We are interested in perceptions of teams and organizations who have opted for a strategy focused on building and enhancing the abilities of current members (development) versus perceptions of teams/organizations who have chosen to buy talent from outside the organization (acquisition). We focused on how people view groups and teams established via these two strategies. In the Heat/Spurs case, fans and members of the media displayed far more negative perceptions of the Heat than the Spurs, suggesting a preference for built teams over bought teams. We hypothesize that this is not unique to the Heat versus Spurs rivalry, nor even sports in general. We expect the preference for bought teams and organizations is common across a wide variety of organizational settings, in part because research shows the way one succeeds is as important as whether one succeeds (Weiner, 1985).

What makes people see a team, a company, or a person more “worthy” of success than another (Roberts et al., 1998)? When is success justified and appropriate (Reijonen & Komppula, 2007)? In the studies below, we demonstrate experimentally the preference for “built” teams and examine several potential explanations for the effect. We focused on two kinds of explanations for “built” preferences, one based on status quo biases, and one based on attributions for success.

1.1 | Status quo, existence, and longevity biases

Teams that have the same group members for long periods benefit from status quo-based biases that promote positive evaluations from others (e.g., athletic teams comprised of the same players for an extended time may garner greater fan support). People generally prefer the status quo, and persons who are established and have a longer tenure with a team or a group will benefit from a generally positive bias in their favor (Eidelman & Crandall, 2012). This process is known as the status quo bias, and in some guises as the existence bias (Eidelman et al., 2009). The biases operate heuristically and apparently nonconsciously, and imbue established, existing structures, products, processes, or people with a slightly more positive evaluation (Eidelman & Crandall, 2014). Status quo biases are modified by longevity; the longer the product, practice, or team exists, the stronger the bias—the older and more established something is, the more positively it is evaluated (Eidelman et al., 2010).

Although pertinent in a wide arena of group and organizational contexts, an application of the status quo bias can be found in sports in a manner related to the development or acquisition of talent. That is, when a sport team is built (i.e., developed) the players have—by definition—been around longer than bought teams (i.e., acquisition); if a team has been built, it has had its “current existence” longer than a team that has been bought. When a team is slowly built, the time spent on building helps accrue fan support—it does this virtually automatically, without specific effort on the part of the team, the longer the team, and players have been around, the better (Eidelman et al., 2010). Buying a team with “instant” star players does not have the longevity advantage. Since the “time in existence” is greater for built teams, they should benefit from the status quo and longevity-based biases.

1.2 | Protestant ethic and the perception of work

A second factor with the potential to have an impact on preferences for teams and organizations that have been built rather than bought involves the protestant ethic and work perceptions. A built team, group, or organization is thought to result from effort on the part of the organizational leaders and the management. Because it is a Western cultural value to treat work and labor as their own good, one might conclude that people who value hard work and self-denial will find teams and groups that are built more appealing, more worthy of praise and attention, than those that were simply bought (see Furnham, 1984; Meriac et al., 2013).

If hard work is the key to success, those who work hard and long should win. This idea is part of the Protestant Work Ethic (Weber, 1904/2013). Endorsers of this cultural value should favor built groups and organizations. Returning to a sports analogy, when former player and current sports commentator and celebrity Rose (2013) tweeted “The Heat were bought, the Spurs were built”; the implication was the Spurs are more worthy of support and of the championship (see also Wise, 2014). “As a small-market team, they

have been unable to entice big-name free agents with fat contracts. The Spurs have built championship teams through the draft, player development, and astute player evaluation" (Robinson, 2013).

The Protestant Work Ethic values work, and built teams and organizations are based on the long-term commitment to working toward a goal. If built groups represent the cultural value, then endorsement of the Protestant Work Ethic values (Katz & Hass, 1988) would act as a mediator of the evaluation of those that were built versus bought. If the Protestant Work Ethic values play a role, the mediating factor is likely to be one of two of its constituent factors—the denial of pleasure, self, and worldly delights, or the attribution of responsibility based on hard work. Given the argument laid out above, we hypothesize that attributions of responsibility for success will mediate the relationship between the groups' "built" status and liking of the groups.

1.3 | Overview of research

In five studies, we asked participants to evaluate built and bought teams and groups, and we measured attitudes and attributions that could play a mediational role. The first three studies concerned sport teams (New Zealand rugby), the fourth study concerned teams of attorneys, and the fifth study used both types of teams. In Study 1, we predicted (H1) that teams perceived as built will be more liked than teams perceived as bought (experienced "stars" are bought into the team). If status quo/longevity biases are responsible for built team preference, we predict that (H2) the length of a team's existence will lead to greater liking. We also predicted that the preference for built teams would be moderated by how much people like sports; (H3) the effect of the manipulation will be greater for people who are sports fans.

2 | STUDY 1

To test our predictions regarding people's liking of teams, we collected a sizeable sample, assigned participants to one of four conditions (the combinations of built vs. bought, and old vs. new), and asked them to report their liking of a sport team they likely have never heard about based on a short vignette describing the team, and other judgments. We tested our main hypothesis (H1) that a team perceived as built (members/players were brought in young and inexperienced and developed over time), will be liked more than a team perceived as bought (experienced "stars" are bought into the team).

Based on the existence/longevity/status quo family of biases, we hypothesized that participants might simply rate a team more positively because it is established and long-lasting.

We thus tested the idea (H2) that a team perceived to exist longer (had been around for a longer period of time) would be evaluated more positively than a team that exists a shorter amount of time. Finally, we test whether the effect of built versus bought will be stronger among sports fans (H3); and would be mediated by people's endorsement of hard work and effort as precursors of success (H4).

2.1 | Method

2.1.1 | Participants and procedure

We recruited 539 people from the Department of Psychology subject pool to participate in the study. Participants were 47% female and their ages ranged from 18 to 70 years ($M = 25.10$, $SD = 8.94$). After clicking the initial link to the survey on SONA (the research management platform used by the university), participants read the information statement and initial instructions. They then were randomly assigned to one of four conditions (old/new, built/bought), and directed to the study web page on Qualtrics (a survey platform). Once they completed the survey, participants read a debriefing statement online and were thanked for their participation.

2.1.2 | Manipulation

Participants were exposed to one of four vignettes. For example, in the built condition participants read the following vignette:

Rugby in New Zealand

The national sport of New Zealand is rugby, a game that is similar to American football but is played without helmets, at nonstop pace, and with a rounder ball than in football. The New Zealand national team is called the "All Blacks" after their all-black uniforms; they are the international champions of the sport.

In New Zealand, there are several professional teams throughout the country. The two teams expected to go to the national finals this year are the Otago Highlanders and Waikato Mooloos.

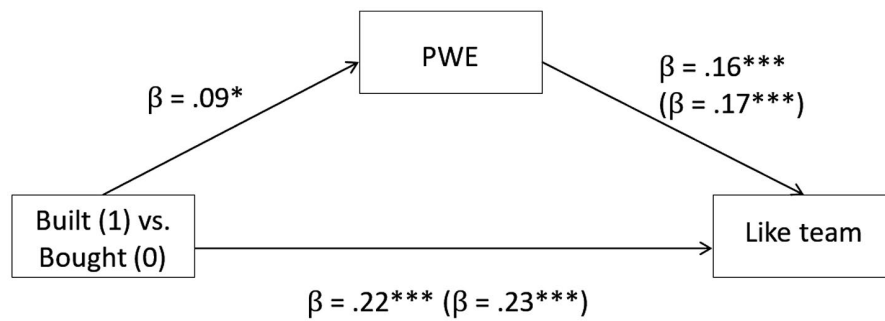
Otago highlanders. The Otago Highlanders is based in the city of Dunedin, and its home ground is Forsyth Barr Stadium. Their uniforms are deep blue, with yellow trim. The Highlanders have been a professional team since 1998; it is one of the newest [oldest] teams in the Rugby Union.

Their lead player is Jacob Ellison, who plays the Prop position, in the front row of the scrum. Ellison, like most everyone on the Otago team, has played his entire professional career with the Highlanders, coming up through the Otago development teams in the Dunedin region. The Otago Highlanders have a long-term commitment to developing their players within their own system. Ellison is one of the best-paid players for Otago, but he is not among the highest-paid rugby players in New Zealand.

In the bought condition they read the following vignette:

Waikato Mooloos. The Waikato Mooloos represents the Waikato area in the North Island of New Zealand. The team plays its home games at the Waikato Stadium in Hamilton. The uniform is broad horizontal stripes of red, yellow, and black. The Waikato Mooloos began to play in 1921, making them one of the oldest [newest] teams in New Zealand.

The Mooloos best-known player is Tawera Kerr-Barlow who plays scrum-half; he receives the ball from the forwards and passes it to the backs. Kerr-Barlow was born in Australia, has played for the



Note. (***) $p < .001$, (*) $p < .05$

FIGURE 1 Mediation of liking of built vs. bought teams via PWE

Chiefs and quite a number of other teams before moving recently to the Mooloos. Many of the other Waikato players are recent acquisitions of the Mooloos; the Waikato team is recognized for its practice of hiring its best players away from other teams with superior salaries. Kerr-Barlow is one of the ten highest-paid rugby players in the country.

The names of the teams and whether they were built/bought, new/old were counter-balanced. Participants also completed measures assessing attitudes about sports (see below) and about valuing effort across domains in life (Protestant Ethic values).

2.1.3 | Measures

Liking the team

Two items measured how much participants liked the team. The first asked participants how much they agreed with the statement, "If I liked rugby, this is the kind of team that I would like (or be a fan of)" on a scale from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*). The other item asked participants, "If I found myself watching this team on television, I would..." on a scale from 1 (*Root for them to win*) to 7 (*Root for the opponent*). The latter item was reverse-scored and then averaged with the former item to measure how much participants liked the team (The correlation between the two items was $r = 0.25$, $p < .001$).

Being a sports fan

Two items measured how much participants liked sports in general: "I consider myself a sports fan," and "I watch sports on television." Agreement was measured on a 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*) scale. The items were averaged together to measure how much participants considered themselves a sports fan ($r = 0.86$, $p < .001$).

Work ethic

To measure valuing of effort and hard work, we included the Katz and Hass (1988) Protestant Work Ethic (PWE) scale. Items included "If one works hard enough they are likely to make a good life for themselves," "I feel uneasy when there is little work for me to do," and "A distaste for hard work usually reflects a weakness of character." Items were averaged together to measure how much participants endorse Protestant Work Ethic values, $\alpha = 0.57$ (this alpha was

calculated with all items included; dropping the first item increased the alpha to 0.619).

2.2 | Results

The built team ($M = 4.88$, $SD = 1.11$) was liked more than the bought team ($M = 4.36$, $SD = 1.12$), $t(537) = 5.46$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.47$, 95% CI [0.30, 0.64]. There was no effects for old versus new, $F < 1$. We tested if the effect of built versus bought was moderated by being a sports fan. We mean centered the independent variables, entering the bought versus built condition, sports fan, and the interaction between the two in a linear regression equation. Sports fans liked the team more, $b = 0.10$, $SE = 0.03$, $t(535) = 3.76$, $p < .001$, and the built team was liked more than the bought team, $b = 0.51$, $SE = 0.10$, $t(535) = 5.42$, $p < .001$. These main effects were moderated by a significant condition by sports fan interaction, $\Delta R^2 = 0.01$, $b = 0.13$, $SE = 0.06$, $t(535) = 2.35$, $p = .019$.

We probed this interaction by examining the effect of condition at one standard deviation below and above the mean of being a sports fan (Hayes, 2013). The effect of condition was significant at one standard deviation below the mean, $b = 0.29$, $p = .031$, but much stronger at one standard deviation above the mean, $b = 0.74$, $p < .001$. Built teams were preferred by all, but it mattered to sports fans more.

2.2.1 | Mediation analysis

To test whether individual differences in Protestant work ethic drove the preference for built teams, we tested whether PWE served as a mediator of the association between built and liking. We used PROCESS macro version 3.2 for SPSS with Model 4 and 5,000 bias-corrected bootstrap resamples (Hayes, 2013; see Figure 1). Participants who read about the built team scored higher on PWE than those who read about the bought team, $t(535) = 2.01$, $p = .045$. Thus, built predicts greater PWE than bought, which in turn predicts greater liking of the team. The indirect effect's 95% confidence interval did not include zero, 0.013 [0.001, 0.034]. Nevertheless, the size of the individual differences effect is not impressive. We also found that endorsement of PWE correlated with reporting being a "sports fan," $r = 0.18$, ($N = 537$) $p < .001$, and

with reporting watching “sports on television,” $r = 0.21$, ($N = 536$), $p < .001$.

We found a preference for built over bought teams (supporting H1) but no evidence of the longevity of the team (no support for H2). We did find that the preference was larger among sports fans (H3). We also found that PWE was a mediator between preferring built over bought teams and liking the team (H4), but the mediational component was particularly modest (compared to the size of the effect of built versus bought).

Because PWE accounted for so little variance, in the next studies we turned our attention toward more direct assessments of attributions of effort, as well as other attitudes regarding team success.

3 | STUDY 2

In Study 2, we used crowdsourcing to identify and compare possible explanations for the built-preference effect. The goal of Study 2 was to identify, the main reasons, for why people prefer built teams over bought ones. These reasons could then be tested as potential mediators between the manipulation and preference. We asked participants what they think were the reasons for that preference in an open-ended format. We then used a conceptual content analysis to determine the frequency of concepts in participants’ open-ended responses. We coded each coherent or complete sentence into a manageable content category (selective reduction). The coding represents all of the explanations, regardless of who offered them.

3.1 | Method

3.1.1 | Participants and procedure

We recruited 111 people from a Midwestern University introductory to psychology subject pool to participate in the study. Participants were 65% female and their ages ranged from 18 to 31 ($M = 18.96$, $SD = 1.41$).

After clicking an online link to the survey, participants read an information statement and initial instructions and then were directed to the study on Qualtrics, and instructed: “Multiple studies have shown that people prefer teams that were built rather than teams that were bought. One example would be people’s support for the NBA team San Antonio Spurs when it competed with the Miami Heat who bought LeBron James and Chris Bush. Why do you think this is the case?” Once they completed the survey participants read a debriefing statement online and were thanked for their participation.

3.2 | Results

We obtained 132 different explanatory responses. We sorted content into categories using some pre-defined categories (gleaned

from professional discourses especially sports commentary and motivational psychology), as well as interactive categories, which allowed us the flexibility to add categories as we completed the coding process. Our level of analysis was themes, so we paid little attention to specific changes in text, and focused on meaning implied from these words. Validity of our coding process was ensured by being consistent and coherent in our codes. This process was informal compared to more focused qualitative projects. Because we did not have a representative sample of US residents, we used the process to seek out plausible candidates for why acquired/bought teams were less preferred than developed/built teams. Coding was done by hand.

The resultant list of reasons generated is in Appendix 1. This method corresponds to the theoretical sampling phase of grounded theory (see Corbin & Strauss, 1990), primarily using open coding (Böhm, 2004), we came to use a decision rule based on the frequency of mention by our participants. As can be seen in Appendix 1, there were 9 categories altogether. The most common theme was “*effort and hard work*,” with 37 mentions. Examples include:

“People like to see the progress made from hard work”.

“... because people see that they worked harder to get the winning team instead of just buying players. I would say people like to see other people succeed due to hard work”.

“Hard work is more respected than talent”.

The second most common theme was “*the sense of team cohesion and cooperation*” that comes from growing together as a team. Examples include:

“They work better together and work harder for each other”.

“A team that is build was put together based upon the skills of all the players combined; therefore, they make an actual team.”

Other categories included loyalty (12 mentions), injustice, and fairness (9), root for the underdog (8), money is bad (7), and front office expertise (2). Nineteen statements were classified under other/I don’t know, and 16 under repeating the statement (built is good). Our content analysis, while simple and straightforward, allowed us to identify the general trends in participants’ responses. As we expected, “work and effort” and “cohesion” were the two main reasons that came through, in line with the literature on protestant work ethic (Furnham, 1984) and the focus on hard work in the United States. The cohesion of groups drew a lot of attention in social psychology (Stewart, 2006), and we rotate back to it in Study 5. The other categories, lower on the count, were not included in the rest of our analyses; we report them in Appendix 1 as candidates for future study.

4 | STUDY 3

In Study 1, we argued that groups developed (i.e., built) over time would be perceived more positively than groups in which the talent was acquired (i.e., bought). Tested within a sports setting, we found support for this pattern of effects. However, the two factors we believed may be responsible for the preference for built groups, the PWE and status quo bias, seemed to have little if any impact. Thus, we conducted Study 2 in an attempt to determine what, precisely, individuals found so appealing about groups and teams that were built. The data from Study 2 suggest that attributions play a key role, and, in particular, attributions of effort.

There is a substantial amount of research and theory indicating that perceptions of effort are a critically important contributor to person perception and judgments of performance (e.g., Siegle et al., 2010; Weiner, 1985). Generally, effort tends to be both valued and rewarded (Inzlicht et al., 2018; Morales, 2005). In fact, the importance of effort in facilitating positive judgments of performance is so prominent that there appears to be an effort heuristic, in which the more effort invested in an object—be it a painting, a poem, or a scientific article—the better it is deemed to be (Kruger et al., 2004).

Furthermore, researchers have often found that individuals are more impressed by success attributed to effort than similar levels of success thought to be a function of ability (Weiner, 1994). This pattern of effects has been documented in a variety of domains including education (Espinoza et al., 2014), sport (Wann et al., 2002), and supervisor/subordinate relationships (Mitchell et al., 1981). Additionally, individuals often prefer items they have built themselves over purchased items that were fully constructed, a phenomenon termed the IKEA effect (Norton et al., 2012; see similar attitudes toward home cooking versus bought meals). These findings are highly relevant to our results from Studies 1 to 2. That is, sport teams that were built received more favorable evaluations than those that were bought (Study 1) and individuals reported that this preference was a function of the effort required to build (i.e., develop) a team (Study 2). As a result, it stands to reason that attributions of effort versus ability may be critical in facilitating preferences for built teams, groups, and organizations. Groups that are built may be viewed as having required more effort to construct than teams that were bought, and, as a result, built groups are viewed in a more positive light.

Given the aforementioned work on the importance of effort in judgments and evaluations, the goal of Study 3 was to test whether the liking people felt toward built teams (found in Study 1) was due to attributions regarding hard work and effort (the most common reasons for preferring built teams identified in Study 2). The two main differences from Study 1 were: (a) dropping the old versus new manipulation (no evidence for H2), and replacing PWE with a direct assessment of attributions for success (hard work/effort). We again predicted that (H1) people will like built teams more; and also that (H4) the preference for built teams would be mediated via attitudes regarding effort and hard work as precursors of success.

4.1 | Method

4.1.1 | Participants and procedure

We recruited 170 University undergraduates to participate in the study for partial course credit. The sample was 54% female and their ages' ranged from 18 to 36 ($M = 19.03$, $SD = 1.99$). After clicking the initial link to the survey on SONA, participants read the information statement and initial instructions. They were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (built/bought) and directed to the study page on Qualtrics. At completion, participants read a debriefing statement and were thanked for their participation.

4.2 | Manipulation

Participants were exposed to one of two vignettes. We used the same built versus bought vignettes we had in Study 1 (excluding the old/new manipulations).

4.3 | Measures

4.3.1 | Liking the team

The same two items from Study 1 were used to measure how much participants liked the team ($r = 0.58$, $p < .001$).

4.3.2 | Attributions for team success

We created a measure to assess whether seeing hard work and effort as facilitating success mediates the link between built versus bought and liking the team. The measure included a list of reasons for a team's success (including effort, but also other reasons so that participants will not focus only on that reason). We asked participants to indicate the extent to which they attributed the team's success to each reason. Participants rated the reasons using a seven-point Likert scale. The stem read, "I believe that the success of the team is primarily due to..." and asked participants how much they agreed with seven attributions: "the work that they put into developing the team," "the effort that they put into developing their team," "the natural talent of the players on the team," "the ability level of the players on the team," "luck," "abusing the system," and "cheating."

We submitted these seven items to a principal component analysis, direct oblimin rotation, suppressing coefficients below 0.40. This analysis yielded three factors with eigenvalues above 1.2. First, *negative attributions* (cheating, abusing the system, and luck, $\alpha = 0.76$); second, *natural ability* (the natural talent of the players on the team, the ability level of the players on the team, $r = 0.69$); and third, *hard work and effort* (the work that they put into developing the team, the effort that they put into developing their team, $r = 0.81$).

4.4 | Results

The built team was liked more than the bought team (H1), and their success was attributed more to hard work and effort (H4) (see Table 1). Manipulation (built versus bought) did not have an effect on attributions for success related to natural ability and negative attributions.

We next tested whether the attributions we asked participants to rate mediated the effect of built versus bought on liking the team. To do that, we analyzed two separate linear regression models with the PROCESS macro version 3.2 for SPSS using Model 4 and 10,000 bias-corrected bootstrap resamples (Hayes, 2013). First, we regressed attributions of hard work and effort on condition. As noted in Table 1, participants were more likely to attribute team's success to hard work and effort for built teams (coded 1) than for bought teams (coded 0), $b = 0.36$, $SE = 0.16$, $t(168) = 2.20$, $p = .029$. We then regressed liking the team on condition and attributions of hard work and effort. Both were significant predictors: built team was liked more than the bought team, $b = 0.96$, $SE = 0.16$, $t(167) = 5.90$, $p < .001$, and perceptions of hard work predicted liking the team more, $b = 0.34$, $SE = 0.08$, $t(167) = 4.53$, $p < .001$. The indirect effect (ab) was 0.12, and its 95% CI did not include 0, [0.02, 0.28], indicating a significant indirect effect, $p < .05$. We did not analyze mediation for negative attributions and natural ability because they did not differ by group. Study 3 replicates Study 1, and enhances generalizability, showing similar effects regardless of whether the attributions are measured "in general" about the world (PWE, Study 1) or measured specifically about the outcome described (attributions to effort and work, Study 3).

5 | STUDY 4

In Study 4, we tested whether the effects we found in Studies 1 and 3 are unique to sport teams or could be applied to other contexts. We chose the context of law firms, which on the one hand is different from sports and does not relate with fans and fanship; but on the other hand, it is very competitive, and may invoke strong preferences and liking (or disliking) from people. The idea that attitudes regarding firms and businesses are similar to those about sports or sport teams has received some support in the literature (Werbach & Hunter, 2012). We kept the vignettes as similar as possible to the ones used in Studies 1 and 3 to avoid introducing any additional confounds. We predicted that (H1) people would like built (law) teams more than bought teams, and that (H4) this would be mediated by people's attributions to effort.

TABLE 1 Evaluations and type of attributions by built versus bought

Measure	Built	Bought	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>	95% CI
Liking team	5.49 (0.91)	4.41 (1.26)	6.39	<.001	0.98	[0.66, 1.30]
Hard work and effort	5.80 (0.89)	5.44 (1.22)	2.20	.029	0.34	[0.03, 0.64]
Ability and talent	5.24 (0.99)	5.53 (1.07)	-1.81	.072	-0.28	[-0.58, 0.03]
Negative attribution	2.62 (1.10)	2.83 (1.19)	-1.17	.242	-0.18	[-0.48, 0.12]

5.1 | Method

5.1.1 | Participants and procedure

We recruited 551 participants (88 of whom were from the University subject pool and the rest from MTurk), 38.3% were females and participants' ages ranged from 18 to 75 ($M = 31.24$, $SD = 11.55$).

5.1.2 | Manipulation

Participants read one of two vignettes. We used the original vignettes from Studies 1 and 3 to activate built versus bought, and modified them to fit law firms.

Built version

5.1.3 | Instructions

"Please read this brief description of a law firm below and then answer some questions about the firm on the following pages.

5.1.4 | Otago law firm

A law firm is a formal business entity, an association of lawyers who practice law. Usually, the members of a law firm share clients and profits.

In New Zealand, unlike the US, law firms are not simply partnerships, but rather highly competitive "teams" that work together. These partnerships sometimes hire successful lawyers away from their competitors. In the US, law firms are named after their partners, in New Zealand, they are usually named after the region. There are several such big law firms throughout the country; one well-known firm is **Otago Law Firm**.

The Otago lead lawyer is Jacob Ellison, who practices criminal law, especially in front of higher courts. Ellison, like most everyone working at the firm, has practiced his entire professional career with the Otago firm, starting after law school, and climbing through the Otago partner development program. The Otago firm has a long-term commitment to developing its lawyers within their own system. Ellison is one of the best-paid lawyers for Otago, but he is not among the highest-paid lawyers in New Zealand.

Bought version

5.1.5 | Otago law firm

A law firm is an association of lawyers who practice law. It is a business entity formed by one or more lawyers to engage in the practice of law. Usually, the members of a law firm share clients and profits.

In New Zealand, there are several big law firms throughout the country. One well-known firm is Otago Law Firm. Their lead lawyer is Jacob Ellison, who deals with criminal law, especially in front of higher courts. Ellison has worked for quite a number of other firms before moving recently to Otago. Many of the other Otago lawyers are recent acquisitions; the Otago firm is recognized for its practice of hiring the best lawyers away from other firms with superior salaries. Ellison is one of the ten highest-paid lawyers in New Zealand.

5.2 | Measures

5.2.1 | Liking the firm

We asked participants how much they agreed with the statement, "If I was looking for a law firm, this is the kind of firm I would like"

TABLE 2 Attributions for success by built versus bought, study 4

	Built		Bought	
	Mean (N = 277)	SD	Mean (N = 274)	SD
Work/effort	5.58	0.96	5.50	1.02
Ability/talent*	5.40	0.97	5.78	0.98
Cheat/abuse/luck	3.11	1.36	3.09	1.48

$t(549) = 2.19, p = .029$, all others p 's > .35.

on a seven-point Likert scale to assess how much participants liked the law firm.

5.2.2 | Attributions for team success

We also asked participants similar questions to those in Study 3 assessing how much participants perceived the success of the law firm due to the hard work, effort, or skill of the lawyers.

5.3 | Results

Replicating Studies 1 and 3, the built condition ($M = 5.65, SD = 1.03$) resulted in higher liking than the bought condition ($M = 5.39, SD = 1.20$), $t(549) = 2.77, p = .006, d = 0.23, 95\% CI [0.08, 0.45]$. Attributions by condition are displayed in Table 2; attributions to ability were higher for "bought" lawyers; no other differences emerged.

We tested whether attributions regarding the success of the firm (efforts individuals in the firm put up versus their ability) mediated the association between our manipulation (built versus bought) and liking the firm. Unlike Study 3, attributions of effort did not play a significant mediating role, $t(549) = 0.94, p = .35, 95\% CI [-0.09, 0.25]$ here. Instead, we found that attributions about the ability level of the lawyers on the team mediated the effects of built versus bought, $t(549) = 3.14, p = .0018, 95\% CI [0.10, 0.43]$. Only the indirect effect of individuals' ability or skill was significant, and its 95% CI did not include 0, $[-0.01, -0.004]$, indicating a significant indirect effect, $p < .05$. Although for law firms, built teams were liked more, the lawyer's ability mattered more than the effort made by the company (Figure 2).

The preference for built teams over bought extends to the contexts of laws firms, although the effect size ($d = 0.23$) was smaller than for rugby teams (S1, $d = 0.47$; S2, $d = 0.98$). The key difference in Study 4 was that attributions for success focused on ability—the built versus bought teams differed on ability, and attributions related

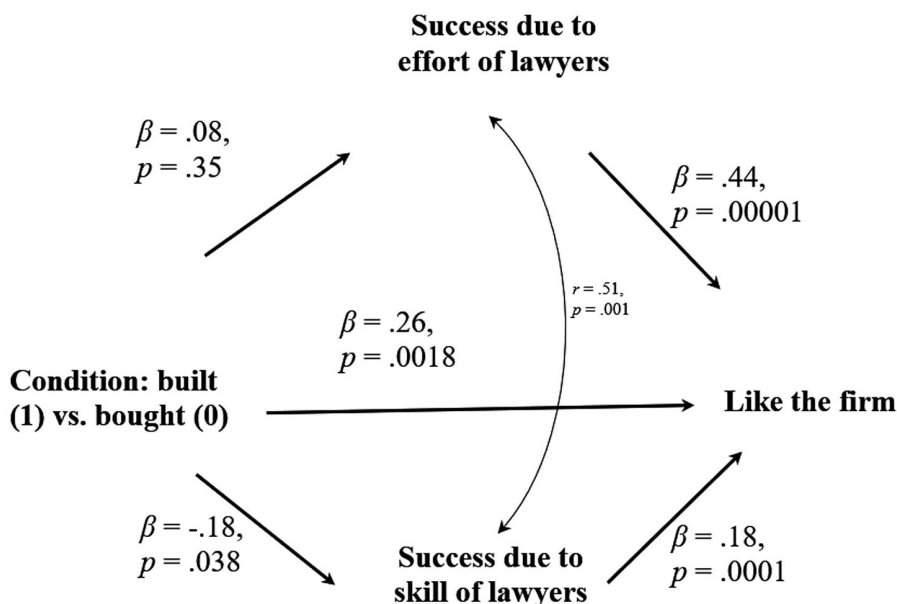


FIGURE 2 Testing mediators between built/bought and law firm evaluation, firm 3

to ability mediated the effect on team liking, rather than attributions related to hard work and effort.

6 | STUDY 5

In Study 5, we once again tested whether the effects we found in Studies 1, 3, and 4 were unique to sport teams or would they also take place in other contexts. Once again we kept the vignettes as similar as possible to the ones used in the previous studies to avoid introducing any additional confounds. We were again interested in both the main effect of the manipulation (built vs. bought) on liking and the indirect effect via attitudes toward effort and success. In Study 4, we found ability rather than effort, to mediate the link between the manipulation and liking in law firms. In Study 5, we decided to include both effort and ability and add team cohesiveness as a mediator.

Group cohesion is a fundamental phenomenon of interest in social psychology (Stewart, 2006), intergroup relations (Hogg et al., 1993), and is specifically well-studied in sport psychology (Carron, 1982; Carron et al., 2002). Group cohesion usually leads to improved performance and productivity (e.g., Podsakoff et al., 1997; but see, Langfred, 1998). In Study 5, we added an additional hypothesis to test (H5) whether cohesiveness will serve as a mediator for the link between the manipulation (built vs. bought) and liking regardless of the specific context (for both sport teams and law firms).

6.1 | Method

6.1.1 | Participants and procedure

We recruited 302 participants (256 of which were from the University subject pool and the rest from MTurk in the United States) to participate in the current study. The sample was 50% female and participants' ages ranged from 18 to 68 ($M = 21.93$, $SD = 8.14$).

6.1.2 | Manipulation

As mentioned above, we used similar vignettes to the ones we used in Studies 1, 3, and 4 (law bought [$n = 73$], law built [$n = 78$], sports bought [$n = 76$], sports built [$n = 75$]).

6.2 | Measures

6.2.1 | Liking the team

We asked participants how much they agreed with the statement, "If I was looking for a law firm, this is the kind of firm I would like"

on a seven-point Likert scale to assess how much participants liked the law firm. Or "If I liked rugby, this is the kind of team that I would like (or be a fan of)" on a scale from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*) to assess liking of sport teams.

6.2.2 | Attributions for team success

We also asked participants similar questions to those in the previous studies assessing how much participants perceived the success of the law firm/sport teams due to various reasons: 1. **Effort** (2 items: hard work and effort, $\alpha = 0.87$); 2. **Ability** (2 items: ability and talent, $\alpha = 0.82$); 3. **Cohesiveness** (new to study 5) with 3 items: "Working together as a cohesive team," "The team communicates and coordinates well," "The team displays a sense of togetherness," $\alpha = 0.89$); and 4. **Illegitimate** reasons (also new to Study 5) with 3 items, cheating, abuse, and luck; $\alpha = 0.76$). All items were rated on the same 1 to 7 scale as in the previous studies.

6.3 | Results

A 2 (built/bought) \times 2 (sport/law) ANOVA revealed that people liked built teams more ($M = 5.70$, $SD = 0.97$) than bought teams ($M = 4.53$, $SD = 1.55$), $F(297) = 64.32$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.18$, similar to Studies 1, 3, and 4. The ANOVA also revealed a main effect for group, $F(297) = 12.13$, $p = 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.039$, such that law firms were more liked ($M = 5.39$, $SD = 1.12$) than sport teams ($M = 4.87$, $SD = 1.62$). These two main effects were qualified by a two-way interaction between group and manipulation, $F(297) = 11.57$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.037$. Probing the interaction using pairwise multiple comparisons showed that, whereas the groups did not differ in the built condition (5.705 vs. 5.693 for law and sport), they did differ in the bought condition, such that people liked bought sport teams much less (5.042 vs. 4.053).

Next, we tested attitudes regarding the success of the firm (efforts individuals in the firm put up, individuals' ability, the cohesiveness of the group, illegitimate success, see Table 3) as potential mediators of the association between our manipulation (built vs. bought) and liking. We first used Process model 4 (Hayes, 2017; version 3.2) to test whether cohesiveness (the average of the three items) mediated the link and found that attributions to cohesiveness of the team indeed mediated the effects of built versus bought, $t(299) = 3.16$, $p = .0017$, 95% CI [0.15, 0.64]. The indirect effect of cohesiveness was significant, and its 95% CI did not include 0, [0.04, 0.25], indicating a significant indirect effect, $p < .05$. Thus, for both law firms and sport teams, alongside the direct effect of manipulation that remained significant (built liked more), there was an indirect effect of perceptions of team cohesion. We then used Model 8 to test for a moderated (by group: sports vs. law) mediation. Although the model was significant the moderated mediation was not 95% CI [-0.16, 0.18].

We next used Model 4 again to test the mediation by the two other reasons (hard work and effort; and ability and talent). **Effort:**

		N per cell	Cohesive	Effort	Ability	Cheat
Bought	Law (SD)	72	5.09 (1.15)	5.26 (1.11)	5.20 (1.16)	2.92 (1.08)
	Rugby (SD)	76	5.03 (1.17)	5.24 (1.24)	5.29 (1.28)	3.31 (1.30)
Built	Law (SD)	78	5.48 (0.98)	5.54 (1.04)	5.22 (1.02)	2.91 (1.17)
	Rugby (SD)	75	5.43 (1.04)	5.58 (1.14)	4.57 (1.53)	2.74 (1.02)

TABLE 3 Means and SDs for four IVs by built versus bought for lawyers and rugby teams

$t(299) = 5.61, p = .0185, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.05, 0.57]$. The indirect effect of effort was significant, and its 95% CI did not include 0, $[0.014, 0.22]$, indicating a significant indirect effect, $p < .05$. **Ability:** $t(299) = 5.45, p = .0202, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.64, -0.05]$. The indirect effect was significant, and its 95% CI did not include 0, $[-0.006, -0.13]$, indicating a significant indirect effect, $p < .05$.

Finally, we ran Model 6, with all three mediators of interest (cohesiveness, effort [hard work and effort], and talent [ability and talent]). The overall model was significant, $t(296) = 25.13, p = .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.52, 94]$. The only indirect effect that was still significant with all three mediators (effort, ability, and cohesiveness) in the model was effort, and its 95% CI did not include 0, $[0.008, 0.15]$, indicating a significant indirect effect, $p < .05$.

7 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

In five studies we examined the proposition that people like teams or firms built for success, more than teams or firms that their members were bought to generate instant success. Study 1 showed that people like built sport teams more than bought ones and that this is the case, especially among sports fans. The association between the manipulation (built versus. bought) and liking was mediated by scores on PWE. In Study 2, we identified the main reasons why people report they prefer built over bought teams. We used the main reason (hard work and effort) as a potential mediator in the next two studies, comparing it to having an ability or talent. In Study 3, we replicated the findings of Study 1 using a different sample. We further showed that the effect of liking built teams was mediated by attributions regarding effort and hard work. Participants attributed the success of built teams to effort and hard work more than the success of bought teams. In Study 4, we showed that this effect replicates in a different context (law firms) and that attributions (this time about individuals' ability) again mediated this effect (although the effects were not as strong, potentially due to differences in the vignettes). In Study 5, we further examined the effect of built versus bought and tested yet another mediator—group cohesiveness. We found the main effect of built versus bought on liking regardless of the context, and we found that cohesiveness served as a mediator in both contexts (sports and law). When all mediators were entered into a single model, effort and hard work emerged as the most robust mediator.

Psychologists have been interested in why people like or prefer one group over the other for a long while (e.g., Allen & Wilder, 1979). In the current set of studies, we identified one reason for such preference—people prefer teams that put the effort and build themselves from scratch. While this preference was replicated both on and off the court (i.e., sport teams and law firms), the reasons people

provided were not always the same (e.g., hard work of players in Study 3 versus skill of lawyers in Study 4, but see Study 5). This suggests that attitudes matter, and that different attitudes might matter at different circumstances. Perhaps the different kind of work, the “players” engage in (physical in sports versus. mental in law firms) creates the difference in attribution. Perhaps the context of moral values matters, where sport is clean and fairness should predominate, and lawyers are tasked with winning, in ways that may be perceived as immoral.

The reader may question the extent to which our results were simply a function of preferences for individuals and groups with an underdog status. Certainly underdogs (people and groups expected to lose a competition to a superior opponent) are appealing, and support for them can be found both within and outside of sporting contexts (Allison & Goethals, 2011; Goldschmied et al., 2017; Vandello et al., 2007). Because expectations for success are lower for underdogs, they can be psychologically “safer” to support. Their defeat would not be surprising and there are readily available protective attributions for their loss. Built teams do not automatically possess underdog status relative to bought teams. Consider again the NBA rivalry between the Heat (bought) and the Spurs (built). During the two seasons when the teams met for the NBA championship (with each team winning once), the teams had identical regular season records (120 wins, 44 losses). Additionally, both teams had multiple players ranked in the top 100. The Spurs had won more overall championships than the Heat in the years prior to the rivalry seasons. Preference for the Spurs was probably not due to being granted underdog status; they were not underdogs. It appears to be a function of how their team was constructed—it was built rather than bought. Our vignettes in all cases deliberately mentioned that the teams were successful, and not underdogs in any usual way.

Cutting corners or taking short cuts is viewed as the opposite of hard work and effort. Short cuts are often viewed as immoral, and are associated with various negative outcomes such as low job performance, safety violations, and injuries (Christian et al., 2009; Jonason & O'Connor, 2017). Buying all-star caliber players might be seen by many as cutting-corners or taking a short-cut to success by the front office. Because bought teams are assembled quickly, with money rather than training, commitment, time and effort, a bought team might be seen as taking a short cut compared to a built team.

In Study 5, group cohesiveness was a mediator that worked across contexts (sports or law). When all the attributions were entered simultaneously, effort was the last mediator standing. Nevertheless, the perception of group cohesion, and the observer's sense of valuing that cohesion, deserves more research (see Dobbins & Zaccaro, 1986; Tjosvold, 1986).

Professional basketball is suffering a substantial decline in the number of viewers in the US, for example from 2018 to 2019 there was a 15%-21% decline (Thorne, 2019). Many reasons have been suggested: the big stars have been injured or benched; other sports are competing for the same time slots and available leisure hours (e.g., "Thursday Night Football"); the best team in the league for a period of 5 years (2014–2019) with a sizeable fan base (the Golden State Warriors) performed horribly during the season the ratings fell (Nadkarni, 2019). Lesser reasons include the imbalance of stars between the coasts (e.g., LeBron and Anthony Davis moved from an East Coast team to a West Coast team), fewer East Coast fans can watch the later games, and a general drop in cable ratings (Thorne, 2019).

We suggest that one further reason for the ratings drop may be that teams have shifted, along with their players into the "bought" category rather than "built." "Player empowerment" has increased, and structural incentives lead stars to move between teams. Players are being bought by teams that can afford them, can pay a "max contract" to create superteams or star duos (Nagel, 2019; Ziller, 2018). Because liking and enthusiasm come, in part, from seeing a team being built, as the strategy of quickly purchasing star players or duos increases, fandom might be suffering.

7.1 | Constraints on generalizability

The preference for built teams applied reliably across the 2–3 years we collected data on this project, and it applied across sport teams and legal teams. Our participants were mostly from the University subject pool, but also from the more representative Amazon's MTurk; we found no important differences between these two samples.

Because of the importance that hard work, effort, and long-term commitment to a goal in our data, it is a reasonable guess that we have tapped cultural values that are central to Western cultures. We cannot be sure if other fundamental values, such as commitment, loyalty, purity, and the like might matter more in countries where these values are central.

A difference between the sports and law teams was that bought law teams were perceived to have more skill and ability. This may reflect our cultural understanding or stereotypes of the group, or it may reflect what these groups are for—their functions in society are different. Although we prefer our sport teams and law teams to win for us, the pathways they reach these goals may be different—sport teams should win through long struggle, loyalty and effort, and a law team might win through brilliance alone. The purpose of the groups we are evaluating—the societal function—may play a key role in how we perceive built versus bought, and which characteristics matter most in explaining the bias in favor of built teams, when discovered.

7.2 | Envoi

The identification of the preference for built over bought teams, mediated by attributions of hard work, still leaves a number of questions

to consider. Does it apply to all groups? Is competition a necessary component? Does it apply to groups one is a member of, or only to outgroups? Does self-interest or level of group identification play an important role? (e.g., would fans of the team care less about it being bought). What are the important contextual factors, and which are the key individual differences? We have ruled out one reasonable alternative hypothesis, that these effects were due to time (old versus new); the built > bought effect is not a variation of the status quo bias. But what other alternative pathway is a possibility? We are eager to see these questions play out in future studies.

What are the implications of our studies? People like winners, and achieving success is an important part of winning. However, how you win or succeed is also important. People like others to win "fair and square," rather than by making it easy on themselves. People are more apt to like others who are "playing fair" and putting the effort in obtaining their goals than those who cut corners.

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APPENDIX 1

The most common theme was work, effort, and the rewards that should come from it. Coming in a close second was the sense of team cohesion and cooperation that comes from developing together at the same time.

There were four less common, but still reliable themes that emerged. The third most common explanation was that the building process promotes loyalty to sports teams, followed by a sense that deep pocket spending was simply unfair or unjust.

Rounding out the top seven reasons were the pleasure of rooting for the underdog, and a general sense that money alone is a bad way to build sports loyalty, and two mentions that building teams reveal the expertise of front office management.

There were 19 statements in a form of “I don’t know” or a reason that was uncodeable, and 16 statements that simply restated that built teams were “good” in some general way (e.g., “genuine”).

Theme	Frequency
Work and Effort	32
Team Cohesion	27
Loyalty	12
Injustice and Fairness	9
Root for Underdog	8
Money is Bad	7
Front Office Expertise	2
Other/I don’t know	19
Restatement that “Built is Good”	16
Total Statements Coded	132

LOYALTY

They work better together and work harder for each other

I think that this is the case because when people build teams, the people who are there truly want to be there and care for one another.

Loyalty over Royalty baby

Injustice and fairness

Buying teams could be seen as unfair, one team may have the upper hand just because they are wealthy and can afford to buy and select specific players that they think will make them most successful.

I think people prefer teams that were built rather than bought because built teams seem more fair.

Because buying the team feels almost like cheating to a lot of people.

It is unfair for people with the financial upper hand to have more opportunities than someone with less financial support.

Underdog

People like to root for the underdog.

Teams that are built show greater strength, that they have worked together to overcome a feat and become great. Everyone loves an underdog.

Money is bad

By just having money and buying athletes like Golden State makes fans not like them.

People often look down upon paying off people as a negative. In my opinion, this is the case because people respect talent and adversity rather than money.

It is more appealing to the public to support teams that built based on the love of the sport, not based on the money.