Journal of Organizational and End User Computing
Volume 37 • Issue 1 • January-December 2025

From Expertise to Audience:
Exploring the Dynamics of Social Status and Perceptions in Online and Offline Contexts

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Received: March 3rd, 2025 | **Accepted:** April 30th, 2025

ABSTRACT

Although many studies have examined social status in offline contexts, the combined influence of digital metrics—such as the number of followers a person has—and traditional cues, such as expertise on online status perceptions, remains underexplored. Drawing on the stereotype content model, this study investigated how expertise and number of followers jointly affect perceived social status, dominance, and warmth across both real-life and social media contexts. The findings show that high expertise and a large number of followers significantly boost perceptions of status and dominance yet have no meaningful impact on warmth. These results underscore the interplay between digital and traditional status cues and offer practical insights for personal branding, influencer marketing, and social media platform design.

KEYWORDS

Expertise, The Number of Followers, Social Status, Warmth, Dominance, Context

INTRODUCTION

Hierarchy is at work in our professional, social, and personal lives, as well as in formal and informal settings. In all these different areas, there are always a few people who enjoy a higher social status than others. *Status* refers to the social prestige one gains by virtue of being respected and admired (Gregg et al., 2021). Previous research has demonstrated that higher status generally confers significant advantages: It not only boosts self-esteem and happiness but also makes a person more likely to gain access to resources and influence (Anderson et al., 2015; Ghaed & Gallo, 2007; Meythaler et al., 2025). As a result, people generally strive to improve their social status within their groups. A growing body of recent literature has focused on how people strive for social status (Cheng et al., 2013; Kakkar, 2024; Leary et al., 2014; Meythaler et al., 2025). Many studies have shown that expertise in a particular field is crucial for improving an individual's social status (e.g., Anderson

DOI: 10.4018/JOEUC.378873

et al., 2015; Berger et al., 1972; Cheng et al., 2013). Groups tend to ascribe higher social status and influence to individuals with superior expertise and skills in important domains (Maner & Case, 2016).

To date, most research has focused on offline contexts to explore how social status is acquired and its impact (e.g., Anderson et al., 2001, 2015; McGregor et al., 2023; Veltrop et al., 2017). Research on how people acquire social status in online environments is still limited. With the widespread use of social media, people's methods of acquiring online social status may differ from those in offline contexts (Rosenthal-von der Pütten et al., 2019). Unlike offline environments, where social status is mainly based on one's level of expertise, in online environments, people may judge the social status of others on the basis of the digital metrics provided by the platform. This is because, in online contexts, social media accounts with many followers often bring considerable economic rewards and social influence (De Veirman et al., 2019; Dhanesh, 2019; Ouvrein et al., 2021; Scott, 2014). Users also often rely on these digital metrics to identify social media success and failure (Meythaler et al., 2025). It is therefore necessary to explore in depth how people construct, display, and perceive social status in social media contexts.

Another important research limitation is the lack of a clear theoretical understanding of how expertise contributes to the acquisition of social status in fast-paced online environments. Although the role of expertise in establishing status hierarchies in offline settings is well documented (e.g., Berger et al., 1972; Cheng et al., 2013; Maner & Case, 2016; Veltrop et al., 2017), its function in fast-paced online environments remains less clear. In offline contexts, acquiring social status through expertise largely depends on sustained, face-to-face interactions (Groysberg et al., 2011; West, 2012). For example, individuals earn group recognition by repeatedly demonstrating their professional abilities—such as effectively solving team problems or optimizing organizational performance. In contrast, online environments, which are marked by weak ties and limited cues, may hinder the rich, face-to-face interactions that are necessary for thoroughly assessing expertise and social status (Huber & McCann, 1982; Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). An environment that lacks sustained, in-depth interactions may inhibit the effectiveness of acquiring social status through expertise. However, despite extensive research on expertise as a route to social status in offline contexts, there remains a significant gap in our empirical understanding of how expertise functions as a mechanism for obtaining social status in fast-paced online environments.

A further limitation is the lack of comparative research that has examined status indicators across offline and online environments. Social status has long been anchored in offline contexts by markers, such as expertise (Anderson et al., 2001; Cheng et al., 2013), whereas online context research often prioritizes digital metrics, such as the number of followers (De Veirman et al., 2019). This divergence raises a critical question: Do traditional and digital status cues operate independently, act in concert, or even conflict with one another under different contextual conditions?

Finally, there is a notable gap in our understanding of how offline cues — such as demonstrations of expertise—and online cues, such as number of followers, jointly influence social judgments. Understanding *social judgments*—the attributes that perceivers assign to a target—is essential because these judgments not only influence how perceivers interact with the target (Cuddy et al., 2007) but also affect how the target responds (Snyder et al., 1977), ultimately shaping broader social interactions and relationships. Stereotype content theory further indicates that online social judgments—such as assessments of warmth and dominance—profoundly affect user engagement, trust formation, and interaction patterns (van Doorn et al., 2010). Investigating these variables is essential because it can provides a theoretical framework for understanding how both expertise and number of followers distinctly modulate the intensity and quality of interactions between online users and account holders.

To address these gaps, in this study we used the stereotype content model (Fiske et al., 2002) to answer the following research questions: How do number of followers and expertise level jointly shape others' perceptions of a social media account owner's social status and social judgments (warmth and dominance), and how does their relative importance differ across various contexts (social media vs. real life)?

We explored the effects of expertise and number of followers on perceptions of social status, specifically in online and real-life environments. First, we focus on how expertise affects an individual's social status, that is, whether individuals with high expertise are perceived as having higher social status in real-life and online environments. Second, we explored the influence of numbers of followers on social status perceptions on social media platforms, examining whether account holders with more followers are perceived as having higher social status. In addition, we explored the moderating effect of different contexts on the effects of these factors, examining the differences between social media and real-life contexts in terms of social status enhancement through expertise and number of followers. Finally, we analyzed the effects of these factors on two core dimensions of social judgment: dominance and warmth; specifically, we examined whether individuals with high expertise are perceived as more dominant and whether individuals with high numbers of followers are perceived as less warm.

This study advances our theoretical understanding in several key ways. First, it clarifies the relative importance of traditional status cues (expertise) and digital indicators (number of followers), highlighting how each uniquely contributes to the construction of social status. Second, it extends the application of stereotype content theory within online contexts by uncovering how these diverse signals interact to influence perceptions of dominance and warmth. Third, it offers robust empirical and theoretical insights that have practical implications for personal branding and interaction strategies in digital environments, providing a foundation for more effective digital status management.

This article is organized as follows. First, we present a literature review on the topics relevant to our study and list the hypotheses. Next, we describe the methodology, followed by the results, and then we discuss the results. Finally, we conclude the article with a presentation and discussion of our findings and highlight the theoretical and practical implications of this study as well as suggest future research directions.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development

Pathways to Social Status: The Importance of Expertise

Social hierarchies are ubiquitous, and they profoundly influence the organization and functioning of human societies (Anderson et al., 2015). Like other social animals, human societies have hierarchical structures in which specific individuals enjoy higher social status than others (Maner & Case, 2016). *Status* denotes the social prestige one gains by virtue of being respected and admired (Gregg et al., 2021). Individuals with higher socioeconomic status are usually better positioned to exert influence than those with lower socioeconomic status. *Expertise* refers to knowledge gained through experience or training in a specific domain and often is demonstrated by superior and consistent performance on relevant tasks (Larrick & Feiler, 2015). These domains include accounting, chess, firefighting, medicine, software programming, tennis, and typing. Individuals with knowledge in a particular field are called *experts* (Williams & Danovitch, 2024). Experts differ from novices because they have a deeper understanding of a particular task, can quickly identify important cues, and understand strategic or causal relationships relevant to decision making. However, this knowledge is usually limited to their area of expertise.

Discussions of social hierarchies tend to focus on *competence* (Berger et al., 1972). Competence can be understood as acquired expertise, cleverness, proficiency, and efficiency (Abele et al., 2016). Groups tend to confer greater influence on individuals perceived to have superior expertise and competence in valuable areas (Berger et al., 1972). This acquisition of social status through competence cannot be achieved through coercive means, such as bullying or intimidation; instead, it relies on the individual's notable contributions to the group (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009). Acquiring social status through expertise (e.g., hunting and gathering) dates back to foraging societies. Individuals with superior expertise are more likely to achieve higher social status. They enhance their status by demonstrating knowledge and skills that the group values. For example, in foraging societies, leadership positions are often held by individuals who excel in hunting or political influence and earn the respect of other group members because of their expertise (Price, 2003). In addition, older

individuals are usually more likely to be perceived as being of high status because of their accumulated knowledge and wisdom. For example, professors have earned respect and high status through their career achievements and extensive subject knowledge (Mancer & Case, 2016).

The relationship between expertise and social status is also reflected in the interrelatedness of these two constructs. Fiske et al.'s (2002) stereotype content model (SCM) states that groups with high social status are generally perceived as having high competence. Perceptions of competence are often based on perceptions of group or individual status. This means that people usually perceive groups or individuals with higher social status as more competent. For example, the stereotype of competence is defined by measuring a group's professional prestige and economic success, both of which are direct reflections of status (Kervyn et al., 2015). This phenomenon suggests that expertise is vital in achieving and maintaining high social status. In modern society, this trend is particularly evident in the academic, business, and scientific fields. Individuals with high levels of expertise are not only able to exert greater influence in their field but also gain respect and recognition in society.

There is considerable empirical support for a hierarchy based on expertise. In corporate settings, the status of group members often depends on the task-related expertise they possess and the extent to which they contribute to the group (Groysberg et al., 2011). Those with higher levels of expertise are often more effective at solving team tasks and thus contribute more to the organization's success (West, 2012). Anderson and Kilduff (2009) noted that group members are often judged and assigned influence on the basis of the task-related expertise and competencies of others. As a result, group members with more relevant expertise are more likely to gain influence and leadership positions.

In other settings, research has also shown that high levels of expertise typically lead to higher levels of influence and social status. For example, the discourse of these individuals is often perceived to be of higher quality (Gintner & Lindskold, 1975), and they are more often perceived as experts (Littlepage et al., 1995), leading to greater social influence. Cheng et al.'s (2013) pioneering study further demonstrated that expertise is an effective strategy for gaining social status in real-world settings. They organized participants into small groups to complete a task that required discussion and a consensus. Throughout the study, participants had the opportunity to express their opinions, influence others, and be influenced by others in shaping group decisions. The results showed that expertise was an effective means of gaining influence and that participants with higher expertise were better able to achieve their goals during the task. In addition, an independent observation group using eye-tracking devices found that members with higher expertise gained more attention in the eyes of the observers. These findings prove that expertise can help people achieve higher social status and influence in newly formed groups.

A notable limitation of the current research on the impact of expertise on social status is that most of it has been conducted in offline settings. Social media platforms have become one of the primary channels through which people communicate, obtain information, and present themselves on a daily basis (Kakkar, 2024). In these virtual spaces, people build and maintain their social networks via platforms such as Facebook, X, Instagram, and professional networks like LinkedIn. Social media environments mirror many aspects of the real world; both are complex networks with large user bases where social class and hierarchical structures are inevitable (Marwick, 2015). Prior research suggests that people with high levels of expertise are more likely to gain influence and attain higher social status by demonstrating valuable characteristics, skills, and knowledge to their group (Cheng et al., 2013; Maner & Case, 2016). Similarly, in online settings people with superior expertise and experience are often recognized as opinion leaders with substantial followings, which enables them to effectively shape the attitudes and behaviors of their online audiences (Martensen et al., 2018). Compared with ordinary online users, professionals tend to be more successful in establishing influence and earning the respect of their audience (Meythaler et al., 2025). For example, people with a high level of expertise in a particular field can attract attention and gain recognition from other online users by showcasing their abilities through social media interactions or self-introductions (Maner & Case, 2016). Given that social status reflects the degree of prestige, influence, and respect an individual

enjoys (Anderson et al., 2012), and that individuals with higher social status receive more attention, are more respected by others, and exert greater influence in social groups (Anderson et al., 2001),we put forth the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Owners of social media accounts with a high level of expertise will be perceived as possessing a higher level of social status than those with a low level of expertise.

New Means of Acquiring Status on Social Media Platforms: Digital Indices

Social media influencers (SMIs) are persons who create and share content through social media networks, significantly affecting their target audience (Willemsen et al., 2011). Audiences follow influential people voluntarily on the basis of free will, recognizing the SMIs' abilities and contributions (Wiedmann & von Mettenheim, 2020). The main characteristics of these individuals are their ability to create valuable content, their reputation in a particular field (Cha et al., 2010), and their large number of followers on online social networks (De Veirman et al., 2017). Their information is often actively sought and consumed, representing that online audiences follow influencers of their own volition (Childers et al., 2019).

On social networking sites like X and TikTok, quantifiable indicators, apart from content sharing, are used to distinguish between users' statuses (Vogel et al., 2014). For example, Ki and Kim (2019) pointed out that high-quality textual content might signal high social status. However, their study mainly focused on textual content and did not fully consider digital indicators of nontextual content, such as the number of subscribers and followers in user profiles and the number of likes, comments, and shares per post. Among these external indicators, the number of followers is particularly noteworthy and a focus of this research. The number of followers offers a different method of assessing influence compared with indicators such as likes, posts, follower numbers, and comments that reflect content appeal and the level of user engagement, but it also plays a crucial role in reducing perceived uncertainty. Consumers often lack complete information to accurately evaluate a potential purpose, relying on these obvious cues to form judgments and opinions (Huber & McCann, 1982). Thus, number of followers becomes one of the most direct indicators of an SMI's influence (Zhou et al., 2023).

Influential persons often strive to build a large following on social media because one's number of followers is seen as a sign of popularity and influence (De Veirman et al., 2017; Tafesse & Wood, 2021). A large following signifies a degree of popularity (Pittman & Abell, 2021) and significantly enhances attractiveness and credibility (Jin et al., 2021). From the classical social status theory perspective, influence is considered a critical status dimension (Anderson et al., 2001). People with high social status usually have significant influence, with subordinates often attempting to imitate their opinions and skills (Cheng et al., 2010). Therefore, one reason SMIs are viewed as having high influence could be because the audience perceives them as high-status individuals. Modern SMIs are typically ordinary people, such as food, fashion, or travel bloggers. They gain a reputation through activities on social media platforms, establishing a professional image in their field (Al-Emadi & Yahia, 2020).

In many cases, even if the audience does not thoroughly understand the content they might consider SMIs with a large following to be experts in specific fields (Zhou et al., 2023). From a psychological perspective, people tend to have positive attitudes toward people with more extensive social circles and negative attitudes toward those with smaller ones. This is because having many friends is not only considered a sign of higher social status but also viewed as an ideal personality trait (Eder, 1985). Therefore, SMIs with a large following are likely perceived as having higher social status.

Finally, SMIs with a high number of followers can reach a wider target audience, offering significant advantages in brand marketing and potentially leading to higher economic income (Casaló et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2023). This income may become a basis or source for judging one's social status (Anderson et al., 2015). On the basis of these perspectives, we think

that number of followers is one of the critical factors in achieving status on social network sites. Given these observations, studying the effect of follower numbers as a new indicator of social status in online environments is crucial. Although traditional status indicators, such as wealth, expertise, and occupational prestige, have been extensively studied offline, the digital age has introduced new metrics, such as follower count, that can significantly influence perceived status. Understanding how this online metric contributes to the formation and perception of social status is essential, especially as social interactions increasingly move online. By exploring this metric, we can address an essential gap in the current literature and better understand the evolving nature of social hierarchies in the digital age. Thus we proposed, the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Owners of social media accounts with a high number of followers will be perceived as possessing higher social status than owners of social media accounts with a low number of followers.

The Moderating Effect of Context on the Effectiveness of Ways of Acquiring Social Status

Although social media has become a part of everyday life, the effectiveness of acquiring social status through the number of followers and expertise differs between real-life and social media environments. Individuals with high levels of expertise tend to have unique skills and knowledge that are highly valuable to social groups, and thus they increase their social status by demonstrating these skills (Price, 2003). In real life, this phenomenon is widespread. For example, students often perceive knowledgeable teachers as having higher social status, and employees tend to respect knowledgeable managers. In addition, even when these skills are not directly demonstrated, people with high expertise are often seen as having a higher status. Human culture tends to honor those who contribute to culture and society (Maner & Case, 2016).

Even if a particular expertise does not directly help a certain individual, society still perceives people with a high level of expertise, such as honorary scientists and professional athletes, as having a high social status. In contrast, some digital metrics on social media platforms, such as number of followers, may not be as effective as expertise in enhancing real-life social status. Although some people accumulate many followers by sharing their expertise, in real life the number of followers is only an indirect reflection of the influence of expertise. People are usually more sensitive to traditional indicators, such as education and position, than to the number of followers. A hallmark characteristic of social media is the viral spread of content, which allows some people to become popular and quickly gain a large number of followers. These individuals tend to attract business opportunities because of their solid online communication skills, thus improving their socioeconomic status (Tafesse & Wood, 2021). However, in real life, when people make social comparisons with SMIs, they may be evaluated less favorably because of emotions such as jealousy (Meythaler et al., 2025).

In summary, there is a significant difference in the effectiveness of social status conferred through expertise and number of followers in real-life and social media environments. In real life, expertise has a direct and substantial effect on social status, whereas number of followers is a relatively indirect indicator. Although the number of followers can significantly increase an individual's influence and economic status in the social media environment, this effect may be limited by different contextual factors in real life. For example, in real life, expertise has a broader and longer lasting effect on increasing social status.

In the social media environment, digital metrics, such as number of followers, may be more effective than expertise in enhancing a person's online social status. The egalitarian communication structure of social media weakens traditional hierarchical structures and individual influence (Tapscott & Williams, 2008), meaning that even individuals with expertise need to be recognized and successful online by sharing their knowledge and helping others (Shi et al., 2014). Therefore, simply having expertise without sharing it online or using that knowledge to help others may not be as effective

in gaining social status as it would be in real life. In addition, because of the large amount of social media content to which users are exposed daily, they usually do not have enough time to gain an in-depth understanding of each person's background. In this case, people are more likely to rely on digital metrics, such as number of followers, to infer and evaluate the social status of others. From an efficiency perspective, digital metrics, such as the number of likes, comments, and followers, can quickly reflect an individual's online activity and popularity. Some people rapidly accumulate these metrics by creating and sharing content to quickly improve their online status (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Status that is based on digital metrics is more dynamic and volatile than traditional indicators of social status (e.g., expertise, income, and educational attainment; Adler et al., 1994). The accumulation of expertise typically requires a long period of training and practice. In contrast, status based on digital indicators can change rapidly, sometimes significantly improving a person's online status in a short period (Delgado, 2007). Furthermore, the prevalence and recognition of expertise can vary across cultures and social groups (Han et al., 2010).

In contrast, numerical metrics, such as number of followers, have become globally recognized symbols of online status (Marwick, 2015). These metrics cross cultural and social group boundaries and can broadly communicate success. Finally, digital metrics are prominently displayed on a user's profile or posts, making online status measurement more transparent and immediate. For example, the number of one's followers on X can be publicly displayed, allowing for a more visual, public display of social status. In contrast, the recognition and display of expertise tend to require specific platforms and channels, with less transparency and visibility than status that is based on digital metrics. Overall, digital metrics have become important social status symbols in social media, even more so than traditional expertise. These metrics provide a quick and visual way to measure an individual's online influence and social status. On the basis of the above analyses, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Context moderates the effect of expertise and the number of followers on perceived social status. In the social media context, the number of followers will have a stronger effect on perceived status than expertise. In the real-world context, expertise will have a stronger effect on perceived status than number of followers.

Effects of Expertise and Number of Followers on Perceived Dominance and Warmth

Understanding the mechanisms of social judgment is crucial to the study of social interactions and interpersonal relationships. The characteristics of a target person that people perceive influence how they treat that person and how that person responds, thus affecting the overall quality of the interaction (Cuddy et al., 2007). In a social media environment, how influencers behave and interact shapes the social judgments viewers make about them. These judgments influence the audience's expectations and behavior, how influencers respond, and the quality of the interaction between them. For example, if an SMI presents an aloof and unapproachable image online, viewers may make negative comments and be more likely to create conflict in their interactions. With these negative comments, account owners may feel attacked and take defensive measures, such as deleting comments or restricting commenting privileges. These responses can further reinforce viewers' perceptions of indifference, creating a vicious cycle. Conversely, if viewers perceive account owners as friendly and approachable, they may make positive attributions about their behavior and be more supportive and follow them.

In this study, we focused on two fundamental dimensions of social judgments: dominance and warmth (Abele et al., 2008). *Dominance* refers to an individual's competence and desire to promote self-interest and includes traits such as ambition and assertiveness. Conversely, *warmth* reflects an individual's attitude toward and relationship with others and includes traits such as cooperation and respect. Warmth judgments are also related to an individual's popularity because people generally tend to like those who like them (Wojciszke et al., 2009).

On the one hand, we argue that expertise and number of followers can positively influence the perceived dominance of a target. Both are important sources of potential influence (e.g., Cheng et al., 2013; De Veirman et al., 2017; Littlepage et al., 1995). Influence and dominance have a reciprocal relationship (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009). People with potential influence tend to behave more confidently and dominantly in interactions in order to realize their potential. For example, highly expert individuals tend to be more talkative and assertive in negotiations and arguments (Cheng et al., 2013). Similarly, SMIs with many followers tend to be more confident, willing to share ideas, and act as opinion leaders (Kleck et al., 2007). On the other hand, research suggests that social media account owners with high levels of expertise and large numbers of followers may be perceived as less warm.

According to social status theory, individuals with high social status are typically ascribed higher levels of competence and influence, which may influence others' perceptions of their warmth (Abele et al., 2008). Cheng et al. (2013) found that people with high levels of expertise display assertive and dominant behaviors in interactions, which observers may interpret as a lack of approachability and warmth. Similarly, De Veirman et al. (2017) found that SMIs with many followers may maintain a certain social distance from those followers, reducing personalized interactions with their audience. This distance and professional status may lead viewers to perceive these influencers as unapproachable or even aloof, especially if they are very concerned with maintaining a public image. Thus, a high level of expertise and a large number of followers may lead to an SMI being perceived as less warm, thus affecting the quality of their interactions with the audience. Dominance and warmth are key dimensions of social perception. Studying these variables is essential because they help explain how expertise and follower numbers simultaneously boost perceived influence (dominance) while potentially reducing approachability (warmth). This duality is crucial for understanding the balance between authority and relational dynamics in the context of SMIs. On the basis of this, we proposed the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 4: Owners of social media accounts with a high level of expertise will be perceived as possessing higher dominance than owners of social media accounts with a low level of expertise.

Hypothesis 5: Owners of social media accounts with a high number of followers will be perceived as possessing lower warmth than owners of social media accounts with a low number of followers

METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

Pretest

Purpose of the Research

The main purpose of the pretest is to prepare research materials for the formal experiment. First, we assessed what number of followers on X participants thought could be considered high or low. The assessment of what kind of educational background participants thought could be considered high or low expertise on X was crucial in compiling the material we used in the formal experiment. In addition, because number of followers and level of expertise measure different constructs, it is difficult to directly compare the two variables. Therefore, we needed to ensure that the chosen number of followers and level of expertise are comparable to some extent. To be specific, we needed to find scores that are similar and not significantly different at the same level of both variables; that is, low expertise and low number of fans scored similarly, and high expertise and high number of fans scored similarly. In addition, the difference between the respective high and low levels of these two variables should be statistically significant.

Materials

We designed two versions of social media account profiles. The first profile displayed only an avatar, background, self-description, and basic personal information. The second profile displayed an avatar, background, number of accounts being followed, number of followers, and basic personal information (See more details in appendix A). According to Ruiz-Gomez (2019), 1,000 followers is the threshold for becoming an SMI and categorizes influencers into mega-influencers (>1 million followers), large influencers (100,000–1 million followers) and medium influencers (1,000–100,000 followers). Recognizing that X may not have as large a user base as platforms such as Instagram or YouTube, we set an upper limit of 100,000 followers. On the basis of this, we set four levels of follower numbers, including: 191, 522, 5,145, and 52,243, to investigate how many the number of followers can be regarded as a high (low).

Control of Research Material

To ensure the validity of the research material, we set the owners of the social media accounts to be people with a background in psychology and nutrition because fans tend to focus on the level of expertise in the area of knowledge sharing. Compared with entertainment-oriented social media accounts, online audiences place greater value on the perceived expertise of knowledge-sharing accounts. Each account profile described the owner as an undergraduate, graduate, postgraduate, or lecturer in psychology or nutrition. In addition, the material was differentiated according to the gender of the subjects; male subjects viewed only male social media accounts, and female subjects viewed only female social media accounts. In total, 32 social media accounts were created: 16 male accounts (including 8 with a background in psychology and 8 with a background in nutrition) and 16 female accounts.

To accurately reflect expertise level, self-introductions were limited to 14 words, and tags were added to reflect the level of expertise. Common names were used for all profiles to avoid name bias. The avatar background of each profile was white, and individuals wore formal clothing with consistent hairstyles, facial expressions, and postures. All account holders were labeled as 36 years old with a birth month of May or June. X join dates were controlled to be between November 2016 and February 2017, and the range of followers was set between 180 and 200, in units of five. To further standardize the home pages of the social media accounts, the same avatars were used for both the nutrition and psychology accounts, showing professionals in formal attire and with friendly smiles.

Research Procedure

We divided all the personal profiles into two groups and presented them to the participants. The first group of participants saw the social accounts of beginner with a background in psychology, social accounts of undergraduates with a background in nutrition, social accounts of people with a PhD with a background in psychology, and social accounts of lecturers with a background in nutrition. The second group of participants saw the social accounts of beginners with a background in nutrition, the social accounts of undergraduates with a background in psychology, the social accounts of people with a PhD with a background in nutrition, and the social accounts of lecturers with a background in psychology. All profiles were presented to the participants in random order.

When participants viewed the personal profiles and the number of their followers, they were asked: “How many followers do you think this person has? To what extent do you agree that this person has a high level of expertise in nutrition/psychology?”

In addition, we asked a number of screening questions to exclude participants who did not meet the requirements, such as whether or not they use X and whether or not they have lived in a Western country for a long period of time. Polygraph questions were also used to exclude participants who failed more than two attention tests. Finally, to test for differences in attractiveness between the photos, we asked participants: “To what extent do you agree that this person is attractive?”

Participants

Data collection took place on the Prolific platform (https://www.prolific.com/) in May 2024, and 36 participants were recruited for the pretest. Two screening criteria were used. First, participants had to live in the United Kingdom, United States, or Australia and have had a long experience living abroad. Second, participants had to have an active X account. Three subjects did not meet the criteria to participate in the experiment or failed the attention test (trap question), and two others had high repetition options, and so their data were therefore excluded from the analysis. A total of 31 subjects, approximately 51.6% of whom were female, passed the screening (M_{age} = 40, SD = 15.24).

Results

The paired-sample t-test results indicate no significant difference between the Beginner group and 522 follower (t = 1.242, p = .224, M difference = 0.323). Similarly, there was no significant difference between the Grad group and 5,145 follower group (t = -1.01, p = .32, M difference not provided). The Lecturer group and 52,243 follower group also showed no significant difference (t = -1.433, p = .163, M difference = -0.367).

Table 1. Paired-samples t test results

Expertise	No. of followers	*t*	*M* difference	*SE* difference	*p*
Beginner	191	2.51	0.71	0.28	.02*
Beginner	522	1.24	0.32	0.26	.22
Beginner	5,145	-4.01	-1.16	0.29	<.001***
Beginner	52,243	-11.95	-2.6	0.22	<.001***
Grad	191	4.73	1.55	0.33	<.001***
Grad	522	3.86	1.16	0.30	<.001***
Grad	5,145	-1.01	-0.32	0.32	.32
Grad	52,243	-7.22	-1.83	0.25	<.001***
PhD	191	7.29	2.61	0.36	<.001***
PhD	522	6.11	2.23	0.36	<.001***
PhD	5,145	2.16	0.74	0.34	.04*
PhD	52,243	-2.75	-0.7	0.25	.01**
Lecturer	191	8.67	2.97	0.34	<.001***
Lecturer	522	7.59	2.58	0.34	<.001***
Lecturer	5,145	3.63	1.10	0.30	.001***
Lecturer	52,243	-1.43	-0.37	0.26	.16

Note. N = 31.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

As shown in Table 2, there was a significant difference between the Grad and Lecturer groups (t = -5.517, M difference = -1.419, p < .001). There was also a significant difference between the Follower3 and Follower4 groups (t = -7.264, M difference = -1.467, p < .001).

Table 2. Paired-samples t-test results for independent variables

Expertise	No. followers	*t*	*M* difference	*SE* difference	Cohen's *d*	*p*
Grad	**5,145**	**-5.52**	**-1.42**	**0.26**	**-0.99**	**<.001*****
Lecturer	52,243	-7.26	-1.47	0.20	-1.33	<.001***

Note. $N = 31$.
***$p < .001$.

The data in Table 3 indicate no significant difference between the combined of Grad and Lecturer groups and the Follower3 and Follower4 groups ($t = -0.096$, M difference $= -0.096$, $p = .924$).

Table 3. Paired-samples t-test results for grad-lecturer and 5,145-52,243 followers

Expertise	No. followers	*t*	*M* difference	*SE* difference	*p*
Grad–lecturer	5,145–52,243	0.10	-0.03	0.34	.92

Note. $N = 31$.

Conclusion

On the basis of our analysis, we found that individuals identified as "Grad" were perceived as having relatively low expertise, and those identified as "Lecturer" were perceived as having high expertise. In terms of follower numbers, 5,000 followers were perceived as a relatively low level, whereas 50,000 followers were seen as a high level. These variables are relatively comparable because the difference between expertise levels (Lecturer vs. Grad) and the difference in follower levels (50,000 vs. 5,000) are approximately equivalent. There is no significant difference between these two dimensions.

The Main Study

Research Design

This study had a 2 (expertise: high vs. low) × 2 (number of followers: high vs. low) × 2 (context: real life vs. social media) mixed experimental design. Expertise and number of followers were manipulated as within-subject variables, and context was manipulated as a between-subjects variable.

Participants

Following the recommendations of Guo et al. (2013), we conducted Hotelling Lawley Trace analyses using GLIMPSE, which showed that 202 participants were required to conduct a mixed analysis of variance (ANOVA) with an effect size of .95. In addition, an ex ante analysis using G*Power 3.1, as recommended by O'Connell et al. (2017), showed that 210 participants were required to conduct an ANOVA with an effect size of 0.25 and an efficacy level of .95. We planned to recruit 220 participants to avoid exclusions and technical issues.

Data were collected via the Prolific platform between July 5 and July 6, 2021. Participants ranged in age from 24 to 47 years ($M = 35.68$, $SD = 11.12$; men accounted for 50%) and were required to be proficient in English. The ratio of men to women in the sample was 1:1. The sample was restricted to Western countries (United Kingdom/United States/Australia) because these countries' relatively homogeneous sociocultural and economic environment helps control extraneous variables and establish a clear baseline for our investigation (Hofstede, 2001). Participants were compensated at a rate of £9/hr. In total, 225 participants took part, and 14 were

subsequently excluded for not meeting the inclusion criteria. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Experimental Psychology, University College London, in 2023 (Project No. EP_2024_012).

Measures

Independent Variables. In the formal experiment, our independent variables—expertise and number of followers—were manipulated as categorical variables on the basis of pretest findings. Each variable was manipulated at two levels: Expertise was defined as either high or low, and number of followers was defined as either high or low. On the basis of our pretest findings, individuals identified as "Grad" were perceived to have relatively low expertise, whereas those identified as "Lecturer" were regarded as having high expertise. Similarly, on the X platform a follower count of 5,145 was considered low, and 52,243 was viewed as high. These differences between levels of expertise (Lecturer vs. Grad) and number of followers (52,243 vs. 5,145) were approximately equivalent, with no significant disparity between the two dimensions, thereby validating their use in our formal experiment.

Dependent Variables. The first dependent variable was perceived status: Participants rated each target (social media profile) on a scale from 1 to 5, using the social status scale adapted from Huo et al. (2010): (1) *I respect this person*, (2) *I admire this person*, (3) *I look up to this person*, (4) *I consider this person a high-status individual*. Two items on the original scale that refer specifically to a person's talents and opinions were excluded to avoid bias toward expertise. Depending on the context condition, participants saw different question stems of "on social media" and "in real life." The second dependent variable was perceived dominance and warmth: Participants rated each target on a scale that ranged from 1 to 7 with respect to whether they thought the target would be assertive, dominant, timid (i.e., dominance), cooperative, agreeable, or quarrelsome (i.e., warmth; Wiggins, 1979; Fragale et al., 2011, see more detail in appendix C).

Controls

Gender-Specific Profile Presentation. To eliminate potential gender confounding effects, in the formal experiment each participant saw only the profile that corresponded to their self-identified gender. The male and female versions of the profiles were structurally identical, differing solely in the owner's name and avatar.

Fluctuations in Numbers of Followers. A slight fluctuation in values was introduced into the experimental design to reduce the likelihood that participants would form fixed impressions or biases. Number of followers varied slightly within a range of ±2%. This adjustment helped decrease randomness and noise in the data while increasing the ecological validity by closely mirroring real-world conditions.

Stimulus Material

On the basis of the pretest material, we combined number of followers and expertise level to create fictional personal profiles on psychology or nutrition. Profile information on the profiles included an avatar, self-introduction, background image (psychology or nutrition), date of birth, date of joining X, and number of followers. We designed 16 social media accounts, including accounts for 8 males and 8 females that included psychology and nutrition backgrounds. There were two versions of the study material at each level, with entirely different names, educational backgrounds, and avatars, to rule out the possibility that participants would think the two versions were the same account (see Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1. Formal study material (man version)

James Wright

@imjames_wright

Born June 06 1987 Joined Feb 2017

198 Following **52243** Followers

Lecturer of Nutrition @NCU, sharing insights for healthy eating practices based on evidence #ExpertAdvice

Figure 2. Formal study material (woman version)

Research Procedure

First, participants were informed that this study aimed to optimize X account profiles. They would view several actual X account home pages and provide input. After participants gave consent, we collected basic demographic information about them, including age, gender, ethnicity, education level, socioeconomic status, frequency of X use, number of X account followers, and whether they had lived in the West for an extended period. Next, we showed participants a series of social media account profiles. We asked them to rate the perceived social status, perceived warmth, and perceived dominance of the profile owners and indicate whether they would like to follow the accounts. Participants were randomly assigned to either the online environment group or the real-life environment group. In the online environment group, participants were asked to imagine meeting the person on X and to rate their perceived social status, warmth, and dominance after viewing their profile. In the real-life setting group, participants were asked to imagine that they had met the person at a casual gathering and that the person had displayed their X profile during the conversation. After viewing their X profile, they were asked to rate their perceived social status, warmth, and dominance. At the end of the experiment, the participants were given feedback and thanked.

Results

Perceived Status. Descriptive statistics indicated that the perceived status scores for the group with low expertise and low follower numbers ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 1.06$) were lower than those for other groups. Conversely, the group with high expertise and high follower numbers had higher perceived status scores ($M = 4.67$, $SD = 1.05$) compared with other groups (comparison of averages only).

From the context perspective, the perceived social status of social media account owners with low expertise and low follower numbers was lower both in the social media context ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 1.04$) and in the real-life context ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 1.05$) compared with other levels. However, account owners with high expertise and a high number of followers were perceived as having higher social status in both the social media context ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 1.10$) and the real-life context ($M = 4.91$, $SD = 0.94$). Detailed statistics are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for perceived status by expertise and follower

Expertise level	Follower level	Context	*M*	*SD*	*n*
Low	Low	Social media	3.94	1.04	108
		Real life	4.28	1.05	103
Low	High	Social media	4.12	1.07	108
		Real life	4.41	0.99	103
High	Low	Social media	4.25	1.01	108
		Real life	4.75	0.96	103
High	High	Social media	4.44	1.10	108
		Real life	4.91	0.94	103

A repeated-measures ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of expertise level on the perceived status of social media accounts, $F(1, 210) = 77.409$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .27$. The main effect of number of followers on perceived status was also significant, $F(1, 210) = 24.021$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .103$. However, we did not find significant interaction among expertise, number of followers, and context, $F(1, 210) = 3.28$, $p = .07$, $\eta^2 = .02$. To be specific, although we expected follower numbers to have a more substantial effect on perceived social status in the social media context, and expertise to have a more substantial effect in the real-life context, the results did not show significant interactions to support these expectations. Similarly, the interaction between follower numbers and context was not significant, $F(1, 210) = 0.48$, $p = .49$, $\eta^2 = .00$. Detailed statistics are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Within-subject contrasts for perceived status by expertise and followers

Source	SS	*F*	*p*	η^2
Expertise	33.50	77.41	<.001***	.27
Expertise × context	1.42	3.28	.07	.02
Followers	5.87	24.02	<.001***	.10
Followers × context	0.12	0.48	.49	.00
Error	27.45			

Note. *N* = 211. SS = sum of squares.
***$p < .001$.

Perceived Dominance. Descriptive statistics indicated that social media account owners with low expertise and a low number of followers had lower perceived

dominance, both in the social media context ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 0.76$) and in the real-life context ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 0.77$), compared with other levels of social media account owners. Conversely, account owners with high expertise and a high number of followers were perceived as having higher dominance in both the social media context ($M = 4.74$, $SD = 0.83$) and the real-life context ($M = 4.81$, $SD = 0.82$). For detailed statistics, see Table 6.

Table 6. Descriptive statistics for perceived dominance by expertise and followers

Expertise level	Follower level	Context	*M*	*SD*	*n*
Low	Low	Social media	4.30	0.76	108
		Real life	4.33	0.77	103
Low	High	Social media	4.40	0.78	108
		Real life	4.40	0.76	103
High	Low	Social media	4.50	0.73	108
		Real life	4.68	0.83	103
High	High	Social media	4.74	0.83	108
		Real life	4.81	0.82	103

Note. $N = 211$. This table displays the means, standard deviations, and sample sizes for perceived dominance across different levels of expertise and followers in both social media and real-life contexts.

A repeated-measures ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of expertise level on the perceived dominance of social media accounts, $F(1, 210) = 50.56$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .20$. In addition, the main effect of number of followers on perceived dominance was also significant, $F(1, 210) = 18.90$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .08$; however, no significant interactive effects were found among expertise, follower numbers, and context. To be specific, the interaction between expertise and context was not significant, $F(1, 210) = 1.53$, $p = .22$, $\eta^2 = .00$. Similarly, the interaction between follower numbers and context was not significant, $F(1, 210) = 1.04$, $p = .31$, $\eta^2 = .01$. For detailed results, refer to Table 7.

Table 7. Within-subject contrasts for perceived dominance by expertise and followers

Source	SS	*F*	*p*	η^2
Expertise	21.76	50.56	<.001***	.20
Expertise × context	0.66	1.53	.22	.00
Followers	3.99	18.90	<.001***	.08
Followers × context	0.22	1.04	.31	.01
Error	35.31			

Note. $N = 211$. SS = sum of squares.
***$p < .001$.

Perceived Warmth. Descriptive statistics indicated that social media account owners with low expertise and a low number of followers had perceived warmth scores of $M = 4.70$, $SD = 0.68$, in the social media context and $M = 4.72$, $SD = 0.72$, in the real-life context. Account owners with low expertise but a high number of followers had perceived warmth scores of $M = 4.60$, $SD = 0.76$, in the

social media context and $M = 4.71$, $SD = 0.70$, in the real-life context. For those with high expertise but a low number of followers, perceived warmth scores were $M = 4.67$, $SD = 0.65$, in the social media context and $M = 4.64$, $SD = 0.71$, in the real-life context. Finally, account owners with both high expertise and a high number of followers had perceived warmth scores of $M = 4.62$, $SD = 0.69$, in the social media context and $M = 4.64$, $SD = 0.65$, in the real-life context. For more details, refer to the Table 8.

Table 8. Descriptive statistics for perceived warmth by expertise and followers

Expertise level	Follower level	Context	*M*	*SD*	*n*
Low	Low	Social media	4.70	0.68	108
		Real life	4.72	0.72	103
Low	High	Social media	4.60	0.70	108
		Real life	4.71	0.70	103
High	Low	Social media	4.67	0.65	108
		Real life	4.64	0.71	103
High	High	Social media	4.62	0.69	108
		Real life	4.64	0.65	103

Note. $N = 211$. This table displays the means, standard deviations, and sample sizes for perceived warmth across different levels of expertise and followers in both social media and real-life contexts.

A repeated-measures ANOVA did not reveal significant main effects or interactive effects; specifically, participants did not perceive a significant main effect of expertise on the perceived warmth of social media account owners, $F(1, 210) = 1.28$, $p = .26$, $\eta^2 = .01$. Similarly, the main effect of the number of followers on perceived warmth was also not significant, $F(1, 210) = 2.46$, $p = .12$, $\eta^2 = .01$). In addition, there was no significant interaction effect between expertise and context, $F(1, 210) = 0.74$, $p = .39$, $\eta^2 = .00$. The interaction between the number of followers and context was also not significant, $F(1, 210) = 1.66$, $p = .49$, $\eta^2 = .01$. For more details, refer to Table 9.

Table 9. Within-subject contrasts for perceived warmth by expertise and followers

Source	SS	F	p	η^2
Expertise	0.37	1.28	.26	.01
Expertise × context	0.21	0.74	.39	.00
Followers	0.36	2.46	.12	.01
Followers × context	0.24	1.66	.20	.01
Error	24.30			

Note. $N = 211$. SS = sum of squares.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Social status is a fundamental area of study in social psychology given that hierarchical structures are inherent in human societies, with certain individuals holding higher status and thereby accessing more resources and influence (Maner & Case, 2016). These status differences significantly affect social

interactions, resource distribution, and group decision making. Although a lot of research has focused on offline status acquisition, the dynamics within social media contexts remain underexplored. Given the deep integration of social media into daily life, understanding how social status is acquired online is increasingly important.

In this study, we examined how expertise and follower numbers affect perceived social status and social judgment in both real-life and social media contexts. In an online experiment, participants were shown account profiles with manipulated levels of expertise and follower numbers to assess their impact on perceived status, dominance, and warmth.

Our findings indicate that social media account owners with high expertise are perceived as having higher status, regardless of whether the context is online or offline. This result confirms that the level of expertise remains a robust strategy for perceiving social status in a social media context, which is consistent with traditional models in which people who master valuable skills and knowledge gain influence and elevated social status (Cheng et al., 2013; Maner & Case, 2016).

In addition, our research findings underscore that number of followers is a critical digital indicator of social status, reflecting a new change in the process of status perception. Social status traditionally has been assessed through prolonged, face-to-face interactions, such as in team collaboration, where social rank emerges gradually over time (Cheng et al., 2013). In contrast, our findings demonstrate that participants can form an initial judgment of an account owner's social status merely by briefly browsing their profile. This suggests that people are more inclined to rely on heuristic strategies to quickly form impressions when judging the social influence and status of others in a social media environment (Huber & McCann, 1982; Metzger & Flanagin, 2013).

Our findings also reveal that social media account owners with high expertise and many followers were perceived as having higher perceived dominance than those with lower expertise and fewer followers, consistent across both real-life and social media contexts. Prior research has shown that people with high expertise are often perceived as more dominant (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009). This is largely because expertise is associated with greater competence and confidence, which drives a person to be more persuasive and influential in interactions (Cheng et al., 2013). Similarly, on social media, a large follower count acts as a powerful signal of social influence. This digital validation encourages users to display higher levels of confidence and assertiveness, prompting them to share their ideas more freely and assume the role of opinion leaders rather than just passively absorbing others' input (De Veirman et al., 2017; Kleck et al., 2007).

However, our study did not find a significant effect of expertise and follower number on perceived warmth. This null result may stem from our use of highly standardized profile images and self-introductions, which limited the availability of personalized and affective cues necessary for perceiving warmth. Warmth, as highlighted in the literature, relies heavily on signals of communion and closeness, such as personalized interactions, expressions of care, and everyday sharing (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Fiske et al., 2002; Wojciszke et al., 2009). In fact, Abidin (2016) suggested that influencers are perceived as approachable and trustworthy when they actively share details of their personal lives and engage positively in comment sections. In addition, presenting only static profiles may have overlooked the dynamic, real-time communication inherent to social media—such as interactive conversations and immediate feedback (Kim et al., 2021). This limitation likely further reduced participants' emotional cues as to perceive warmth. Overall, these findings make important theoretical and practical contributions and suggest avenues for future research.

Finally, our analysis did not reveal a consistent moderating effect of context across all research models. One potential explanation is that the operationalization of context may not have been sufficiently distinct. We used scenario-based manipulation: Participants were asked to imagine either an online or an offline context in which they evaluated others' social status on the basis of cues such as expertise and the number of followers. However, this method has certain limitations. Research has shown that individual differences in imaginative ability, scenario immersion, and subjective interpretation can prevent the intended psychological states or behavioral responses from

being fully and effectively induced (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014). Although our research models did not consistently show a significant moderating effect of context, the further investigation of this variable remains essential, for several reasons. First, even if the context variable does not yield uniform statistical significance across all models, its role is theoretically critical: the interplay between traditional status cues, such as expertise, and digital metrics, such as number of followers, is likely to manifest differently in online versus offline settings. Second, online environments tend to encourage quick evaluations of influence and status (Arora et al., 2019); offline contexts, in contrast, require more thoughtful and nuanced assessments (Cheng et al., 2013). This suggests that context might still influence these effects in ways that our current models do not fully capture. These considerations highlight the need for future research to refine both the conceptualization and empirical measurement of context, possibly through more sensitive experimental manipulations or alternative analytical frameworks, to fully understand the conditions under which context shapes the influence of expertise and digital metrics on social status perception.

Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to social psychology by demonstrating that expertise and follower numbers are crucial indicators of perceived social status, both online and offline. First, our findings confirm that expertise plays a central role in status attribution. This is consistent with previous research indicating that people with high expertise gain social status through knowledge-sharing and perceived instrumental value (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009; Cheng et al., 2013; Tracy et al., 2020). Although studies have emphasized that expertise-based status acquisition is a slow process that requires direct interaction (Bunderson, 2003), our findings suggest that social media users form such judgments rapidly on the basis of limited profile information. This supports the notion that technological advancements and information overload drive users to rely on heuristic cues, such as educational background or displayed expertise, when assessing status (Bawden & Robinson, 2009; Hallowell, 2005).

This study also extends existing research by identifying follower numbers as a status cue in both online and offline contexts. Previous studies have shown that high follower numbers are associated with increased popularity, credibility, and attractiveness (De Veirman et al., 2017; Jin et al., 2021; Pittman & Abell, 2021; Tafesse & Wood, 2021). Our study further established that social media metrics function as cues similar to traditional status markers, such as expertise, occupation, and physical appearance (Cheng et al., 2013). It is important to note that we found that a high follower count influences not only online judgments but also real-world perceptions, suggesting that digital popularity translates into offline social capital and influence (Zhou et al., 2023).

Finally, our findings refine the understanding of dominance perception in social status acquisition. Consistent with prior studies, individuals with high expertise and large followings were viewed as more dominant (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009; Cheng et al., 2013). This perception of dominance stems from the authority and assertiveness that accompany expertise and widespread influence. Moreover, the reciprocal relationship between dominance and influence on social media platforms reinforces the idea that high-follower accounts often maintain an advantage in online discourse and conflict resolution (Marwick, 2015). These findings provide novel insights into the intersection of digital and social psychology, illustrating how social media structures influence dominance perceptions and social hierarchy formation.

Practical Implications

The results of this study have several implications for social media platforms, digital marketing, and public relations strategies.

First, understanding that expertise and follower numbers are key determinants of perceived social status can help digital influencers and brands strategize their online presence. To increase credibility and influence, professionals and influencers seeking to enhance their social status should focus on clearly presenting their expertise and accumulating a large follower base.

Second, our findings indicate that follower count can serve as a persuasive tool in marketing and brand positioning. Companies and marketers can leverage this by collaborating with influencers who have high follower numbers because they are perceived as more dominant and influential. However, because numerical metrics, such as follower count, are easily manipulated (e.g., by purchasing followers), authenticity in engagement remains crucial.

Third, our study suggests that social media users may rely on heuristic cues rather than deep engagement with content when forming status judgments. This underscores the importance of profile optimization, including clear self-presentations that highlight achievements, credentials, and areas of expertise. In addition, businesses and influencers can enhance audience perceptions by balancing numerical credibility with content-driven engagement.

Fourth, for social media platform designers and marketers, reexamining the status cues embedded within digital interfaces is warranted. Current designs that lean mainly on numerical indicators—such as number of followers and likes—may inadvertently oversimplify complex assessments of credibility and influence. Our study suggests that integrating more nuanced measures of expertise (e.g., peer endorsements, quality of content, or verified accomplishments) could provide users with richer cues. This approach may help counterbalance the overreliance on purely quantitative metrics that can inadvertently foster the spread of fake news.

Finally, marketers can benefit from a more nuanced approach to influencer selection by evaluating not only an influencer's digital reach but also their domain expertise. Relying solely on quantitative metrics, such as number of followers, may promote people who, despite extensive visibility, lack the substantive knowledge that can drive key marketing outcomes, such as purchase intentions and brand identification. By incorporating assessments of expertise into the selection process, marketers are better positioned to partner with influencers who not only broaden a brand's exposure but also convey meaningful, in-depth insights that foster consumer trust and deeper brand connections.

Taken together, these implications highlight how social media structures influence status perceptions, thus providing valuable insights for individuals, businesses, and policymakers navigating digital influence dynamics.

Study Limitations and Future Directions

Our study's conclusions are drawn from a text-based interaction environment on X (formerly Twitter). However, extending this investigation to other types of platforms is worthwhile given that different content formats and interaction dynamics may shape the perception of social status in unique ways. For example, on visually dominant platforms, such as Instagram or TikTok, user engagement is driven by evocative visual narratives and more personalized, emotional profiles (Kim et al., 2021; Loukianov et al., 2020). These platforms also emphasize entertainment value and visual impact (Rietveld et al., 2020), which could inhibit the role of expertise in conveying social status. Similarly, professional networks, such as LinkedIn, are designed to showcase career-related attributes through features like skill endorsements and work experience, often placing less emphasis on follower count (Cortez & Dastidar, 2022). On LinkedIn, users typically follow others on the basis of immediate professional needs rather than numerical metrics (Chiang & Suen, 2015), potentially amplifying the effect of expertise while downplaying follower count. Thus, future research should conduct cross-platform comparative studies to investigate how different platform types affect the perception of social status on the basis of expertise and follower number.

From a conceptual and empirical perspective, it is important to understand how people's stereotype-based judgments of others' social status change over time. Stereotype-related research has pointed out that over time, group members become familiar with the focal individual and are able to make more accurate social judgments (Brambilla et al., 2012; Cuddy et al., 2007; Wojciszke et al., 2009). Previous research has shown that social status evaluations based on expertise often expand and solidify over time compared with initial impressions (Redhead et al., 2019). In the early stages of a group, the members are generally in a naïve learning state and have not yet accumulated enough

information to accurately judge who is a successful and suitable role model for learning (Henrich, 2015). However, as social interactions continue the level of expertise individuals display gradually strengthens their social status in the group because people tend to gravitate toward and imitate those seen as successful and respected (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). Therefore, we believe that future in-depth explorations to determine whether judgments of social status based on digital indicators also change over time, and with increased participation, are worthwhile. Research on digital influence has shown that when social media account owners have large numbers of followers, people perceive their influence to be higher, even when there are implicit or explicit clues that suggest fake followers. This phenomenon is referred to as the *mere volume effect*, and it is is partly due to the fact that people see a large number of followers as a sign of influence (Arora et al., 2019; Niu et al., 2023). However, impressions based on heuristic judgments often evolve as engagement increases and more information cues become available (Binder et al., 2009). Therefore, it is necessary to further explore whether judgments of social status based on digital metrics also improve over time and with deeper engagement. For example, by observing the behavior of a focal person in terms of online interactions and self-disclosure over time, and how these behaviors affect the group's assessment of their social status, we may gain a deeper understanding of this phenomenon.

Finally, one limitation of our study is the use of fictitious profiles, which may not have fully captured the real-world complexity of SMIs. Participants might compare the manipulated follower number with benchmarks from influencers they know or even to their own follower number. Despite our efforts to design profiles that closely resemble actual social media accounts, that followed established paradigms (e.g., Ruiz-Gomez, 2019), this approach may have inherently restricted external validity. Future research should address these limitations by using real-world profiles or collaborating directly with influencers to obtain genuine follower metrics, thereby enhancing the ecological validity of the stimulus and the robustness of the findings.

CONCLUSION

Our study aimed to investigate how expertise and follower numbers influence individuals' perceptions of social status and their social judgments in the social media environment. In the context of social media as a new field, the way people acquire and display social status has undergone significant changes. In an online experiment, we manipulated the level of expertise and the number of followers of a virtual X account and observed participants' responses to these variables. We kept self-presentation information constant throughout the experimental design to control for interaction style, enabling a more accurate assessment of the effects of these two variables on perceived social status and social judgments (e.g., dominance and warmth). The results revealed that both expertise and follower numbers significantly influenced participants' perceptions of social status. Accounts with high expertise and a large number of followers were perceived as having higher social status and dominance. However, the effects of follower numbers and expertise on warmth were not significant, possibly because of our controls for verbal style.

This study offers new perspectives for understanding the dynamics of social status in the digital age. The results suggest that expertise and follower numbers are key factors that influence perceptions of social status in social media environments, with expertise playing a particularly significant role in enhancing perceptions of social status. Future research should further explore the performance of these factors across different social media platforms, and possible changes over time, in addition to considering other potential influences.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

We wish to confirm that there are no known conflicts of interest associated with this publication and there has been no significant financial support for this work that could have influenced its outcome.

FUNDING STATEMENT

This publication is supported by: NCN Poland (2021/03/Y/HS6/00251); FORTE: Swedish Research Council for Health, Working life and Welfare; Federal Ministry of Research, Technology, and Space, Germany (01UX2210); Gobierno de España, Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación / Agencia Estatal de Investigación, Spain (Under grant PCI2022-135090-2).UKRI Economic and Social Research Council, and UKRI Arts and Humanities Research Council the UK, under the CHANSE ERA-NET Co-fund programme, which has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme, under Grant Agreement no. 101004509

PROCESS DATES

05, 2025

This manuscript was initially received for consideration for the journal on 03/03/2025, revisions were received for the manuscript following the double-anonymized peer review on 04/15/2025, the manuscript was formally accepted on 04/24/2025, and the manuscript was finalized for publication on 05/07/2025

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APPENDIX A

Pretest Material

Figure 3. One of the images for the expertise judgments of the pre-laboratory test (man case)

Note. This social media profile includes a background image, avatar, X ID, and self-introduction.

Figure 4. One of the images for the number of followers of the pre-laboratory test (man case)

Note. This social media profile includes a background image, avatar, X ID, date of birth, date of joining X, number following, and number of followers.

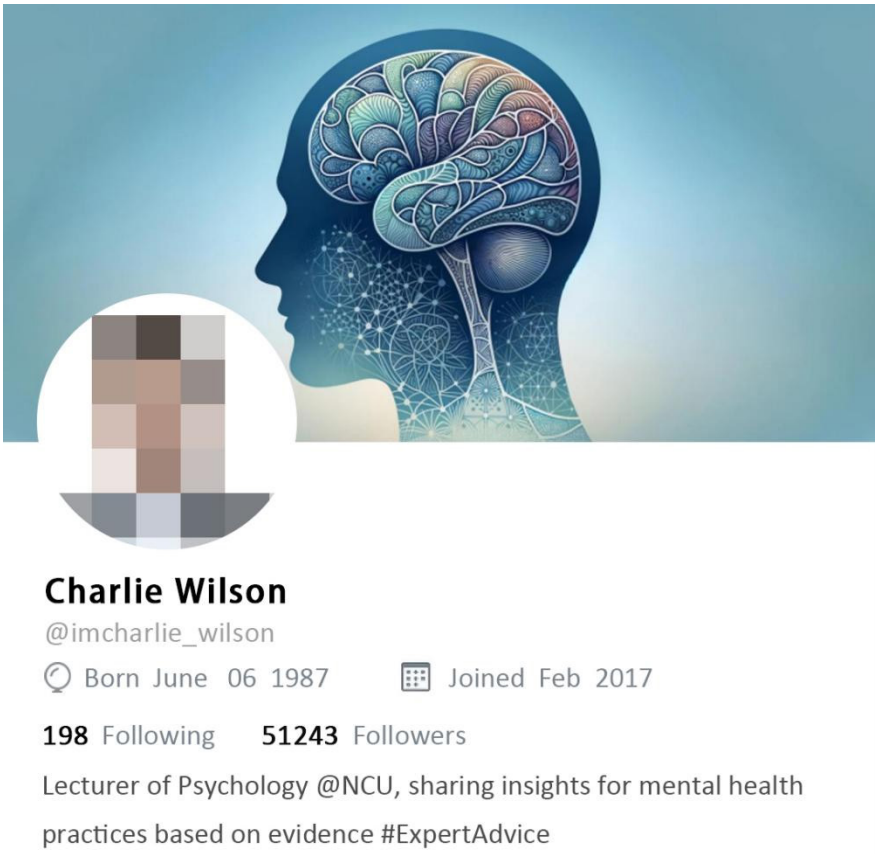
APPENDIX B

Formal Study Materials

Figure 5. Social media account profile with a background in nutrition (man case)

Note. This social media profile includes a background image, avatar, X ID, date of birth, date of joining X, number following, number of followers, and self-introduction.

Figure 6. Social media account profile with a background in psychology (man case)



Note. This social media profile includes a background image, avatar, X ID, date of birth, date of joining X, number following, number of followers, and self-introduction.

APPENDIX C

Guides and Measured Variables

C1 Guide on Social Media Environment

Welcome!

Nowadays, social media is a significant part of people's social lives. This study examines how individuals form impressions of others on social media based on their social media profiles.

You will browse some virtual X accounts on the following pages. **Please pay careful attention and answer some questions about your impression of the account owners.**

Imagine that you are browsing X casually, and your friend shared with you a new account on X, whose owner is your friend's friend. Please examine this account carefully and answer a few questions.

C2 Guide on Real Life Environment

Welcome!

Nowadays, social media is a significant part of people's social lives. This study examines how individuals form impressions of others in real life based on their social media profiles.

You will browse some virtual X accounts on the following pages. **Please pay careful attention and answer some questions about your impression of the account owners.**

C3 Perceived Social Status (Huo et al., 2010)

Note. 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*

1. I respect this person.
2. I admire this person.
3. I look up to this person.
4. I consider this person a high-status individual.

C4 Perceived Dominance and Warmth (Fragale et al., 2011; Wiggins, 1979)

Note. 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*

Dominance

1. I would be assertive.
2. I would be dominant.
3. I would be timid.*

Warmth

4. I would be cooperative.
5. I would be agreeable.
6. I would be quarrelsome.*

Note. Topics marked with * are reverse-scored.

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