

Instagram Popularity Seeking and the Meaning of Happiness in Early Adulthood: A Qualitative Study

Aisyah Wulan Suci¹, Maemunah^{2*}, Isnaini³

^{1,2,3}Universitas Muhammadiyah Mataram, Mataram, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how Instagram popularity seeking is experienced and understood in relation to the meaning of happiness in early adulthood, highlighting how visual culture and social evaluation shape emotional well-being. A descriptive qualitative approach was used through in-depth interviews, digital observation, and documentation to capture participants' direct experiences and digital behavior. The study involved three young adult participants aged 18–21 years, consisting of one male and two females, and two female expert informants, consisting of a psychology lecturer and an Instagram observer. The study was conducted in a university environment for the primary participants, while the expert informants were interviewed based on their relevant expertise. The data analysis focused on recurring themes, such as identity performativity, social comparison, and emotional dependence, using the Miles and Huberman approach through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Research shows that popularity on Instagram is seen as a marker of social value and modern relevance, encouraging users to adjust their appearance and content to align with dominant aesthetic norms. Validation in the form of likes, comments, and number of followers does provide short-term emotional satisfaction, but at the same time reinforces fragile happiness because it depends on unstable external responses. Social comparison, the FOMO phenomenon, and repeated exposure to idealized content were described by participants as contributing to psychological pressure, including anxiety, self-dissatisfaction, and dependence on digital appreciation for feelings of self-worth. These findings reveal the paradox that digital connectivity may increase emotional vulnerability and challenge participants' perceptions of authentic well-being. This study concludes that the culture of popularity on Instagram is closely associated with how young adults understand and experience happiness and emotional well-being in early adulthood. The implications emphasize the importance of digital literacy, emotional regulation strategies, and supportive interventions to reduce the psychosocial risks of social media use.

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Corresponding Author:

Maemunah

Civic Education, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Muhammadiyah Mataram, Mataram, Indonesia

Email: maemunah.mahmudabdullah@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology has changed the way individuals interact, express themselves, and build social relationships in the modern era. One platform that occupies a central position in this dynamic is Instagram, a visual-based social media platform that allows users to share photos, videos, and short stories online [1]. Through features such as likes, comments, direct messages, stories, and reels, Instagram creates a fast, interactive, and highly personal communication space [2]. These interactions go beyond mere entertainment, as the platform has evolved into an important arena for the formation of identity, lifestyle, and self-image representation in the global digital environment [3]. Instagram's presence not only offers opportunities for social connection but also creates a visual culture that encourages users to select and display certain aspects of themselves to the public.

In the context of human development, early adulthood is a critical transitional phase in the formation of self-identity. Users in this age category tend to use social media to express and negotiate their personal identity through selectively curated posts. Instagram's visual character reinforces the tendency of early adult users to present an idealized, aesthetically pleasing, and consistent version of themselves, so that the process of self-representation often takes place in an intense and focused manner [4], [5], [6]. In Indonesia, 32.7% of active Instagram users are between 18–24 years old, making young adults one of the platform's most dominant user groups [7]. This dominance demonstrates the significant role of digital environments in supporting identity exploration while simultaneously shaping perceptions of social acceptance and personal happiness. As Instagram increasingly becomes a space for self-presentation, the pursuit of popularity has emerged as a distinctive social phenomenon among young adults. Popularity is commonly reflected through visible indicators such as followers, likes, comments, and audience engagement, which frequently function as symbols of social recognition and personal achievement within digital culture. Consequently, many users consciously curate content, appearance, and online activities in order to attract greater public attention and validation.

Previous studies consistently indicate that Instagram influences identity construction through visual self-presentation, social comparison, and digital performativity. Research has shown that users frequently construct idealized identities to meet audience expectations, while repeated exposure to attractive and successful online personas intensifies upward social comparison and affects self-evaluation [8], [9], [10], [11]. Furthermore, studies have reported that dependence on digital validation, including likes, comments, and follower counts, is associated with emotional pressure, reduced self-confidence, anxiety, and lower quality of offline social relationships [12], [13], [14]. Taken together, these studies demonstrate that Instagram has become both a medium of identity expression and a source of psychosocial vulnerability.

However, existing literature predominantly examines identity construction, social comparison, digital validation, and mental health as separate issues. Most studies also emphasize adolescents or university students as broad populations, while limited attention has been given to early adulthood as a distinct developmental stage in which happiness is

actively negotiated through experiences of Instagram popularity seeking. Moreover, quantitative approaches remain dominant, leaving insufficient qualitative evidence regarding how young adults themselves interpret the relationship between digital popularity and happiness from their lived experiences.

This study offers novelty by adopting a descriptive qualitative approach to explore the lived experiences of young adults who actively pursue Instagram popularity and possess substantial online audiences. Rather than measuring psychological outcomes statistically, this research investigates how followers, likes, and digital recognition are interpreted as meaningful elements in constructing happiness, self-worth, and emotional well-being within everyday digital life. Therefore, this study aims to explore how Instagram popularity seeking shapes the meaning of happiness among young adults through their subjective experiences and social interactions in digital environments. The findings are expected to contribute theoretically by enriching the literature on digital identity, social comparison, and the meaning of happiness from a qualitative perspective. Practically, this study provides insights for educators, mental health practitioners, and digital literacy programs in developing strategies that encourage healthier and more reflective engagement with social media among young adults.

2. METHOD

The approach used in this study is qualitative with descriptive analysis methods [15]. The qualitative descriptive approach aims to describe social phenomena in depth through the collection of natural and fact-based data in the field. This study seeks to explore how young adults experience Instagram popularity seeking and how they interpret its relationship with happiness and emotional well-being, rather than statistically measuring causal effects. Data collection methods included in-depth interviews, digital observation, and documentation [16]. The qualitative approach was selected because the study sought to understand participants' experiences, perspectives, and personal interpretations of Instagram popularity seeking in their everyday digital lives. The research was conducted in a university environment from September to December 2025. The three main participants were identified and interviewed within the university environment based on their active engagement with Instagram. The two expert informants were interviewed separately based on their relevant expertise, namely psychology and Instagram-related digital culture. The study involved three main participants and two expert informants. The three main participants were young adults aged 18–21 years, consisting of one male and two females. The two expert informants were female and consisted of a psychology lecturer and an Instagram observer.

The main participants were selected based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) being in the early adulthood age range of 18–21 years; (2) being an active Instagram user; (3) having more than 1,000 Instagram followers; and (4) actively seeking likes, followers, and audience responses through Instagram content and online activities. The selection of participants with more than 1,000 followers was intended to identify users who had demonstrated sustained engagement in building an Instagram audience. The participants also demonstrated deliberate efforts to increase the attractiveness and visibility of their Instagram content, including selecting particular locations or activities as material for their posts. The

expert informants were selected because of their relevant knowledge and experience in understanding psychological aspects of social media use and Instagram culture.

Participants and informants were selected using purposive sampling. This technique was used because the study required individuals who possessed specific characteristics and experiences relevant to the research phenomenon. The researchers initially identified Instagram users who met the predetermined criteria and subsequently selected participants who were willing to share their experiences in greater depth. The expert informants were purposively selected based on their professional or experiential knowledge relevant to the psychological and social dimensions of Instagram use. The study used both primary and supporting data. Primary data were obtained directly from interviews and digital observations involving the selected participants. Supporting data were obtained through documentation, including relevant screenshots, field notes, and other materials related to participants' Instagram activities. The expert informants served as supporting sources for contextualizing and interpreting the participants' experiences.

Data collection methods included in-depth interviews, digital observation, and documentation [16]. In-depth and informal interviews were conducted to explore participants' views, experiences, and personal interpretations of Instagram popularity seeking and happiness. The interviews explored several areas, including how participants obtained followers, the types and frequency of content they uploaded, the responses they expected from audiences, their reasons for pursuing likes and followers, and their emotional experiences throughout the process. The conversations were conducted flexibly to allow participants to describe their experiences in their own words rather than following a rigid question-and-answer format. Digital observation was conducted by observing the Instagram activities of selected young adult users, particularly their patterns of self-presentation, content selection, posting practices, audience engagement, and responses to digital feedback such as likes, comments, and follower numbers. The researchers also conducted informal conversations with prospective participants during the initial observation process to identify users whose experiences were relevant to the research criteria. Digital observation was used as a complementary source of data rather than as participant observation because the researchers did not become active members of the participants' social activities or Instagram communities. Documentation included collecting screenshots, field notes, and other supporting data relevant to the phenomenon being studied. Screenshots and other digital materials were used selectively to support the interpretation of participants' accounts and observations.

In qualitative research, the researcher served as the primary research instrument. The researchers were directly involved in identifying participants, conducting interviews, carrying out digital observations, recording field notes, organizing the data, and interpreting the findings. Supporting instruments included a semi-structured interview guide, digital observation guidelines, field note records, and documentation records. The interview guide focused on participants' experiences of pursuing followers and likes, content curation, expectations of audience responses, experiences of social comparison, and perceptions of happiness. The observation guidelines focused on visible patterns of Instagram self-presentation, content characteristics, posting frequency, audience engagement, and

popularity indicators. The trustworthiness of the qualitative data was addressed through triangulation of data sources and data collection techniques. Information obtained from the three main participants was compared with observations, documentation, and information obtained from the two expert informants. Triangulation was used to examine the consistency of information across interviews, digital observations, and documentation rather than relying on a single source of evidence. Credibility was strengthened by comparing participants' statements with observed digital behavior and supporting documentation. Dependability was supported by maintaining records of the data collection and analysis process, including interview notes, observation records, and documentation. Confirmability was addressed by grounding interpretations in participants' statements and supporting field evidence. Transferability was supported by providing a clear description of the research context, participant characteristics, and selection criteria so that readers can assess the applicability of the findings to similar contexts.

Data analysis refers to the Miles and Huberman model, which includes four stages: (1) Data Collection, where researchers gathered information through interviews, digital observations, documentation, and relevant supporting literature; (2) Data Reduction, where the collected data were selected, coded, summarized, and focused on information relevant to Instagram popularity seeking, social validation, identity presentation, social comparison, and the meaning of happiness; (3) Data Display, where the reduced data were systematically arranged into descriptive narratives and thematic summaries to facilitate the identification of relationships and patterns among the findings; and (4) Drawing Conclusions and Verification, where conclusions were drawn by identifying recurring meanings and patterns across the data and continuously checking the interpretations against the available evidence. The analysis was directed toward understanding participants' experiences and interpretations rather than determining the statistical significance or causal effect of Instagram popularity seeking.

Ethical considerations were applied throughout the research process. Participation was voluntary, and the participants and expert informants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study before the interviews were conducted. Participants' identities and personal information were kept confidential, and identifying information from Instagram accounts was not disclosed in the reporting of the findings. Digital materials and screenshots were used only as supporting research evidence and were handled with attention to participants' privacy. Participants were also informed that they could decline to answer questions or withdraw from the research process.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings obtained from interviews, digital observations, and documentation involving three young adult Instagram users and two expert informants. The findings are organized into three interconnected themes: (1) the construction of digital popularity and social validation, (2) the meaning of happiness and emotional dependence on digital feedback, and (3) psychological pressure associated with popularity-seeking, social comparison, and idealized Instagram content. The findings are presented based on recurring

patterns identified during the data analysis process using the Miles and Huberman interactive model.

3.1 Participant Characteristics and General Findings

The study involved three main participants aged 18–21 years, consisting of one male and two female Instagram users. All three participants were active Instagram users with more than 1,000 followers and reported actively engaging in practices intended to increase likes, followers, and audience engagement. Two female expert informants were also involved: a psychology lecturer (DP) and an Instagram observer (PK). The main participants were interviewed in a university environment, while the expert informants were interviewed based on their respective areas of expertise. The initial observations indicated that the pursuit of Instagram popularity was expressed through deliberate content selection, attention to appearance, efforts to follow current trends, and expectations of positive audience responses. Some participants also described deliberately visiting particular tourist or recreational locations to obtain material considered suitable for Instagram content. These observations provided an initial basis for exploring how popularity-seeking was connected to self-presentation, social validation, and the participants' understanding of happiness.

3.2 Construction of Digital Popularity and Social Validation

The results of the study show that digital popularity is understood by young adults as a symbol of social status related to public acceptance and the ability to keep up with the times. Informant (PI) emphasized that:

“I personally feel it is important to have many followers so that I appear to be keeping up with the times and to attract others to follow me on Instagram. I change my style of dress and create content that is currently trending.”

This finding indicates that, for the participant, follower numbers and trending content function as visible indicators of social recognition, rather than being understood solely as numerical measures, popularity was associated with being perceived as relevant, attractive, and socially accepted in the digital environment.

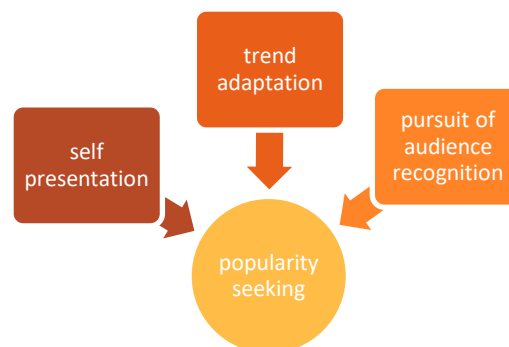


Figure 1. Construction of Digital Popularity

This statement illustrates that popularity serves as an indicator of social credibility in the digital space, in line with Amelia's [17] findings, which explain that social media has become a dramaturgical arena where individuals display identities that are tailored to the expectations of their audience. Popularity is not merely a quantitative aspect in terms of the number of followers, but also a representation of success in executing a digital identity that is considered relevant. The participants' accounts further indicate that changing clothing styles and creating trending content represent a process of self-construction that may involve adaptation to aesthetic norms formed within the digital community. These findings are consistent with literature that highlights that young adults tend to display a visually curated version of themselves to gain social validation [18], [19], [20]. This dependence on digital aesthetics reinforces the view that Instagram encourages the formation of performative identities, especially when users feel the need to modify their self-image to fit current trends continuously. The findings therefore suggest that the participants' pursuit of happiness through Instagram was partly associated with their ability to construct a socially desirable digital identity. Happiness was not described solely as an internal emotional state, but was also connected to the recognition received from other users.

In addition, PI informants showed that the happiness sought was closely related to social acceptance. Followers are seen as a measure of self-acceptance, and an increase in the number of followers is an indicator that an individual is considered worthy and attractive to the digital public. These findings reinforce Hiremawati et al.'s [21] argument regarding the tendency of individuals to place external validation as a determinant of psychological well-being. However, the participant's experience suggests that this form of happiness was unstable because it depended on fluctuating audience responses. Thus, social acceptance through Instagram provided positive feelings but simultaneously created a continuing need for recognition. This is in line with the findings of Zephania et al. [22], which confirm that happiness based on public validation is easily distorted by social comparisons and aesthetic demands. A different perspective was presented by a psychology lecturer (DP), who described the process through which the pursuit of popularity may develop into a repetitive cycle of validation and social comparison. The DP informant stated:

“The need for validation has turned into social comparison... the phenomenon of FOMO has also become a trigger that encourages social comparison, to the extent that social media users strive to achieve unrealistic standards.”

The expert informant's explanation complements the participants' experiences by indicating that the pursuit of validation can be reinforced by comparison with other users and by fear of being excluded from current trends. This statement illustrates that Instagram not only provides a platform for self-expression, but also creates a reinforcement mechanism that may encourage users to monitor and evaluate their digital performance repeatedly. DP explains that this process begins with a need for social validation, reinforced by positive comments and likes. Literature on social comparison confirms that young adults are particularly vulnerable to psychological pressure when they cannot meet the ideal standards displayed by other users [23],[24]. The phenomenon of FoMO (fear of missing out) mentioned by DP reinforces the informants' urge to keep up with trends so as not to be

considered left behind. This fear triggers efforts to replicate popular lifestyles and aesthetics, even when such demands are unrealistic. These findings are in line with Shinta's [25] research, which explains that users often seek upward comparisons as a way to reduce anxiety, even though this practice actually triggers long-term emotional pressure. Taken together, the findings in this theme show that digital popularity was constructed through three interconnected processes: self-presentation, audience validation, and social comparison.

3.3 The Meaning of Happiness and Emotional Dependence on Digital Feedback

The second theme concerns how participants interpreted happiness in relation to Instagram feedback. The findings indicate that positive digital responses, particularly comments, likes, and follower growth, generated temporary feelings of happiness and recognition. However, negative or unexpected responses could produce discomfort and emotional distress. Based on the PI's description of the meaning of happiness in the digital space, the informant stated:

“Many positive comments make me feel happy, but on the other hand, I feel uncomfortable and lonely when I receive negative comments.”

This statement indicates that the participant's emotional experience was closely connected to the nature of audience feedback. Positive responses generated immediate pleasure, whereas negative responses were associated with discomfort and loneliness.

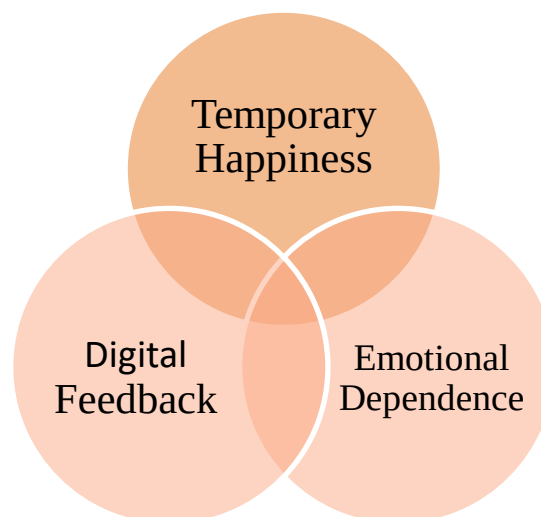


Figure 2. The Meaning of Happiness

This statement reveals a pattern of emotional dependence on public evaluation. For the participant, happiness was partly experienced through external digital responses rather than solely through personal satisfaction. This is in line with the findings of Yasin et al. [14], which explain that digital responses such as likes and comments serve as determinants of self-esteem that directly influence emotional well-being. The informant also stated that he tends to unfollow accounts that do not follow him back, indicating that digital social relationships are treated as symbolic transactions to maintain status. This supports Zhu's [26]

research, which asserts that digital validation encourages shallow and socially advantageous relationship patterns. This finding suggests that follower relationships may be interpreted not only as social connections but also as indicators of reciprocity and digital status. Consequently, the numerical value of followers can become intertwined with the participant's evaluation of social acceptance. From a psychological perspective, DP explains that happiness based primarily on external validation differs from happiness associated with self-acceptance. DP states:

“True happiness is self-acceptance... unlike instant happiness obtained through social validation, which is often unrealistic.”

This statement distinguishes between happiness based on long-term self-reflection and temporary happiness that depends on external judgments. The literature on the concept of well-being emphasizes that authentic happiness is built through self-understanding and stable emotional balance [27],[28]. The convergence between participant and expert accounts indicates that Instagram can provide immediate positive emotions while simultaneously creating a dependence on external evaluation. The resulting happiness is therefore experienced as temporary and vulnerable to changes in audience responses. Conversely, the instant happiness offered by social media tends to trigger a cycle of negative emotions, especially when individuals feel unable to meet unrealistic social expectations.

3.4 Psychological Pressure, Social Comparison, and Emotional Well-Being

The third theme concerns the psychological pressure associated with popularity-seeking. The findings indicate that participants experienced pressure through social comparison, exposure to idealized content, concerns about audience evaluation, and the need to maintain an attractive digital identity. Informant DP explained that the more individuals understand themselves, the further they may move from unrealistic external standards of happiness. DP stated:

“True happiness is self-acceptance... unlike instant happiness obtained through social validation, which is often unrealistic.”

The expert informant further explained that continued exposure to idealized content may strengthen unrealistic expectations regarding appearance, lifestyle, and happiness. Informant DP also mentioned that persistent pressure to meet digital standards may contribute to extreme emotional responses when individuals perceive themselves as unable to meet those expectations. Meanwhile, PK added that psychological pressure does not only stem from direct interactions, but also from exposure to uniform content that displays ideal standards of happiness. PK emphasized that algorithms reinforce exposure to similar content, which may contribute to repeated exposure to particular lifestyles and aesthetic standards and thereby intensify social comparison. These findings align with research by Syandana et al. [29], which shows that exposure to idealized content can blur the boundaries between real identity and performative identity. The digital observation also supported the interview findings by showing recurring patterns of self-presentation, attention to appearance, trend-

oriented content, and efforts to obtain audience engagement. These observations provided contextual evidence for participants' descriptions of popularity-seeking and social comparison. The dynamics of popularity-seeking reveal a pattern of psychological pressure arising from the interaction between individuals, other users, and the platform environment. The emotional pressure reported in the data included anxiety, self-dissatisfaction, and dependence on external validation. Rather than indicating a statistically significant effect, the qualitative findings suggest that popularity-seeking was experienced by the participants as being associated with emotional vulnerability and fluctuations in well-being. Research findings show that participants described experiences of popularity-seeking that were accompanied by social comparison and emotional pressure. Based on PI's statement:

“The desire to achieve popularity sometimes makes me compare myself to other Instagram users who are more popular...”

It appears that informants experience pressure due to intense social comparison. This reinforces the findings of Jaoude et al. [9] that ability-based comparison is more likely to reduce emotional well-being than opinion-based comparison. The internalization of unrealistic aesthetic standards, coupled with repeated exposure to popular content, was described as contributing to feelings of anxiety and unease, particularly when participants felt the need to monitor their Instagram accounts continuously.

The habit of using Instagram late into the night was also described as a form of intensive digital engagement that participants associated with disrupted sleep routines. This is in line with research by Merino et al. [30], which confirms that consuming content that triggers social comparison can damage psychological balance. Although informants claimed to try to ignore negative comments, the pressure still affected their mood. Thus, the findings reveal an emotional paradox in which Instagram popularity-seeking can provide momentary pleasure while simultaneously being associated with emotional instability and pressure. Further elaborating on the indicators of declining mental health that appear in users obsessed with popularity, DP explained:

“Feeling anxious when the responses received are not as expected... losing focus... to the point of withdrawing from social circles.”

This account suggests that digital pressure may interfere with emotional regulation, concentration, and social functioning. Excessive emotional reactions to criticism are a sign that self-esteem has become fragile, as discussed in the literature on the effects of excessive external validation [31],[32]. PK further emphasized that exposure to idealized digital content reinforces the pressure to maintain a performative identity. Such exposure may create unrealistic standards and feelings of inadequacy, making it more difficult for users to maintain a sense of authentic identity. This is consistent with the findings of Wasserfurth et al. [33], who explain that the pressure to maintain an ideal image can lead to emotional exhaustion and identity tension. Overall, the findings indicate three interconnected patterns. First, Instagram popularity was constructed through follower numbers, visual self-

presentation, trend-oriented content, and audience recognition. Second, happiness was frequently described in relation to digital validation, particularly likes, comments, and follower growth, resulting in temporary positive emotions but also emotional dependence on external responses. Third, popularity-seeking was associated with social comparison, FoMO, exposure to idealized content, anxiety, self-dissatisfaction, and difficulties in maintaining emotional stability. The findings do not establish a statistically significant causal effect of Instagram popularity-seeking on mental health because this study employed a qualitative descriptive design. Instead, they demonstrate how the participants experienced and interpreted the relationship between popularity-seeking, digital validation, happiness, and emotional well-being within their everyday Instagram use.

4. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine how obsession with Instagram popularity shapes the meaning of happiness among young adults, particularly through identity construction, social comparison, and dependence on digital validation. The findings indicate that obsession with digital popularity plays a significant role in shaping how young adults interpret happiness, build identity, and manage emotional well-being. Popularity is understood not merely as the number of followers or the level of interaction, but also as a symbol of social value, acceptance, and modern relevance. The findings directly answer the research objective by showing that the meaning of happiness among young adults can shift from an internally constructed sense of well-being toward happiness that is increasingly dependent on external digital evaluation. Likes, comments, and follower growth provide short-term emotional satisfaction; however, this satisfaction is fragile because it depends on fluctuating public responses. Furthermore, upward social comparison, the Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) phenomenon, and repeated exposure to idealized content reinforce emotional vulnerability. These conditions encourage anxiety, self-dissatisfaction, emotional dependence, and reliance on digital appreciation as a determinant of self-esteem.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the understanding of digital well-being by integrating identity performativity, social comparison, and the meaning of happiness within the context of early adulthood. Rather than viewing Instagram popularity as merely a behavioral tendency, the findings demonstrate how popularity-seeking can become intertwined with identity construction and emotional evaluation, thereby influencing how happiness is defined and experienced. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of strengthening digital literacy and emotional regulation among young adults. Educational institutions, counselors, and relevant stakeholders can use these findings to develop interventions that promote self-acceptance, critical awareness of idealized social media content, healthier patterns of social media engagement, and emotional resilience against external digital validation.

This study is subject to several limitations. The study involved a relatively small number of participants, consisting of three early adult Instagram users and two expert informants, and was conducted within a specific campus context. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as an in-depth understanding of the experiences of the participants rather than as statistically generalizable conclusions. Future research should involve a broader range of

participants and social contexts to examine whether similar patterns occur across different cultural, educational, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Longitudinal studies are also recommended to investigate the long-term effects of Instagram popularity obsession on happiness and emotional well-being, while intervention-based research could examine the effectiveness of digital literacy, self-acceptance, and emotional regulation programs in reducing psychosocial risks associated with popularity-oriented social media use.

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