

## Digital Popularity and Self-Confidence: Examining the Role of Instagram Followers among University Students

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### Abstract

*The rapid expansion of social media has transformed how university students construct identity and evaluate self-worth, with Instagram emerging as a prominent platform for social validation. This study aimed to examine the relationship between Instagram follower count and self-confidence among university students, positioning follower count as a psychosocial indicator of digital social approval. Using a quantitative cross-sectional design, data were collected through an online survey administered to 76 undergraduate students who actively used Instagram. Self-confidence was measured using a Likert-scale questionnaire adapted from social self-efficacy theory, while follower count was assessed through self-reported data. Instrument validity and reliability were confirmed prior to analysis. Normality testing indicated non-normality, leading to the use of Spearman's rank-order correlation to examine the association between variables. The results revealed a strong, statistically significant positive relationship between Instagram follower count and self-confidence, indicating that students with higher follower counts reported greater confidence in social interactions. These findings suggest that follower count serves as a meaningful form of social validation, influencing students' self-perceptions in both digital and offline contexts. The study highlights the psychological implications of digital popularity metrics and underscores the need for higher education institutions to promote digital literacy and mental health awareness. By fostering critical engagement with social media, universities can help students develop healthier relationships with online validation and support more resilient forms of self-confidence.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of information and communication technologies in the digital era has profoundly transformed social interaction patterns, particularly among young adults. Activities that were traditionally conducted in person have increasingly shifted to virtual spaces mediated by social media platforms. Social media is no longer limited to facilitating information exchange; it has evolved into a central arena for social interaction, self-expression, and identity construction (1). Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram offer users opportunities to curate personal narratives, showcase achievements, and negotiate social belonging in digital environments. For university students navigating critical developmental stages in identity, autonomy, and social integration, social media has become an integral part of everyday life.

Among the various platforms, Instagram has emerged as one of the most influential social media applications worldwide. Its visually oriented features such as photo and video posts, stories, and reels enable users to present idealized versions of themselves while simultaneously receiving immediate social feedback. In Indonesia, Instagram's prominence is reflected in its rapidly growing user base. Indonesia has surpassed 100 million active Instagram users, placing it among

the countries with the largest Instagram populations globally. This widespread adoption underscores Instagram's role not merely as an entertainment platform but as a significant social space where users seek recognition, affirmation, and social visibility (2,3).

Within this digital ecosystem, quantitative indicators such as likes, comments, and follower counts have become symbolic markers of popularity and social acceptance. Among these metrics, follower count is particularly salient because it is often interpreted as representing the size of one's social network and the extent of one's influence in digital spaces. For many university students, having a large number of followers is associated with positive self-perceptions, including feelings of being valued, recognized, and socially desirable. However, dependence on such external validation can also create psychological vulnerability, particularly when expectations for social recognition are unmet or when users engage in unfavorable social comparisons. This duality highlights Instagram's potential to influence psychosocial outcomes, including self-confidence, in both constructive and detrimental ways.

Self-confidence is a crucial psychological resource during the university years, influencing academic performance, interpersonal relationships, and readiness for professional life. Students with higher self-confidence tend to participate more in academic activities, engage more socially, and use more effective coping strategies when facing challenges. Conversely, low self-confidence has been associated with social withdrawal, academic anxiety, and reduced well-being. Given the increasing integration of social media into students' daily routines, it is essential to examine how digital interactions and social media metrics intersect with self-confidence as a core psychosocial construct.

Existing research has documented various psychological implications of Instagram use among young adults. Studies have shown that the intensity of Instagram use is associated with self-esteem and self-confidence, suggesting that frequent engagement may amplify self-evaluative processes (4). Other studies have demonstrated links between Instagram features such as filters and body image dissatisfaction, which in turn affect self-worth, particularly among female students (5). Furthermore, positive social feedback, such as likes, has been shown to enhance self-esteem, reinforcing the role of digital affirmation in shaping self-perception (6). Collectively, these findings underscore Instagram's capacity to shape users' psychological experiences through social validation mechanisms.

Beyond local studies, international literature further elucidates the psychosocial dynamics underpinning Instagram use. Research indicates that social media engagement can enhance self-esteem through perceived peer validation and social approval (7,8). At the same time, Instagram fosters environments conducive to social comparison, where users are exposed to curated and idealized representations of others' lives. Such exposure can trigger upward social comparison, often resulting in dissatisfaction, anxiety, and diminished self-confidence (9,10). These findings suggest that Instagram operates as a double-edged sword, offering opportunities for affirmation while simultaneously posing risks to psychological well-being.

A growing body of literature conceptualizes follower count as a form of digital social capital or symbolic social acceptance. Higher follower counts have been associated with increased perceptions of self-worth, social legitimacy, and influence (11). Conversely, when individuals perceive their follower count as inadequate relative to peers, feelings of inadequacy and social anxiety may emerge (12,13). Despite these insights, empirical studies that explicitly position follower count as a primary independent variable rather than as a peripheral indicator remain limited, particularly in non-Western contexts.

Social comparison theory provides a useful framework for understanding how Instagram metrics influence self-confidence. Exposure to idealized content often prompts users to compare their appearance, lifestyle, or social popularit

with others, leading to fluctuating self-evaluations. Empirical evidence suggests that frequent social comparison on Instagram is associated with increased depressive symptoms and anxiety among university students (14,15). Students who engage in upward comparisons—comparing themselves to perceived superior others—are particularly susceptible to reduced self-confidence and feelings of inadequacy (16,17). These findings reinforce concerns about the psychological costs of metric-driven social evaluation.

From a generational perspective, Generation Z demonstrates heightened sensitivity to digital popularity metrics as components of identity formation. Likes and followers are frequently interpreted as indicators of personal value, success, and social relevance (18). In collectivist cultural contexts, such as Indonesia, where social recognition and communal acceptance are highly valued, the psychological impact of digital validation may be even more pronounced (19,20). Consequently, social media exposure can significantly influence students' psychological well-being, amplifying both positive and negative self-evaluations.

Despite the growing literature on Instagram use and psychological outcomes, a notable research gap persists. Most existing studies emphasize usage intensity, engagement behaviors, or feedback mechanisms such as likes and comments, while relatively few investigations focus explicitly on follower count as a distinct psychosocial factor. Given that follower count is prominently displayed and widely interpreted as a measure of popularity and influence, its omission represents a critical gap in understanding how digital metrics shape self-confidence among university students. This gap is particularly evident in Indonesian contexts, where empirical evidence remains scarce.

In response to this gap, the present study aims to analyze the impact of Instagram exposure on university students' self-confidence by positioning follower count as a key psychosocial indicator. Using a cross-sectional quantitative design with correlational analysis, this study examines the relationship between the number of Instagram followers and self-confidence among students at IPB University. The study hypothesizes a positive association between follower count and self-confidence, grounded in theories of social validation and social self-efficacy. Self-confidence is widely recognized as a protective component of mental health, as it supports university students' psychological well-being and resilience in managing academic pressures and social challenges, particularly within digitally mediated environments. In this context, self-confidence can be understood not only as a social attribute but also as a key element of students' mental health, contributing to emotional stability and adaptive coping in the face of digital social evaluation. By focusing on follower count as a central variable, this research offers a novel contribution to literature and provides empirical insights relevant for higher education institutions seeking to promote digital literacy and mental health among students.

## **METHODS**

This study employed a quantitative research approach, using a survey, to empirically examine the relationship between Instagram follower count and self-confidence among university students. A quantitative design was selected because it enables the objective measurement of relationships between variables through numerical data and statistical testing, which is appropriate for assessing psychosocial associations within large populations (21). The focus of this study was to analyze whether variation in Instagram follower count, conceptualized as a form of digital social validation, is associated with differences in students' self-confidence as a psychosocial outcome. The study adopted a cross-sectional design, collecting data at a single point in time to capture prevailing patterns of social media exposure and self-perception. The study population consisted of undergraduate students enrolled in the Digital Communication and Media Study Program at the Vocational School of IPB University, totaling 319 students. This population was selected because students

in this program are highly engaged with digital platforms and social media across both academic activities and daily life, making them a relevant group for investigating the psychosocial implications of Instagram use. The sample size was determined using the Slovin formula, with a 10% margin of error, resulting in a required sample of 76 respondents.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design limits causal interpretation of the observed relationship. In addition, the sample was drawn from a single academic program at one university, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Data were also based on self-reported measures, which may be subject to response bias. A margin of error of 10% was considered acceptable, as this study was exploratory in nature and aimed to identify preliminary psychosocial associations rather than to produce precise population estimates. Sampling was conducted using a simple random sampling technique to ensure that each member of the population had an equal probability of selection, thereby minimizing selection bias and enhancing the sample's representativeness.

Data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire distributed online via Google Forms. The use of an online survey facilitated efficient data collection and ensured accessibility for participants, particularly in a digitally active student population. The questionnaire employed a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), a widely used scale in social and behavioral research to measure attitudes and psychological constructs. Likert-scale instruments have demonstrated strong psychometric properties in studies assessing self-confidence, self-esteem, and social self-efficacy among university students, with consistently high internal consistency and construct validity (22,23).

The research instrument comprised two main variables. The independent variable was Instagram follower count, operationalized as self-reported follower counts for participants' Instagram accounts. The dependent variable was self-confidence, measured using items adapted from Bandura's (1997) theory of social self-efficacy (24). This theoretical framework emphasizes individuals' beliefs in their capacity to perform behaviors required to achieve desired social outcomes. Accordingly, self-confidence indicators included students' perceived ability to express opinions confidently, their lack of fear of negative evaluation by others, and their confidence in engaging in social interactions. These indicators are consistent with prior research linking social self-efficacy to confidence in interpersonal and academic contexts.

Prior to the main data collection, the questionnaire underwent psychometric evaluation to ensure its validity and reliability. Item validity was assessed using Pearson product moment correlation; items were considered valid when the correlation coefficient exceeded the critical  $r$ -value. Reliability testing was conducted using Cronbach's alpha to assess internal consistency; values of 0.70 or higher indicate acceptable reliability. The use of Pearson correlation for validity testing and Cronbach's alpha for reliability assessment aligns with standard practices in quantitative social science research and has been widely applied in studies examining psychological constructs related to social media use (22,23). These procedures ensured that the instrument consistently and accurately measured both Instagram follower count and self-confidence.

Data analysis was conducted using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 29. Descriptive statistics were first generated to summarize respondents' characteristics and the distribution of key variables. Prior to inferential analysis, data normality was assessed using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov and Shapiro–Wilk tests to determine whether parametric assumptions were met. Normality testing is a critical step in selecting appropriate statistical techniques, as psychological and social media-related data often deviate from normal distributions (25). When normality assumptions are violated, non-parametric methods provide a more robust alternative for analyzing relationships between variables.

Given that the data did not meet normality assumptions, the relationship between Instagram follower count and self-confidence was examined using Spearman's rank-order correlation. Spearman's correlation is a nonparametric statistic suitable for ordinal or continuous data that are not normally distributed, and it is particularly appropriate for studies with relatively small sample sizes (25). This method allowed for the assessment of both the strength and direction of the association between the two variables without relying on strict parametric assumptions. The interpretation of correlation strength followed conventional social science research guidelines, in which higher coefficients indicate stronger associations.

In addition to correlation analysis, simple linear regression was conducted to further the predictive relationship between Instagram follower count and self-confidence. Regression analysis is commonly employed in quantitative studies investigating the influence of social media metrics on psychological outcomes, as it enables estimation of the magnitude and direction of effects (23,26). The regression model was specified as  $Y = a + bX + e$ , where Y represents self-confidence, X denotes Instagram follower count, a is the constant, b is the regression coefficient, and e is the error term. Hypothesis testing was performed using a t-test at a 5% significance level to determine whether the independent variable significantly predicted the dependent variable.

All research procedures were conducted in accordance with established ethical standards for social and behavioral research. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed of the study's purpose before completing the questionnaire. Anonymity and confidentiality of participants' identities were strictly maintained throughout data collection and analysis. Ethical considerations were guided by the American Psychological Association's ethical guidelines, which emphasize respect for participants, informed consent, and responsible data management (27). By adhering to these ethical principles, the study sought to ensure the integrity of the research process and to protect participants' rights.

By integrating rigorous sampling procedures, validated measurement instruments, and appropriate statistical analyses, this methodology provides a robust framework for examining the psychosocial relationship between Instagram follower count and self-confidence among university students. The methodological choices adopted in this study are consistent with best practices in quantitative social media research and provide a sound empirical basis for interpreting the findings and informing future research on digital media and psychological well-being.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This section integrates empirical findings with their interpretation in relation to the study objectives and relevant theoretical perspectives. Consistent with the journal guidelines, the results are directly discussed to explain their meaning, linking statistical evidence to existing theories and prior research. The analysis focuses on the relationship between Instagram follower count and self-confidence among university students, positioning follower count as a psychosocial indicator of digital social validation.

The study involved 76 undergraduate students of IPB University who actively used Instagram. Instagram follower count served as the independent variable, while self-confidence was the dependent variable measured through six questionnaire items reflecting dimensions of social self-efficacy. Before examining the association between variables, the instrument's psychometric properties were evaluated to ensure the robustness and credibility of the findings.

**Validity and Reliability of the Instrument**

The validity analysis demonstrated that all questionnaire items met the criteria for item–total correlation, with correlation coefficients exceeding the critical r-value of 0.413 at a 5% significance level. As shown in Table 1, the correlation coefficients for the Instagram follower variable ranged from 0.468 to 0.804, while those for the self-confidence variable ranged from 0.455 to 0.716. These results indicate that each item contributed meaningfully to its respective construct and adequately captured the underlying theoretical dimensions. In line with construct validity standards in social and behavioral research, such item–total correlations suggest that the instrument appropriately measured the intended psychosocial constructs (28,29).

**Table 1. Results of Item Validity Testing**

Item	r-calculated	r-table	Remark
X1	0.804	0.413	Valid
X2	0.468	0.413	Valid
X3	0.720	0.413	Valid
X4	0.768	0.413	Valid
X5	0.793	0.413	Valid
X6	0.803	0.413	Valid
Y1	0.639	0.413	Valid
Y2	0.614	0.413	Valid
Y3	0.716	0.413	Valid
Y4	0.455	0.413	Valid
Y5	0.537	0.413	Valid
Y6	0.561	0.413	Valid

Reliability testing further confirmed the instrument's internal consistency. As presented in Table 2, the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for the Instagram follower variable was 0.897, while the self-confidence variable yielded an alpha value of 0.819. Both values exceed the minimum acceptable threshold of 0.70, indicating good reliability. Coefficients within the range of 0.80–0.90 are generally interpreted as demonstrating strong internal consistency without excessive redundancy among items (30–32). These findings support the reliability of the measurement tool and justify its use in subsequent inferential analyses.

**Table 2. Results of Reliability Testing**

Variabel	Cronbach’s Alpha	N of Items
X	.897	6
Y	.819	6

**Normality Assessment and Implications for Analysis**

Following confirmation of validity and reliability, data normality was assessed to determine the suitability of parametric statistical techniques. The Kolmogorov–Smirnov and Shapiro–Wilk tests were applied to both the Instagram

follower count and self-confidence variables. As summarized in Table 3, the significance values for both tests were below 0.001, indicating that the data did not follow a normal distribution.

**Table 3. Results of Normality Testing**

Variabel	Sig.Kolmogorov–Smirnov	Sig. Shapiro–Wilk
X	<0.001	<0.001
Y	< 0.001	<0.001

The non-normal distribution observed in this study is consistent with patterns commonly reported in psychological and social media-related datasets. Self-report measures of psychological constructs often exhibit skewness, while social media metrics such as follower counts tend to show non-normal distributions due to extreme values and bounded characteristics (33,34). Given these violations of normality assumptions, the use of non-parametric statistical methods was considered methodologically appropriate. The Shapiro–Wilk test, in particular, is regarded as highly sensitive for small to medium sample sizes, further supporting the robustness of the normality assessment in this study (7,35).

**Correlation Analysis and Interpretation of Findings**

To account for the non-normal distribution of data, the relationship between Instagram follower count and self-confidence was examined using Spearman’s rank-order correlation. This non-parametric technique is suitable for assessing monotonic relationships between variables when parametric assumptions are not met and is widely applied in behavioral and communication research (25,36). The results of the correlation analysis are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4. Results of Spearman Correlation Analysis**

N	Correlation Coefficient	P-value	Interpretation
76	0.704	p < 0.001	Strong, positive, and significant

The analysis revealed a strong, statistically significant positive correlation between Instagram follower count and self-confidence, with a correlation coefficient of 0.704 and a p-value of < 0.001. In the context of social and behavioral sciences, correlation coefficients of 0.70 or higher are typically interpreted as indicating a substantial association between variables (37). This finding suggests that students with more Instagram followers tend to report higher levels of self-confidence.

From a theoretical perspective, this result supports the premise that Instagram follower count functions as a salient form of social validation. Consistent with social validation theory, higher follower counts may signal acceptance, visibility, and social worth within digital communities, reinforcing positive self-beliefs and confidence in social interactions (11,38). Unlike likes or comments, which may fluctuate across posts, follower count represents sustained engagement and long-term social endorsement, thereby exerting a more stable psychological influence.

The strong positive association between Instagram follower count and self-confidence highlights the role of digital social validation in shaping students’ self-perceptions. Rather than functioning as a transient form of feedback, follower count represents sustained social recognition, which may reinforce feelings of social competence. At the same time, the visibility of popularity metrics may intensify social comparison processes, influencing self-confidence depending on how individuals interpret their relative social standing.

Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory further explains how follower count may shape self-confidence through mechanisms of social self-efficacy. Observational learning and social feedback play a central role in the development of efficacy beliefs. Exposure to peers who receive extensive online recognition may shape students' perceptions of social success, thereby influencing their confidence in their own social abilities (42). In this context, follower count serves as social feedback that informs students' evaluations of their competence in social interaction.

### **Cultural and Mental Health Implications**

Indonesia's cultural context provides additional insight into the observed relationship. As a society with collectivist tendencies, social recognition and group belonging are highly valued, which may amplify the psychological impact of digital validation. Although previous research suggests that family and community approval may strongly influence self-esteem in collectivist cultures (43), the present findings indicate that digital forms of validation, such as Instagram followers, have become increasingly influential among university students. This shift reflects the growing integration of digital culture into traditional social structures.

The strong association between follower count and self-confidence also carries important implications for student mental health. Reliance on social media metrics as a primary source of self-worth may create instability in self-confidence and increase vulnerability to anxiety and emotional distress. Previous studies have linked excessive dependence on social media validation with negative mental health outcomes, including anxiety and depressive symptoms (44–46). Therefore, while follower count may enhance confidence for some students, it may simultaneously pose psychological risks for others.

Overall, the integrated results and discussion demonstrate that Instagram follower count is significantly associated with self-confidence among university students. By combining rigorous statistical analysis with theoretical interpretation, this study provides empirical support for the role of digital popularity metrics in shaping self-perception. These findings highlight the need for higher education institutions to promote digital literacy and mental health awareness, enabling students to engage with social media in ways that foster healthy, resilient self-confidence. This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. From a practical perspective, higher education institutions may integrate digital literacy education into student orientation programs or counseling services to encourage critical engagement with social media metrics. Such initiatives can support students in developing healthier interpretations of online validation and fostering more stable, internally grounded self-confidence.

The cross-sectional design limits causal interpretation of the observed relationship. In addition, the sample was drawn from a single academic program at one university, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Data were also based on self-reported measures, which may be subject to response bias. Students to engage with social media in ways that foster healthy, resilient self-confidence.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study concludes that Instagram follower count is strongly and positively associated with self-confidence among university students, indicating that digital popularity metrics play a meaningful role in shaping students' self-perceptions in contemporary academic and social contexts. The findings show that follower count functions as an important psychosocial indicator, influencing how students evaluate their social competence and personal worth, rather than serving merely as a numerical feature of social media profiles. These results suggest that higher follower counts are linked to higher levels of self-confidence, while also implying potential vulnerability when students place excessive

importance on online validation. From a practical standpoint, the findings highlight the need for higher education institutions to address social media use through digital literacy and mental health promotion initiatives that encourage students to interpret social media metrics critically and to develop more stable, internally grounded self-confidence. This study contributes empirical evidence from an Indonesian university setting, where research on this topic remains limited. Future research is recommended to employ longitudinal or experimental designs to clarify causal relationships and to examine additional factors that may influence this association, such as individual characteristics, cultural influences, and offline social support systems.

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