

# The Influence Of Social Media On Mimetic Desire And Social Validation: Users Speak

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## **Abstract**

Girard's mimetic theory, "the intense capacity of humans to imitate is what forces them to become what they are". Do social media users unconsciously emulate an inclination towards successful or desirable narratives? Can the media influence the user in shaping his mimetic desire and social validation-seeking behaviour? Algorithmic design, social validation mechanisms, and global cultural dynamics create the phenomenon of conformity in visual aesthetics and lifestyle presentation. In parallel, the digital platform helps in reinforcing the social validation-seeking behaviour through engagement metrics such as likes, comments, and shares. A descriptive survey was conducted with a sample of one thousand individuals in Kerala. Data were collected using a survey poll and an inventory. One of the objectives of the study was to identify the influence of social media in fostering mimetic desire among young adults in Kerala. The second objective was to study their social validation-seeking tendencies. Results revealed that 60% of the survey participants selected at least one event to celebrate, with dominant choices such as "Save the Date" (71%), "Bride-to-be/Groom-to-be" (60%), "Mom-to-be/Dad-to-be" (38%), and "Haldi Kumkum" (36%), events popularized on social media. Seventy four percent cited social media as their drive for their preferences. This provides a clear picture of digital mimicry, which supersedes the cultural continuity. The percentage of individuals who frequently checked their engagement metrics was 76%, and those who relied on the filters and edited photos were 72% and 53% respectively, to enhance their online presence. The finding exclusively exhibits the social validation-seeking behaviour. Even though only 15% participants changed their opinions based on widespread approval of trending posts, this behaviour reiterates the power of such digital trends to alter personal perceptions, which strongly influence the sense of self.

**Keywords:** Social media influence, mimetic desire, social validation-seeking, engagement metrics, digital mimicry, cultural continuity.

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## **I. Introduction**

Social media, through visual representation norms, subtly but persistently shapes user behaviour. Algorithmic design, social validation mechanisms, and global cultural dynamics create the phenomenon of conformity in visual aesthetics and lifestyle presentation, which is a complex sociocultural process. Users experience psychological pressures to emulate popular visual styles. Present lifestyles that appear aspirational and create visually striking, attention-grabbing content designed to outshine and differentiate oneself from others. These digital performances reveal deep psychological mechanisms such as mimetic desire and social validation-seeking behaviour.

Mimetic desire influences people to unconsciously copy what they see as successful or desirable narratives. Users scroll vigorously, compulsively and intensely and yet desire without 'seeing' (Chetty,2020). The capacity for mimetic desire is innate in human beings (Girard 2001). we are constantly forced to submit to rules of thought and behaviour that we have neither devised nor desired, and that are sometimes even contrary to our most basic inclinations and instincts (Durkeim,1976). Social media's power originates from its apparent (moral) authority, as opposed to its enforced power. Furthermore, social and cultural forces amplify an individual's being on social media. Individuals become prone to emotions and behaviours of the crowd to the extent that they are incapable of feeling or processing their own. These ideas converge with Girard's concept of how mimesis in heightened phases of desire can bring about an intense capacity for contagious expansion (Chetty,2020).

Social validation refers to the process by which individuals seek confirmation or approval from others, often through feedback, recognition, or acceptance (Ghaemmaghmi et al., 2021; Wellons et al., 2023). In the context of social media platforms, social validation is often quantified through metrics such as likes, comments, and shares (Martínek, 2021; T. Luo et al., 2020). These digital interactions serve as forms of validation, indicating social approval or recognition for one's posts, photos, or ideas (Walther, 2022; Yenilmez Kacar,

2023). Likes, comments, and shares become quantifiable measures of popularity and success, fueling the desire for validation (Guinaudeau et al., 2022). When users receive positive feedback and validation through likes, comments, and shares, it triggers a release of dopamine in the brain, creating feelings of pleasure and satisfaction (Bucyte, 2023; Okanovic & Agnès, 2023). The positive reinforcement of social validation triggers the release of neurotransmitters in the brain, such as dopamine, which are associated with pleasure and reward (Dresp-Langley & Hutt, 2022). Moreover, a lack of validation or receiving negative feedback on social media can have detrimental effects on individuals' self-esteem and self-worth (Krause et al., 2021; Meeus et al., 2019).

This study aimed to identify the power of social media in inculcating the mimetic desire and social validation-seeking behaviour among the young adults using social media.

## **II. Need And Significance**

Social media exhibits a democratic character that progresses with advances in technology and grants individuals the ability to instantly take and share visuals and thoughts with others (Du Preez 2018). In Kerala, observed a fascinating phenomenon emerging from social media's cultural landscape - the widespread adoption and commodification of cultural practices that are often disconnected from their original contexts. A profound example of these complex cultural dynamics is the 'Haldi-Kumkum' ceremony. Dating back several centuries, this ceremony, with its origins, is ingrained in the cultural traditions of Maharashtra, India. It is closely aligned with Hindu culture as well as social practices, explicitly in the Marathi-speaking regions. Female solidarity, respect, and social bonding are symbolized via this ritual. Now, this culturally specific tradition has transformed into a performative social media spectacle. As of now, irrespective of the cultural background, the ceremony has become a universal "content opportunity" rather than a localized practice, due to the desire of individuals to mimic others by seeing their shared posts on digital platforms. Currently, wedding preparations become less about personal meaning, with the young people interested in recreating idealized representations witnessed through online media. Each social media post becomes mimicking and subtly challenging existing wedding aesthetics. 'Bride-to-be' or 'Groom-to-be' celebrations are a significant example of such mimicking emerging due to the large influence of social media platforms. In the case of pregnancy, it has undergone a big shift in how it's portrayed. Presently, 'monthly milestone posts, maternity photoshoots, and baby showers,' etc., are trending in the digital world. Due to the urge to follow idealized images of pregnancy seen online, the private and personal experience is now a public display of beautifully curated moments. Also, 'Arikkuthu kalyanam,' 'valakappu,' etc. have emerged to take on the role of constructing mimetic desire in the users of online platforms.

Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube have gained immense popularity, with billions of users worldwide (Gongane et al., 2022; Kobiruzzaman, 2021; Yufada & Simanjuntak, 2023). Social media has become an integral part of daily life (Karim et al., 2020), influencing various aspects of society, including social relationships, politics, marketing, and self-expression (Alhouti & Johnson, 2022; Grover et al., 2022). Users seek validation to enhance their self-esteem, establish social status, and reinforce a sense of belonging. However, they must navigate the tension between seeking validation and maintaining authenticity, recognizing the limitations of social validation metrics. Emotional responses to social validation feedback vary widely, with positive feedback leading to happiness and satisfaction, while negative feedback can trigger envy and disappointment. Social validation also contributes to the construction of online identities, shaping how individuals present themselves and seek validation from others (Ballara, 2023). There exist several reasons in understanding the power of likes, comments, and shares in shaping user behavior. It provides insights into the psychological mechanisms underlying social validation and its impact on individuals' thoughts, emotions, and actions (Arora et al., 2022; Vrontis et al., 2021). Furthermore, the societal implications of social validation are evident. The formation of echo chambers and polarization occurs as individuals gravitate towards like-minded individuals and engage primarily with content that reinforces their existing beliefs. This can hinder constructive dialogue and contribute to societal divisions (Ballara, 2023).

This survey sheds light on the powerful influence of social media on human desire and self-perception by exploring how algorithm-driven exposure to viral content reinforces the mimetic desire. Also, excessive reliance on engagement metrics such as likes, comments, and shares resembles the social validation-seeking behaviour that influences self-esteem and decision-making. Thus, this study is focused on analysing the social media influence in developing mimetic desire as well as social validation-seeking behaviour among young adults using social media in Kerala.

## **III. Review Of Literature**

René Girard (2008) contends that "the intense capacity of humans to imitate is what forces them to become what they are". Human desire is, to a great extent, mediated desire. Girard refers to this concept as "mimetic desire" after the Greek word "mimesis" meaning "to imitate". In order to understand the distinctive character of mimetic desire, a distinction between appetites and desires is necessary. Palaver (2013) cited that

Girard (2008 ) explains appetites are instinctual or “biologically grounded,” such as appetites for food or sex. However, appetites can be tainted with mimetic desire when there is a model present. Girard refers to the character Sancho Panza in Cervantes’s Don Quixote and explains that Panza’s response to cheese and wine is instinctual and natural; his craving is triggered by simply seeing the desired objects. The capacity for mimetic desire is innate in human beings. Passion, a form of heightened desire, emerges when ambiguous yearnings are exercised on a model to signal what one should desire, which usually takes the form of desiring the model (Girard 2001). Human desire is not rooted in the subject but instead in the desires that encompass the subject. In fact, people are unaware of what to desire, and this leads them to imitate the desires of others (Palaver 2013).

In the social media environment, the self is continuously being hounded by a greater network comprised of pattern recognising algorithms. Understanding how individuals interact and engage with one another on social media platforms requires an understanding of how the ‘self’ is constituted in this network. Therefore, it is worthwhile analysing the idea of the ‘self’ from the perspective of mimetic theory. Social media platforms have created a space where individuals have lost their sense of self in the era of advanced technologies. Such advancements offer a space for the re-creation of a ‘self’ wedged between the device and reality to become an actuality through technology (Turkle, 2011). The social media sphere affects the decisions a person makes when choosing which character traits to suppress in the portrayal of a persona. This persona helps an individual to adapt to a social setting. This technological climate fuels the progression of a persona through the portrayal of the public self. Van der Walt (2018) explains how social media users make use of persona to sustain control in their social environments by disguising some characteristics of their personality and displaying other parts of it. Ultimately, advances in technology have changed how we portray ourselves and how we communicate with one another.

The need for social approval and validation is deeply ingrained in human psychology (Tunçgenç et al., 2021). From an evolutionary perspective, social acceptance and belongingness were crucial for survival in early human communities (Allen et al., 2022; Vinales & Thomas, 2021). Research suggests that individuals experience a broad range of emotions in response to social validation feedback (Hasell & Nabi, 2023; Nicholas et al., 2020). Positive emotions, such as happiness, satisfaction, and validation, are commonly reported when users receive high engagement on their posts (Casaló et al., 2021; Lu & Lin, 2022). These positive emotions reinforce users’ self-esteem and social belongingness (Kavaklı & Ünal, 2021; Marengo et al., 2021). Conversely, negative emotions, including envy, disappointment, and frustration, may arise when users compare their own level of validation with that of others or when they receive minimal engagement (Aldous et al., 2021; C. Yang et al., 2023).

#### **IV. Objectives**

1. To identify the influence of social media in fostering mimetic desire among young adults between the age 18 to 30.
2. To study the role of social media in promoting social validation-seeking behaviour among young adults between the age 18 to 30.

#### **V. Methodology**

The study is carried out using a descriptive survey method. For identifying the role of social media in fostering mimetic desire, a survey poll was used to collect data. Also, administered an inventory to get data for studying the social validation-seeking behaviour in light of digital media influence.

Tools used for the study:

**Survey Poll of Mimetic Desire:** The poll consists of 7 celebratory events to be preferred by the young adults without any limit in the number of choices. Additionally, the poll consisted of three items that were the reason behind celebrating those events to find the emergence of mimetic behaviour among social media users.

**Inventory of Social Validation-Seeking Behaviour:** This tool consisted of 10 items. The participants were needed to mark yes or no for each item. There existed positive and negative items to collect data to analyse social validation-seeking behaviour.

Sample:

One thousand young adults between the age 18 to 30 in Kerala were taken as the sample for the study regarding both mimetic desire as well as social validation-seeking behaviour using random sampling technique. Among the 1000 those who preferred at least one event were selected for finding reason behind celebrating those events.

Analysis of Data:

To identify mimetic desire, the data collected using a survey poll on mimetic desire has been analysed by using a percentage analysis technique. Furthermore, a percentage analysis was also used to analyse the data collected by inventory of social validation-seeking behaviour

### VI. Result And Discussion

As this study aims to deal with the areas including mimetic desire and social validation, a survey poll was administered along with an inventory, respectively.

#### Mimetic Desire

In the survey poll, many options were given to the young adults, like which events they preferred to celebrate in their lives. The number of preferences was not limited. The events were Bride to be/Groom to be, Save the Date, Haldi Kumkum, Arikkuthu Kalyanam, Mom to be/Dad to be, Valakaappu, and Baby Shower. Collected data is represented in Table 1.

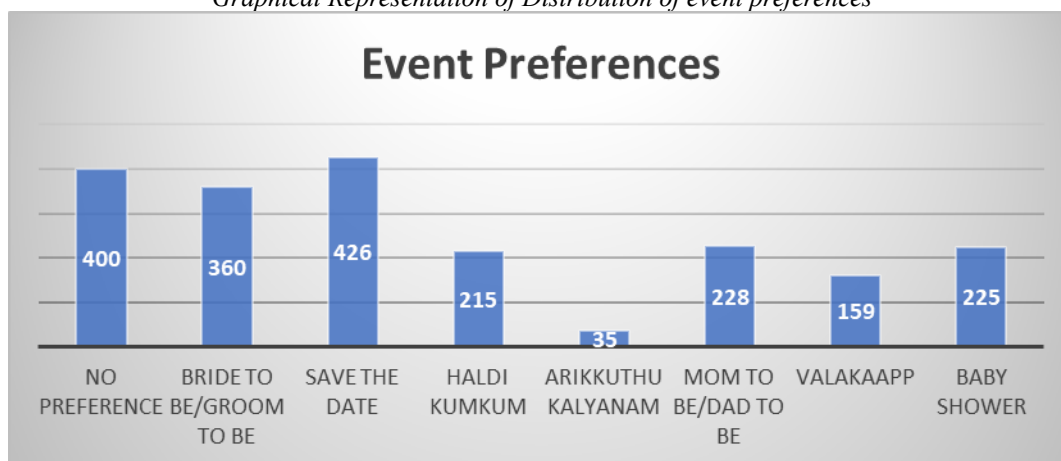
**Table 1**  
*Distribution of event preferences*

Events	Preferred Number of People	Percentage
<b>Bride to be/Groom to be</b>	360	60
<b>Save the Date</b>	426	71
<b>Haldi Kumkum</b>	215	36
<b>Arikkuthu Kalyanam</b>	35	6
<b>Mom to be/Dad to be</b>	228	38
<b>Valakappu</b>	159	27
<b>Baby Shower</b>	225	38
<b>No Preference</b>	400	40

From the table, it is visible that though among the 1000 participants, 60% selected at least one event and 40% didn't prefer any event. Within the 60%, the bride-to-be/groom-to-be preferred by 60%, save the date by 71%, haldi kumkum by 36%, arikkuthu kalyanam by 6%, mom-to-be/dad-to-be by 38%, valakaappu by 27%, and baby shower by 38%.

The distribution of event preferences is presented in figure 1.

**Figure 1**  
*Graphical Representation of Distribution of event preferences*



The 60% of the sample who preferred at least one event were selected to find the reasons for their preferences, whether they are culturally aware about the events or not. For this, there were three choices to poll: influenced by social media (not culturally aware), influenced by friends (not culturally aware), and culturally aware. The distribution of their poll is given in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
*Distribution of Reason for Event Celebrations*

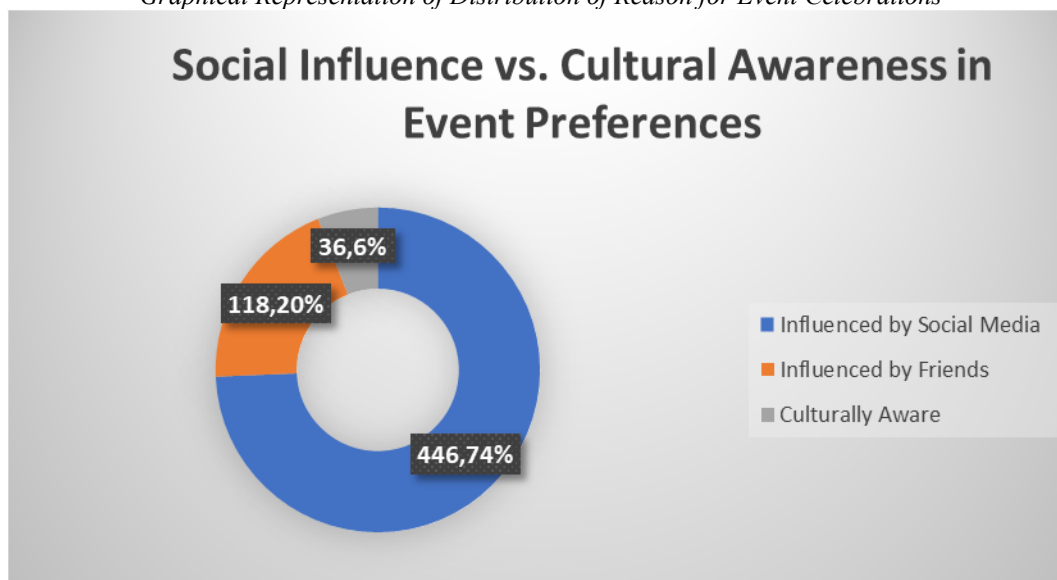
Reason for Celebration	Number of People	Percentage
Influenced by Social Media	446	74
Influenced by Friends	118	20
Culturally Aware	36	6

The majority of the sample, 74% polled ‘influenced by social media,’ which showed that they were not culturally aware. The other 20% among the 600 were influenced by friends, who were also not culturally aware. Only a few among them, 6%, were culturally aware of celebrating such events. This result is highlighting the social influence in performing events like mom to be/dad to be, save the date, etc., more than cultural awareness.

In figure 2, the distribution of reasons for event preferences is graphically represented.

**Figure 2**

*Graphical Representation of Distribution of Reason for Event Celebrations*



Human desire is, to a great extent, mediated desire. Girard refers to this concept as “mimetic desire” (Girard, 2008). The survey data highlighted that 60% out of 1000 respondents chose at least one celebratory event. Also, among the 600 events, like save the date (71%), bride-to-be/groom-to-be (60%), mom-to-be/dad-to-be (38%), and haldi kumkum (36%) which are most popularised through social media like Instagram, are most preferred. However, while a vast majority, 74% who were influenced by social media and 20% who were influenced by friends, didn’t illuminate any cultural or historical awareness, only 6% participants, which is only 6% of the 600 respondents, were culturally aware of these events. This result underscores the motivation for performing such events is primarily mimetic adoption through social influences rather than cultural continuity.

**Social Validation**

From a sample of one thousand young adults, collected data using the inventory to study the social validation-seeking behaviour. The data is demonstrated in table 3.

**Table 3**  
**Social Validation Indicator**

Inventory Items	Number of Responses	Percentage
Frequently recreate popular poses and makeup styles	413	41
Rather than raw photos, prefer edited photos for social media posts	526	53
Prefer filters for social media photos	721	72
Feel motivated by high engagement posts to create to create similar	524	52
Post similar content aligns with trends	453	45
Change opinions on trends based on social approval	149	15
Frequently check views and likes for WhatsApp status or Instagram stories	758	76

Do not check views and likes for WhatsApp status or Instagram stories	242	24
Experience happiness from high engagement of own social media posts	633	63
Do not care about views and likes for social media posts	367	37

A substantial portion, which is 76% out of 1000 respondents, frequently check the engagement metrics, that is, views and likes on their posts. Also, 72%, which represents a significant number of the sample, rely on filters to enhance their social media presence. These responses underscore considerable engagement in social validation-seeking behaviours. The 52% of respondents showed that the influence of social validation mechanisms is reinforced via motivation derived from popular and highly engaged posts. The 63% participants, who acknowledge the happiness brought by the high engagement of their own social media posts, illuminate a strong psychological association with social media approval. Those who actively monitor the views and likes are a prominent portion of participants while comparing the number of individuals who claim that they do not care about the engagement. The results assert that individuals seek confirmation or approval from others, particularly in digital spaces. Among the young adults, 15% change their opinions on trends based on social approval.

## VII. Conclusion

Regarding celebratory events, mimetic desire plays a prominent role in shaping personal choices. Thus, the study underscores that rather than personal or cultural drive, external influences that the events popularized on social media platforms largely influence the preference for such celebrations among the users. The individuals imitate perceived social models instead of adopting their intrinsic aspirations. It exclusively substantiates Girard's theory of mimetic desire. Not only does the mimetic desire tend to lead individuals to celebrate those events in their lives, but it is also aligned with the social validation-seeking behaviour. The social media posts of celebratory events catalyse the mimetic behaviour of users and therefore, it can amplify the collective participation. As the digital platforms continuously enhance the visual representation of these celebrations, users become trapped in a cycle of reinforced desirability. The findings highlighted that imitation supersedes ingrained culture. As cultural continuity takes less of a role in celebratory event preferences among the individuals, the study emphasized the capacity of online media in elevating the mimetic behaviour.

While the social media users show profound social-validation seeking behaviour, it cannot accurately represent a person's actual value or worth. It's crucial to understand that popularity bias can be found in the online environment, which act as the propensity to follow the trends. Rather than expressing authentically by the people, they give more importance to get more likes and comments. It can lead to a distorted sense of validation. Furthermore, the quantified social validation metrics are easy to measure, they cannot fully capture the depth of human experiences. The results showcased a strong alignment of individuals in seeking social validation by exhibiting behaviours like editing photos before posting on any digital media, frequently monitoring the engagement metrics, and creating content based on trends. Thus, these digital interactions took a prominent role in framing the feel of social belonging and self-perception. Also, the findings revealed that only a smaller group is concerned less about the likes, views, and trend participation. Thus, the engagement metrics shape participation which strengthen the social validation-seeking behaviour. Even though a few participants change their opinions based on widespread approval of trending posts, this behaviour illuminated the power of such digital trends to alter personal perceptions, which strongly influence the sense of self.

Overall, it is evident from the findings that social media influences largely in forming the mimetic conduct as well as social validation-seeking behaviour.

## VIII. Recommendations

- *Role of State and other Public Agencies:* Public agencies should take the responsibility of conducting large-scale awareness campaigns to inform the public about the psychological effects of the influence of social media. Additionally, these agencies should collaborate with social media platforms to introduce regulations that encourage reducing algorithmic bias toward viral trends. Also, the public agencies, including the government, take a responsible role in organising programmes to raise self-preserved personalities who keep their uniqueness.
- *Role of Schools and other Educational Institutions:* The institutions should conduct awareness programmes on the influence of social media in degrading self-esteem and self-worth. Also, these institutions can organize workshops on mindful social media use, which help the individuals to critically engage with digital media. Teachers should encourage the pupils to preserve their self by standing on their own perceptions rather than being with the trend, as there exists a notable condition of altering the self-perception. Additionally, educational platforms should provide enough as well as equal opportunities to all for performing their talents;

it can reduce the pressurised validation-seeking through social media. Teachers and other educational professionals can act as role models to control thoughts, emotions, and actions on their own to collapse the negative influence of social media.

- *Role of Parents and Families:* As families act as the basic agent for socialisation, open discussions take an influential role in encouraging self-worth beyond digital approval. In addition, family can create opportunities for individuals to illuminate their talents and values in real life. Thus, the sense of self can be nurtured instead of raising the pseudo sense through the quantified engagement metrics in the digital world. Furthermore, parents can be the role models for their children for being culturally aware individuals with self-esteem personalities.

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