

# UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL VALIDATION AS A PROCESS AND LIVED EXPERIENCE AMONG COLLEGE GOING STUDENTS IN DELHI.

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## Abstract

*Considerable research has explored the variables that affect the socialization and social life of an individual. We build on this research by examining the different dimensions of social validation as a process and lived experience among college students through focus group discussion. Social validation is concerned with social norms and how people often look on to others' behaviour in deciding how to behave across situations, especially in ambiguous contexts. In other word, we tend to consider how others act and behave in similar situation. To understand the lived experience of social validation we used focus group discussion. Through the focus group discussion, social validation was identified as a process that may directly or indirectly affect one's mental health, and emotional wellbeing. One of the key point that was found in social validation that it may either be a positive factor, or a negative factor: it may be a source of motivation for an individual while be a source of deprivation and low self-esteem for the other.*

**Keywords:** *social validation, conformity, social – norms, focus-group discussion,*

## Introduction

Social validation, also known as social proof, is one of the key principle of social influence (Cialdini, 2009). It may be described as a phenomenon that results in conforming to a group. The concept behind terming it as social proof is that as individual we look to other members in the society or a group to provide a proof for us that the critical decisions were already made, and their behaviour act as a signal that what is being done is the accepted behaviour or the norm, and we should do the same. The human race as a social animal have an innate tendency and a desire to belong to a social group. This desire to be an in-group may inculcate in man the notion of following the norms that is laid down by the society. According to Cialdini (2009), social validation is concerned with social norms and how people often look on to others' behaviour in deciding how to behave across situations, especially in ambiguous contexts. In other word, we tend to consider how others act and behave in similar situation. This may eventuate in the form of a following at times, especially when an ideal model behaves with certain peculiarities, we tend to develop the same peculiarities at least with a conscious effort, if not unconscious. Thus, we have trend setters, social influencers, avant-gardist, not to forget the fact that we use the term models in the fashion industry. Social validation recognizes and builds on our innate desire to be a part of the main group, and that we tend to change our perceptions, opinions, and behaviours in ways that are consistent with the norms of a particular group, especially a group that we may find ideal and want to belong to. This same method of validating our actions and behaviours against that of actions or behaviours of others may act as a way of our conceptualization of what constitutes correct behaviour. We term a behaviour as more correct when we see others doing it, and use other's behaviour to guide our own actions, to validate what we should or should not do.

The need for validation compels us to change our behaviours, attitudes, and our actions, even when what we observe may not an internalized. A study by Oh in 2013 identified the difference between conforming to the group externally, and internalizing the attitudinal change. According to the study, collectivistic culture showed higher level of conformity as compared to individualistic culture, but there were no significant differences in the degree of internalization of the said attitude. In other word, in a collectivistic culture, individuals tend to give in to the group without changing their attitude, perception or belief. There may also be a general lack of individual

responsibility when we follow the decision of a group. An adherence to social norms may lead to a depersonalization according to the social identity model of deindividuation, as under the condition of anonymity, individuals look more toward a group for normative direction rather than following their internal standards for behaviour (Postmes, Spears & Lea, 1998).

The external environment and stimuli may also determine how we react to or behave in a situation. Asch's (1951) classic experiment on conformity demonstrates the importance of social validation leading to conforming to the majority even when one is correct and the majority are at large incorrect. There is high consensus on the unanimity of the said action to have an overbearing influence on an individual (Allen & Levine, 1968). Such influence may occur passively as well as actively. We may be as unaware of our conforming to situations or being influenced in a situation, that we may even hardly notice our emotional states becoming similar with those we spend our time with (Anderson, Keltner & John, 2003). Chartrand and Bargh (1999), in their experiment on imitation found that there was a tendency in their participant to positively evaluate the confederate when their behaviours were being imitated by them in comparison with the participants whose behaviour had not been imitated. Social validation, as a rule, is a rule of thumb, as it helps us define what works. There is an adaptive value in our tendency to change our behaviour to compliment and match the response of others (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004), and such an imitation of other's behaviour may work in our advantage leading to a successful behaviour especially when individually acquiring response is costly (Henrich & Boyd, 1998). The imitating and copying of what others do is an automatic response that are unconscious in us (Cialdini, 2009).

According to Festinger (1954) one way of validating one's opinion is to see if whether others agree with them. In his social comparison theory, he identifies the processes by which individuals evaluate their own abilities, opinions, attitudes, feelings, physical features, accomplishments, or any other self-aspects in relation to other individuals and/or groups. He further notes that in the absence of directly perceivable physical standards, there is a drive in each of us to evaluate our opinion, and our abilities, and thus be validated; in the process of which we end up comparing ourselves to others around us, especially to those that are similar to us. As identified by Shrauger and Jones (2004), we tend to be attracted toward individual who evaluate us positively, especially when their validation of us is deemed important by us. Smith et al. (2013) identified the importance of initial evaluation from the leader of an organization and peer evaluation, as the prior is likely to decrease a newcomer's disengagement from the organization over time, and the later led to a greater use of positive coping strategies within the organization.

The process of belongingness is not only emotional but also a cognitive process, the lack of which may be linked to maladjustment and a detrimental effect on our well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The need to belong is a fundamental and powerful motivation that is basic to human's need (Maslow, 1943; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The need to belong is a drive on which the foundation of our self-esteem is laid (Maslow, 1943). Deci and Ryan's (1991, 1995) self-determination theory suggests that personality develops through internalization and integration of the extrinsic motivation, and intrinsic motivation. They further identified autonomy, competence, and relatedness as important factors for intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Likewise, self-esteem based on the true self, or the intrinsic self, is not constantly subjected to external evaluation, or scrutiny; whereas contingent self-esteem that depends on extrinsic motivation, demands a living up to the external or introjected standards and hence requires ongoing assessments (Deci & Ryan, 1991, 1995). Schimel et al. (2001) identified the difference between social validation of intrinsic aspects of the self, such as what one thinks one really is, and social validation of the extrinsic aspect (our achievement) of the self. They further contend that we exhibit less of a defensive behaviour when we are liked or validated for who we believe we really are, rather than being like or validated for extrinsic factors such as our achievement.

## METHODS

The current study focuses on the social validation as a process and lived experience among college going students in Delhi. To identify the above, a focus group discussion was planned with the participation of second year student of Psychology Department, Aryabhatta College, University of Delhi. Sessions were planned, and the students were divided into four groups consisting of 11 students per group. The group discussion was conducted in Lab 1 of Psychology Department, Aryabhatta College, University of Delhi over a span of three weeks. A student was assigned as note-taker and a moderator, with the teacher facilitating the whole sessions, and helping the moderator with his/her task. The teacher and moderators decided on 10 questions which would help the moderator if at all there seem to be a lack of topic, and also in staying within the topic. Prior to the sessions, aside from theoretical class on what focus group discussion is, a mock focus group discussion was held with a different topic, so as to help the moderators and the note-taker understand their role.

On the day of the focus group discussion, the arrangement of chairs and tables was done one in the shape of a circle so as to facilitate a better discussion and smoother communication wherein participants could see and hear each other and the moderator very well. The criterion was to understand the everyday lived experience of what social validation is in the life of college going students. With this as the criterion, the agenda of the focus group

discussion was assigned as “Understanding Social Validation.” A time limit of 45 minutes was decided, so that the session was not too long neither too short. The sessions were recorded with the help of a recorder. It was also made sure that everyone had their phone on flight mode during the session so that there would be no disturbance.

### CONDUCTING THE FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

The participants were seated in a circle, with the moderator and the note-taker. A recorder was placed in the middle. The session began with an introduction of what social validation is by the moderator. The participants were free to follow up with their own definition of what social validation is. The discussion was active and dynamic with each member participating in the discussion. The note-taker summarised the discussion at the end of the session, and asked the group to ponder on any point on topic that was amiss or not discussed properly. The discussion was then reviewed with the whole participant along with a formulation of a Venn diagram with the participants. A grand Venn diagram was later formulated to encompass all the points that were discussed in all the sessions of the focus group discussions. Members of the discussions were then followed up with the result of their discussion, and a request to summarise on what social validation is according to them. This was then incorporated into the result of the focus group discussions.

### RESULTS

**Table – 1**  
**Venn Diagram**

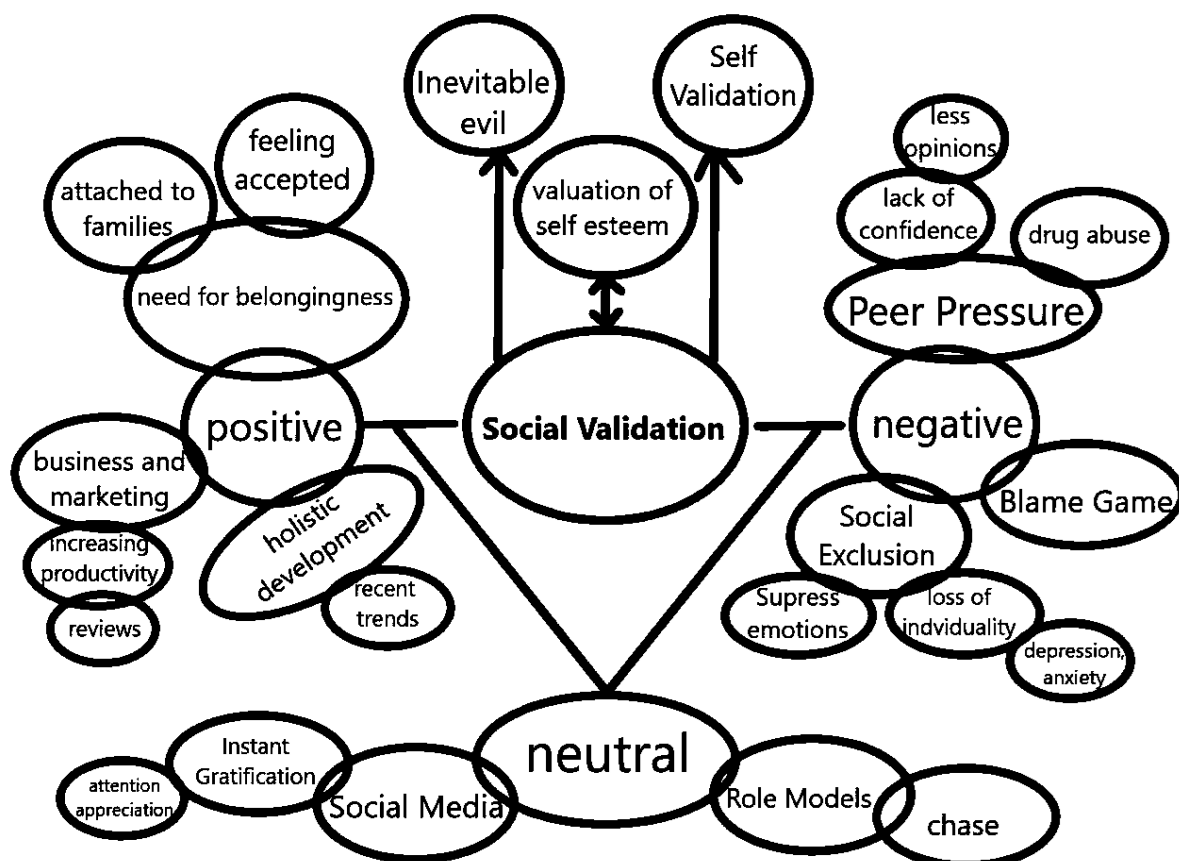


Fig. Venn diagram representing the discussion on social validation a process and lived experience among college going students in Delhi

Social validation, according to the discussions, is a source of self-validation, and valuation of self-esteem, and an inevitable evil that one cannot escape. There are different factors which is responsible for our need to be

validated socially, and they can be experienced either in a positive manner or a negative manner. In most settings, the positive dimension of social validation includes factors such as need for belongingness which result in sense of being accepted by others, being attached to others, and hence forming a relationship. The positive factor also includes the ability to use the motivation to increase one's own productivity and creativity that in turn help in sustaining our own self, and a holistic development of the self. Some of the negative factors include social exclusion, loss of individuality, dispersion of responsibility, devaluation of the self by lowering of one's self-esteem. While they are broadly divided into positive and negative, it is mindful to note that the participants agreed that everything was not all white or all black. They identified factors which may be termed neutral, such as having a role model, using social media, yearning for instant gratification, need for attention and appreciation, which may all be deemed either positive or negative depending on the extension to which we devote ourselves to seeking validation from others around us, and on what the subject or area of interest is.

According to the group discussion, an individual who is socially validated and is trusted or accepted by the peer group feels worthy, while an individual who is not socially validated feels unworthy. This, the group agreed, directly influenced their own self-concept, and their self-esteem. This further endorses our self-validation. There was an identification of an intrinsic value of self-validation which may help an individual to overlook the need for validation from others. But it was agreed that there are certain areas in life where each individual somehow adhere to the norms and rules laid down by the society, if not our family or parents, and thus, it was considered an inevitable evil that one cannot escape. The importance of peer pressure was discussed, and again here the groups agreed that peer pressure may enable a person to better themselves, while on the other hand it could devalue the person, and may even influence the use of substance. Students shared their experience of how teachers' prejudices effected their conceptualization of themselves, and also how the need to belong drives their everyday wants to want to come to college or not. It was a heartfelt and engrossing discussion as students shared their own experiences of trying to do their best to be socially validated by others, while some even shared that they do not really care anymore at this point. Participants shared of how they tried to change themselves to the extent that they lost a sense of their own self. Trying to fit into a group which does not accept you was agreed as one of the most difficult experience they faced, especially when the group of people they wanted to be friends with repeatedly ghosted them. They agreed that such experiences affected them individually, and it, at times, hindered their self-confidence and self-esteem. They agreed that such experience could, and at times had, created a sense of instability and questioning of their own self-worth, and eventually agreed that it could very well lead to a depreciation of one's mental wellbeing, which could further extent to a depreciation of our own physical wellbeing. They identified body image issue as one of the possible result of the extreme need of validating the self externally. There is a bi-directional relationship between our intrinsic self-evaluation and the validation we get from the external world. An individual who intrinsically value their own self may be more socially appreciated, and hence, validated by the society at large. And an individual who is socially accepted, acknowledged, and appreciated will again be likely to have a high self-esteem and self-worth. This may be the reason why we tend to continually seek the approval of those around us especially when we are low on self-esteem and self-worth.

Social media, the students agreed, made it easier for everyone to access the concept of what is considered ideal and beautiful, or what was the accepted norms among their age group in the society. But the level of how much one is invested in the use of social media platform such as instagram, facebook, tiktok, twitter, may be vulnerable to how much they affect us. They identified that there were a few of them who don't really get into the hype of uploading the best picture, and having more likes and followers. And for such individuals, the content of social media did not really matter. Apart from this, most knew the effort and hard work models, idols, actors, and actresses put in to look how they look. There was an agreement that for such individuals looking good was their business while it was not for themselves. The understanding of such difference also helped in levelling down the effect of social media influencer. At the same time, they agreed that at times they themselves are an abuser of seeking attention through social media at least once in their period of life. The participants were divided on this, with more number of the female students agreeing to using social media as a platform of seeking attention as compared to their male counterpart. But the number of participant being minimal, we cannot contend that it is indicative of the difference between male and female, it could merely be a difference of personal choice. The impact of social media use was discussed further to influence their own personal choices in what product is good and which ones are deemed bad. Self promotion using social media was also considered a tool if one wants to be in the marketing market, signifying an understanding of the impact social media has on today's world.

In one of the discussion, there was a mention of how being in a collectivistic society we as Indians might be more concerned about being validated by others. The discussion then focused on the concept of arranged marriage where they noted that arranged marriage was more familiar in Asian countries than the west, and consenting to an arranged marriage was a form of seeking approval and validation from our parents, especially



when one breaks off a relationship with the partner to marry an individual of one's parents' choice. Another commented that we did not really have the data to make such a comment, which everyone agreed to. But there was an agreement on how in India the concept of joint family was slowly diminishing, citing that even now most of them are living alone and how most of the families they know are nuclear family their own included. The discussion then went on to how different types of familial setting could affect a child's formation of the need to be socially validated, and there was basic agreement that the need to belong started from home. Does the parent give attention to the child, or are they busy in their own work or world that they hardly have time for the child, especially in cases where both parents are employed? This, the group mentioned, could be the genesis of an individual continually seeking attention in the world, and continually trying to be accepted for who they really are if they had been criticized by their parents too many a times. Here they also emphasized on how a joint family might be more ideal for a child giving the reason that if the parents were busy there were others who would give proper attention to the child.

## DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS:

As a social being there is an innate desire and drive to be socially validated. With this objective in hand we attempted to inquire upon the possible dimensions of social validation. Social validation is a part of the everyday life of each individual within a society. The impact of which is heightened especially with easy access to ideal models of behaviours or livings, and opinions in the form of social media and social networking tools. Social media may be one of the mediator for the huge impact social validation have on the society provided we are intensely involved in its usage (Stapleton, Luiz & Chatwin, 2017), and the need for social validation may lead to compliance (Guadagno et al., 2013). As we learn how others are, and how others behave, we tend to be influenced by their actions.

This need to be validated may stem from the need to belongingness under Maslow's hierarchy of needs. This here lies the aspect of individuals where they want to be accepted and be acknowledge, to be a part of something and know they belong to something or someone or at least somewhere. A sense of deprivation could be evident in an individual without such belongingness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). But the danger of identifying with the extrinsic factor that is social validation is that it may lead to a loss of the self, to the extent that you belong solely to the group, and become enmeshed in the family or the society that one is, and the external persona becomes the self (Olson, 2000).

Through the focus group discussion, social validation was identified as a process that may directly or indirectly effect one's mental health, and emotional wellbeing (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). One of the key point that was the most prominent in all the discussion was the fact that social validation may either be a positive factor, or a negative factor: it may be a source of motivation for an individual while be a source of deprivation and low self-esteem for the other. Herein lies its foundational similarity with the concept of conformity and peer pressure, in that, social validation is, as mentioned by a member during the session, what an individual expect other expects from him/her. This may be detrimental if the point of reference is to the extreme. For example, obsession with being validated by a group or people that one wants to befriend may lead to loss of individuality in the process; judging oneself against the layers of expectations from the family and the society may have the tendency to both hamper the self-esteem or the self-worth, and eventually effect the confidence of an individual in themselves. On the other end, the same social validation that one seeks may boost self-confidence in the form of extrinsic motivation. Then again, this may cause a lacking in the individual if one depends only on that extrinsic motivation for a source of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 1991, 1995). Likewise, peer pressure may have positive functions (Beaty & Alexeyev, 2008), and negative factors (Schnohr & Niclasen 2006; Ryan, 2000; Kiran-Esen, 2003).

A point that was passively made in the discussion was that social validation becomes a pressure if an individual views his own standing and likings as less validated by the society. On the other end, even if an individual's tastes and likings, and behaviour may be out of the norm in a given social circle, but a larger society adheres to that standard and norms, the pressure to be validated by the current social circle is minimized, if not absent. Further on, such an individual themselves could be the source of pressure for others around them. This phenomenon was identified when two people shared their experiences in two different sessions. A participant mentioned that since she was into Punjabi music during high school, while all her friends were listening to English songs, she felt like she had to start listening to English songs, mentioning that was how she learned of the band *One Direction*. Another participant shared of how after coming to Delhi he found most people preferred listening to Hindi or Punjabi songs, and somehow still don't find the need to give into it because he loves English songs. These comments by two individuals in two different sessions gave a glimpse of how social validation work through our perception of what we find worth, and what meaning we give to the event or stimulus. Social validation can become a point of identifying ourselves with influences around us so that we may be more accepted by others, and our self-worth is contingent with the approval of others. Inversely, we may be the source itself when we consciously or unconsciously decide upon setting standard on events, behaviours, objects, or stimulus, and term one

better than the other.

The need for social validation is established in the home environment, wherein the immediate family are responsible for how one may experience the extent of the need to be validated (Williams, 2012; Haun, Rekers & Tomasello, 2014). Sherwin-White (2017) in her paper on Melanie Klein's observation of infant paramount's the importance of consistent love and care for an infant's ability to develop trust and develop well. This concept has been resonated in earlier theories, such as that of Erik Erikson's stages of development, the first stage of which is trust vs mistrust. This first stage that takes place between birth and 18 months of age is the most important of all later stages as it shapes both our world view and personality (Weiten, 2012).

On a minimal level, social validation may be our source of being social, our source of being complacent and decent in our performance. If not for the fear of being invalidated, we would not have worked so hard to be in college and study for our future, or be able to save money for the future. Maybe this is where the saying "survival of the fittest" fits the best, an evolutionary perspective of how we learn and survive in our environment, and the behaviours that preserve our existence or enhances it may be validated (Henrich & Boyd, 1998; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). An example could be that of social misfits, which may lack being socially validated. Again, herein lays the importance of mentioning how social validation may be a subjective experience of the ego self, the basis of which may lie in the family and the parenting style that was adopted (Marcia, 1966), and our later experiences of our environment, for example, an adolescent relation with teachers (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1966).

Social validation, is thus, the need to belong- to be loved and accepted, if not acknowledged, so as to feel attached and connected with those we love and revere. When the self is validated through such external validation, the self feels a sense of validation itself, thus acting as a source of self-worth and esteem. Herein lies the danger of social exclusion. As this may not only lead to an individual being neglected or rejected, resulting in a sense of being alienated, but where one may live in a limbo trying to please those around them just to be accepted by them, in turn creating a dependency, and which in turn again leads other to judge the individual as incompetent. And thus, the cycle continues.

In the long run, what matter is the internal self-validation that one has. Herein lies the importance of having a solid basis and self-acceptance that fosters on knowing one self, and valuing oneself, and not just giving into the pestering of the society, be it in the form of social media or the real time society that one lives in. Cialdini and Goldstein (2014) noted that people are frequently motivated to change and conform to other's behaviour and belief so as to protect or enhance their own self-esteem. They identified the importance of an affirming self-concept to overcome the need to give in and conform accordingly. Such a development may lead to a sense of uniqueness and personality that in turn may strengthen the will to avoid the need for external validation (Nail, MacDonald & Levy, 2000; Blanton & Christie 2003). The fear of isolation and rejection that may lead some to yearn for social validation may be a personal experience, that could lead to bettering of oneself and positive self-assessment (Brewer & Roccas, 2001). But once limits are exceeded, the consequence may again be detrimental. It may even help in forming bonds and relating to others. This psychological need can unconsciously influence behavioural change, and interfere with personal choices. We can prioritise society over the personal life, which may further lead to furthering of seeking social validation from one's family, friends, college, teachers, parents, and eventually workplace. This need to fit in may determine an individual into drug or alcohol abuse as well (Newman & Newman, 1976; Hansen & Graham, 1991). Yet, a positive peer group could be a source of positive self-esteem, and an immunity from detrimental environmental influences (Burack, 1999).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we may define social validation as the process of seeking acceptance, and acknowledgment from people - a psychological phenomenon that may lead to a change in behaviour. These changes can be positive or negative, grossly depending on how involved and invested we are in the said behaviour and attitude. Seeking social validation is a phenomenon that may have a harmful consequence as long as we let the external drive invent and motivate us. According to the discussion and researched reviews, a strong sense of self in the form of self-concept, high relatedness, and an autonomy may validate our intrinsic motivation against the influence of the external motivation in the form of social validation.

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