

## Seeking Approval: How Social Media and Peer Influence Shape Decision-Making in Young Adults

Diya N. Dharaiya<sup>1\*</sup>, Dr. Deep Pathak<sup>2</sup>

### ABSTRACT

In this digital era, obtaining social approval has become a defining feature of decision-making. This study explores how adult choices are shaped by social media and peer influence, questioning the assumption that adult decisions are fully independent. Data was collected from 55 individuals of 20-29 years of age. A mixed-method approach was utilized and structured questionnaire was distributed through online medium which constituted of both open-ended and close-ended questions. Results indicate a strong positive correlation ( $r = 0.76$ ) between perceived influence from social media/peers and altered decision-making patterns. Qualitative analysis revealed that emotional responses like confidence, anxiety, and regret arise from seeking external approval. Findings further suggests that decision-making is strongly affected by the need for approval from social media and peers. Emphasizing the psychological repercussions of making decisions, this study advocates for a critical evaluation of adult autonomy in today's social world.

**Keywords:** *Decision-Making, Social Media, Peer Influence*

Aayan was a young boy with passion for theater and drama. When he had to choose a career, he was firm about theater. Though he sought advice from a friend, who suggested him to explore the field of psychology which was recently gaining popularity. Curiously, he went on social media and surfed about it. He was gradually flooded with content about thriving careers in psychology. Amidst all those posts, his dream of theater began to fade, not because it was less important, but because of the noise outside that grew louder than the one within. He ended up choosing psychology.

Adults are frequently portrayed as 'independent' decision-makers, but how true is that? We are frequently swayed by the opinions of those around us; their paths may seem more prestigious than our own. Therefore, even a small comment from them can influence our final choice.

According to the *American Psychological Association*, social approval is "Positive appraisal and acceptance of someone or something (a behavior, trait, attribute, or the like) by a social group. Its manifestations may include compliments, praise, statements of approbation, and

<sup>1</sup>Graduate, St. Xavier's College, Ahmedabad

<sup>2</sup>Psychologist, The Even Mind

\*Corresponding Author

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so on.” Thus, when a group of people likes and praises someone’s actions, followed by giving compliments to show acceptance, it is considered social approval. Seeking approval is the act of wanting someone’s permission, or more often their agreement, in order to feel secure in their decisions, ideas, or behavior.

This kind of behavior is rooted in childhood when an infant is dependent on others to fulfill needs. An infant soon learns that socially approved behavior is rewarded, whereas socially disapproved behavior often leads to negative consequences. In this group-conscious society, the inability to acquire acceptance results in loneliness. This is particularly true for those who rely strongly on others’ opinions to shape their self-identity and worth (Coleman, 1971).

### Why do we Seek Approval?

Approval-seeking behavior stems from our need to belong. Acceptance and validation by others are essential to our mental health, and to build strong relationships, we humans are innately motivated (Baumeister & Leary, 2017). In ancient cultures, the chances of survival increased when humans chose to stay in groups. This led to a rise in behaviors that promoted acceptance. Today, that same instinct is observed in approval-seeking, either in friendships, social media or work.

The importance of social acceptability and psychological well-being is emphasized in Maslow’s (1943) **Need Hierarchy Theory** by placing the need for love and belonging before self-esteem needs. When one’s efforts are acknowledged by others, the person becomes self-assured and impelled. In theories of basic psychological needs, social approval provides more than social validation; it enhances a sense of inclusion, competence, and emotional stability (Deci and Ryan, 2013).

A significant contributing factor to approval-seeking behavior is the way in which people develop and defend their self-esteem. These connections are referred to as "**Contingencies of Self-worth**" (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). People base their sense of value on how other people see them. Thus, indicates that appreciation requires others’ approval, success, or validation. That is to say that approval becomes a measure of self-worth. The feelings of unworthiness and insecurity are experienced when these sources are unavailable. This is particularly true when basic psychological needs such as independence and connections are not met. Consequently, individuals heavily depend on approval to feel good about themselves (Deci & Ryan, 2013).

A substantial role is played by culture and growing technology. People are often taught to priorities group harmony and relationships in collectivist societies, which can intensify sensitivity to others’ opinions (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In today’s world, validation is encouraged because of followers, subscribers, likes, and comments on social media platforms. A research concludes that this kind of digital approval-seeking can result in reduced self-esteem, especially for those who already construct their self-worth on others’ opinions (Vogel, Rose, Roberts, & Eckles, 2014).

Another relevant perspective to understand the reason behind approval seeking comes from **Schema Therapy**, developed by Jeffrey Young, which investigates how early life experiences can build consistent emotional patterns. One such pattern is the **Approval-Seeking/Recognition-Seeking Schema**. Here, people grow up believing that their worth relies entirely on gaining acceptance, praise, or attention from others (Young, Klosko, &

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*Weishaar, 2003*). Childhood environment might accelerate this belief where a child receives conditional love or validation, i.e. when expectations are met. As a result, people with this schema may learn to suppress their own needs, preferences, or even identity, all in the need for securing approval.

Altogether, these influences show how approval-seeking is not just a personal habit but something shaped by biology, culture, and environment.

### **Social Media as an Influencing Factor**

Social media refers to applications and websites that enable an individual to communicate with others or take part in social networking. YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, etc., are expanding their usability day by day. In this second decade of the 21st century, social media is a common medium through which social influence operates. On social media, there is an accumulation of various opinions, judgments, and advice; an individual is exposed to this. As a result, one experiences conflict in their decision-making. For instance, certain clothing styles quickly become popular, and many people adopt them not necessarily out of preference, but because they see others doing the same. Social media platforms lead adolescents to engage in social comparison and feedback-seeking behaviors, these technology-based behaviors are linked with depressive symptoms (*Nesi & Prinstein, 2015*).

On social media, this process can lead to increased self-monitoring and content curation aimed at gaining approval. Neuroimaging research concludes that, nucleus accumbens is activated when photos with many “likes” are displayed. This brain region is linked with reward processing, suggesting that both behavior and brain responses are influenced by peer endorsement online (*Sherman et al., 2016*). Thus, social media amplifies peer influence by encouraging behaviors aimed at gaining social validation.

### **Algorithms and its Impact**

Algorithms tailor the content that an individual interacts with on social media. An algorithm is a collection of precise guidelines or rules created to carry out a task or address a particular issue. When a person engages with a particular type of content by liking, commenting, watching the whole content, or by simply searching the keyword, the algorithm detects this preference and shows similar content.

This pattern leads to repeated exposure of the same kind of viewpoints, reinforcing those beliefs or behaviors. A study found that when users liked or clicked on specific types of posts, Facebook’s algorithm showed them more of the same content, resulting in seeing the content they already agreed with (*Bakshy et al., 2015*). This suggests that such algorithms can influence attitudes and decisions by creating a perception of popularity or social approval around a specific ideology.

Another study shows that repeated interaction with idealized content on Instagram often triggers negative emotions and reduced self-esteem due to social comparison (*De Vries et al., 2018*). This emotional impact can influence decision-making, as people may alter their choices to align with what appears to be socially valued in order to seek approval online.

### **Peers as an Influencing Factor**

One of the most common forms of social influence is peer influence. It occurs when a person is affected by opinions or expectations of their social group. By definition, “Influence occurs when an individual acts or thinks in ways that he or she might not otherwise act or

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think, an effect that can be attributed to experiences with friends and affiliates” (Laurson, 2018, p. 447). Hence, peer influence suggests a situation where people of similar age either influence, or get influenced by others.

A person can continuously monitor what others are doing or thinking, through social media. Therefore, it becomes easier for an individual to compare and adjust their actions accordingly. The **Social Comparison Theory** (Festinger, 1954), states that people have inborn ability to assess their beliefs and capacities by comparison with peers. They do this in order to identify if their actions are suitable when there is absence of objective norms. Vulnerability to peer influence spikes during mid-adolescence along with frequent influence on decision-making in risky situations by peers (Steinberg & Monahan, 2007).

**Social Learning Theory** (Bandura, 1977), states that individuals learn through observation of actions and results of others and not just by direct experience. In the environment where adults live, the representation of successful behavior is demonstrated by peers. To gain approval or to avoid disapproval, they may assimilate observed behavior.

### How Social Media and Peer Influence can shape Decision-Making

According to the *American Psychological Association*, "The cognitive process of choosing between two or more alternatives, ranging from the relatively clear-cut to the complex, is known as decision-making." Thus, decision-making is the process of selecting one alternative from various choices present.

A part of the decision made by an independent adult is significantly shaped by the need for social approval. People consider how their actions will be perceived by others rather than solely relying on internal reasoning. Anticipation of social feedback, influences behavior, specifically when acceptance or belonging is considered vital. The desire for approval satisfies the personal need of validation, as well as maintaining harmony and inclusion within the society (Baumeister & Leary, 2017). With time, the drive for acceptance may subtly shape choices, often aligning with socially accepted norms and personal values for decision-making, and gradually fade.

According to *Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior*, behavioral intentions are formed by attitudes, perceived control, and subjective norms, these norms mirror what individuals believe others expect them to do (Ajzen, 1991). When an individual perceives that a particular decision is approved or encouraged by important people in their life, they are more inclined to act in that way. Thus, the need for approval shapes decisions way before they are made, including the motivations that lie behind that behavior.

Cognitive shortcuts influenced by social dynamics also play a role in how decisions are made. For instance, people may adopt a choice simply because others have done the same; this is known as the '**Bandwagon effect**'. This effect stems from a tendency to follow popular opinion that mostly implies approval. Individuals conform to the behavior of others, even when the influence is unknown (Nolan et al., 2008). Similarly, **Confirmation Bias** reinforces the approval-seeking by directing individuals to focus on feedback that aligns with their need for validation from others. These biases shift attention away from critical thinking and towards decisions based on perceived social alignment.

Approval and Disapproval elicit various emotions that affect the decision-making process. Self-esteem is described as a sociometer by Leary et al. (1995), which reflects perceived

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social acceptance. There is an increase in self-worth when people feel accepted. In contrast, people can experience doubt and anxiety when they anticipate disapproval, which can interfere with confidence in decision-making. This internal response to social evaluation demonstrates how emotional well-being is inextricably linked to the decisions people make, particularly when those decisions are public or interpersonal.

Examining the effect of approval or validation on individual choices has remained a relevant area of research. Acquiring a second opinion is a crucial part of the decision-making process for some. Whereas others may look for approval as a habit, or consider it as a formality with little to no impact on their final choice. In today's digital world, social media is rooted in our lives, and individual choices, attitudes, and behaviors are influenced by access to diverse opinions online.

Healthy mental health depends on emotional and psychological well-being. When the decision-making process is guided by the influence of others, it may cause heightened anxiety and self-reflection. As a result, there is indecisiveness, which is particularly true for conflicts between personal wants and cultural norms or societal trends. When approval is denied for a longer period of time, a person starts to question the rightness of their choices, they lose confidence and self-worth. Failure to gain others' approval can exacerbate a sense of dissatisfaction and mental anguish.

The available literature on seeking social approval and how this operates through peer influence and social media shaping decision-making is conducted on adolescents and younger populations. However, there is a lack of research on how these factors operate in adults. Adults are constantly engaging with social media platforms, therefore being exposed to numerous opinions and preferences.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how peer and social media approval affect adults' decision-making. It seeks to determine the extent to which people depend on external approval while making decisions for their personal or professional lives. The study aims to determine if adults are affected by a desire for social validation by examining trends in confidence, hesitancy, and reconsidering decisions. The study also seeks to evaluate the affective reactions associated with these influences, such as reassurance or regret. Through this, the study will advance the knowledge of how contemporary social contexts influence choices made beyond adolescence.

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

#### ***(1) The Power of Like in Adolescence: Effects of Peer Influence on Neural and Behavioral Responses to Social Media (Sherman et al., 2016)***

*Sherman et al.* (2016) has investigated the neural and behavioral reactions are affected by peer feedback in social media settings in teenagers. The study explores effects of online validation on the adolescent brain. It describes "likes" as a contemporary form of peer approval. When teenagers viewed popular images on social media, improved neural activities was observed in brain areas that were linked to reward processing. The findings support previous studies on how rapid brain growth in adolescent can result in greater impact of social input.

The researchers used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to scan the brains of teenagers, there were photos with various number of "likes" and some of them were their own submissions. Results demonstrated that viewing images with lot of likes, especially on

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their own, stimulated activity in the nucleus accumbens. Reward perception is linked with this part of the brain suggesting that receiving likes activates the same neural circuitry as other forms of positive reinforcement. Moreover, there was behavioral conformity to perceived peer approval as adolescents were more prone in liking the photo that already had more likes.

This study offers important insights into how peer influence functions in online environments, it also contributes to the conventional theories of teenage decision making into the digital sphere. Despite the absence of direct social contact, online environments can evoke identical brain responses. These results provide support to the theory that peer interactions online could modify behavior via neurobiological processes by enhancing the allure of socially acceptable information. Tying reward sensitivity to online approval, teenagers process social information and make decisions in technologically driven environments.

### ***(2) Social Media and Web 2.0 on Decision-Making (Power and Wren, 2011)***

*Power and Wren* (2011) has examined the development of Web 2.0 technologies and their effects on social interaction, communication, and user-generated content. This study emphasizes on how social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have changed the way how people interact with information and others. According to the authors, Web 2.0 has changed users from being passive consumers to active contributors. This change brought substantial psychological effects especially on adolescents and young adults who are more prone to internalize social cues and approval found within digital spaces.

The research analyses user behavior and communication patterns and highlights on how Web 2.0 platforms promote peer influence on a large scale. Likes, comments, and shares result in constant feedback which guides user decision-making by social comparison. According to Power and Wren, people are more likely to change their beliefs, tastes, and actions based on what is well-received or popular online. Younger users, are particularly pronounced to this conformity because of critical stages of identity formation and increased susceptibility to external approval as a basis for self-worth and decision making.

Rather than a technological advancement, Web 2.0 is considered to be a social ecosystem that promotes peer-driven influence through shared visibility and real-time feedback which are more widespread than offline peer pressures. Along with demonstrating the relationship between technology and psychology, the study offers significant insights into how teenagers engage with the digital world. The paradigm provided by Power and Wren's research helps us comprehend how social media can have a significant impact on decisions, preferences, and identity.

### ***(3) Peer Influence on Risk Taking, Risk Preference, and Risky Decision Making in Adolescence and Adulthood: An Experimental Study (Gardner and Steinberg, 2005)***

*Gardner and Steinberg* (2005) an influential research in which they explored how peer presence can influence adult and adolescent risk-related behaviors and decision-making. Peers imposed more influence on risky behavior during adolescence because of their neurological and social makeup. Mere presence of peers can change their perceptions and assessments of dangers. This basic idea challenges the idea that careless behavior is solely a result of inexperience or ignorance, emphasizing social environment as a key factor.

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The groups were made based on age and the participants had to engage in a stimulated driving game, during the presence and absence of peers. Results concluded that adolescents took more risks when they were with their peers, whereas adults' risk-taking behavior remained stable regardless of social context. In presence of peers, adolescents were more likely to accelerate through yellow lights and take other dangerous decisions. Rather than improvements in cognitive ability or knowledge of consequences, this effect was attributed to peer-induced adjustments in reward sensitivity and increased motivation to seek social approval.

These results provided strong empirical support to the notion that peer influence plays a central role in adolescent risk taking. This study has important implications in understanding decision making during adolescence in school or online environments. A better understanding, of how social approval and peer dynamics influence broader behavioral patterns during the initial stages of development along with risk preferences, is provided by this study.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative as well as quantitative research methodologies to investigate the impact of social media and peer influence on decision-making among young adults. A cross-sectional survey was conducted and data was gathered through structured questionnaire.

Convenience sampling method was utilized to obtain data from 55 young individuals aged 20 to 29 years, who spent at least one hour daily on social media. The sample was chosen from a variety of occupations and educational levels; no gender restrictions were applied to maintain inclusivity and ensure a varied picture of those being impacted.

A self-constructed questionnaire was developed and distributed through Google Forms. The survey consisted of both; close-ended questions (using a 5-point Likert scale to determine different levels of agreement) and open-ended questions for participants to elaborate on their experiences.

The questionnaire measured following aspects:

1. Social media engagement
2. Susceptibility to social approval
3. Influence of peer input on decision-making
4. Emotional dependence on validation (confidence, anxiety, regret)
5. Decision-making autonomy vs. conformity

Research purpose was clarified and consent was taken from the participants.

Responses were collected anonymously to ensure confidentiality and minimize social desirability bias.

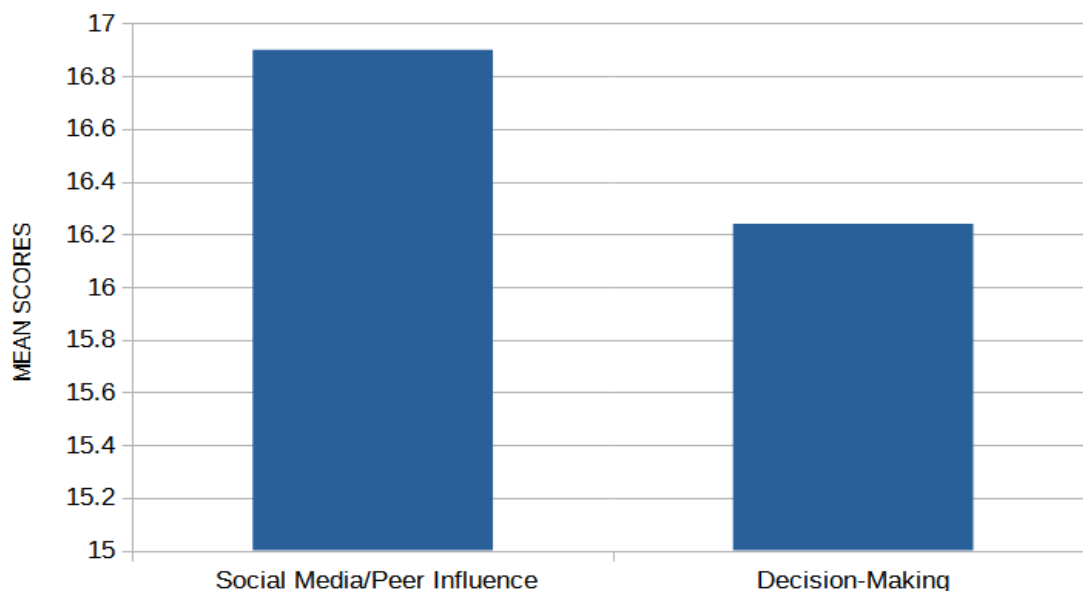
Thematic analysis was used to analyze qualitative data to identify common patterns in how participants described the emotional effects of approval or disapproval. Quantitative data was analyzed by descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation whereas, inferential statistics like Pearson correlation was used to examine the relationship between social media/peer approval-seeking and decision-making.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Two major constructs were calculated by descriptive statistics: Social Media/Peer Influence and Decision-Making. The mean score and standard deviation for Social Media/Peer Influence is 16.9 and 3.2 respectively which indicates moderate to high level of perceived influence from peers and social media platforms. Mean score for Decision-Making is 16.24 with 2.47 standard deviation, this suggests that participants had relatively consistent tendencies to approach decision-making.

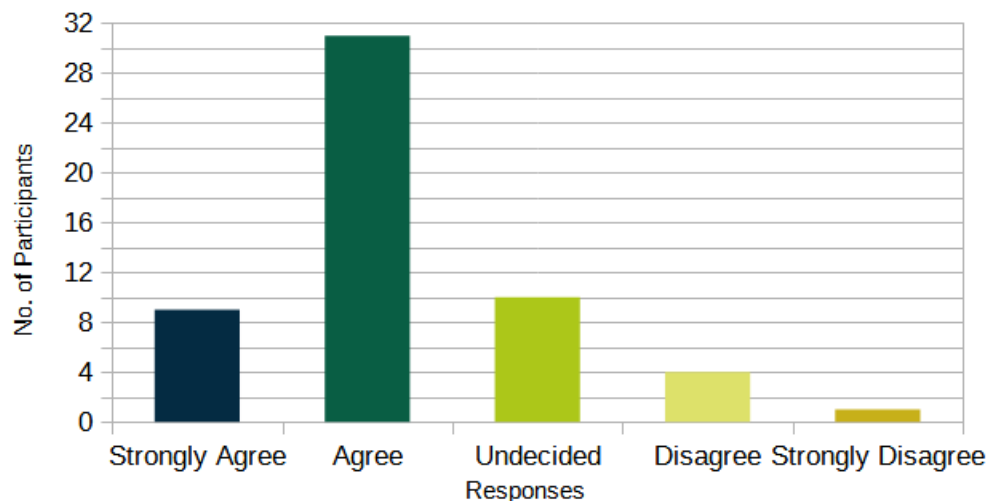
**Graphs**

**Graph-1: Showing the mean scores received for Social Media/Peer Influence and Decision-Making.**



Pearson correlation was used to examine the Social Media/Peer Influence relationship with Decision-Making. The score obtained was  $r = 0.76$ , i.e. strong positive correlation. This concludes that participants who show greater influence from social media/peer, also display high reactivity on their decision-making process.

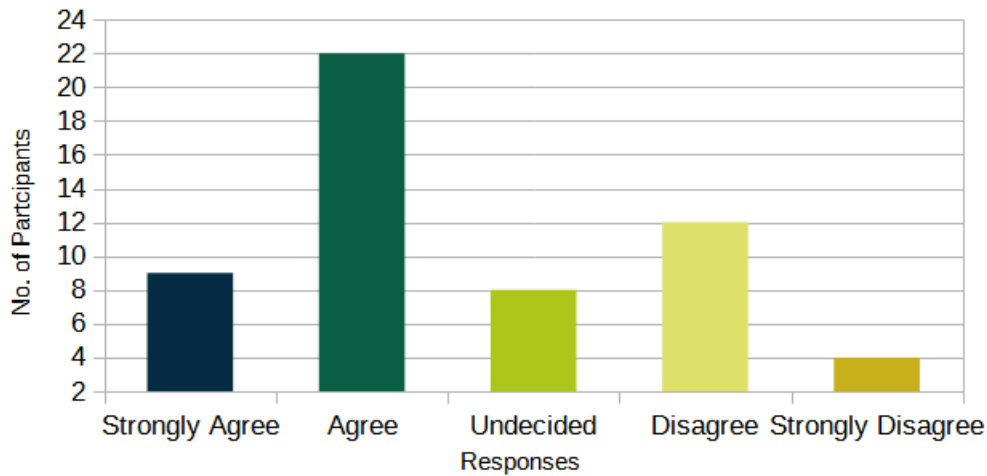
**Graph-2: Input from peers sometimes influence my choice.**



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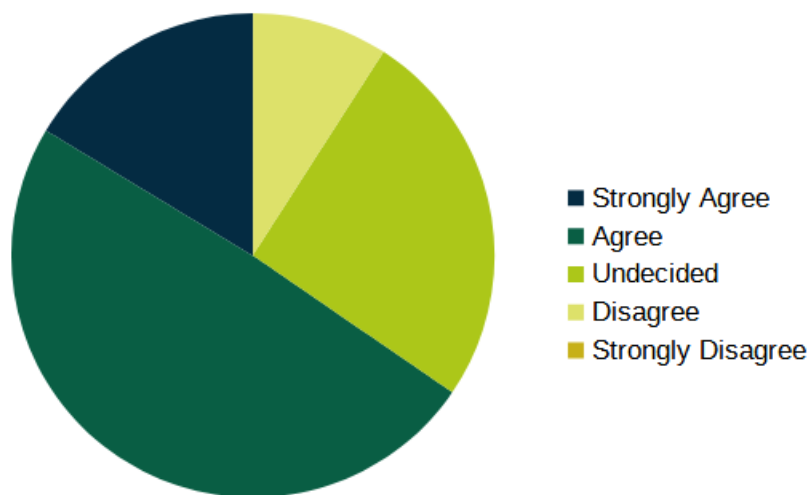
Majority of Participants (about 70%), agreed or strongly agrees that input from peers sometimes does influence their choices. Showing a strong role peers play in decision-making. Few (around 9%), disagreed that peers do not influence their choices.

**Graph-3: I feel at ease only after my choices are approved by others**



Nearly half of the participants (56%) agreed or strongly agreed that they feel at ease only after their choices are approved, this indicates a significant reliance on external input to feel satisfied. However, about 29% valued self-assurance by disagreeing.

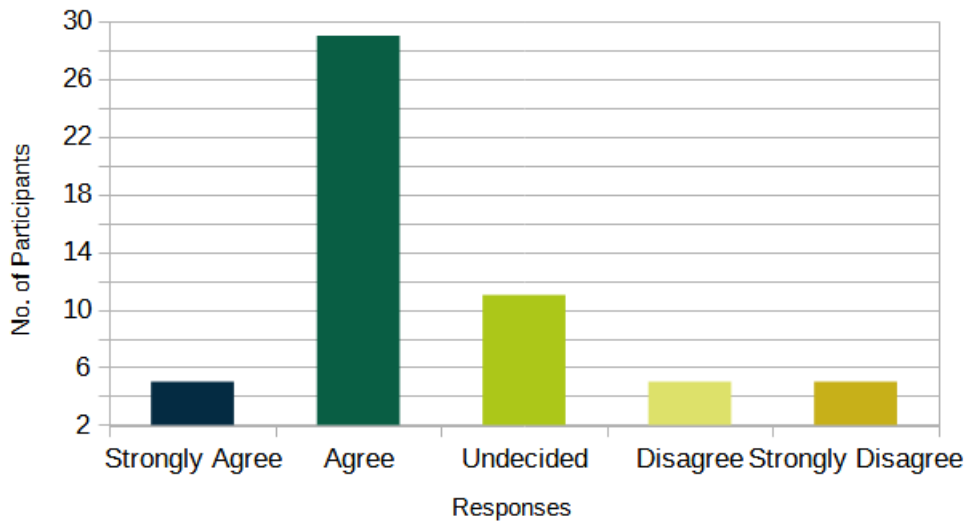
**Graph-4: I often wait for close family or friend's input before deciding.**



65% of participants agree or strongly agree that they await for their close family or friends input before finalizing a choice, this reflects the influential role that social group plays in decision-making of an individual. About 25% have selected undecided, showing the ambivalence or situational variability in seeking input.

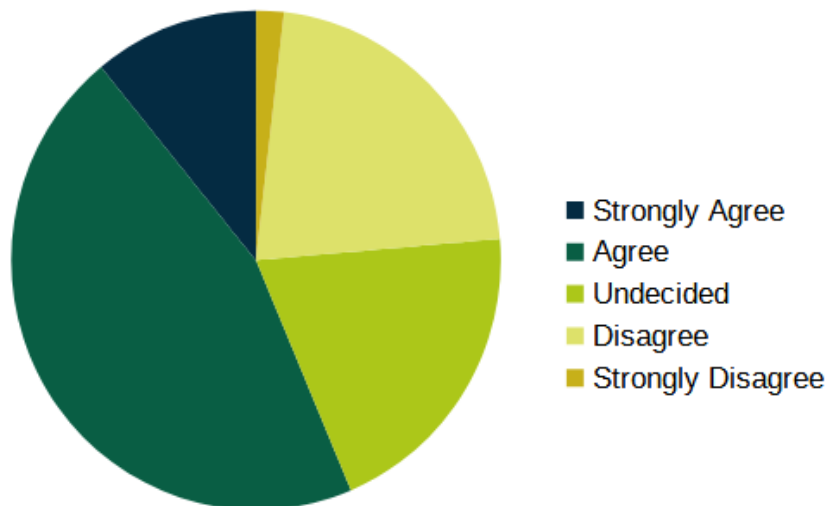
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**Graph-5: Positive feedback on social media (on my post or about my choices) makes me feel more confident.**



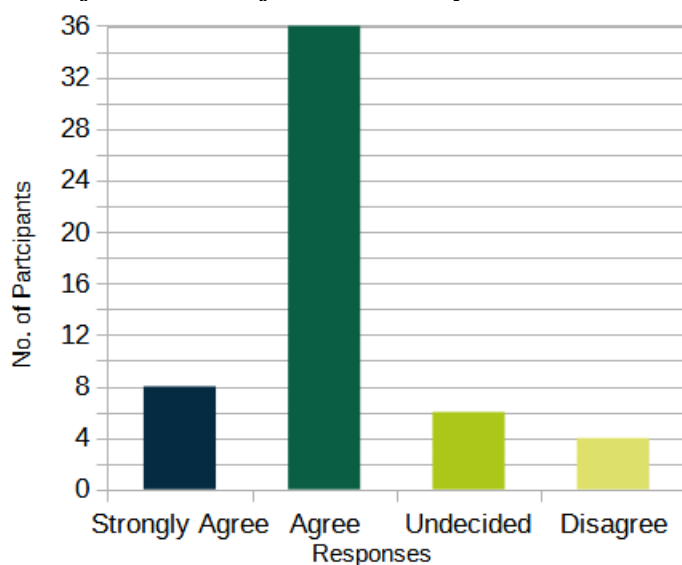
Approximately 62% of participants agreed that positive feedback does improve their confidence. Whereas, a smaller percentage disagreed on this showing how little impact social media feedback has on them.

**Graph-6: I usually like to get others' opinions before finalizing a decision.**



About 56% of participants agreed that they prefer getting others' opinion before making a decision, showing reliance on external input. 24% disagreed and 20% stayed neutral.

**Graph-7: I feel more confident about my decisions when others support them.**



Over 65% of participants expressed that there is increase in their confidence when others are supporting them, highlighting a major role of external approval and its relation to emotional well-being. Few (10%) rejected this statement.

## DISCUSSIONS

The results of this study support the idea that adults have a tendency to seek approval from social media and peers that significantly shape their decision-making. The desire for social approval is amplified by the likes, comments, etc. received on social media while, peer interactions online as well as offline reinforce desire for validation.

The correlational score ( $r = 0.76$ ), between Social Media/Peer Influence and Decision-Making patterns, suggests a strong relationship between them. This implies that, people who score high on social media and peer influence are more likely to shape their decisions based on external influences. As individuals get more influenced, their decision-making becomes increasingly guided by the desire for approval. Thus, approval-seeking behavior is more than a social habit, it acts as a driving force behind many choices adults make.

The mean scores indicates that young adults do experience moderate to high level of influence from peer and social media. Those who rely on social approval tend to get influenced more than those who try to make independent choices. Participants are not fully “independent” in the decisions that they make, considering what others might think plays a crucial role as well. Participants are consistent in responses, as shown by relatively low standard deviations, this implies that the tendency to act according to others’ opinions.

The emotional depth of approval-seeking behavior can be revealed by open-ended responses. Many participants described that they felt heightened emotional response such as “amazing,” “validated,” and “relieved” when they received approval from others. Hence, supporting the idea that approval-seeking can built confidence in personal decisions. Approval-seeking is an active factor behind shaping decisions, not a passive one, it involves expectations, internal conflicts as well as emotional investments.

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The findings can also be explained through Ajzen's Theory of Planned behavior, this explains that individual intentions are shaped by subjective norms. This aligns with the idea that people are more likely to behave in certain ways if they think that those acts will be approved by others.

Some explained on how seeking approval is important step before making any decision because it provides a novel understanding of the same situation. Such individuals tend to place greater trust in others knowledge and beliefs sometimes even by neglecting their own ideas. As a result, they may experience heightened amount of inner conflict because they value others more.

Age-related differences could also be observed. Few older participants (ages 25-29), acknowledged the earlier influence of social media and peers but also emphasized on personal growth and critical thinking over time. This suggests a positive shift towards self-approval or internal validation, indicating developmental change in how decisions are made.

The overall results support the idea that in today's digitized world, adults do not always make decisions independently. Instead, in decision-making process the ideas get filtered through the social lens. Seeking-approvals serves as a psychological reassurance and as a motivational tool which either guides towards collective acceptance or towards undermining personal freedom.

### *Limitations*

- The study limits us to generalize these results to a larger adult populations because it included only 55 participants.
- As responses are self-reported, it might be influenced through variables such as social bias or desirability, as participants may under-report their dependence on others for approval.
- This study is does not account for changes in decision-making patterns over a longer time period, because it is a cross-sectional study.
- Cultural background, self-esteem levels, or personality traits were not measured, but may influence approval-seeking behavior.

### *Implications*

- Results highlight the emotional impact of approval-seeking, this can be helpful to mental health professionals when addressing problems related to self-esteem and anxiety in adults.
- The study supports the need for digital education that can promote critical thinking in online environment.
- Parents, mentors and Institutions like schools and colleges can develop a support system that encourages independent thinking with healthy peer collaborations.
- The study opens up direction for longitudinal research to explore changes in social media and peer influences over time.

## **CONCLUSION**

The study emphasis the significant role of social media and peer influence in shaping adult decision-making. Individuals rely on external approval, whether in the form of likes, opinions or suggestions, when making choices. Strong correlation between Social Media/Peer Influence and Decision-Making patterns together with moderate to high mean

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scores suggest that approval-seeking is not just common but major force behind decisions made.

The responses further revealed that how emotional validation both online and offline from others can influence choices in academic, lifestyle, career and self appearance. By basing decisions on external inputs, some participants felt satisfied whereas, some expressed regret. There is a positive relationship of approval-seeking with self-esteem, confidence and belongingness

Thus, approval-seeking is influential and common aspect of decision-making in adult.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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