



International Journal of Veterinary Sciences and Animal Husbandry



ISSN: 2456-2912

NAAS Rating (2026): 4.61

VET 2026; 11(3): 265-269

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www.veterinarypaper.com

Received: 13-12-2025

Accepted: 17-01-2026

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Allelomimetic behavior in farm animals

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DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.22271/veterinary.2026.v11.i3e.3137>

Abstract

Allelomimetic behavior is defined as the tendency of animals to mimic or synchronize their actions with conspecifics and represents a fundamental mechanism underlying social organization in gregarious farm species. Expressed through behavioral synchrony, social facilitation, and emotional contagion, allelomimetic processes enhance group cohesion, collective vigilance, resource-use efficiency, and adaptive responses to environmental stimuli. This review synthesizes current literature on the expression of allelomimetic behavior in cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, and poultry, integrating cross-species comparisons to identify shared mechanisms, species-specific patterns, and management-related drivers. In ruminants, synchronized lying, grazing, and feeding are consistently associated with improved welfare indicators, including reduced social tension, longer resting bouts, and enhanced group stability, whereas overcrowding and resource limitation disrupt coordination and increase competition. In pigs, coordinated feeding and resting behaviors promote social integration and reduce aggression in stable groups, although transport, regrouping, and space restriction may induce behavioral desynchronization and stress. In poultry, social facilitation supports natural behaviors such as dust bathing and foraging but may also amplify maladaptive patterns, including piling and feather pecking, under intensive housing conditions. Comparative analysis highlights stocking density, environmental enrichment, pasture access, and group stability as key determinants influencing the direction and magnitude of behavioral synchrony across species. Increasingly, behavioral synchrony is recognized as a positive welfare indicator and a practical metric for evaluating housing systems. Advances in precision livestock technologies, including accelerometry, computer vision, and artificial intelligence-based vocal analysis, offer new opportunities for real-time monitoring of group-level coordination. Understanding allelomimetic processes provides an integrative framework for designing management systems that promote welfare, productivity, and sustainability in modern livestock production.

Keywords: Allelomimetic behavior, behavioral synchrony, social facilitation, emotional contagion, animal welfare, farm management, precision livestock farming

Introduction

Allelomimetic behavior is defined as the tendency of animals to mimic or synchronize their actions with those of group members and is a key component of social behavior in herd or flock-based species (Foris *et al.*, 2019) ^[12]. This behavior, also known as social facilitation or contagious behavior, serves adaptive functions such as enhancing group cohesion, improving foraging efficiency, and providing protection against predators. Within a group, the activity of certain individuals, usually rapidly followed by the majority, appears to guide the behavioral pattern of the entire group. This group effect serves as a basis for the holistic strategies of group behaviour. Social facilitation in flocks and herds underlies coordinated daily movements, as well as large-scale collective events such as stampedes, marches, and migrations, which represent prominent expressions of social organization in animals. (Rath *et al.*, 2015) ^[24]. In farm animals, where individuals are often housed in groups, understanding allelomimetic behavior is essential for optimizing management practices, improving welfare, and boosting productivity. Social facilitation is more likely where there is adequate association, ability to communicate and react, a potential for mimicking activities, similarity of motivational state and suppression of intra-species aggregation (Rath *et al.*, 2015) ^[24].

The concept of allelomimetic behavior has been recognized since early ethological studies, but recent research has focused on its implications in intensive farming systems.

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With the intensification of agriculture, farm animals face environments that may constrain natural behaviors, leading to welfare concerns. This review synthesizes recent literature on allelomimetic behavior in major farm animal species, drawing from studies on cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, and poultry. It examines how this behavior manifests, its benefits and challenges, and its role in welfare assessments. Unlike previous species-specific reviews, this synthesis integrates cross-species comparisons with emerging precision livestock technologies, positioning behavioral synchrony as both a welfare indicator and a management optimization tool.

Allelomimetic Behavior in Cattle

Cattle, particularly dairy and beef breeds, exhibit strong allelomimetic tendencies due to their highly gregarious nature. This manifests as synchronization of key behaviors such as feeding, lying, rumination, and locomotion, which helps maintain herd cohesion, reduces individual predation risk in natural settings, and supports efficient group functioning in farm environments (Keeling *et al.*, 2021) ^[16]. In dairy cows, allelomimetic behavior is particularly evident in the preference for simultaneous performance of activities, such as group lying or feeding bouts, which can be disrupted by environmental constraints like high stocking density or limited resources (Jurkovich *et al.*, 2024) ^[15].

High stocking densities in intensive housing systems frequently lead to desynchronization, resulting in reduced lying times, more frequent interruptions to resting, increased standing on hard surfaces, and elevated risks of lameness and other welfare issues (Cortese *et al.*, 2020) ^[7]. For instance, overstocking at the feed bunk or stalls increases competitive displacements, alters feeding patterns, and reduces overall behavioral synchrony, contributing to uneven resource access and heightened stress. Lower stocking densities closer to 80-100% of resources per cow promote greater lying durations, fewer transitions, and higher herd-level synchrony in lying behavior, particularly in periparturient or lactating cows (Kok *et al.*, 2023) ^[17].

Behavioral synchrony has been associated with improved welfare outcomes. Finishing bulls demonstrate significantly higher synchrony in pastures compared to confined pens, with more consistent group lying and feeding patterns indicating reduced competition and improved positive affective states in less restrictive environments (Tuomisto *et al.*, 2019) ^[29]. Pasture access similarly enhances synchrony in dairy cows, leading to longer overnight lying bouts, fewer interruptions, and greater overall comfort, as herds can respond to shared environmental cues without resource limitation (Crump *et al.*, 2019) ^[8]. In lactating dairy groups, affiliative social networks strengthen allelomimetic patterns; cows with stronger positive relationships show greater mutual behavioral matching, which sustains social stability and group harmony (Foris *et al.*, 2019) ^[12].

Neural and physiological mechanisms underpin these mimetic responses, particularly in feeding. Social cues from conspecifics can trigger synchronized intake patterns, helping ensure consistent nutrient acquisition across the herd (Sasaki, 2017) ^[26]. Disruptions in confined housing such as limited space or asynchronous management routines often result in aggressive competition, desynchronized lying or feeding, and compromised health outcomes like reduced rumination or increased lameness prevalence (Keeling *et al.*, 2021) ^[16].

Effective management strategies to enhance allelomimetic behavior include providing adequate space allowances, access to comfortable lying surfaces *e.g.*, pasture or deep bedding,

and timed resource provision to align with natural group rhythms. These approaches foster synchronization, leading to improved milk yield uniformity, better feed efficiency, reduced health disorders, and enhanced overall welfare indicators. Emerging research also positions behavioral synchrony as a reliable positive welfare metric in cattle, with higher levels correlating to lower stress and greater expression of motivated behaviors (Keeling *et al.*, 2021) ^[16].

Allelomimetic Behavior in Sheep and Goats

Sheep and goats display pronounced allelomimetic behavior, particularly in grazing, resting, and locomotor activities. As highly gregarious small ruminants, both species rely on coordinated group behavior to maintain social cohesion, optimize foraging efficiency, and enhance predator avoidance. Synchronization of activity states such as simultaneous grazing, rumination, or resting facilitates collective vigilance and reduces the risk of social fragmentation within flocks. This coordinated activity supports flock stability and enables rapid, unified responses to environmental changes.

In sheep, behavioral matching during grazing and locomotion plays a critical role in maintaining spatial cohesion, particularly in open grazing systems where individuals may otherwise disperse. Such coordination becomes especially evident during exposure to novel environments or perceived threats, where rapid alignment of movement direction and activity state minimizes isolation risk. Behavioral synchrony in grazing and resting has been associated with positive welfare indicators in ruminants, including reduced social tension and improved group stability (Mattiello *et al.*, 2019) ^[19]. High levels of synchrony are typically observed under extensive management systems, where animals have sufficient space to express natural movement patterns.

Conversely, intensive housing conditions and elevated stocking densities may disrupt natural synchrony. Under such constraints, competition for feeding and resting resources can fragment activity patterns and reduce coordinated behavior (Manenti *et al.*, 2025) ^[18]. Disruptions in synchrony may manifest as asynchronous feeding bouts, shortened resting durations, or increased agonistic interactions. These alterations suggest that environmental limitations can interfere with normal allelomimetic processes and potentially compromise social stability within the flock.

The concept of fission-fusion dynamics further illustrates the flexibility of sheep social organization. Subgroups may temporarily form and dissolve in response to resource distribution, spatial heterogeneity, or temporal activity patterns, while overall flock cohesion is maintained (Della Libera *et al.*, 2023) ^[9]. This dynamic structuring allows sheep to balance local resource use with broader social integration. Importantly, individual differences in temperament or gregariousness may influence the degree to which animals initiate or follow synchronized behaviors, thereby modulating the overall strength of group-level coordination.

Goats exhibit similar patterns of synchronized feeding, resting, and exploratory behavior, although their social organization may be more fluid depending on ecological context. Environmental variables such as terrain complexity, vegetation distribution, and time of day influence collective movement trajectories and transitions between behavioral states. Empirical observations have demonstrated coordinated shifts in activity states under varying ecological conditions, reinforcing the role of environmental drivers in shaping allelomimetic responses (Cheng *et al.*, 2025) ^[6]. Such synchronization enables goats to efficiently exploit patchy

resources while maintaining visual and social contact with conspecifics.

Social communication mechanisms underpin these mimetic interactions. Vocal, olfactory, visual, and tactile signals contribute to behavioral alignment within groups and facilitate rapid information transfer regarding environmental cues. These processes are particularly relevant in maternal offspring contexts, where synchronized resting and movement patterns support bonding and offspring protection (Orihuela *et al.*, 2021) ^[23]. The integration of sensory communication and behavioral matching highlights the multidimensional nature of allelomimetic coordination in small ruminants.

In farm settings, management practices strongly influence the expression of natural synchrony. Adequate space allowance, appropriate resource distribution, and stable social groupings may support coordinated grazing and resting patterns. In contrast, confinement systems and high stocking densities may suppress synchronized behavior and elevate stress-related responses (Mattiello *et al.*, 2019) ^[19]. Because behavioral synchrony reflects both social cohesion and environmental adequacy, it has been proposed as a complementary indicator within welfare assessment frameworks for sheep and goats. Monitoring the degree of coordinated activity may therefore provide insight into both social functioning and environmental suitability in managed systems.

Allelomimetic Behavior in Pigs

Pigs, though less herd-oriented than ruminants, show allelomimetic behavior in group activities. Although pigs are less rigidly herd-oriented than ruminants, they exhibit clear allelomimetic tendencies also referred to as behavioral synchrony, social facilitation, or emotional contagion in group activities like feeding, resting, exploration, and responses to stressors. This synchronization aids in social integration, reduces aggression during group formation, and facilitates collective responses to environmental cues, contributing to group stability in commercial settings.

In group-housed pigs, synchronization of behaviors such as feeding and resting helps integrate newly mixed social groups and minimizes conflict. For example, pigs show coordinated activity patterns that promote cohesion and lower agonistic interactions, particularly in stable groups where dominant individuals influence subordinates through mimetic responses (Agha *et al.*, 2020) ^[1].

Transport stress in weaned piglets disrupts behavioral patterns, including altered feeding, drinking, and activity synchronization, leading to prolonged recovery times and impacts on water consumption post-transport (Sutherland *et al.*, 2014) ^[27]. Transport acts as an acute stressor that alters physiological homeostasis and disrupts coordinated behavioral patterns, with subsequent negative effects on recovery and welfare status (AHAW *et al.*, 2022).

Social challenges, such as mixing or competition, can induce aggressive mimetic responses where dominant pigs influence subordinates behaviors through observational learning or facilitation, amplifying group-level aggression or submission (Tibbetts *et al.*, 2022) ^[28].

Emerging technologies like AI-driven sound analysis enable detection of emotional contagion, a key form of allelomimetic spread in pigs. Pig vocalizations encode emotional valence (positive/negative) and context (*e.g.*, distress, anticipation), with machine learning models classifying calls accurately across life stages. This allows non-invasive monitoring of welfare-relevant emotional states and group-level contagion

(Briefer *et al.*, 2022) ^[5]. Such tools show promise for real-time detection of distress propagation via vocal mimicry or contagion.

Genetic selection for calmer temperaments enhances positive mimetic traits, such as reduced fearfulness and better social synchronization, improving overall welfare in group housing (principles from recent welfare genetics reviews, *e.g.*, emotional contagion and helping behaviors in pigs, Moscovice *et al.*, 2023) ^[21].

Management strategies should prioritize adequate space allowance (*e.g.*, > 0.6-1 m²/pig depending on age/weight) to facilitate natural synchronization of resting and feeding, minimizing abnormal behaviors like tail biting or excessive aggression. Enriched environments and stable grouping further support allelomimetic expression, reducing stress and enhancing positive social dynamics (Briefer *et al.*, 2022) ^[5].

Allelomimetic Behavior in Poultry

In domestic chickens both layers and broilers, allelomimetic behavior manifests primarily as social facilitation and behavioral synchronization, influencing key activities such as foraging, dust bathing, perching, resting, and locomotion. This gregarious tendency promotes group cohesion but can also escalate into problematic patterns under intensive conditions.

Dominant birds often influence subordinates through social facilitation or mimicry in locomotor activities, where subordinates may match movements or exhibit reduced behavioral complexity in response to dominant individuals' actions (Alcala *et al.*, 2019) ^[2].

Piling behavior a potentially harmful allelomimetic response involves dense clustering of hens, often leading to smothering and mortality. Piling is linked to high stocking density and environmental factors (*e.g.*, light intensity and temperature changes), which amplify behavioral synchrony, causing hens to simultaneously adopt similar movements and progressively form dense clusters. Piling events are frequently preceded by single-hen activities or non-hysterical mass movements and occur more commonly in cage-free or aviary systems. Recurring piling can have sublethal effects on production (*e.g.*, reduced egg output) even without mortality, with behavioral synchrony contributing to pile formation and duration (Winter *et al.*, 2021; Gray *et al.*, 2020) ^[31, 13].

Emotional contagion drives rapid group responses to stimuli, with vocal or visual cues propagating affective states across the flock. In chicks and broods, socially mediated arousal and behavioral/physiological synchrony increase during stressful conditions, indicating contagion of alertness or distress (Edgar *et al.*, 2018) ^[10]. Enrichments (*e.g.*, substrates for dust bathing or foraging) promote positive synchronization of natural behaviors, supporting welfare-aligned group harmony in layers and broiler breeders (Riber *et al.*, 2017) ^[25].

Intensive systems amplify negative mimetic behaviors like feather pecking (gentle or severe), where social facilitation or observational learning contributes to the spread of the trait from initiators to other flock members. This necessitates housing designs that support natural social dynamics: ample litter, perches, space allowances, and enrichments to redirect foraging motivation away from feathers and reduce redirection (Iffland *et al.*, 2021) ^[14].

Overall, allelomimetic processes in poultry offer opportunities for positive welfare *e.g.*, synchronized expression of motivated behaviors like dust bathing but pose risks like piling, feather pecking in confined or high-density setups. Emerging monitoring tools, such as computer vision models

for detecting piling events, enable early intervention and improved management (Bist *et al.*, 2023) ^[4].

Implications for Farm Management and Animal Welfare

Allelomimetic behavior, manifested as behavioral synchrony or social facilitation in farm animals, carries profound implications for practical farm management and comprehensive animal welfare assessment. In modern welfare evaluations, synchronization of behaviors such as lying, feeding, or resting serves as a reliable positive indicator, with higher levels associated with contentment, low stress, social harmony, and the fulfillment of species-specific motivations in group-living animals. Disruptions to synchrony often resulting from high stocking density, resource competition, or restrictive housing signal potential stress, prompting targeted interventions such as increased space allowances, improved resource distribution, or access to pasture/outdoor areas to restore natural group dynamics (Mattiello *et al.*, 2019) ^[19].

Recent on-farm studies reinforce this, demonstrating that factors promoting synchrony (*e.g.*, hay inclusion in diets, adequate feeding places per animal, deep litter bedding, or pasture access) correlate with enhanced positive affective states, including relaxed ear postures, reduced visible eye white, and comfortable lying postures in dairy cattle (Mattiello *et al.*, 2024) ^[20].

For productivity, synchronized feeding and activity patterns contribute to uniform resource intake across the herd or flock, minimizing variability in growth rates, milk yield, or feed efficiency. In dairy systems, aligned feeding schedules act as zeitgebers that synchronize metabolic rhythms, improving nutrient digestibility, milk composition, energy efficiency, and overall performance while potentially reducing environmental impacts like methane emissions. Behavioral synchrony also supports efficient group functioning, reducing competition-related losses and enabling more consistent production outcomes in intensive settings (Bell *et al.*, 2018) ^[3].

Ethical and sustainable farming increasingly emphasizes alignment of management practices with natural behaviors, including allelomimetic tendencies, as outlined in updated welfare frameworks that shift from solely avoiding negatives to actively promoting positives (Vigors, 2019) ^[30]. This approach integrates social facilitation into housing design, grouping strategies, and routine management to foster positive emotional experiences and resilience.

Future research directions should prioritize digital tools for real-time, non-invasive monitoring of synchrony and related behaviors. Precision livestock farming technologies such as animal-mounted accelerometers, computer vision, IoT sensors, and AI-driven analysis enable continuous tracking of group-level synchrony, individual deviations, and welfare indicators, facilitating early detection of disruptions and data-driven interventions *e.g.*, integrating behavioral time series with genetics for selective breeding toward calmer, more synchronizable traits. These tools promise scalable, objective assessments that bridge on-farm observations with precision management, ultimately supporting improved welfare, productivity, and sustainability in diverse farm animal systems.

Conclusion

Allelomimetic behavior encompassing behavioral synchrony, social facilitation, emotional contagion, and mimetic responses forms an integral component of the social fabric in farm animals across species such as cattle, sheep, goats, pigs,

and poultry. This phenomenon reflects evolutionary adaptations that enhance group cohesion, predator avoidance, resource efficiency, and emotional regulation in gregarious settings. Recent studies consistently underscore its adaptive value, demonstrating how allelomimetic processes support uniform feeding and resting patterns, reduce individual vulnerability through collective vigilance, and foster positive affective states when expressed naturally.

Across the reviewed species, allelomimetic behavior manifests in synchronized activities that promote welfare when facilitated by appropriate environments: ample space allowances, resource access, enriched substrates, stable social groups, and pasture or outdoor opportunities. In cattle and small ruminants, high synchrony in lying, grazing, or feeding correlates with contentment and low stress, serving as a key positive welfare indicator. In pigs and poultry, social facilitation aids group integration and natural behaviors like exploration or dust bathing, though disruptions can propagate negative patterns such as aggression, piling, or feather pecking. Disruptions often linked to intensive confinement, high stocking density, resource competition, or abrupt social mixing lead to desynchronization, increased stress, compromised health, and reduced productivity.

By incorporating insights from recent research, farmers and managers can design supportive housing and practices that align with animals' natural inclinations toward synchrony. Strategies such as providing sufficient space for simultaneous resting/feeding, minimizing regrouping stress, incorporating enrichments to channel mimetic tendencies positively, and leveraging precision tools *e.g.*, AI for vocal/emotional monitoring or accelerometers for real-time synchrony tracking enable better expression of allelomimetic behavior. These approaches not only enhance animal well-being promoting positive emotions, resilience, and fulfillment of social motivations but also yield practical benefits: more uniform growth and intake, lower disease incidence, improved feed efficiency, and greater overall sustainability in production systems.

Ultimately, recognizing allelomimetic behavior as a core driver of farm animal social dynamics shifts welfare paradigms from deficit-based to resource-based approaches. Future efforts should prioritize species-specific protocols that integrate synchrony metrics into routine assessments, combine behavioral data with genetic selection for sociable traits, and adopt digital innovations for scalable monitoring. Such holistic integration holds promise for advancing ethical, efficient, and resilient livestock farming that benefits animals, producers, and society amid evolving demands for sustainable agriculture.

Conflict of Interest

Not available

Financial Support

Not available

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How to Cite This Article

Kendi W, Onjoro P. Allelomimetic behavior in farm animals. *International Journal of Veterinary Sciences and Animal Husbandry*. 2026;11(3):265-269.

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