



PART 2

Read the text below and answer questions 14–26.

CONFORMITY: THE POWER OF SOCIAL INFLUENCE

A

Conformity is commonly described as the tendency to align one's judgement or behaviour with that of a group, yet the phenomenon is more ambiguous than the word suggests. In social life, some degree of alignment is functional: shared norms reduce friction, coordinate expectations, and allow institutions—from classrooms to workplaces—to operate without constant negotiation. At the same time, conformity can impose a psychological cost when it discourages dissent or suppresses critical thinking, particularly in contexts where accuracy matters. Sociologists therefore treat conformity as a tension between cohesion and autonomy: it can stabilise collective life, but it can also produce collective error when the pressure to agree becomes stronger than the incentive to evaluate evidence independently.

B

A useful analytical framework distinguishes two broad mechanisms. Informational influence occurs when people conform because they interpret the group as a source of knowledge, especially under uncertainty. When an environment is ambiguous, or when a person assumes others have better information, agreement can function as a shortcut for accuracy. Normative influence, by contrast, is driven less by truth than by belonging. People may publicly agree in order to gain approval, avoid embarrassment, or protect relationships, even when they privately disagree. The two motives often interact rather than compete: someone facing a difficult judgement may simultaneously suspect they are wrong and fear social sanctions if they stand out. In this sense, conformity is not merely a personality trait but a situational response shaped by perceived expertise, social status, and the anticipated consequences of disagreement.

C

The power of group pressure was demonstrated with striking clarity in Solomon Asch's line-judgement experiments, first reported in the early 1950s. Participants were asked to match a target line with one of three comparison lines—an easy perceptual task when judged alone. However, each participant was placed in a group in which the other members were confederates instructed to give the same incorrect answer on certain trials. Asch found that conformity occurred even when the correct answer was visually obvious: a substantial proportion of participants agreed with the erroneous majority at least once, and many conformed on multiple trials. Equally revealing was the phenomenology



participants later reported. Some described genuine doubt—treating the group as informational authority—while others admitted they “went along” despite recognising the error, illustrating normative pressure in action. The experiments became influential precisely because they showed that clear evidence can be overridden by the social risk of being the lone dissenter.

D

Later research refined the conditions under which conformity is most likely. Group size matters, but not indefinitely: pressure tends to rise sharply from one to a few others, then plateaus, suggesting diminishing returns as additional members are added. Unanimity is especially important. When a majority appears perfectly consistent, disagreement feels riskier and the individual has fewer cues that dissent is socially permissible. The “dissenter effect” highlights this point. If even one person breaks the unanimity—whether by giving the correct answer or simply offering a different incorrect answer—conformity drops markedly. The presence of a dissenter changes the social meaning of disagreement: it signals that deviation is possible and reduces the sense that the majority represents an unquestionable consensus. In practical terms, a single dissenting voice can transform a group from a closed system into one in which alternative judgements can be expressed without immediate social punishment.

E

Conformity is also structured by identity. Social identity theory argues that people define themselves partly through group membership and are therefore motivated to protect the status and cohesion of valued in-groups. Norms set by friends, professional communities, or culturally significant groups carry a different weight from norms expressed by strangers. Aligning with the in-group can signal loyalty and shared values, strengthening solidarity and reducing internal conflict. Yet the same mechanism can intensify boundaries between groups. If conformity becomes a badge of belonging, dissent may be interpreted not as intellectual disagreement but as disloyalty. Under such conditions, even informational disagreements—about policy, evidence, or risk—can acquire moral significance, making it harder for individuals to revise positions publicly without appearing to betray their group.

F

Digital environments introduce new forms of conformity pressure by converting social signals into quantified metrics. Likes, shares, trending lists, and follower counts operate as visible cues of social endorsement, turning popularity into a kind of social currency. This can amplify the “spiral of silence”: when people believe an opinion is dominant, they may self-censor to avoid backlash, which in turn makes the dominant view appear even more prevalent. Algorithms can intensify this dynamic by preferentially amplifying content that



already attracts engagement, thereby narrowing the range of perspectives users encounter. However, online spaces can also reduce conformity under some conditions. Where anonymity is protected, individuals may express minority views with less fear of personal retaliation, and niche communities can provide counter-publics that validate dissent. The overall effect depends heavily on platform design: whether it rewards outrage, whether it exposes users to diverse perspectives, and how effectively it limits harassment that can weaponise normative pressure.

G

The implications of conformity research are therefore practical as well as theoretical. In organisations, decision quality improves when leaders separate evaluation from status, explicitly invite dissent, and assign roles—such as a “devil’s advocate”—that legitimise disagreement. In educational settings, students can be taught to distinguish evidence from popularity cues and to recognise that consensus is not necessarily a marker of truth. In online contexts, design choices that reduce performative metrics or increase exposure to heterodox viewpoints may weaken conformity spirals, though such interventions face commercial trade-offs. Overall, conformity is neither inherently virtuous nor inherently harmful. It facilitates coordination and social order, yet it can also suppress critical judgement. The central question is therefore not whether people conform, but whether the social conditions surrounding conformity promote wise coordination or discourage thinking that challenges collective error.

Questions 14–19

Select the correct answer.

14 Why can conformity create problems even though it helps social groups function?

- A** It makes shared norms impossible to maintain.
- B** Pressure to agree can discourage independent evaluation and produce collective error.
- C** It prevents institutions from coordinating people’s expectations.
- D** It occurs only when individuals lack reliable information.

15 What is meant by informational influence?

- A** Conforming because the group is believed to be correct, especially under uncertainty.
- B** Conforming because agreement produces social rewards, regardless of private beliefs.
- C** Conforming because algorithms present one option more frequently than others.
- D** Conforming because visible popularity signals remove the need for personal judgment.

16 What does the passage suggest about classic line-judgment experiments?



- A** Participants changed their answers mainly when the task was genuinely ambiguous.
- B** Most participants resisted group pressure once they realised others were confederates.
- C** Some participants agreed with an incorrect majority even when the evidence seemed obvious.
- D** The findings apply only when participants cannot see the group's answers directly.

17 According to the passage, what effect can reduce conformity sharply?

- A** Increasing the number of people who state the same opinion.
- B** Making the group's judgment more visible to everyone present.
- C** Ensuring that the majority responds in the same way each time.
- D** The presence of a single person who does not agree with the majority.

18 Why are people more likely to conform to norms set by valued in-groups?

- A** Because in-groups typically provide clearer factual information than strangers do.
- B** Because following in-group norms can signal loyalty and strengthen cohesion.
- C** Because in-groups remove the need to weigh evidence against popularity.
- D** Because members of valued groups rarely disagree with one another in public.

19 What is one way social media can increase conformity?

- A** By making popularity cues visible, such as likes, shares, and follower counts.
- B** By preventing users from comparing how widely different opinions are supported.
- C** By ensuring that dissenting opinions are shown first to encourage balance.
- D** By reducing the social consequences of disagreement through default anonymity.

Questions 20–23

Complete the summary below. Choose **ONE WORD ONLY** from the text for each answer.

Factors influencing conformity

Normative influence can push individuals to agree publicly in order to avoid **20**, even when they privately disagree. Group size has a limited effect: after rising sharply from one to a few others, pressure eventually **21** as more members are added. In digital environments, algorithms may reinforce conformity by giving greater visibility to content that already attracts **22** However, some online environments reduce these pressures when **23** is protected, allowing minority views to be expressed with less fear of personal retaliation.

Questions 24–26



Choose **TRUE** if the statement agrees with the information given in the text, choose **FALSE** if the statement contradicts the information, or choose **NOT GIVEN** if there is no information on this.

24 The passage states that conformity is always a sign of personal weakness.

25 The passage provides exact statistics for how often people conform on social media.

26 The passage suggests that online conformity pressures depend partly on platform design.

Answer Key

14. B

15. A

16. C

17. D

18. B

19. A

20. embarrassment

21. plateaus

22. engagement

23. anonymity

24. FALSE

25. NOT GIVEN

26. TRUE