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Conformity and Consumerism: The Compromising of Self in Exchange for Acceptance

As time passes by different tastes and styles change with it. You can compare the life styles of people throughout time and you can see a great difference between what they’re wearing, what kind of music they listen to, and the certain people they hang around with. Acceptance, people around the world want to have this feeling of acceptance in order to thrive within their own lives. The need of feeling an acceptance from their surrounding leads them to conforming to the ideas that others have. Depending on who you speak with, the idea of conformity, it can be seen as either a positive or a negative thing. Industries see conformity as an advantage towards their company. Knowing what everyone likes and doesn’t help industries keep up with what’s in style and what’s not. New marketing tactics are forming as time goes on, this can be great for the companies but bad for the people. People don’t seem to realize how much their lifestyle and consumerism can affect the business of a company, their own life, and somebody else’s life. All of this came together because of conformity; conformity build people’s lives, build businesses, and can sometimes destroy or make somebody’s else’s life. Societies embrace conformity to varying degrees as a necessary component of their organization and structural agenda. Unquestionably some conformity is required for our survival.

Certainly no-one likes to be left out, cast away or worse unlikable by the natural order of our being. Especially by, or beginning with our families, friends, amongst society, nor in essence by the world for the matter. Unfortunately, we allow ourselves to seek the reward, the gratification, from one another, such as through love and the extenuating part-time benefits found within. As such is so, the same principles on a more minuscule level, whereas we reduce to something as brief as a compliment regarding something we have done, or specific quality we possess as individuals, and systematically by instinct we sub-consciously react to the influences thereof. Instead of trying to be different in their way people find conforming more appealing and easier to do. It seems like being exclusive has become a contest among people nowadays. Our individualistic characteristics are judged by what we own materialistically. Everything is “too mainstream” and whatever isn’t doesn’t seem to stay that way for very long. The end result is that those people, who feel lesser about themselves because they haven’t caught up with the newest trend, do what they can in order to not fall behind. This usually means spending money that they can’t really afford at the moment. The underlying factor of this happens to be peer pressure and the fear of being looked at as somebody who is not “up to date”. Companies, whether big or small, use this as a personal gain and a very effective marketing scheme.

Consumerism is defined by the spending habits of America's middle and upper classes. They do not spend frugally, but continue to buy luxury items, well after they reach a state of comfort for themselves and their surroundings. They do this because they must compete for products to maintain the status quo of their lives. For example, if one member of a neighborhood buys a new product that makes their lives noticeably easier or raises their status, the rest of the neighborhood must also buy that product, or else be at a disadvantage socially or economically. Social pressures and public sentiment drives this competition. Heath and Potter point out that human sentiment is highly contagious  that being in a crowd full of laughing people makes things seem funnier, and that being in a crowd full of angry people may make even mild-mannered people irrational and dangerous such is human nature. Competitive consumption has allowed unfettered capitalism to thrive in the U.S. for several decades. Our culture today is pervaded by countless advertisements. Advertisements have become integrated into our culture so that it is impossible to avoid them while living a normal life. They are on TV, radio, billboards, and all over the Internet. Constant exposure to advertising forces the American people to pay attention to buying. With new advances in technology, as well as the help of advertisers, people are provided with easy access to new products that seem essential to their everyday life, even though they have survived this long without them. People cannot live without food, clothing, and shelter. But realistically, according to people's different lifestyles, more than food, clothing, and shelter are needed. Most people need to work to survive. Unless a job is either in their home, or within walking distance, a means of transportation is needed. Whether it is a vehicle, money for a taxi-cab, or a token for a ride on the subway, money must be spent in order to reach the place of work. For a student, paper, pens, and possibly a computer are a necessity. In order to complete school assignments, these tools are sometimes even required. Schooling is required for many types of jobs, which provide money, which is without a doubt essential in life. Food, clothing, and shelter are not the only things needed to survive. The problem begins when people with a larger disposable income take it too far. A car is definitely needed, but the fastest car in the most attractive color is not.

A Japanese proverb says, "The nail that sticks out will be hammered down." Society tries to place many rules on us as an individual as to what is acceptable and what is not. We must decide for ourselves whether to conform to such a social decorum. We are taught as soon as we are old enough to grasp the idea that it is bad to be unique and to avoid being different. At some point, however, we must decide within ourselves whether to spend every day trying to be like everyone else because society says we should or living each day true to ourselves. Our strength as a person is proven through what we decide. Society teaches us to conform by not thinking for ourselves. We are simply told how to solve a problem or accomplish a task. We are never taught why or how something works. If we do not attempt to break out of that mold, we will never get to the point where we wonder why or how things work.

The way businesses attract people to buy their product is by trying to convince someone to try something different or to be unique. By doing this, the rest see that, the person who bought that item makes it seem cool, so the rest would follow the pack and buy the same item. The slogans that companies use make a huge impact on consumers as well. Two ad slogans that I can think of are from Apple and Wheaties; Apple: “Think Different” and Wheaties: “The Breakfast of Champions”, these slogans, make the customer feel like they are superior to others. It sort of makes them feel like they are conforming to nonconformity, yet in the end everyone confirms by buying the same product that someone else bought. Another way that companies attract more consumers towards their product is the way they package their product or the actual appearance of it. If a product is not attractive enough it won’t catch the eye of a shopper. That’s why knowing what the consumers like and how they think helps out industries in advancing their products towards a more attractive way. Because most shoppers confirm to what other consumers like, companies have it easier in researching new ways on how to advance their production of new products for the consumers. As time passed by Companies improved, the same as different tastes and styles of consumers changed. What consumers liked in the 1960’s or earlier is totally different from what consumers like in this era.

I came about this ideas by reading different papers in the book “Signs of Life in the USA”, Two specific papers that I read were “Commodify Your Dissent”, by Thomas Frank and “What’s in a Package”, by Thomas Hine. Both of these papers explain their ideas on how conformity, style, taste, consumerism, and companies all affect each other. It is clear the Conformism is a part of living, for the good or bad people conforms in order to feel accepted. People dress, act, shop and live alike; companies take this into consideration and use for their advantage. So it seems like conformity may be a negative or positive thing but in the end of the day there is no denying that is required in people’s lives.