

# A Brief Review of Conformity: Bandwagon Effect and Bystander Effect

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**Abstract.** Human beings, as representative creatures of social life, exhibit herd effects in all aspects of life. In this paper, we summarize the manifestation of the bandwagon effect and the bystander effect in people's behavior and summarize their causes and commonalities, namely why people choose to make the same choices as everyone else. This review aims to discuss the conformity behavior from bandwagon effect and bystander effect. Both of these effects account for a large part of the factors that contribute to conformity behavior. People can get rid of the conformity effect and stick to their ideas and beliefs, and become more independent. Meanwhile, policies should be taken to avoid it in the case of running a red light. We conducted the demonstration by collating relevant experiments. People behave differently in groups than on their own. This is attributed to conformity, doing the same as others.

**Keywords:** Bandwagon effect; bystander effect; conformity; behavior; politics.

## 1. Introduction

While an individual is interacting with others in society, the behaviors of the individual will be influenced by the people around them. Usually, individuals will shift their attitude or behavior in order to let themselves fit into a group. In social psychology, this phenomenon is called conformity [1, 2]. Since the last century, psychologists have conducted plenty of research to explore the phenomenon of conformity. Famous experiments such as Asch's experiment, Milgram's Shock experiment, and the Stanford Prison experiment all revealed the existence of conformity.

The research on conformity provided scientific explanations of why people tend to follow the crowd [3-5]. These researches also explain why people tend to go into a restaurant that has a crowd of consumers in it, which psychologists call the phenomenon "bandwagon effect," and why people tend to ignore the victim during an emergency situation, which psychologists call the phenomenon "bystander effect."

This paper will review the previous studies done by other psychologists by using a literature review. The paper will mainly focus on research related to the bandwagon effect as well as the bystander effect, which both are parts of the phenomenon of conformity. In the end, the paper will discuss how conformity influences individuals in society as well as the whole society from the perspective of the bandwagon effect and the bystander effect.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. The Definition and Causes of Conformity

In modern society, individuals inevitably interact with each other or social groups to survive. During interaction with groups, people tend to shift their attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs to match with the social norms. This kind of phenomenon is what we call conformity. Since last century, researchers have conducted multiple experiments and observations to discover explanations for conformity. These explanations can be divided into two classifications: (1) Normative social influence. This influence suggests that people conform to a particular group because people want to be admitted and accepted by that group [6]. For example, the bandwagon effect is the phenomenon in which individuals follow the crowd. Normative social influence interprets this phenomenon as individuals wanting to be accepted by society, and therefore, they follow what others in the society

do; (2) Informational influence. This influence suggests that individuals conform to a group because individuals believe that the group provides the correct information [7]. Therefore, individuals shift their behavior and attitude based on the information they receive. The Smoke-filled Room study is a good example. In this experiment, participants received the information implied by the confederates that the smoke was not dangerous, and therefore, participants modified their behavior and did not report the smoke.

After more and more studies appear, scholars are prone to put more effort into unconscious conformity [8-10]. Unconscious conformity suggests that, in some cases, individuals conform to others, and individuals themselves do not even realize it. The most used method to conduct research on conformity is experiment. Famous experiments, including Asch's experiment, Milgram's Shock experiment, Stanford Prison experiment, and the Smoke-filled Room study, all boosted the progress of exploring conformity.

## **2.2. Theoretical Frameworks of Conformity Behavior**

In order to gain a deep understanding of the behavior of conformity, psychologists used plenty of methods, and experiment is the most used among these methods. There are a lot of famous experiments: Asch's Conformity Experiments, the four experiments conducted by Bibb Latane and John Darley, as well as the Stanford Prisoner Experiment [11, 12]. In conformity experiments, researchers usually simulate a situation in which other people are presented who can guide participants to conform to them, and researchers are going to observe and record the behavior of participants to study conformity. Many famous experiments revealed the behavior of conformity and took a huge step forward in the study field of conformity.

### **2.2.1. Bandwagon Effect**

The bandwagon effect occurs everywhere in people's lives. Customers flock to the grocery store, speeding to the same shelf just to buy a new type of fruit that is said to have a great benefit to health. When crossing the road, some people know that the red light is on but still go forward, just because many people also ignore the traffic light [13]. Many young people have purchased a flashy luxury product because a recently famous movie star has used it. Many people borrow money to buy this luxury item in order to follow the trend, and they ignore what they need. These people just want to look glamorous in the eyes of others. The benefits that celebrities bring to business are also enormous and fans and followers buy those celebrity endorsement products. As long as it is a perfume used by a certain idol or the shoes are worn, fans will immediately buy them. Conformity makes people fit in society.

According to Asch's conformity experiment, people are prone to changing their opinions to align with those of group members, even when they think the group's response is incorrect [14]. Asch asked 50 participants for a vision test, and they were asked to determine which of the three lines was the target line. The experimenter put an unsuspecting participant into a room with seven insiders who were asked to point the wrong line in the experiment. In the experiment, the unsympathetic participant chose the same line when he heard that the other seven people had chosen the wrong line [14]. The participant in the experiment tried to choose the same line as the other participants, knowing that it was the wrong answer [14]. However, that participant still believed fitting into a group was better than standing alone.

Asch's experiment embodies people's bandwagon effect. People want to fit into the collective, so they deliberately hide their differences and identities as individuals as members of groups. This effect changes human behavior in society that people are like chameleons hiding their colors and voices to fit in the surroundings. Moreover, as chameleons, they change their color so that they can be prevented from predators. It means that people also use this method to avoid isolation from the group.

The bandwagon effect appears in all corners and industries of human society, such as politics, business, tourism, and the Internet. In politics, especially voting, the bandwagon effect plays a huge role and causes people to vote with the group. By collecting samples and making experiments, Mike Farjam and Karl Loxbo proposed that people avoid minority opinions because of fears of social

isolation and stigma. In other words, people will choose the opinion of the majority in order to avoid social isolation and neglect or opposition [15]. In the experiment, participants were asked to choose their preferred donation project. The two experimenters divided the participants into two groups. One group was informed of the polls. This means they know which donation project has more supporters before choosing. The other group didn't know anything about the polls. The results of the final experiment were also similar to the hypothesis that participants who otherwise favor the least popular organizations tend to change their choices after they notice the polls. People would support the organization chosen by the majority. This phenomenon can be combined with the theory of Asch experiment. When people face a group larger than themselves, they will choose to abandon their original beliefs and support the ideas of the majority. Thus, people's behavior is changed by the conformity effect, technically called the bandwagon effect.

### 2.2.2. Bystander Effect

Bystander effect is another form of conformity. This effect suggests that people are less likely to act in an emergency situation when other people are present. The bystander effect happens a lot in society. For example, if a person suddenly faints on the street, most people pass by him but tend to ignore him. In this case, conformity plays an important role. Some people may notice the victim for a while, but they do not take any action until they see the first person who takes action.

The experiments of the bystander effect started after the murder of Kitty Genovese. One of the primary experiments on the bystander effect is called Smoke-Filled room study conducted by Bibb Latane and John Darley [11]. In this study, researchers asked the participants to fill out a questionnaire in a room. The participants were divided into three conditions. In condition 1, a participant was staying in the room alone; In condition 2, three naive participants were staying in the room together; In condition 3, one participant stayed with two confederates who pretended to notice the smoke but ignored it.

As soon as the participants completed the second page of their questionnaire, researchers started adding smoke into the room and wanted to see how many participants reported the simulated emergency. The result is as follows: in condition 1, when the participants stayed alone, 75% of them reported the smoke; in condition 2, when three naive participants stayed together, 38% of them reported the smoke; in condition 3, when participants stayed with two other confederates, only 10% of them reported the smoke [11].

The result revealed that when someone notices an emergency, he tends to conform to others who are present. From an informational social influence perspective, the two confederates in the third condition implied the information that the smoke is not a dangerous situation. After receiving this information, participant also shifted their belief to "the smoke is not dangerous" and shifted their behavior as well.

The two experiments, Asch's conformity experiment and the Smoke-filled Room experiment, illustrate the phenomenon of conformity from two different aspects. The bandwagon effect was explained by Asch's conformity experiments. From the aspect of normative social influence, the individual conforms others because he wants others to acknowledge him and be part of the group. Like in Asch's conformity experiment, most of the participants who are alone are more likely to give the wrong answer as well because they want to be accepted by the group around them. From the aspect of informational social influence, the individual conforms to others because they think others provide the correct information. For example, when buying some stuff, people tend to buy the thing that is purchased by a large amount of people. That is because people believe that this is a good staff and therefore most of the people purchase it as well. People believe that it is the correct information provided by others, and they will tend to buy that staff as well.

The bystander effect proved by the Smoke-filled Room study is more likely to be explained by the informational social effect [16]. In the study, the third condition with the lowest report rate, in which participants stayed with the two confederates, the confederates ignored the smoke, which implies that the smoke is not a dangerous case. In this case, the participants received that information and

considered it as correct information. Therefore, in the third condition, people tend not to report the smoke.

Besides the two experiments listed above, other experiments, such as Stanford Prisoner experiment, all proved that the phenomenon of conformity exists in modern society and that human behavior is largely influenced by conformity. Conformity does have a positive impact: when you are following what others purchased, you are likely to purchase a good product. However, conformity also has a serious negative impact: during an emergency situation, conformity will cause catastrophic consequences like what Kitty Genovese faced, people did see her being raped, but nobody provided aid to her.

### 3. Conclusion

This review mainly includes the float effect and bystander response. Both of these effects account for a large part of the factors that contribute to conformity behavior. The conformity effect not only plays a role in life but also affects people's choices and decisions in various fields. The most prominent example is running a red light. It was obviously a red light but because most people ignored the red light, a large group of people violated traffic rules. Not everyone does something that makes sense or is right. More and more experiments and studies show the fact that people lose their self-knowledge in groups. People should take responsibility. In the bystander effect, it is precisely because of the spread of responsibility that people ignore their true thoughts. Bringing these phenomena forward can make people aware of the negative effects of these behaviors. This will make people pay more attention to their herd behavior and correct it. People can get rid of the conformity effect and stick to their ideas and beliefs, and become more independent. On an individual level, people should be aware of herd behaviors that have negative effects and make corrections. At the social level, people should emphasize independent thinking and correct cognition. At the same time, policies should be taken to avoid it. In the case of running a red light, for example, some policies may not be enough to deter people from running red lights, so manhole covers have strengthened punitive measures to prevent people from following suit. Once one person makes a change, everyone else will follow suit, so everyone will obey the traffic rules.

### Author Contribution

All the authors contributed equally, and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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