



The Illusion of a Social Norm - How Everyone is an Exception to Social Rules

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In highschool, it can feel almost impossible to be your authentic, full self. Students are constantly influenced by peer pressure, social standards, and comparison to others. It is evident when you walk into a classroom and see every girl in the same leggings and uggs, every guy with the same haircut and sweater. The similarities are clear, however the source of the standard is untraceable. The ending is unclear, as these similarities are not limited to just high school, following us throughout our entire lives.

From a young age, we are often taught who we are supposed to be. Friends, family, teachers, and peers all have their own perspective on how you should act, and who you should be. As a kid, your friends may influence you to be louder, funnier, and more social, while a teacher may praise you for being quiet and introverted. None of these influences are directly wrong or negative, they are all trying to form a well-rounded individual. However, it can be confusing and make it difficult to distinguish what you really want from the loudest influences. When everyone around you has a different idea of who you should be, it becomes difficult to hear your own voice and your own wants. You start to wonder if your choices are really yours, or just reflections of others.

As you get older, these contrasting expectations don't disappear, they evolve. You become more aware of the "social norm," a combination of expectations that seems impossible to avoid. In elementary school, the norm might be as simple as liking certain games or fitting into friend groups. In high school, it becomes more intense, and rigid; what you wear, how you act, who you hang out with, and what you post can feel like they define your entire life. If you make one mistake, reject what is defined as "normal" one time, your entire social life feels endangered. This norm even follows into adulthood, where its focus shifts to success, relationships, career paths, and lifestyle. There is always an unspoken standard which defines behavior, even if we cannot directly see it.

The ironic part is, nobody perfectly fits the social norm. It's an illusion, a constantly moving target which changes based on who you're around. Since the rule is always changing, we're all exceptions to a rule that doesn't truly exist. This just increases the confusion which began at a young age, the question if you are your own person or a combination of the expectations which surround you. It creates a lifestyle of uncertainty and confusion instead of confidence and certainty.

The norm isn't something anyone naturally is, it's a performance. Both online and in person, there is a constant trend of people being called performative or fake due to their fashion, interests, or behavior. However, it's all hypocritical, as we are all performing to some capacity. Trying to change ourselves, even if it seems in the smallest way, is the show we cannot escape. Whether it be online or with a social group, it is practically impossible to not let ourselves be changed, especially when it is hard to understand your authentic self in the first place.

Social media only intensifies the pressure and performance. Instead of trying to keep up with the standards of the people directly around us, we are now trying to keep up with the standards of thousands of people. We see the carefully curated versions of other people's lives through a screen, and try to match it to seem trendy or likeable. The result is a constant feeling of falling short, unable to keep up with an online highlight reel.

It is clear we are all a little performative, influenced by the norms we cannot control or escape. We adjust how we act depending on where we are and who we're with. That doesn't make us fake or ingenuine, it makes us human. The goal isn't to completely reject the idea of social norms, which is an expectation even harder than keeping up with the norms themselves. Instead, the challenge is to recognize standards without completely losing yourself to them.

The first step to moving past the norm is to figure out which parts of yourself feel real when no one is watching. It's about choosing which standards to keep and what to let go of. Through this, it's easier to learn about yourself and the interests, new and old, that feel the most "you."

Finding your authentic self isn't about escaping influence entirely, an impossible goal. Social pressure is something which exists from the second we are born, starting with our parents and evolving into the opinions of everyone we surround ourselves with. These influences are not always negative, and that's important to remember. So, instead of avoiding the influence and standard, the goal is to learn how to exist within the expectations, without letting them define you altogether.



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