SOCIAL INFLUENCE

Types and Explanations of Conformity

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A-LEVEL PSYCHOLOGY TUTOR

- Types of conformity: internalisation, identification and compliance. Explanations for conformity: informational social influence and normative social influence, and variables affecting conformity including group size, unanimity and task difficulty as investigated by Asch.
- Conformity to social roles as investigated by Zimbardo.
- Explanations for obedience: agentic state and legitimacy of authority, and situational variables affecting obedience including proximity and location, as investigated by Milgram, and uniform. Dispositional explanation for obedience: the Authoritarian Personality.
- Explanations of resistance to social influence, including social support and locus of control.
- Minority influence including reference to consistency, commitment and flexibility.
- The role of social influence processes in social change.

What is conformity?

A change in a person's behaviour or opinions as a result of **real or imagined group pressure**. It is a form of **majority influence**.

Brainstorm 5 examples of conformity from everyday life.
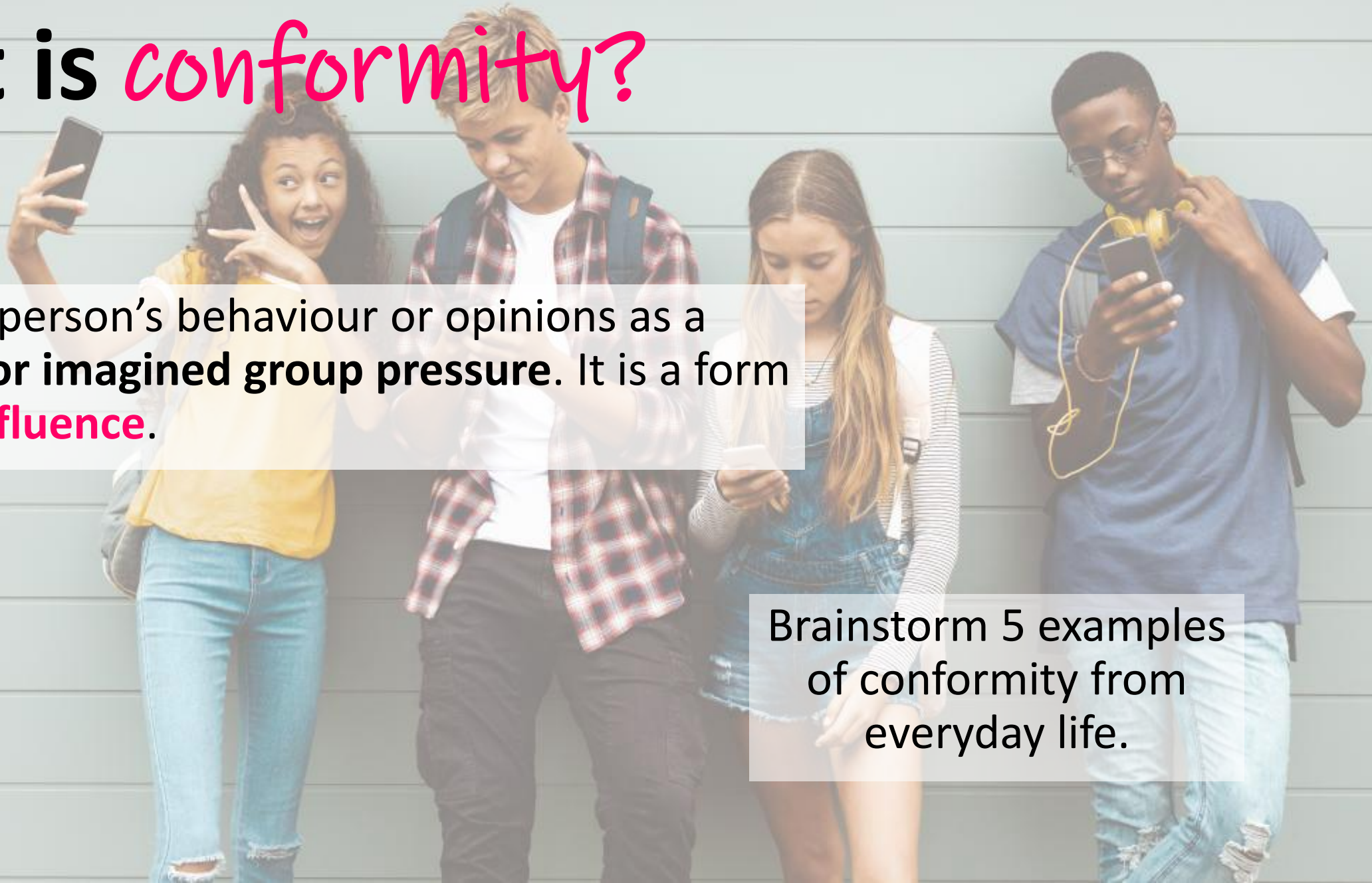
Types of Conformity

Kelman (1958) identified three levels (types) of conformity.

Compliance is the lowest level of conformity. It is when a person **changes their public behaviour**, but **not their private beliefs**.

This is usually a short-term change and is often the result of **normative social influence.**

Tip: When describing the types of conformity always refer to public behaviour and private beliefs.

Highest/ Permanent

Internalisation

Identification

Compliance

Lowest/ Temporary
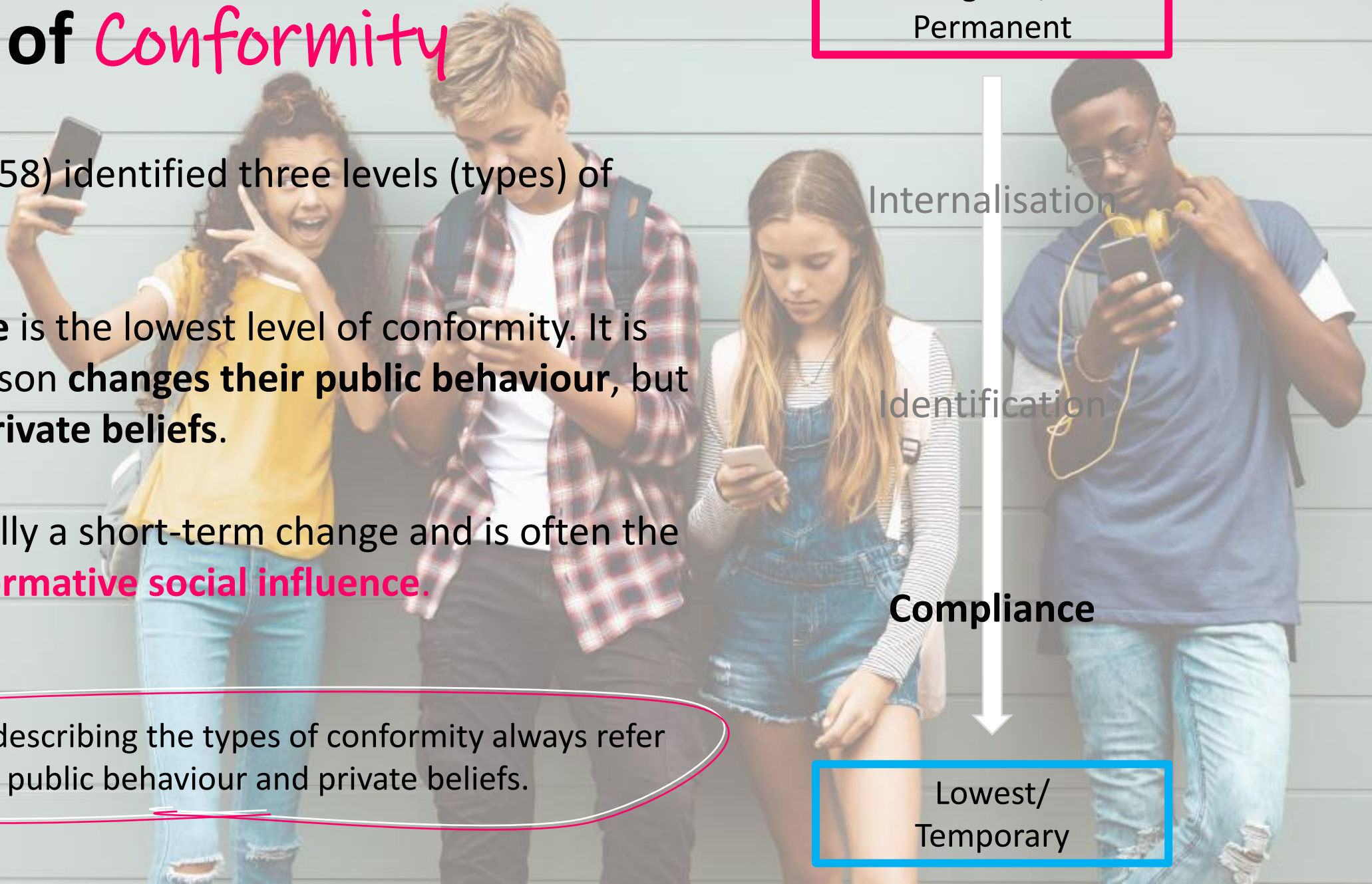
Example of *compliance*

Alex is part of a study group in his Sixth Form. The group decides to meet every day after school for two hours to prepare for an upcoming exam. Alex feels that two hours every day is too much and would prefer to study on their own. However, he personally disagrees with the amount of time the group is dedicating to studying together, but conforms to the group's decision in order to fit in.
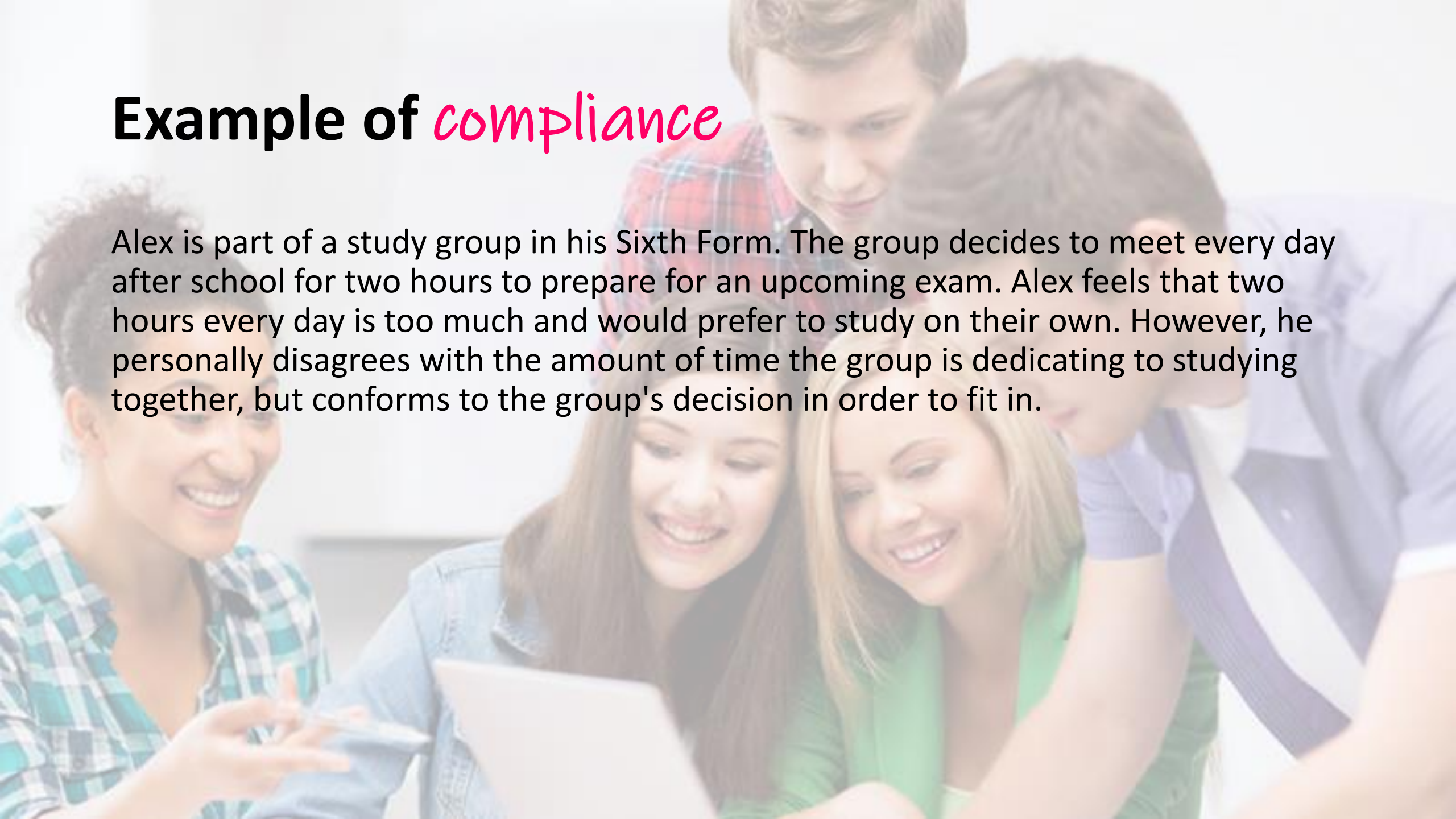
Identification is the middle level of conformity. A person changes their public behaviour and their private beliefs, but **only while they are in the presence of the group**.

Highest/ Permanent

Internalisation

Identification

Compliance

Lowest/ Temporary
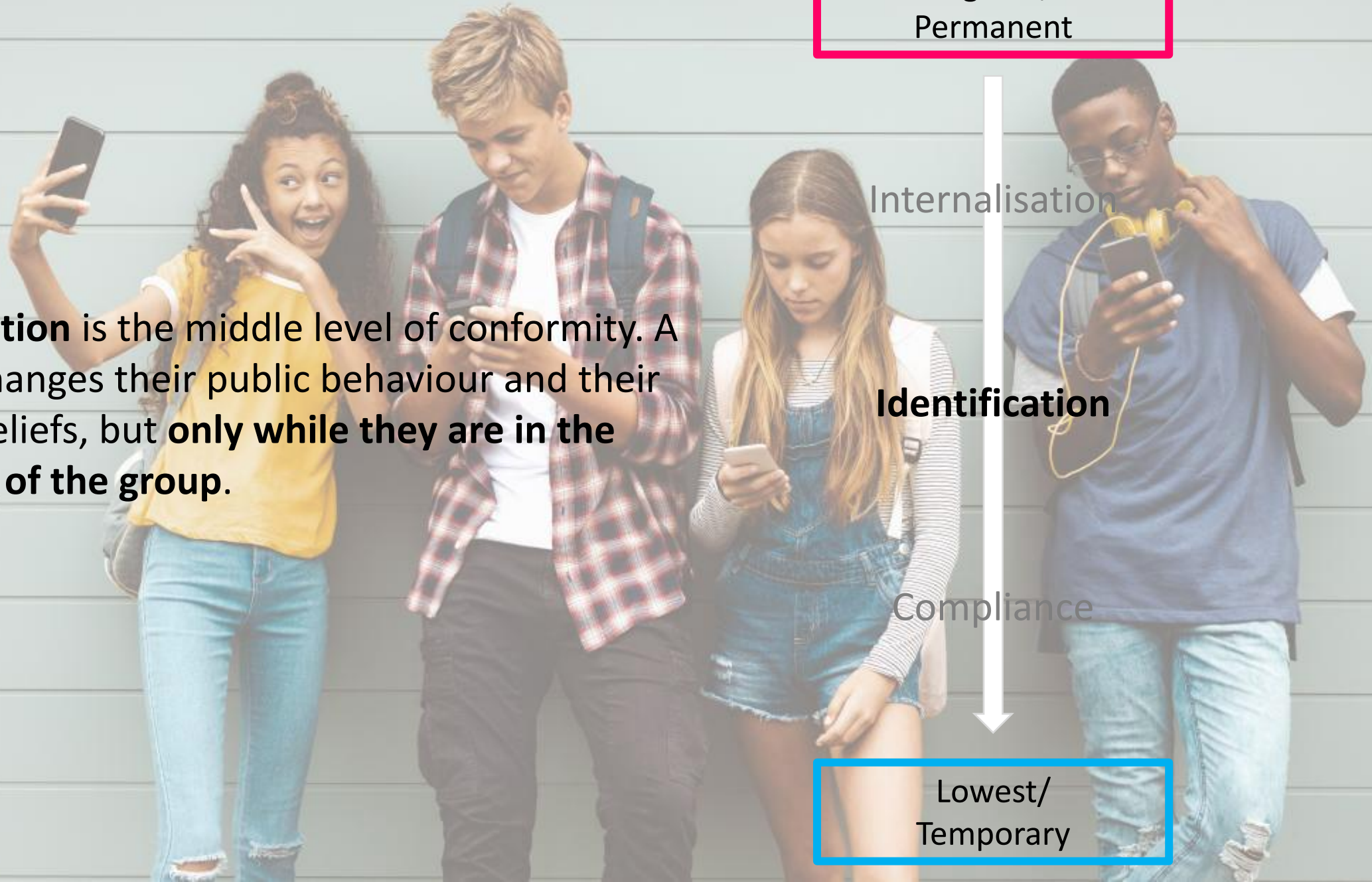
Example of identification

Tom is a sixth form student who recently joined the school's rugby team. The senior members of the team, particularly the captain Jack, are well-respected and known for their discipline, dedication, and camaraderie. They often wear team jackets and participate in team rituals and chants before each game. Tom participates enthusiastically in all the team activities and adopts the same disciplined attitude. He believes that by aligning himself with the behaviours and attitudes of the group, he will become a better player and earn their respect.

Internalisation is the deepest level of conformity. It is when a person **changes their public behaviour** and **their private beliefs**.

This is usually a long-term change and often the result of **informational social influence (ISI).**

Highest/
Permanent

Internalisation

Identification

Compliance

Lowest/
Temporary

Example of internalisation

Emily is a sixth form student who joins the school's environmental club. The club members are passionate about environmental sustainability and regularly engage in activities like recycling drives, tree planting, and educational campaigns about reducing waste. Initially, Emily participates in these activities to be part of the club and make new friends. However, as she attends more meetings and learns about the impact of human activities on the environment, she starts to genuinely believe in the importance of sustainability. Over time, Emily's behaviour changes even when she is not with the club as the group's values have now become her own.

Knowledge *check*

Identify the type of conformity in the following scenarios.

1. Jess began volunteering at the animal shelter because she looked up to her older sister, who was passionate about animal welfare.

2. John attended the extra study sessions because his teacher insisted, even though he didn't think they were necessary.

3. Emma started recycling at home because she truly believed in the importance of protecting the environment after joining the eco-club.

4. Sarah wore the school uniform correctly because everyone else did, but she didn't care much about the dress code.

5. After months of attending yoga classes, Liam began to meditate daily and genuinely valued mindfulness in his life.

6. Alex started wearing a leather jacket and talking about motorcycles to fit in with the group of older students he admired.

7. Rebecca adopted a vegetarian diet because she came to believe in animal rights after being influenced by her classmates' discussions.

8. David started practicing football daily because he wanted to be like his favourite player and earn the respect of his teammates.

9. Mike joined the school band because his friends pressured him, even though he wasn't interested in playing an instrument.

Knowledge check *Answers*

1. Jess began volunteering at the animal shelter because she looked up to her older sister, who was passionate about animal welfare. Identification.

2. John attended the extra study sessions because his teacher insisted, even though he didn't think they were necessary. Compliance.

3. Emma started recycling at home because she truly believed in the importance of protecting the environment after joining the eco-club. Internalisation.

4. Sarah wore the school uniform correctly because everyone else did, but she didn't care much about the dress code. Compliance.

5. After months of attending yoga classes, Liam began to meditate daily and genuinely valued mindfulness in his life. Internalisation.

6. Alex started wearing a leather jacket and talking about motorcycles to fit in with the group of older students he admired. Identification.

7. Rebecca adopted a vegetarian diet because she came to believe in animal rights after being influenced by her classmates' discussions. Internalisation.

8. David started practicing football daily because he wanted to be like his favourite player and earn the respect of his teammates. Identification.

9. Mike joined the school band because his friends pressured him, even though he wasn't interested in playing an instrument. Compliance.

Explanations for conformity

Deutsch and Gerard (1955) argued there are two reasons why people conform.

Normative social influence: A person conforms because of a **need to liked** and accepted by the group. It normally leads to compliance and is short term. It happens mostly in unambiguous situations.

Informational social influence: A person conforms because of a **need to right**. It normally leads to internalisation and is long term. It happens mostly in unambiguous situations.

Knowledge *check*

Identify the explanation for conformity in the following scenarios.

1. Jess changed her answer during the math class because she thought her classmates had the correct answer and she didn't want to be wrong.

2. Kevin decided to invest in a particular stock because his financially savvy friend recommended it, believing his friend had better information.

3. Emily started using social media more often because all her friends were active on it and she didn't want to feel left out.

4. Alice started taking notes in a new way after seeing that the top students in her class were doing it, assuming they knew the best method.

5. Tom agreed to go to the movies with his friends even though he preferred to stay home, just to avoid being the odd one out.

6. Lisa started drinking coffee because it seemed like the cool thing to do among her peers, even though she didn't particularly like it.
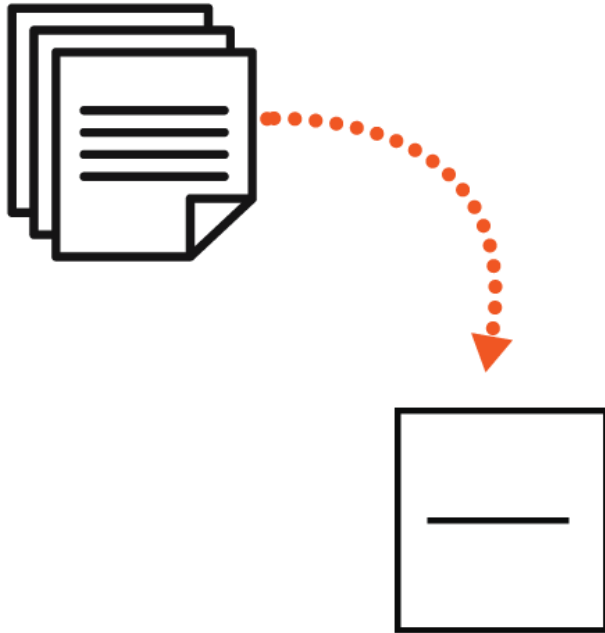
Knowledge check Answers

1. Jess changed her answer during the math class because she thought her classmates had the correct answer and she didn't want to be wrong. ISI.

2. Kevin decided to invest in a particular stock because his financially savvy friend recommended it, believing his friend had better information. ISI.

3. Emily started using social media more often because all her friends were active on it and she didn't want to feel left out. NSI.

4. Alice started taking notes in a new way after seeing that the top students in her class were doing it, assuming they knew the best method. ISI.

5. Tom agreed to go to the movies with his friends even though he preferred to stay home, just to avoid being the odd one out. NSI.

6. Lisa started drinking coffee because it seemed like the cool thing to do among her peers, even though she didn't particularly like it. NSI.

Type	Definition. Use public behaviour and private beliefs.	Change behaviour / opinions based on what need	Caused by NSI or ISI?	Long term or short term changes?
Compliance				
Internalisation				
Identification				

Topic Summary

Complete the key terms in the **AO1**
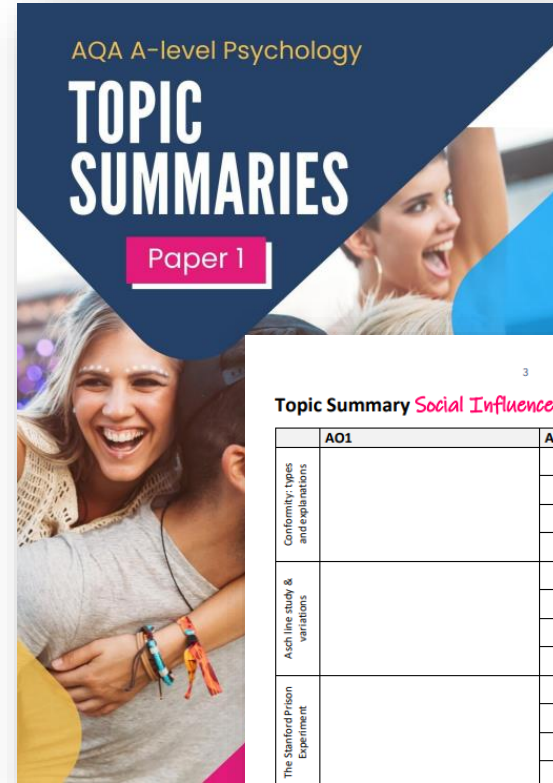
AO3 Supportive evidence NSI

One strength of the theory of NSI is there is empirical evidence supporting the explanation that people conform to others because of a need to be liked.

In **Asch's study** he found that many participants went along with the obviously wrong answer in the critical trials showing they knew the right answer but chose to give the wrong answer to fit in with the group. Asch also demonstrated in a later variation that when participants wrote down their answer instead of stating it aloud conformity rates dropped to 12.5%. This shows the fear of rejection of the group had become less when their answers were private.

Additionally, in post-experimental interviews of the original research participants revealed they had changed their answer to avoid disapproval from the rest of the group. This shows compliance had occurred in order to 'fit in'.

This is the outcome predicted by NSI as it shows that people changed their behaviour to fit with the norm and therefore it increases the validity of the explanation.

AO3 Supportive evidence ISI

One strength of the theory of ISI is there is empirical evidence supporting the explanation that people conform as they want to be correct.

Lucas et al (2006) asked students to give answers to mathematical problems that were easy or difficult. There was greater conformity to incorrect answers given by confederates when the problems were difficult rather than easy. Moreover, this was most true for students to rated their mathematical ability as poor.

This study shows that when people are faced with the perception that they may be wrong e.g. when facing a hard maths problem, they are more likely to look to others to reduce their uncertainty and fulfil their need to be right.

This is the outcome predicted by ISI and therefore this research increases the validity of the explanation.

AO3 Incomplete explanation

One limitation of Deutsch and Gerrard's two process model (NSI/ ISI) as an explanation for conformity is that it may not offer a complete explanation of the reasons that people conform.

Turner (2008) argues that people conform because they want to maintain the norms of the group they see themselves belonging to (the in-group). This is known as referent informational influence (RII) and is based on social identity theory.

By conforming to the norms of the groups it reinforces an individual's self-categorisation as a member of that group. This suggests that the two-process model of conformity is an incomplete explanation because people might conform for reasons not measured by the model.

Therefore, the triple process theory may be a more valid model in explaining conformity.

AO3 Individual differences

One limitation of the explanation of NSI and ISI is that it does not consider individual differences.

McGhee and Teevan (1967) found that students with a high need of affiliation (nAffiliators) were more likely to conform as they care more about being liked, showing that NSI affects people differently. In Perrin and Spencer (1980) they found very little conformity in a replication of Asch with engineering students, showing that ISI affects people differently.

This demonstrates that not everyone is affected by NSI and ISI in the same way. The two process model does not take this into account as it assumes all people feel the desire to be liked by others and have a need to be right.

This challenges the validity of the explanation and individual differences should be considered when examining conformity of human behaviour.

AO3 Real life application

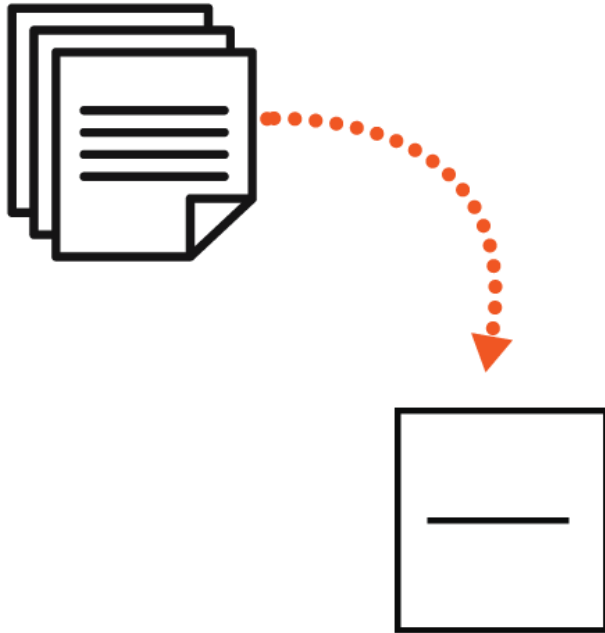One strength of the theory of NSI is that it has good real-life application to creating social change.

Linkenbach and Perkins (2003) made an anti-smoking campaign for teenagers in the USA, with a key message that 'most children in their own age group do not smoke'. Only 10% of non-smokers went on to start smoking, compared to 17% in a town not exposed to the message (control group). In another town where teens were told that people in their own age group did smoke 41% then started smoking.

This research shows how NSI can be used to change the smoking habits of teenagers because teens who were exposed to a simple message that 'most of their peers did not smoke' were less likely to take up smoking. In addition, in areas where teens were told most peers did smoke, more teens started smoking.
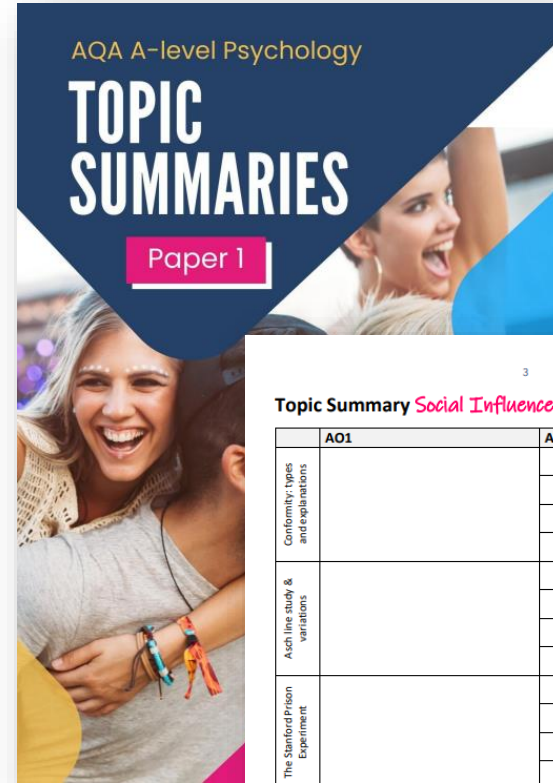
This shows that Governments should used normative messaging to try and change health habits of societies in order to reduce the burden on the NHS and create a healthier society.

Topic Summary

Complete the key terms in the **AO1**
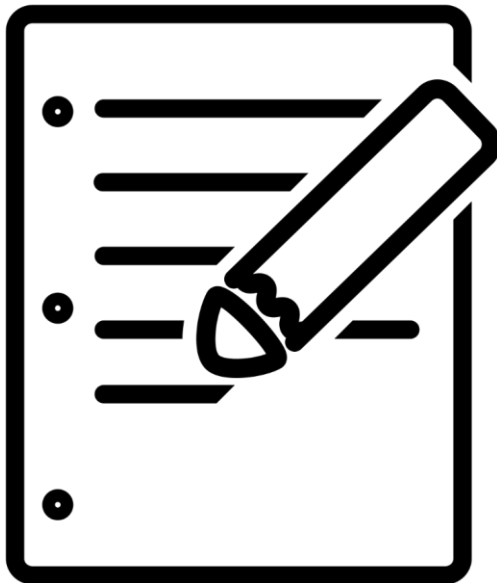
Complete the + and – in **AO3**

Essay Plan

Discuss research investigating the reasons why people conform.
(16 marks)

AO1

AO3

Complete the **AO1** using full sentences and the **AO3** using either full PEELs or as shortened flow diagrams.

Essay Planning booklet