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Introduction

If one looks up the word “uniform” in an English dictionary, it becomes apparent that it can be used as a noun, an adjective as well as a verb, but in all its forms it has a similar meaning: regular, identical, unchanging. The word originally comes from Latin, the words ānus, “one“ and forma, “shape“, are put together to form āniformis. Therefore it can be assumed that when a person wears a uniform, the statement is made that the wearer is a member of one uniform shape, a group of people in which every member will be wearing a distinctive form of clothing.

When I was living in Japan it rather struck me how much emphasis the Japanese seemed to put on their appearance, as well as how many different types of people wore an easily identifiable set of clothing, i.e. a uniform. One was usually able to tell, from these uniforms, basic information about the wearer; their position, age, and work. Good examples might be the Japanese schoolgirl on one hand, and the Japanese businessman on the other. However as my stay in the country wore on, I started noticing patterns in the way people who were not wearing a specific uniform dressed, namely, that the way people dressed in general could be claimed to be uniform. Fashion and subculture groups were easily discernible, as well as the way people would wear clothing casually. When they should have been able to express themselves through their clothing and show individuality, I started suspecting they actively chose not to. Therefore I decided to try to find out if my suspicions were correct, and if so, what the reason might be.

Are all Japanese people divided into members of certain groups with which they identify and try to conform? If so, is there any time when they are not actively identifying as members of a group? Are all these groups of people in Japan easily recognized by appearance alone? Do they always choose to be? Do they actively seek out conforming to visual and uniform ideals? Can it therefore be said that the Japanese are always in uniform?

\(^1\) Online Etymology Dictionary 2014.
My research was done mainly to discover the importance of the uniform in Japan, why Japanese people want to belong to a group, and how wearing a uniform can make it easier for them to identify themselves and others as members of these respective groups. I also wanted to show how being easily identifiable is important in communication between people in Japan, both strangers as well as people close to oneself. The Japanese language has several different levels of respect in the way it is spoken, and it can be considered rude or even offensive to use the wrong way of speaking in certain situations. Furthermore, I will discuss the people that could be considered as having been cast out of the Japanese group system, as well as negative implications of the importance of how one’s appearance defines oneself as a person. I maintain that whether they may want to or not, the Japanese are always in uniform.
The Uniform Exposed

The Meaning of a Uniform

When a person makes themselves visually easy to recognize, it may eliminate certain awkwardness in human interaction. When in uniform, people will be familiar to those they interact with, even though they may be perfect strangers. "Only one set of norms is applicable in evaluating a uniform-wearer. With strangers in ordinary dress, several sets may be applicable, none of which may be as explicit as the single set pertaining to the policeman, for example."² This makes interaction with a uniform-wearer have a certain sense of predictability, which in turn can make interaction with a uniformed individual seem familiar and secure. In this way it can be said that the uniform wearer is expected to act in a certain way by other people, that an ideal is applied to how the uniform-wearer is supposed to behave. The fear of the “unknown” and anxieties related to it are minimized when one interacts with somebody in uniform.

It might moreover be that this gives the wearer a certain amount of power over a situation when interacting with people that aren’t in uniform, as it can be expected that the other party have a certain amount of trust in them prior to the meeting, judging from appearances alone. There are even certain uniforms that can be considered internationally standardized, so that wherever one may be at least a certain level of familiarity can be expected, e.g. will policemen often wear blue while medical officials wear white.³ This trust and recognition of an otherwise unknown individual can make interaction between people more fluent and easy than it were if people always had to assess a person from their own intuition every time a stranger is encountered, and thus be more likely to exercise caution. "[T]he impact of the

² Joseph, Alex; 1972:726
³ Joseph, Alex; 1972:720
The uniform can be an indicator of a certain status or power belonging to the wearer within their own group, a certain uniform may lift up the wearer’s status from that of another group of uniform wearers. Often the manner of achieving this is by altering the original uniform only slightly, so as to make it appear that the wearer is still a member of the general group, albeit in a higher position within its hierarchy. These alterations of the uniform may be things like different colored hats, bandanas, number of pips or pins on the uniform itself, and so forth. The reasons for the promotion of the member might be various, such as a long running membership, or an achievement that warrants a reward. “Official material rewards may consist of medals, braids, or stripes added to a member’s uniform.” Depending on whether the hierarchy within the group is an important factor in the way it is run, this may make the promoted member both responsible for and in power of the other members of the group. The wearing of a uniform by an elite team can make the uniform into a status symbol that is desired by people, as can be seen when Laura J. Kriska states unequivocally that she “wanted the uniform to set me apart from other girls” on the subject of a uniform worn by the cheerleading team of her school.

So why is it so important to be able to recognize the status of a fellow member of society? It may have something to do with the desirability of belonging, of making oneself a part of a larger whole, the group. And what does the membership of a group have to do with the Japanese, and their preference of wearing a uniform?

**Behavioral Modifier, for the Greater Good?**

According to sociologists Nathan Joseph and Nicholas Alex, the uniform can be used as a tool to maintain control within a complex organisation, and the uniform “acts as a totem, reveals

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4 Joseph, Alex; 1972:724
5 Lebra; 1976:183
6 Lebra; 1976:183
7 Kriska; 1997:21
and conceals statuses, certifies legitimacy, and suppresses individuality.” Subsequently, this would indicate that the uniform actually holds some power over people, that it can cause a person to act within certain preconceived ideas, and that the uniform can be used to specify and legitimize the wearer’s status. The wearer is also no longer an individual entity, but one of many in a group of individuals that share ideals and goals, and make their membership of said group known both by members as well as non-members by donning said uniform. "[T]he uniform becomes the group, and it rather than the group is often the focus of thought and affect." The wearer is no longer just a person, but the visual representative of a body of people. In her article, Jennifer Craig claims that the uniform denotes certain attributes in the wearer, that they “are a shorthand code for the ‘ideal attributes’ imparted by schooling - discipline, order, authority, respectability, belonging, effective personal performance,” disclosing that the wearer’s capability to wear the uniform must also mean that they have dedicated themselves some specific behavior that is desirable in an individual. These attributes are those of conforming to the requirements of society, and therefore the uniform acts as a modifier of the group’s behaviour. Thus people might find wearing a uniform desirable in order to assert themselves as a high-functioning member of society. As is mentioned in an article detailing a Japanese students’ experiences with the uniform, even when schools abolished the requirement for a uniform after student’s protests in the 60s, the students themselves would choose to wear it because of the glorified ideal it stands for and the society’s opinion of those who wore it, and because it was fashionable. Often the appeal of the uniform is the appearance itself, as people can find the uniform to be tasteful and beautiful, while trends and fashion may also have a say in the matter.

According to an interview conducted in Japanese schools in 2011, students say that the uniforms act as an enforcer of good behavior, and that the wearer themselves as well as their peers were less likely to act out when in uniform. They also claimed the schools would often encourage the students to wear the uniforms outside of school and during extra-curricular activities, because the students as representatives of the school are expected to behave according to school protocol and show ideal behavior, even when outside the school grounds. “I was told to wear my school uniform when I went to town, that is why everyone stayed out of trouble. Because of the knowledge that people would immediately recognize which school

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8 Joseph, Alex; 1972:719
9 Joseph, Alex; 1972:720
10 Craig, 2007:38
you went to, it was a good break from temptation” one student said\textsuperscript{12}, indicating that the uniform rendered the wearer easily identifiable as a student of a certain school. The students as well as their peers were more likely to have to face repercussions for their behavior whilst wearing their uniform. They couldn’t hide behind the mask of an anonymous body and their behavior could be easily traced back to the group to which they belonged. The students further claim in the interview that in order to maintain control over a group, the rules of uniformity would be enforced in even stricter ways: "’When schools become rowdy, teachers police hairstyles, uniforms and tardiness, which really calms the students down’.”\textsuperscript{13}

Thus, it can be concluded that the uniform can render it’s wearer an ideal citizen, that the image of a uniform can be portrayed as something desirable, a way to better conform to the group one belongs to, and a means of modifying unwanted behavior. The uniform turns the wearer into a visible member of a group and makes it apparent to whomever he encounters that he is, triggering certain cues in the other party’s behavior. These facts would certainly indicate that the voluntary uniformity of the Japanese can be traced to discipline and social convention, however there are other social elements which are yet to be reviewed. A clearer answer might be found in what is so specific about Japanese culture and the history of how they first came to wear uniforms, and how it might make the uniform an important tool in the workings of Japanese society.

**Societal importance of costumes in Japanese Culture**

Japan has its own unique cultural history. An interesting dynamic that is almost unique to Japan has been the historical tendency to choose to isolate themselves, even going so far as to shut their borders for any international trade or communication for hundreds of years at a time.\textsuperscript{14} Therefore a certain amount of control could be exerted over the influences that the nation was subjected to by the cultures of other countries. After a long spell of isolation

\textsuperscript{12} Uniforms – The Japanese Fashion Everyone Loves, 2011
\textsuperscript{13} Uniforms – The Japanese Fashion Everyone Loves, 2011
\textsuperscript{14} Prasol; 2011:20
during what are historically referred to as the Tokugawa (1600-1876)\textsuperscript{15} and Meiji periods (1868-1912),\textsuperscript{16} it became so that Japan had little choice but to open their borders on behalf of Commodore Matthew Perry. The invasion succeeded mainly because the Japanese government were intimidated by the power of the British Navy, which had already wreaked havoc in other countries of East-Asia, namely China.\textsuperscript{17} Hence the Japanese nation were faced with a nation of people who could be said to have been technologically advanced. The appearance and technology of the British was a something completely different from what the Japanese were used to, as the Japanese had remained unchanged in culture, habits and customs for almost 200 years, the closing of their borders so strict that even returning Japanese citizens were unwelcome after a certain length of stay abroad.\textsuperscript{18} The way the Japanese dressed was also a subject of interest to the foreigners visiting Japan. “Common clothes are worn by both genders and all of the social classes wear similar garments; the only difference is the value and color of the fabric. The rich wear exactly the same shoes as do the poor.”\textsuperscript{19} Making the assumption that these foreign newcomers had already asserted themselves as technologically advanced as well as the winner over the Empire of China, it is likely the foreigners must have appeared rather intimidating and impressive to the Japanese, and so the Japanese used an old and trusted method of adapting innovation to their culture that had worked for them well in the past.

The cultural influence that the Japanese have historically adopted have usually followed a cyclical pattern when assimilating innovations and cultural changes. Their culture and habits had oft been influenced by the Chinese Empire, the most obvious everyday example being the written language that is currently still in use by the Japanese. When the specifically Japanese culture was still in development, they looked to the closest source of influence, China, an ancient empire rich in arts, culture and had developed a written language before the Japanese. The Chinese had been writing in an elaborate hieroglyphic script for over a thousand years, and the Japanese borrowed this script and adapted it to their own written language. It wasn’t until much later that a written language specifically native to Japan was developed, and today a mixture of both the borrowed script as well as native ones are used.\textsuperscript{20} This is a good example of the Japanese method of adapting to new technology, which can be said to be split

\textsuperscript{15} Tsutsui; 2009:70
\textsuperscript{16} Tsutsui; 2009:156
\textsuperscript{17} Tsutsui; 2009:73
\textsuperscript{18} Prasol; 2011:20
\textsuperscript{19} Prasol; 2011:39
\textsuperscript{20} Prasol; 2011:21
into three defined levels: Imitation, adaptation, improvement. Therefore, during the late 19th century, there was a trend of Japanese people attempting to emulate the foreigners’ attire. The uniform was fitted to the Japanese appearance and culture in order to establish the nation visibly as modernized.

“Uniforms were, in Japan, one of the first crucial visual expressions of modernity; the armed forces being the paramount place for modernization in the minds of the Meiji political elites, fearing Western domination. With astonishing speed, Japan not only created a modern force clothed in Western uniforms but also came to understand the importance of the fashion system which operated in the world’s militaries, imitating the most recent victorious power so as to appear as advanced as that power.”

This strongly suggests that the uniform had a great historical importance in Japan, how it was used as a means to assert their modernity in order to make themselves appear more civilized to the invading cultures of Western countries. The beginning of the twentieth century was a period of great changes for the Japanese, they had overthrown the government that had ruled for hundreds of years, reinstated the emperor and opened their borders to international trade. One fact that might be noted is the apparent speed with which the Japanese took to the uniform and made their own, even going so far as to follow whichever power was the greatest and mimicking their attire to uplift their apparent status. The uniform and the way the Japanese quickly adapted it to their culture and habits may inspire more thought about the Japanese ability to adapt so well to social changes. That may have something to do with the inner workings of Japanese society, mainly the Japanese emphasis on forming and maintaining group relationships. The donning of a uniform may indeed suggest that the Japanese are very willing to conform to a group and show it by wearing similar clothing to the other members of their group.

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21 Prasol; 2011:2
22 Slade; 2009:76-77
23 Tsutsui; 2009:73
The Uniform, Groups and Conformity in Japan

Anatomy of a group

Besides giving the wearer ideal and desirable attributes, another merit of the uniform is that it makes it easier for the wearer to identify with a group they choose to belong to. How a group comes to be and how one is a member of it is a subject folklorists Martha C. Sims and Martine Stephens delve into extensively in *Living Folklore*. They maintain that a group consists of individuals that share certain traits and behaviors with other members of the group. Belonging to a group can be said to be vital to an individual, the importance of belonging to a group stemming from human nature itself. It begins with the family group that one is born or adopted into. The family group will form who a person is through rearing, influencing the formation of their personality, manner of speech and customs, and many will adhere to the rules of the home, often long after they have left the original family group. Alongside belonging to a such a group, any individual will also be a member of even larger groups, with which they will share certain characteristics or traits. Nationality, gender, age, occupation and even race can all be considered as denoting separate groups that any individual belongs to, with some being easier to discern visually than others.\(^{24}\) Judging from this, a person may choose to leave some of the groups they are preordained to belong to, but belonging to others is an unchangeable fact. Race and age are, for example, mostly unchangeable, while

\(^{24}\) Sims, Stephens; 2011: 31-32
occupation and even gender can be changed or modified if an individual so wishes. By choosing to belong to a group, an individual is making a certain statement about their own person, and by making their membership visual, that statement is made even stronger. Changing uniforms can therefore mean that an individual has left one group to join another, the visual indicator serving as a means of creating distance from the original group.

Group orientation in Japan

In Japan, belonging to a group might hold an even greater importance, as the Japanese are inclined to put the group and its needs above that of the individual. From the time that Japanese children first enter primary school, they are instructed that above their own needs and desires, the well-being of the group they belong to is important. Not only is primary education in Japan standardized, but it is maintained that by treating all Japanese children the same, they will maintain certain similarities as adults. “Japanese still feel that education, not quite inborn differences, is the key to individual development. What is required for a well-functioning and fair modern social system is to give all children, at least at the elementary school level, the same education.” It is believed that if all children get the same treatments and experiences in childhood, they will grow into a more founded society of similar adults. Thus, a Japanese child is expected to show attributes and capabilities conforming to every other child of the same age in the whole country.

What goes on in the classroom itself delves even deeper into group orientation. An example of this is that the children are expected to clean their own classrooms from the time they enter the school life, this often includes the entire school building. The teachers join in, and the whole process is considered a tool for training the children to take responsibility for one another and their environment. Schoolchildren are made responsible for various tasks during the school day, such as putting chairs and tables in order, appointing their own class-leaders, taking responsibility for distributing meals to their classmates and so on. Through these activities, children are made to take care of one another, and the place that they inhabit during their school day. With this a sort of “family” is formed within the school group, a family that

25 Benjamin;1997: 25
26 Benjamin;1997: 34-36
takes over from the child’s original family group, with everyone taking care of one another as well as the place they inhabit. If a student is slow or unskilled, instead of being scolded by their peers, the other students, conscious of the whole group being in danger of a scolding, will take on more work to be able to have a positive result as a group. In many areas Japanese school children will wear a school uniform unique to their school starting from elementary school, while elsewhere they are only supposed to wear a yellow hat indicating their status. In wearing some visual representation of their school, their sense of unity and sameness will strengthen even further. In a way, a child loses its status as just a “child”, taking up the status of “student” once it enters elementary school and dons the uniform. Parents will even stop referring to the child’s age when speaking of them, instead informing whoever asks which year they are at in school.

This group oriented behavior, once ingrained in childhood, will be carried with the Japanese individual as they grow into adults. The Japanese worker is taught to put their company before themselves, even their family, as often the company he belongs to becomes a sort of family unit to the individual. “For Japanese, legitimate egotism includes nation egotism, company egotism or family egotism, not individual egotism.” For the individual to give up their own egotistical desires, the sense of membership within a group must be made stronger than just by informing them that they are members. This is where the uniform steps in as a unifier of the group’s individuals. “The idea of looking the same, carried over into livery and group identification, is at the heart of all fashionable desire, to be uniform with those we identify with.” In this way, he uniform enforces a certain amount of sameness on top of the attributes the wearers have in common as the members of the same group.

Thus, the Japanese preference of wearing a uniform and so maintaining the individual’s belongingness in the group which is put even in front of the individual’s own interests can partially be understood. Wearing a uniform can be a merit when forming a relationship between individuals, and a visual cue would be an easy indicator of shared interests, a way to tell who belongs to the same group. The fact that it seem so important to the Japanese people to be able to visually recognize one another as members of a specific group is curious. Is it purely because of the importance of the act of belonging itself? Besides the uniform, there are

27 Benjamin;1997: 54
28 SCHOOL LIFE IN JAPAN: SCHOOL DAY, LUNCHES, PINWORM CHECKS, CELL PHONES, RULES, 2013
29 Benjamin; 1997:38
30 Lebra; 1976:35
31 Lebra; 1976:35
other aspects of Japanese culture and everyday life where visual recognition and following the correct social cues can be vital to maintain an acceptable way of communication between individuals.

Japanese Respect Language and the Uniform

A foreigner comparing Japanese culture to that of his own may notice that there are certain appropriate ways of behaving as well as manners of speech dependent on what group or position a person, and the person they interact with, belongs to. The Japanese language possesses a number of distinctive grammatical frames, which apply to whether one is speaking to an equal, or not. The proper way of speaking to people can depend on their “age, gender, area of geographic origin (“dialect”), socioeconomic class, and profession.”

When addressing a teacher for example, a student may do so in a vastly different manner than when addressing a fellow student. When using polite language to someone more intimate, a member of one’s family group for instance, it can be considered a cold and distancing approach, while casually bantering with a teacher or superior in the workplace might seem overly casual and disrespectful. Being able to differentiate grammar usage correctly, a visual indicator of who is being addressed and what position they may hold in relation to one’s own before making an introduction can make the process of communicating with strangers considerably smoother.

It can be assumed that the language can be used to deliberately disrespect or demean the addressed, that or elevate into the position of a projected superior from the other’s own point of view and demeanour. Women are moreover expected to speak in a decidedly more demure and polite manner than men, which can be seen as discriminating between the sexes. On the other hand a group of people surveyed by questionnaire in Japan found a person more affable if the politer form of language was used. This might suggest that being talked to in a polite

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32 Wetzel; 2004:6
33 Wetzel; 2004:15
34 Wetzel; 2004:14
manner by a stranger might make the listener feel elevated socially, that it might make them feel that the speaker holds them in high esteem.

Confucian ideals strongly influence Japanese society, as it is considered one of the country’s main religions, and large part of the Japanese people consider themselves Confucian. The philosophy maintains the importance of filial piety, and the proper way to act and communicate between superiors and inferiors. Alexander Prasol discusses extensively how this affects Japanese society, stating that it is not “as much a religion as it is a code of social behavior.” The whole of Japanese society and the manner in which its people interact with one another is based on the five different forms of interaction, between “superior and an inferior, between parents and children, between a husband and a wife, between brothers and sisters, and between friends.” He goes further and claims that these Confucian ideals are the basis of Japanese society as a whole, as well as the cause for a certain drive to appoint each person their group and role within said group in Japan. This is also based on the assumption that each and every Japanese person can be sorted into these ten different groups depending on one’s own social perspective at any given time, but how would one be able to tell which group a stranger belongs to? If that person were to be wearing a uniform, the answer to that question is obvious. The uniform acts as a visual signal to trigger certain behavior, in view of the imposed social rule on communication as well as other general interaction between individuals in Japanese society. This also implies that the group formation in Japanese society is vital for it to function, thus it is important for the Japanese to assert their own status outwardly, so that the various rules and regulations in everyday etiquette can be respected.

These strict rules of communication and etiquette can be stifling, and when an individual wishes to break out of these social conventions, seeking advice from other members of a group of people who are in a similar state of opposition can provide solace and security.

**Safety in Numbers**

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35 Prasol; 2011: 283
36 Prasol, 2011: 63
37 Prasol, 2011: 63
When it comes to breaking out of a social pattern, a person may feel safer by conforming to a group of people that share a similar goal, and by using the group’s size, they all become an anonymous member of the larger group of individuals. They will not have to take sole responsibility for their actions anymore, as the purpose of the group is to share responsibility. There is a certain security in being one of many. In fact, if members of a group all wear the same uniform and conform to the groups ideals, one might claim that everyone who isn’t in uniform is an “other”, an outsider from the body of the uniformed group. So the members of the group can decide to stand together against that other, and thus form tighter bonds with their peers as they are all members of “the same”.

“People with different attributes can be led to feel that they are members of the same group, and that this feeling is justified, by stressing the group consciousness of ‘us’ against ‘them’, i.e. the external, and by fostering a feeling of rivalry against the other similar groups.”

This can be seen in the behavior of members of groups that pertain to subcultures that aren’t necessarily visual or normalized in everyday society, such as people who like dressing up as characters from anime, Japanese animation, or manga, Japanese comics. They will wear colorful and exaggerated outfits, using wigs, weapons and other accessories to interpret the chosen character, and in that manner standing out when amongst people in everyday clothing. When alone they might feel weak against the pressure to conform to normal society, and vulnerable to other people’s remarks and laughter. When in a group of other people dressed the same way however, they might even be said to enjoy the negative reactions and attention because as a group, they have “othered” the people who are not dressed the same way, and are stronger as a unified group than the people that are outside it. They might even go so far as to seek out to shock the outsiders, to strengthen the feeling of similarity within the group. The same might be said about the many groups of people that adhere to the other exaggerated subculture fashion movements in Japan. It might be claimed that following the fashion trends is something that Japanese people only do in their spare time, a kind of uniform they wear, instead of school or work uniforms, when they are free to.

**Fashion in Japan**

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38 Lebra; 1976:177-178
39 Sims, Stephens; 2011:61
In the streets of Japan’s larger cities, sometimes young people dressed in outrageous outfits can be observed. Colors and accessories and hair extensions abound, the youths will parade in trendy neighbourhoods such as Shibuya in Tokyo. To the one time observer these young people might appear to be completely out of tune with the rest of society, kids caught up in freedom of self-expression. The truth is, that by wearing these loud outfits they aren’t declaring their individuality, but actually conforming to separate groups of sub-culture fashion. The fashion groups maintain strict rules of what is admissible to wear and what isn’t, and offenders may find themselves excluded from the group.\textsuperscript{40} Often the members of these fashion groups will split into smaller alternative groups to accommodate their tastes and preferences. A group of girls mostly clad in exaggerated frilly skirts and doll-like ensembles in pinks, creams and other light colors would be referred to as lolita, a word pertaining youth and innocence in the spirit of Vladimir Nabokov’s novel \textit{Lolita}. Using the same term for definition, Gothic Lolita could wear similar cuts of outfit, however in darker colors and dreary patterns.\textsuperscript{41} While adhering to the same fashion in a sense, they’re still members of strictly separate groups. In some cases, the members of these groups go so far as to modifying their actual physical appearance through actions such as applying tanning lotions to their skin, dying or cutting their hair or getting specific piercings to conform to the group’s ideals.

Some of the fashion these groups wear can be directly connected to the actual uniform from which the members have deviated, school uniforms being the main casualties. In these cases the wearer would break the strict regulations and inhibitions set in place by the school, modifying the uniform into a completely different image.\textsuperscript{42} Often students will wear the uniforms in this manner even within the school, but in a way that can be easily reversed, e.g. by hitching up skirts or unbuttoning blouses and shirts. Young people in Japan often have a hard time with the social pressure they are under both at school and in their daily lives, and so choose to use fashion to get release, or at least have a little fun. In this manner, the average Japanese individual may see fashion as a different costume from that of the uniform they wear when they are conforming to everyday ideals, one that enables them to swap into a different kind of life when the pressure and stress of conforming gets too high. A Japanese person may therefore live a mundane life of an office worker during the day, then change their uniform and become someone else in their free time. “We choose groups that express identity we want to create for ourselves rather than find groups that express the identity (or perhaps, identities)

\textsuperscript{40} Evers, Macias; 2010:79
\textsuperscript{41} Sims, Stephens; 2011:60
\textsuperscript{42} Evers, Macias; 2010:46
we already have. We may seek new groups or reject groups that we belong to due to proximity or circumstance in order to express an identity that is closer to our own concept of who we are.”

Some people take membership in sub-culture groups more seriously than others, as conforming to said group may be more of a sacrifice, both socially and individually. In some cases the fashion group is not a simple visual statement, but an actual lifestyle. Fashion can be used to make a statement in society, a tool of protest against the conforming to normality. A good example of this would be Punks in the 80s and 90s in Europe and America, who would shave their heads and pierce their faces to make a statement, because they feel like society reacts to them in a way that is negative. In order to prove to society that maybe that’s correct, they try to differentiate their appearance from the norm, using that to stating their agenda.

Thus, a member of a group that assumes itself on the outskirts of society may feel unable to associate with non-members because that would go against the cause they stand for.

Above, a lot of positive social implications have been pondered, as well as the importance of conformity to the Japanese. The uniform, whether a tool to conform to a group of school peers, or a way to enforce membership in a chosen group, might even be considered to be a wholly positive phenomenon. However, as has been disclosed, such power over an individual or a group of individuals and their behavior, the uniform’s negative implications of the uniform and it’s role in Japanese society are also an interesting subject of study.

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43 Sims, Stephens; 2011:38
44 Sims, Stephens; 2011:37
Negative Implications of the Uniform

Uniform as a Social Separator

Though the uniform may have numerous positive connotations, there are instances where it has been used to discriminate, humiliate or even punish the wearer. In settlement era Australia, a certain uniform was used as a way to punish people who broke the law. They’d be made to wear a pair of brightly colored trousers, which made it obvious that they had done something wrong, and as fabric was of short supply in the country it was difficult to bypass the punishment once it was enacted. The wearer understandably found this to be extremely humiliating, as it became public knowledge that he was a wrongdoer.\(^{45}\) The recognizability made it easier for the wearer to be made into “an other”, or a member of a different group from those who wore no such trousers. Any kind of uniform can be perceived as a prison of certain ideals that an individual may not be able to fulfill at every moment of their life.

Thus, belonging visibly to a certain class or group of people can mean that when wearing a uniform, a person is unable to escape their projected image or role. An individual "becomes closely identified with [his] uniformed status and only with [his] status. Often he must remove [his] uniform to escape [his] obligations as a member of the group."\(^{46}\) So when in uniform, some behavior may be unacceptable to those who witness it, while the same behavior may not be considered a problem when committed by someone not wearing a uniform. This can also be seen in the previous chapter’s interview with Japanese students, although the interview

\(^{45}\) Craik; 2007:49
\(^{46}\) Joseph, Alex; 1972:726
itself was held in a rather positive light. Being made to embody a certain ideal may not be
desirable in every situation, as a person is not necessarily always the one in control of said
situation. A student may do their best to fulfill the projected ideal and exhibit desirable
behavior, even following every rule to the fullest, their actions may be taken out of context
and cause them to be unjustly punished. In this way, the anonymity and conformity of
wearing a uniform takes no heed of an individual’s personal situation, which can make the
wearing of the uniform oppressive and stressful. The uniform may also act as a separatory
element in communication between two individuals already familiar with each other. “Even
between the same two persons different degrees of respect will be called for on different
occasions: a civilian may be on familiar terms with another and not bow to him at all, but
when he wears a military uniform his friend in civilian clothes bows to him.”

This might cause some stress in the relationship between the wearer and the other party.
The relationship between individuals that the uniform can inspire is not always of a
completely desirable ilk, as the image that the uniforms stands for might also make the wearer
vulnerable to the unwanted attentions of those who chase after certain type of interactions.

**Sexualisation of the Uniform**

As the Uniform is often seen as a status symbol, a way to show the merit and worth of the
wearer, its positive qualities can also be said to be a marketing device. The Japanese school
uniform is ideally worn by young, pure and innocent school girls, which in a certain setting
can be used to entice a buyer who seeks out these qualities in a “product”. In Japan, high
school girl prostitution is not unheard of, as girls are able to use their uniform and its visual
representation to make themselves more desirable to those who seek that kind of service.

Often it doesn’t go as far as actual sex, but school girls will go out on “dates” with elderly
men, and accept presents or other trinkets as tokens of the buyers affection. In Japanese pop-
culture, the school uniform has long had a connection with the carnal, used as a tool to pitch
products and music to the consumer. In the song *Se-ra fuku wo nugasanaide* or, “Don’t make

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47 Benedict; 1946:47
48 *A Plain School Uniform the Latest Aphrodisiac*, 1997
me take off my school uniform”, a young girl pleads to someone to “please be patient,” because the time is not right, rather than it being wrong to remove the girl’s clothing.49 The lyrics of the song strongly suggest that the singer is anticipating sex with the listener, if only he can maintain composure long enough for them to get somewhere private. This song was originally released in 1985, but performed again recently by members of the pop-idol mega band, AKB48, the audience of which is mostly male. The members of AKB48 are even regulated in their private lives to keep up the image they are supposed to project for their fans, the pure and innocent young girl. When a member was found out to have broken the band’s “no-dating rule”, she shaved her head and apologized tearfully in a video she uploaded for her fans to see.50 This suggests that when this young girl broke the projected image of a girl band member, she had to degrade herself as punishment and sacrifice her appearance by shaving away all her hair, in order to appease the men that had been her fans.

Another apparent problem with the sexualisation of the uniform is that the targeted uniform wearer group keeps getting younger. Only a few decades ago, the Japanese “OL”s, or Office Ladies, were the main objects of desire, but they are women that have already graduated university and gotten employed by larger companies.51 This group of women was also strongly recognizable by a certain uniform, a company specific set of clothing that all female employees were obligated to wear, regardless of their position within the company. Laura J. Kriska, an American woman working within the Japanese office hierarchy, found these uniforms revolting as they placed every woman on the same level; below the men. As adamant as she had been about wearing the uniform of a cheerleading team at her school, she was just as adamant about abolishing the rule that women had to conform to wearing such a demeaning outfit.

On the subject of disliking a uniform or wanting to abolish a rule, there are certain “uniforms” or attributes that cannot be shed, as they may not necessarily be clothing.

49 Morning Musume – Sailor Fuku [eng sub], 2012
50 Minami Minegishi, of Japan’s teen girl band “AKB48,” shaves head, apologizes for having boyfriend, 2013
51 A Plain School Uniform the Latest Aphrodisiac, 1997
The Uniform One Can Not Take Off

When one is unable to conform to the group one wishes to belong to, what does that make one as an individual? Many traits are beyond the individual’s control, some people are overweight, while some have different skin color or other visual differences. In Japan, a certain group of people referred to as the *burakumin* are a good example, they have the misfortune of having been born into the wrong family, and by being members of their family group they have inherited their ancestors’ position in an abolished caste system. Despite the caste system no longer being in existence, they still have to face consequences such as poorer education and employment opportunities, and being confined to cheap housing provided by the government in allotted areas. To escape this fate some burakumin go as far as changing their family names and moving to a different part of the country to be rid of their alleged inferiority of status.52 This way, without an actual uniform or visual indicator in modern times, an outdated social caste still lingers in the descendants, making it difficult for them to break out of the applied social shackles. When the uniform an individual wears, or the group they belong to, are socially appointed, it may not necessarily be in their own best interest.

Another problem with the glorification of group conformity and uniform behavior is that not everyone has it in their power to physically conform to every desirable trait of the ideal individual. When an individual differs from the social group in which they are unconsenting members, what are the consequences? Many school children, who for some reason differ from their peers will be subjected to bullying. In some cases they don’t differ at all, the bullying commencing at the whim of other members of their group. In Japan, a certain method of bullying is employed, namely social exclusion. "Typical Japanese bullying takes the form of most of the class tormenting a classmate every day by collectively ignoring, or deliberately excluding him or her solely because he or she is somewhat different from the others."53 Often the teachers and other supervisors have been known to take part in such bullying, rendering the recipient completely helpless. In a group oriented society, what implications does this have for the victim? The sufferer, having entered a new social group outside of its family is in a predicament. The child no longer has “peers”, it is completely alone. Considering that the Japanese school system is mainly focused on encouraging group oriented behavior, the victim becomes stuck between being told to conform by their superiors, and rejected from

52 *On Living in the Wrong Neighbourhood in Japan*, 2013
53 Tanaka; 2001:465
conforming by its uniformed peers. The result is complete rejection, on par with that of an irrereplaceable caregiver who has been denied to the child. The individual subjected to this kind of bullying may resort to extreme cases of social isolation, where they break down and refuse to leave the comfort of their family group or area, becoming what the Japanese refer to as hikikomori, or a recluse.

The Hikikomori are a group of people that have completely withdrawn from society, ranging in severity of a period of a couple of months, up to decades at a time. The environment within Japanese schools is extremely stressful, both academically and socially. It can be a matter of an individual’s entire future how well they do academically in their early teens, which also happens to be the age when a person is at the peak of emotional growth, and therefore vulnerable to pressure. Another pressure point that is applied at this time is an added emphasis on uniform appearance. Upon entering high school, the peak of the uniform regulation is reached, and as discussed above the uniform is used as a tool of control and discipline. So when a person is bullied because they cannot change their appearance to fit with the other members of the group, the person chooses to withdraw completely and never show themselves again. The fact that the reaction to rejection by peers results in complete isolation can further support the statement that groups are really important to the individual, as is being able to express a sense of sameness with peers. Being outside of a group could almost be said to be similar to non-existence in a group oriented society, and therefore, when rejected, the person feels like they don’t exist or matter anymore.

The feeling of being isolated, different, or useless can have serious consequences in an individual’s psyche. The stress of maintaining the expected image, succeeding academically and keeping up with one’s peers may be a big factor in one serious social implication Japan has been facing for a long time. When the individual gives up and feels that there is no other way out other than taking their own lives. Suicide is the last option, and a more common one in Japan than elsewhere in the world, to those who do not see another way out.

**Dying to Conform**

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54 *The Japanese hikikomori phenomenon, 2008*
55 Benjamin; 1997:78
When a person resorts to suicide, it can be assumed it is because they cannot think of another way to solve the problem they are facing. In Japan, however, a suicide has more than just one specific meaning. According to the group conscious Japanese, the act of suicide may be considered to be the last act of self sacrifice and dedication for the benefit of the group. An honorary suicide, to clear one’s name and that of one’s group is not an uncommon occurrence in Japanese history. In WWII, military officials instructed groups, hundreds and thousands of both civilians and troops, to submit to committing suicide for the benefit of the state rather than be captured by the enemy. Another Japanese military tactic was the kamikaze, or fighter pilots that crashed their aircraft into strategic vessels of the enemy, sacrificing their lives for their country. “People were led to venerate kamikaze pilots as saints. In the kamikaze mission, the suicidal act attained such perfect legitimacy that it was not conceived as suicidal.”56 The pilots, belonging to the group of the Japanese were not being “self-destructive”, but giving up their lives in order to destroy the “others”, or non-members of their group.

By committing suicide, the individual is making their last stand towards their group, whether they are in agreement with the groups ideals, or if the individual wishes to give the group one last message by their action.

“the Japanese sense of guilt, generated by an empathetic understanding of another person’s suffering, is maximized in the face of this extreme form of masochism, suicide.” A Japanese person may be guilted into acting out on the suicide committers last requests, either by feeling guilt or being pressured into it by other sympathizers.57

Thus, when an individual feels they are being pressured into doing something against their will, by their group or those outside of it, they may resort to suicide as a last resort, as a way to get their tormentors to feel remorse and to realize the gravity of their actions. When self-expression and non-conformity are is frowned upon, and those who for one reason or another are barred from conforming, there can exist a situation where children as young as 6 years old resort to suicide as a means of escape. With a suicide rate of over 30,000 people a year for the last decade, suicides could be considered a major social problem in Japan.58 How many of them are due to the conformist and uniform culture of Japan is indiscernible, but considering how important belonging to a group and wearing the visual indicators to make that apparent are to Japanese society, it can certainly be assumed that it is also one of the factors in this

56 Lebra; 1976:191
57 Lebra; 1976:192
58 Children’s depression and suicide a worsening problem, 2009
social dilemma. If the importance of Conformity and Uniformity is more than that of the individual's life, it might be time to re-prioritize.

Conclusion

The uniform as a concept is important to the Japanese and their culture. It provides a way which makes conforming to the social groups that make up Japanese society easier. From the time Japanese children start school, emphasis is put on being able to perform in a group and helping other members. The group, whether it is family, school or company where an individual works, becomes the main priority of the individual, a person often giving up their own goals and wants to be able to fulfill that which is required by their group. Japanese social etiquette also relies on the ability to quickly assess the status of another person to be able to perform and speak in tune with societal rules. The uniform also plays a rule in Japan's history, Japanese people do have certain freedom to choose a group to belong to, finding their peers through fashion or common interests such as anime or music. But others that may dislike their social group or status may not have the freedom to change their position. Having a hard time conforming to the uniform appearance that is expected of people in their every day lives may be a cause of added stress, going so far as to pushing people to commit themselves to isolation, or even taking their own lives. The uniform which is chosen, as well as the uniform which is not, has certain power over the individual, as well as providing security, anonymity and encouraging people to act within the projected social image of the uniform they wear. Therefore, I believe that it is important to the Japanese psyche, and that wearing a uniform is something that elevates social stress and provides a Japanese person with the ability to meld into the group that they belong to, the group that takes precedence over other things in a Japanese person's life. Therefore, a Japanese person, whether dressed in a sailor uniform or fashionable outfits is making the statement that they are a member of a group of unified members.
Bibliography


