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Stigmatizing Labels, Peer Conformity, and Campus Group Exclusion: A Review of the Mechanisms of Identity-Based Bullying

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Abstract. The exclusion and bullying targeting minority groups--including sexual minorities, individuals with disabilities, and orphans--have become observable social phenomena in Chinese campus settings. This review examines, from a social psychological perspective, how the herd effect operates within physical campus environments to trigger, amplify, and consolidate prejudice and discrimination held by majority groups toward minority students. Adopting a literature review methodology, this paper synthesizes Asch's conformity experiments, behaviorist theory, Freudian individual unconscious, Jungian collective unconscious, and empirical studies on school bullying and peer conformity published over the past two decades. The central argument proposes a "three-tiered ladder" through which the herd effect function: first, linguistic stigmatization transforms neutral identity labels such as "gay" and" Tang"(a colloquial abbreviation for Down Syndrome in Chinese, used similarly to offensive slurs like "mong" in English) into tools of humiliation; second, social isolation dismantles the victim's support network; and third, peer pressure escalates into physical violence and property damage. This mechanism is significantly amplified within the Chinese collectivist educational context, where the physical inseparability of fixed-class systems extends conformity pressure from temporary behavior into chronic survival anxiety.

Keywords: Sexual Minority student, Peer Conformity, Linguistic Stigmatization, Chinese campus, Identity-Based Bullying

1. Introduction

It is a common issue that group-based exclusion and verbal bullying against minority students occur on campus. The writer's two personal experiences illustrate this issue. In the first case, the author was bullied for having a different musical taste from others, and the bullying became fiercer after the writer's sexual orientation was exposed, leading to harsh humiliation. In the second case, the author's English pronunciation was complimented by a foreign teacher, which made some students really annoyed, and a simple argument turned into physical conflict.

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The author's experiences show that these are not unusual. Nowadays, memes like "xxx is gay" and "little Tang" have become quite common among young people. According to a report by China Youth Daily, a middle school student in Chongqing used the term "Tang" to mock a classmate. The word came from "Down Syndrome", but it has become a common insult on campus [1]. The report shows that most minors who repeat those memes are just doing it for fun, and they don't really know the actual meaning of those offensive "memes". These phenomena may also have a strong link with the institutional signals. In 2006, the queer students at Sun Yat-sen University were the first group of queers that were allowed to register their LGBT student group in mainland China. It was called the " Rainbow Club". But a year later, pressure from the institutional level killed it. In July 2021, more than ten universities, including Tsinghua and Peking University, had their LGBT student group WeChat public accounts blocked [2]. In May 2022, Bilibili creator "Yishiji" killed himself after coming out of the closet. His comment sections were filled with that kind of "warm" comment--like "He deserves to die" and "Gay men deserve it"--and those "kind-hearted" people's comments received thousands of likes [3, 4]. These events show a pattern: when institutions are telling people that minorities should be hidden, most people will show their hostility to minority groups, whether the minorities are queers or disabled.

In a famous social psychology experiment, Asch found that about 32% of participants went along with the majority's judgement in a simple task, even when the majority was 100% wrong [5, 6]. There's a lot of work on conformity in Western psychology, but researchers have fewer theories about it on Chinese campuses. Li observed that existing research "remains limited in scope and often restricted to specific geographic region" [7]. Domestic research studies on how offline group dynamics produce prejudice on campus are also scarce, especially on the link between linguistic stigmatization and peer conformity.

The review focuses on 3 questions. How does peer pressure turn neutral identity labels into bullying tools? How does the collectivist context make this worse? And what does it do to the minorities mental health?

2. Methodology

2.1. Review design

This review uses a literature review method. The searches were done in June 2026. The author used PubMed, Project Gutenberg, Internet Archive, Google Scholar, and SimplyPsychology.org as main sources. The publication dates covered classic theory (1921–1959) and empirical studies from the last 20 years (2005–2025). News reports for case studies were found through targeted Google searches.

2.2. Search strategy

The author got most of the essays from PubMed, Project Gutenberg, Internet Archive, Google Scholar, and SimplyPsychology.org.

I picked 3 essays from PubMed. Meyer explains how prejudice makes minorities stressed. That shows the herd effect actually affects people's mental health [8]. Li realizes that campus bullying leads to depression among Chinese LGB students. This connects to the mental health discussion later in the author's paper [7]. Bandura explains why bystanders won't stop the bullying--they may blame others or stop treating victims as human. That helps people understand why bullying keeps happening even without all the people joining in [9].

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The author used Freud, Jung, and Asch's conformity experiment as classic theories. Freud explains how group relationships can weaken an individual's moral judgement [10]. This review uses Jung's theories of the collective unconscious to argue that hostility to gay men in China is not some kind of ancient archetype but something new built into the culture [11]. Asch found that about 32% of people will follow a wrong answer just to fit in with the "normal people" and "mainstream". The author's paper uses his data to discuss the conformity in the campus [5, 6].

The author found these news articles and case studies through Google. Yang Xinyu's report shows how linguistic bullying(those "lovely" internet "memes") works in reality. Reports on the 2021 queer students group WeChat account suspensions show the institutional level that the author mentioned in the intro. The Yishiji suicide case shows what is going to happen when minorities try to express themselves in public--- "kind-hearted" people pour out their "love". Rednet, Phoenix News, and Sina News provide the data that the author used in the Results section---about heterosexual marriage among sexual minorities and the rough number of "Women married to gay men" in China.

3. Results

3.1. Behaviorism

From a behaviorist perspective, individual responses within groups are shaped by external stimuli--the classic S-R(stimulus-response) model [12]. In campus settings, students are bound to relatively stable peer groups over extended periods of time--even in schools that have adopted flexible class scheduling, the mechanisms of stable classification and evaluation of individual identity persist. Once an individual is labeled as "deviant", that label becomes difficult to reverse within group cognition and serves as an anchor for sustained social punishment. However, the cross-contextual transfer of labels is not automatic: its occurrence depends on specific conditions- the labeler must possess sufficient group endorsement in a new environment; without peer confirmation, the stigmatizing power of the label weakens, and conformity behavior will not be triggered. In other words, conformity behavior depends on whether the label has been collectively recognized as "valid" within the current group.

To achieve a minimum level of survival comfort, individuals are compelled to respond to group norms, regardless of whether those norms align with their own judgments. Within this framework, behaviors that deviate from the mainstream, such as "listening to classical music")expose individuals to exclusion and attack, whereas conformist behavior affords them immediate social rewards.

Behaviorism's reinforcement mechanisms further explain how conformity is maintained: participation in verbal humiliation of minority groups rapidly garners peer laughter and approval(positive reinforcement), while refusal to participate or defending the bullied invites immediate social punishment-- "Are you gay?" or marginalization [5, 6, 8]. Additionally, classical conditioning provides a lens for understanding the automatic injuriousness of derogatory memes. The term "Gay", having been repeatedly paired with negative evaluation such as "dirty" and "abnormal" in the course of long-term social stigmatization, has evolved into a conditioned stimulus--the mere appearance of the word can automatically trigger contempt or rejection responses [12].

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3.2. Psychoanalysis

If behaviorism explains "how behavior is shaped by the environment," psychoanalysis further asks: what happens to the individual's internal psychological structure at the moment they integrate into a group?

Freud argued that group membership suspends the superego, releases the id, dissolves individual responsibility, and makes emotions and behaviors highly contagious [10, 12]. Watching and laughing in person gives people cover to do things they wouldn't do alone—like in the author's own experience, where the laughter wasn't based on individual judgment but on copying what the group felt.

Freud didn't explain why the word "Gay" triggers such irrational reactions. Jung's collective unconscious gives a clue: it holds universal images shared by all humans [11]. Yet this review argues that contemporary Chinese rejection of homosexuality is not a universal archetype but a collectively unconscious pattern artificially inscribed under specific historical and contemporary conditions. This inscription proceeds through 3 layers:

External implantation--conservative self-media and news outlets amplify negative narratives within sexual minorities, implanting the equation "homosexuality=abnormal" into public consciousness, serving as the bellwethers of the herd effect.

Internal extremization-under this distorted framework, any same-sex intimacy risks being labeled "homosexual", regardless of actual orientation. This structurally mirrors the McCarthy-era "Lavender Scare" in the U.S; once a stigmatizing label is formed, it becomes weaponized against any "non-compliant" individual.

Spatial compression-minority identities and intimate relationships lack formal recognition within the existing legal framework. This institutional invisibility signals the absence of counter-discriminatory endorsement comparable in strength to discriminatory stances, thereby granting structural permission for stigmatizing labels-as noted in 3,1, a label's efficacy depends on collective recognition of its validity, Survey data indicate that 84.1% of married sexual minorities are in opposite-sex marriage [13], and number of "tongqi" (women married to gay men in the Chinese context) in China is estimated at 16 million [14, 15]-not deception by sexual minorities, but forced adaptation under institutional absence, later recast in public narratives as moral failure.

The cumulative outcome: male same-sex intimacy, once referred to in ancient China through neutral terms like "Longyang zhi hao" (the "preference of Longyang" — a classical Chinese term for male same-sex intimacy derived from a Warring States period anecdote), has been re-coded as "yin-yang inversion" and "in-auspiciousness", setting into a pre-rational aversive response to "homosexuality". Just as Jung used the image of a cliff to illustrate the automatic fear embedded in the collective unconscious, "homosexuality" has become a conditioned cultural stimulus that triggers rejection for some individuals.

3.3. The campus-based adaptation of the Asch paradigm

Asch's experiment showed that in a face-to-face setting with a neutral line-judgement task, about 32% of participants conformed to the majority. However, participants only interacted for minutes in a lab, lacking real long-term relationships--whereas in actual campus settings, peer groups persist over time with stable identity classification mechanisms.

Temporal differences: Conformity in Asch's experiment was a short-term response ending with the experiment. In campus settings, group relationships last for years. Long-term face-to-face

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interaction turns conformity from a temporary move into something needed to survive every day—the cost of stepping out becomes "social death," not just getting a question wrong.

But the stimuli are different now. Asch's task was neutral—no moral weight. On campus, the stimuli are stigmatized labels like "Gay" and "Tang." When conformity changes from making a wrong judgment to hurting others, people feel less responsible as a group. That weakens individual resistance—the idea that "everyone did it, so no one's really to blame" lets people lower their guard when they're in a group; this can be seen in Figure1.

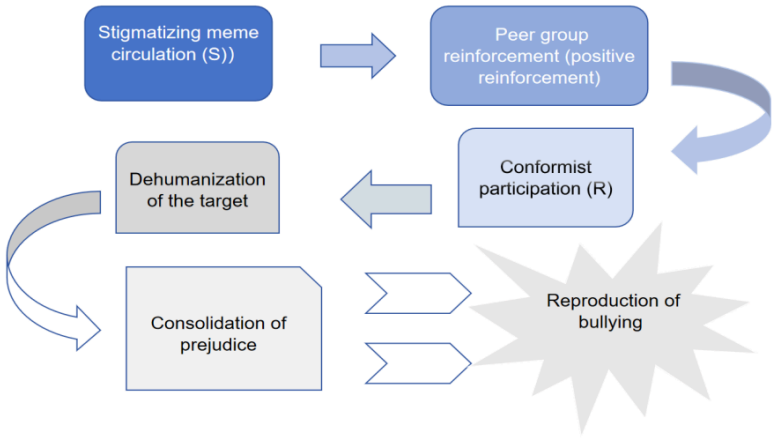


Figure 1. Theoretical model of the herd effect in campus

4. Discussion

4.1. Contextual conditions affecting peer conformity in Chinese campuses

In Chinese campuses, fixed- class organization, long-term stable peer relationships, and limited opportunities for group exit constitute the institutional foundation that sustains the influence of peer norms. Students find it difficult to change classes or schools within a span of several years and must continuously face the same peer group, which transforms conformity from a one-time choice into a daily strategy requiring repeated confirmation. This organizational feature itself is not a necessary condition for the occurrence of the herd effect--as noted in 3.1, the effectiveness of a label depends on whether the group has recognized it as "valid", rather than on whether the administrative unit is fixed. However, when the above conditions are present, the duration of peer norm influence may be extended, and conformity pressure thereby gains a more sustained operational space. This interpretation awaits further cross-school or cross- cultural validation.

4.2. Psychological consequences of the herd effect and mechanisms of exception

The sustained operation of the herd effect in campus settings first falls upon the mental health of bullied individuals. Minority stress theory points out that stigma, prejudice, and discrimination create a hostile and stressful social environment, which in turn leads to mental health problems. Domestic empirical research also supports this pathway: school bullying experiences affect the mental health of Chinese LGB students through self-stigmatization. Repeated verbal attacks and social isolation can make people stay alert all the time and feel emotionally drained. Over time, that can look a lot like depression. The author's own experience is one example of this.

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The herd effect doesn't just rely on the bullies themselves. It also needs bystanders who do nothing. Bandura's theory explains how people can take part in or allow bad things without feeling bad about it—by seeing victims as less human, spreading responsibility around, or reinterpreting what they did. On campus, bystanders often say things like "I was just joking," "everyone says so," or "he's really weird." That turns verbal violence into normal talk, so the herd effect keeps going and no one feels guilty.

It's worth noting that not everyone follows the crowd. The Asch experiment found that about 25% of participants stuck with their own judgment. But in China's collectivist campus context, those "independent individuals" pay a much higher price than they would in Western cultures—not conforming can mean years of isolation and exclusion within a fixed class system. Strangely, their mental health often suffers more than those who conform, because they choose to face rejection rather than give up who they are. This isn't weakness—it's a sign of intellectual honesty.

5. Conclusion

This review asked how peer pressure turns neutral identity labels into bullying tools on campus. Using behaviorism, psychoanalysis, and the Asch experiment, it argues that this happens in three steps: it starts with insulting language, then moves to social isolation, and finally becomes physical violence when group identification gets strong enough.This process gets stronger in China's collectivist campus context—not because of fixed classes themselves, but because groups keep validating identity labels. Institutional limits on minority visibility quietly give permission for this validation. Based on this, suggest three things. First, schools should stop the stigmatizing language right away—stopping group laughter or jeering on the spot works better than punishing later. Second, education should include media literacy about sexual minorities in anti-bullying programs, so students can see the stigmatizing mechanisms behind insulting memes, not just be told not to swear. Third, online platforms need to step in on the spread of "neutral-to-insult" shifts by setting up identification and traffic-limiting tools at the content level. As a theoretical review, this framework still needs real-world testing. Future studies could build on this preliminary analysis of the link between insulting language and peer conformity by developing measurement scales or doing cross-school comparisons.

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