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The Asch Conformity Problem: From Domestic Pressure to Cognitive Passivity and Its Implications for Students' Autonomous Thinking

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Abstract
High levels of social conformity among university students often hinder independent decision-making and critical thinking. While classic social psychology frames conformity primarily as a peer-group dynamic as demonstrated in Solomon Asch's seminal experiments. This study investigates the manifestation of conformity among undergraduate students across three major universities in Indonesia and traces its psychosocial roots. A qualitative approach was employed, combining semi-structured in-depth interviews (N=36) and direct participant observation in academic and socio-cultural campus settings. The findings reveal a distinct trajectory of conformity: systemic psychological pressure and authoritarian parenting within the internal family environment establish a baseline of compliance long before students encounter peer groups. When transitioning to higher education, this internalized pressure manifests as acute self-doubt, anxiety over social divergence, and defensive alignment with majority opinions. Contrary to traditional models that view peer pressure as the primary driver of conformity, this study demonstrates that academic conformity is an amplified continuation of domestic psychological conditioning. Framed through the philosophy of education, this developmental dynamic systematically degrades critical thinking skills and undermines epistemic autonomy, rendering students passive recipients of collective consensus rather than independent analytical thinkers. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña model. Practically, these findings urge higher education institutions to design learning spaces that guarantee epistemic safety and legitimize intellectual dissent to foster students' cognitive autonomy.

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Introduction

The classic experiments conducted by Solomon Asch, a Polish-born social psychologist, examined conformity to illustrate a fundamental human tendency to sacrifice objective perception in order to align with group consensus (Alhamdika & Neviyarni, 2025). Within contemporary global academic dynamics, this phenomenon is no longer confined to simple laboratory simulations; rather, it has evolved into a complex psychosocial reality within higher education environments. The pressure to conform to the majority frequently triggers groupthink, which diminishes the diversity of perspectives in intellectual discourse. This condition is exacerbated by informational and normative social influence mechanisms that lead students to perceive majority opinion as the singular truth to avoid social isolation (Sjöberg & Karlsson, 2023). Consequently, academic spaces intended as arenas for critical dialectic experience cognitive stagnation as individuals prioritize social acceptance over analytical rigor. This phenomenon indicates that conformity does not merely govern outward behavior but deeply restructures students' cognitive decision-making processes (Moreno-Fernández et al., 2024). In an era of information overload and intense social network pressures, individuals require robust epistemic resilience to avoid falling into collective bandwagon tendencies (Zhang & Chen, 2021). Therefore, re-examining Asch's conformity construct within modern educational settings is vital for understanding how group dynamics affect the integrity of individual reasoning (Al-Zahrani, 2022).

In the context of Indonesian higher education, conformity is not merely a transient peer-group interaction dynamic, but a dominant behavioral pattern and mindset among university students. Empirically, evidence from the field reveals that many undergraduate students in Indonesia exhibit a structured reluctance to articulate dissenting ideas, tend to defer to majority decisions during group discussions, and demonstrate a strong dependence on group social norms to avoid resistance (Pratama & Lestari, 2022). This inclination frequently manifests as self-censorship, wherein students deliberately withhold critical arguments out of fear of provoking open confrontation with peers or lecturers. Within an academic ecosystem that prioritizes communal alignment, dissenting opinions are often misconstrued as a form of disobedience or a lack of group solidarity (Nugraha & Setiawan, 2024). Consequently, false consensus becomes a normalized survival mechanism in the lecture hall, impeding the cultivation of a healthy culture of intellectual dialectic (Sari et al., 2025). Indonesian social culture, which is deeply imbued with collectivist values and communal harmony, often inadvertently reinforces this passivity in the classroom, where the courage to refute or express differing views is still perceived as a threat to group cohesion (Wibowo et al., 2023).

Research on peer-group conformity has been extensively documented across diverse cultural and geographical contexts. In the United States, Chen (2020) found that despite the dominance of an individualistic culture, university students still exhibit significant classroom conformity driven by fear of negative evaluation from peers. Meanwhile, a study in Taiwan by Lin and Wang (2021) underscored that academic conformity in East Asia is triggered by face-saving pressures and adherence to academic hierarchies. In China, Wang et al. (2023) identified that collectivist orientations and tight group norms directly suppress students' impulse to

experiment with independent ideas. Consistent with these findings, recent comparative research in Southeast Asia by Tan and Lim (2024) revealed that hierarchical social structures exacerbate students' tendencies to align with group authority to maintain social acceptance. Furthermore, a study by Park and Kim (2025) in South Korea demonstrated that conformity pressure directly correlates with a decline in students' academic self-efficacy in defending rational arguments amid majority opinion. Even within digitally mediated collaborative learning environments, individuals from collectivist cultural backgrounds continue to display high levels of normative compliance toward group consensus (Alvarez & Mendoza, 2024). Within the domestic Indonesian context, Santoso and Kusuma (2022) confirmed that student conformity in the classroom is driven by the normative need for acceptance within campus social networks.

Although conformity literature has thoroughly documented the roles of normative and informational social influence, most studies focus primarily on the peer environment and situational classroom pressures as the main variables. However, applying Asch's paradigm uncritically to Indonesian higher education overlooks the fact that an individual's structure of social compliance does not originate in the classroom, but is constructed much earlier through family communication systems oriented toward consensus and communal harmony (Nurhayati et al., 2025). In collectivist societies like Indonesia, hierarchical parent-child relationships tend to normalize authoritarian parenting styles that suppress personal autonomy and establish absolute obedience as a moral standard from early childhood (Fajri & Kusumaningrum, 2024). Consequently, shifting the locus of analysis from peer-group interactions to the domestic family sphere is crucial for uncovering the psychosocial roots that render Indonesian students highly susceptible to conformity pressures upon entering academia. The state of the art of this study offers a novel perspective: student conformity does not emerge abruptly within the university environment, but is rooted in psychological pressures within the internal family sphere, such as authoritarian parenting, early restrictions on expressing opinions, and expectations of absolute obedience. This internalized domestic pressure forms a fragile mental schema that subsequently shapes campus cognition and behavior, characterized by self-doubt regarding the validity of personal thoughts and profound anxiety about appearing different from one's peer group.

The urgency of this study is pressing given the strategic function of higher education as an incubator for independent learners. Viewed through the lens of the philosophy of education specifically Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy and Immanuel Kant's notion of epistemic autonomy this structured and internalized conformity causes a fatal weakening of critical thinking functions and erodes students' epistemic autonomy (Rahayu, 2024). Without a deep understanding of the domestic roots of conformity, universities risk failing in their mission as arenas of intellectual liberation, instead becoming factories that reproduce cognitive passivity and social conformism (Suryani & Wijaya, 2023; Abebe et al., 2024).

Based on the problem background and literature gap outlined above, this qualitative study aims to investigate the manifestations and psychosocial trajectory of Aschian conformity among Indonesian university students. To guide this inquiry with focus and depth, the study addresses two fundamental research questions: (1) How is the psychosocial trajectory of internal family

pressure internalized and manifested as cognitive self-doubt and divergence anxiety in the behavior of students across three universities in Indonesia? (2) What are the implications of this internalized conformity for students' critical thinking capacities and epistemic autonomy when examined from the perspective of the philosophy of education?

By answering these two research questions through qualitative in-depth interviews and direct observations across three Indonesian universities, this study is expected to make a significant theoretical contribution to the integration of social psychology and the philosophy of education. Moreover, these findings offer an empirical foundation for formulating pedagogical strategies capable of dismantling cycles of defensive conformism while reconstructing academic spaces that foster cognitive courage and rational autonomous thinking among students (Hasanah & Hidayat, 2025). The study also seeks to enrich the conceptual understanding of how students negotiate authority, conformity, and intellectual autonomy within higher education institutions. It further highlights the importance of creating dialogical learning environments in which critical inquiry, intellectual independence, and constructive disagreement are encouraged as essential components of academic development. Ultimately, this research is expected to contribute to the development of a more reflective and emancipatory educational framework that positions students as active, autonomous, and critically engaged participants in the learning process.

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach to explore the subjective experiences, meanings, and psychological constructs underlying students' conformist behavior. The research was conducted across three universities in Indonesia representing distinct institutional variations: a public university, a religiously affiliated private university, and a multicultural private university. Using purposive sampling, 36 undergraduate students (18 males and 18 females) from various academic disciplines were selected based on their pronounced tendency to follow group decisions in both academic and extracurricular settings. Specific criteria for key informants included active enrollment in at least the fourth semester and identified experiences of self-doubt and high conformity tendencies within group dynamics. Each in-depth interview session lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Data collection involved semi-structured in-depth interviews and direct participant observation. The interviews were designed to trace family upbringing histories, experiences of social pressure, and personal versus group decision-making dynamics. Additionally, direct observations were conducted during classroom interactions (group discussions and lecturer Q&A sessions) and student organization activities to observe non-verbal responses and verbal verifications when dissenting opinions arose. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis based on the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña model, encompassing data reduction, data display through theme-based coding (e.g., *internalized family pressure*, *divergence anxiety*, *epistemic passivity*), and conclusion drawing. To ensure data credibility and trustworthiness, the study applied methodological triangulation by cross-checking interview transcripts with field observation notes, source triangulation across

institutional backgrounds, and member checking to verify the alignment of transcripts and thematic interpretations with participants' subjective experiences.

Results and Discussion

Results

To understand the roots of conformity within internal family psychological pressures, interview data revealed that 80% of participants exhibiting high conformity levels on campus came from family backgrounds characterized by authoritarian upbringing that repressed dissenting opinions. From childhood, they were expected to obey parental authority figures unconditionally without room for negotiation.

Informant 1, a male student with the initials AR, stated:

> "Since I was a child at home, whenever I had a different opinion from my parents, I was always labeled rebellious and disrespectful. That habit has carried over to campus today, where I choose to stay silent rather than spark a debate. During group discussions, I doubt my own thoughts and fear that my views will be considered strange by my friends. Ultimately, I just go along with whatever the group majority says, even when I actually know their ideas are inaccurate. For me, maintaining a sense of safety and harmony is far more important than pushing my personal ideas."

Informant 1's statement illustrates a direct trajectory from repressive parenting at home to conformist behavior in the lecture hall. Being positioned as a "rebellious child" when expressing dissent within the family internalizes fear and anxiety regarding social rejection (*divergence anxiety*). This results in cognitive self-doubt regarding one's own intellectual capacity, leading the student to defensively submit to majority consensus in pursuit of psychological safety and the avoidance of interpersonal tension.

Informant 2, a female student with the initials LS from a private university, explained:

> "My parents are very authoritarian and always dictate what I must do without ever listening to my reasoning. That feeling of restriction made me accustomed to lacking self-confidence when having to make independent decisions in class. On campus, if my opinion differs from my peers, I immediately feel anxious and doubt whether I am the one who is wrong. So, rather than being excluded or seen as uncooperative, I prefer to agree with the majority voice."

Informant 2 underscores how the dominance of authority figures within the family undermines a child's cognitive independence early on. A domestic environment that forecloses dialogue fosters a lack of self-confidence that translates into epistemic doubt at the university level. Within an academic climate, anxiety over social isolation compels the informant to automatically align with the majority to preserve her status of acceptance within the group.

Informant 3, a male student from the Education study program at a private university, revealed:

> "At home, I was raised to always obey and never contradict my parents' words in the slightest. The impact is deeply felt in college; I am afraid of standing out alone during presentations or group discussions. Every time I have a new idea, I worry that it will be ridiculed or cause me to be ostracized. That is why I always play it safe by following whatever the majority of my friends decide."

The absolute obedience instilled during Informant 3's family upbringing mutates into social fear within the academic environment. This psychological barrier restricts the student's courage to articulate original ideas due to an overarching dread of social sanctions, such as rejection or ridicule. For Informant 3, conformity operates as a self-defense mechanism to secure a safe standing within group dynamics.

Informant 4, a female student with the initials BS from a public university, noted:

> "Whenever I tried to speak at home, my parents would frequently interrupt and say that a child doesn't know anything yet. That experience makes me constantly doubt what is inside my own head every time I participate in group work on campus. I feel anxious and unsettled if my opinion does not align with the majority of the other members. Rather than being labeled uncooperative, I choose to keep quiet and agree with their ideas. This habit of blind compliance makes it difficult for me to think critically or make decisions on my own."

Informant 4's account demonstrates how the parental delegitimization of a child's voice triggers intellectual demoralization. This domestic dismissal transforms into a fear of being stigmatized as "uncooperative" on campus. Consequently, the student consciously suppresses her critical thinking abilities and passively accepts group direction, ultimately paralyzing her autonomous thinking in the learning process.

Informant 5, a final-year male student from a public university in East Java, shared:

> "My family strongly emphasized total obedience, so from a young age, I was rarely given the opportunity to voice my opinion. Once I entered university, I felt confused and afraid whenever I had to take a stance contrary to the general view in class. Self-doubt makes me more comfortable remaining passive and tailing behind ideas approved by the majority. Having a different opinion feels like committing a major offense that could ruin relationships."

Informant 5's experience clarifies that restricting the right to express opinions at home constructs a cognitive schema equating dissent with wrongdoing. In higher education, this schema manifests as cognitive passivity and a strong inclination to follow the mainstream. This condition confirms that the failure to achieve autonomous thinking on campus is deeply rooted in psychosocial constructs formed long before students enter the academic world.

The verbatim accounts provided by the informants are summarized and coded in the following matrix:

Table 1. Coding Matrix of Commonalities in Informants' Verbatim Data

Coding Category	Points of Convergence	Informant 1	Informant 2	Informant 3	Informant 4	Informant 5
Domestic Roots	"Differing from parents seen as rebellious," "Authoritarian parents," "Raised to always obey/total obedience," "Forbidden to argue"	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Cognitive Self-Doubt	"Doubt my own thoughts," "Doubt what is inside my own head," "Lack self-confidence," "Self-doubt"	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Divergence Anxiety	"Fear of being seen as strange/excluded," "Anxious and unsettled if misaligned," "Fear of ridicule/ostracism," "Afraid to take a contrary stance"	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Conformist Action (Bandwagoning)	"Just go along with the majority," "Tailing behind majority ideas," "Keep quiet and agree," "Agree with the majority voice"	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Paralysis of Autonomy & Critical Thinking	"Difficult to think critically," "Maintaining a sense of safety," "More comfortable remaining passive," "Afraid to make independent decisions"	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

The coding matrix above synthesizes the primary commonalities across the five key informants, confirming Solomon Asch's conformity trajectory within this study. Based on the matrix, a consistent causal and psychosocial pattern emerges across all five informants. First, uniform domestic roots: all five informants (100%) explicitly indicated that authoritarian parenting and the enforcement of absolute obedience at home served as the genesis of their conformist attitudes. Phrases such as "obey," "authoritarian," and "rebellious" reflect internalized verbal repression. Second, the nexus between self-doubt and anxiety: these

domestic experiences trigger two parallel psychological patterns on campus, cognitive self-doubt (doubting one's own mind) and divergence anxiety (fearing exclusion or being perceived as strange), which jointly erode students' cognitive courage. Third, defensive conformity as a coping strategy: to mitigate social anxiety, all five informants resorted to identical conformist actions, namely bandwagoning ("agreeing with group ideas," "going along with the majority") to secure social safety and harmony. Fourth, the erosion of autonomous thinking: comprehensively, the matrix demonstrates that academic conformity culminates in the weakening of critical thinking capacities and the inability of students to act as autonomous intellectual agents in higher education.

Methodologically, it is important to clarify that the 80% proportion (29 out of 36 total participants) noted in the initial findings refers to the overall research sample identified as having a history of repressive family upbringing, whereas the remaining 20% (7 participants) exhibited conformity tendencies driven primarily by situational campus adaptation factors. The coding matrix in Table 1 specifically presents the commonalities of five key informants purposively selected from the 80% cohort because their narratives provided the richest and most representative illustrations of the conformity trajectory from the domestic to the academic sphere. Thus, the 100% consistency indicated in the matrix refers specifically to the causal pattern shared among these five quoted key informants, rather than a statistical generalization across the entire 36-participant sample.

In addition to interview data, direct observations in classrooms and student organization dynamics across the three universities revealed visible manifestations of conformity in students' social interactions. During group discussions and lecture Q&A sessions, the majority of students displayed defensive non-verbal cues, such as avoiding eye contact with lecturers, looking down when prompted for critical responses, and delaying the articulation of arguments until gauging the direction of the class majority. A similar pattern was documented in student organization meetings, where strategic decisions were frequently passed via false acclamation without substantive debate; students who initially signaled disagreement through hesitant gestures ultimately voiced verbal agreement with the chairperson or majority flow to prevent interpersonal friction. These observational findings confirm that bandwagoning is not merely a subjective perception reported in interviews, but an institutionalized behavioral practice embedded in both academic and extracurricular campus cultures.

Discussion

The findings of this study address the first research question by revealing that the conformity trajectory of students across three Indonesian universities does not originate from transient campus interactions, but is constructed through the internalization of psychological pressures within the domestic family environment. As shown in the coding matrix in Table 1, all key informants (100%) exhibited a uniform causal lineage beginning with "Domestic Roots" characterized by authoritarian parenting and verbal repression, such as being labeled "rebellious" when expressing dissent (Informant 1) and prohibitions against contradicting parental figures (Informants 3 and 5). Early experiences of repression forge a cognitive schema that frames dissenting opinions as threats to relational harmony and personal safety.

Psychosocially, this aligns with contemporary research on family socialization in collectivist societies, which demonstrates that upbringing grounded in absolute obedience produces an *internalized compliance schema* that persists into emerging adulthood (Li & Chen, 2023). Consequently, the university classroom is not the birthplace of conformity, but an arena of amplification where domestic compliance schemas are reactivated when students navigate peer-group dynamics.

An interpretive reading of the intersection between "Cognitive Self-Doubt" and "Divergence Anxiety" in Table 1 illuminates the psychological mechanisms that paralyze students' intellectual courage. Verbatim expressions such as *"doubting what is inside my own head"* (Informant 4) and *"fearing being seen as strange or excluded"* (Informants 1 and 2) indicate a delegitimization of personal epistemic capacity resulting from past restrictions on self-expression. Within academic interactions, this self-doubt transforms into defensive conformity manifested in *"keeping quiet and agreeing"* or *"going along with the majority voice"* operating as a survival coping mechanism to evade social sanctions such as isolation or being stigmatized as uncooperative. These findings both confirm and extend Solomon Asch's classic conformity framework; whereas Asch emphasized situational normative pressure from the majority, this study proves that susceptibility to such pressure is predetermined by the fragility of psychological autonomy forged in the domestic sphere (Kowalski & Nowak, 2024). Therefore, student bandwagoning during class discussions reflects an effort to alleviate interpersonal anxiety rather than a rational consensus on group arguments.

Addressing the second research question, the implications of internalized conformity for the paralysis of critical thinking (Table 1) can be analyzed through the paradigm of the philosophy of education, specifically Immanuel Kant's epistemology of autonomy and Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy. From a Kantian perspective, academic conformity rooted in social fear represents a manifestation of *self-incurred immaturity*, wherein students fail to exercise their own reason independently without the guidance or approval of majority authority (Müller, 2023). When students sacrifice the validity of their personal reasoning to preserve a "sense of safety" and social harmony, as seen across all informants. An erosion of epistemic agency occurs, reducing learning subjects to passive objects within the knowledge ecosystem. Consistent with Paulo Freire's critique of *banking education*, a culture of absolute obedience carried over from home into campus conformism perpetuates a *culture of silence* that extinguishes students' critical consciousness (*conscientization*) toward reality. Philosophically, such conformity is not merely a behavioral psychology issue, but an existential and epistemological crisis that undermines the essence of higher education as a space for intellectual emancipation (Vargas & Morales, 2025; Gultom, 2025).

Dialectically, the tension between social conformity and critical thinking uncovered in these findings exposes an epistemic paradox in higher education pedagogy. Critical thinking inherently demands the courage to engage in *epistemic dissent*. The willingness to interrogate majority assumptions, propose antitheses, and substantiate arguments based on objective evidence (Siegel & Robertson, 2022). However, the verbatim matrix demonstrates that mental schemas shaped by family repression lead students to associate cognitive divergence with moral wrongdoing or social defiance (*"having a different opinion feels like committing a major offense,"*

Informant 5). Consequently, the reflective and evaluative functions of critical thinking are intercepted by self-censorship mechanisms before ideas can be articulated in the public sphere of the classroom. This explains why active learning methods such as group discussions often fail to yield analytical depth, as group dynamics function as instruments of cognitive homogenization rather than arenas for rational dialectic (Gultom & Mari, 2025).

Furthermore, within the framework of virtue epistemology and contemporary philosophy of critical thinking, internalized conformity rooted in domestic pressure systematically erodes the foundation of students' intellectual virtues. Critical thinking is not merely a set of formal logical skills; it requires *intellectual courage* and *intellectual autonomy* to challenge established assumptions when rational evidence demands it (Baehr, 2021). When authoritarian parenting instills a schema equating dissent with moral insubordination, students experience paralysis in actualizing these epistemic virtues within academic spaces. Rather than functioning as epistemic agents who independently verify truth, students remain trapped in unhealthy *epistemic deference* toward majority group consensus to avoid social risk. As a result, critical reasoning is reduced to passive rationalization of prevailing classroom opinions, stifling students' capacity for authentic knowledge production.

A further philosophical implication of this cognitive passivity lies in the collapse of communicative rationality, which serves as a primary prerequisite for cultivating critical thinking within an academic community. In the tradition of critical educational philosophy, knowledge claims can only be validated through rational discourse free from psychological coercion and power hierarchies, where the force of the better argument stands as the sole authority (Papastephanou, 2021). However, the findings matrix illustrates that the trauma of domestic compliance imports coercive power relations into student discussion spaces, producing a false consensus driven by interpersonal fear rather than an equal exchange of arguments. When students engage in collective self-censorship to maintain artificial harmony, the university forfeits its role as a deliberative public sphere that sharpens the dialectic of thesis and antithesis. Restoring students' autonomous thinking therefore necessitates a radical deconstruction of the domestic compliance habitus through pedagogies that explicitly safeguard students' right to rational dissent without fear of social delegitimization.

While this study offers significant theoretical contributions by bridging domestic developmental psychology, Asch's conformity paradigm, and critical philosophy of education, several limitations warrant future exploration. First, the qualitative design involving 36 informants across three universities does not quantitatively measure the magnitude of correlation between degrees of parental authoritarianism and divergence anxiety indices across academic disciplines. Second, this study focused exclusively on student perspectives and has yet to examine the role of lecturers and curriculum design in either reinforcing or dismantling inherited conformity schemas. Future research is recommended to develop pedagogical intervention models grounded in Socratic dialogue and *epistemic safety* to test their efficacy in restoring students' autonomous thinking (Okafor & Mensah, 2026). Practically, these findings urge universities to design learning environments that explicitly legitimize dissenting viewpoints, enabling students to transcend domestic compliance trauma toward autonomous and critical intellectual maturity.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that academic conformity among undergraduate students across three Indonesian universities is not merely a situational response to peer pressure, but a direct continuation of internalized authoritarian parenting and verbal repression within the domestic family sphere. Established in early childhood, this schema of absolute obedience mutates into cognitive self-doubt and divergence anxiety when students engage in classroom discussions. Viewed through Kantian educational philosophy and Freirean critical pedagogy, this defensive conformity aimed at preserving social harmony systematically paralyzes critical thinking and erodes students' epistemic autonomy. These findings make a significant theoretical contribution by expanding Solomon Asch's classic conformity paradigm through the integration of family developmental social psychology and critical philosophy of education. Practically, the study underscores the urgent need for higher education institutions to cultivate learning spaces that guarantee epistemic safety and legitimize students' intellectual courage to dissent. Without deconstructing this culture of silence and passive compliance, universities risk failing in their emancipatory mission to nurture rational and autonomous learners. Future research should quantitatively measure the correlation between family authoritarianism and divergence anxiety across disciplines while testing critical dialogue-based pedagogical interventions to restore students' intellectual independence.

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Authors' Note

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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