

Relationship between Teasing and Self-esteem in Thai Adolescents from a High School in Bangkok

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ABSTRACT

Teasing, playful actions between peers that are believed to be humorous and mean no harm, is very common among high schooler students in Thailand. However, research has stated that there is a link between worse self-esteem and worse mental health. Despite its prevalence and possible negative effects, researches relating to the topic are not widely available in Thailand. Examining the relationship between the frequency of verbal teasing and self-esteem level in Thai teenagers can help raise social awareness on the potential negative effects of teasing. Child-Adolescents Teasing Scale (CATS) was used to assesses the frequency of teasing in Thai high schoolers and the Thai version of the Five-Scale Test of Self-Esteem for children (T-FSC) was used to assess the level of Self-Esteem in teenagers. Based on a survey with 187 valid answers from a Thai high school in Bangkok, results show that the most frequent form of teasing is Physical Appearance Teasing ($f=1.74$), followed by Personality & Behavior Teasing ($f=1.52$) and School-related Teasing ($f=1.52$) with the least frequent being Family & Environment Teasing ($f=1.46$). we found that these four factors of teasing are moderately positively correlated among each other, when tested with students' self-esteem level, there is a significant negative correlation (Pearson's correlation test $p=0.01$). Our data suggested that teasing can possibly cause damage to one's self-esteem, and when self-esteem is low, it could be one of the factors contributing to poor mental health, consequently leading to common mental problems such as depression.

Keywords: Adolescents, Teasing, Verbal, Self-Esteem, High school, Mental health

INTRODUCTION

Teasing and bullying –especially in adolescents– have been very common in our daily lives. Tragic incidents involving the suicide of teenagers are often reported. It came to the public that most motives for the suicide were because of harassment from people victims. Some people may think that those words are merely funny phrases passing in and out of their ears. However, in fact, those words can become a deadly weapon that can psychologically hurt others; hearing those words every day is like constantly deepening one's wound. Therefore, it may not be surprising if

teenagers, who are at their limits, take the decision to end their lives, leaving all the pains behind.

According to a Bangkok Post journal, the Department of Mental Health survey in 2020 reported that, with more than a thousand students involved, 91.79% of Thai teenagers had been bullied and teased by their peers. This statistic led Thailand to be the second-highest rank in the world for bullying and teasing-stayed after Japan. Moreover, 13% of target students had depression as a result of getting harassed by their classmates.

Teasing is defined as verbal and nonverbal behaviors among friends that can be humorous and playful at one level but at another level can be annoying to the target (Vessey & Horowitz, in press, p. 10). Continuous and frequent teasing results in losing self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem in victims. Teasing has been associated with disturbances in global psychological functioning, depression, body-image dissatisfaction, and eating disturbances, and feelings of loneliness anger, embarrassment, hurt, and sadness (Liu, 2008). These conditions could lead to poor psychological conditions, depression, and even unexpected acts of violence such as suicide (Liu, 2008; Georgesen *et al.*, 1999; Solhkhah *et al.*, 1999) –not only a major problem in Thai society but also in a global term (Yoelao *et al.*, 2016; Kongsuk *et al.*, 2017). These effects are not limited to adolescent age. As they grow up to become adults, the unremarkable experiences of the past are still deeply rooted in their minds –like a scar that will never fade away (Georgesen *et al.*, 1999; Warm, 1997).

This study was carried out to examine and reaffirm the relationship between frequency of teasing and the changing tendency of self-esteem among high school students who are considered to be a group most vulnerable to be mentally affected (Georgesen *et al.*, 1999; Solhkhah *et al.*, 1999; Warm, 1997). Research also shows that low self-esteem can be one of the factors contributing to mental health problems in adolescents (Sowislo, 2013). So, this study is conducted under the hypothesis of "the more frequent the teasing, the less the level of self-esteem", resulting in possible mental health problems. Although teasing in various forms is ubiquitous in our society, it has not been made aware and people have not been paying attention to it yet. We hope that this study will be able to raise public awareness regarding the possible negative impacts of teasing which are currently ambiguous in Thai society.

Research Purposes

The purposes of this study were to:

1. Examine how frequent teasing happens among Thai high schoolers.
2. Assess the level of self-esteem in Thai highschoolers.

3. Assess the relationship between the teasing frequency and level of self-esteem in Thai adolescents.

Research Questions

Three research questions derived from the purposes of the study were listed:

1. In what direction is being verbal teasing aligned with the self-esteem of the victim, considering the overview
2. How do the different factors, which cause verbal teasing, affect self-esteem in the same or different direction?
3. Following the second question, how do each factor result in more or less change?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Definitions of teasing are widely variable, unclear, and sophisticated, depending on the way they are preceded. Consequently, this phenomenon could not be defined easily (Liu, 2008; Scambler *et al.*, 1998; Vessey & Horowitz, in press). According to the Cambridge Dictionary, teasing refers to saying unkind things about others or to laugh at someone, either because you are joking or because you want to upset that person. Among the scholars, it is mutually agreed that teasing may involve aggression, and others believe that teasing incorporates prosocial behaviors as well, most typically humor or play. Teasing can also be defined as "any playful remark aimed at another person, which can include mock challenges, commands, and threats as well as imitating and exaggerating someone's behavior in a playful way" (Eder, 1991).

Teasing can be both verbal and nonverbal. According to Liu (2008), Most teasing is verbal. The most common verbal forms of teasing include making humorous references to the target behavior or attribute, using humorous names to call the target, and/or simply laughing at the target (Shapiro *et al.*, 1991; Scambler *et al.*, 1998). Other verbal forms include sarcastic statements, facetious questions, tricking the target into believing something untrue, exaggerated verbal imitation, and engaging in wordplay with the target's name. Nonverbal teasing is less common. Nonverbal forms of teasing included pointing, making faces, pestering the target physically, taking some possession from the target

and refusing to give it back, and attaching a sign to the target's back (Shapiro *et al.*, 1991; Scambler *et al.*, 1998)

Unconsciously, teasing has become a common phenomenon in social interactions. Several studies have shown negative impacts of teasing on mental health as well as dangerous psychological effects on adolescents. For instance, it is reported in 'Adult Psychiatric Outcomes of Bullying and Being Bullied by Peers in Childhood and Adolescence' (Copeland *et al.*, 2013) that being bullied has elevated the prevalence of agoraphobia, panic disorder, psychiatric morbidity, and social avoidance in adolescents –all with 95% confidence intervals. Those negative effects are long-lasting, leading to depression and suicide in the worst case (Georgesen *et al.*, 1999).

Available research by Gleason *et al.* in 2000 remarked that lowered self-esteem was significantly predicted by teasing, using sociometer theory, a theoretical perspective created by Mark R. Leary published in 1999. Leary's later research in 2005 based on his sociometer theory suggested that we are able to measure people's relational value (their acceptance and rejection by others) by looking at their self-esteem. In other words, receiving the expression of being opposed by society –including teasing behavior– more frequently is psychologically damaging and socially isolating; these cause lowered self-esteem and increased depression. In addition, A person who has teasing experiences tends to have lowered self-esteem.

METHODOLOGY

A three-part questionnaire was developed and verified by language and psychological professionals with an Item-Objective Congruence Index rating more than 0.5 for each question. It was then distributed as an online survey to Thai high school students in a certain school in Bangkok to evaluate how frequently they get teased and how they esteem themselves.

The three parts of the questionnaire include:

[1] Personal information: consisted of 5 questions to examine the participants' background and social environment, which might be a factor that exposed the participants to verbal teasing -it could even

explain the changing tendency of self-esteem after being teased.

[2] Frequency of getting teased: To measure the frequency of teasing in adolescents the Child-Adolescent Teasing Scale (CATS), originally developed by Vessey and CATS Project team (2008), was used. CATS measured teasing in four subscales including Personality & Behavior Teasing, Family & Environment Teasing, School-related Teasing, and Physical Appearance Teasing. Each item is placed on a four-point scale: 1 = Never, 2 = Sometimes, 3 = Often and 4 = A Whole Lot

[3] Self-esteem: In this section, the Thai version of the 'Five-Scale Test of Self-Esteem for Children (FSC)' –original by Pope AW. – translated by Suwannee Putthisri, M.D. (2013), was used to determine the level of self-esteem in Thai high schoolers. Respondents were to choose an answer from a 4-point Likert scale: 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, and 4 = Strongly agree for positive questions. The options were inverted for negative questions.

The questionnaire was first tested with a sample group. The analysis on its reliability was carried out using Cronbach Alpha's reliability test with a passing rating of not less than 0.8 for each question. Items that did not pass the reliability test were excluded.

After collecting 187 responses, the analysis on its reliability was carried out with the statistical analysis was carried out as the next process, transforming the quantitative responses into statistical data. Lastly, all data were processed to reveal the mean and standard deviation. The Pearson correlation test was conducted in order to examine the relationship between teasing frequency and the changing tendency of teenagers' self-esteem.

RESULTS

Listed below are the data from a statistical survey of 187 high school students on the topic of teasing. According to Table 1, it appeared that teasing on one's physical appearance occurred most frequently with the rating of 1.74 out of 4, followed by teasing on the teen's personality and behavior, with the mean frequency of 1.52. School-related teasing, in which the students are teased in relation to school work and academic performance, were rated 1.46 out of 4, and ranked at the lowest was family and environment

teasing in which teasing targeted on the student's family members and how he/she lived, with the rate of frequency at 1.25. With all the four factors of teasing combined, nonetheless, the mean frequency is

at 1.59 out of 4, meaning that the high school students in Bangkok only got teased sometimes and not often.

Teasing subscales	Mean rating (out of 4)	Standard Deviation	N
Personality & Behavior Teasing	1.52	0.45	187
Family & Environment Teasing	1.25	0.53	187
School-related Teasing	1.46	0.56	187
Physical Appearance Teasing	1.74	0.66	187
Overall Teasing Frequency	1.59	0.42	187

The Pearson correlation test is performed to examine whether the four factors were related to each other. As a result, the analysis from Table 2 shows that there were positive correlations among the four factors. While Personality and Behavior Teasing is strongly correlated with School-related Teasing ($r = 0.552$) and Physical Appearance Teasing ($r = 0.546$), it demonstrated a moderately positive correlation with Family and Environment Teasing ($r = 0.382$). A

strong positive correlation is also found between Family and Environment Teasing and School-related Teasing ($r = 0.525$); in contrast, Family Teasing is moderately correlated with Physical Appearance teasing ($r = 0.395$) as well as School-related Teasing and Physical appearance Teasing ($r = 0.452$). Additionally, it could also be inferred that all the four factors of teasing are positively correlated to one another with a significant level of 0.01(**).

	Personality	Family	School	Physical
Personality	1.00			
Family	0.382**	1.00		

School	.552**	.525**	1.00	
Physical	.546**	.395**	.452**	1.00

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 2: The correlation test of the four factors of teasing

According to the correlation test performed on the four factors of teasing and average teenagers' level of self-esteem rated at **2.39 out of 4**, it could be inferred from Table 3 that the two types of teasing that showed weak negative correlations with significance at 0.01 and 0.05 were Personality and Behavior Teasing ($r = -0.277^{**}$) and Physical Appearance Teasing ($r = -0.162^{*}$), respectively, showing that they contributed to one's lower self-esteem. However, the

remaining two types of teasing, School-related Teasing and Family and Environment teasing, illustrated very weak to negligible negative correlation with self-esteem, with $r = -0.130$ and $r = -0.021$, respectively, meaning that they were not related to one's self-esteem. Overall, when combining all the four factors, a weak correlation ($r = -0.222^{**}$) is discovered with significance at the 0.01 level when they are tested on teenagers' self-esteem level.

Teasing subscales	Self-Esteem (2.39 out of 4)
Personality	-0.277**
Family	-0.021
School	-0.130
Physical	-.162*
Overall	-0.222**

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3: The correlation test between the four factors of teasing and self-esteem level

DISCUSSION

Sources of teasing could be classified into four domains. These were Physical Appearance, Personality and Behavior, Family and Environment, and School Relations (Vessey, 2004). Similarly, each type of teasing targets those who differ from social norms. At younger ages, children might perceive those who are different from them as weird. However, when they grow up to become teenagers, they meet more people coming into their life, forcing them to interact with different types of people in society. Admittedly, they began to understand more about the diversity of people in society and are more likely to perceive these differences as normal, resulting in less teasing among teenagers. Thus, the result shows that teasing in high schoolers does not occur frequently but only occasionally.

In Thailand, family is considered a crucial aspect of society that everyone respects. Thai teenagers often feel proud of their household and regard their family highly. They may not feel a need to be uncomfortable with their family, thus, bad words about their family are not a concern for them. As a result, a negligible negative correlation is found between family and environmental teasing and their self-esteem. The same goes for school-related activities, where students may believe that academic is also not a serious concern for them. These two findings may be considered as reliefs since they have minor effects on high schoolers' self-esteem. However, the concerns are on the other two types of teasing. When it comes to physical appearance and personality, high schoolers may feel more self-conscious as the people want to be highly esteemed among their peers. So, they might feel less valued when they realize that their appearance and actions are made fun of. Some may not take this teasing seriously, but it is not certain that others will do the same. Once it comes to these two types of teasing, more significant negative correlations with self-esteem are found. This prompts both teachers and friends to be more cautious about their teasing actions that may cause negative consequences to others' self-esteem. Therefore, awareness of teasing as a form of communication among peers that are considered to be good-natured, playful, and humorous should be made clearer, since it is possible that. It is recommended that high schoolers should be more cautious about their words and use other kinds of activities that do

not target anyone in general. This will help avoid unintentional negative effects that might be made on their friends. In addition, more research in Thailand related to teasing should be conducted to reveal more possible negative consequences that may threaten public mental health.

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