



## How self-control influences Thai women's aggression: The moderating role of moral disengagement

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### Abstract

This research explores the aggression in Thai women as an attempt to investigate the way self-control influences aggression and how moral disengagement moderates the influence of self-control on aggression; and the types of aggression (reactive and proactive aggression) they display. A sample of 924 Thai females aged 18 years and above were asked to complete self-report questionnaires: the Self-Control Scale, the Moral Disengagement Scale, and the Reactive-Proactive Questionnaire. Structural equation modeling analysis reveals that self-control affects aggression,  $\beta = -.535$ ,  $p < .001$ , and moral disengagement moderates the relationship between self-control and aggression,  $\beta = -.593$ ,  $p < .001$ . Moreover, it is found that age difference affects aggression, that is, Thai women aged between 18 and 25 years exhibit higher reactive aggression than other age groups.

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### Introduction

Aggression is a person's behavior towards a target with the intention to inflict pain or cause harm, while the target wants to escape from such violence (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Bettencourt, Talley, Benjamin, & Valentine, 2006). This tends to occur when a person feels hostile and angry, and is ready to respond violently, both physically or verbally (Buss & Perry, 1992). In general, men are perceived to react to negative or threatening situations with aggression, determination, and boldness. They dare to face terrible incidents and consider less of the consequences of their actions compared to women. Gender role differentiation also plays a prominent role. Men tend to socially cultivate the attitude that aggression is allowed and that it is an appropriate behavior, while women are instructed by parents and social norm from childhood that aggression is not appropriate and that it has to be suppressed (Archer, 2004; Campbell, 2013; Crick & Dodge, 1996;

Denson, O' Dean, Blake, & Beames, 2018). This leads to less visible aggression in women. Research findings provide empirical evidence to support the notion that men are generally more aggressive (Buss & Perry, 1992; Bussey, Quinn, & Dobson, 2015; Connor, Steingard, Anderson, & Melloni, 2003).

Surprisingly, we have seen an increase in women's aggressive behavior. Leisring (2009) found that females used physical aggression with intimate partner at both general and peril levels and numbers of females arrested for libel was increasing every year (Henning, Martinsson, & Holdford, 2009; Hirschel & Buzawa, 2002). In addition, American women have an increased level of simple assault and aggravated assault. The rate of arrest of simple assault increased from 1996 to 2005 (Campbell, 2013). However, the research on the aggression of women was not very specific, and most of it had children and youth samples.

Similarly, Thailand is a socially collectivist society, which emphasizes harmony and compromise. However, the rate of crime or aggression of women is surprising, and it is a current problem in society. This can be seen from both printed media and social media. One of the most notorious crimes of the year

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was the case of the murder of Warissa Klinjui or 'Amm' by Preyanuch or 'Priao' and her accomplices (who were later arrested) on 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2017. There was also the case of Jariyaporn Buayai or 'Nammon' who was arrested on 8<sup>th</sup> August 2017 for fraud after having fooled multiple men into marrying her and running away with the dowries. The statistics of female imprisonment surveyed by Corrections Department, Ministry of Justice is important empirical evidence. It showed that women had a higher rate of arrest and imprisonment every year (The Department of Corrections, 2018). This leads to the question: how do present Thai women display aggression and how self-control, a personal attribute that is likely ingrained in Thai women, and morality affect Thai women's aggression levels. This research aims to answer these questions. The understanding of the influences of self-control and moral disengagement on aggression in Thai women will be beneficial for policy planning in addressing such behavioral change.

## Literature Review

### *Proactive and Reactive Aggression*

This research focuses on 2 types of aggression: reactive and proactive aggression. According to the Frustration-Aggression model (Winstok, 2009), reactive aggression is associated with hostility, impulsiveness, and anger. It is the immediate reaction to when a desired goal is barred or when one is feeling guilty or sensitive to negative emotions. Furthermore, it is also associated with low self-control. Reactive aggression requires an external stimulation or provocation (Berkowitz, 1989; Dodge & Coie, 1987; Poulin & Boivin, 2000). Reactive aggression is mainly driven by fear, and manifests in order to protect the aggressor (Pulkkinen, 1996).

According to Bandura's social learning theory (Winstok, 2009), proactive aggression occurs when a person uses aggression as a tool to seek benefit from others, or to acquire reward or what is desired. In such situation, the aggressors are the ones who initiate the attack and believe that their aggression causes less harm than it actually does. Thus, this type of aggression does not require an external agent to stimulate the feelings of anger or hostility (Dodge & Coie, 1987). The basis of proactive aggression is driven by anger, which leads to the display of aggressive behavior in order to achieve desired results (Pulkkinen, 1996).

As mentioned above, studies of aggression in females are still limited. The majority of the samples were children and adolescents, both males and females (e.g., Ang, Huan, & Florell, 2014; Baker, Raine, Liu, & Jacobson, 2008; Fung et al., 2018). However, the results of the study still cannot provide accurate information on aggression because of inconsistent findings. It is interesting as to why aggression in Thai women is so increasing. This current research is committed to studying the aggression of Thai women in particular with different age range from previous research.

### *Self-control and Aggression*

Self-control refers to the ability to restrain oneself and suppress undesirable behavior, or to change such behavior into a response that is in line with social ideals, social values, social moral standards, social expectations and personal long-term goals. Thus, self-control has a major role in effectively managing a person's behavior. Low self-control might lead to mental health problems, negative emotions, anxiety, impatience, anger management issue, the inability to wait for delayed gratification, poor relationship with family and peers, eating disorders, substance abuse, alcoholism, sexual deviance, as well as personality disorder, antisocial behavior, misconduct, aggression, being victimized and violence (Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007; DeLisi, 2011; DeWall, Baumeister, Stillman, & Gailliot, 2007; Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). Moreover, low self-control can also lead to crime (Blackwell & Piquero, 2005).

Six notable characteristics of people with low self-control (Buker, 2011) include preferring easy and uncomplicated work, seeking short-term or immediate satisfaction, preferring physical expression, preferring activities that require physical power or invoke thrill and audacity, lacking the ability to see long-term benefit, preferring work that requires few skills or little planning, being self-centered, lacking empathy, and being quick to temper and cruelty.

Self-control is negatively correlated with aggression, anger and antisocial behavior (Sofia & Cruz, 2015). In addition, self-control can significantly predict reactive aggression, more so than it can predict proactive aggression (Winstok, 2009). Evidently, people with high self-control display less aggression than those with low self-control. However, several prior researches did not specifically study female samples. Thus, to explore a gender centric association, this research intends to investigate and confirm the correlation between self-control and aggression in Thai female samples.

### *Moral Disengagement, Self-control and Aggression*

Moral disengagement is a mechanism used to suppress guilt or self-depreciation after committing something immoral by changing the structure of one's perception. The perpetrator modifies their view into seeing that their behavior is not harmful or immoral, or is less harmful than it actually is, and rationalizing their action as appropriate. This occurs when a person does not behave in line with their moral standard in certain situations. Moral disengagement enables them to still preserve their good and morally impeccable image. As moral acts tend to lead to pride, any action that lacks humanity or is not in line with one's moral standard causes one to feel reprimanded. Consequently, two kinds of results can be expected. That is, it either stops the person from repeating such action or, on the contrary, builds greater moral disengagement while rationalizing that the moral standard cannot be used in the situation they faced (Bandura, 1999, 2002; Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, & Regalia, 2001).

Bandura (1999) categorizes moral disengagement into 8 components: moral justification, euphemistic language, advantageous comparison, diffusion of responsibility, displacement

of responsibility, distorting consequences, dehumanization, and attribution of blame. Nowadays, moral disengagement can be seen in many circumstances. Most immoral acts are done in self-interest, while the actor fails to consider the disadvantages they might be causing others. People with a high level of moral disengagement tend to feel less guilt while committing an immoral act, and are less helpful, more aggressive, and engage in more misconducts (Bandura, 1999, 2002; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). The level of moral disengagement differs according to the type of aggression. People with reactive aggression recognize that being aggressive to others is immoral. On the contrary, those with proactive aggression do not recognize much morality or righteousness (Arsenio, Adams, & Gold, 2009; Pulkkinen, 1996).

At present, most studies agree that moral disengagement is a source of aggression, misconduct (Gutzwiler-Helfenfinger, 2015), lack of self-control, lack of responsibility and deviant behavior (Newton, Barrett, Swaffield, & Teesson, 2014). Tittle, Antonaccio, Botchkovar, and Kranidioti (2010) found that the level of moral standard can also predict the likelihood of committing crimes or violent misconduct, even more so than self-control can.

As there are no studies that contain a sample made up exclusively of women, this research aims to investigate the causal effect of moral disengagement in Thai women by studying the relation between moral disengagement and self-control, and observing how effectively it can predict aggression in Thai women.

The two main hypotheses are as follows:

1. Self-control has a direct effect on aggression
2. Moral disengagement moderates the influence of self-control on aggression

Additionally, this study also explores whether age difference affects aggression, reactive and proactive aggression, in Thai women.

## Methodology

### Participants

Participation was voluntary. Initially, the sample contained 924 Thai women. After the exclusion criteria: sexual deviance, or with a history of treatment for psychological issues that affect aggressiveness, or score higher than the 79<sup>th</sup> percentile in the social desirability test was used, 728 women remained as the study sample. Demographic data for the study sample showed that the majority were from the central region and Bangkok metropolitan area (63.71%), age ranged between 18 and 41 (85.32%), holding a bachelor's degree or higher (75.42%), and not married (66.50%). Most of them were Buddhist (93.00%). The sample covered undergraduate or graduate students (24.86%), career women in a government agency (14.97%), in the private sector (29.80%), entrepreneurs (16.21%), and not specified (14.14%).

### Measures

*The Reactive-Proactive Aggression Questionnaire* (Raine et al., 2006) is a self-report questionnaire with 23 questions, divided into two subscales: (1) 11 questions are related to reactive aggression, and (2) 12 questions are related to proactive aggression. The researcher translated the questionnaire into Thai on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1, never to 5, always. The questionnaire has a Total Reliability score of  $\alpha = .927$  ( $\alpha = .858$  for reactive aggression;  $\alpha = .917$  for proactive aggression).

*The Self-Control Scale* (Tangney et al., 2004) is a self-report questionnaire with 13 questions, which was translated into Thai on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1, not at all to 5, very much. The scale has a Total Reliability score of  $\alpha = .710$ .

*The Moral Disengagement Scale* (Bandura et al., 1996) is a self-report questionnaire with 32 questions, divided into 8 subscales: (1) moral justification, (2) euphemistic language, (3) advantageous comparison, (4) diffusion of responsibility, (5) displacement of responsibility, (6) distorting consequences, (7) dehumanization, and (8) attribution of blame. The scale was translated into Thai on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1, never to 5, always. The scale has a Total Reliability score of  $\alpha = .908$ .

*The Revised Social Desirability Scales – Form X1* (Fischer & Fick, 1993) is a self-report questionnaire with 7 questions. The scale was translated into Thai on a true-false scale basis, with a Total Reliability score of  $\alpha = .529$ . This scale is used as the exclusion criteria, where the participants who scored higher than the 79<sup>th</sup> percentile in the Social Desirability Scale were eliminated from the study.

### Data Collection and Data Analysis

This research was approved by the Ethics Review Committee for Research Involving Human Research Participants, Health Sciences Group, Chulalongkorn University. All scales were combined into 1 set with a counterbalance system. A trained researcher and a female staff member monitored the procedure to ensure that the session was in line with the expected research standard. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using the Mplus program was performed to test hypotheses.

## Results

### Description, Reliability and Correlation between studied Variables

As shown in Table 1, women in this sample revealed moderate level of self-control ( $M = 3.31$ ,  $SD = 0.50$ ), whereas their average moral disengagement ( $M = 1.86$ ,  $SD = 0.51$ ) and aggression ( $M = 1.65$ ,  $SD = 0.52$ ) were relatively low. All variables significantly correlated. On one hand, self-control was negatively correlated with moral disengagement ( $r = -.182$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and aggression ( $r = -.324$ ,  $p < .01$ ), while on the other hand, moral disengagement was positively correlated with aggression ( $r = .596$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

**Table 1** Means, standard deviations, and the intercorrelations between latent variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	SC	MODIS	AGG
SC	3.31	0.50	(.710)		
MODIS	1.86	0.51	-.182**	(.908)	
AGG	1.65	0.52	-.324**	.596**	(.927)

Note: Reliability coefficient alphas are presented in parentheses along the diagonal edge. SC = self-control, MODIS = moral disengagement, AGG = aggression

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

When only the observed variables of self-control, moral disengagement, and aggression were considered, the sample showed low levels of moral disengagement ( $M = 1.40$  to  $2.19$ ,  $SD = 0.57$  to  $0.75$ ), reactive aggression ( $M = 1.94$ ,  $SD = 0.60$ ) and proactive aggression ( $M = 1.38$ ,  $SD = 0.54$ ). Correlation coefficients among observed variables were statistically significant ( $r = -.079$  to  $.747$ ), except for the correlation between self-control and the attribution of blame.

#### Factor Analysis

Table 2 summarized the confirmatory factor analysis which revealed the component loading of self-control which is the single indicator,  $\beta = 0.514$ ,  $p < .001$ , moral disengagement,  $\beta = .575$  to  $.788$ ,  $p < .001$  and aggression,  $\beta = .700$  to  $.909$ ,  $p < .001$ .

#### Structural Equation Modeling

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used to test hypotheses, using the Mplus program. Self-control had the direct influence on aggression,  $\beta = -.535$ ,  $SE = 0.076$ ,  $t = -7.068$ ,  $p < .001$ ; that is, the higher the level of self-control, the less aggression they display; Hypothesis 1 was supported. Moreover, moral disengagement moderated the influence of self-control on aggression,  $\beta = -.593$ ,  $SE = 0.066$ ,  $t = -8.994$ ,  $p < .001$ ; that is, the higher the level of moral disengagement, the less influence their self-control has on aggression; Hypothesis 2 was supported. Figure 1 illustrated the result of the causal model analysis.

#### Supplementary Analysis

The present study also examined whether there are any differences of reactive and proactive aggression among women of different age groups (18–25, 26–33, 34–41, and above 41 years old). One-way analysis of variance revealed

that there was a significant difference only in reactive aggression,  $F = 4.478$ ,  $p = .004$ . The post hoc test showed that Thai women who were 18 and 25 years old elicited higher reactive aggression than other age groups.

#### Discussion

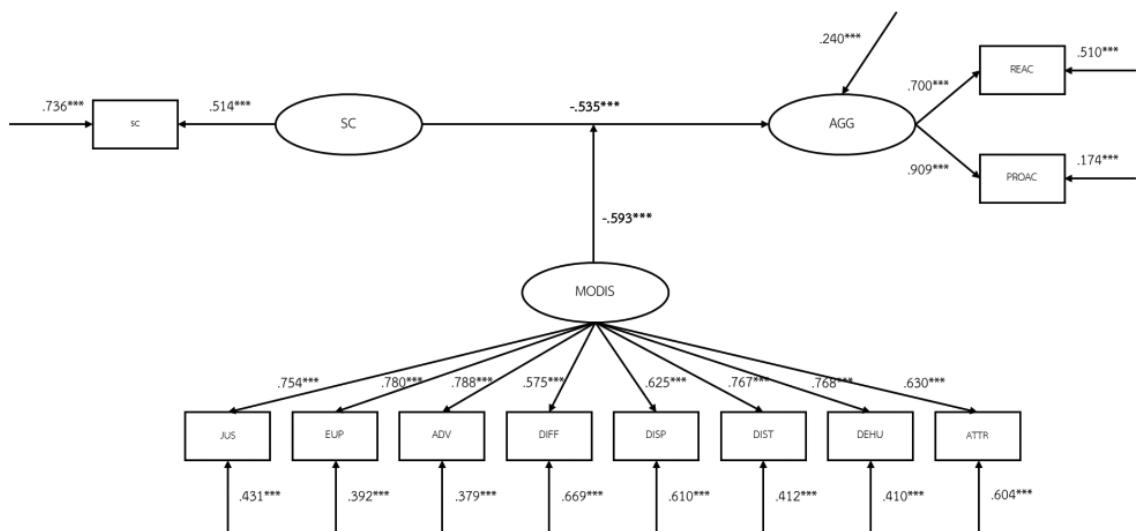
The results supported both hypotheses. On average, Thai women elicited higher reactive aggression than proactive aggression. This is because women felt the need to display aggressive behavior to defend themselves, especially in the role of a partner in a relationship, or to respond to men when they were angry, jealous or stressed (Leisring, 2009). Thus, this type of aggression in women was used as self-defense or retaliation to a partner who has caused them pain in the first place. In line with prior research, it is found that reactive aggression in women mostly correlates with childhood sexual abuse (Kernsmith, 2005), lack of emotional management skills, and history of being raped (Connor et al., 2003).

The degree of aggression in this study was quite low in both reactive aggression and proactive aggression, which was congruent with previous studies that people in collectivistic societies which were more easily seen in Eastern societies such as China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Thailand, showed less aggressive level when compared to individualistic society. Individualism is characterized by self-reliance, whereas collectivism places emphasis on interdependence. Values of the family, unity, cooperation, and consciousness in the compliance of the group are concerns of collectivists. Thus, in the individualistic society, expression of aggression is more acceptable while aggression in collectivistic society is reproached because it represents a rift by destroying the good atmosphere of that society. Consequently, people in a collectivistic culture try to suppress feelings, thoughts, anger, and dissatisfaction in order to keep peace in society and maintain the stability of the group (Ang et al., 2014; Baker et al., 2008; Forbes, Zhang, Doroszewicz, & Haas, 2009; Fung et al.,

**Table 2** Confirmatory factor analysis of the causal model of aggression in Thai women

Variables	Factor loadings			$R^2$
	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	
SC	.514	0.042	12.253***	.264
JUS	.754	0.020	38.439***	.569
EUP	.780	0.023	33.310***	.608
ADV	.788	0.023	34.163***	.621
DIFF	.575	0.029	20.068***	.331
DISP	.625	0.026	23.970***	.390
DIST	.767	0.022	34.728***	.588
DEHU	.768	0.021	36.787***	.590
ATTR	.630	0.025	25.622***	.396
REAC	.700	0.020	35.757***	.490
PROAC	.909	0.011	81.525***	.826

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .



AIC = 11718.663, BIC = 11870.143,  $R^2 = .760$ .

**Figure 1** A causal model of aggression in Thai women

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

2018; Li, Wang, Wang, & Shi, 2010). It is also interesting to continue the further study that childhood experience, family factors, and the parenting style are considered a subculture in the main culture, affecting what the aggression level is. The results of previous studies showed that this relationship was not constant (Denson et al., 2018; Fung et al., 2018; Rumpf, 2016).

The direct influence of self-control on aggression was moderate. The result was consistent with prior research comprising of male and female samples. For example, Denson, Capper, Oaten, Friese, and Schofield (2011) found that aggressive characteristics did not correlate with aggressive behavior of those who were trained in self-control. The opposite was found with those who were untrained. Lagrange and Silverman (1999) found that self-control could predict misconduct. When considering only the female sample group, it was found that low level of self-control manifests as risk-seeking, consequence of alcohol consumption and anger, which are the sources of misconducts. Hence, women could display aggression when they had low self-control.

It was notable that moral disengagement moderated the influence of self-control on aggression. This finding supported prior research, which indicated that moral disengagement was positively correlated with aggression and misconduct (Pelton, Gound, Forehand, & Brody, 2004). Li, Nie, Boardley, Situ, and Dou (2014) reported that the interaction between moral disengagement and self-control predicted verbal aggression and hostility. Moral disengagement was a source of aggression, violence, theft, and other antisocial behavior of teenage groups (Bandura, 1999; Gini, Pozzoli, & Bussey, 2015; Gini, Pozzoli, & Hymel, 2014). Gini et al. (2014) found that moral disengagement and aggression occurs more in teenagers than in children, which agrees with the additional analysis in this research.

Interestingly, only women in age range of 18–25 years old displayed higher reactive aggression than any other age groups. The results of this study are close to the previous

research studying children and adolescents in that reactive aggression increased when the samples were older (Fung, Raine, & Gao, 2009; Fung et al., 2018; Jia, Wang, & Shi, 2014). Such difference, however, was not found in proactive aggression and total aggression. These findings could be explained with age development. During teenage years, biological and physical changes occurred, specifically the development of hormones that affected emotions, causing women to become more sensitive to stimulants or external situations. Teenage girls in reproductive age are often very aggressive. At present, women recognize that they have the same rights and equality as men in choosing spouses. And, if they can fight for the men who they love, they will be seen as more popular. Apart from this, jealousy is another reason that women fight to show offense. Therefore, teenagers display high tendency towards reactive aggression. The ability to control and shape emotions and impulsiveness into other appropriate reactions develop later on (Campbell, 2013; Nolen-Hoeksema, Fredrickson, Loftus, & Lutz, 2014).

## Conclusion and Recommendation

The present study provided the evidence that self-control has a direct influence on aggression. In accordance with prior research, moral disengagement is found to moderate the influence of self-control on aggression in Thai women. Hence, self-control and moral disengagement are variables that affect both proactive and reactive aggressions. Women who are 18 to 25 years old have the highest reactive aggression compared to other age groups. Thus, results suggest that reduction of the level of aggressiveness in Thai women can be done through increasing self-control, decreasing moral disengagement, and monitoring Thai women's behavior during their teenage years.

## Conflicts of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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