

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Tall ghosts, Chopsticks and Monitor Lizards: Name-calling and its Perpetrators in the Cultural Context of Thailand

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## Abstract

While name-calling has been associated with several adverse effects on students' well-being, it is often overlooked, particularly if understood as harmless teasing. Scholars have stressed that not only the intention of the name-caller but also the perception of the receiver should be considered. Such perceptions can be influenced by cultural value orientations, which remain understudied but gain importance with the increasing internationalisation of education. This study explores name-calling in the context of Thailand, a prototypical collectivist, high power distance society, which has shown a high prevalence of verbal bullying. This study conducted 95 autobiographical written narratives and 20 in-depth interviews of past and current name-calling experiences with Thai university students. Findings revealed that friends, teachers, and parents frequently called students names, which were primarily related to students' skin colour and weight. Despite its adverse effects, name-calling was often normalised and accepted as part of Thai culture. Values including collectivism, conflict avoidance, social harmony, being considerate and shared enjoyment appeared to discourage students from defending themselves against friends, who were frequently identified as name-callers. Teachers regularly called students hurtful names, particularly when taking attendance, entertaining the class, asking questions, and addressing performance, which seemed to be reinforced by the societal norm of showing respect to people of high status.

**Keywords:** name-calling; bullying victimisation; culture; values; Thailand

## Introduction

Students worldwide are regularly called names regarding their facial features, skin colour, ethnicity, physical handicaps, socioeconomic status, gender identity, and study performance (Gardella *et al.* 2019; Ioverno *et al.* 2021; Thornberg 2011). While name-calling has been identified as the most common form of bullying, there is a lack of in-depth research investigating the phenomenon and its context (Kshrsagar *et al.* 2007; Malhi *et al.* 2015; Whitney and Smith 1993). With an increasing internationalisation of education, the role of the country-based context in which name-calling occurs must be considered. Particularly understudied countries, such as Thailand, with a high prevalence of name-calling deserve scholarly attention. A recent study conducted by the Network of Legal Advocates for Children and Youth and led by Niammeese surveyed over 1000 students from 15 different schools across Thailand. Ninety-two per cent of school children reported that they had been subjected to physical or psychological abuse by their peers. While such findings must be treated cautiously because bullying, in this case, was measured by asking for at least one incident, the survey also revealed that 35% and 25% of pupils had experienced bullying at least twice a semester and several times a week, respectively. Among bullying victims, 13% had become clinically depressed (Dumrongkiat 2020).

Name-calling has been conceptualised as the use of harmless (nick) names, which could aim to bond but also include offensive, hurtful and discriminatory labels (Eder 1991). Goffman (1967) discussed different forms of social interaction, stressing how teasing could function as prosocial behaviour and play but also as face-threatening and hurtful. Scholars have highlighted the significance of name-calling

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as a form of verbal bullying (e.g. Austin & Joseph 1996), characterised by an intention of the bully to marginalise or humiliate the victim but also by the victims interpretation of it being hurtful (Oliver *et al.* 1994). Scholars and victims' have regularly associated name-calling with feeling hurt, unhappy, upset, and embarrassed and with depression, substance abuse and anxiety in adolescents (Crozier and Skliopidou 2002; Davis *et al.* 2021; Shapiro *et al.* 1991).

As name-calling can include elements of play and affection as well as aggression, criticism, and sarcasm (Kowalski 2003), it is often difficult to interpret for recipients. The element of humour contributes to its perceived ambiguity, making it difficult for various educational stakeholders to identify it as a form of bullying (Aho 1998). Furthermore, studies show that bystanders and perpetrators often perceive name-calling as more harmless than receivers (Alberts *et al.* 1996; Boxer and Cortés-Conde 1997; Shapiro *et al.* 1991). At the same time, perceptions of name-calling as harmless have been associated with a higher prevalence of name-calling (Teräsahjo and Salmivalli 2003). A mixed-method study (Mahidol 2014) identified a high prevalence of LGBT bullying in Thailand. Thai students stressed that the meaning of behaviour would lie in the intention of the perpetrator, which led to the acceptance of name-calling if the intention was perceived as positive, even if victims suffered from its consequences. Findings showed that while victims felt angry, disappointed, offended, sad, vengeful, scared, and depressed, only one-third responded by consulting their friends, fighting back, or telling a teacher. Two-thirds coped by acting indifferently, fleeing, walking away, and not talking back. A significantly higher proportion of those who had been bullied (as compared to those who had not) reported class absence, depression, and attempted suicide. The authors criticised a lack of school bullying prevention policies.

While the study addressed bullying of students who were perceived as attracted to the same sex or as transgender, it did not particularly focus on the role of name-calling or the cultural context of Thailand. A better understanding of victims' perceptions of name-calling, perpetrators, and effects in its particular cultural country context can contribute to developing and adapting respective school policies and intervention strategies. Review studies on school bullying (Hall 2017; Kennedy 2020) show that policies that guide stakeholders in their actions and decision-making can prevent and reduce bullying. Such policies can support reporting procedures, training administrators and teachers on how to intervene, developing awareness, empathy and respectful behaviour of students and cooperating with parents. In their review study, Kennedy (2020) concluded that prevention programs for verbal bullying were less effective than those for relational and physical bullying. This was assumed to be the case because verbal bullying was often not perceived as such by different stakeholders, even if it met the criteria for bullying. Differences in the effectiveness of programs across countries were attributed to the more culturally specific character of verbal bullying compared to other forms of bullying. Research is needed to support intervention programs that consider the role of culture.

Name-calling research can further contribute to theory development in the field. There is a lack of studies focusing on name-calling content, its interpretation, and its effects (Eder 1995), except for particular content, such as homophobic name-calling (Davis *et al.* 2021; DeLay *et al.* 2017; Poteat *et al.* 2014; Poteat and Espelage 2007). Scholars have further emphasised the need to address the environment where bullying happens and have started to utilise ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner 1977) as a framework to discuss factors associated with bullying and its risks in school contexts (Espelage 2014). Microsystems such as peers, family, and schools have been shown to contribute to bullying perpetrated or experienced by youth. The theory expands the concept of "environment" by considering the macro-system, which includes the broader culture, such as the role of ethnicity, values, societal customs, and socio-economic factors in child development. When reflecting upon the context, macroeconomic and social indicators, such as socio-economic inequalities, have been investigated and were found to contribute to an increase in bullying inflicted on those with less power (Bradshaw 2009). However, research investigating the cultural context of bullying victimisation, including national value orientations and those of subcultures, remains scarce.

### **Name-calling Behaviour and Perceptions – The Role of the Cultural Context of Thailand**

Culture can be defined as: "A set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviours shared by a group of people, but different from each individual, communicated from one generation to the next" (Matsumoto 1996: 6).

Cultural value orientations and shared perceptions towards groups characterised by features such as ethnicity or religion can influence name-calling behaviour and content (Moran *et al.* 2011). Scholars exploring the role of cultural value orientations in bullying have mostly referred to Hofstede's cultural dimensions (1991), with many Asian countries, such as Thailand, characterised by collectivistic and high power distance value orientations. Further, the Globe Study (House *et al.* 2004) has mapped cultures based on value clusters and differentiated between value orientations of South East Asian (SEA) countries and the more studied East Asian countries (Confucian cluster), such as China and Japan. The Confucian cluster scored noticeably higher on performance orientation than SEA countries, which is also reflected in Hofstede's masculinity-femininity dimension.

Thailand has been identified as one of the most feminine countries in the world, stressing values of social harmony, low levels of competition, conflict avoidance and supporting the collective (Hofstede *et al.* 2010). Scholars have started to address the role of collectivism and power distance in bullying. Smith and Robinson (2019) focused on the individualism-collectivism dimension and addressed rumours as a form of verbal bullying but did not refer to name-calling. Sittichai *et al.* (2018) further addressed that cultural characteristics may explain the relatively high prevalence of cyberbullying compared to offline bullying in Thailand but also in China, and Singapore, which share similar cultural value orientations. While definitions of bullying commonly refer to an imbalance of power between the bully and victim as one of the key defining characteristics of bullying (Olweus 1995), the degree to which power is expected and accepted – also measured as power distance (Hofstede 2011) – differs across countries. Studies conducted in Thailand, Korea, China, and Japan have shown how perceptions of power influence bullying (Smith *et al.* 2016), such as when older pupils were seen as more legitimate, and their actions were less often interpreted as a form of bullying. Furthermore, authoritarian parenting styles common in many parts of Asia have been positively related to bullying behaviour (Martinez *et al.* 2019).

While scholars have started to address the role of cultural value orientations in bullying, there is a lack of qualitative research exploring victims' perceptions of name-calling, coping, and its effects in the context of culture. Ruthaychonnee Sittichai and Smith (2015) reviewed papers related to 10 ASEAN countries and identified only five qualitative studies, of which two were conducted with a Thai sample (Kasetchai Laeheem 2013; Mahidol *et al.* 2014). Among the two identified qualitative studies on bullying in Thailand, the sample of Laeheem (2013) consisted of students of Islamic private schools in the South of Thailand, which is known for frequent violent conflicts and cannot easily be compared to the majority of Buddhists in Thailand. While the two studies did not address the role of the Thai cultural context, Mahidol *et al.* (2014) referred to a lack of bullying prevention policies as a form of cultural and structural violence. The study showed that most LGBT students were aware of problems in their schools, while most teachers were not. A mixed-method study (Samoh *et al.* 2019) on cyberbullying in the Thai cultural context highlighted a lack of qualitative approaches. Authors elaborated on the role of Thai cultural values of “sanúk” (fun), “sabai sabai” (relax), “lên” (to play), *mây penray* (it's not a big deal) as well as conflict avoidance and story-telling. Such values may support bullying, particularly if tolerated for being perceived as playful and affectionate.

However, to not simplify and over-generalize the concept of culture and its associated values, attitudes and behaviours, subcultures—such as city and village cultures—different socio-economic status groups or religious groups, and dynamic societal changes should not be ignored. Thai culture has uniquely developed with Thailand being the only Southeast Asian country that has never been colonised. Societal values, on the one hand, have been reinforced by the triad of the monarchy, nationalistic politics, and Buddhism. On the other hand, during recent student movements opposing the influence of the military government and monarchy, students have criticised traditional values, such as those reinforced by educational intuitions (Lertchoosakul 2021).

The “Twelve Core Values of Thai people”, as defined by the Head of the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) for Thai private and public university students, highlight the importance of upholding the nation, religion, and monarchy but were also ridiculed by many Thais. These values encourage putting the public and national interest before personal interest and to maintain discipline, respect, and gratefulness towards parents, the elderly, and seniority (Ministry of Education, Department of Academics 2015). Though King Rama IX, Bhumibol Adulyadej, has been celebrated and idealised as a

caring and supportive father figure in Thailand, with his passing in 2016, his less popular son, Vajiralongkorn, took the reign. These changes and the control of the military led to pro-democratic student movements in Thailand challenging values of power distance and conformity, with students demanding to overthrow rules, such as those that support school uniforms (Lertchoosakul 2021). Movements like these could affect perceptions of power dynamics in bullying and coping strategies, such as when deciding whether to approach name-callers or accept name-calling behaviour. However, with 93.46 per cent of Thais being considered Buddhists (Population by religion, region, and area, 2018), mindfulness and values of “cayyen ๑” (ใจเย็น๑, keep a cool heart), “kreeṅ cay” (เกรง๑, to be considerate of others’ feelings), “sanùk” (สนุก, fun and enjoyment of the moment) and “sabai sabai” (สบายสบาย, relax) (Suntaree Komin 1990) could reinforce conflict-avoidance, which could lead to higher acceptance of name-calling behaviour.

Lastly, modernisation theories (Inglehart *et al.* 1987) have highlighted that collectivist values, which also encourage children to contribute to the livelihood of the family financially, can change with an increase in socioeconomic status, particularly in cities. While such subcultures within one national context can develop, some scholars have argued that financial dependencies may be replaced by emotional dependencies fostered by parents in collectivist societies (Kagitcibasi 2005). Research should consider the possible role of socioeconomic status when studying students in collectivist contexts. Furthermore, if emotional dependencies continue as students enter university, collectivist value orientations may also continue to influence students’ behaviour and possibly name-calling perceptions. While most studies on verbal bullying have focused on the school context rather than that of universities (Lund and Ross 2016), name-calling should be studied across educational institutions.

As elaborated above, there is a need for qualitative research in the field of bullying victimisation in countries such as Thailand, which remain understudied despite the high prevalence of verbal bullying and values of national and sub-cultures that may influence name-calling content, behaviour and coping. This qualitative study explores perceptions of name-calling victimisation experiences in the context of national culture, whilst considering the possible role of school levels and socioeconomic status, asking students across income groups (international and local colleges) to refer to experiences in both schools and universities. This study raises the following questions:

- What is the content of name-calling, and how are names created in Thailand?
- How is name-calling perceived and dealt with in Thailand?
- Who are the bullies? What role do peers, parents, and teachers play in name-calling behaviour in Thailand?
- What role do Thai national culture and possible subcultures play in name-calling behaviour, its content, perceptions, and perpetrators?

## Method

### Participants

Data from 115 Thai Bachelor students aged 18–26 were collected from two international colleges and one local college. Different types of colleges were chosen due to the differences in study fees and, thus, income groups to consider the possible role of socioeconomic status in cultural value orientations. Students were asked about current and past name-calling experiences across schools (elementary, middle and high schools) and universities to determine if and how name-calling behaviour would take place in universities as compared to schools. Further, since students were, at the end, asked to reflect upon the role of culture, university students seemed a suitable sample due to their cognitive abilities to analyse and reflect on more abstract concepts, such as those of cultural values. Students were majoring in social sciences, natural sciences, media studies, business studies, and medical science.

### Data collection

Methodological triangulation was utilised, using more than one method to gather data to provide a more detailed and enriched picture of participants’ experiences of the phenomena. Twenty in-depth interviews

were led, and ninety-five autobiographical essays were collected. The researcher approached lectures in different universities to announce the project to their students. Further, snowball sampling was applied. The researcher asked students who took part in the interviews if they could identify any other potential interview partners.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with questions addressing name-calling experiences, observations, coping, the role of the perpetrators and the cultural context. The possible role of culture was addressed in the final question to not influence students and allow them to, at first, discuss the role of any cultural associations or culturally relevant values without the influence of the researcher. Interviews took place online and offline and lasted 45–60 minutes. The principal researcher, who conducted interviews, was, at the time of the data collection, employed as a social counsellor with the responsibility to support students who experienced mental and emotional distress by assessing their situation and identifying coping strategies as well as by collaborating with mental health professionals in case of psychological disorders. Thus, the interviewer could establish rapport and a trusting atmosphere and could react to students' distress. Furthermore, students who were uncomfortable talking to a foreigner or lecturer were interviewed by a trained research assistant of Thai nationality. Interviews were led mostly in English. However, if students could not express ideas, they could switch to Thai. Later, Thai-language interview parts were translated into English. Back translation was applied to evaluate the equivalency of meaning between the source and target text. Interviews were conducted until saturation was reached and no more new phenomena occurred in the data.

Autobiographical written narratives (400–1600 words) were conducted in a free format with a few guiding questions that asked students to describe experiences of name-calling, perceptions of perpetrators, and the possible role of culture in detail. Scholars have shown the efficacy of this method when studying sensitive topics related to experiences of anger and hurt feelings (Baumeister *et al.* 1990). The approach also served students who were not comfortable expressing themselves face-to-face.

### **Ethics**

Permission for the study was sought from the Ethics Committee of the International College the author is employed in. The process involved an assessment of the research purpose, background and methodology. Interview questions, consent forms and information for participants about the study background were submitted and assessed to ensure that they met ethical requirements, such as informing participants that they could interrupt the study at any time and that personal information was protected. Close attention was paid to the body language of participants to ensure that participants' distress was detected, which helped the researcher to remind participants to only share what they felt comfortable sharing and to interrupt at any time if needed. Furthermore, as a social counsellor, the researcher offered follow up sessions in case students felt the need to continue to process their experiences. No incentives were given to students for participation. The research project was approved by the Ethics Committee of the International College.

### **Data analysis**

Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was applied to capture meaning within textual data sets with the help of a stepwise and systematic data analysis framework and to unfold students' experiences, behaviours, attitudes, and perceptions in-depth. The qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA served to explore and organise rich data. The principal researcher systematically coded and built categories to identify why victims were targeted and the possible role of the societal and cultural context of the participants. The process of coding was repeated until clear themes and subthemes emerged.

### **Findings**

#### **Name-calling content**

Students, teachers, and parents used several names (see table 1), mainly referring to students' appearance, classroom performance, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity. Students shared names

**Table 1** : Names and their meanings used by students, parents, and teachers to address students

Target characteristics	Names
Skin colour because of one's ethnicity or tanned skin	black skin (ผิวดำ), black skinned child (เด็กผิวดำ), black face (หน้าดำ), termite face (หน้าปลวก) (referred to being ugly, having darker skin, and acne), negro, black person (โหด), burned potato (มันไหม้), burned chopstick (ตะเกียบไหม้) (referred to being thin and having darker skin)
Ethnicity	China, Chinese child (ลูกคนจีน), thrifty Chinese (คนจีนขี้เหนียว), clothes seller (คนขายผ้า) (referred to Indians), roti seller แปกขายโรตีส (referred to Indians), abang (referred to Indians)
Weight	fat person (โอด้วน), fat or chubby (อ้วน), elephant (โอด่าง), little pig (หมูน้อย), pig (ไอนู), bone (กระดูก), dried shrimp (กุ้งแห้ง) (referred to being thin and small), skeleton (โอดแห้ง), fishbones (โอดาง), chopstick (ตะเกียบ) (referred to being skinny), chopstick legs (ขาตะเกียบ)
Hair	mushroom head (หัวเห็ด), (referred to hairstyle), cockroach antenna (referred to messy hair), shower head/hairstyle (ทรงผมอาบน้ำ) (referred to hair worn in a bundle, careless hairstyle), sponge (ฟองน้ำ) (curly hair)
Height and weight	Street light (ไฟจราจร), electric post (เสาไฟฟ้า), a tall ghost (เปรต) (referred to being tall and skinny), shorty (โอด็ย), chopstick legs (ขาตะเกียบ) (referred to being skinny and tall)
Gender identity or expression	Pussy (จูนจูน), deer (กั่งกวาง) (referred to being homosexual), transgender woman (กระเทย), tomboy, tom (ทอม), bitch (เบรด)
Names of parents	First or last names of parents (was not used to refer to particular appearance or behaviour)
Classroom performance	Big mouth (ปากมาก), idiot (โอดโง่), bird brain, buffalo (โอดควาย) (stupid), mute (โอด) (referred to being quiet), airhead (สมองขี้เลื่อย)
Glasses, looking older	Glasses (โอดแว่น), auntie (โอดป้า), old lady (ป้าแก่)
Expression of emotions	Shell boy/shelly (referred to a student's fear of snails), crying girl (เด็กหญิงร้องไห้), emotionless (โอดารวม), not fun (โอดสนุกสนาน)
Others	Pig or piggy (หมู) (referred to the big nose of a student and to snoring sound), monitor lizard (เหี้ย) (associated with dirt or being a bad person), big upper lips (โอด), Pacman (referred to being lame, making lame jokes), noobs (referred to a student being bad at a game), countryside girl/boy บ้านนอก

in Thai and/or English. While the researcher could understand most Thai names and translate them back to English, translation was done in exchange with participants to ensure that they captured the original meaning. Table 1 includes English translations as well as the original names in Thai. Some names were addressed in English only and, thus, did not include a translation. Names most frequently mentioned referred to students' appearance, particularly to dark skin (e.g. "black face"), body shape (e.g. "elephant", "fat person", "dried shrimps"), height (e.g. "shorty", "electric post") and hairstyles (e.g. "cockroach antenna", "shower hair"). Names related to skin colour mostly addressed students of Thai or Indian ethnicity with tanned skin due to extended sun exposure. Indian and Chinese students who grew up in Thailand reported ethnic name-calling (e.g. "thrifty Chinese", "roti seller"). Names also addressed behaviour, such as that of being slow in learning (e.g. "bird brain") or too supportive of the teacher (e.g. "teachers' pet"). Students were further called names related to their gender identity and expression (e.g. "tom") as well as their socio-economic status (e.g. "rich kid"). They regularly called each other by their parents' names, which was perceived as highly disrespectful. Some names, such as animal names, referred to one or more physical or behavioural characteristics. For example, the name "cockroach antenna" addressed students' "messy hair", while "termite face" was said to refer to those being "ugly", having "dark skin tone", and "acne".

Some names were created concerning Thai or Asian culture (e.g. food, beliefs in spirits, animals), addressing body shapes ("dried shrimps", "chopstick legs", "tall ghost") as well as to one's character ("monitor lizard"). While animist practices, such as giving offers to spirits and decorating trees, are common in Thailand, spirits are often feared (Sprenger 2016), which may explain names related to ghosts.

Students would often add the Thai word “อ” (ii) or “โ” (ay) in front of any characteristic or behaviour to create insulting names, which were experienced as less offensive among friends.

### *Parents’ names – The most serious offence*

Students reported that they frequently addressed each other by their parents’ first or last names or, in some cases, talked negatively about other parents. The worst offence would be to call someone’s parents dead. In contrast to other types of names, students felt most offended when being called by their parent’s names and reacted with verbal or physical retaliation in several cases. A student (male, 19) shared how, when he was called names related to his sexual orientation, both in playful and aggressive ways, he pretended to be ok with it. However, sometimes they would talk about his parents: “They said it in a derogatory way that I don’t want to describe, which drove me mad, and once, in high school, I physically attacked one of them.” Another student (male, 20) shared how most students who got called by their parents’ names would react aggressively and violently because parents are “highly respected and loved”: “Some might punch back to the name-caller or report the event to their teachers or parents. Some would get angry or stop talking to their harassers. Only a few students did not hold on to their grudge and let it go.” A student (female, 22) explained:

If a student is angry at another friend, [they] might attack that person verbally by calling him [by] his parent’s name. It is inappropriate because it shows disrespect towards that person’s dear father. In Thai culture, not using the word “คุณ” (Khun), the polite form to address someone, or mister and miss, is deemed as rather disrespectful.

Students hardly ever expressed discontent towards teachers who called them names related to their appearance or behaviour, except for one case where a high school teacher called a student by his fathers’ name: “As I remember, I saw that his expression was extremely dissatisfied. Of course, he went to sue the teacher, and the teacher was greatly upset that it happened. Finally, the teacher punished the student with more mean words” (male, 19).

### *Perceptions of name-calling – Part of everyday life, just fun, subliminal, a way to connect, or a horrible feeling*

While some students referred to name-calling as a type of bullying, students mostly associated it with teasing. Many students described it as “not serious” and stressed how name-calling served to form bonds between students and was used to express that students felt comfortable with each other. Most names, as students reported, could be used with both negative and positive intentions (e.g. “fatty” and “dark face”), except calling each other by parents’ names, which was clearly interpreted as an insult.

Students regularly referred to the frequency and normality of name-calling, which happened across different school levels and in university, daily and over extended periods. Name-calling was described as “typical Thai”, “very common in Thailand”, “part of the jargon of Thai teenagers”, “completely normal”, “something that has been going on for ages without any improvements” and which would “happen daily”. Classmates, friends, parents, teachers, and university staff were involved in name-calling.

While many students stressed the normality of name-calling, very few of those who got called names perceived name-calling as clearly positive, many students described their experiences as “shameful”, “offensive”, “difficult”, “embarrassing”, “very degrading”, “a horrible feeling”, “terrible”, “really hard”, “stressful”, “uncomfortable”, “numbing” and described how they just pretended to be ok and lost confidence. Students rarely expressed feelings of anger, except for cases when students were called by their parents’ names. Name-calling, in several cases, led to withdrawal, dropping out of school, low levels of self-esteem, depression, and social anxiety. A student (female, 22) shared: “Everyone called me black meatball. It felt like verbal abuse. I was fat and black, the darkest student in the class. This happened every day for like ten years. You just get stuck with that name for your whole life.”

Further, several students who considered name-calling as “normal”, “not serious”, “understandable” and “helpful to improve oneself” also reported how they suffered, which led to mixed feelings. A student

(female, 21) explained: “I think name-calling and social evaluation, such as body-shaming and beauty standards, are common among Thai students. It is just too common to the point that many victims get used to it, though they feel suffocated.” Another student shared:

There were many situations from elementary school to high school, where all the guys would call me fatty, they would call me a pig, and they would say I’m obese. It was like almost every day, you know? Sometimes they did not even use my name anymore; they just greeted me, ‘hey fatty, what’s up?’ I take it as an offence, but it just happens so often that it becomes like a casual name thing (female, 19).

Another student explained how in Thailand, it is almost impossible not to be called names by peers or teachers:

Every single one of my classmates has been called names multiple times. Some may feel bad, and we don’t even know. The most famous ones in my school were the names of our parents. Every Thai student has to go through that. Since we were kids, teachers called us names, so they must have assumed that it was all right to do so. This can cause pain inside students, so they pass it on later, maybe as teachers. It’s a loop (male, 18).

A student (female, 19) shared how she had witnessed “too many cases to count”, with many of those being “rather subliminal” and victims remained silent: “It’s these little moments, like being made fun of for having dark skin, the weird smell of packed lunch food, being called a fat pig and being called ‘black’, despite being Asian.”

Feelings of discontent, as well as acceptance, arose as students described how they felt hurt as well as how they tried to understand name-callers. They shared how name-callers did not mean to offend and how some friends would get worse names than them, which made them feel lucky. A student (female, 24) shared how she was regularly called “fat girl” and “pig” during middle school. She stressed that her friends were “just joking” and “played around”. She understood and forgave them because it was her “weakness” but at the same time, expressed feelings of discontent, highlighting that no one would like to be called such names. A student (male, 20) shared how “of course” he was called names because he was a “fat boy”. He felt “hurt” and “agitated” but not angry. He thought it was understandable that they teased him about his weight because he was part of the minority and stood out.

### *Friend’s involvement in name-calling – Blame, intentions and the role of group belonging*

Many students did not blame name-callers if they were their friends, which was often the case. Instead, many protected their friends, stressing it was not their intention while, at the same time, referring to the negative effects of name-calling on their mental well-being. Several students also mentioned that some name-callers would not be their real friends but that it was important to “stay in a group” and to “not stick out”.

A student (female, 21) who was called “short” and “fat” during high school and university described how friends treated her otherwise nicely, and this would be “pretty much what best friends do”: “I do not want other people to get the wrong idea that I don’t like them. I do love them very much because they are my best friends. Even though they hurt my feelings, those fun times that we spent together can outweigh those bad memories.”

Another female student (18) elaborated:

I am usually not a person who really cares about insults, but sometimes it hurts. My friends insulted me about how stupid I am and how ugly I look. They said it in a joking manner. At first, I did not care, but they kept saying it to my face to the point that I hated everything about myself. If I confronted them about how much I disliked what they did, they would answer, ‘We were just joking! You’re being too sensitive and overthinking it.’ It might be a joke to them, but to me, it wasn’t fun.



### *Teachers' involvement in name-calling – Remembering names, creating a good atmosphere, getting closer to students*

Many teachers called students names related to their appearances, such as their weight (e.g. “fat boy/girl”, “skeleton”), skin colour (e.g. “dark face”, “ghost face”, “black potato”, “fat boy/girl”), glasses (“four-eyes”) as well as to their ethnicity (e.g. thrifty Chinese) and behaviour, particularly that related to school performance (e.g. “stupid”). Students shared that name-calling would happen because teachers wanted students to “answer questions” and “entertain others” when they “took attendance” and referred to “performance or classroom behaviour”. Name-calling by teachers happened frequently and across educational institutions but less often in university settings.

In many cases, names were related to physical characteristics. A student (female, 18) reported how, in high school, she was on her way to have lunch with her friends after a morning ceremony at the auditorium when suddenly, a physical education teacher shouted at her twice. “Then he shouted again, asking me if my butt could fit into the auditorium’s seats. I know that I am chubby and have a big figure, and I am very insecure about it.” Another student (female, 19) elaborated:

Many of my childhood teachers like to call their students by their physical appearance. Names I often hear are ‘fat’, ‘walking chopstick’, ‘black’, and ‘nerd’. I think they did that because they think that students might not feel bad about it because they were still young. When they made fun of students, others laughed along and started using those names.

Many students criticised their teachers’ behaviour and referred to the negative effects of name-calling:

Teachers usually use name-calling for appearance, such as being fat, black, or having acne. I think this is so terrible because in my high school, we have a name label, and they can see our first name. Also, my friend who is fat always is called fat and pig. Teachers always say not to think too much and that it is a joke. Why do people have to call others names to make a joke? This makes my friend have less confidence (female, 25).

A student called “glasses” and “fat boy” by his middle school teachers shared: “In my opinion, it is not okay, it is harassment” (male, 18). Students emphasised how teachers should instead teach them how to honour themselves and others, while few suggested that there should be a form of punishment for the teachers.

While several students viewed teachers’ behaviour critically, many stressed that teachers did not have negative intentions but instead aimed to “create a good class atmosphere”, “give the best mood to students when studying”, and “get closer to students”. It was said that for teachers, it was “easier to remember names that way”, that teachers were “just joking” and that they “did not realise that this meant a lot to other students”.

Teachers would, in some cases, use name-calling to differentiate between students who had the same name. Students explained how teachers would, for example address a student as “beautiful Fah” and another one as “ugly Fah” or “white Fah” and “black Fah” or “smart Fah” and “stupid Fah”. A student (female, 20) referred to her experience with an English teacher: “For example, he would call them chubby Madalyn and skinny Madalyn. Skinny Madalyn did not show too much emotion, but with chubby Madalyn, I could totally tell from her face that she was not so happy about it.” Other names were related to students’ class performance and perceived as a way to encourage or discourage participation. Students who talked too much were called names such as “big mouth” or, in an ironic way, “superman”. Several students stressed that teachers would call them names if they did not reach their expectations. A student (female, 21) described it as “a general thing here” to be insulted if students did not reach their teacher’s expectations, which would happen daily in many schools and universities: “If we ask them a question perceived as a, like, nonsense question, they will tell that we are stupid. It’s not like just saying it normally, it’s like using scolding and blaming ways.”

Students also shared how name-calling from teachers would be copied by students. This would happen because “the teacher never confessed that it was wrong” or because “they could do it if the teacher did it”. A student (female, 26) shared how she was called names because of her dark skin:

Our society thinks dark skin is not beautiful, so sometimes the teacher called me like “black girl”, you know, just kidding, but for me, it hurts a lot. Other students thought, ‘Oh since the teacher does it, we can do it too.’ If a teacher can say ‘fat girl’ [then] my friends can do it. I think [for] Thai teachers or professors or friends, we think, ‘just kidding,’ but for the girl or the boy who gets bullied, it does not feel good. Students just laugh when teachers laugh.

Several students referred to the importance of looking appropriate and dressing politely, as well as wearing a proper hairstyle. One participant (female, 18) mentioned how the school director called her “shower head” to indicate how her hairstyle looked careless, like when one quickly ties up their hair after a shower.

### *Parents’ and relatives’ involvement in name-calling – Intention to motivate improvement and lack of blame*

Students, in most cases, did not approach their parents if they were called names by teachers or peers. Some parents would perceive their child as a “problem child” if the student’s appearance caused problems in school, such as not wanting to go to school anymore. Many parents called their children names. Several students referred to their parents and relatives to emphasise the normality of name-calling. While parents were said to “only want the best for their children” and to use name-calling to encourage their children to improve, such as to lose weight and get brighter skin, some students reported that they felt hurt. None of the students blamed their parents. Instead, many stressed that they loved their parents, who looked after them and cared for them. Relatives were viewed more critically by some students. A student (female, 19) described how various people, including family members, were involved in name-calling:

Even adults will make fun of my weight. All of my cousins, everyone, even my mum and dad. They would tell me if I was getting fat. So there’s no point telling them it’s like every day of my life, so it’s just...I just like getting used to it, but then it still bothers me a lot and even teachers in my school they would be like, as a joke, ‘oh hey fatty’, but it’s not okay.

Another student mentioned how he would not mind that he and his family members would insult each other very often in passive-aggressive ways (male, 19). Many students shared that they got used to their parents calling them “fat” or “dark”, while they would mostly not try to stop such behaviour. Parents and relatives would refer to their body shape or their skin colour, reminding them to lose weight and to join sports classes: “My dad told me to exercise and took me to run every day. My mom actually forced me onto the swim team. She signed me up for soccer and even triathlon (laughs) and comments when my skin is dark” (female, 19).

### *Influence of culture and society on name-calling*

The majority of students stressed that Thai society and culture would affect name-calling. It was said to be “Traditional Thai behaviour to make a name for everybody”, “accepted here”, as well as “typical for the Thai and Asian society”. Societal values would encourage students to look “presentable”, which would influence appearance-related name-calling. Furthermore, those in higher positions, such as teachers, should be respected in Thailand, which was said to reinforce name-calling. Students said that the Thai value of staying in groups, not stick out and remain friends with peers kept them from approaching the name-caller, particularly if they were a friend. Some students who went to international schools stressed the involvement of Thai students: “Actually only the Thai students were like ‘you’re dumb’, ‘you’re fat’ and ‘you are stupid’ (female, 18).

Thai society was described as valuing appearance, particularly white skin and being skinny, and associating beauty with superiority. This, students stressed, would explain peoples’ mindsets that they could

treat those that did not meet beauty standards poorly: “There is a big problem if many Thai children think ‘Oh, if you are black, if you are fat, it’s not good’, then no people accept you. So, many try to use cream or eat medicine to make bright skin and to lose weight” (female, 26). A male student (19) shared:

I think the Thai sense of humour is very weird and discriminates against others. The joke has to be about appearance to be funny. When I was young, I felt like it was not right to tease other people like that, but when I was growing up, I got used to it because almost everyone laughed about those jokes and kept doing it. Finally, I laughed too (male, 19).

Another student (male, 18) stressed how students were called appearance-related names, which is “one of the biggest problems in Thai society.” He described how many Thai children had not been taught to respect others independent of their race, sex, appearance, or nationality: “This mistake in the Thai society can lead to many mental problems for people that are bullied.”

With the exception of being called parents’ names, which was considered “typically Asian” and “very offensive”, name-calling victims would often remain silent because they did not want to “get in trouble” or “mess up relationships”. Students related these motives to Thai collectivist and conformist values. Defending oneself against name-calling from a teacher is especially discouraged. According to students, in Thai society, teachers were believed to “have power” over and “could dominate” students. Moreover, they reported an expectation that “Young people should listen to those [who are] older”. Therefore, students would be expected to accept what their teachers said or did. A student (male, 20) described how students kept quiet and walked away, trying to perceive name-calling as a joke: “However, deep down they may lose confidence in their looks. Few kids stood up for themselves to stop bullies from shaming them. There seems to be no one who went against the teachers when they do the same things.” Many students critically referred to the Thai value of respecting social hierarchies:

I think Thai culture really influences the way we treat each other. You should always respect people who are older than you. This is the most hated culture for me. I mean it is good to respect others but more because we are all humans, equal. One of my friends was called ‘an idiot’ by a teacher. That teacher thinks that she could call him whatever she wanted just because she was older than my friend, and because of our culture, my friend could not say that she was not okay. This is really painful (female, 21).

A tall student who was frequently called names such as “street light”, “telephone pole” or the name of a tall ghost was the only student who expressed his discontent towards his high school teacher, though he felt it was wrong to do so: “Believe it or not, I once called back a teacher. She named me after my height. I then called her short. She never call[ed] me by names again. That kind of felt good, but I think what I did was wrong” (male, 18). Educational institutions were criticised for ignoring the problem of name-calling. A student (female, 19) shared: Most would not focus on the name-calling problem but on other nonsense things like the height of students’ socks, hair or skirt length.” She concluded that the chances of reducing name-calling would be limited because schools would be the main place for children to meet and participate in activities (female, 19).

## Discussion

Ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner 1977) highlights the role of the macrosystem and the cultural elements that affect our development. Studies have neglected to investigate the cultural context of name-calling, a form of verbal bullying. This study suggests that cultural value orientations, and particularly Thai values, play a noticeable role in name-calling behaviour and perceptions.

Findings revealed that Thai students were called various names related to their appearance, behaviour, and background, with some being culture-specific, such as names associated with animistic beliefs (e.g. tall ghosts) or animals (e.g. monitor lizard). Names related to skin colour, weight, and hair were noticeably common. Students described how appearance significantly influenced being accepted in Thai society. Many students stressed how they felt that it was important and expected of them to change their

appearance, such as by taking pills to reduce weight or using skin-whitening cream. The tendency to try to blame and change oneself, rather than blaming the name-caller, may be encouraged by Thai values, such as collectivism, conformity, and power distance.

While several students stressed the negative effects of name-calling on their well-being, most refrained from confronting the name-caller. Such passive coping may be explained by collectivist and feminine values, which have been associated with conflict avoidance and the need for social harmony (Hofstede *et al.* 2010). Students who were called names or observed name-calling as bystanders regularly laughed along with name-callers. The behaviour of name-callers was often accepted or perceived as unintentional, particularly if name-callers were friends. None of the students blamed their parents for calling them names, despite many of them consequently suffering. Students referred to Thai values of “sanùk” (สนุก = fun, enjoyment of the moment), “sabaay” (สบาย = relax), *mây penray* (มันไม่ไร = it doesn't matter) and “kreen cay” (เกรงใจ = to be considerate of other's feelings), to explain why they did not take name-calling too seriously and refrained from speaking up. Students seldom retaliated when called names unless they were called by their parents' names, which was considered the most serious offence.

Many teachers addressed students with names, such as those related to their skin colour or weight, when taking attendance, aiming to entertain the class, addressing the performance of students, and asking them to answer questions. While students justified name-calling by teachers and lecturers, stressing that it was a way for them to remember names better or to entertain the class, several students criticised their behaviour and the societal values to respect those in higher positions and of older age. Such responses may indicate changes in values of power distance (Hofstede *et al.* 2010), which could be influenced by recent student movements challenging the importance of respecting and obeying authorities. On the other hand, except for one case, students did not directly criticise their teachers or university lecturers.

Changes in the perception of power distance show the importance of considering dynamic changes in cultural contexts over time. This study further aimed to consider the possible role of subcultures. However, values seemed to influence students similarly across local and international universities (different socio-economic groups) and school levels (different age groups). Students often stressed the importance of being considerate of parents, friends, teachers, and society, referring to the Thai value of “kreen cay” (to be considerate of other's feelings), which can be associated with feminine value orientations, found in many SEA countries and particularly in Thailand (Hofstede *et al.* 2010). Similarities may be explained considering Kagitçibasi's (2005) assumption that economic interdependencies fostering collectivist values in families of lower income can be replaced by emotional interdependencies among high socio-economic income groups. That way, collectivist values could be reinforced across subcultures (e.g. different income groups).

Further, while much research focuses on school bullying and less on university settings (Lund and Ross 2016), this study showed regular name-calling among students across all educational levels, including university. This may also be explained considering how emotional interdependencies can be fostered even as students become older and more financially independent. Some students shared how teachers were unaware of the effects of the offensive names they used. Next to hurtful names, some teachers called their students “lùuk”, which can be translated as “child” (daughter or son), which may have influenced the acceptance of teachers' name-calling behaviour.

Lastly, though gender has been shown to play a role in appearance-related bullying, with girls more likely to tease others about physical appearance than boys (Shapiro *et al.* 1991), no clear gender difference emerged in this study. This may be explained by societal expectations of maintaining harmony and avoiding conflict, which seemed to influence name-calling and were directed at male and female students alike.

## Conclusion

Name-calling, despite its potential harm, prevails if overlooked or accepted due to its possible interpretation as playful teasing, as this study demonstrates. Findings showed that name-calling underlies societal and cultural influences that appear to reinforce its occurrence. The study shows possible interactions between Thai societal values and perceptions of name-calling content, its perpetrators, name-calling behaviour, as well as coping mechanisms. Interviews and essays were conducted in English, which

may have limited students' expression and did not allow for language-specific cultural expressions. However, names were translated into Thai and English. Future studies could interview students exclusively using the Thai language. Further, cultural values can influence bystanders as well, which were not centered in this study, but deserve attention as they could copy name-calling behaviour to conform with friends or if they perceive teachers using names as role models. Educational stakeholders operating in Thailand or country contexts with similar value orientations can utilise the findings of this study to deal with name-calling behaviour appropriately by understanding the possible influence of the societal context. Educators should collaborate with counsellors and parents to reduce name-calling and its effects and support preventive approaches.

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