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## University initiation and the formation of group cohesion among students: A mediating role of social identification\*\*

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### Abstract

This research examined the relationship between universities' initiations (both constructive and destructive forms), and group cohesion among Thai university students with social identification as a mediator. Participants were undergraduate students who had experienced initiation from various universities in the Bangkok Metropolitan Area (N = 200). The results of Multiple Regression Analysis using PROCESS (Hayes, 2013) revealed that constructive-initiation-activity (CIA) had a significant positive direct effect on students' group cohesion at  $p < .05$ . In contrast, destructive-initiation-activity (DIA) found no significant direct effect on neither social identification nor group cohesion. In addition, we found that social identification was a significant partial mediator for the relationship between CIA and group cohesion. These findings indicated that relevant departments, as well as senior students, should be encouraged to promote CIA within university faculty, in order to help newcomers identify themselves with the faculty. This can subsequently lead to formation of group cohesion among students.

### Introduction

Group cohesion is considered an essential factor for university students as it supports a good relationship among group members (Forsyth, 2013); affects members' attitudes toward the group which can foster their motivation to align with the group's outputs and objectives (Aubke, Wöber, Scott & Baggio, 2014); enhances the productivity of work teams and performance (Forrester & Tashchian, 2006; Evans & Dion, 2012); and decreases members' turnover rate and stress levels (Forsyth, 2013). Regarding the importance of group

cohesion and its positive outcomes, the current study aimed to investigate the factors which can cause the formation of group cohesion among undergraduate students in the settings of their participation in initiation ceremony at universities. As it apparently seems to be impossible for students to be solely independent, they need to connect with other students to share their thoughts, knowledge and experiences, and fulfill their need of belonging from their first day at university through the graduation based on the hierarchy of needs theory (Maslow, 1943). The students' ability in maintaining quality relationship during their university

years, therefore, are considered important as it will impact their social wellbeing within the university society.

University Initiation, or ‘Rub Nong Mai’ in Thai language, is a traditional freshmen-welcoming-activity which has been commonly practiced among Thai universities (Nunklieng, 2014). The main purpose of the activity includes fostering love, warmth, and unity between senior students and newcomers (Ngamsomrej, 2004). Unfortunately, as the time passed, activities during university initiation has been altered and completely deviated from its main proposes (Ngamsomrej, 2004; Sritrakul, 2003). Some groups even started using power and violence, similar to hazing, to bully or force newcomers to follow their commands regardless of the appropriateness or whether it’s a human rights abuse. Hazing behaviors can be subtle and violent in nature, such as shouting with offensive words to pressure or emotionally harm newcomers; harsh punishments; force of alcohol consumption; painting newcomer’s body with condensed milk for peers to lick; mouth-to-mouth candy distributing game; chili chewing challenge and many others (Ngamsomrej, 2004; Singprom, 1988; Wongrachit, 1990). These activities might result in accidents and, occasionally, the loss of lives. At present, using such violent or hazardous activities during university initiation rituals has become a major concern in Thai educational settings.

From all problems listed above, many studies have indicated that university initiations truly produce negative outcomes to participants. According to Mann, Feddes, Doosje and Fischer (2015), the experience of humiliation from participating in school initiation was found to mediate the relationship between perceived severity of an initiation in the past and lower affiliation with other novices in Dutch and American samples. These results were consistent with the findings in Thai studies by Choochom et al., (1999), Ngamsomrej (2004), Nunklieng (2014), Singprom (1988), and Wongrachit (1990), in which severe initiation could result in negative outcomes, and render newcomers feeling stressed, pressured and frustrated. A group of freshmen reported that some older students often tried to install misguided social values to them by suggesting that true man must consume alcohol and forcing freshmen to consume the drink to prove themselves (Choochom et al., 1999; Ngamsomrej, 2004; Nunklieng, 2014; Singprom, 1988; Wongrachit, 1990). Such inappropriate practices might pressure students to file their resignation form and seek better society elsewhere, regardless of their academic performance

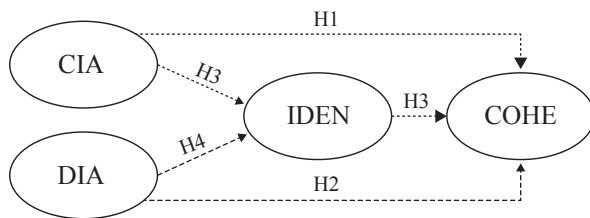
On the contrary, a study of Canadian samples by Johnson and Chin (2015) suggested that after the participation in university initiations, most of the participants felt that the activities facilitated team bond and fostered feelings of inclusion and cohesion. Correspondingly, Dias and Sá (2012) revealed that hazing can promote affiliation among freshmen due to their needs to cope with threatening experiences together. Furthermore, it was also proven to promote affiliation among freshmen and older students by the desire to be promoted to a higher social status as ‘true’ university students. These processes foster integration, configuring hazing as a lever of group cohesion through the group identity construction. Similarly, Allan and Madden (2008) also indicated that students in the United States perceived positive rather than negative outcomes of hazing. Most students mentioned that hazing made them feel more like a part of group, a sense of accomplishment, feel stronger, and capable to do better in class (Allan & Madden, 2008).

Despite its negative perception published by the media for its harsh and unethical activities, conducting hazing in a proper manner might be beneficial for new university students. It can be positively related to the feeling of inclusion, affiliation and group cohesion. Due to the contradictory results of hazing’s and different forms of initiation activities’ influence on the group cohesion among university students, this leads us to the research question “so what kind of university initiation will influence the formation of social identification and group cohesion among students?”. The mediation model of the linkage among university initiation type, social identification and group cohesion is examined in the context of Thai universities. This study, therefore, will provide a guideline for educational institutions in developing the policies which encourage college students to initiate constructive activities for freshman students in order to foster the formations of group identification and cohesion.

## Objectives

1. To examine the relationship between universities’ initiations (both constructive and destructive), and group cohesion among Thai university students with a mediating role of social identification.
2. To develop a new scale of university initiation type perceptions for the Thai contexts.

## Conceptual framework



Notes. CIA refers to constructive-initiation-activity; DIA refers to destructive-initiation-activity; IDEN refers to social identification; COHE refers to group cohesion; solid lines indicate the effect of constructive-initiation-activity; dashed lines indicate no effect of destructive-initiation-activity.

Figure 1 Conceptual framework

H1: CIA has a positive effect on group cohesion

H2: DIA has no effect on group cohesion

H3: Social identification is a mediator of the relationship between CIA and group cohesion

H4: DIA has no effect on social identification

## Research Methodology

### Participants

Participants were 200 undergraduate students who experienced initiation from various universities in Bangkok (56 males and 144 females, age range 18-24 years) using the convenience and snowball sampling techniques. The population of the current research was Thai undergraduate students who experienced university initiation.

### Instruments

This research classified the university initiation into 2 types, which are (1) the constructive-initiation-activity (CIA) and (2) the destructive-initiation-activity (DIA). Despite the use of different terminologies for university initiation, it captures both positive (i.e., non-violent initiation, initiation with acceptable and entertaining behaviors) and negative aspects (i.e., initiation with harsh behaviors, unacceptable and potential illegal behaviors) (Choochom et al., 1999; Hoover, 1999; Keating et al., 2005; Ngamsomrej, 2004; Nunklieng, 2014; Singprom, 1988; Sornsa, 1988; Sridaphan, 2007; Sritrakul, 2003; Wongrachit, 1990).

To generate potential scale items for measuring the university initiation activities, we asked undergraduate students ( $N = 130$ ) to describe the initiation activities which were constructive or destructive in which they had experienced and as many as they could recall. We selected our final scale items from this pool to represent the

initiation activities of Thai college students.

The results of the online open-ended questionnaire yielded 12 activities for CIA (e.g. activities that support a positive relationship among students, group unity, and entertainment) and 8 activities for DIA. (e.g. threatening initiation practices such as shouting at newcomer students, intimidation, harsh punishment, alcohol, sexual and physical abuse). These twenty activities were included in the inventory which was developed to measure the respondents' perception of their university initiation in our research model. After all items were generated into questionnaire format, three subject matter experts were asked to check the contents of each item and to deem whether they reflected the concept of CIA and DIA. The content validity was employed using the item-objective congruence (IOC). The result showed that activities listed in the questionnaire exceeded the criterion for the content validity with average score between 0.67 – 1.00.

The reliabilities of the new developed university initiation activity scale were .91 and .88 for CIA and DIA, respectively. Confirmation Factor Analysis (CFA) revealed that the one-factor CIA model fit the empirical data well:  $\chi^2 = 40.46$ ,  $df = 29$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.395$ ,  $p = .073$ , GFI = .968, CFI = .992 and RMSEA = 0.045. As well as the one-factor DIA model had also satisfactory fit index:  $\chi^2 = 13.54$ ,  $df = 11$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.231$ ,  $p = .260$ , GFI = .984, CFI = .998 and RMSEA = 0.034.

Social identification was assessed by the organizational identification scale (Mael & Ashforth, 1992) which was translated into Thai. The reliability of the scale was .82. To examine the construct validity test, the CFA was employed and revealed that the social identification model fit the empirical data well:  $\chi^2 = 8.43$ ,  $df = 7$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.20$ ,  $p = .296$ , GFI = .99, CFI = 1.00 and RMSEA = 0.032.

Group cohesion was measured by the Group Environment Questionnaire of Carron et al. (1985) which also was translated into Thai ( $\alpha = .94$ ). The results of CFA showed that the one-factor group cohesion model fit the empirical data well:  $\chi^2 = 1.79$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.79$ ,  $p = .181$ , GFI = 1.00, CFI = 1.00 and RMSEA = 0.063.

### Data Collection

The data collection of this study started after the completion of university initiation rituals, using both paper and online based questionnaires. The hard-copied questionnaires were distributed to those students who agreed to participate in this study around university campuses in Bangkok. For online survey, we used social media (Facebook) to circulate the survey link.

### Data Analysis

The causal relationship of two types of university initiation (CIA and DIA), social identification, and group cohesion. The Multiple Regression Analysis using PROCESS (Hayes, 2013) was conducted to examine the mediation effect.

### Results

A total of 200 undergraduate students participated in this study, comprising 56 males and 144 females. The average age of the sample was 20.35 years, ranging from 18 to 24 years. All respondents were undergraduate students from universities in Bangkok Metropolitan Area and had experienced University Initiation. Most of them were recruited from the Civil Aviation Training Center (28%), followed by Chulalongkorn University (23.5%), Kasetsart University (17.5%), Srinakharinwirot University (11.5%), Rattanaabundit University (11.5%), and other universities (8%) respectively. Participants were studying in Year 1 (19%), Year 2 (21.5%), Year 3 (20%), and Year 4 (39.5%).

No missing data were found in this study. The multivariate outliers' detection was employed using Mahalanobis Distance (MD). The results found no multivariate outliers,  $\chi^2(4) = 18.47$  at  $p < .01$ . The result of the correlation analysis between CIA, DIA, social identification and group cohesion are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1** Mean, Standard Deviation, and Pearson's correlation coefficient between related variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>CIA</i>	<i>DIA</i>	<i>IDEN</i>	<i>COHE</i>
CIA	5.21	1.04	(.91)			
DIA	2.27	1.17	.079	(.88)		
IDEN	4.55	1.14	.451**	.078	(.82)	
COHE	5.03	.95	.519**	.074	.545**	(.94)
<i>MIN</i>			1.25	1.00	1.33	1.22
<i>MAX</i>			7.00	6.13	6.83	7.00

\*\* Correlation is significant at the .001 level (1-tailed).

Notes. CIA refers to constructive-initiation-activity; DIA refers to destructive-initiation-activity; IDEN refers to social identification; COHE refers to group cohesion; numbers in parentheses show the reliability of instruments.

From Table 1, the results revealed that all variables of interest were inter-correlated in the expected direction. The correlations between predictors were below 0.8, suggesting no multicollinearity problem. For hypothesis testing, the results of multiple regression analysis using PROCESS (Hayes, 2013) are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2** Research result from the multiple regression analysis (N = 200)

	COHE			IDEN			COHE		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
CIA	.470**	.056	.000	.489**	.070	.000	.312**	.057	.000
DIA	.027	.050	.585	.041	.062	.507	.014	.046	.763
IDEN							.324**	.052	.000
	$R^2 = .271$			$R^2 = .205$			$R^2 = .391$		
	$F(2, 197) = 36.59,$			$F(2, 197) = 25.47,$			$F(3, 196) = 41.97,$		
	$p < .01$			$p < .01$			$p < .01$		

\*\*  $p < .001$

Notes. CIA refers to constructive-initiation-activity; DIA refers to destructive-initiation-activity; IDEN refers to social identification; COHE refers to group cohesion.

From Table 2, the results revealed that CIA had a significant positive effect on group cohesion ( $b = .470$ ,  $p < .001$ ), while DIA had no significant effect on group cohesion ( $b = .027$ , *ns.*). CIA and DIA together explained 27.1% of the variance in group cohesion. CIA was also significantly related to social identification ( $b = .489$ ,  $p < .001$ ), while DIA was not related to social identification ( $b = .041$ , *ns.*). Results were supportive of Hypotheses 1, 2 and 4.

After the inclusion of social identification as a mediator, the direct effect of CIA on group cohesion was still significant ( $b = .312$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The indirect effect of CIA on group cohesion was significant ( $b = .159$ , 95% CI [.083 - .266],  $p < .001$ ). These results indicated that social identification was a partial mediator of the relationship between CIA and group cohesion. CIA and social identification together explained 39.1% of the variance in group cohesion, supporting Hypothesis 3.

### Conclusion

From the results of Multiple Regression Analysis, all the research hypotheses were supportive. We found that CIA had a positive direct effect on students' group cohesion, but the direct effect of DIA was not found. The results suggest that if university faculty encourages their senior students to create or design constructive initiation activities, such as fun and enjoyable activities that can foster better relationship and unity among students. These constructive activities appear to support group cohesion among newcomers. On the other hand, the destructive activities, which involved the use of offensive words, harsh punishments, sexual abuse, and force of alcohol consumption, did not foster group cohesion among newcomers.

The partial mediating effect of social identification was found for CIA and group cohesion. CIA appeared to enhance newcomers' sense of who they are based on their group memberships. This can eventually lead to the group cohesion. However, we did not find an influence of DIA on students' social identification in the study.

## Discussion

The current study makes a contribution to knowledge in two ways. (a) by providing an empirical support for the mediating effect of social identification in the link between CIA (but not for DIA) and group cohesion, and (b) by developing a new scale of the university initiation activities in the Thai context. Our findings also provide an insight into the formation of group cohesion among Thai undergraduate students.

CIA had a positive direct effect on students' group cohesion while DIA had no direct effect. This suggests that university faculty should encourage their senior students to create or design the university initiation activities in a constructive form as it will eventually lead to group cohesion among students. On the contrary, destructive initiation was not a significant determinant of group cohesion among Thai college students in the current study. These results are in line with the findings of Lodewijckx and Syroit (1997), Mann, Feddes, Doosje, and Fischer (2015), and Raalte et al., (2007).

The findings also revealed that CIA had a significant positive effect on social identification, indicating that the participation in constructive initiation can encourage students to identify themselves with their faculty. This implies that CIA can enhance the feelings of inclusion or being a part of group with other student members in the faculty. The results were consistent with the findings of Johnson and Chin (2015), in which the social identification was found to be a partial mediator for the relationship between CIA and group cohesion. After participating in initiation practices, Thai students might directly feel greater cohesion with fellow group members without identifying themselves with the group. However, sometimes the students might identify themselves with their faculty, and will later feel a sense of group cohesion between them and other students. However, the relationship between destructive initiation and social identification was not found in this study.

Overall, our findings suggested that constructive initiation practices can act as a lever for group cohesion. As most newcomers need to feel like they are on the same

page with others and feel unity with their group, engaging in the initiations that are a positive activity can increase a deep sense of belonging to a group as a whole. Therefore, universities should have an initiation policy which encourages positive activities or appreciate initiation practices for promoting positive sentiment and unity within the institute or university faculty.

## Limitation

1. Participants were recruited from different universities in the Bangkok Metropolitan Area. Each university may have unique ways of initiation practices and different cultural contexts. The results might be different in other study samples.

2. Our participants were studying at different school years: from freshmen to senior students. With greater experiences in school, it might affect the feelings of unity and sense of belonging with their fellow group members.

## Suggestion

1. By using a single data collection with a survey study, the causal link among the study variables cannot be examined rigorously. An experimental design or longitudinal study should be employed in the future research on this area to address the causal link.

2. Future researchers should consider studying students from universities outside Bangkok, in order to enhance the representative level of the research population.

3. Future researchers should consider comparing the mediation model of group cohesion between students who had involvement in activities and those who had not. A pretest-posttest design might be employed to explore the effect of CIA or DIA initiation activities on group cohesion.

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