

# UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' SELF-DIRECTED LEADERSHIP FOR THEIR ONLINE LEARNING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC OUTBREAKS IN THAILAND



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## Abstract

This study focused on the undergraduate students' self-directed leadership for their online learning during the Covid-19 Pandemic Outbreaks in Thailand. It aimed to investigate the level of the undergraduate students' self-directed leadership for their online learning in the selected universities, Thailand; to compare the undergraduate students' self-directed leadership for their online learning according to their gender and university type; and to compare the undergraduate students' self-directed leadership for their online learning according to their grade levels, in the selected universities, Thailand. The study took all the undergraduate students from two universities in Thailand. A total of 7393 undergraduate students were used as the population for this study. The Self-directed Leadership Questionnaire for Online Learning sent in a google form way to the sample students, finally 279 valid questionnaires were analyzed. The major findings included the overall level of undergraduate students' self-directed leadership in the selected universities was regarded as "high", however, the levels of students' self-talk, self-punishment, self-observations, and self-cueing were "moderate" still. There was a significant difference of undergraduate students' self-directed leadership for their online learning based on their gender, and grade level, but no significant difference based on university type.

**Keywords:** Self-Directed Leadership Undergraduate Students, Online Learning; Covid-19 Pandemic Outbreaks, Thailand

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## Introduction

Due to the spread of the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19), which broke out in early 2020, this pandemic outbreak changed many people's work, learning, and life in every aspect. It also pushed and increased popularity of distance education, and online learning in the education field. This kind of distance education or online learning has become more widespread with advances in the Internet and computer technologies, but it also results in many new learning problems. For example, learners lack of self-discipline, with low self-motivation, or run into time management problems.

As self-leadership was the process that human beings use specific behavioral and cognitive strategies to control personal behaviors, even more to affect and lead people's self-control studied self-leadership (Manz and Neck, 2004). Self-directed leadership had been described as a cognitive strategy that can improve the efficiency of an activity (Danica, 2016); it is a normative model which is a combination of cognitive and behavioral strategies, and self-promotion through these strategies, as Paul (2012) stated, which is becoming a crucial concern, and could be the possible solution as the focus of human resource development for many learning problems.

The online learning problems that mentioned could be also related to the learners' self-directed leadership; in other words, studying the learners' self-directed leadership. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate and improve the learners' self-directed leadership level for the current pandemic online learning time.

## Research Objectives

This research focused on the undergraduate students who are using online learning during the Covid-19 Pandemic Outbreaks in Thailand, mainly for the following objectives:

- 1.To investigate the level of the undergraduate students' self-directed leadership for their online learning in the selected universities, Thailand.
- 2.To compare the undergraduate students' self-directed leadership for their online learning according to their gender and university type, in the selected universities, Thailand.
- 3.To compare the undergraduate students' self-directed leadership for their online learning according to their grade levels, in the selected universities, Thailand.

## Research Hypothesis

There are significant differences of undergraduate students' self-directed leadership for their online learning according to their gender, university type and grade levels in the selected universities.

## Theoretical Framework

The major theories that will be applied as the basis for this study include: Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory. Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory determined that the basic structure of self-regulatory was a process that combined self-monitoring, self-judgments and self-reactions. But self-regulation mainly focuses on discrepancy reduction, social cognitive theory brings forward a system of discrepancy production and with the discrepancy reduction. The basic assumption of social cognitive theory is based on the past performance and experiences, individuals can set their own performance standard or performance goal, in addition can reduce the discrepancy.

The concept of social cognitive strategies was first developed by Manz (1983). Self-directed leadership is a set of strategies in which individuals can improve their performance levels. Self-directed leadership strategies are usually concluding in the three categories which are behavior-focused strategies, natural reward strategies and constructive thought patterns strategies.

Relying on the same theory, Houghton (2002) further developed the dimensions for teachers' self-directed leadership. He also focused on three categories which are behavior-focused strategies, natural reward strategies and constructive thought patterns strategies. Moreover, he developed subscales for each strategy, accordingly, behavior-focused strategies comprise of visualizing successful performance, self-talk; natural reward strategies comprise of self- goal setting, self-reward, focusing thoughts on natural rewards, constructive thought patterns strategies comprise of self- punishment, self-observation, and self- cueing (Houghton, 2002).

- for the successful performance in the future.
- **Self-goal setting**–Refers to teachers' assumption objectives in their job.
- **Self-talk**-Refers to the action that teachers practice or act to talk to themselves either aloud or mentally.
- **Self- reward**-Refers to the action that teachers according to can increase the sense of competence, individuals give themselves some rewards.
- **Evaluate beliefs and goals**-Refers to the action that teachers' analysis their working objectives and assumptions.
- **Self-punishment**-Refers to facing failures and undesirable behaviors, teachers reshaping of those behaviors.
- **Self- observations**-teachers observe their own behaviors and thoughts during the working process.
- **Self-cueing**-refers to the internal and external that encompasses a systematic set of behavioral and cognitive strategies for workers leading themselves to higher performance and effectiveness.
- **Focusing thoughts on natural rewards**- It is an intrinsic reward from the task itself or the individuals are rewarded by the task.

## Review of Related Literature

### **Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory**

American psychologist, Bandura in 1977 developed a social learning theory. Social learning theory is increasingly recognized as an important part of sustainable development, and also natural resource management and promotion of desirable behavioral changes of human beings (Moru & Jeffrey, 2008).

Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory plays an important role for the development of Self-leadership. The basic assumption of social cognitive theory is based on the past performance and experiences, individuals can set their own performance standard or performance goal, in addition can reduce the discrepancy. On the occasion that the mobilizing and reducing discrepancy, individuals can set a higher standard, go and return in the following circle.

Bandura's social cognitive theory provides a framework for understanding, forecasting and changing human behavior (Green & Peil, 2009). The theory provides a framework for understanding how people are proactively shaped and shaped by the environment. In particular, the theory details the process of observing learning and modeling, and the impact of self-efficacy on behavior. The main component is observational learning. Bandura claimed that observational learning occurred through which people observe and imitate models that they meet in their environment. By carefully choosing the environment, people can influence who they want to become, their choice is influenced by their beliefs and abilities (Bandura, 1997). Bandura proposed there is an internal principle consisting of the three interacting elements, this is the very beginning idea for self-directed leadership according to current researchers such as Green & Peil (2009).

Self-efficacy is another important idea as described in context of Bandura theory. Bandura stated that in human behavior, self-efficacy has a causal effect on expected outcomes. Self-efficacy is people's self-assignment of the abilities that are necessary to finish a specific task (Bandura, 1986, 1991). Self-efficacy primarily affects the people's aspiration, effort, persistence and thought patterns.

Mark and Campbell (2011) claimed that self-efficacy beliefs through cognition, motivation, emotional and decision-making processes. Efficacy beliefs affect whether individuals think optimistic or pessimistic, in a way that is self-improving or self-weakening. They played a game central role of self-regulating motivation through goals, challenges and outcomes and expectations. In their study, they regard self-efficacy as the center of social cognition learning theory, it defends those beliefs about human beings' capability and capacity to execute a behavior successfully. It also states that human beings tend to participate in activities based on the sense of competence.

Social cognitive theory also further developed into self-regulation theory in terms of self-reaction. Bandura and Cervone (1986) stated that there are three types of self-influences affected the relationship between goal and performance; they are self-

satisfaction, self-efficacy and the regulation of internal standards. On the contrary, social cognitive theory focused on the crucial of the self-reactive of satisfaction and self-efficacy.

## **Self-directed Leadership**

Facing the rapid development of the worldwide competitive environment, many organizations transform their leadership styles to face it. For the purpose of remaining competitive in the high-tech and serve-oriented marketplaces, organizations are finding the flexibility and rapid response abilities.

This decentralization in the organizations supply opportunities for individuals in all levels to take greater responsibility in their work (Shipper & Manz, 1992). This trend is going to continue in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, more and more organization leaders need to rely on individual employees to share the responsibility to lead themselves rather than the traditional leadership styles.

The concept of self-leadership was first referred to by Manz in the middle of 1980s, self-leadership is an extension of self-management, it is also a crucial part of self-control theory (Blanchard, 2005).

Self-directed leadership is a set of strategies in which individuals can improve their performance levels. Self-directed leadership strategies are usually concluding in the three categories which are behavior-focused strategies, natural reward strategies and constructive thought patterns strategies (Manz & Neck, 2004).

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Behavior-focused strategies are focused on highlighting the individuals' self-awareness to improve the behavioral management, especially the management of behaviors which are essential in the unpleasant tasks (Manz & Neck, 2004).

Self-observation aims to examine one's behavior and improve individuals' awareness whether need to change the present behaviors or not. Self-goal setting encourages individuals to develop and adapt to specific goals and associated rewards and contingencies to motivate and guide the necessary performance-related behaviors (Blanchard, 2005). A few studies have shown that accepting specific, challenging, and realistic performance goals significantly affects task-related performance (Unsworth, & Mason, 2012; Sesen, Tabak, & Arli, 2017). Self-reward is cooperating with self-goal setting, aims to promote individuals to accomplish their goals (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2015).

Self-rewards can be something mentally prize oneself or a right movie or simple dinner, it can promote individuals to move towards the specific goals (Danica, 2016). Self-correcting feedback includes a constructive self-examination in order to

more actively reshape these behaviors and the directions. However, excessive self-punishment, including harsh and unrealistic self-criticism, should be avoided, because this can lead to feelings of guilt and inadequacy, which are often counterproductive (Marco, Pierre and Silvia, 2012; Unsworth & Mason, 2012). Self-cue can be explained as some effective ways, environmental cues, such as to-do lists or wall decorations, can be an effective way to stay focused on the task at hand (Houghton and Neck, 2006; Manz and Neck, 2010).

Natural reward strategies are intending to increase the motivation by the means of creating some reward or positively enhance the enjoyment of finishing a task. The first primary natural reward is to create more enjoyable characteristics in an activity so that the task itself can be more enjoyable and make the individuals feel more positive (Manz and Neck, 2004; Manz and Sim, 2001). The second natural reward is focus on ignoring the negative and unpleasant part of the task and highlighting the positive part of the task (Marco, Pierre and Silvia, 2012). Both strategies focus on enhancing the competence feeling and self-determination, increasing the performance and achievement.

Constructive thought patterns strategies focus on the thought patterns to reflect the individual's own performance and replace the negative thoughts by positive self-talk (Neck and Manz, 1992; Manz and Neck, 2004). Constructive thought patterns strategies include identifying and replacing the dysfunctional beliefs in assumptions, encouraging positive thoughts and self-talk (Brown & Isaacs, 2001). Furthermore, individuals should identify and replace the dysfunctional beliefs with more positive dialogues (Paul, 2012). Self-talk is defined as what the people tell themselves, it includes mental-evaluations and reactions (Manz and Neck, 1992).

Houghton (2002) further developed the dimensions for the teachers' self-directed leadership, including three categories which are behavior-focused strategies, natural reward strategies and constructive thought patterns strategies. Behavior-focused strategies consist of visualizing successful performance, self-talk. Natural reward strategies are comprised of self-goal setting, self-reward, focusing thoughts on natural rewards, Constructive thought patterns strategies are comprised of self-punishment, self-observation, and self-cueing (Nelissen & Zeelenberg, 2009; Amundsen & Martinsen, 2015).

## **Research Methodology**

### **Participants**

The study took all the undergraduate students learning at grade 1-4 level from two universities in Thailand. Among them, all 3825 students from a public university, 3568 students from a private university. A total of 7393 undergraduate students were used as the population for this study.

The researchers requested the permission from the selected universities including one public university and one private university in Thailand. After passing the proposal. The Self-directed Leadership Questionnaire for Online Learning was designed as a google form survey, sent to the target universities, and distributed by the university IT department by post online classroom/subject in Zoom or Microsoft team classes, the whole data collection process was completed by July 15, 2022. By the end, 384 questionnaires were returned, excluded the invalid ones, finally 279 questionnaires were used in the data analysis process.

### Instrument

This study was a quantitative study. To measure the research objectives, this researcher will use a questionnaire including three parts to collect the data for the study, which were: (1) Demographic data for the respondents, (2) Self-directed leadership, The first part gathered the basic demographic information such as gender, grade level and university type.

The second part of the questionnaire was to use the self-leadership questionnaire (RSLQ). The RSLQ totally includes 35 questions for nine major components. The major components and items used in this part are shown in the following Table 2. This part questionnaire for the teachers' self-directed leadership was adopted from Houghton (2002) and the details about breakdown items were explained below.

**Table 1.** Breakdown of the items for Self-directed Leadership Questionnaire

Dimensions	Question items	Total Number
Visualizing successful performance	1,10, 24,30	4
Self- goal setting	2,11,18,25	4
Self-talk	3	1
Self-reward	4,12,19	3
Evaluate beliefs goals	5,13,20,26	4
Self-punishment	6,14,21,27	4
Self- observations	7,15,22,28	4
Self- cueing	9,17	2
Focusing thoughts on a natural reward	8,16,23,29,31	5

The students were required to respond to their perceptions towards self-directed leadership by circling the number best match their perceptions. The following Table 3 shows the corresponding values for the 5-points scales based on the criteria ranging from 5 to 1, with the interpretation of 5= Strongly agree, 4=Agree, 3= Neutral, 2= Disagree, 1= Strongly Disagree.

**Table 2.** The scale and interpretation for the questionnaire

Students' perception of their self-directed leadership	Score	Range	Interpretation
Strongly Agree	5	4.51-5.00	Very High
Agree	4	3.51-4.50	High
Neutral	3	2.51-3.50	Moderate
Disagree	2	1.51-2.50	Low
Strongly Disagree	1	1.00-1.50	Very Low

### Validity and Reliability

The self-directed leadership questionnaire is originally called “The Revised Self-Leadership Questionnaire” (RSLQ) introduced by Houghton and Neck (2002). This questionnaire’s validity was proved by the IOC test in the study of Houghton and Neck (2002). The total Cronbach’s alpha of reliability as Houghton and Neck (2002), and Neubert& Wu (2006) reported was .750-.812. The overall alpha coefficient reached .798 for this current study as Table 3 below showed.

**Table 3.** Alpha Coefficient Reliability Report for Self-directed Leadership

Questionnaire	Dimensions	Current study
Self-directed Leadership	Visualizing successful performance	.760
	Self- goal setting	.760
	Self-talk	.801
	Self- reward	.758
	Evaluate beliefs and goals	.778
	Self-punishment	.860
	Self- observations	.860
	Self-cueing	.773
	Focusing thoughts on natural rewards	.761
<b>Total</b>		<b>.798</b>

## Results

The number and percentage of the participants Demographic information was shown in the following Table 4. As results, among the participants, the majority students are female, which occupied 60.6%, only 39.4% are male. Most students were freshmen (46.2%), the least were the fourth-year students (15.8%), as many of them



might finish course work and busy for their internship. And 59.9% of students were from the private university, 40.1% were from the public university.

**Table 4.** Demographic data for the participants

Demographics		Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	110	39.4
	Female	169	60.6
Grades	First Year	129	46.2
	Second Year	54	19.4
	Third Year	52	18.6
	Fourth Year	44	15.8
University	Public	112	40.1
	Private	167	59.9

Mean and Standard deviation were used to identify the level of the undergraduate students' self-directed leadership in the selected universities, Thailand. The research questionnaire adopted the self-leadership questionnaire (RSLQ) which in a total number of 35 questions, 9 subscales to identify the level of students' self-directed leadership in the selected universities. Table 5 presented the level of undergraduate students' self-directed leadership in the selected universities, Thailand. As a result, the overall level of undergraduate students' self-directed leadership in the selected universities was regarded as "high", however, the levels of students' self-talk, self-punishment, self-observations, and self-cueing were "moderate" still.

**Table 5.** The level of the undergraduate students' self-directed leadership in the selected universities, Thailand

Self- directed Leadership Factors	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Visualizing successful performance	3.59	.65	High
Self-goal setting	3.84	.63	High
Self-talk	3.49	.82	Moderate
Self-reward	3.78	.79	High
Evaluate beliefs goals	3.57	.67	High
Self-punishment	3.46	.76	Moderate
Self-observations	3.46	.65	Moderate
Self-cueing	3.47	.74	Moderate
Focusing thoughts on a natural reward	3.54	.83	High
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.55</b>	<b>.71</b>	<b>High</b>

Independent samples t-test was used to compare of the undergraduate students' self-directed leadership for their online learning based on their gender and university type in the selected universities, Thailand, shown in Table 6 and 7. Based

on the t-test results of Table 6, it reflected that there was a significant difference of undergraduate students' self-directed leadership for their online learning based on their gender at the .05 level, as the p value was .027. The female students' self-directed leadership for their online learning seemed higher than the male students during the Covid-19 Pandemic Outbreaks in Thailand. However, results from Table 7 revealed that there was no significant difference of undergraduate students' self-directed leadership for their online learning based on university type, as the p value was .349.

**Table 6.** Comparison of undergraduate students' self-directed leadership for their online learning based on their gender

Gender	N	Mean	SD	t	Sig. (2- tailed)
Male	110	3.32	.36	-2.26	.027*
Female	169	3.60	.47		

\*p< .05 level

**Table 7.** Comparison of undergraduate students' self-directed leadership for their online learning based on university type

University	N	Mean	SD	t	Sig. (2- tailed)
Public	112	3.42	.36	-.943	.349
Private	167	3.60	.47		

Lastly, one way ANOVA were used to compare the undergraduate students' self-directed leadership for their online learning based on their grade levels in the selected universities, Thailand. Table 8 showed the F-test result of undergraduate students' self-directed leadership for their online learning based on their grade levels in the selected universities, Thailand. Since the p value was .024, therefore, multiple comparison of the undergraduate students' self-directed leadership for their online learning based on their grade levels in the selected universities were continued, as Table 9 showed.

**Table 8.** Comparison of the undergraduate students' self-directed leadership for their online learning based on their grade levels in the selected universities, Thailand.

Source of Variance	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1.609	3	.536	3.305	.024*
Within Groups	13.307	276	.162		
Total	14.916	279			

\*p< .05 level

Multiple comparison results from Table 9 revealed that significant differences of undergraduate students' self-directed leadership for their online learning based on their grade levels might exist, as fourth year students used more self-directed leadership for their online learning compared with first year ( $p=.031$ ) and second year students ( $p=.041$ ); which may also reflect that higher grade students may show more self-directed leadership skill in their own online learning, as they were more mature.

**Table 9.** Multiple comparison of the undergraduate students' self-directed leadership for their online learning based on their grade levels in the selected universities, Thailand.

Years of study at the school (I)	Years of study at the school (J)	Mean Difference (I-J)	Sig.
First year	Second year	.222	.309
	Third year	.273	.252
	Fourth year	-.362	.031*
Second year	Third year	.050	.985
	Fourth year	-.348	.041*
Fourth year	Third year	.139	.697

\* $p < .05$  level

## Discussion

Firstly, the overall level of undergraduate students' self-directed leadership in the selected universities was regarded as "high", however, the levels of students' self-talk, self-punishment, self-observations, and self-cueing were "moderate" still.

Students' self-talk in fact can have a positive influence on applying self-regulation which was a potential part for achieving an objective. When facing challenges and difficulties, positive self-talk and mental imagery strategies can promote optimism or an opportunistic mindset, it also can lead to greater persistence (Manz and Neck, 1991).

Nelissen and Zeelenberg (2009) showed that self-punishment may bring benefits to others, the individuals may motivate or improve their performance through different levels of punishment. Compared with trying to avoid one's mistakes or wrongdoing, when they performed poorly, admit one's own responsibility for the guilt learned from this behavior, even if it was not easy but it was a way to examine the reason for wrongdoing.

Neck and Houghton (2006) discussed behavior focused strategies, in their study they identified self-observation as an essential link in identifying and one's behaviors and promote the effectiveness of one's behaviors. Therefore, the researchers would like to encourage undergraduate students to use more a self-talk when they are facing problems might give themselves confidence and strengthen their belief in

finishing the task (Danica, 2016). Students' self-punishment, self-observations, and self-cueing need to be improved in their online learning process (Nelissen & Zeelenberg, 2009).

Secondly, this study found that there was a significant difference of undergraduate students' self-directed leadership for their online learning based on their gender, but no significant difference of undergraduate students' self-directed leadership for their online learning based on university type. The female students' self-directed leadership for their online learning seemed higher than the male students during the Covid-19 Pandemic Outbreaks in Thailand. This finding was consistent with previous researchers such as Gabrielle, Lucy & Guglielmino (2006), they also found that female learner's self-directedness scores were higher than the male students, when developing self-directed learning readiness of future leaders in a military college through instructional innovation.

Finally, significant differences of undergraduate students' self-directed leadership for their online learning based on their grade levels existed, finding showed that fourth year students used more self-directed leadership for their online learning compared with first year and second year students, which also reflected that higher grade students may show more self-directed leadership skill in their own online learning, as they were more mature. Albertina and António (2006) found that learner's self-directed leadership was a complex capacity that was influenced, directly, by psychological variables and, indirectly, by socio-demographic ones. Therefore, the students' maturity and education level may influence their self-directed learning in most situations.

## Conclusions

To conclude, the researchers summarized the major findings as the conclusions of this study, as follows:

1. The overall level of undergraduate students' self-directed leadership in the selected universities was regarded as "high", however, the levels of students' self-talk, self-punishment, self-observations, and self-cueing were "moderate" still.

2. There was a significant difference of undergraduate students' self-directed leadership for their online learning based on their gender, but there was no significant difference of undergraduate students' self-directed leadership for their online learning based on university type.

3. There were significant differences of undergraduate students' self-directed leadership for their online learning based on their grade levels, as fourth year students used more self-directed leadership for their online learning compared with first year and second year students.

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