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*Gender and Sexuality, Paper 3*

**Eastern Girls and Boys: Mapping Lesbian and Gay  
Languages in Kuala Lumpur**

Michael Hadzantonis

*Independent Scholar*

# Eastern Girls and Boys: Mapping Lesbian and Gay Languages in Kuala Lumpur

Michael Hadzantonis<sup>a</sup>

*<sup>a</sup>Independent Scholar*

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## Abstract

Lesbian and gay communities in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, evidence unique and highly localized language practices, influenced by the specific organization and appropriation of a variety of social and cultural factors and networks. A hybridity and restylizing of Islamic, Confucianist, neoliberal, and transnational discourses significantly shape these communities, thus providing a lens through which to effect description of these speech communities.

This paper discusses language styles in lesbian and gay communities in Kuala Lumpur, and evidences that their language practices, language ideologies, and identities, are fostered and legitimized in culturally complex ways. These complexities become predicated on a specific reapropriation of transnational factors, sociocultural histories, and patriarchal standpoints, mediated by society at large. As such, the study explores and finds a significant bias across these two communities, in that the language practices specific to gay communities far exceed those of lesbian communities. These language practices are mediated by gendered practices and gendered differentials pervasive of larger Malaysian society.

*Keywords:* gay, lesbian, sexuality, transnationalism, Kuala Lumpur, Linguistic Anthropology

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## Context

In Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Lesbian and gay (LG) communities draw from larger networks to negotiate and subvert the marginalizations imposed on these communities. To effect this negotiation of self and community, LG groups appropriate sociocultural resources and semiotic devices, predominantly in the form of linguistic affordances, and in the process, develop their specifically designed sociolects. This study has sought to determine the factors that shape language practices in these communities, and that subsequently either reflect practices in LG communities in other East Asian cities and localities, or that position these communities in Kuala Lumpur as anomalies within a larger East Asian context.

## Data collection and corpus

The data collection for the study on LGBT communities throughout East Asia spanned 20 years (1998–2017), aiming to document the linguistic practices of LG communities in 10 cities throughout East Asia (Hadzantonis forthcoming), that is, Kuala Lumpur, Manila, Ho Chi Minh, Shanghai, Jakarta, Seoul, Tokyo, Singapore, Bangkok, and Taipei. This paper however provides data on and discusses one of these contexts, that is, Kuala Lumpur. To aid data collection, the study documented interactions within LG communities during the period 2012–2017. The ages of all participants in both gay and lesbian communities ranged between 19 and 55.

## Discussion

The diachronic shaping of language practices within LG communities in Kuala Lumpur correlates with the sociocultural histories of larger society, to inform factors that work together to construct identity within these communities. As such, LG identities emerge from sociolinguistic constructions grounded in specific language and cultural practices that have evolved with cultural heritage. These constructed practices appropriate the semiotic devices of speakers who collaboratively act to accomplish gender dominance and subordination, to either subvert or (re) construct and reinforce the already dominant gender differentials of larger society. Here, the sociolinguistic flows grounding these communities contest yet reconstruct institutionalized gender orders (Connell 1987; Holmes 2007), as speakers in these communities employ mechanisms which leverage discourses such as Confucianism, Islam, Buddhism and Transnationalism.

The study presents that Kuala Lumpur, and much of Malaysia, exhibits a pronounced patriarchal element, assigning male populations significant liberty to both develop social networks and to seek to suppress women's networks and social structures. Here, a socially emancipative male population influences the development of inclusive, unique languages and identities in gay male communities that reflexively further segregate male-female populations. A predominance of gay languages vis-à-vis an absence of lesbian languages attests to this skew in social practice. Languages in lesbian communities in Kuala Lumpur are almost negligible, suggesting a correlation between patriarchal forces and language practice. However, countering the apparent masculinity of a patriarchal Malaysia are Islamic notions of humility and traditional concepts of Malay matriarchy. The humility construct of Islam may well encourage renouncement of masculinity where male individuals advocate egalitarianism between the sexes, as would traditional cultural practices in the Malay world, confirmed by the fluid use of macro- and micro-positioning strategies in language. Linguistic markers support this notion, through which speakers seek to increase or decrease social distance, a fluidity which evidences itself in significant infantilization amongst gay men.

Boellstorff (2007, 2010) notes that ethnographies of gay and lesbian experiences require consideration of spatial frames such as transnational. Observations of Malay gay communities substantiate this as these communities shift across sexualities and sexual identities that are predicated on the conceptions by these speakers of their situatedness in transnational flows. Similarly, an attempt to sustain tradition through filial relationships amidst an increasing need for transnational positioning also seems to influence the enactment of LG identities, becoming a 'hyperchronic' jump across time frames, in which these speakers juxtapose social models of different, and not necessarily adjacent, eras.

Following Boellstorff (2007), the analysis of ethnographies of gay and lesbian experiences in Kuala Lumpur illuminate ways in which modern ways of being persist at intersections and global flows, such as of post-colonialism and globalization. In any focus of lesbian and gay speech communities, we should consider the local/ethnolocal, the national(ist), frequently becoming a third space of global queering analysis, and the global, reflecting contemporary transnationalism.

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