

LANGUAGE CHOICE AND GENDER CONSTRUCTION:
A CASE STUDY OF LESBIAN LANGUAGE IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the construction of gender identity among lesbians in Malaysia. The study specifically examines the verbal and non-verbal languages used by female homosexuals in constructing their lesbian identity. There were 4 lesbian participants who took part in this study. All four participants were Malaysian Chinese whose age ranges from 19 to 23 years old and all were college students. A qualitative approach was used to collect and analyze the data gathered. Specifically, a case study method was used to explore the language and construction of identity of lesbians in Malaysia. The analysis of data is divided into two phases, which include interview and observation. The first phase of data gathering was an interview conducted with each participant. Questions were focused on how lesbians use a language to construct their identity. The second phase of data gathering was the observation on the non-linguistic features present during the interview. The results show that there are certain lexical items used by lesbians that helped to construct their gender identity. However, hedging, which is of typical feminine language feature, was not significant throughout the interview but time-filling devices were frequently used by all participants. It is also found that the culture of swearing is prominent in the lesbian community. Different address terms were used by members to address the in-groups. The non-verbal language used by lesbians to construct gender identity includes masculine gestures and masculine manner of dressing. The result concluded that lesbians use linguistic features such as common vocabulary, taboo words, address terms and fillers, and non-linguistic features such as gestures and manners of dressing to construct their gender identity.