

Constructing *Tom* Identities in Interaction: A Conversation Analysis of the YouTube Show, “Talk with Betty”¹

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Abstract

The representation of Thai *toms*—individuals assigned female at birth who embrace a masculine identity and are attracted to women—has been limited and often confined to stereotypes, particularly regarding masculine expression. The emergence of new media provides a fresh platform for Thai *toms* to share their experiences. Using conversation analysis as a framework, this article examines interactions between Thai *toms* on the Thai YouTube interview-based show “Talk with Betty,” with a particular focus on narratives surrounding their identity realization and coming-out practice. The findings reveal that Thai *toms*’ identities are heterogeneous, as demonstrated by conversational features. Coming out is constructed as an unnecessary practice. Thai *toms*’ identities revolve around expressions of both masculinity and femininity, which contrasts with the stereotype that they adhere exclusively to masculinity. Through interactions between the host, Betty and *tom* guests, they share a mutual understanding that creates solidarity amongst Thai *toms*.

Keywords: *tom*, Thai, conversation analysis, gender, identity

Introduction

Over the past two decades, research on language, gender, and sexuality has highlighted the role of language in constructing gender and sexual identities as emergent and context-dependent rather than static and pre-existing (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992; Livia and Hall, 1997; Bucholtz and Hall, 2005). Rather than associating specific linguistic features with particular genders, language is viewed as shaping identities within specific contexts.

Conversation analysis (CA) is one of the various approaches that examine the discursive construction of gender and sexuality. It was initially developed to study the sequential organization of talking and has evolved to explore how interactions construct identities, such as attributing distinct conversational styles to men and women (e.g. Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 2014; Speer, 2011). By examining LGBTQ+ speakers, whose identities challenge binary distinctions, CA highlights the crucial role of language in the discursive construction of gender.

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LGBTQ+ visibility has grown recently, particularly in Thai new media, which provides spaces for individuals to share their experiences. The Thai *tom*, a label for individuals assigned female at birth who identify with a masculine gender and are romantically involved with women, have traditionally been less visible than *kathoey* (Thai male-to-female transgender people). Their representations have often been based on certain stereotypes, including the portrayal of their masculine expression and an aspiration to be perceived as men. However, platforms like YouTube have become important spaces for identity expression and increased LGBTQ+ visibility. In the Thai context, the popular interview-based show “Talk with Betty” offers valuable insights into *tom* identities. Given the limited conversation analysis (CA)-based research on Thai *toms* in digital discourse, this study aims to fill that gap by investigating how Thai *toms*’ identities and coming out narratives are constructed and negotiated through interaction on the YouTube interview show “Talk with Betty,” using CA as the methodological lens to explore the discursive construction of identity.

Literature Review

Thai *Toms*

“*Tom*,” shortened from the English term “tomboy,” is an umbrella term used in Thailand to refer to individuals who are assigned female at birth but have a masculine identity and engage in romantic relationships with women (Sinnott, 2004). It is a parallel term to “*dee*,” shortened from the English term “lady,” which refers to Thai females who are sexually attracted to other females and are the feminine partners of *toms*. Thai *toms* express ideological masculinity through visual signifiers, characteristics, and sexual roles (Sinnott, 2004, 2007). For example, they are likely to wear masculine clothing and have short haircuts. They are associated with confident and tough personalities, traits commonly perceived as masculine. They are also expected to perform exclusively penetrative roles and resist being touched by their partners, as this would undermine their masculinity.

Despite this stereotype, Thai *toms* perceive themselves as situated between Thai heterosexual males and females, leading them to construct their own form of masculinity—a *tom*’s masculinity (Sinnott, 2007; Miedema et al. 2022). This form of masculinity differs from hegemonic masculinity as it blends normative masculinity and femininity. For instance, *toms* are expected to act as caretakers or leaders for their feminine partners, similar to men. However, they also use attentiveness and gentleness—traits culturally associated with Thai femininity—to care for their partners by prioritizing their partner’s emotional and sexual needs over their own. This suggests that *toms* integrate these feminine characteristics to complement traditional male roles of caretaking and leadership. Their blended identity is also reflected in language by alternating between the Thai masculine final particle “*khrap*” and the Thai feminine particle “*kha*” based on context (Miedema et al., 2022). They often use “*khrap*” with close friends or family but switch to “*kha*” in formal settings such as the workplace.

Conversation Analysis and Gender

Conversation analysis (CA) is the study of spontaneous, online production, and understanding of language in moment-to-moment social interactions (Clift, 2016). CA views talk not as a language, but rather as an action. The key interest of the CA approach is to investigate the organizational structure and the set of

resources (e.g. turn-taking, repair initiation, backchannel responses, and non-minimal expansions) that speakers employ to coordinate their talk in orderly and meaningful social interactions.

This approach can reflect the power dynamics of talk-in-interaction including those of men and women. The imbalanced power relationship between men and women is often manifested through frequent interruptions, mostly by men, to dominate and control the conversation (Edelsky, 1981). Consequently, several studies have examined the different gendered conversational styles of men and women in conversation (Tannen, 1994; Coates, 1996; Lakoff, 1990). Women’s talk is often considered collaborative, as they frequently overlap each other’s speech, indicating active participation and support. Conversely, men’s talk is described as more competitive, as they are more likely to interrupt others (Coates, 1996). This contrast reinforces gender binary categories and stereotypes about gendered speech styles.

In recent years, gender has been conceptualized as a performative act, as it involves a repeated set of practices in accordance with socially constructed norms that define masculinity and femininity, rather than as inherent traits of individuals (Butler, 1989). As a result, studies in CA have shifted their focus to how gender identities are reproduced or performed in talk-in-interaction through various conversational strategies. For instance, British, male builders tend to create solidarity amongst themselves by completing each other’s utterances and using supportive backchannel responses, features typically associated with women’s talk, to construct themselves as honest, British, working-class men (Baxter and Wallace, 2009).

CA studies explore how LGBTQ+ individuals construct their identities through interactions. For instance, transgender people use compliments relayed by others as a means to construct their identity, emphasizing attributes that validate their ability to pass as a woman or man (Speer, 2011). Some lesbians implicitly construct their identities by using the person reference term “my partner,” followed by their partner’s name during conversations (Rendle-Short, 2005). Interactions are also used to challenge heteronormativity. Lesbians, for example, initiate repair—a conversational practice used to address problems in talk—when their partners are referred to as “husband” or “wife,” correcting the presumption of heterosexuality and reinforcing their lesbian identities instead (Land and Kitzinger, 2005).

Methodology

The data were drawn from the “Talk with Betty” interview show, which broadcasts on a YouTube channel called “Betty’s Story.” The channel was created by Thanit Wachirarattanawong, also known as Betty, a Thai *tom* YouTuber who produces content focused on the identity and lifestyle of Thai *toms*. One of their shows, “Talk with Betty,” gained popularity on social media, resulting in 14 million views and 1,100 subscribers as of October 24, 2024. The “Betty’s Story” channel was awarded a Siamrath Online Award in 2023 for being a supporter of LGBTQ+ rights and for its contributions to the positive portrayals of *toms* and fostering understanding amongst the wider public.

We selected 14 videos from the “Talk with Betty” interview show (2020-2023) for analysis based on the following criteria. First, we selected only episodes that are a single interview, which were not longer than 30 minutes. Second, the invited guests identified as *toms* regardless of whether they were explicit about it. This includes the Thai female-bodied individuals who display varying levels of masculine expressions, such as adopting Thai masculine final particle “*khrap*,” having short haircuts, or wearing masculine clothes, and are sexually attracted to women. In addition, each episode must address four main themes regularly asked about by Betty—the *tom*’s identity realization, love relationships, body modification, and their sex lives.

Due to space limitations, this paper focuses on the theme of *toms*' identity realization, referring to the interview segment in which Betty asks questions about the guests' backgrounds and how they became aware of their *tom* identity. The interactions on the topic are usually at the beginning of the interview show. The first question Betty asks every guest is how and when they realized they were a *tom* (e.g. "When did you know you are a *tom*?"). Follow-up questions often address whether they have come out, especially to their family (e.g. "Did your parents know you were a *tom*?").

The data is analyzed using conversation analysis (CA) as a framework. Within CA, identity is understood as interactionally constructed and enacted through talk-in-interaction, rather than as a pre-existing or static state. CA enables researchers to gather empirical evidence of this process by analyzing the sequential, turn-by-turn structure of talk, through which participants position themselves and others. The framework is expected to reveal how Thai *toms* engage in turn-by-turn interactions, contributing to their identity construction.

As identity realization involves complex internal and sociocultural dimensions, CA is suited to examining identity construction through observable interaction rather than internal self-discovery. Accordingly, coming-out practices are analyzed as interactional phenomena, with a focus on how narratives are constructed in conversation and how they reflect the speakers' identities.

Results

In this section, we examine how conversational features in the interactions between Betty and their guests on the interview show contribute to the construction of Thai *toms*' identities in various ways. Our analysis focuses on three key issues emerging from the data: the necessity of coming out or lack thereof, the expressions of masculinity and femininity, and the shared understanding among Thai *toms*. We will explain the three issues and highlight the conversational features that contribute to their emergence.

Coming Out as (Un)necessary

Several previous studies have highlighted that coming out is an interactional process that LGBTQ+ individuals negotiate or interactionally construct their identities with others as a collectivity, rather than an inner process that they recognize their identity and desire (Valentine et al., 2003; Gray, 2009). In contemporary Western societies, coming out is a critical means for constructing and negotiating LGBTQ+ identities within a heteronormative context. It is often viewed as essential for visibility and empowerment, with those who come out typically valued more than those who remain closeted (Rasmussen et al., 2004:145–146).

The answers to questions regarding when the guests realized they were a *tom* or whether they came out to their family reveal that Betty and the guests seem to have different ideas about coming out, as illustrated by the use of backchannel responses. These are short utterances or less articulated noises used to indicate the listener's attention and understanding or to provide support for the speaker in a conversation (Yule, 1996), such as expressing agreement or signaling the speaker to continue speaking. They are not intended to interrupt the current speaker or take over the floor of the conversation. The most common type of backchannel response is a verbal response, which can take the form of a word, phrase, or sentence (Heinz, 2003).

In the data, we find three types of verbal responses: short verbalizations, repetition, and lexical items. Based on Heinz (2003) and Sungkaman (2006), short verbalization is short utterances or minimal responses such as “mm-hm,” “mhm,” “uh-huh,” “okay,” and “yeah.” It appears in a single form or a set of short verbalizations by repeating a single item in a turn such as “um um” and “uh-huh uh-huh.” It can also occur with other types of backchannel responses like repetition or lexical items. Repetition is in the form of repeating the previous utterances. It often occurs after short verbalization, and such repetition may be in a word, a phrase, or a sentence, while retaining the major meaning. The lexical item is a backchannel response performed at the lexical level. It can be either an isolated word or a reduplication of a word. The three types of verbal responses are shown in (1) and (2).

(1) Betty and Jyb are talking about coming out as *tom*.

- 96 J: เออ ประมานนั้นมากกว่า ก็แบบ (.) ก็แบบ (.) ยังไงอะ (.) เหมือนกับบอกว่าเออ [ไร้สาระ เหมือนแบบปดๆ ไป]
 97 → B: [อ่า อ่า อ่า]
 98 J: ตั้งแต่เด็กยันโต ตั้งแต่ไปทำศัลยกรรม ก็คือแบบเหมือนเริ่มเปลี่ยนใจใหม่
 99 → B: อืม
 100 J: เค้าก็ (.) แรกๆ คือเขายังไม่รู้ เราก็พยายามปดๆ
 101 B: คือไปทำไปตัดหน้าออกอะไรอย่างเงี้ย ก็คือยังไม่ได้บอกที่บ้าน
 102 → J: ไม่รู้ ไม่รู้ ไม่รู้ ไม่รู้ ยันตัดมดลูกเลย ไม่ได้บอก
 103 → B: เซี่ย:
 104 J: เออ ไม่บอก ไม่บอก

English translation

- 96 J: Yeah, something like that (.) Like (.) Well (.) I'll just say that yeah
 [It is nonsense. Just answer it away.]
 97 → B: [Ah Ah Ah]
 98 J: From childhood up until now, after having some surgeries, my appearance started to change, right?
 99 → B: Mmh.
 100 J: They were like (.) At first, they did not know about it, and I tried to be vague.
 101 B: You had your breasts removed, and you still did not tell your family?
 102 → J: They didn't know, no, no, no, until I had my hysterectomy. I didn't tell them.
 103 → B: Shi:t!
 104 J: Mmh. I didn't tell them, I didn't tell them.

In (1), Betty produces a backchannel response by uttering a set of short verbalizations “อ่า อ่า อ่า” (“ah ah ah”) in line 97, which indicates their agreement and understanding with Jyb’s attempt to avoid coming out as *tom* to their parents. In line 99, Betty also utters a short verbalization “อืม” (“mmh”) to express agreement with Jyb’s statement about gradual changes in their appearance. Then, Jyb adopts a reduplication of the lexical item “ไม่รู้” (“They didn’t know”) in line 102, which emphasizes their answer that their parents still do not know about their *tom* identity.

The backchannel response, like a prolonged lexical item “เซี่ย” (“Shit”) in line 103, is a Thai swear word, which Betty adopts to show extreme astonishment after learning that Jyb never revealed their gender identity as *tom* to the family. This highlights the contrasting views of Betty and Jyb on coming out. Betty appears to expect that *toms* should disclose their identity, expressing surprise that Jyb has not come out to their family despite a masculine appearance. In contrast, Jyb views coming out as unnecessary, choosing to conceal their *tom* identity even after undergoing a hysterectomy, resulting in a more masculine appearance.

As illustrated in the data, coming out is perceived differently by Betty and Jyb. Betty’s consistent inclusion of the question about coming out suggests that they assume it is a practice every *tom* must go through at some point. However, Jyb’s unexpected disclosure that they have never told their parents elicits Betty’s surprise through backchanneling, highlighting divergent views on the necessity of coming out. Furthermore, the view of coming out as unnecessary contrasts with the Western perspective, which often frames coming out as crucial for identity development and a practice for gaining acceptance and legitimizing one’s identity in public through visibility (Zimman, 2009).

The Expressions of Masculinity and Femininity

The image of Thai *toms* is associated with masculinity. They often express masculinity through specific traits and appearances. Typically, they act boldly and toughly, have short haircuts, and wear masculine clothing (Kositsawat, 2019; Miedema et al., 2022). In the interview show, the conversations between Betty and the guests reinforce the *tom*’s stereotypical masculine expressions, as evidenced by the use of topicalization.

A sequence of talk is completed when the first-pair part, such as a question, request, or invitation, is followed by a second-pair part, such as an answer (“yes” or “no”), acceptance, or declination. However, such a sequence can be further expanded through non-minimal post expansions, such as topicalization. Topicalization is a type of non-minimal post-expansion used when speakers extend a sequence of talk because certain utterances are marked as noteworthy or interesting enough to warrant further discussion, referred to as a “newsmark” (Schegloff, 2007). This can be demonstrated in (2).

(2) Betty asks Zee how they came to realize that they were *tom*.

- 20 B: รู้ตัวเองว่าเป็นทอมตั้งแต่=
- 21 Z: =จริงๆ มันก็เหมือนกับว่าตอนประถมมันยังไม่รู้ละ รู้แล้วว่าตัวเองชอบเล่นกับผู้ชาย มารู้ตอนม.1 ที่เข้าโรงเรียนหญิงล้วนปุ๊บ แล้วก็แบบ พอเข้าไปแล้วแบบผู้หญิงกรี๊ด เซี่ย อะไรวะเนี่ย อะไรอย่างจี้ แต่ไม่รู้คำว่าทอม ไม่รู้เลย
- 22 → B: แล้วไผ่ผมยาวผมสั้น
- 23 Z: ผมสั้น
- 24 B: สั้นแล้ว
- 25 Z: ผมยาวตอนประถมแล้วก็ตัดเข้ามา.1 ใจ เข้าโรงเรียนสตรีภูเก็ต
- 26 → B: อ่า แล้วคือตอนนั้นเรา เราก็คือทำตัวห้าวๆ
- 27 Z: เราเป็นอยู่แล้ว เหมือนเราเป็นอยู่แล้ว
- 28 → B: เราเป็นคนห้าวๆ ชอบเล่นกับผู้ชาย
- 29 Z: คือเรารู้ เรารู้เรื่องเพศนะด้วยตัวเอง เหมือนกับเพื่อน เพื่อนที่รู้จักในโรงเรียน
- 30 B: อ้อ ที่เขาเป็นทอม

- 31 Z: เออ แบบเห้ย มันคืออะไรวะ เห้ย แล้วมันทำยังไงหรอ ((หัวเราะ))
 32 B: ((หัวเราะ))

English translation

- 20 B: You know you are a *tom* since=
 21 Z: =To be honest, it was like I had no idea when I was in elementary school. I just knew that I enjoyed playing with other boys. I began to realize it in the seventh grade as soon as I started attending an all-girls school. When I entered that school, some girls were attracted to me. What the heck was that? It was something like that, but I did not even know the word “*tom*” back then. I really did not know.
 22 → B: Did you have a long or short haircut at that time?
 23 Z: A short haircut.
 24 B: A short one.
 25 Z: I had long hair when I was in elementary school, but when I started in the seventh grade at Satree Phuket School, I had my hair cut.
 26 → B: Ah, and did you act boldly at that time?
 27 Z: I was already bold. I had already been like that.
 28 → B: So, you were bold and enjoyed playing with other boys.
 29 Z: Just learning. I learned about my gender on my own. Just like my school friends.
 30 B: Oh, your *tom* peers.
 31 Z: Yeah, like, what is that? How to be a *tom*? ((Laughter))
 32 B: ((Laughter))

In (2), Betty asks Zee a question when they realized the *tom*’s identity as a first-pair part (line 20). Zee gives an answer as a second-pair part, which was that they realized their *tom* identity when they were in seventh grade in an all-girls school (line 21). However, the sequence of this conversation is further expanded.

Several topicalization questions delivered by Betty disclose how Zee explored their *tom* identity in the past. Initially, a topicalization question about hairstyle “แล้วไว้ผมยาวผมสั้น” (“Did you have a long haircut or short haircut at that time?”) in line 22 is posed to Zee. In Thai culture, hairstyle serves as a visual marker of gender, with long hair expected for girls and short hair typically reserved for boys. Zee’s response of having a short haircut implies an adoption of a masculine appearance. Another topicalization question “อ่า แล้วคือตอนนั้นเรา เราก็อึดทำตัวห้าวๆ” (“Ah, and did you act boldly at that time?”) in line 26 and a topicalization statement “เราเป็นคนห้าวๆ ชอบเล่นกับผู้ชาย” (“So, you were bold and enjoyed playing with male peers”) in line 28, focus on gender expressions, and are directed at Zee. These two topicalizations reflect Betty’s expectation of typical *tom* subtlety, expecting that Zee, as a *tom*, must embody masculinity, both in physical appearance or mannerisms. Zee then admits that they acted boldly and had played with male peers for a long time (line 27), indicating that they embraced masculinity. Hence, the use of topicalizations reveals that the construction of *tom* identity within Zee is exclusively tied to stereotypical masculine expressions.

Nevertheless, some Thai *toms* express femininity, which does not fit with the stereotypical masculine image of *toms* mentioned above. Betty seems surprised that some *tom* guests explicitly clarify that they express femininity, as shown through the use of overlapping speech and interruption.

Overlapping speech is the talk in which more than two speakers speak at the same time. In the conversation, the one-at-a-time principle governs one speaker to speak at a time, and the other speaker needs to wait until the first speaker completes the turn (Sidnell and Stivers, 2012). However, overlapping speech may occur without disrupting interaction and can instead contribute to conversational flow.

(3) Betty and View are talking about wearing feminine clothing.

- 15 V: ไม่ชอบใส่กระโปรงแต่เลิฟมากเวลาใส่ชุดนักเรียน
 16 B: อ้อ เพราะว่า
 17 → V: ฉันชอบยูนิฟอร์มนี้ [อ้าว อย่างงี้]
 18 → B: [ใส่สั้นๆ ึ่งเหรอ]
 19 V: ถู่งเท้าอย่างงี้
 20 B: เอ้อ
 21 → V: ปากแดงคือ [-
 22 → B: [ปากแดงด้วย]

English translation

- 15 V: I don't like wearing skirts, but I enjoy wearing them when it comes to school uniforms.
 16 B: Yeah, why?
 17 → V: I like this uniform [oh, like this.]
 18 → B: [Like wearing a short skirt?]
 19 V: Wearing socks like this.
 20 B: Mmh.
 21 → V: Red lips [-
 22 → B: [RED LIPS]

In (3), View mentions that they loved wearing their school uniform and elaborates by using hand gestures to illustrate how short their skirt was (line 17). Betty instantly responds with, “ใส่สั้นๆ ึ่งเหรอ” (“Like wearing a short skirt?”) in line 18 overlapping with View’s words, “อ้าว อย่างงี้” (“Oh like this”) in line 17. This overlapping speech displays Betty’s exclamation and surprise at View’s feminine expression, as demonstrated by wearing a short girl’s school uniform skirt.

Similarly, in line 21, View mentions that they also like wearing red lipstick. Before View completes their turn, Betty intentionally interrupts with “ปากแดงด้วย” (“Red lips”) in line 22. Interruption occurs when the second speaker begins to speak before the current speaker has finished their turn, disrupting the flow of the conversation and making the switch between speakers less smooth (Ferguson, 1977). Betty’s interruption immediately conveys their surprise at View’s choice to wear red lipstick, even though they are aware that View has not finished speaking.

As illustrated in the data, the CA framework demonstrates that the expression of masculinity and femininity, as part of *tom* identity, is revealed through talk content and its sequential organization. Masculine expression is often topicalized, reinforcing the common association with *tom* identity. Both overlapping speech and interruptions highlight Betty’s surprise at View’s expression of femininity, which deviates from typical expectations and underscores the diversity within the *tom* community, where the *tom* identity can encompass expressions of femininity.

The Shared Understanding among Thai Toms

Thai *toms* may differ in their views on coming-out practices and gender expression, but the interactions in the interviews between Betty and the guests reveal shared understanding through alignment in certain aspects, as evidenced by their co-constructed speech and overlapping speech.

Alignment is conceptualized as structural cooperation that facilitates conversational activities or reflects acceptance of presuppositions and terms (Stivers et al., 2011). It appears in various forms and plays a crucial role in shaping social relationships between interlocutors. According to Enfield (2006: 399 cited in Stivers et al., 2011), the pursuit and use of mutual knowledge and shared expectations not only support the joint management of referential information but also have significant implications for social and interpersonal relationships. In other words, conversation carries both an “informational imperative” and a “social imperative,” which promote cooperation (Stivers et al., 2011: 20). Therefore, showing cooperation or alignment not only indicates shared understanding but also helps maintain positive social relations.

In the data, alignment is in the form of co-constructed speech which occurs when the syntactic units of a speaker’s utterance are jointly constructed or completed by other speakers in the conversation (Clancy and McCarthy, 2014; Ono and Thompson, 1996: 72). It results in a shared turn, allowing speakers to maintain the floor and demonstrating alignment between Betty and the guests in the interview show, as shown in (4) and (5).

(4) Airmin shares a story about a time when they tried to be a woman.

- 27 → A: ไม่แต่ว่าจะเล่าว่าจริงๆนะ ตอนนั้นมันเกิดจากการที่ว่าเราก็อยากเพศตัวเองคือแอร์จะเพศตัวเองทุกครั้งที่แบบ
เปลี่ยนช่วงชั้น ว่าแบบเสียสรุปสั้นคือ=
- 28 → B: =ฉันเป็นแนวไหนอย่างเงี้ยหรือ
- 29 → A: ฉันเป็นอะไรกันแน่ อะไรคือ(.) อะไรคือฉัน อะไรอย่างเงี้ย
- 30 B: อืม อืม
- 31 A: ม.4 เราก็อพยายามจะเป็นผู้หญิงแปบหนึ่ง มันมันไม่ไหวจริงๆ เราก็อพอเปลี่ยนช่วงชั้นอีกครั้งหนึ่ง ก็เลยแบบผมก็ยาว
ประมาณนี้ อ๊ะ ลองดู ครั้งสุดท้าย
- 32 B: ลองเป็นผู้หญิงดู
- 33 A: ลองเป็นผู้หญิงดู ถ้าโอเค ก็จะเป็นผู้หญิงไงเพราะเราก็อไม่ได้ยากคิดเพศอะไรนี่ก็ออกกะ
- 34 B: เข้าใจ
- 35 → A: ใจ เราก็อเลยแบบแต่ถ้ามันไม่ได้ ก็ไม่ [ไม่เทิร์นแล้วนะ]
- 36 → B: [ก็รู้แล้วนะว่าทางนี้แน่นอน]

English translation

- 27 → A: No, but, actually, back then it was all because I wanted to test myself. I tested myself every time I moved to the next grade, like, so I am=
- 28 → B: =Like what am I?
- 29 → A: Who am I actually? What is (.) What am I? Something like that.
- 30 B: Mmh Mmh
- 31 A: When I was in the tenth grade, I tried to be a woman for a while, but I really couldn't stand it. When I moved to the next grade, I had my hair this long. Right, I gave it a try, one last time.
- 32 B: Trying to be a woman?
- 33 A: Trying to be a woman. If it had worked, I would have become a woman because I did not want to present as the wrong gender, you know.
- 34 B: I see.
- 35 → A: Yeah. So, I was like, but if it doesn't work, I will not
[will not turn back]
- 36 → B: [You will know you are surely going this way.]

In (4), Airmin explains to Betty that participating in a university beauty pageant was a way to explore their *tom* identity. They wanted to determine whether they were a *tom* or not. Airmin's statement in line 27 is completed by Betty's utterance, “ฉันเป็นแนวไหนอย่างเงี้อ” (“Like what am I?”) in line 28. Airmin's response in line 29 “ฉันเป็นอะไรกันแน่ อะไรคือ อะไรคือฉัน” (“Who am I actually? What is What am I? Something like that”) shows alignment with Betty's prior turn. Similarly, while Airmin is stating that if they do not feel right to be a woman, they will not revert to being one (line 35), Betty is simultaneously speaking, “ก็รู้แล้วนะว่าทางนี้แน่นอน” (“You will know you are surely going this way”) in line 36. These overlapping responses indicate shared understanding in the form of alignment that they would be more certain of their identity as a *tom* after resolving their identity confusion by trying to be a woman. This co-constructed and overlapping speech reflects alignment between Betty and Airmin as *toms*, suggesting that identity confusion is a common struggle for *toms* during their upbringing.

Despite the perception of *tom* identity as being tied to gender expression, interactions in the interview show sometimes frame it in terms of sexuality, clearly highlighting the distinction between feminine expression and attraction to women. This alignment between Betty and the guest is illustrated in (5).

(5) Betty asks Aom whether they have known they were a *tom* since childhood.

- 11 B: พี่อ้อมเล่าตั้งแต่เด็กเล็กก่อน ขอคุยตั้งแต่เริ่มต้น พี่อ้อมเริ่มเป็นทอมตั้งแต่เด็กเลยไหม
- 12 A: เป็นเด็กผู้หญิงธรรมดา เหมือนเด็กผู้หญิงทุกอย่างที่ (.) ที่ไม่ได้แบบ ไม่ได้ชอบผู้ชาย
- 13 B: อ้อ แค่มิได้ชอบผู้ชาย
- 14 A: เออ แค่มิได้ชอบผู้ชาย
- 15 B: แล้วชอบผู้หญิงไหมตอนเด็ก
- 16 → A: ถ้าเด็กเลยก็ใช้ชีวิตปกติ พอเริ่มสักแบบม.1 ม.2 ก็รู้สึกว่าเป็นแบบอ้อ [เริ่มชอบผู้หญิงละ]
- 17 → B: [เริ่มเป็นทอม] เริ่มเป็นทอมอะไรอย่างเงี้อไหม
- 18 A: ((พยักหน้า)) แต่ผมขยวนะ

English Translation

- 11 B: Tell me about your childhood, Aom. Let’s start from the beginning. Were you *tom* since childhood?
- 12 A: I was just an ordinary girl back then. Like most girls who did not develop feelings for boys.
- 13 B: Right, so you were just not into boys.
- 14 A: Yeah, I was just not into boys.
- 15 B: And were you into girls back then?
- 16 → A: When I was a child, I lived such a normal life, but when I was in seventh or eighth grade,
[I started to like girls.]
- 17 → B: [Started to be a *tom*] Just like you started to be a *tom*, right?
- 18 A: ((Nodding)) But I still had long hair.

In (5), Betty and Aom discuss how Aom came to realize their *tom* identity. In line 15, Betty asks Aom if they had feelings for girls as a child. While Aom begins to explain that they started liking girls when they were in seventh or eighth grade, saying “เริ่มชอบผู้หญิงละ” (“I started to like girls”) (line 16), simultaneously says “เริ่มเป็นทอม” (“started to be a *tom*”) in line 17, indicating their alignment with Aom’s prior statement.

This overlapping speech demonstrates that both Betty and Aom associate being a *tom* with female homosexuality. Moreover, Aom nods to confirm agreement with Betty’s statement and adds that despite their attraction to women, they had long hair—a typical feminine trait—indicating that masculine expression does not necessarily correlate with attraction to women.

Conclusion and Discussion

This article focuses on the discursive construction of Thai *toms*’ identities in the “Talk with Betty” interview show episodes broadcasted on YouTube, using conversation analysis as a framework. The findings unveil that Thai *toms*’ identities are heterogeneous, as highlighted through significant conversational strategies. Coming out is constructed as an unnecessary practice for Thai *toms*. Moreover, Thai *tom* identity is revolved around the expressions of both masculinity and femininity. While Thai *toms* are often stereotyped as expressing masculinity, they also embrace feminine expressions. The study demonstrates how Thai *toms*, through their interactions, dissociate female homosexuality from stereotypical masculine expressions, reflecting the struggles and confusion commonly encountered during their upbringing.

The findings of the study diverge from dominant gender and sexuality discourse surrounding masculine lesbian identities in Southeast Asia, which tend to exclusively embrace stereotypical masculinity as part of their identities, such as T in Taiwan (Wang et al., 2018) or pengkid in Malaysia (Wong, 2012). In contrast, Thai *toms* are associated with both masculine and feminine expressions, making their identity construction more culturally specific. Moreover, as discussed, coming out is considered an unnecessary practice among Thai *toms*, contrasting with Western notions that view it as essential for LGBTQ+ recognition and authenticity (Gray, 2009). The implication of this finding is that, although Thai *toms* may not verbally disclose their identities, they appear to come out subtly, such as their hyper-masculine appearances may lead people to recognize their *toms*’ identities in advance.

The conversations between Betty and self-identified *tom* guests in the interview show can be considered a collaborative style, typically associated with women's conversation style (Tannen, 1990; Coates, 1996). Betty's production of co-construction and overlapping speech establishes a localized alignment between Betty and their *tom* guests. Through these interactions, they eagerly collaborate to complete each other's utterances, sharing incidents and emotions common among Thai *toms*—mutually confronting their identities. This interaction can be seen as a way of creating solidarity between Thai *toms*.

Although the data in this study were drawn from naturally occurring interactions, the interview format means that the power dynamic is asymmetrical. As the interviewer, Betty holds the power to control the direction of the conversation by asking or repeating a series of questions that guide Thai *toms* to reveal their identities in specific ways. For example, they implicitly reinforce the idea that Thai *toms*' identities are exclusively tied to stereotypical masculine expressions, such as acting bold or having a short haircut. Consequently, despite the diversity observed, it shapes *tom* guests as interviewees to produce responses that align with Betty's expectations.

Despite the focus on *toms* in the data, we do not intend to claim that interactions among Thai *toms* consistently follow the patterns observed in this study across all contexts. Our findings may partially apply *toms* in other settings, such as more institutional settings, since the contextual variability and the diversity within Thai *toms* may shape identity construction differently. However, we hope we have illustrated how Thai *toms* interactionally construct their identities in digital space, which may challenge the stereotypical perceptions prevalent in Thai society.

Appendix

Jefferson's Transcription Convention (2004)

Symbol	Meaning
[]	Square brackets indicate the onset and end of overlapping speeches.
=	The equal sign is used to display that speakers speak without pauses.
(.)	A dot enclosed in the brackets indicates a micro interval.
?	A question mark indicates a rising inflection.
:	a colon represents that the preceding sound is being prolonged. The number of colons used indicates the length of the sound.
(())	A description enclosed in double brackets signifies non-verbal actions, such as nodding or laughter.
CAPITALS	A word in capital letters is used to mark noticeably loud speech.
—	A dash represents the cut-off of the prior words or sounds.
→	An arrow in the left margin points to specific utterances discussed in the analysis.

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