

CONCEPTUALIZING LESBIANS ACROSS CULTURES: EXPLORING LESBIAN TERMS IN ENGLISH AND THAI

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ABSTRACT

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This review article examines the conceptualization of lesbian identities in English and Thai contexts through a comparative analysis of their respective terminologies. The primary objectives are twofold: first, to trace the historical development, power relations, and modes of resistance underpinning these lesbian terms within their cultural contexts; and second, to discuss how these terminologies reflect divergent constructions of gender roles and sexual identity. Synthesized from existing academic studies from the 1900s onward, the insights presented in this article are organized into three major sections: the first section introduces English terms and definitions associated with lesbian identities from English-dominant Western societies; the second traces the historical development and evolution of Thai lesbian terms; and the third examines the ideologies and perceptions underlying the coinage of these terminologies in both cultures. Findings reveal that English terms prioritize self-identification and gender fluidity, while Thai terms are discursively constructed through contextually dependent, binary role structure, and social harmony. This distinction highlights the cultural and linguistic differences in conceptualizing lesbian identities. By examining these terminologies across two distinct linguistic and cultural contexts, this study contributes to the fields of LGBTQ+ studies, sociolinguistics, and cross-cultural discourse, offering insights into how language reflects and shapes understandings of sexual and gender identities in different societies.

Keywords: Lesbian terminology; English-dominant Western lesbian; Thai lesbian; queer spectrum; cross cultural context

1. INTRODUCTION

Ideas of gender fluidity and queer movements destabilize traditional lesbian terminologies, especially in a binary sense (Hagai & Seymour, 2022; Perkins, 2022). As this shift promotes inclusiveness and self-determination, concerns arise about the erosion of lesbian specificity, particularly among culturally diverse lesbians (Macias, 2022; Perkins, 2022). Despite the growing influence of the global queer movement, specific lesbian terminologies persist in everyday usage. Nevertheless, many contemporary users deploy such terms without full awareness of their historical, political, or cultural origins. Therefore, this review article contributes to existing scholarship by comparatively examining the historical emergence, circulation, and transformation

of lesbian terminologies in English-dominant Western and Thai contexts to understand how different societies conceptualize lesbian identities.

In the current academic climate, LGBTQ+ diversity is widely discussed. By challenging monolithic views of same-gender sexual orientation, a trend towards researching subcategories of non-binary people has emerged. Consequently, a dominant theme in research on gay and lesbian subcategories is the intersection of their identity with other factors such as race, class, age, and sexual orientation (Barrett, 2017; Callahan & McGuire, 2022; Cerezo et al., 2020; Halberstam, 1998; Lane-Steele, 2011; Maltz, 1998; Moore, 2006). The identities of non-binary subcultures can be primarily expressed through their language (Barrett, 2017), particularly in the terminology they use to identify themselves. These self-labeled terms help mainstream society understand and affirm non-binary identities. While several studies examine LGBTQ+ labels from broader perspectives (Coleman-Fountain, 2014; Shi & Lei, 2020), English lesbian terminology has been explored more exclusively. Reorganizing lesbian self-labeled terminology into subcategories can therefore shed light on how lesbian identities are expressed and negotiated nowadays.

Although globalization propels the proliferation of modern non-binary and transgender identities across national borders, lesbian identities in contemporary Southeast Asia differ from those found in English-dominant Western contexts due to sociocultural backgrounds (Choomgrant, 2014; Jackson, 2009; Keeler, 2023; Sinnott, 2004). In Southeast Asia, Thailand has long been a prominent hub for queer research because of its long-standing reputation for gender diversity and cultural acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals (Jackson & Duangwiset, 2017; Monjagapate & Rungkittanasan, 2019). Compared to many other Asian countries, the visibility of transgender people and same-sexual orientation in Thai media offers rich research materials (Cheng, 2021; Expósito-Barea, 2012; Fongkaew et al., 2019; Jackson, 2011; Prasannam & Chan, 2023). Furthermore, Thailand's unique cultural context allows researchers to challenge and expand Western-centric gender and sexuality theories (Jackson, 2009; Supawantanakul, 2018). Comparing lesbian spectra in English-dominant Western and Thai cultures contributes to broader discussions of how labeling systems shape lesbian identities in mainstream society. It also highlights how lesbians are perceived within global queer culture, dominant heteronormative norms, and their own subcultures.

2. METHODOLOGY, SCOPE, AND LIMITATIONS

This article adopts a narrative review approach to synthesize lesbian terms from published scholarship examining lesbian identities in both English-speaking Western and Thai contexts. Relevant studies were identified through searches on Scopus and Google Scholar. The search combined keywords, such as *lesbian terminology*, *lesbian identity*, *masculine lesbian*, as well as specific English and Thai lesbian terms such as *dyke*, *butch*, *tom*, and *dee*. Academic sources published from the 1990s to the 2020s were collected. Studies not directly relevant to lesbian terminologies, identities, or socio-cultural contexts, such as biomedical outcomes, economic behaviors, or marketing research, were excluded. The reviewed terminologies were thematically identified by their socio-cultural contexts and gender spectrum. The English and Thai terms collected are categorized and compared based on gender expression, sexual attraction, sexual role, dress, body transition, and class, race, political, and rights involvement.

Regarding scope and limitations, this study concentrates on a comparative review of English and Thai language terms used in their respective cultural contexts. Across two different cultures, lesbian terminologies are explored regarding histories, power relations, identity formation, and resistance. As a review-based comparative analysis, the study is limited to published material and textual resources that presumably do not encompass lesbian lived experiences. Furthermore, the study exclusively examines lesbian-related terms and excludes other non-heterosexual identities.

3. LESBIANISM IN THE ENGLISH-DOMINANT WESTERN CONTEXT

In English-dominant Western culture, the term *lesbian* has diverse definitions. However, lesbian identity is commonly defined by their same-sex attraction to women (Eliason & Morgan, 1998). The LGBTQ+ community and publications increasingly view lesbians as queer, a group of non-heteronormative individuals. Despite its popular use, queer does not distinguish lesbians from other sexual minorities nor recognize the sexism women experience (Eliason & Morgan, 1998; Hagai & Seymour, 2022).

The notion of gender fluidity has shifted in recent years, and these labels may become less relevant in the future. However, researchers, regardless of their theoretical stance, must have encountered or been obliged to use these terms. Both English-language Western culture and Thai culture are deemed beneficial to move an academic endeavor on the issue of female-female sexual orientation forward.

The key to promoting diversity is recognizing the nuance of lesbian identity. This section outlines three parts on lesbian terminology in English-dominant Western contexts: first, common terms based on attraction to women, second, masculine-identified spectra, and third, terms for feminine lesbians.

3.1 English terminology for lesbian identities

There are several terms signifying lesbians. An initial survey of the terminologies reveals intricacy and contradiction. Different definitions of lesbianism exist. Originally, lesbians were first labeled in English as *tribade*, meaning “a woman who rubs”, a term from ancient Greek referring to female-female sexuality and historically framed as unnatural (Vecchio, 2021; Vilhjalmsson, 2015). As such, lesbian identities are socially constructed and vary across spectra. Their terminologies are shaped not only by sexuality but also by race, individual self-expression, the feminist movement, and queer activism. The following section introduces common lesbian terms and their definitions.

3.1.1 Lesbian

A *lesbian* refers to a woman who has an attraction to other women sexually or romantically. Regardless of gender expression, lesbian identity is understood as women engaging in same-sex relationships (Duggan, 2025; Eliason & Morgan, 1998). From a social-psychological perspective, however, lesbians are individuals who identify as women, whether cisgender, transgender, or genderqueer. They may be attracted to women and other non-male identities, including nonbinary people (Tate, 2012).

3.1.2 Dyke

Dyke or *dike* originated as a slur for lesbians and was later reclaimed in feminist and queer spaces. Even with its primary association with a masculine lesbian identity, the term functions as a radical or general in-group identifier for women who love women (Duggan, 2025; Hanneder & Best, 2023). Originally a homophobic slur targeting masculine or androgynous women, *dyke* or *dike* remains pejorative in some contexts, especially when describing lesbians as mannish, tough, or aggressive (Duggan, 2025). Its negative connotations come from the contested etymology of the word. As Krantz (1995) argues, *bulldicker* or *bulldick* preceded *bulldike* as a term for masculine lesbians. In 1920s America, *bull* could imply falsehood, suggesting *bulldick* connoted a “fake penis” or “false man” (Krantz, 1995, p. 219). Despite its ominous origins, the term *dyke* is respectively perceived as an authenticity marker for lesbians who rebel against feminine heteronormative norms (Duggan, 2025).

While historically associated with masculinity and gender non-conformity, the term *dyke* has evolved into a broader identifier through a significant process of reclamation (Duggan, 2025; Hanneder & Best, 2023). Since its reappropriation by activists in the 1960s and 1970s, the label has been utilized within the community to foster solidarity and drive radical rights activism. In response to shared experiences of oppression, *dyke* has become a powerful in-group identity marker that indexes self-confidence, toughness, and defiance. This ongoing resignification has contributed to acceptance among many self-identified lesbians (Duggan, 2025; Hanneder & Best, 2023). Furthermore, the term often connotes ambiguous gender performance, allowing individuals to position themselves beyond traditional butch-femme binary identities (Hanneder & Best, 2023).

3.1.3 Genderqueer

Genderqueer refers to individuals whose gender identity is not entirely male or female. Notably, genderqueer differs from other terms in its greater fluidity and openness, as it does not align with normative gender expectations. Various identity expressions fall under the genderqueer term. First, they identify themselves as both male and female simultaneously. Second, they choose to be gender neutral. Third, they have transitioned psychologically from one gender to another, without following social stereotypes of their new gender (Magliozzi et al., 2016; Tate, 2012). Genderqueers are defined by gender identity rather than sexuality; nonetheless, they may be lesbians if they identify as women attracted to other women (Tate, 2012).

3.1.4 Pansexual

Pansexual, *omnisexual*, or *gender-blind* are terms that can be used interchangeably to describe individuals who are attracted to other people regardless of gender or sexuality. Pansexual individuals assert that their attraction depends on factors other than gender and sex (Cavendish, 2010).

It is worth noting that being lesbian is defined by attraction, making it a sexuality category as much as a gender one. Having attraction to women or other queer women is the core quality of lesbians. Such quality coexists with two distinct gender expressions: masculine and feminine. As Judith Butler (1990) argues, gender expressions are performative acts regulated by the root of the *heterosexual matrix* (p. 5). This matrix operates through a logical sequence in which individuals' gender identity and sexual desire align with their assigned biological sex. Serving as a social filter, this matrix establishes heterosexuality as an authentic identity while

framing non-heteronormative identities as bad copies. The presence of masculine-identified lesbians profoundly disrupts this matrix. Their gender expression, which exhibits masculinity and contradicts their female-assigned identity, is often visibly gender deviant or non-conforming. Consequently, to negotiate in-group membership and visibility, their masculinity appears in many shades, involving diverse dimensions of expression, sex roles, and political activism (Duggan, 2025). Thus, the following section explores these spectra of masculine-identified lesbians within English-dominant Western culture.

3.2 English terms for masculine lesbian

Since the 21st century, masculinity has served as the prominent expression of lesbian aspiration and identity in American culture (Newton, 1984). Halberstam (1998) explores the *masculine continuum* within the context of lesbians and transgender people under the English-dominant Western culture. Despite Halberstam's (1998) view that the masculine continuum does not adequately capture the entire queer women's gender fluidity, such a continuum does provide a glimpse of shading masculine lesbian identities through its terminologies. This part complies with terms that signify masculine lesbian in the English-dominant Western context based on the continuum of Halberstam (1998), along with multiple scholars' insights into each term.

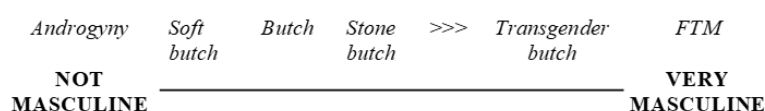


Figure 1: Halberstam's (1998) continuum of masculine lesbians

On this continuum, lesbian and transgender masculinities are divided into six categories, ranging from not masculine to very masculine (Figure 1). These terms are defined below.

3.2.1 Androgyny

Androgyny refers to the display of both masculine and feminine behaviors or appearances simultaneously (Martin et al., 2017). With dualistic self-identification, this lesbian identity is defined as neither butch nor femme (Gunn et al., 2021; Tate, 2012). When claiming their lesbian identity, androgynous individuals tend to view themselves as feminine (Gunn et al., 2021).

3.2.2 Soft butch

Soft butch refers to lesbians who display some stereotypical butch traits to a less masculine degree. Soft butches embrace their female-sexed bodies and express a blend of masculinity and femininity through physical appearance and sexuality (Maltz, 1999; Rose, 2009). The soft butch spectrum is fluid, generally presenting more masculine than feminine in physical, sexual, and romantic expression (Carpenter & McKenzie, 2011). Alternatively, some soft butches prefer a more passive sexual role or associate themselves with femininity in a romantic relationship (Rose, 2009). Aside from their fluidity, soft butch styles mainly feature masculinity with impressions of athleticism, power, and feminism (Geiger et al., 2006). Related labels for *soft butch* are *chapstick* or *futch* (Moore, 2023; Prado-Castro & Graham, 2017).

3.2.3 Butch

Butch describes a lesbian who exhibits a masculine identity (Bergman, 2010; Mackay, 2019; Smith et al., 2011). Dressing in male clothing, grooming their bodies, and styling their hair are butch expressions of masculinity (Mackay, 2019). Despite being subjected to masculine stereotypes, being butch is a form of womanhood which can be defined as *female masculinity* or *lesbian masculinity* (Mackay, 2019, p. 5). Thus, butchness is intertwined with womanhood and masculine lesbian identity (Halberstam, 1998; Mackay, 2019).

3.2.4 Stone butch

Stone butch refers to a butch who prefers to be untouched sexually. There is an emphasis on sexual behavior in this term. Emerging in America during the 1950s, it refers to a butch who prefers not to be stimulated on their genitals or breasts during sexual activity (Halberstam, 1998; Maltz, 1998). Historically and currently, stone butches are defined by their ability to *receive sexual pleasure by giving sexual pleasure* to a femme (Maltz, 1998, p. 275). Stone butches embody masculinity, but not maleness. They confine and give a new signification to their female bodies in various ways, such as binding their breasts, wearing a dildo under clothing, having a masculine haircut, and displaying an erotic signal of untouchability (Maltz, 1998).

3.2.5 Transgender butch

Transgender butch or *transbutch* refers to female-assigned individuals who adopt a male appearance, blurring boundaries between *butch*, *lesbian masculinity*, and *transgender identity* (Halberstam, 1998; Manion, 2014). Within English-speaking LGBTQ+ communities, the term *trans* is preferably employed as

a form of self-identification (Vecchio, 2021). Associated with the trans political movement, this term identifies a spectrum that extends from butch history to transgender rights activism (Hagai & Seymour, 2022; Halberstam, 2017). They are masculine-identified lesbians who display traditional masculinity but do not want to be men and are comfortable with their unique gender role (Halberstam, 1998). While transgender butches embrace masculinity, they maintain their identity as born girls and raised as girls (Manion, 2014).

3.2.6 FTM

FTM, “female-to-male transsexual”, or *trans men* refers to individuals who are born female, but transition to male during their lives (Tate, 2012). FTMs embrace maleness and do not see themselves as women or lesbians (Halberstam, 1998). Many FTMs consider transsexuality a birth defect that should be medically cured by surgical and hormonal therapies. FTMs ultimately desire masculine bodies and usually begin their sex reassignment once taking hormones (Halberstam, 1998; Maltz, 1998; Rubin, 2006). Several commonalities exist between transgender butch and transmen terms. Examples include adopting a masculine sexual identity, refusing that biology determines destiny, and identifying as more masculine than androgynous (Manion, 2014).

Halberstam’s (1998) continuum focused on tracing white, Euro-American masculine lesbian traditions, which were represented in the 1990s’ mainstream queer theory. Whereas white lesbians dominate mainstream LGBTQ+ representation and leadership advocacy, lesbians of color, particularly African American and Latina communities, struggle to gain their visibility and inclusion (Lane-Steele, 2011; Moore, 2006; Prado-Castro & Graham, 2017). Thus, beyond Halberstam’s (1998) framework, Kimberlé Crenshaw has highlighted that race is central in shaping lesbian identity (Hagai & Seymour, 2022). Afterwards, Black lesbian identities, like *stud*, became scholarly visible.

3.2.7 Stud

Stud refers to a dark-skinned, masculine lesbian. Originally influenced by Black American masculine culture, studs’ gender identity is expressed through their hip-hop grooming style, such as baggy clothes, Timberland boots, and flashy jewelry (Lane-Steele, 2011; Moore, 2006). Studs appear to be attracted to both masculine partners in *stud-stud relationships* and feminine partners in *stud-femme relationships* (Lane-Steele, 2011, pp. 486–487). Besides African American masculine lesbians, Latina lesbians who exhibit masculinity are also included in this term. An alternative term for stud is *AG*, standing for *aggressive* as a negative distinction between aggressive butch and passive femme in their stereotypical relationship (Moore, 2006). In New York, *AG* has a connotation of class prejudice as well (Moore, 2006, p. 114). Produced through multiple power systems, *stud* and *AG* identities are not only marginalized by female-female sexuality but also deeply embedded in American histories. Within African American communities, racialized histories that stereotype Black women as “aggressive” have shaped the emergence of *stud* and *AG*. These terms circulate primarily within urban, often working-class Black lesbian networks and are discursively constructed through the adoption of street-coded styles of hip-hop masculinity (Lane-Steele, 2011; Moore, 2006; Prado-Castro & Graham, 2017).

3.3 English terminologies for feminine lesbian

Generally associated with masculine lesbians, the term *femme* describes the female partner of a butch (Bergman, 2010). Although feminine lesbian roles exist across cultures, most research centers on *femme* identity in English-dominant Western cultures (Smith et al., 2011).

3.3.1 Femme

Femme describes lesbians who look feminine and conform to cisgender identity. In a traditional sense, a femme is a feminine lesbian in a butch-femme relationship (Hoskin, 2021; Smith et al., 2011).

3.3.2 Stone femme

Stone femme refers to the partner of a stone butch and is someone who *desires stone butch masculinity and sexuality* (Maltz, 1998, p. 277). The term *stone* denotes sexual practice and boundary-making within butch-femme sexual roles (Maltz, 1999). By disrupting normative patterns of sexuality, femmes’ erotic roles and positions are ambiguous (Hart, 2002). Erotically, *stone femme* can be defined in two ways. Firstly, *stone femme* is a femme-of-a-stone-but, sexually receptive but not likely to touch a stone butch’s private parts (Maltz, 1999). Secondly, the term aligns with the sexually active role of a femme. An alternative term for this second definition is *femme top* (Hart, 2002, p. 57).

Comparatively, femmes exhibit more stereotypical female traits, while butch lesbians express diverse masculine interests in defining themselves (Gunn et al., 2021). Feminine-expressed lesbians remain invisible or misrecognized, as the normative feminine look conceals their same-sex desires. Lipstick lesbian identity exemplifies this phenomenon. Emphasizing conventional femininity, the term foregrounds how lesbian identity is hidden under a female stereotypical façade, making them seemingly conform to heteronormative expectations.

3.3.3 Lipstick lesbian

Lipstick lesbian is a slang term for lesbians with strongly feminine presentation (Bell et al., 1994). Rebelling against the patriarchal stereotype of women, lipstick lesbians exhibit gender identity through their *hyperfeminine* dress codes (Bell et al., 1994, p. 38), such as make-up, form-fitting skirts or jeans, high heels, and jewelry. In the early 1990s, lipstick lesbians emerged in San Francisco among successful professional lesbians who could afford feminine fashion (Bell et al., 1994). The term originally signified resistance to male dominance. It challenges heteronormative femininity by asserting women's right to be aesthetically expressive and be attracted to other females, rather than satisfying male desire (Bell et al., 1994). Despite their lesbian identity, lipstick lesbians are often mistaken for heterosexuals because they are cisgender. Their outward appearance corresponds to their female birth sex (Kerr, 2013). As far as fashion impacts their visibility, lipstick lesbians are a typical representation of feminine lesbians in mainstream media (Ciasullo, 2001; Geczy & Karaminas, 2020; Laalo, 2012). Criticized by many scholars, lipstick lesbians are ironically viewed as stereotypical attractive lesbians who are subjected to the male gaze because of their feminine appearance (Bell et al., 1994; Ciasullo, 2001). In common usage, the term *lipstick lesbian* is associated with positivity, especially regarding feminine attractiveness (Geiger et al., 2006).

From the aforementioned, in the English-dominant Western context, lesbian terminologies extend beyond sexuality, reflecting and interplaying racial politics, feminist movements, queer activism, and self-expression practices. For instance, terminologies such as *dyke*, *stud*, *lipstick lesbian* and *transgender butch* are not static labels; rather, they serve as dynamic tools for negotiating social acceptance, gaining visibility, and empowering in-group membership.

Taking a discourse studies stance, this article argues that the concept of lesbian is socially constituted and socially constitutive. The meaning varies across cultural and historical contexts, rather than being universally fixed. Across cultures, female-female attractions and identities carry distinct meanings. Scoping down to explore within the lesbian community, debate regarding which term to be used to signify women who identify as non-binary or gender non-conforming is not nonexistent (Duggan, 2025; Hanneder & Best, 2023; Kositsawat, 2019). This contestation of terms is also present in Thailand. The identification of lesbianism is a *contentious act* with unresolved tension among scholars and community members regarding which terms are most appropriate (Kositsawat, 2019, p. 2). Central to the debate is the politics of lesbianism between Thailand and the English-language international community, as well as that within the Thai context. Contention begins with Thai lesbians' rejection of imported English terminology and the presence of overlapping labels that carry distinct social implications (Jackson, 2004; Kositsawat, 2019; Sinnott, 2011). The following section examines Thai lesbian terminology, offering significant insight into how gender and sexuality are constructed outside of an English-dominant Western context.

4. LESBIANISM IN THE THAI CONTEXT

Various queer identities emerging in Asia diverge from English-dominant Western models (Jackson, 2009). However, Thai lesbian identities derive from the concept of hybridity, which combines Thai-ness with some adaptation of Western values (Sinnott, 2004). Although Thai queer culture adopts some English terms, it demonstrates strong linguistic innovation and localization in shaping lesbian identities (Jackson, 2009).

Female-female sexual behavior in Thai culture has traceable historical roots in discourses. Drawing upon the work of Thai queer cultural studies, this section consists of three parts: the history of Thai lesbian terms, the evolution of masculine lesbian terms, and a common term for feminine lesbians.

4.1 Thai terminologies for lesbian

From the eighteenth to the twenty-first century, several pieces of evidence from Thai royal documents, literature, and media demonstrate terms that suggest lesbianism and transgender expression (Fongkaew et al., 2019; Pongpanit & Murtagh, 2022; Prokati, 1993). The following is a list of Thai terms and definitions related to lesbianism.

4.1.1 Len-pheuan

Len-pheuan, "play with a friend", has been specifically used to describe female-female sexual behavior (Jackson, 2004; Sinnott, 2004). During the pre-modern era, most eighteenth-century evidence comes from royal court records. These documents note same-sex behaviors among palace concubines as *len-pheuan*. This term denotes female-female intimacy and originally referred more broadly to same-sex activity for both males and females. However, such a term conveys a pejorative sense because it indicates forbidden and illegal sexual behavior, historically marking *len-pheuan* as socially taboo (Prokati, 1993; Sinnott, 2004).

4.1.2 Ti-ching

Ti-ching, “clashing cup-shaped cymbals”, describes female same-sexual activity (Jackson, 2004, p. 210). In its literal meaning, it describes a Thai classical music in which a rhythmic sound is created by the clashing of cup-shaped cymbals. An erotic non-literal meaning can be interpreted as genital rubbing between women. This term is used in contemporary Thai society as an insult against female same-sex behavior (Fongkaew et al., 2019).

4.1.3 Tom-dee

Tom-dee is a term that emerged in the 1980s as Thai queer women were unlikely to accept the English term *lesbian* (Jackson, 2004, 2009; Sinnott, 2004, 2011). In Thai culture, the term *lesbian* is associated with sexually provocative relationships, and homoeroticism. Avoiding such a label, Thai queer women use the term *tom-dee*, shortened from *tomboy* and *lady* instead. Like butch-femme couples, *tom-dee* is widely represented in Thai media (Jackson, 2004, 2009; Sinnott, 2004, 2011). The term was clarified in July 1984 in a Bangkok Review interview with a self-identified *tom-dee* couple, Alice Christian and Yortsoi Komanchun. They were introduced to the public as *two young female actors who admit that they are tom and dee...live together like husband and wife* (Jackson, 2004, p. 214). In the early 21st century, Thai lesbian culture exhibits significant linguistic diversity. The binary *tom-dee* has been increasingly challenged by more nuanced terms describing female-female sexual orientation (Jackson, 2011; Ojanen, 2009; Sinnott, 2011).

4.1.4 Ying-rak-ying

Ying-rak-ying, “women who love women”, was first published in Anjareesarn in 1993 as an alternative term for queer women by Anjaree, a feminist lesbian rights organization. Aside from promoting a non-gender-specific category, it emphasizes a couple’s shared femaleness instead of gender-polarized terms used to identify *tom-dee* relationships (Sinnott, 2011). Though the attempt to introduce the term, *ying-rak-ying*, among public usage was deemed unsuccessful in 2011 (Sinnott, 2011), it has since gained more social recognition in current academic and media contexts (Sanmongkol & Tinnam, 2024). Therefore, the growing circulation of this Thai term, which accommodates more neutrality, is likely to align with global queer discourse in which lesbian identity is defined primarily through same-sex desire rather than binary role-based identity.

4.1.5 Les

Les is a contraction of the word *lesbian*, referring to cisgender feminine-feminine partners (Ojanen, 2009; Sinnott, 2012). In the mid-2000s, the term emerged on the Lesla website, an online community of women in same-sex relationships (Sinnott, 2011). Identified by their sexual behavior, *les-king* and *les-queen* are subcategories of *les*, feminine-feminine lesbians (Ojanen, 2009; Sinnott, 2012). Drawing on the Thai gay male terms *king* (active partner) and *queen* (passive partner), *les-king* denotes a cisgender woman who assumes a sexually active role, while *les-queen* refers to one who takes a receptive role (Sinnott, 2012, p. 463). Even though both paired terms refer to a female-female partner, *les-king* and *les-queen* connote a slight difference in meaning compared to *tom-dee*. While *tom-dee* refers to masculine-feminine romantic pairings, *les-king* and *les-queen* denote active-passive sexual roles among feminine cisgender lesbians.

4.2 Thai terminologies for masculine lesbian

As Jackson (2004) asserts, a variety of Thai non-heterosexual categories have emerged over time from public documents such as newspapers, magazines, and academic papers. As evidenced by the Thai public discourse, there have been several decades of evolution and change in Thai masculine lesbian terminologies.

4.2.1 Katoey

Katoey was a premodern broad term covering both males and females who displayed androgynous traits or gender-nonconforming behavior (Jackson, 2004). During the 1960s, women who exhibited masculinity through their manners and cross-dressing appearances were commonly called *kathoey* (Jackson, 2004; Sinnott, 2004). From the 1970s onward, the concept of masculine-presenting females became obsolete within the *kathoey* domain (Jackson, 2004). Within the contemporary Thai milieu, this shift redefined the term as an inclusive classification of birth-assigned males encompassing gays and trans identities (Jackson, 2004; Shuttleworth, 2023).

4.2.2 Sao-dai

Sao-dai or *Sao-lesbian*, Thai-English compounds, were used in Thai press reports during the 1970s to categorize masculine-identified lesbians (Jackson, 2000). As the category of *kathoey* underwent a significant shift and became restricted to the assigned male at birth queer identity, the term *sao-dai* or *dai* derived from the English word *dyke*, was adopted to specifically relabel this emerging masculine lesbian identity (Jackson,

2000, 2004). While the term *dyke* has evolved into a more generic or radical identifier within the English-dominant Western context through the process of political reclamation, its historical core and primary social meaning remain deeply tied to masculinity and the subversion of feminine gender norms (Duggan, 2025). In this regard, Thai culture is likely to selectively preserve the original masculine connotation of the term *dyke* to distinguish masculine lesbians from their feminine partners.

4.2.3 Tom

Tom is derived from the English word *tomboy*. The term refers to masculine-identified lesbians who desire women sexually (Jackson, 2004, 2009; Sinnott, 2004, 2011). In the 1980s, *tom* emerged after *kathoei*, *sao-dai*, and *sao-lesbian* fell out of use (Jackson, 2004). Typically, toms dress in masculine attire, refrain from wearing make-up, wear short hair, and have a swaggering attitude (Jackson, 2004, p. 221). Despite expressing themselves like men, toms have different attitudes from Thai normative masculinity. As Sinnott observes, toms combine masculine appearance and feminine attentiveness, often prioritizing their sexual partners' satisfaction over their own pleasure (Sinnott, 2000). In other words, toms construct a distinct, fluid masculinity that differs from normative Thai masculinity and femininity (Sinnott, 2000, 2004, 2012).

According to Sinnott (2000), although there are a variety of factors that determine tom identity, one central aspect of tom is masculinity. The notion of toms' masculinity has been discursively practiced in terms of attitudes towards sexuality, masculine empathy, and expectation of their feminine partners (dees). For instance, based on Sinnott's (2000) research, typical tom masculinity involves leadership, a mannish dress code, being *jao-chu*, "womanizers", and taking care of their *mia* "wives" or *faen* "girlfriends" (p. 106).

A spectrum of *tom* is further subcategorized. Thai masculine-lesbian identities are differentiated by gender expression, style, and sexual roles according to the following terms. *Tom-tae* "real tom" denotes masculine lesbians who emphasize sexual expertise, untouchability, and an exclusively active role (Sinnott, 2000, 2004). Meanwhile, *tom-boy* refers to masculine-identified lesbians who adopt Korean-style menswear fashion (Sinnott, 2012). *Tom-gay* describes masculine lesbians who are partnered with other masculine lesbians. The term is formed by compounding *tom* with *gay*, a word that typically denotes a category of men who are not sexually attracted to women in Thai context (Shuttleworth, 2023). In its emergent usage, the *tom-gay* identity exhibits a Korean-pop-inspired masculinity and marks a shift toward same-gendered pairing, using the subcategories, *tom-gay-king* and *tom-gay-queen* to specify active and receptive sexual roles, respectively (Sinnott, 2012). Moreover, there are additional categories that emerge to delineate binary sexual identities of Thai masculine lesbians. Whereas *tom-one-way* indicates an exclusively active and penetrative sexual role, *tom-two-way* denotes flexibility between active and receptive sexual roles (Chonwilai, 2009; Sinnott, 2012).

4.3 Thai terminology for feminine lesbian

In the context of a sexual or romantic relationship with toms, a common Thai term used to describe a *tom's* feminine partners is *dee*, adapted from the English word *lady*. This term emerged in the 1980s, referring to a feminine partner of a *tom*, masculine-identified lesbians (Jackson, 2004; Sinnott, 2004). Rather than calling themselves *lesbians*, which has overly sexual connotations, the terms *lady* and *dee* are used to define Thai femme lesbians. Preferably, feminine lesbians are legitimized by this term as they have connotations of elegance, high-class femininity, and social respectability (Jackson, 2004).

Typically, those who identify as *dee* have long hair and wear feminine clothing (Jackson, 2004). In Thai mainstream and social media, such as television shows, sitcoms, and talk shows, *dees* are still defined as ordinary women even when they are in a relationship with the *toms* (Jackson, 2004; Sinnott, 2004).

Sinnott (2004) notes that nowadays, *dees* are more likely to describe behavior than a complete identity because the term overlaps with ordinary women. As Sinnott (2004) states, the distinction between a *real-dee* and a *fake-dee* is explicitly defined. A *real-dee* has a sexual and romantic relationship only with toms. Conversely, a *fake-dee*, identified as bisexual, may form relationships with both men and toms.

As Jackson (2004) asserts, a variety of Thai non-heterosexual categories have emerged over time from public documents such as newspapers, magazines, and academic papers. As evidenced by the Thai public discourse, there have been several decades of evolution and change in Thai lesbian terminologies. It is suggested that Thai lesbian terms are closely embedded in Thai local gender systems, linguistic conventions, and cultural norms surrounding masculine and feminine roles (Jackson, 2004; Kositsawat, 2019; Sinnott, 2004). In this sense, lesbian terminology functions not as a neutral descriptor of sexual orientation but as a culturally situated discourse that reflects distinct origins of identity formation.

5. LESBIAN TERMINOLOGY: PARADIGMATIC OBSERVATION

Across languages, words maintain systematic relationships with one another. Regarding lesbian identity, subcategories can be found for more specific definitions. In Tables 1 and 2, the bolded terms represent terminologies in which subcategories are located under each of them. Mostly in compound form, these subcategories denote more specific lesbian spectra.

Certain fields use terminology to conceptualize objects, processes, states, and attributes (Gil-Berrozpe & Faber, 2017). Taking lesbian spectra into consideration, English and Thai terms, as shown in Tables 1 and 2, are categorized based on gender expression, sexual attraction, sexual role, dress, body transition, and class, race, political involvement, and rights activism. These criteria are defined as follows:

Gender expression refers to how individuals display and understand their masculine and feminine traits. Such expression reflects the gendered subjective self-perception through attributes such as appearances, roles, mannerisms, and personalities (Henrichs-Beck & Szymanski, 2017).

Sexual attraction is defined as the desire caused by an individual's erotic attraction to have sexual contact with another individual (Cook & McHenry, 2013; Kauth, 2000). Since sexual attraction is evident in female same-sex relationships (Diamond & Butterworth, 2008; Rust, 1992), the categorized terms are based on lesbians' attraction toward their partners who exhibit either masculine or feminine characteristics.

Sexual role is a category for distinguishing lesbians by their erotic interactions. In some respects, lesbian spectra are described by terms that indicate their active or passive sexual practices (Halberstam, 1998; Sinnott, 2004, 2012).

Dress is a category identifying lesbians through clothing and accessories. Dress expresses a person's gender identity (Barnes & Eicher, 1992). A variance in gender is often accentuated, highlighted, or even constructed by the choice of clothing (Samborska, 2012).

Body transition is a category that identifies masculine lesbians who transition from feminine bodies to masculine ones. Physically, surgery and hormone therapy are possibly involved in the transitional process (Manion, 2014; Rubin, 2006).

Class, race, and rights involvement is a category depicting an association between the terms' originality and their relevance to class, race, and rights.

In Tables 1 and 2, every reviewed term is marked by the following three different symbols:

- Identified The term is identified in a category.
- ◎ Blurry/fluid The term is blurrily or fluidly identified in a category.
- Unidentified The term is unidentified in a category.

Table 1: English lesbian terminology

English lesbian terminology	Gender expression		Sexual attraction		Sexual role		Dress		Body transition	Class, race, rights involvement
	Masculine trait	Feminine trait	Masculine partner	Feminine partner	Active role	Passive role	Masculine style	Feminine style		
Lesbian	●	●	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Dyke	●	●	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	●
Genderqueer	●	●	●	●	○	○	○	○	○	○
Pansexual/omnisexual/gender-blind	◎	◎	◎	◎	○	○	○	○	○	○
Androgyny	◎	◎	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Butch	●	◎	○	●	●	○	●	○	○	○
- Soft butch/chapstick/futch	◎	◎	◎	◎	◎	◎	●	◎	○	○
- Stone butch	●	○	○	●	●	○	●	○	○	○
- Transgender butch/Transbutch	●	○	○	●	○	○	●	○	◎	●
- FTM/Transmen	●	○	○	●	○	○	●	○	●	●
Stud/AG	●	○	◎	◎	◎	○	●	○	○	●
Femme	○	●	●	○	○	○	○	●	○	○
- Stone femme	○	●	●	○	◎	◎	○	●	○	○
Lipstick lesbian	○	●	○	●	○	○	○	●	○	●

● Identified ◎ Blurry/fluid ○ Unidentified

Table 2: Thai lesbian terminology

Thai lesbian terminology	Gender expression		Sexual attraction		Sexual role		Dress		Body transition	Class, race, rights involvement
	Masculine trait	Feminine trait	Masculine partner	Feminine partner	Active role	Passive role	Masculine style	Feminine style		
Len-pheuan	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Ti-ching	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Ying-rak-ying	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	●
Les	○	●	○	●	○	○	○	●	○	○
- <i>Les-king</i>	○	●	○	●	●	○	○	●	○	○
- <i>Les-queen</i>	○	●	○	●	○	●	○	●	○	○
Katoey	●	○	○	○	○	○	●	○	○	○
Sao-dai/Sao-lesbian	●	○	○	●	○	○	●	○	○	○
Tom	●	○	○	●	●	○	●	○	●	○
- <i>Tom-tae</i>	●	○	○	●	●	○	●	○	○	○
- <i>Tom-boy</i>	●	○	○	●	○	○	●	○	○	○
- <i>Tom-gay</i>	●	○	●	○	○	○	●	○	○	○
- <i>Tom-gay-king</i>	●	○	●	○	●	○	●	○	○	○
- <i>Tom-gay-queen</i>	●	○	●	○	○	●	●	○	○	○
- <i>Tom-one-way</i>	●	○	○	●	●	○	●	○	○	○
- <i>Tom-two-way</i>	●	○	○	●	●	●	●	○	○	○
Dee	○	●	●	○	○	○	○	●	○	○

● Identified ● Blurry/fluid ○ Unidentified

Comparative discussion of lesbian terms in English-dominant Western and Thai contexts provides insight into how lesbian identity can be constructed through different labeling schemes. Looking at terminologies from such dual perspectives, the following categories are considered:

5.1 Gender expression

Because the gender expression is defined by lesbians' display of their masculine or feminine traits, English and Thai terminologies imply dissimilar concepts. In English-dominant societies, gender expression among lesbians is commonly framed through individual identity and self-expression. In contrast, gender expression in the Thai context is more socially legible and role-based.

In the English-dominant Western context, gender expression is understood as self-perception (Eliason & Morgan, 1998). Certain lesbian terminologies are constructed around self-identification, reflecting identities that individuals claim and share within a social context. Thus, several lesbian terms are marked as fluid, depending on their choices of gender performance. Terms such as *stud*, *stone butch*, *transgender butch*, and *FTM* belong to the masculine spectrum, whereas *lipstick lesbian*, *femme*, or *stone femme* refer to feminine lesbians. However, some English terminologies alter non-stereotypical traits of masculine and feminine exhibitions (Cavendish, 2010; Gunn et al., 2021; Tate, 2012). For instance, *lesbian* is a neutral term referring to women who prefer women to men, regardless of their feminine or masculine appearances (Eliason & Morgan, 1998; Tate, 2012). Aside from this, terms such as *genderqueer* and *androgyny* describe blurry boundaries of gender expression. Although some terms, such as *dyke* or *butch*, are likely to convey lesbians' masculine traits, there is some degree of womanhood implied by these terms (Mackay, 2019).

In Thailand, gender expression is relational and role-based. Masculine and feminine roles of lesbian identities are expected to be recognizable rather than fluid. Therefore, terms such as *les*, *tom*, and *dee* are divided based on how lesbians express themselves with masculine or feminine traits (Sinnott, 2004, 2012).

5.2 Sexual attraction

The sexual attraction category varies according to lesbians' attraction toward their partners with a masculine or feminine characteristic. English and Thai terminologies differ in this category.

In English terms, lesbian sexual attraction is defined primarily by same-sex object choice. Each group of lesbians has a certain pattern of sexual partners. It identifies specific options for *butch*, *stone butch*, *transgender butch*, and *FTM* who desire only feminine partners. Likewise, *femme* and *stone femme* gravitate towards masculine lesbians. However, some English terms suggest that female-to-female sexual attraction is not necessarily gender-dependent. Spectra of *stud*, *gender queer*, *pansexual*, and *soft butch*, for instance, are fluid in terms of their sexual desire and chiefly concern female-female sexual attraction.

In contrast, several Thai terms emphasize either masculinity or femininity that lesbians find appealing. Accordingly, spectra of *les*, *tom*, *tom-tae*, *tom-boy*, *tom-one-way*, and *tom-two-way* are attracted to feminine partners, unlike *dee* or *tom-gay* who seek their same-sex partners with masculine looks.

5.3 Sexual role

Reviewing their erotic interactions, there are English-dominant Western and Thai lesbian spectra that are similarly categorized into active or passive roles. Both English and Thai terms describe masculine lesbians who reject receiving sexual contact and instead pleasure their partners by performing stimulation, friction, penetration, or oral sex to induce orgasms (Maltz, 1998; Sinnott, 2004). Evidently, a key element that English terms, *butch* and *stone butch*, share with some Thai terms, including *tom*, *tom-tae*, and *tom-one-way*, is their active sexual practice of untouchability. However, several English terms, including *stud*, *soft butch*, and *stone femme*, connote blurred boundaries in sexual roles.

Historically, Thai terms such as *len-pheuan* or *ti-ching* described female-female erotic behavior without sexual role identification. Until the proliferation of lesbian terms in the 1980s, the term *tom-dee* was introduced, connoting dichotomous masculine-feminine sexual roles. Afterwards, lesbian sexual roles became more structured and expected as male-active and female-passive roles. Many Thai subordinate terms, such as *les-king*, *les-queen*, *tom-gay-king*, and *tom-gay-queen*, are expanded by combining local queer men's linguistic practices that convey active, as *king*, or passive, as *queen*, in their sexual agency (Sinnott, 2012).

5.4 Dress

Dress is a category that identifies lesbian spectra through clothing and accessories. In English-language Western and Thai cultures, likewise, dress codes reflect lesbians' gender preference. English lesbian terms such as *stud*, *butch*, *stone butch*, *transgender butch*, and *FTM* dress in masculine style, as do Thai *toms*. Conversely, both English *femme* and Thai *les* and *dee* spectra are cisgender.

Besides expressing gender identities, fashion signifies lesbians' political agendas and racial subcultures, especially in an English-dominant Western context. *Lipstick lesbians* emerged in late 1980s to early 1990s American movements, advocating lesbian rights through hyperfeminine fashion and makeup (Bell et al., 1994). Hip-hop *studs* typically wear flashy accessories and Timberland boots to express an African American masculine lesbian identity (Lane-Steele, 2011; Moore, 2006).

While several English and Thai terms define lesbian dress through a masculine-feminine binary, an English term, *soft butch*, suggests fluidity of clothing and hairstyles that are predominantly masculine with a feminine twist (Geiger et al., 2006).

5.5 Body transition

Body transition is a category that describes lesbians who transform their feminine bodies into masculine ones through surgical or hormonal processes (Manion, 2014; Rubin, 2006). While there are existing English terminologies in this category, some Thai terms are likely to broaden their definition in this domain.

The English terms *transgender butch* and *FTM* fall under this category. Both terms reject breasts as prominent symbols of femininity. However, the *transgender butch* doesn't entirely embrace maleness (Halberstam, 1998). To minimize visibility of the breast, *transgender butch* wears loose clothing, bind their tops, or have their breast surgically removed (Manion, 2014; Rubin, 2006). Unlike *FTM*, sex-reassignment is the primary way to manifest their masculinity (Halberstam, 1998; Maltz, 1998).

In Thailand, the depiction of *tom* identity in terms of body transition is ambiguous and negotiable. Sinnott (2004) noted that *toms* reject breasts and prefer to hide them through outfits. Despite these observations, *toms'* desire to undergo medical transitions had not been remarked. Currently, due to Thailand's availability of female-to-male gender-affirming treatments and mastectomy, many *toms* undergo surgical and hormonal procedures to enhance their physical masculinity (Boonyapisomparn et al., 2023; Pliensak et al., 2023). Therefore, the definition of *tom* has become blurry as the trend in body transitions shifts.

5.6 Class, race, rights involvement

This category centers on class, race, and rights. In English-dominant Western societies, particularly in the USA, some lesbian identities are rooted in rights-based politics. For instance, as a reclaimed identity, the term *dyke* is often politically charged, aligned with feminist and queer activism (Hanneder & Best, 2023). In contrast, Thai lesbian identity is less explicitly politicized. Thai LGBTQ+ movements often emphasize social harmony over confrontation (Jackson, 2004, 2011). As a tolerated subculture, Thai lesbians often exist in a visible silence, a social condition where they remain unspoken and do not challenge traditional family structures or public morality (Kositsawat, 2019, p. 67). This state of silence reinforces a lack of formal social recognition and makes Thai lesbians less politicized compared to the Western LGBTQ+ cultures that prioritize coming out and public declaration. Accordingly, English-speaking Western cultures have a wider range of terms than Thai culture, including *dyke*, *stud*, *lipstick lesbian*, *transgender butch*, and *FTM*. Meanwhile, only one Thai term, *ying-rak-ying* "women who love women", is coined by a feminist lesbian organization, Anjaree, to advocate for lesbian rights by emphasizing female-female unity gender-specific labels (Sinnott, 2004, 2011).

According to Tables 1 and 2, the overview of lesbian terminologies is informed by published academic scholarship. However, a study of the emergence of English and Thai terms for lesbians has not been conducted

to date. For instance, *tomboy-femme* is an emerging English-dominant Western spectrum with potential for gender-mixed expression. In an additional case, an emerging Thai term, *trans* (shortened from the word transmen), appears on social media to describe queer women who undergo hormonal and/or surgical gender-affirming procedures to pursue masculinized bodies.

Lesbian identity is not universal; it does not revolve around attraction alone but emerges through culturally specific intersections of gender norms, social hierarchy, and bodily practices. First, drawing on gender norms, lesbian identity terms function as discursive tools for negotiating heteronormative expectations. In both English-dominant Western and Thai cultures, lesbian terms such as *butch-femme* and *tom-dee* rework male-female binaries, while more gender-neutral terms like *genderqueer*, *pansexual*, or *ying-rak-ying* challenge the binary system and heteronormativity altogether. Second, in relation to social hierarchy, lesbian terms are discursively framed by class and race. In the English-dominant Western context, terms such as *lipstick lesbian* depict middle-class femininity norms that exhibit financial and professional success through outfits. Meanwhile, *stud* signifies a Black lesbian identity marked by intersecting marginalization under heteronormativity and white supremacy. Third, regarding bodily practices, lesbian terms serve not only as linguistic labels but also as semiotic markers legible through gender expression, dress, and body transition. As bodies become readable texts, different lesbian spectra are articulated through distinctive appearances. For instance, although masculine lesbians share certain traits, their masculinity performances vary across cultural and subcultural contexts. In an English-dominant Western context, spectra such as *soft butch*, *transgender butch*, and *FTM* are differentiated by grooming styles, manners, and degrees of medical transition. Soft butches may express fluid masculinity while embracing their female bodies. Alternatively, transgender butches embody conventional masculinity without necessarily pursuing a full male embodiment as FTM individuals do. On the contrary, in Thailand, *tom* is usually an umbrella term for masculine lesbians. However, the bodily practices under this label are not uniform. While many *toms* share short hair, flattened chest, and masculine dress, some *toms* pursue muscularity, hormone use, or mastectomy.

Comparing lesbian terminologies in English-language Western and Thai cultures, a significant contrast emerges. English terms emphasize self-identification and denote gender fluidity. In contrast, Thai lesbian identities are negotiated through contextual dependence, binary role structures, and social harmony.

English-dominant Western culture constructs lesbian terminologies around individual perception and non-fixed gender identity. Many terms convey self-ascribed identities that individuals claim and circulate within specific subcultures. In this way, several lesbian terms are marked as fluid, according to individual gender performative choices. For instance, regarding gender expression, labels such as *lesbian*, *genderqueer*, *pansexual*, and *soft butch* may occupy ambiguous or gender-neutral positions, thereby blurring the boundary between masculine and feminine expressions. Moreover, identities such as masculine *stud*, feminine *stone femme*, and hyperfeminine *lipstick lesbian* demonstrate that sexual attractions and sexual roles may remain fluid or unmarked despite relatively fixed gender expressions. In addition, dress and body transition can function as identity, signaling class, race, and queer rights involvement in categories such as *transgender butch*, *FTM*, *stud*, and *lipstick lesbian*. Accordingly, such Western lesbian culture can be understood as comparatively more assertive in challenging heteronormativity through practices of self-identification.

On the other hand, in Thailand, context dependence, binary role structures, and social harmony contribute to the negotiation of lesbian identities (Jackson, 2004). Throughout history, Thai lesbian terms are embedded in Thai cultural logic rather than global categories. Besides having lesbian terms in the original Thai language, English words are borrowed, adapted, and resisted in Thailand's local context rather than simply imported with English-dominant Western meanings. In addition, Thai lesbians define themselves through gender roles in a dichotomous sense. In the categories of gender expression, sexual attraction, and sexual roles, Thai terms often describe the interactive relationship between the two opposite partners. Sex roles are more structured and expected. Dress prioritizes gendered visibility over political expression. Several pairing terms are marked by assumptions of masculine-feminine roles. Moreover, since Thai lesbians are less politically concerned, their involvement in this dimension is modest, conflict-avoiding, and harmony-oriented. Thus, language is crucial in showing how Thai lesbian women reproduce heterosexual norms. As Sinnott argues, Thai lesbians negotiate their identities by *blending in with normative codes* rather than challenging them (Sinnott, 2004, p. 146). Thus, heteronormativity is replicated through lesbian coupled terms which mimic the masculine-feminine roles.

6. CONCLUSION

Various terms, definitions, and cultural contexts from English-speaking and Thai cultures are examined to illuminate the diversity of lesbian identities. By synthesizing existing scholarship, the article shows that lesbian terminologies are not neutral labels but are discursively constructed through power

relations, sociocultural contexts, and shifting gender and sexual norms. While English terms emphasize self-identification and gender fluidity, Thai lesbian identities are shaped by contextual dependence, binary role structures, and social harmony.

This review contributes to queer and lesbian studies by challenging the universalization of English-dominant Western concepts of gender identity. Through Thai contexts, it promotes an understanding of gender identity as embedded in specific sociocultural and discursive conditions. Further research could extend this work through empirical studies exploring how such terminologies are negotiated in lesbians' lived interactions, as well as comparative research across other non-Western languages.

Practically, the findings have significant implications for LGBTQ+ advocacy and public discourse. This review highlights the cultural specificity of lesbian terminologies. Such awareness informs language users' choices to avoid stereotyping and stigma. Such awareness may empower individuals to articulate their identities equitably on their own terms with pride and dignity.

DECLARATION

1. Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

2. Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

The authors used generative AI tools to assist with language refinement, grammar checking, and clarity enhancement. The authors confirm that the entire research process, including conceptualization, methodology, investigation, logical structuring, interpretation, writing, revision, and scholarly judgment, was conducted exclusively by the authors.

3. Data availability statement

All data analyzed in the study were obtained from previously published sources and are systematically synthesized and presented within this review article.

4. Ethics statement

Not applicable. This study is based exclusively on published literature and does not involve human participants or personal data.

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Rongruang Bhasayawan: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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