

# A STUDY OF NON VERBAL COMMUNICATION AMONG THE THIRD GENDER IN MALAYSIA

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## Abstract

*The third Gender is well known for their verbal and non verbal expression. Words used by the third gender have proven to be well received by the masses when adopted by artists in television dramas and entertainments. Non verbal expression is of no less important. It has been widely imitated and applied by artists and entertainers worldwide. Body language and facial mimics are some of the widely used non verbal expressions by the third gender.*

*This paper ventures into the types of non verbal communication exhibited by the third gender through observation and self involvement with this group of people. This paper also highlights the details of the third gender non verbal communication that can be identified as special to this group of people which has been commercialized by some artists to become a common command in the society.*

## 1.0 Introduction

Third gender has always been looked down by many especially with regard to certain aspects of their life. Most of them were associated with wrong doings and social ills. However, third gender has now becoming more prominent in most of the Malaysian scenes especially in the newspapers, be it on the negative note of their confused marital relations or their positive significant achievements in the fashion industry. Understanding their behaviors are inevitably essential since they form quite a large portion of the population in Malaysian fabric of society.

Third gender has in their life created special way of communicating that can be classified into many types. One way of communicating, which can become a labeling point for the third gender, is their non verbal communication behavior. Blinking eyes, waving hairs, hands

walking style and body posture depicts that they are sissy. Despite being remarked as being sissy, they are proud of their feminine behavior.

Artists like to imitate the third gender's non verbal behavior and surprisingly had gained overwhelming receptions from the public. Many artists like Imuda ( the actor for the comedy sitcom show 2+1), Fauziah Ahmad Daud, Sheila Rosli and the Senario Comedy Sitcom group had proven their success by imitating the body language of transvestite in Malaysia. Words uttered by transvestite in Malaysia which is well known as the "Maknyah" at one time became very popular in Malaysia such as " Akak", "Deknon", "this is my card" and "tak kuasa" – so much so that it has become a laughing stock for the public in Malaysia. They also imitated the way the Maknyah walks, stands and behaves. This phenomenon is not just happening in Malaysia, but it also prevails in most countries in the world. New Year television programmes in Japan sometimes aired special programs showing the life and behavior of the *Okama* ( transvestite in Japanese). In Thailand, Khru Lily, a Katoey entertainer(transvestite in Thai language) receives overwhelming response from television viewers on her Television program. The Baklak (in Tagalog referring to Transvestite) is sort of a "Must" appearance in any television in Phillipines, be it a soap drama or entertainment program. The wide spread of transvestites non verbal language on Television has made it well known and well accepted by the masses.

The ways they behave are also being imitated in films and dramas. They even make movies out of the third gender dilemma. "To Wong Foo", "The Iron Lady", "The Beautiful Boxer", "Bugis Street" and "Buka Api" are some of the films made to familiarize the society with the third gender. Be it in the Western countries or in Asia, the story of the Third Gender are the same. Many are involved in the limelight of the film industry, modeling agency, artistic creation and not forgetting the tourism industry.

The third gender as addressed by the public as *maknyah* is a unique subculture group in Malaysia that has special dialect which is not easily understood by the masses. In both states the maknyah has formed a small community with special way of talking. Apart from their femininity in the body language their communication language differs from the rest of the common society. In their effort to be secretive about their lives, they have created a form of language which is not easily grabbed and understood by the society.

## 2.0 Definition of Third Gender

Third gender in this paper is defined as a group of individuals which were born as males but incline to behave and dress like female. This third gender group is sometimes labeled as the ‘She- Males’ people. The term “Third Gender” is used by the ever popular “Discovery Channel” in producing a documentary entitled “ The Third Gender” that featured the transvestites across Asian countries. The Discovery Channel shown on Astro Malaysia (May 2006) investigated on the Third gender in Asia thoroughly. The topic was “The Third Gender” and the writer had decided to adopt the label used by the documentary in writing this paper. The figure of Lily Khru, the Thai language teacher of Thailand, Shabnam Mausi, the mayor of one of the states in India, the world popular beautiful Thai boxer and a street Hijra of India were portrayed in the program. The world was served with the story of the Third gender so that they understand the dilemma of being a transvestite and also the contribution that they have lent to the world.

In Malaysia, the third gender is called in many ways namely “pondan”, “Bapok” and “Maknyah”. The commonly accepted term which also sound a little less discriminative is Maknyah, while the term bapok and pondan sound harsh, offensive and tend to be more negatively meant.

The third gender people are literally defined as transvestites or the so called ladyboys in Thailand. In detail, the third gender people in this paper are defined as males who possess feminine characters and feelings. They normally have the higher tendency to behave, act, talk and dress almost like women. They are also more prone towards having love affairs or relationships with their similar sex that is men than that of women as they do not have interest in the opposite gender. On the other hand, gay people are defined differently from the transvestites. Gay people are defined as those male individuals who are not feminine but having the desire of having relationships with individuals of the same sex.

In Thailand, the term “Katoey” refers to the Transvestites. In Tagalog, “Baklak” is the word indicating transvestites whereas in Indonesia they used a short form “Wadam” signifying both male and female gender that are Adam and Hawa (Adam and Eve). Sometimes, the Indonesian also referred to transvestites as “Bencong” and “Waria” (combination of Wanita/woman and Pria/man). In England, the short form for transvestites is “TV” although some do call them

“fad”. In India, the term used to describe transvestites is “Hijra”. “Hijra” is a group of transvestites that moves from one place to another by performing (normally dance and singing). The traditional Indian community believes that they will be given better luck by inviting the Hijra to perform at their house for some special occasion such as to celebrate the birth of new offspring. They also believe that the act of dancing and singing by the Hijra will bless those that hire them.

However, both gays and transvestites in this context can be categorized as homosexuals. But for the purpose of discussion in this paper, the third gender is only referred to the transvestites.

*Wikipedia.Org* mentions that the term transvestism has undergone several changes of meaning and it was firstly coined in 1910 by Magnus Hirschfeld. His group of transvestites consisted of both males and females, with heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual and asexual. He does not just associate clothing with transvestites but it goes more beyond simply physical interpretation. After the second world war, in both Europe and North America, transvestite behaviour until the 1960s (both by male and female bodied persons) was seen as an expression of homosexuality or suppressed homosexual impulses. Also, the three-gendered framework of Hirschfeld disappeared, and the two-gender framework became the frame of reference again.

Nasirin (2005) distinguishes transvestite and gay according to the way they dress and their inclinations towards having sexual relationships with men. David Lim (2005) on the other hand mentions that a man is considered as transvestites when he dresses in women attire and behaves like ones. Both Nasirin (2005) and David Lim (2005) agree that transvestites dress in woman’s clothing and behaves like women.

Nasirin (2005) however expands his discussion by mapping queerness and the literary scenes in Malaysia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century whereby he found that it has become a trend for English literature in Malaysia to include dialogues of transvestite as part of their contents. He further expands his work on queerness by pointing out that Malaysian short story writers like Raslan Kassim and Dina Zaman indirectly use transvestite characters in their publications.

Nasirin's view is supported by David Lim's (2005) paper, presented at the conference on sexualities, gender and rights in Bangkok. He describes that Maknyah characters are part of film making in Malaysia. He pointed out that even in an aggressive film like KL Menjerit, maknyahs' roles were being embraced in making the film more interesting and likable.

Hence, in the context of Malaysian society, transvestites have been implicitly regarded legal and well accepted. It is proven true when the characters of transvestites portrayed in the comedy soap show of 2 +1 played by Imuda received overwhelming positive responses from audience of TV3. The same goes to the recent drama shown on Astro and TV3 channels entitled "Wali" that portrayed the actor Ahmad Tamimi Siregar playing two roles of a father and a transvestite dancer simultaneously which later receives overwhelming critics and good responses from the media as well as the audience. Another TV sitcom that extensively used transvestite character is the Senario, produced by TV3. It hits stardom and was highly rated as interesting by the viewers when it was initially introduced. One distinguished point worth highlighting is that generally in Malaysia the transvestite characters add flavour to a TV show and was well accepted by the public.

### 3.0 Non-Verbal Communication

Quoting 2 kind of definitions given in Business Dictionary.Com (retrieved 26 January 2010, 2.00p.m), non verbal communication are referred to as follows:

a. Larger, non-spoken context within which all face-to-face communication takes place. Every conscious or subconscious behavior in presence of another is suffused with meaning without which all verbal communication would be ambiguous. Non-verbal communication includes pitch, speed, tone and volume of voice, gestures and facial expressions, body posture, stance, and proximity to the listener, eye movements and contact, and dress and appearance. Research suggests that only 5 percent effect is produced by the spoken word, 45 percent by the tone, inflexion, and other elements of voice, and 50 percent by body language, movements, eye contact, etc.

b. Transmission of messages by a medium other than speech or writing.

[www.toolingu.com](http://www.toolingu.com) defines non verbal communication as follows:

A medium for communication that entails using cues via body language to convey message content. Facial expressions, body gestures, and voice intonation are forms of nonverbal communication.

[www.city.londonmet.ac.uk](http://www.city.londonmet.ac.uk) (retrieved 26 January 2010, 2.00p.m) defines non verbal communication as **the way people:**

- Reinforce the spoken word
- Replace the spoken word using their bodies to make visual signals or their voices to make oral but non-verbal signals

It is regarded as an area of study in its own right whereby a person can make their own observations in all sorts of situations. Normally, we are often not aware of our own Non-verbal Communication, but aware of that of other people. The web site further discussed on the functions of non verbal communication. The functions are basically to help manage our social and our professional relationships and to present the self that we want others to see such as social status, job status, group membership, personality (appearance), Conveys our mood/state of mind, Conveys interpersonal feelings, supports our verbal message if we are speaking and provides feedback, assurance and etc. if we are listening.

Other sources define it as follows (retrieved 26 January 2010 at 2.10 p.m):

- Nonverbal communication (NVC) is usually understood as the process of communication through sending and receiving wordless messages.  
[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Non-verbal\\_communication](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Non-verbal_communication)
- the impact of gestures, gaze, expressions, and other symbols capable of substituting for words and conveying information. ...  
[www.oup.com/uk/orc/bin/9780199253975/01student/glossary/glossary.htm](http://www.oup.com/uk/orc/bin/9780199253975/01student/glossary/glossary.htm)
- Ways of conveying or altering the meaning of an intended message other than oral speech (eg gestures, eye contact, facial expression).  
[www.armor.k12.sd.us/Mary's%20Classes/literary\\_terms\\_glossary.htm](http://www.armor.k12.sd.us/Mary's%20Classes/literary_terms_glossary.htm)

- Physical behaviour that supports communication (eg, gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, physical proximity, touching).  
[www.oise.utoronto.ca/eslinfusion/Home/Background\\_information/Glossary.html](http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/eslinfusion/Home/Background_information/Glossary.html)
- Gestures, body language, facial expression, sign language are all ways of communicating without the spoken word. [www.tki.org.nz/r/arts/drama/glossary\\_e.php](http://www.tki.org.nz/r/arts/drama/glossary_e.php)

### **3.0 Objectives of the Research**

The main objective of this research is to study the non verbal behavior of the transvestites in Malaysia.

The specific objectives are as follows:

- A. To study the personal background of transvestites
- B. To determine the non verbal communication practiced by transvestites

### **4.0 Research Methodology**

This paper is prepared by collecting secondary and primary data. Due to the nature of the topic, the writer collected information from newspapers, magazines and the internet.

In order to obtain an insight into matters pertaining to transvestites, the writer interviewed 35 transvestites who are members of the Paper Dolls Show in Kuala Lumpur(15), the transvestite circles of Kota Baru (10) and Kuala Terengganu (10). Basically, a Paper Dolls Show group consists of 10 to 20 transvestites acting as impersonators of famous local or international artistes performing at night clubs and discos around Kuala Lumpur. They were interviewed with the aim to have some basic personal backgrounds of transvestite.

Since the writer mingled around well with the transvestites in Kuala Lumpur, Kuala Trengganu and Kota Baru, the experience of mixing and socializing with them, has become a source of obtaining data for the writer to rewrite the experience communicating with them. Observation while mixing with then had became very valuable to the writer in arriving at the findings for this paper.

The interview methods were used to obtain first hand information from the transvestites in Kuala Lumpur, Kota Baru and Kuala Terengganu. The purposive snowballing approaches were used in gaining the samples of respondents for this research. The data obtain were the quoted individually and analysed qualitatively. Opinions put forward by the respondents in the conversation during the carried out interviews were recorded and quoted as naturally as possible. The opinions were then analysed to see the differences and similarities in the points given by the respondents. The outcomes were then illustrated manually in a tabular form. The researchers also use observation as a way in understanding their gesture, behaviour and obtain information. In ensuring the comfort of the respondents, the researchers have to wait and follow their tight schedule, since many of the respondents are dancers and designers. Samples of 35 transvestites involved in beauty queen, paper dolls performances as well actively involved in the transvestites circles were chosen as respondents. These respondents are considered as the prominent figures of the Malaysian transvestite social groups in their respective locations.

## 5.0 Findings

### 5.1 Basic personal data of the transvestites

5.1.1 Most of the respondents (57%) are transvestites living in Kelantan and Terengganu. The rest (43%) of the respondents are performers of Paper Dolls Show in Kuala Lumpur.

#### 5.1.2 Age

Table 1.0: Age

Age bracket	%
15-20	34 (12)
21-25	51 (18)



26-30	9(3)
Above 30	6(2)
Total	100 (35)

Majority (85%) of the transvestite interviewed were in the age bracket of 15 to 25 years old. Most of them are still young and they are very inspired to become glamorous entertainers or workers in the creative industries. At this young age their non verbal languages are varieties since they also invented some new non verbal communication.

### 5.1.3 Educational background

Table 2.0: Educational Background

Educational background	%
Primary school	0
Lower secondary	5.7 (2)
Upper and higher secondary	74.3(26)
Diploma	11.4 (4)
Degree/ Masters	8.6 (3)
Total	100 (35)

Most (74.3% ) of the respondents interviewed are educated up to the upper and higher secondary that is either they have passed their Malaysian Certificate of Examination which is equivalent to “O” Level or Higher

School Certificate that is equivalent to “A” level. Four respondents hold Diploma in Culinary Arts , Business Administration, Office Management and Computer Science and the other three possess Bachelor Degrees in Banking, Hospitality and Office Manangement. All of the respondents are able to speak English although not very well polished.

#### 5.1.4 Profession

Table 3.0: Profession

Profession	%
Dancer	42.9 (15)
Make-up artist	14.3 (5)
clerk	22.8 (8)
Professionals such teachers, bankers etc	20 (7)
Total	100 (35)

Almost Half (57.2%) of the transvestites interviewed are involved in the creative industry working as dancers and make-up artists. The rest of the respondents are working as clerks. However seven of them are professionals, mainly due to their tertiary education that they have secured a Diploma and Bachelor’s Degree. Obviously, most of the transvestites are more incline towards working in the creative industry.

### 5.1.5 Family members

Table 4.0: Family members

Number of family members	%
1-3	22.9 (8)
4-6	65.7 (23)
7-10	11.4 (4)
More than 10	0
Total	100 (35)

66% of the respondents have family members ranging from 4 to 6 persons in a household exclusive of the parents. This is a common figure of Malaysian family which is in the range of 4 to 6 person in a family.

### 5.2 Any other family members as transvestites too

When posed with the question of whether any of their family members are transvestites, almost 91.4% mentioned that they are the only transvestites born in their family. However three respondents (8.6%) agreed that he has a younger sibling which is also a transvestite and they are best friends at home.

### 5.3 Types of non verbal communication exhibit by transvestites

#### 5.3.1 Body language

Most of the non verbal language of transvestites are about the movement of their body and can be classified as body language. It can then be further divided into details such as below:

- a. Way of walking

Most transvestites observed have a very attractive way of walking which can be divided into two ways:

i. Walking *melenggang*

*Melenggang* is a Malay word which refers to one special way of walking by most woman that can depict their femininity.

The *melangang* “ way of walking can also be associated with the fineness of femininity among woman. Most transvestites are seen as walking *melenggang* by swinging their arms and hips to show that they are femine. The hip is being swung from right to left and vice versa while walking. This way of walking is mostly exhibited by old timers.

ii. Catwalking

This way of walking is observed among transvestites when they walk. They like to look elegant as supermodels and hence they imitate the way supermodels walk. Feeling elegant and sophisticated is a state fond by most modern transvestites.

b. Way of blinking eyes

Most of the transvestites interviewed frequently blinked and gazed towards the other parties which they are interacting. The way they move their eyes depend on the type of person that they are talking to. If they are talking to a female, they will have proper eye contact. However, if they are talking to a man, they will not look straight into the eyes of the speaker but ogle to them

c. Hand movements

The hands of transvestites met never stop moving in many ways. They like to support what they express by lifting their hands and making symbols. Their hands are also place softly or pointing softly in a feminine manner. Their long well manicured finger nails show their feminine identity. When eating or drinking they automatically lift one of the fingers

on the opposite hands. This act is common to most of the transvestite met in the interview. The way they handle cutleries is very feminine that depict woman mannerism.

d. Head movement

Transvestites normally like to look down when walking or when not interacting with others. But when communicating they like to pose their face to resemble a diva. They also like to wave their long hair, to the left and right as if they just won the Miss World title. They also like to touch their hand trying to keep their hair neat and well groomed. This manner is true not only to those with long hair but also to the bald transvestite. The transvestites regularly shake their head depicting an Indian dancer simply to attract attention from others that are observing them. They are like an artist that prefer to be of central attention.

e. Way of grooming

Transvestites prefer to dress in a feminine manner like superstar, models and *Datins*. Their choice of dresses are colourful, tight and flowery as well as very vocal. They like to dress differently so that they stood up in a crowd. Their shirts and pants are prone to be more unisex and loud that carry some statements in it. Since they are sometime being harassed they are more incline towards expressing their feelings in their grooming. They wear chunky watches, bangles and chain. Sometimes, they colored their nails let alone hair.

5.3.2 Facial expression

Most of the transvestites interviewed have a feminine facial expression. They like to speak in a tone which is close to an old woman or *makcik*. They like to uplift their eye brows and open their mouth widely when speaking which can sometimes be very masculine.

Applying make-ups is nothing strange to transvestites because that is making their dreams true as they have always dream of becoming a woman. One interesting observation is that most transvestites met are good at doing make-up, simply because they have high interest in make-ups. They are sort of inborn with the skills of makeup because they have deep interest in matters pertaining to woman and beauty. Furthermore, they are very prone to creative and innovative works.

### 5.3.3 Physical proximity

The transvestites prefer to keep a distance with man but behaving otherwise with woman. They treat woman as the same sex and they have no sexual feelings to woman and hence making them close to woman. However with the man, they felt the sexual heat and hence kept a distance with them.

### 5.3.4 Touching

Transvestites like to touch while talking to someone. This is due to their friendliness and affectionate nature. They are very friendly and can easily become friends with others hence feeling passionate and affectionate to their friends. When talking they like to touch others hand to show how close are they to the speaker.

The types of non verbal communication among transvestites can be summarized in Table 5.0 below:

Table 5.0: Types of non verbal communication

Types of non verbal communication	Features
Body language	Way of walking- melenggang and catwalk
Way of blinking eyes	Blink, gaze, ogle depending on the gender of who is she speaking to
Hand movements	making symbols/ place softly or pointing softly/manicured finger nails / automatically lift one of the fingers on the opposite hands
Head movement	look down when walking or when not interacting with others/ when communicating they like to pose their face /wave their long hair/ touch their hair trying to keep it neat and well groomed/ shake their head depicting an Indian dancer
Way of grooming	Feminine like supermodels. Super star or <i>mak datin</i>
Facial expression	Feminine speaking tone, lifted eye brow and mouth open/ good with their fingers/ creative and innovative
Physical proximity	Distance with man but not with woman
Touching	Touching hands with women and others to show how friendly they are

6.0

## 6.0 Conclusion

The third gender exists in most countries in the world and has been open to criticism by all walks of life in the society. Their roles in developing a country is undoubtedly very essential. Their special lifestyle has brought them to the limelight of the creative industry of the country.

Their special non verbal communication has also helped experts in the field of communication build a crystal clear understanding of this special interest group which exist as part of the society.

No matter how small is the contribution of the third gender people to the field of communication, citizens of the world have to embrace with open arms that this sub-group people in the society is not to be forgotten in terms of making this globe a better place to stay.

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