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Title: Navigating ‘Safe’ and ‘Non-Safe’ Queer Spaces: A Study of Style-Shifting in Singapore*

Short-title: Queer Style-Shifting in Singapore

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Abstract:

It is well documented that gay individuals adopt behavioural strategies to navigate the heteronormative expectations and norms of social space. These practices are likely to be particularly pronounced in socially conservative countries which have seen less progress for LGBTQ+ rights. This study examines how two gay men (Rui and Kenni) stylistically negotiate their sexual identities in a socially conservative country – Singapore – by analyzing the variation in two phonetic variables that have been linked to gender and sexuality: Pitch and /s/. We show that both speakers style-shift across queer-friendly and heteronormative environments though the rate and degree of shifting is influenced both by the situated social meanings of the features and the interactional context. Concluding, we argue that research should consider how minoritised individuals are *required* to style-shift in order to adhere to the hegemonic norms and expectations of society. [139 words]

Keywords:

Sexuality, style, style-shifting, Singapore, gayness, identity

1. Introduction

Although style was initially conceptualized as ‘attention paid to speech’ (e.g., Labov 1966, 1972), third wave variationist sociolinguistic research has now come to theorize style as something speakers agentively construct according to their social goals and the interactional stances taken towards interlocutors (Podesva 2007; Eckert 2008; Jaffe 2009; Kiesling 2019). From this perspective, style can be defined as “the ongoing construction of identity, built both directly through linguistic (and other) resources, and indirectly through the performance of social acts or activities, and the projection of emotive stances” (Podesva et al. 2002: 176).

However, as much as style can be creatively and agentively deployed by speakers, the normative expectations of the spaces that speakers find themselves in also constrains the degree to which individuals can employ certain styles and express aspects of their identities. These issues are perhaps most relevant to minoritised and marginalised individuals who are often required (either explicitly or implicitly) to conceal aspects of their sexual, ethnic, or gendered identities in ‘unsafe’ spaces (e.g., Podesva and Van Hofwegen 2016, Gratton 2016). For members of the LGBTQ+ community, this means navigating a world in which social space is actively structured and produced as heterosexual and heteronormative (Binnie 1997, Bell & Valentine 1995, Valentine 2002).

Though these issues are relevant to minoritized individuals across the globe, they are heightened in socially conservative countries, especially those where LGBTQ+ rights are less advanced. One such context is the city-state of Singapore where conservatism and the political agenda of the government privileges heteronormative scripts for gender performance. Subsequently, in Singaporean society, LGBTQ+ members are often hesitant about being open about their queer identities due to the potential threat of facing stigmatization and discrimination (Pak & Hiramoto 2021, Pak 2021; 2023).

In this study, we take these issues as a point of departure to examine the linguistic

practices of two self-identified gay men in Singapore (Rui and Kenni), focussing on their style-shifting across queer-friendly (or ‘safe’) and heteronormative (or ‘unsafe’) contexts. Specifically, we analyse stylistic variation in two phonetic features that have been previously linked to a stereotypical ‘gay style’: Pitch and /s/ (e.g., Strand 1999, Munson & Babel 2007, Campbell-Kibler 2011, Maegaard & Phrao 2015, Levon, Maegaard & Phrao 2017, Boyd, Fruehwald & Hall-Lew 2021). Our analyses show that both speakers exhibit some level of style-shifting for both features, though the degree and extent of the shift is influenced by the interactional environment in which the speaker finds themselves in. We link these practices to the different social meanings of pitch and /s/ that circulate in mainstream society and in the gay community.

Our study has three aims. First, to contribute a non-western perspective to a growing body of work on the stylistic construction of queer identities across heteronormative and queer-friendly spaces (Podesva 2007, Podesva & Van Hofwegen 2016, Gratton 2016). Second, following the third-wave of variationist studies (Eckert 2008), to provide additional evidence that social meanings of features are situationally and contextually dependent. Specifically, we demonstrate that a feature, fronted /s/, which may have a stigmatised social meaning in public discourse may be ‘recontextualised’ (Bauman & Briggs 1990) and acquire new positive social meanings in a given community, in this case, amongst gay speakers (see also Calder 2019). Finally, beyond a contribution to sociolinguistic scholarship, we aim to add to ongoing conversations in Singaporean society in the fight for social justice and LGBTQ+ rights (Pak & Hiramoto 2021, Pak 2021, 2023). We argue that whilst the tide may be turning with recent repeal of section 377A, members of this community – in this instance gay men – are still expected to adapt their linguistic behaviours to adhere to the heteronormative expectations of society. Through our analysis, we interrogate and critique

these expectations by emphasising the arduous stylistic work that heteronormativity requires LGBTQ+ individuals to participate in.

2. Heteronormativity and LGBTQ+ rights in Singapore

Heteronormativity is a hegemonic ideology that assumes heterosexuality and naturalizes the gender binary. Due to its pervasiveness, heteronormative ideology exists not only in the collective minds of people, but is also ingrained in the very fabric of social, legal, economic, political, and religious institutions (van der Toorn et al. 2020: 161). Thus, the preservation of heteronormativity can lead to the denial and stigmatization of identities, behaviours, and communities that do not conform to heterosexual norms (Walls 2008). These ideologies are common globally but they are particularly pronounced in societies where there is less progress for LGBTQ+ rights, such as Singapore.

Singapore is a relatively young nation-state that only gained full independence in 1965 after 140 years as a British colony. In the 1990s, the nation-state saw rapid economic growth that resulted from a highly developed free market economy and strong international trading links. Today, the country has established itself as a technologically advanced global financial and trading hub that is renowned for its high standards of living, healthcare, infrastructure, and education. Despite its reputation as the most highly developed nation in South East Asia, it is also known for its discriminatory and punitive laws and social conservatism which is reflected in public policies and government legislation. Singapore retains both corporal punishment (in the form of caning) and capital punishment (by hanging) as legal penalties (Yap & Tan 2020).

The lack of LGBTQ+ rights in Singapore can be attributed to the political ideology adopted by the ruling party and the historic enforcement of Section 377A of the penal code – a remnant of British colonial law that criminalized any sexual activity between two men, whether consensual or not. Though Section 377A was de facto unenforced for decades,

leading to its repeal in 2022, the existence of such a law has historically contributed to the disenfranchisement and erasure of LGBTQ+ lives in Singapore (Yulius et al. 2018: 184). Today, the erasure of LGBTQ+ identities in Singapore continues through the conservative ideology of the government. The political ideology adopted by the single ruling party that dominates the government, the People's Action Party (PAP), is one that is grounded in ancient Chinese Confucian ethics which emphasizes values like filial piety and recognizes the heterosexual nuclear family as the basic unit of society (Chan 2009). Scholars have argued that whilst this ideology has been useful in accelerating economic growth and nation building, it also functions as form of social engineering that influences its population to engage in behaviors that contribute to the development of the nation, such as sexual reproduction (Kuah 1990; Offord, 1999). In this way, institutionalization of heteronormativity around the family is an anti-homosexuality stance taken by the state (Yulius et al. 2018: 185, Pak 2023) that privileges normative sexualities. An example of this is the qualification requirements for public housing policy, which only recognizes heterosexual unions as a basic criteria for successful application. The lack of regard for equality and inclusivity in public policies punishes LGBTQ+ folk as homosexuality is considered a threat and an aberration to the values of the paternalistic state due to the fact that same-sex unions do not result in procreation and thus, subverts the cause of genetic engineering (Leong 1995: 18).

More recently, largely due to the efforts of LGBTQ+ activist organizations such as PinkDot and Sayoni (see Pak & Hiramoto 2021, Pak 2023) and following the repeal of section 377A, debates about LGBTQ+ issues and rights have become more prominent in public discourse. Today, many younger liberals have expressed their dissatisfaction with archaic conceptualizations of gender and sexuality that persist in mainstream society.

However, whilst progress has been made, the LGBTQ+ community continue to be

discriminated against in multiple facets of their lives by the State. LGBTQ+ related information is still heavily censored and the State continues to prohibit same-sex unions. This position was recently reaffirmed when, following the repeal of section 377A, the Singaporean government made a countervailing statement indicating that it would introduce legislation to prevent the definition of marriage between a man and a woman from being constitutionally challenged. This legislation effectively curtails independent judicial oversight over institutionalized discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community (ICJ 2023). Thus, although there are seeds of change, queer lives are yet to be accepted by the majority of the population in this heteronormative and patriarchal society that recognizes the heterosexual gender binary to be the default.

3. Gender, sexuality, and style

Contemporary post-structuralist conceptualizations of gender identity recognize that gender is a social construct in which individuals are socialized into through interaction (e.g., Butler 1990). In sociolinguistics, identity is now conceived of as something that is discursively constructed and which emerges through interaction through the deployment of both linguistic and other semiotic resources (Bucholtz & Hall 2005: 587). Thus, whilst gender and sexuality are separate entities, they are inextricably linked as the construction of both tends to rely on the same discursive resources (Morrish & Sauntson 2007: 13).

Central to this process is the notion of ‘style’. Whereas style was initially conceived of as ‘attention paid to speech’, style is now considered an ‘act of identity’ (LePage & Tabouret-Keller 1985) in which speakers use a variety of semiotic resources, both linguistic and non-verbal, to express their identities. Style, then, is central to our construction of self and other. As Eckert (2008: 456) observes, “every stylistic move is the result of an interpretation of the social world and of the meanings of elements within it, as well as a positioning of the stylizer with respect to that world”. In other words, it is through the

combination of linguistic styles with other stylistic systems (e.g., clothing, hairstyles) that we negotiate our place in the local context as well in society at large. Speakers can be seen to combine semiotic elements through a process of ‘bricolage’ (Hebdige 1984) that not only groups variables in meaningful ways, but also draws on and transforms previous uses of those variables (Zimman 2017: 342).

A now classic example of how speakers actively and consciously construct their gendered styles can be seen in Barrett’s (1999) analysis of the language of African American drag queens (AADQ). In that study, Barrett shows that the drag queens juxtapose a ‘White woman’ style with features of African American Vernacular English as a way of subverting dominant hegemonic culture, heteronormative gender expectations, and racial divisions in the United States. The performances of these AADQ involves creative combinations of disparate linguistic features to create a style that sits at the intersection of class, race, and gender. As styles are part of a system of distinction, where it is the contrast between other styles that make one socially distinguishable and meaningful (Irvine 2001: 22), the unique styles of AADQ position them not only in relation to macrosocial categories like race and class, but also differentiates them within those categories.

More recent research has examined how minoritized speakers’ practices are constrained by normative expectations and prevalent ideologies in society. A case in point is Podesva & Van Hofwegen’s (2016) analysis of /s/ in sociolinguistic interviews with 42 speakers residing in a small conservative town in California. In that study, the authors demonstrate that due to the sociopolitical conservatism and dominant local ideologies about gender and sexuality, sexual minorities in this town are pressured to adhere to normative gender patterns. They find that these pressures influence the linguistic practices of the community such that the gay men’s production of /s/ is comparable more to straight men in this community than to urban gay speakers. Similarly, in a study of (ING) in the speech of

transgender individuals, Gratton (2016) finds that speakers style-shift in their production of (ING) according to the whether the space is ‘safe’ (i.e., queer) or ‘non-safe’. However, the rate and direction of the shift is influenced by the speakers’ resistance of hegemonic gender norms. Specifically, speakers utilize different variants in different contexts to distance themselves from their respective gender assigned-at-birth. Thus, speakers appear to use different variants of (ING) to not only index their own non-binary transgender identities, but also enact a stance of resistance toward cisnormative gender ideologies.

3.1. Gay styles

In the current paper, we take a similar approach to Gratton (2016) though our focus here is on how gay men style-shift across two different variables – pitch and /s/ – which are often considered stereotypical features of ‘gay voice’. Though ‘gay voice’ is often described as a homogenous style, as Podesva et al. (2002) point out, this assumption is highly problematic as it homogenizes the diversity within the gay community and is all at once too specific and too general. Kiesling (2019: 18) explains how such conceptualizations about gay voice are a result of ‘enregisterment’ (Agha 2007) in the wider speech community that occurs through repeated circulation of the stereotype in media and popular culture.

Nevertheless, research has found that there are some linguistic features that are distributionally and indexically associated with gay men’s speech (at least in the West). Generally, gay men in have been shown to exhibit higher pitch modulation patterns than in comparison to straight men. Gay men also tend to produce more front and fricated productions of /s/, acoustically observable as a fricative with a higher peak frequency, higher centre of gravity (COG) and a negative spectral skew (Munson & Babel, 2007; Maegaard & Pharao 2015; Levon, Maegaard & Pharao 2017, Boyd et al. 2018). Each of these measures have been shown to correlate with general perception of ‘gay voice’ (Zimman 2013: 6). For instance, Campbell-Kibler (2011) tested the perception of different voices by manipulating

pitch, /s/ fronting and (ING) in the speech of 4 speakers. The analysis revealed that guises with fronted /s/ tokens were overwhelmingly heard as ‘gayer’ than those with mid or backed tokens across different speakers and conditions. She suggests that the strong effect of /s/ fronting is due to its status as a salient and widely understood sociolinguistic stereotype which has evolved into a stand-alone symbol that indexes gayness and a lack of masculinity consistently across a range of guises. Evidently then, whilst there is a common perception of a monolithic ‘gay voice’, in reality, gay men will very likely variably recruit features of this style to communicate particular interactional and identity goals in different communicative contexts.

However, it is worth acknowledging that the existing research focusses almost exclusively on the practices of gay men in the West. Nevertheless, there is some evidence to assume that the social meanings of these features and their association with gay voice may operate cross-linguistically (see Levon et al. 2017). In the current study, we take this assumption as a point of departure to examine the stylistic variation in pitch and /s/ to understand how gay men variably recruit these features to navigate queer-friendly and heteronormative contexts in Singapore.

4. Method

This study focusses on the stylistic practices of two cisgender individuals who identify as gay men and who live and work in Singapore, Rui and Kenni¹. The two men are personal acquaintances of first author, Khoo, and so personal rapport was built with the participants before undertaking this study. These individuals are drawn from Khoo’s social networks and so can be considered a convenience sample but they are nonetheless representative of young Singaporean gay men immersed in the local queer scene.

¹ The study was approved by the University of Edinburgh, PPLS ethics committee. Participants consented to participation in the study and to the use of their data in publications.

Table 1 Self-recorded environments & length of recordings

Participant	Queer-Friendly	Heteronormative
Rui	Gathering with close friends 00:31:29	Teaching a class 00:09:31
Kenni	Conversation with partner 00:20:54	Online business meeting 00:18:19

Both men are young professionals in their mid-20s, have lived in Singapore for majority of their lives, and are part of the two largest ethnic groups in Singapore (Rui: 28, Malay; Kenni: 25, Chinese). Rui was previously a freelance art teacher but is now training as a state school teacher. Outside of teaching, Rui is a practicing artist and also a DJ who plays mostly at queer events. Kenni's work involves marketing and creative work for a family run business. Like Rui, he also occasionally DJs at queer events and engages in a range of artistic activities outside of his work. They are both well acquainted with the underground queer scene in Singapore and are part of a tight knit community of LGBTQ+ individuals in Singapore who frequently attend queer events and patronize queer-friendly establishments.

The data in this study comprises naturalistic self-recordings made by Rui and Kenni and informal interviews with the two men, both recorded in 2022. Prior to data collection, we established the environments in which the participants subjectively perceived as queer-friendly and heteronormative. Rui, who is a teacher, characterized his professional environment in the school as a heteronormative setting and identified any situation where he was with close friends who were aware of his sexuality as queer-friendly settings. Kenni also described his work setting to be a relatively heteronormative environment while classifying any situation where he could openly express himself and his sexuality as queer-friendly settings. Neither speaker has actively disclosed their sexual identity in either of the two heteronormative contexts.

Once the participants' own notions of heteronormative and queer-friendly settings or situations were identified, they were instructed to carry out self-recordings in these situations. Participant self-recordings is a common method of obtaining naturalistic speech data from participants which has been employed in a variety of sociolinguistic studies (e.g. Snell 2010; Sharma 2011). The audio recordings were made on their own personal smartphones which they were instructed to leave on a flat surface in front of them during the recordings. The self-recordings were then later shared with us. Table 1 also shows the length of the self-recordings for each speaker. Although the recording of Rui in the heteronormative setting appears to be relatively short, this recording comprised continuous speech data for the entirety of the recording during which he was presenting a class. In this study, we adopt the terms 'heteronormative' and 'queer-friendly' to describe the contexts in which speakers were engaged in, roughly corresponding to 'unsafe' and 'safe' spaces (cf. Gratton 2016).

Finally, semi-structured interviews with the participants was carried out after the data was analyzed. The interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom and covered topics relating to their experience of being gay in Singapore, their awareness of style-shifting, and their alignment with the queer community. The interview was designed mainly to probe into the participants' metalinguistic awareness of their stylistic practices but also provided essential background information that could not be obtained indirectly (e.g., their self-identified gender). Each participant was interviewed separately with the interviews lasting approximately 20 minutes.

As in all ethnographic work, we acknowledge that our interpretation of the data is informed by our positionalities both as researchers and members of the community. We approach this analysis as researchers who are personally invested in the community under study: Khoo is a queer Singaporean researcher who is actively involved in the LGBTQ+ scene there whilst Ilbury is a queer academic who focusses on gay men's stylistic practices

(e.g., Ilbury 2019). Our emic insights as members of the community therefore heavily inform of our analyses and interpretation of the data herein.

Once the data was collected, transcribed, and coded, the data were analyzed to obtain the values of 4 specific variables: mean f_0 , f_0 range and the COG and skewness measures of /s/, following Cuddy (2019). In order to determine the f_0 measurements for each speaker, a Praat script was first used to extract all pitch frames in each audio recording (Boersma & Weenik 2022). In Suire et al. (2020) which compared the f_0 values of heterosexual and gay men, pitch floors were set to 75Hz with a ceiling of 300Hz. However, it was decided that it would be more accurate to determine the modal pitch range the participants by first creating a density plot of all the pitch frames for each recording in the statistical program R, which allowed for visualization of the distribution of all the pitch points in the audio recordings.

Upon inspection of the density plots, the range of f_0 values was set at a 70–250Hz range to exclude outliers and instances of non-modal speech such as creaky voice, which typically falls below 70Hz (Keating et al. 2015), and falsetto register, which is usually in the range of 240Hz to 634Hz in the speech of men (Hollien & Michel 1968, Svec et al. 1999). All the pitch frames that fell outside of the 70–250Hz range were then removed from the data. The data of each speaker was drawn from the 5% quantile to the 95% quantile, following the procedure in Cuddy's (2019) and Waksler's (2001) studies. This range was taken separately from each recording for all the participants and was chosen in order to further exclude possible outliers that were not eliminated in the 75–250Hz cut off. The mean f_0 , maximum f_0 , minimum f_0 and f_0 ranges were then extracted for each of the 4 audio recordings.

For /s/, all tokens were manually marked out in all the TextGrids of the four corresponding audio files. Tokens of /s/ that were preceded by or followed directly after any sibilants were excluded from the analysis due to the lack of reliability in distinguishing clear

boundaries between the sibilants in these environments. Each token of the spectral measurements was bandpass filtered to a 1000–22050 Hz bandwidth following Podesva and Van Hofwegen (2016), which was used to further remove any ambient noise that coincided with the fricative. A Praat script based on Fecher (2011) was adapted for this study to extract four spectral moments of each token of /s/: Centre of gravity, standard deviation, skewness and kurtosis. A total number of 528 tokens were obtained from the four audio recordings.

5. Phonetic analyses

To examine the stylistic variation in /s/ and fundamental frequency, we first turn to an analysis of the variables across the different interactional contexts. Here, we aim to establish the degree of style-shifting across the two contexts.

5.1. Fundamental frequency

As one can see from table 2 (visualized in figure 1), Kenni exhibits a significantly higher mean f_0 of 107Hz in the safe setting as compared to his mean f_0 of 95Hz in the heteronormative setting ($t=58.834$, $p<0.001$). His f_0 range is likewise observed to be wider in the queer-friendly setting at 90.4Hz as compared to an f_0 range of 61.5Hz in the heteronormative context.

	Heteronormative	Queer-friendly
F0 Mean (Hz)	95	107
SD	13.29	22.22
F0 max	139.7	167.7
F0 min	78.2	77.3
F0 Range	61.5	90.4

Table 2 Kenni’s fundamental frequency (f_0) in Hz

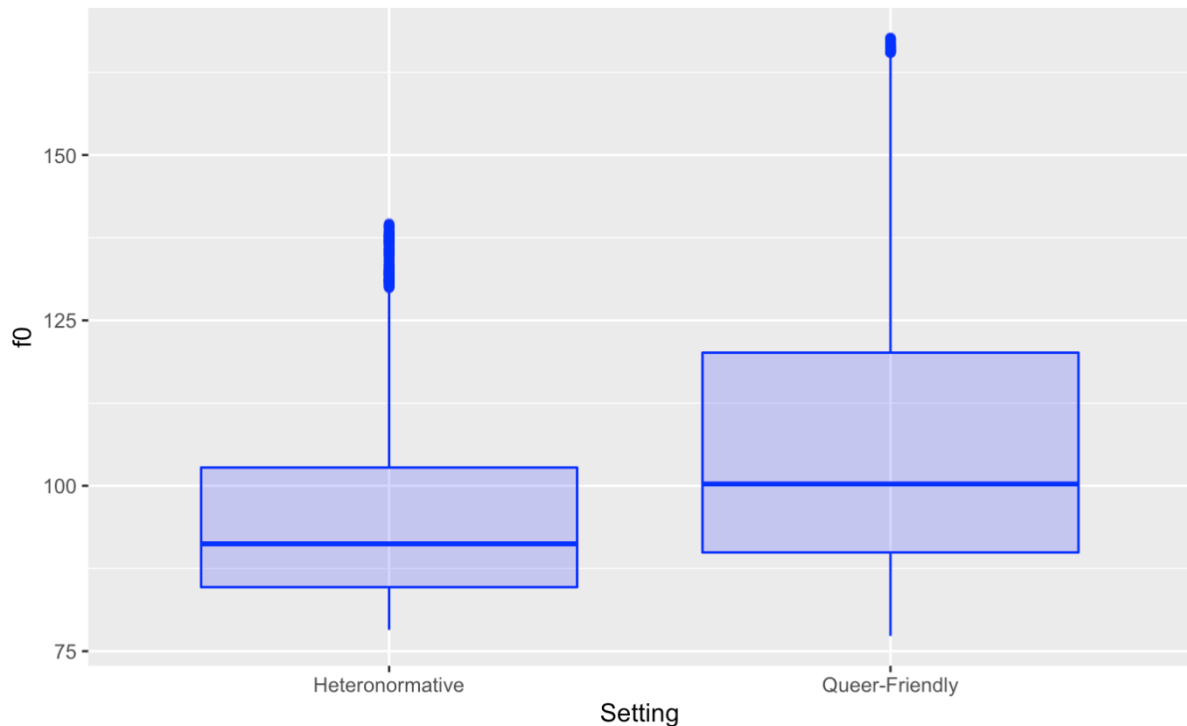


Figure 1. Kenni's f0 observations in Hz across settings

In this case, pitch is a linguistic variable that is used variably in different contexts to achieve different identificational and interactional ends. In the heteronormative setting, Kenni is in a Zoom business meeting. In this setting, he assumes a professional role, remains composed, and uses a serious tone. This is reflected in his restricted pitch range and lower f0 observations. In the queer-friendly context, Kenni is on the phone with his partner. We see in this more relaxed setting that his pitch range is wider and he has an overall higher mean f0 as compared to him in his professional setting. Kenni's style-shifting in terms of pitch shows a similar pattern to that of Heath in Podesva's study (2007), whose falsetto voice quality was observed to have a higher maximum pitch and wider pitch range in an informal context with his friends as compared to other more formal situations such as in a professional clinical setting.

Turning to Rui, his mean f0 is 132.9Hz in the heteronormative setting, when he is teaching a class, compared to his mean f0 of 130.2Hz in the queer-friendly context, where he

is at a gathering with his friends (see table 3 and figure 2). His f_0 range is slightly higher in the queer-friendly setting (106.9Hz) than in the heteronormative classroom setting (93Hz).

Overall, his f_0 observations are comparable across the two different contexts.

	Heteronormative	Queer-friendly
F0 Mean (Hz)	132.9	130.2
SD	20.86	25.85
F0 max	199.1	200.6
F0 min	106.1	93.6
F0 Range	93	106.9

Table 3 Rui's fundamental frequency (f_0) in Hz

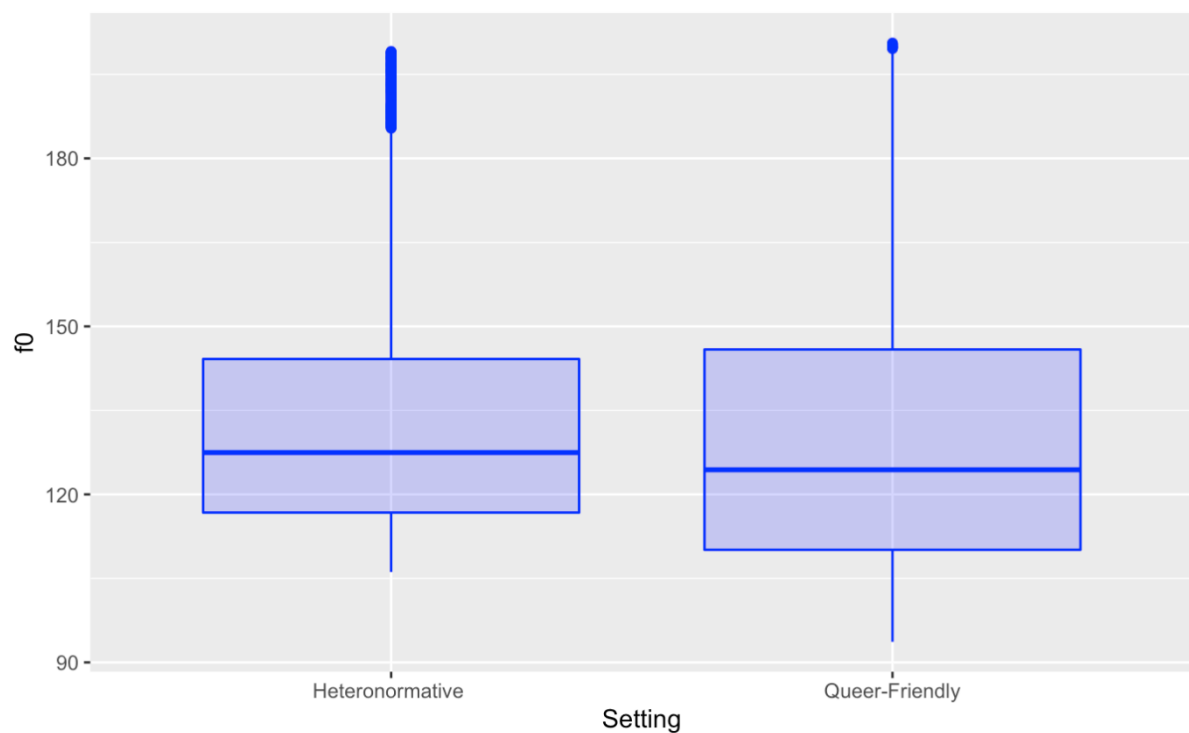


Figure 2 Rui's f_0 observations across settings in Hz

Variation of pitch and pitch range can be attributed to a range of factors in any given situation as pitch can hold a multiplicity of meanings. As Munson (2007) and Smyth, Jacobs and Rogers (2003) have argued, f_0 and f_0 range is linked to perceived masculinity or femininity

of speakers, where guises with lower pitch and less pitch variability are rated to be sounding more masculine than guises with higher pitch and more pitch variability. However, in the environment of the classroom, pitch and pitch range is arguably more an indicator of expressiveness. As pitch is a prosodic feature plays an important role in capturing the expressiveness of language, the prosody of a teacher's voice in the classroom is important as it facilitates communication and comprehension by enhancing reception of the message and maintaining key information in working memory (Hirschberg 2002). Wider range and variability in pitch when reading is also perceived to be generally more expressive (Cowie et al. 2002). Therefore, in the context of the classroom, it is possible that Rui's stylistic manipulation of pitch could be a way of achieving his pedagogical goals when he assumes the role of a teacher.

In fact, during the interviews when Rui was asked about his speech style in the setting of the classroom, he commented that when he teaches he often uses a higher pitch to attract the attention of the class. He also mentioned that he believes that teachers should have a "rhythmic voice" and should not be too "monotonous" (extract 1).

(1) Rui: *When I teach children I use higher registers as well [...] it's friendlier to teach in a higher voice, a higher pitch. So from what I learned about teaching, part of being a teacher to teach well you need to have a rhythmic voice that has a range of tones. It cannot be monotonous. [...]*

Jill: *So this understanding of a teaching voice, was this something that you learned in your formal training to become a teacher?*

Rui: *Yes, somewhat. [...] Not a gay voice but a voice that is more expressive, that is more melodious. And it's all for teaching, it's all for the students so it's nothing to be ashamed of.*

These comments suggest that he has some metalinguistic awareness of his style-shifting and the appropriacy of using a higher pitch in the classroom setting. Potentially then, when Rui takes on the role of a teacher, pitch becomes an important linguistic resource that he uses to keep students engaged. We see that although the classroom is still largely an institutionally heteronormative setting, it is ‘acceptable’ (or “nothing to be ashamed of”) in this situation to use a higher pitch and wider pitch variability. Thus, as part of his formal training in education, Rui consciously uses this style in his performance of a teacher persona. This is markedly different to the context of the business meeting that Kenni is engaged in.

5.2. Variation in /s/

As table 4 and figure 3 show, Kenni’s mean COG in the queer-friendly situation is 7018Hz and his mean COG in the heteronormative setting is 5878Hz. His COG is significantly higher in queer-friendly setting when compared to heteronormative setting ($t=5.9374$, $p<0.01$).

While the mean spectral skew in his production of /s/ is consistently positive across both settings, the /s/ tokens produced in the queer-friendly setting are less positively skewed than in the heteronormative setting.

Setting	Parameter	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Queer-friendly	COG	3767.11	8478.59	7018.32	1070.86
	Skewness	-0.943	1.587	0.316	0.579
Heteronormative	COG	3026.57	8966.47	5877.80	1448.75
	Skewness	-0.625	2.544	0.827	0.546

Table 4 Kenni’s COG and skewness values across settings

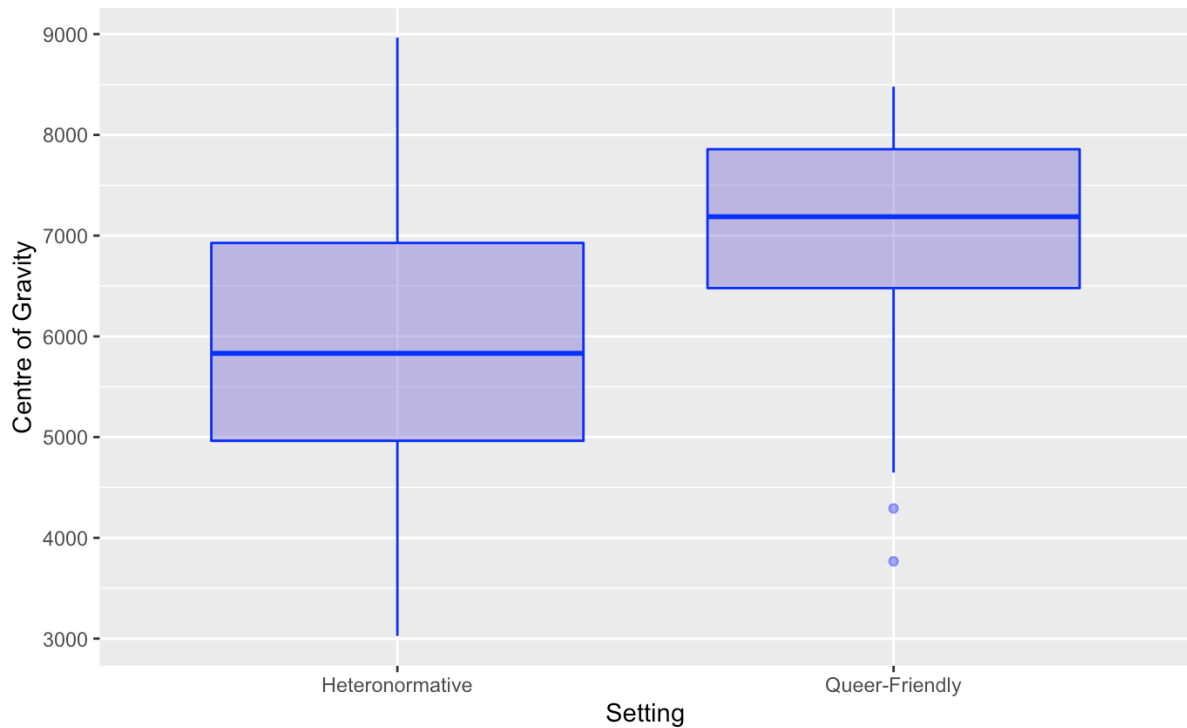


Figure 3 Keni's COG observations in Hz across settings

Rui's COG averages at 7016Hz in the queer-friendly setting and 5642Hz in heteronormative setting (see table 5 and figure 4). His COG values are significantly higher in the queer-friendly setting when compared to the heteronormative setting ($t=12.04$, $p<0.01$). His /s/ tokens are also more negatively skewed in the queer-friendly setting as compared to the heteronormative setting.

Setting	Parameter	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Queer-friendly	COG	3465.02	9613.83	7015.95	967.71
	Skewness	-2.947	1.639	-0.720	0.735
Heteronormative	COG	4041.78	7686.95	5642.12	941.51
	Skewness	-1.619	1.4287	-0.0956	0.597

Table 5 Rui's COG and skewness values across settings

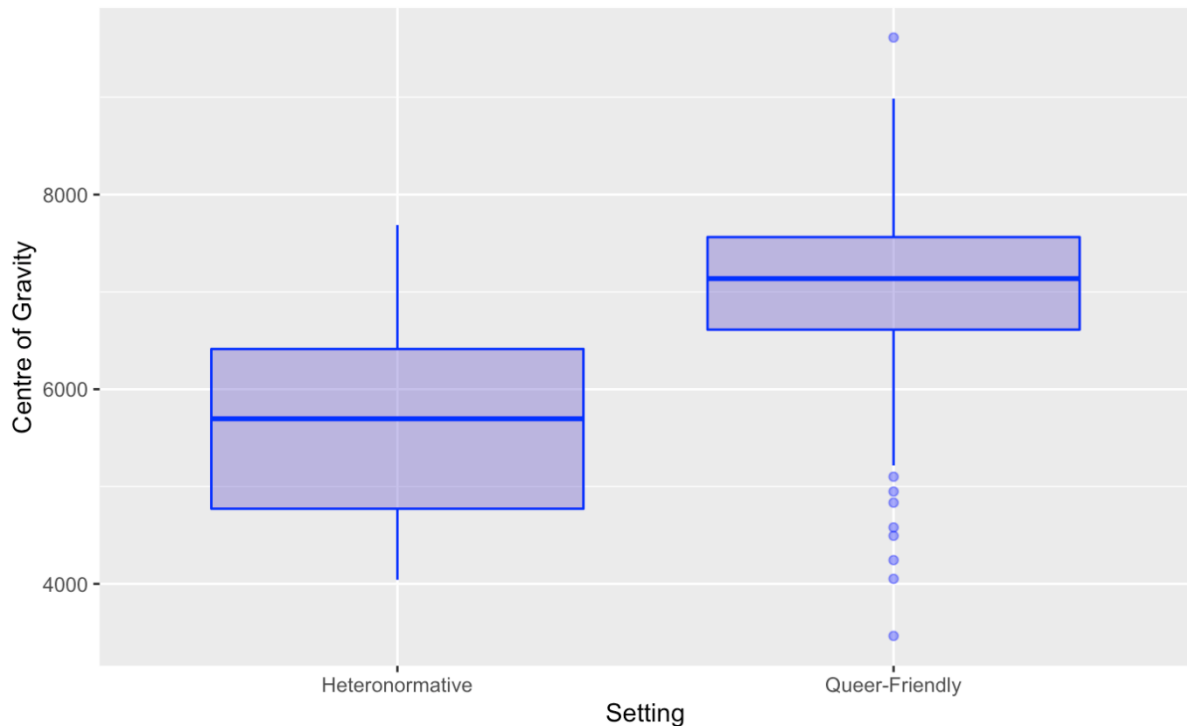


Figure 4 Rui's COG Observations in Hz across settings

Taken together, Rui and Kenni both exhibit a trend of significantly higher COGs in queer-friendly settings as compared to heteronormative professional settings. This can be very likely attributed to the salience of the fronted /s/ as a stereotypical feature of gay speech. The fronted /s/ is an example of a linguistic variable that is constantly utilized in stylistic 'bricolage' (Hebdige 1984) as it is consistently produced and reproduced in stereotypical performances of 'gay speech' in media. As Campbell-Kibler (2011: 64) argues "elements undergoing repeated bricolage become carriers of meaning in their own right [and become] visible across a wide range of cofactors". Thus, due to the salience of the fronted /s/ as a linguistic variable that is explicitly linked to a gay percept or a gay identity, we see that both speakers retract their /s/ in heteronormative settings and exhibit a fronted /s/ in queer-friendly situations.

To contextualize Rui's and Kenni's COG values in the different contexts, we consider how Kenni and Rui's practices relate to those of other speakers in similar types of studies.

Before we present this discussion, it is important to note that these are studies of populations in North America and Canada. There are no studies on in Singapore or the surrounding regions that we are aware of.

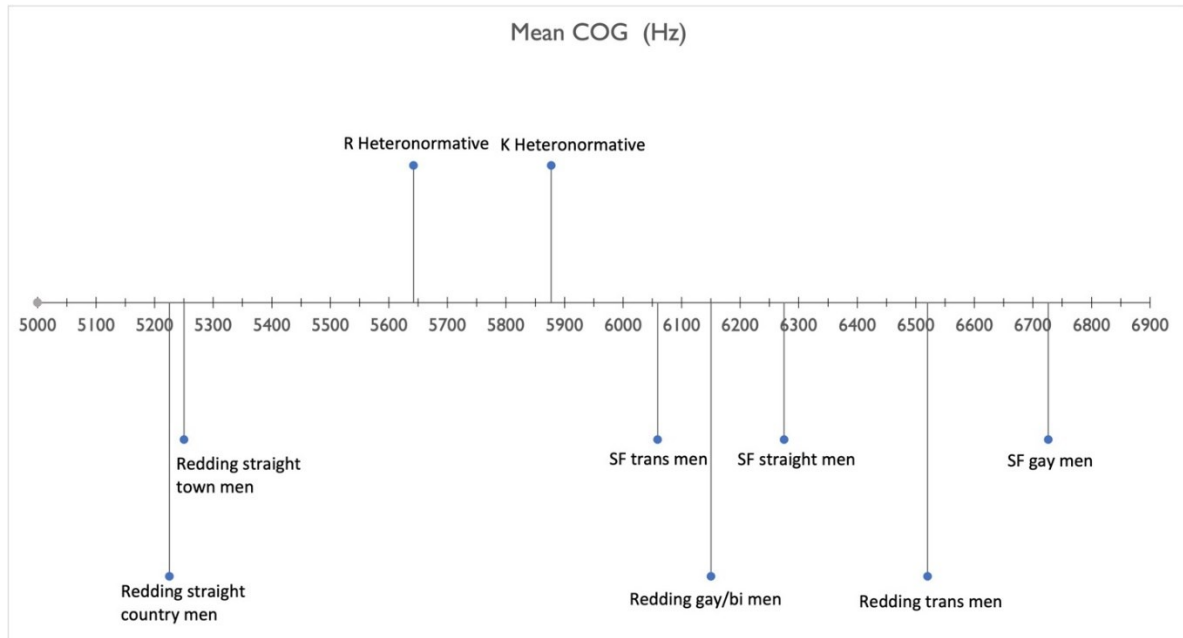


Figure 5 COG comparisons of Rui (R) and Kenni (K) with self-identifying male speakers from Redding (Podesva and Van Hofwegen 2016) and San Francisco (Zimman 2013)

As one can see from figure 5, Rui and Kenni's mean COG values in their respective heteronormative settings fall within the ranges observed of self-identifying male speakers in Redding and San Francisco. Their COG values are higher than that of the straight men of Redding but lower than the gay/bi and trans men of Redding and all men in San Francisco.

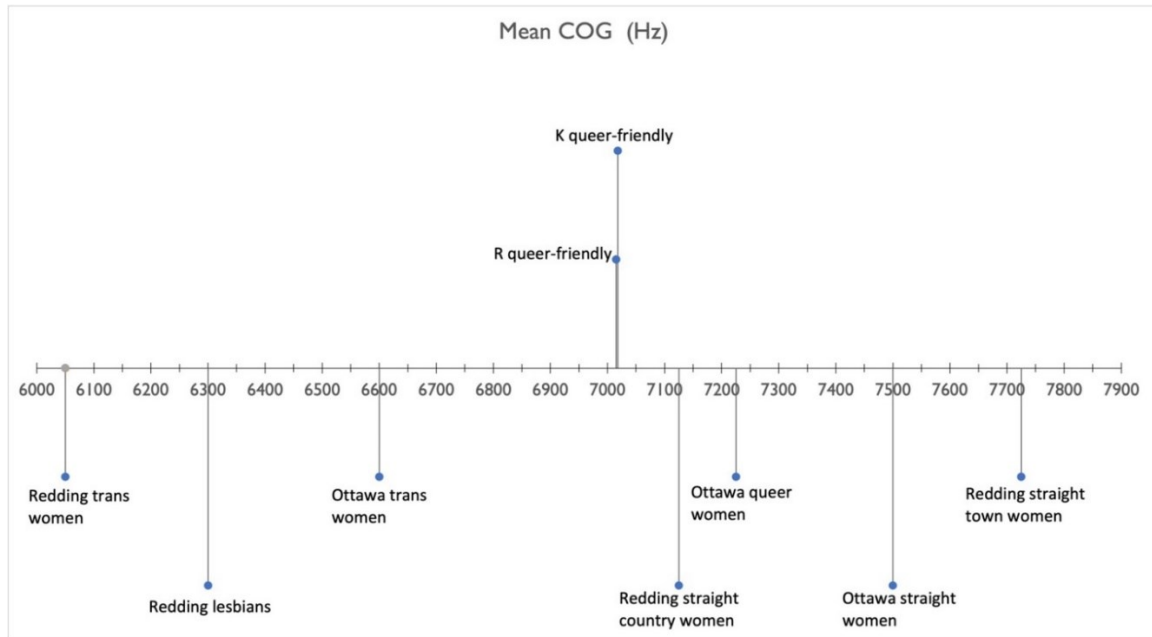


Figure 6. COG comparisons of Rui (R) and Kenni (K) with self-identifying male speakers from Redding (Podesva & Van Hofwegen 2016) and Ottawa (Hazenberg 2012)

In their respective queer-friendly settings, Rui and Kenni's mean COG values fall within the ranges observed of female-identified speakers in Redding and Ottawa, patterning closely to straight cis-women (see figure 6). Their COG values are also comparable to that of those taken from off-stage conversations of the South of Market Street (SoMa) drag queens of San Francisco in Calder's (2019) study, who were found to have mean COG values that fell between 6000–7800Hz, exhibiting patterns similar to that of straight women.

To summarise figure 6, we can see that women produce fronter /s/, queer men produce fronter /s/ than straight men, and that the SoMa drag queens of Calder's study produce fronter /s/ than both queer and straight men. This comparison also illustrates how COG is socially conditioned, where the frontness or retractedness of /s/ acts as an ideological marker for the masculine-feminine binary. The linguistic variable of the fronted /s/ is ideologically linked to femininity and more retracted production of /s/ is linked to masculinity. Thus, the /s/ variable not only reflects ideological oppositions about masculinity and femininity – patriarchal normativity and deviance – but also contributes to the ideological

construction of those oppositions (Calder 2019: 341).

Returning now to Kenni and Rui, we see that their /s/ tokens are significantly more fronted in queer-friendly than in heteronormative contexts. This pattern suggests that they are either retracting or fronting their /s/ across situations depending on the perceived level of security in openly expressing their sexualities. We argue that this pattern can be understood in relation to the indexical meanings of the fronted /s/. Calder (2019) explains the meanings of fronted /s/ through Silverstein's (2003) concept of indexical orders. Fronted /s/ and the female body undergoes a 'baptismal essentialisation' (Silverstein, 2003), which establishes the female body as the appropriate metapragmatic context for which fronted /s/ is allowed to occur. This occurs at the n-order, where fronted /s/ is linked to the quality of being female. At the n+1 order, the indexical meaning of 'femininity' is negatively perceived when it emerges from a male-presenting body as it is a marked form which indexes types of femininity that more precisely means "inadequately masculine" (Calder 2019: 347). Thus, due to this negatively valenced set of n+1 order indexical meanings that is socially salient, fronted /s/ emerging from a male body in heteronormative settings is linked to pejorative gay stereotypes like 'fag', 'pansy', 'sissy'. These evaluations are regularly circulated through popular online sources such as Urban Dictionary, demonstrating that there is an ideological link between deviant expressions of femininity and gayness. For instance, the Urban Dictionary (2023) entry for 'sissy' describes this term as a 'derogatory term used to describe a gay man' before providing an alternative definition of 'a heterosexual man acting in a feminine way'.

Awareness of these stigmatised associations that circulate in popular discourse could potentially be one motivating factor as to why Rui and Kenni use less fronted /s/ in heteronormative settings. In other words, they may avoid (intentionally or otherwise) this feature due to the negative associations of the variable with non-conforming, deviant

masculinity that is suppressed in a hegemonically heteronormative and patriarchal society. In Singapore, these ideologies are observable in the circulation of discourses and labels such as *Ah Kua* (transliteration of 阿官) – a Hokkien derogatory term to refer to a transvestite or a transsexual woman and which is also used to describe men who are perceived as feminine or gay.

In queer-friendly contexts, however, it is possible that /s/ is imbued with other social meanings. As Calder (2019) argues, higher order meanings for fronted /s/ are forged by the SoMa drag queens through the process of ‘recontextualization’ (Bauman and Briggs 1990). When SoMa drag queens appropriate the fronted /s/ in their drag performances, they are able to transform the meaning of the fronted /s/ with the help of visual resources and their physical bodies to create more positive indexicalities that link it to positive qualities like being ‘fierce’ or ‘sickening’ which are desirable qualities that characterize powerful types of queer femininity. Thus, they expand the indexical field (Eckert 2008) of the fronted /s/ through the performance of drag. These meanings are then re-enregistered through media portrayals of drag queens in popular TV shows such as *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. The lexical terms, habits and characteristics of drag queens are positively valued and become a sort of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1991) in queer communities through the commodification of drag culture. When used the fronted /s/ is used by male-presenting individuals, it may not necessarily be a performance of femininity or indexical of a feminine identity, but can actually also serve to index a type of non-normative masculinity as linguistic style that deviates from the cisheteronormative masculine ideal. In other words, a variable which may be stigmatised in society at large becomes reinterpreted with new positive, in-group social meanings and therefore can be used actively to assert some alignment with their queer identities.

In fact, interactional analyses of the specific discourse junctures in which the most fronted /s/ tokens occur reveals that these are often moments in which Rui and Kenni are

performing stances or acts that deviate from hegemonic heterosexual masculinity. For instance, the more fronted /s/ tokens are observed when they are being expressive or animated – qualities often stereotypically associated with gay men. In the queer-friendly situation, Kenni’s most fronted /s/ tokens are observed when he reacts to recently processed film photographs which he is seeing for the first time with his partner (extract 2 and 3):

(2) Kenni: *Look at her! She’s /s/o happy!* (COG: 8178.99)

(3) Kenni: *Oh my god what i/s/ that?* (COG: 8138.33)

As in the above examples, we see that Kenni is being overtly expressive, explicitly showing emotions such as excitement and alarm. In both contexts, the COG is dramatically higher than Kenni’s average in the queer-friendly context (7018.32, cf. figure 6). As heterosexual masculinity demands that men are restrained and composed, being expressive in this way is a behaviour that deviates from heteronormative expectations of masculinity (e.g., Podesva 2007).

Similar examples are found in stretches of discourse where the speakers appear to adopt a ‘sassy’ stance. Here, sassiness is defined as the quality of being “self-assured, bold, cheeky, confident, impudent, sharp, witty, provocative” (OED 2023) – a quality that is both appreciated and admired in the gay community (Ilbury 2019). We see this stance in extract 4 when Kenni is on a video call with his partner. The extract follows a disagreement where Kenni’s partner claimed that he had not received a bank transfer from Kenni. In an attempt to prove that he had not received the transfer, Kenni’s partner attempts to digitally share his bank statement. However, due to an unstable internet connection, Kenni is unable to see the screen.

(4) Kenni: *I can’t see your /s/screen...* (COG: 8461.45)

In extract 4, we argue that the extremely fronted /s/ permits Kenni to exert a ‘sassy’ stance to signal both his disapproval of his partner’s accusation and to exert his confidence in having paid the money. We see a similar type of practice by Rui in a queer-friendly setting. In extract 5, Rui is at a gathering with some friends and is discussing planning an upcoming holiday. They are chatting over wine and talking about going shopping for things they need for their holiday. At a certain point, they joke about doing activities that Rui has no interest in, in which he replies:

(5) Rui: *Non/s/ense eh y’all!* (COG: 8986.39284)

As with the previously discussed examples, the COG is dramatically higher than Rui’s average in the queer-friendly setting (7015.95; see figure 6). These examples of extremely fronted /s/ productions coincide with specific interactional junctures where the speakers are taking confrontational or challenging stances towards their interlocutors. This can be interpreted as indexing a stance of ‘sassiness’ in which the men display a lack of inhibition and boldness in these situations where they are not afraid to voice their displeasure.

It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that some of the most fronted /s/ tokens are stylistically employed at certain junctures of overt stylisation. In Rui’s queer-friendly setting, the most fronted observation of /s/ is when he uses “yass” (COG: 9613.83) in his agreement of finalizing their holiday plans. *Yass* is a highly iconic LGBTQ+ term which is an exclamation used to convey great excitement or pleasure that originated in Black and Latino Ball culture in the late 80s in the US (see Rowan, Long & Johnson, 2013). Together with fronted /s/, these practices appear to function as a type of ‘stylisation’ potentially invoking a type of figure of personhood related to the ‘sassy queen’ (Ilbury, 2019). It is notable that the deployment of this style occurs in discourse contexts when the conversation focusses on topics that are stereotypically less masculine, such as clothes shopping. Thus, we argue that

Rui's stylised and highly fronted /s/ in a salient gay lexical term signals a momentary interactional alignment with queerness.

5.3. Metalinguistic Awareness of Style-Shifting

To provide some further interpretation of these patterns, we turn to the interviews with Rui and Kenni to examine their metalinguistic awareness of their style-shifting. When asked about stereotypical gay speech, both mention a “high pitch” or “tone” and wide pitch ranges. A stereotypical gay style for them also included the use of specific lexis such as “babes” and “yass”, in line with Ilbury's (2019) arguments that such features are part of enregistered gay style. However, Rui and Kenni understand their own shifting styles differently. For Rui, he mentions that he is quite conscious of the way that his speech shifts in different situations and that he tends to use a “higher register” when he is around gay men. In extract 6, Kenni says that he doesn't consciously choose to use a different style across contexts and there are variances in his speech in different contexts but they are more subconscious for him personally.

(6) Kenni: *I don't think it's a conscious thing but I guess subconsciously like when you are more comfortable with people knowing about your sexuality for me it definitely changes a bit*

In this extract, it appears that “being comfortable” is a euphemism for the degree to which Kenni can express his gay identity in a queer-friendly space. What Kenni is describing here is that a tendency to adapt his (linguistic) behaviour depending on the perceived safety of the context – whether he is free to express himself without judgment or derogatory comments. This understanding and freedom of expression, however, is not offered in most public and institutional settings where heterosexuality is assumed and taken as the default, especially in a society like Singapore. It is in such spaces where queer folk experience uncertainty of

possibly facing overt-stigmatization, adverse reactions, or persecution, which prevents them from openly expressing their non-normative identities. Thus, Kenni's comments demonstrate both an awareness of this type of style-shifting and also an acknowledgment that this is a routinized practice that is based on the perceived safety of the speaking context.

Nevertheless, whilst Rui and Kenni both acknowledge that there is less pressure to conceal their sexuality on a day-to-day basis amongst their peers and family, they both mention there is one setting where they are particularly conscious of their gender and sexuality presentations – the context of National Service. National Service is compulsory conscription in Singapore, where all able-bodied males are mandated by the state to serve in active full duty for 2 years. It is a highly heteronormative and patriarchal environment where gender is highly policed and aberrations from heterosexual cisgender masculinity may be faced with ostracization and other potentially undesirable consequences. In extract 7, we see that pitch (“a deeper voice”) is explicitly referenced as one strategy which Rui combines with others (“a more commanding tone”, “words”) to mitigate potential perceptions of gayness and femininity in the highly heteronormative environment of National Service.

(7) Rui: *I try to be more conscious of using a more commanding tone, not necessarily a deeper voice but the way you use words as well.*

These mitigation strategies are not specific to Rui and Kenni nor to Singapore. Rather, they are common linguistic strategies that gay individuals often adopt to conceal aspects of their sexuality in day-to-day life. Thus, whilst the contexts differ, we see that the minoritized speakers adopt comparable style-shifting strategies to adhere to the normative expectations of society.

6. Conclusion

This study has analyzed the stylistic practices of two self-identifying gay men in the socially conservative and heavily heteronormative society of Singapore. For Rui and Kenni, the negotiation of non-normative sexual identities is achieved through variable use of linguistic features such as pitch and fronted /s/ in heteronormative and queer-friendly spaces. Following other third-wave variationist work which has argued for the situated nature of sociolinguistic meaning (Eckert 2008), we provide further evidence to support the claim that, while a variant may attain a given (stigmatized) social meaning in society at large, that feature may be ‘recontextualised’ (Bauman & Briggs 1990) and can acquire new (positive) meanings in specific communities, especially amongst minoritized speakers. Here, we show that, in heteronormative settings, /s/ indexes negatively perceived character types that embody “inadequate masculinity” whereas in queer-friendly settings, this variable has more positive social meanings.

We interpret these practices in relation to the widespread acceptance of heteronormativity that characterizes Singaporean society which *requires* LGBTQ+ individuals to adapt their linguistic behaviours. We see that Kenni and Rui actively respond to these expectations, with both speakers style-shifting to mitigate the potential repercussions for overtly and publicly expressing their gay identity. Although we do not see this phenomena here, a lack of style-shifting could be interpreted as an act of resistance that speakers use to challenge the expectations of heteronormative space. Future research is therefore well positioned to examine this potential, particularly with regard to recent changes in LGBTQ+ rights in Singapore.

Although our arguments are comparable to those made in other work on style-shifting amongst queer speakers in Western communities (e.g., Podesva 2007, Podesva and Van Hofwegen 2016, Gratton 2016, Calder 2019, Zimman 2016), it is remarkable that we see

similar practices are employed by gay men in a non-Western setting to achieve similar ends. Our findings therefore not only provide evidence for the pervasive influence of heteronormativity on LGBTQ+ speakers' linguistic practices but demonstrate that enregistered features of 'gay voice', such as /s/, may index similar social meanings cross-linguistically (see also Levon, Maegaard & Pharao 2017).

Through this analysis we hope to have exposed the heteronormative pressures that LGBTQ+ speakers are expected to respond to in Singapore (and indeed elsewhere). In doing so, our aim has been to not only add to the sociolinguistic scholarship on style-shifting, but also to destabilize heteronormative expectations and their widespread acceptance in an attempt to contribute to the campaign for a more egalitarian Singaporean society.

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