THE AIR-CONDITIONED MAN: THE CONSTRUCTION OF MASCULINITY IN SINGAPORE SCHOOL CHOIRS

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I certify that all work submitted for this thesis is my original work. I declare that no other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement. Except where it is clearly stated that I have used some of this material elsewhere, this work has not been presented by me for assessment in any other institution or University. I certify that the data collected for this project are authentic and the investigations were conducted in accordance with the ethics policies and integrity standards of Nanyang Technological University and that the research data are presented honestly and without prejudice.

26 July 2019
Date

Wye Chong Kit, Calvin

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Wye Chong Kit, Calvin

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Abstract

The unequal participation rates of male choristers in choirs have been studied and documented across various western societies including the U.S., Europe, New Zealand and Australia (Elorriaga 2011; Freer 2010; Hall 2005; Harrison 2004; Harrison, Welch, and Adler 2012; Koza 1993; Legg 2013; McBride 2016; Palkki 2015; Powell 2015; Watson, Rubie-Davies, and Hattie 2017). Gender, specifically notions of hegemonic masculinity, has been cited as the engine that drives this phenomenon of the 'missing males'. However, there has only been a handful of such research conducted in Singapore. Existing literature on Singapore choirs suggests that gender is not an influence in males' decision to sing in their school choirs (Freer and Tan 2014).

Using a phenomenological approach, this thesis draws upon in-depth interviews with 30 men to examine the male choral experience in Singapore's schools. It identifies subscribed notions of masculinity to be the driving force that results in the lower participation rate of boys in school choirs. These subscribed notions of masculinity create a school environment where Co-Curricular Activities (CCAs) such as choir are ranked on a hierarchy by both parents and students. CCAs are imbued with gendered meanings, with some CCAs deemed more suitable and appropriate for boys to join in the pursuit of achieving masculinity. It becomes normative for boys to choose sports or uniformed groups to embody traditional forms of hegemonic masculinity.

Within this school context, hegemonic masculinity is characterized by non-femininity and physical activity. Boys who choose to sing in choirs such as the interviewees in spite of such normative masculinity ideals bore numerous social costs as they were repudiated as exemplars of an 'abject identity' of failed masculinity (Butler 2011). This abject identity was

articulated through various methods, most notably 1) labelling, stigmatisation by schoolmates and 2) interviewees' friends and families flagging choir as an inappropriate CCA.

Keywords: Gender, masculinity, hegemonic, Singapore, choral, choir

I. Introduction

When the topic of singing is brought to attention, some may think of it as a fairly gender neutral activity, hobby, passion or vocation. After all, there are plenty of successful male and female singers within pop culture in recent memory. From singing competitions such as *American Idol*, *Singapore Idol*, to *The Voice*, *X Factor* and *Britain's Got Talent*, the search for the next singing superstar trudges on. Yet, when we actually consider choral singing in schools, it is rarely perceived as a gender neutral activity that is appropriate for both boys and girls. In practice, society's notions of masculinity fuel a trend where girls greatly outnumber boys in Singapore school choirs.

This research paper is informed by literature from both choral and gender studies. According to numerous research by various choral music scholars, researchers, choir conductors and directors, choral singing has been perceived and imagined by both choir singers and audiences/ non-singers as a feminine activity. This recurrent theme can be seen in numerous music and choral journals and publications over the years including *Music Educators Journal*, *Research Studies in Music Education*, *Journal of Research in Music Education*, and *International Journal of Music Education*, just to name a few, and they will be discussed in greater detail in this paper's literature review. Furthermore, gender scholars have examined how expectations of masculinity and femininity have been developed and socialised from a young age, and identified schools as a site where such gendered ideas are routinely propagated.

The activity of choral singing can be undertaken and performed in different contexts, from worship singing in local churches, hobby singing in community choirs, to professional choral singing by groups such as *The King's Singers*. This thesis focuses on choral singing undertaken within Singapore's school settings as what is known as a Co-Curricular Activity. As part of providing a holistic education, Singapore's Ministry of Education advocates the participation of such Co-Curricular Activities (CCAs) for students to discover and develop

their talents and interests, while at the same time instil values of teamwork and friendship (Ministry of Education Singapore 2018). Participation in these CCAs is also aimed at fostering social integration as students engage with each other across diverse backgrounds. When deciding on a CCA, students may choose to enrol in sports, clubs and societies, uniformed groups, and/or visual and performing arts groups. These CCAs typically take place beyond their curricular hours, beginning in the afternoon until evening. School choirs in Singapore fall within this educational framework, where students may choose choir as their CCA.

In this thesis, I ask the questions: what is it like to join and sing in a school choir as a boy? What are some of the obstacles faced when males join and participate in a Singapore school choir? In this research paper, I investigate the experience of choral singing in Singapore schools through the lens of gender. This investigation is structured around four research objectives. Firstly, it seeks to uncover the extent to which choral singing is seen as a feminine activity within the local context. Secondly, it seeks to detail the interactional exchanges that inform male choristers that choral singing is perceived or imagined as a masculine or feminine activity. Thirdly, it aims to elucidate the gendered meanings and messages stemming from such interactions. Lastly, this research seeks to understand how these male participants of school choral singing responded to such interactions. In other words, how do boys' participation in choral music within Singapore schools fare against normative gender expectations of enacting masculinity? How does singing in a school choir as a boy align or transgress gender expectations? To address these questions, I interviewed 30 male respondents below the age of 35 years old who have sung in either their secondary and/or junior college choirs.

This research paper is divided into sections. Firstly, the paper begins with an examination of both gender and choral research with a literature review. This provides an overview of how gender and masculinity has come to be understood over the years, and the key findings and trends regarding choral singing/ participation. Secondly, the paper outlines the impetus for this

research with a statement of the problem. As subscribed notions of gender permeate into different aspects of our lives, these normative ideas of masculinity are also at play within Singapore schools, specifically its choirs. Within this section, I highlight Singapore based choral research that suggests that gender plays little to no role in influencing boys' decision to sing in Singapore school choirs. This thesis contributes by arguing the *opposite* from these existing Singapore based choral research. It asserts that the male experience in Singapore school choirs is indeed highly gendered, as choral singing boys are subjected to a social environment of hegemonic masculinity. Thirdly, I explain why a phenomenological approach was chosen to examine gender in Singapore's school choirs within this paper's methodology and framework section. Fourthly, I will discuss the findings of this paper by analysing the data collected through my fieldwork. This data details how male choristers in Singapore schools were discouraged, deterred and stigmatised for choosing choir as a CCA. It highlights selected quotes to show how boys are pushed towards non-choir CCAs and discouraged from choir through subtle indirect language laced with gendered messages from their friends and family. The rationale for such attitudes is gendered in nature, as choral singing in Singapore schools is seen as an inappropriate activity for males to accomplish masculinity. This section will also provide insights into why male choristers remained singing in the choir. It will highlight the positive choral experiences that fuelled their choice to sing. Lastly, I will conclude by identifying the limitations of this paper, and other future directions that can be taken.

II. Literature Review

Gender and choral studies have been around for decades, and are not new areas of research. Hence, there exists a substantial amount of knowledge borne from each respective discipline. As this thesis is primarily centred on the examination of gender and masculinity, I begin this literature review by examining the significant theoretical findings and knowledge that has emerged from gender studies, namely the significance of gender in daily life and its connection to biological sex. Following that, I move on to the relevant choral research that provides insight into the context of this paper, where gender, specifically normative notions of masculinity, has served to be a barrier for male choral singing in schools.

To begin, West and Zimmerman (1987) lay claim that our competence as members of society, whether as men or women, is held hostage and accountable to the doing of gender. They suggest that doing gender is an unavoidable aspect of life - as a "routine, methodical and recurring accomplishment", which involves navigating through a "complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional and micropolitical that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine "natures"" (West and Zimmerman 1987:126). Doing gender is not an essential feature, rather, it is "something that one does, and does recurrently, in interaction with others" (West and Zimmerman 1987:143). As social beings, we create the concept and categorisation of gender through interaction, and at the same time, gender also structures and guides our interactions.

However, how does gender as a social construct come to be understood? What is its connection to sex? Gender as an interactional practice makes certain assumptions, that is, sex as the biological component of having the relevant genitalia is assumed to be congruent to sex category (Kessler and McKenna 1978; West and Zimmerman 1987). As West and Zimmerman (1987) explains "placement in a sex category is achieved through application of the sex criteria, but in everyday life, categorization is established and sustained by the socially required

identificatory displays that proclaim one's membership in one or the other category." (p.127) In other words, we expect someone to be of the male or female sex based on their visible or identifiable displays. In order for a person to be credited as a man, an individual male must put on a convincing manhood act (Goffman, 1977; West and Zimmerman 1987). This involves not only learning about, but being proficient in a set of conventional practices associated with the identity of 'man' to avoid being discredited.

Accounts of transsexuals are helpful in helping us better understand the symbolic nature of the body and its relation to one's sex category and doing gender well. The account of a pre-operation transsexual in West and Zimmerman's (1987) paper aids our understanding in this regard. As someone who identifies as a woman with a penis at the point in time, Agnes relied on her past encounters with everyday "normal" women to guide her dressing, behaviours, hairstyles etc. She attempted to preserve her categorization as a woman by following and mastering the identificatory cues of everyday women, instead of living up to a heightened ideal of femininity. In our daily conventional situations where one's genitalia are hidden from the public's eye, society takes for granted that sex, sex category and gender are congruent. This implies that a social process of assuming biology with outward displays of gender is in play, when we ascertain the gender of a person via the way they dress or behave. In this light, the creation of gender is a social process, subject to cultural scripts for how males should act and display in order to be recognised as a masculine man. This process of assumption between sex, sex category and gender is what Garfinkel (1967), Kessler and McKenna's (1978) coin as the "gender attribution process", that being "female" and "male" are cultural events. In light of possessing a male biology, Agnes took on the display performances of a woman and became culturally assumed by society to be a female. Agnes relied on the "if-can" test of everyday interaction (Sacks 1972), where people only discredit one's sex category and gender in the presence of discrepant cues. This is in line with the attitudes of everyday life, where

appearances are taken at face value unless there are reasons to doubt or discredit (Schutz 1943, Garfinkel 1967, Bernstein 1986). In other words, we cast doubt on one's gender only when we pick up cues that go against the grain of normative gendered expectations.

The above theories highlight the significance of enacting socially 'correct' or 'appropriate' behaviour towards the accomplishment of gender. They also illuminate how biology and gender are connected. As gendered beings, we have been socialised to abide by certain gendered scripts to be seen as competently masculine or feminine. This insight on normative gendered expectations presents the paper with a few aspects to explore namely 1) how does choral singing in Singapore schools fit within the normative gendered expectations for a male, 2) what are the imagined or real implications of choral singing that places the activity within normative or non-normative gendered behaviour, and 3) how exactly are these normative gendered expectations with respect to choral singing expressed, socialised, and policed?

According to gender and queer theorist Judith Butler (1990), gender is an accomplishment through "a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (p. 43). By acting and identifying as "feminine" or "masculine", we create these very same categories. These seemingly 'natural' genders, or ways of being manly or womanly are created through repeated invocation and repudiation. In other words, we invoke gendered norms to the point that it seems like a timeless truth, while repudiating "abject identities" that fall beyond the boundaries of recognisable and acceptable gendered selves (Butler 2011). Invocation and repudiation must be constantly employed to render one's gender identity as normal and intelligible, and in doing so, delineate the boundaries of gender normalcy. What constitutes as abnormal beyond the boundaries of gender normalcy thus forms the abject identity. This is what Butler (2011) describes as the "threatening spectre" of failing to be a 'man' or 'woman'.

In the example of Pascoe's (2007) ethnographic research, the invocation of heterosexuality as a timeless and unquestioned norm laid foundation for the repudiation of the abject 'fag' identity and discourse. Those who positioned themselves as members of the abject 'fag' homosexual identity found themselves bullied by their heterosexual peers while being discriminated by the school system. Such research not only illustrates in vivid detail how gender comes to be, but informs us that it is essential to examine the day to day interactional processes to highlight how gender is an accomplishment.

From a young age, boys are being taught at home and schools that they should not only dress appropriately as a man, but act like a man. Certain emotional displays must be regulated, or risk being stigmatized as less of a man. Through their ethnographic study, McGuffey and Rich (1999) found that boys who cried were shunned by high-status boys. Boys learnt that they should feel and express their sexual desires for girls. This heterosexual desire is represented through discussions about the sexual appeal of girls and women, most notably through sexual materials such as pornography and lewd magazines, which aim to present themselves as heterosexually active and in the know (Fine 1987; Thorne 1993). The theme of compulsive heterosexuality is also echoed through Pascoe's (2007) ethnography, where high school boys employ both language and violence to reduce females as sexual objects. These boys harassed girls with unwanted comments, touching and even joked about rape. Boys who did not exhibit such compulsive heterosexuality were taunted and negatively labelled as feminine and homosexual (Pascoe 2007).

On this note, this research takes caution not to reduce the enactment of the male masculine identity down to a checklist, where someone who ostensibly looks like a male simply has to enact a certain set of behaviours to be validated as a man. Such a view is too simplistic to have any significant value towards how we understand masculinity in the real world. Butler (1990) reminds us that gender "is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes,

for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence" (p.33) As such, this paper seeks to stay away from simple trait listing, and instead understand both how gendered meanings take shape within these regulatory practices or norms that accredits males as "masculine".

Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) work on masculinities provides yet another theoretical tool to conceptualise the matter at hand. Humans are complex creatures, and may embody multiple masculinities by enacting different ways of 'being a man'. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) use the term *hegemonic masculinity* to describe the form of masculinity that is culturally dominant at any given point or context, taking the highest position within a hierarchy of masculinities. This suggests a power relation that exists between different types of masculinities. Most males may not embody all the features and traits regarded by society as 'masculine'. For example, not all males fall into the category of 'jocks' who are interested in sports. In reality, only a minority of men may enact hegemonic masculinity. However, this form is nevertheless highly visible through cultural icons and media images that we have come to be familiar with. In other words, hegemonic masculinity may not be 'normal' in a numerical or statistical sense, but it is nevertheless normative where people culturally aspire or acknowledge as the highest yardsticks for executing masculinity. The ideological power of hegemony exists not as a form of simple domination based on physical force or coercion. Rather, its power lies in the production and investment of masculinity's exemplary examples which hold authority, even if most boys or men do not live up to them.

Hence, what does hegemonic masculinity look like in the local context, and how is it produced? To answer these questions, we look towards the nation-state's history of legislature and policies that legitimizes the heterosexual and criminalises the homosexual. It was not until the late 1990s when the Singapore government eased up on the active persecution of LGBT

communities in the form of police raids[1]. This easing up was an attempt to reinvent Singapore as a leading creative global city with a tolerance of sexual differences, for the sake economic growth and prosperity (Oswin 2014). While days of such draconian measures are behind, heteronormativity continues to be a key facet of Singapore governance. To date, the contentious Section 377A of Singapore's penal code criminalising sex between consenting adult men for gross indecency continues to be a rallying cry for the local LGBT community. Perhaps the most explicit iteration of heteronormative governance is evidenced through the words of Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in response to the LGBT community's petition to repeal Section 377A, where the family ideal of "one man, one woman marrying, having children and bringing up children within that framework of a stable family unit" remains a "basic building block of Singapore society" (Lee 2007). In addition. the operationalisation of this family ideal extends into pro-marriage and pronatalist initiatives including the formation of then Social Development Unit known as Social Development Network today, the financial incentives under the Baby Bonus Scheme for married couples, and the eligibility requirement of a "proper family nucleus" for Housing Development Board (HDB) flats (Oswin 2010, 2014; Teo 2011). Such government statements and state level policies operate to define and reinforce heterosexuality as the norm that is essential to hegemonic masculinity. As a result, we might expect the essence of these messages to extend into the school and family contexts, through a compulsion to establish a masculine or 'normal' identity through a heterosexual self, or expressing an aversion of being seen or labelled as a homosexual.

It is important to restate that hegemonic masculinity, or any form of masculinity for that matter, is a social construct that is fluid and open to contestation. Contestations to traditional forms of masculinity from time to time are to be expected. For example, as dual income

[1] Infamously, plainclothes policemen from the Geylang Police Division Headquarters posed as decoys and entrapped 12 men as part of an 'anti-gay operation' of Tanjong Rhu in Nov 1993. These 12 men, whose names were published in The Straits Times, were subsequently jailed and caned.

households become an increasingly common phenomenon in Singapore, egalitarian models of masculinity may eventually emerge as a form of contestation and take stage as the new and improved form of hegemonic masculinity. There is evidence to suggest that such a shift towards more egalitarian models of masculinity is gaining traction in Singapore. In his interviews with young Singaporean men, Abdeali (2012) found that egalitarian values in romantic relationships were welcomed. These egalitarian values were expressed via a wide variety of behaviours in various stages of romantic relationships from courtship to marriage, and included the equal sharing of household responsibilities. Abdeali (2012) found that there was a desire to shift away from traditional notions of masculinity including being the primary 'breadwinner' husband. Furthermore, since 2017, the Singapore government instituted longer paternity leave for new fathers to share the responsibility of infant care with their wives (Ministry of Manpower Singapore 2018; Yong 2016). These aforementioned attitudes from Abdeali's (2012) research and government policy hint at a shift away from traditional masculinity towards more egalitarian forms of masculinity. Whether such a mode of enacting masculinity becomes the statistical norm is beside the point. Rather, how people regard and exalt such a concept of masculinity within the gender and masculinity hierarchy would take the spotlight. In other words, hegemonic masculinity should be understood as a fluid concept instead of a static way of recognising and accomplishing our gendered selves. It should be used as a conceptual tool to analyse how men position themselves within the masculinity hierarchy in reality.

The interviewed men from Abdeali's (2012) study wanted to enact egalitarian models of masculinity by, for example, sharing domestic responsibilities of childcare and chores. Yet, these men regarded their egalitarian values as merely an exception to the norm. They were hesitant to act and shape their relationships as equal partnerships due to the fear of how other peoples might think and belittle their masculine identity. More specifically, these men feared

that they would be labelled as ‘unmasculine’ by not meeting the same standards, or not acting like other men.

While Abdeali's (2012) study examined how some Singaporean men are no longer as invested in traditional notions of masculinity, it also highlights how men’s discourse on masculinity, and by extension, their own masculine identities, are shaped by normative societal values held by other gendered beings - men and women. Within the context of Abdeali's (2012) study, the male interviewees imagined that they would be held accountable to masculinity standards by other men and women, and hence, policed their own behaviour to ‘fit in’ with others and accomplish masculinity. This illustrates how hegemonic masculinity operates through discursive means, as men police their own behaviour to shape and align their masculine identities with other men. It also highlights Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) model of multiple masculinities, which suggests that attention should be paid to the discursive means by which men do identity work. Males can weave between and navigate different layers within the hierarchy of masculinities, and such a model of masculinity suggests that there is value in understanding how men imagine their worlds.

We live in a world where certain occupations, vocations and activities are labelled or imagined as feminine or masculine. The social organisation of work, activity and labour in society are legitimized, and perceived as normal and natural through the performance of gender. Men or women’s work are categorized as a reflection of masculine and feminine attitudes and behaviours. The healthcare sector such as nursing is seen as feminine due to its nature of care, while the military as masculine due to the nature of physical aggression. Furthermore, these contrasting industries have the statistical numbers to support these gendered associations, as they are female and male dominated areas respectively. Within the family, breadwinning continues to be helmed by husbands even in today’s context of dual-income households (Tichenor 2005), while homemaking and childcare continues to primarily fall

within the wife's jurisdiction (Hochschild and Machung 2012). Such examples support and reflect how today's society continues to think of gender as dichotomous, where specific activities, spaces, or vocations are thought of as 'for men' or 'for women'.

However, what does this mean for choral singing through the lens of gender? While there has been an acknowledged dearth for large scale quantitative research examining the male and female composition of choirs (Harrison et al. 2012), practitioner-based research and literature indicate a pattern of unequal and lower participation rate of choral singing by males (Freer 2006, 2007, 2010; Harrison 2001; Koza 1993). This has been typically labelled as the 'missing males' phenomenon of choirs. There is a documented pattern of gender imbalance within choirs, where females consistently outnumber males in choirs (Koza 1993). In the United States where choral singing continues to be the most popular activity within the performing arts, choral singers are found in 22.9% of American households, and nearly 43 million adults and children regularly sing in the nearly 270,000 choruses that exist (Chorus America 2009:7; Freer 2012). Yet, the gender composition of female to male choral singers in United States' high schools hovers between a 5:2 (Gates 1989) to 7:3 ratio (Elpus 2015).

To better understand why such gender imbalance exists, further investigations into the social contexts of choral singing have been conducted. These investigations seek to understand what is it that drives males away from choral singing? Gender can permeate into many aspects of life, including influencing one's instrument choice from a young age. Using her position as a music educator, Hall (2005) documented how boys as young as 5 years old were able to sex stereotype instruments to illustrate a masculine/ feminine dualism, and subsequently avoided instruments that were seen as appropriate for girls. While such a finding may initially seem surprising, it makes more sense when one considers that the use of one's voice in choral singing is to be considered like any other musical instrument. As with any research, such investigations into choral singing are not conducted in isolation, but rather, fall within the wider scope of

literature that seeks to understand the performance arts as a musical experience. People may choose to pick up an instrument to learn during their youth as a hobby, and these preferences can be influenced by gender. Harrison's (2001, 2004) work with primary and secondary students highlighted that the use of the human voice as an instrument for choral singing sits closer towards the feminine end of the gender continuum, along with other feminine stereotyped instruments. These echo past research that males avoid playing instruments they identify as softer and gentler such as the flute, clarinet and violin (Delzell and Leppla 1992; Fortney, Boyle, and DeCarbo 1993).

Male participation within choral singing has been studied and published by numerous directors and conductors of choirs all over the world. Through the use of case studies, surveys, interviews and observation of adolescents across different schools over the years, researchers have documented how hegemonic male masculinity within schools is commonly characterised by the avoidance and absence of femininity (Hall 2005; McBride 2016; Palkki 2015; Powell 2013, 2015; Watson et al. 2017). To be more specific, the favouring of sports activities and programs over 'softer' and consequently more feminine activities such as the performance arts by adolescent boys is one aspect of how hegemonic masculinity is enacted for males within schools (Harrison 2007; Koza 1993; Powell 2015). Furthermore, group choral singing has been culturally imagined by youths as a feminine activity. (Freer 2007, 2010, 2012; Green 2002; Hall 2005; Harrison 2004, 2007; Koza 1993; Legg 2013; Powell 2015; Watson et al. 2017). According to findings from Adler's (2002) case study, joining a group such as the school choir carries a gendered meaning of male femininity. To sing in their school choir not only endangers their status as masculine men, but can also cast doubt on their heterosexuality as well. This is evidenced as boys' participation in U.S choirs continue to face problematic stereotypes where male participation in feminine domains are conflated with homosexuality (Palkki 2015).

The research on Singapore school choirs with regards to gender as an analytic lens is lacking. This is because the activity of choir/ choral singing in Singapore is an arguably niche area, and as a result, may not be particularly well known within the general/ mainstream non-choral singing population. To provide some context, participating in a school choir at the secondary and tertiary level in Singapore is categorised as a Co-Curricular Activity (CCA). According to Tan (2000), about 5% of the secondary school population participates in their school choirs. At the secondary level in Singapore, CCAs provide not only educational objectives in instilling values, but academic rewards upon their graduating GCE 'O' Level examinations as well. Performing well by achieving awards and holding leadership executive committee positions in a chosen CCA during secondary school can serve as a shining feather in one's academic portfolio and fast track admittance into the junior college level through Singapore's Direct Schools Admissions (DSA) Scheme[2].

[2]In Singapore, the Direct Schools Admission (DSA) Scheme is a way for students to seek admission to secondary schools and junior colleges based on their talents in Co-Curricular Activities. Successful applicants of the DSA Scheme are guaranteed a place in their next educational institution even before taking their final graduating examinations. These students will automatically be admitted into their next school by meeting less academically demanding cut off points and/or scores.

III. Statement of the Problem

The lack of Singapore localised choral research through the lens of gender highlights the necessity of this thesis. Through this paper, I hope to challenge existing Singapore choral literature which finds that gender plays little to no role in influencing male choral singing in Singapore schools.

I begin this section by justifying why this topic is worth examining in the first place. Why are male experiences within Singapore school choirs worthy of sociological enquiry and attention? To simply sum it up, school choirs may be yet another site where socially constructed scripts of ideal masculinity against femininity are at play. As a sociologist who seeks to understand, dissect and illustrate how gender scripts and assumptions of masculinity can serve as obstacles towards the pursuit of gender equality, I believe that this research paper can and will serve towards that goal. In the same vein that socially constructed ideas of gender and masculinity have forced upon a second shift of domestic and emotional work onto wives (Hochschild and Machung 2012), these same core ideas of gender can push boys and men away from certain 'softer' pursuits like the performance arts and choral singing, and therefore, reinforce yet another gender boundary between what is deemed as appropriate male versus female activity and space.

While western societies such as America, Europe, and Australia have presented a largely consistent theme with regards to how gender can undermine male choir participation in schools, the existing and limited literature on gender within Singapore's choral landscape seems to present a different picture. In an effort to account for and acknowledge the existing efforts put in to examine gender within the Singapore choral landscape, I highlight Freer and Tan's (2014) mixed method study of young men in Singapore's pre-university schools. Utilizing surveys and visual-narrative drawings as methodology, Freer and Tan (2014) found that gender, or more

specifically, issues of masculinity and/or sexuality were not influences in males' decision to sing in school choirs. Yet, for a topic as nuanced and complex as gender, a more open and elaborate research framework would be necessary to achieve a detailed and accurate understanding of how gender works. If gender as an influence is indeed absent from males' decision to sing in school choirs, it would be vital to pursue why and how gender is not present. As such, this thesis is positioned to fulfil these goals, to answer if gender as an influence is present, and how gender operates within the school. Other localised studies on Singapore's school choir have taken a pedagogical perspective. Tan and Yee's (2003) research examined if gender has an impact on the perception of choral learning within a classroom setting. To which, they found that females preferred a cooperative learning environment while males preferred a competitive learning environment when it comes to choral singing and learning.

As someone who has spent a number of years singing in various choirs both within and beyond schools in Singapore (secondary, junior college institutions, and external community choirs), the issues and themes surrounding choral singing as reflected in western literature resonate as shared lived experiences to fellow choristers and myself. Yet, beyond the circles of choral singing, people may possess little to no knowledge regarding the social contexts and processes of singing in a choir. While the influence and impact of gender has been 'tested' within the aforementioned Singapore based research, the choice of research methodologies provide a rather inadequate and shallow understanding on the specific workings of gender and masculinity within choral singing.

On that note, there is still much work to be done to attain an essential understanding of gender and its influence on male choral participation within Singapore schools. It is within this dearth of Singapore based choral and gender research to which I situate this paper. Issues of gender are socially and culturally specific, and we should not simply assume that research findings on male choral participation and singing from western countries can be simply applied

or extrapolated onto Singapore's context. Hence, I hope that this paper will be able to contribute towards a deeper understanding of how gender shapes the male choral experience in Singapore schools.

IV. Research Framework and Methodology

This research question for this paper will be "What is the male experience of singing in Singapore school choirs?" Using Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity as a cornerstone, this study focuses on the personal accounts of male choral singing using a phenomenological approach.

According to Patton (1990), a phenomenological approach seeks to answer the question "What is the structure and essence of experience of these phenomenon for these people?" (p.69). Patton (1990) elaborates that a phenomenon can range from a relationship, emotion to even an organisation or culture.

Furthermore, Patton (1990) adds the following:

> A phenomenological perspective can mean *either* or *both* (1) a focus on what people experience and how they interpret the world (in which case one can use interviews without actually experiencing the phenomenon oneself) or (2) a methodological mandate to actually experience the phenomenon being investigated (in which case participant observation would be necessary). (P. 71)

As such, this research paper will be centred on Patton's first point. The 'phenomenon' within the phenomenological approach will refer to the experiences of boys who joined their schools choirs. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) explain that hegemonic masculinity is constantly in flux. A certain form of masculinity that is hegemonic in one geographical or cultural context may not hold the same reverence or weight someplace else. Hegemonic masculinity is also subject to challenges by other sub-masculinities over time. This means that what we come to learn and accept as the hegemonic form of "being a man" can change over time. For all we know, the popular image of the 'jock' with six pack abs today may come to be supplanted by men with less ripped 'dad bods' or 'dad bodies' some day in the future. As a researcher, these serve as warnings to avoid assuming that Singapore and other parts of the world share the same version of hegemonic masculinity. As such, this paper will be interested in the following areas:

1) What did hegemonic masculinity look like within their schools?
2) How did male choral singing fit into this interpretation of hegemonic masculinity in schools?

I will now proceed to elaborate on these research areas of interest.

First and foremost, I needed to get a descriptive account of what it was like to join and sing a choir as a male student. This included posing questions about the process of joining the choir, and their experiences within the choir. I wanted to understand the context in which they made the decision to sing, what drew them into choir, and the interactional exchanges with friends and family surrounding this choice of CCA. Furthermore, I wished to find out if choir was a popular choice amongst males in their schools, and uncover the reasons for its popularity or unpopularity. I hypothesized that their responses would reveal an underlying expectation about gender and masculinity, and felt that pursuing these questions would shine a light on what hegemonic masculinity looked like within Singapore schools.

Gender is a highly complex and nuanced social construct. Determining if and how gender permeates males' school choir participation requires a research methodology that goes beyond simple surveying. To understand the essential male experience in a Singapore school choir, qualitative research in the form of semi structured interviews was conducted. This semi structured interview format allowed me to begin with a common set of starting questions, before presenting probing and follow up questions to acquire rich, detailed data.

A convenience snowball sampling method was employed by leveraging on my past choir contacts. 30 face-to-face interviews with males were conducted for this study. The interviews took between 40 mins to slightly over 2 hours at agreed locations between October 2018 and January 2019. As the idea for this research project was inspired by my personal experiences as a male chorister in Singapore school choirs, it was important not to seek out interviewees who

I knew confirmed or aligned with my own experiences. Hence, I stayed away from male interviewees who shared the same secondary and junior college choir experiences during the same time period to avoid committing a selection bias.

In order to be qualified for this research project, interviewees needed to have experience in either secondary and/or junior college choirs, and be below the age of 35. Secondary and junior college experiences were selected as the key criterion for 2 reasons. Firstly, choirs in these institutions tend to have clearer educational structures with defined objectives and set milestones as compared to polytechnic singing groups. Choirs in secondary schools and junior college typically embark on similar curricular milestones such as the SYF (Singapore Youth Festivals), at least an annually held concert, plus further local and overseas competitions for growth and reputation. In contrast, polytechnic singing groups in Singapore do not necessarily sing choral music as they are given to option to do any combination of repertoire. This means that polytechnic singing groups can market themselves as acapella groups that sing mainstream pop music. As such, the gendered meanings and connotations associated with Polytechnic singing groups may be vastly different than secondary and junior college choirs. Secondly, these educational stages between secondary and junior college years encompass the stages between adolescent to young adulthood when interviewees discovered, developed and navigated their sense of identities as male individuals. For the purposes of this research, interviewees were required to answer questions that sought to understand their lived experiences in secondary and/or junior college choirs. As such, an age limit of 35 years old was put in place to prevent memory distortion from having to recall experiences that transpired more than 2 decades ago. Out of 30 interviewees, there were 23 Chinese, 4 Malays, 2 Indians, and 1 Javanese. I sought to include interviewees from minority groups to closely reflect Singapore's multi-racial and multi-ethnic population.

In general, interviewees were happy and enthusiastic to share their lived experiences in Singapore school choirs. Upon meeting up, I had a limited window to engage in casual conversations to answer any burning pre-interview questions, diffuse any tensions, build a level of rapport, and prepare them for the interview. For many of these interviewees, choral singing in their earlier years was such an impactful event that they continue to sing in other Singapore choirs including various renowned university, semi-professional and external community choirs. Many expressed their curiosity towards this research by expressing that doing interviews as fieldwork on such a topic seemed to be uncommon in Singapore.

As a researcher, I assured the interviewees prior to the interview that their responses will be kept confidential and anonymous. Identifiers such as their names, schools, and respective conductors have been omitted from the transcripts and research paper. Pseudonyms have been assigned to each interviewee and will be used throughout this paper. It is important that these interviewees feel free in expressing their experiences, views and feelings. Hence, I invited them to be comfortable, added that no detail is too insignificant, and assured them that my interest as an interviewer lies in their subjective experiences within their school choir rather than establishing an objective fact through appropriate or correct answers. I was aware that the nature of discussing gender might be potentially uncomfortable. Hence, respondents were informed on their options to pause at any time and as many times during the interview, skip any questions, or even cancel their participation without any repercussions.

The interview questions were split into various sections. We began with basic background questions enquiring about their singing experiences, personal musical backgrounds, family musical backgrounds if any, and the types of schools they were enrolled in. Next, the interview questions sought to get an account on how they came to join choir in their schools. Following that, I enquired about their experiences of actually participating and

singing in a choir. This included asking how their friends and family lent support, and getting an estimate of the male to female composition in their choirs.

V. Findings

1. Choir as a secondary option

As a starting point, I was interested in not only understanding how these respondents found themselves singing in Singapore school choirs, but the impressions and opinions they held about their prospective CCA choice prior to joining the choir as well. For many respondents, their experience of choral singing begun during their first years of secondary school. Events such as CCA fairs were commonly organised by the school at the start of the academic year for students to be familiar with the available CCAs offered. During the interview, many respondents articulated that they had other preferred CCAs over choir.

For example, one of my respondents, Yoon, said the following:

> In primary school I still thought that it was a very feminine thing to do, to join the choir. I would never have thought to join the choirs in secondary school. It's just somehow the notion, it's for girls, only girls would sing in a choir… Back then I wanted to join the boys' brigade because I was in the boys' brigade in primary school. So I wanted to continue with the boys' brigade. (Yoon)

Yoon was one of a handful of respondents who was quick to express such a connection between CCA choices to the notion of masculinity, at such an early point in the interview. This connection between CCA choice and idealised notions of masculinity is a consistent motif that is reflected throughout the interviews.

Other respondents simply expressed how choir was not their top choice with the following:

> I was in the swimming club in primary school. So I was looking forward to join any form of swimming CCA in _____ (Secondary School). But I realized that there was actually no swimming CCA. (Kenny)
>
> So for my first choice, I actually put infocomm club. My second choice was a uniformed group, but I can't even remember which (uniformed group). The last choice was choir, and I got in. (Bradley)
>
> So I actually came about joining the choir because I was actually from a sports CCA. But then, the secondary school I was in had very limited choices of sports CCA. And the year

> I joined them, my first CCA closed down. I tried another sport, which was not something I liked. So there was no other option. (Robert)

They were unabashedly quick to reflect that choir was secondary or even last place on their preferred choice of CCA. In Robert's exceptional account, he only joined his school choir as a last resort, after leaving 2 sport CCAs. His description of how "there was no other option" highlights just how low choir was placed as a viable activity in his frame of mind back in secondary school.

I decided to follow up and understand how and why choir was a secondary choice. Kenny had the following to say:

> The thing holding me back was that I actively demonized all my best friends for joining a choir in primary school. Because it was, you know, like a dude thing to do, right? … I was already singing, but just not on any form of stage. I was already singing in the car, with the family. I wasn't averse to singing. But before I joined, I was a little bit averse to choir. So choral singing, because I thought it was not very cool thing to do. (Kenny)

Kenny's reason for his initial apprehension towards choir provided an interesting perspective. He was responsible for giving his male friends who sang in choir a hard time in primary school. Describing his act as "a dude thing to do", it was as though ridiculing and holding other male members accountable to a certain set of masculinity standards, which did not involve choral singing, fell within his jurisdiction as a 'dude'. However, Bradley provided a different perspective:

> Well, I mean, I put it as a choice. So it's not like I really didn't want to be in choir? I didn't mind the singing, but it was just that Infocomm club, at the time, had one specific department dedicated to robotics. And I was actually quite interested in robotics when I was a bit younger. So it's not so much that I didn't want to go there, but rather that there were more attractive CCAs… You know, I think in general, a lot of guys, will usually be a bit afraid, especially in terms of... call it their social standing as a result of being in choir. I mean, the kind of label that you get, from being a choir boy, it tends to be quite negative. (Bradley)

While Bradley frames his avoidance of choir through his preference for robotics, both of these accounts serve to peel back how male choristers held unfavourable views towards the idea of male choral singing before starting out. During his interview, Kenny clarified that he

was not averse to singing. Instead, his issue was specifically with choral singing, as it was "not a very cool thing to do".

While Bradley did not mind singing, he was already aware of the negative connotations that came with "being a choir boy". On that note, this paper will elaborate on the specific labels and attached negative connotations that comes with "being a choir boy" in the subsequent section.

The aversion to school choir singing amongst males was prevalent. As such, stories in which males were specially pulled or 'convinced' into joining choir were frequently told. It eventually became a common plot point to hear conductors and school music teachers-in-charge of secondary schools reaching out and convincing potential male choristers to consider joining the choir. While each story took place in different schools, they shared much similarity.

> So how I fell into singing in choir was… it was actually a music lesson… So I think we were having some lessons about singing, some music theory, singing in rounds or something like that. Then I remembered we had to form our little groups and then sing. Then I think at the end of the sessions then she asked me "do you want to consider…", then I told her I already had one CCA. But she said that there's no conflicting schedule. I mean, uniformed groups are typically on the weekend, then she said, "Since choir is on the weekday, then why not? You can still have both. Then see which one you like." So I just went for that. (Faiz)

> So in the end, choir was another option because my music teacher back then, who was also my conductor, auditioned everybody during the music classes through the singing of the school song, and he thought that I have a good voice. So, I can still remember in my class, he only shortlisted two persons. At the end of music class, he called out two names, I was one of them with another girl, and we wrote our names down. And at that time, it was kind of forced because I kind of wrote down my name already that means you are going to be in choir. So, yeah, that's how I ended up in a choir in my secondary school, but it was a very good move. (Yoon)

> So when the conductor at the time told me that, you know, I have a talent for it, I think something changed. I think there was a perspective shift. At that point in time, I became less concerned about the femininity of the art, and more concerned with how far I could push it. (Kenny)

These took place either during music lessons as part of the class curriculum, or during compulsory level-wide auditions during some school's CCA trial period. At the end of said activity, whether it was a formal audition or a class based music activity that sought to covertly

access musical ability, selected students would be identified and personally approached by the teacher-in-charge or conductor. The effectiveness of this method can be said to operate on multiple levels. Firstly, it gave the respondents a sense that they were special, insofar as they were the chosen few who possessed the necessary musical skills to hold a tune. Secondly, the nature of one to one conversations made it more difficult for students to refuse. Lastly, these conversations assured and encouraged our interviewed respondents to just take a shot. This finding was further corroborated by Kenny who had the following to say as part of his reflections:

> When you are a dude, and you're in the midst of puberty, choral singing just not a priority that aligns with you. You know, you have to have someone to tell you, "Hey dude, I think you can do this." Or, some form of expert opinion, something like "Hey, this is something you really should consider". (Kenny)

These responses highlight the effort teachers and choirmasters took to navigate around the barriers surrounding male choral singing. At that young age, when boys are looking to fit in as men, and choir is understood as an unmasculine or feminine activity, a push by an authority figure is needed to shift their perspectives. At the same time, this shows us that while the barriers surrounding male choral singing are present and gendered in nature, overcoming them is not an impossible task.

2. Unpopularity of choir

> I was in a mixed school of course, but choir was not a very popular CCA. So as a guy in choir, I was one out of three. So if any one of us doesn't show up, that's 30% of the attendance gone. (Bradley)

> If I'm not wrong, I was the only sec 1 guy in the batch (for choir). So that was a little bit pressurizing because there was no one else that I was familiar with in the sense, even the girls also. I don't remember if there was any in my class, but it was quite foreign for me, because I was the only guy and there wasn't many people who I knew in my batch. (Asyraf)

> When people know that you are in a CCA where you are 1 of the only 5 guys amongst 30 to 40 girls, you kind of worry about what people think about you. (Gerald)

> I had a lot of classmates who were females. I'm not sure if it's helpful, but a lot of females in my class who were from choir told me that they needed guys and I like singing as a

> pastime. So that was actually how I got into choir. So my school choir was a choir that had very, very little guys. For a good 2 to 3 years, there were only four of us (males) and we were all from the same class. (Robert)
>
> My first 2 years was very good. It was a very good mix of boys, we had about 20 boys compared to 60 girls. Rather large choir. (Yoon)

It was not uncommon to hear such accounts of female choristers outnumbering male choristers by significant margins in Singapore's secondary school choirs. While the above responses show a marked variance for the number of male singers in each school choir, Yoon's positive description of the number of male choristers caught my attention. At first hearing, I was curious towards the remark that having 20 boys in an 80 strong choir was a good mix, despite having a female to male ratio of 3:1. Why is this number of boys in such a large choir considered 'good'? However, Yoon's description of having 20 boys in the choir as a healthy number started to make more sense when I looked towards the accounts of other respondents in this study. When one considers the norm of how scarce males in secondary school choirs are, a male section of 20 boys for secondary schools can be considered an achievement. The very fact that Yoon's choir had more than a handful of male singers was already beyond the norm.

On the other hand, I noticed a pattern where the male to female ratio of junior college choirs were less extreme and more evenly balanced, even though these choirs continued to adhere with the overall pattern of having more female than male choristers.

Respondents offered these explanations as to why this was the case:

> In secondary school, the stigma, of course, being that choir boys are going to be more feminine. And of course, this changed over time. When it comes to JC (junior colleges), you know, people have grown up, they're more mature, they don't really care about these things. So I think in JC, this really didn't exist… It's just that, you know, there was no stigma. But of course, there were still those more traditionally masculine CCAs, they were still prized in a sense. (Bradley)
>
> So in secondary school perhaps then the guys were more driven to join a CCA that didn't bring to question their own sense of identity as a boy or a man, if you put it that way. But when it comes to JC right, it's a bit more complex because sometimes it's got to do with

> the reputation of the CCA… Yeah, and people compete to try to get a place in singing in that choir (junior college). (Faiz)

Key factors that could explain the sex ratios between secondary and junior colleges include the age of the school population, and the reputation and prestige associated with junior college choirs. By having an older school population in junior colleges, respondents felt that males did not try to 'fit in' as a man as much, and sought to carve their own personal identity. Furthermore, because choirs of junior colleges operate at a much more competitive level that accrues reputation and prestige on both local and international stages, respondents felt that males would be more eager to join and compete.

Nevertheless, these accounts support the notion that Singapore school choirs are not spared from the 'missing males' phenomenon that points to an unequal participation rate between males and females, as documented by other choral researchers and practitioners.

3. The allure of non-choir activities

To understand the other side of the story, I felt it necessary to uncover which CCAs were typically deemed popular, and explore how these CCAs came to be more popular than choir amongst males in Singapore schools. If males were not flocking to join the choir, which CCAs were they joining?

> The bulk of my friends? They would be in uniformed groups, infocomm club, or student council. Very few of them were actually in performing arts. (Bradley)

> NPCC (Nation Police Cadet Corps) was very popular, NCC (National Cadet Corps) was very popular. So NCC, NPCC were the popular ones definitely. So if I were to recall my sec 1 class, just based on my class alone, I think most of them ended up in the uniformed groups. (Faiz)

> So for guys, it was definitely NCC Air, Land, NPCC as well, those were the most popular choices for guys. And then for girls, it was Band, Drama or Chinese Orchestra. (Gerald)

> Among the girls the most popular CCA was actually like the dancers, modern dance, Chinese dance. So those were the most popular… For the boys, soccer and basketball were also very popular. In fact, basketball was so popular that when I first entered a secondary one right, they actually didn't recruit anyone during my year, from my year, because they had too many. And they were basically saying something like "basketball

> was causing a deficit in other sports", so they stopped recruiting basketball players during my year. (Hamid)

Such responses outline a pattern where boys were drawn to the sports and uniformed groups. At first inspection, males tended to join CCAs which were often considered niche, award winning and possessed a high profile within the school. This term 'niche' has a specific localised meaning. According to Singapore's then Minister of Education Mr Heng Swee Keat, schools have their respective niche areas in both academic and non-academic fields in an effort to provide diversity (Ministry of Education Singapore 2012). Hence, each school will be renowned for their respective niche areas through good performance and excellence.

However as the interviews proceeded, interviewees spoke and alluded to how certain sports and uniformed group CCAs were attractive to males due to existing expectations of gender and masculinity. When asked about it, Bradley provided the following:

> Of course, this is playing to some very old social norms of masculinity, right? I mean, back then in secondary school, masculinity was very much decided by what activities you were doing. So obviously, those sports people, your uniformed groups, these are the top tier. You would naturally sort of associate them with the alpha males, they are the strong ones, you know? All the usual associations of masculinity. So, by comparison, those in performing arts will already be stigmatized in that sense. Because you always feel like, it's because you can't match up to these guys, that's why you end up in these kind of very feminine CCAs, if you will. (Bradley)

He also added the following at a later point in his interview:

> It's not just perhaps how popular these other CCAs are, but perhaps how masculine these popular CCAs are, that you know, the social currency that's carried by them relative to choir kind of makes choir a bit less attractive an option. (Bradley)

Bradley's response was a representative example of what respondents saw as the pull factors towards non-choir CCAs such as sports and uniformed groups. The concept of the 'alpha male' thus becomes key towards understanding how males gravitate towards certain CCAs. Specifically, it would seem that 'alpha males' are characterised by physical activity and strength. The idea of embodying these values of the alpha male *through CCA choice* thus

becomes a commonly taken route towards executing and achieving masculinity in Singapore schools.

If the sports and uniformed groups carry an association with being an 'alpha male', what does it mean for a boy to sing in a school choir? Many respondents expressed that choir was associated with non-alpha personality males. They had the following to add:

> Choral singing is gay. It's really gay… Very feminine, a very soft art, girls only, the guys who go there are not sporty. Not active, not fit, you know? Very *guniang*[3]. (Kenny)
>
> Stigmas? Yeah for sure. Like I mean if you are a guy in a choir, to think of you as like a pussy or like girly and just not 'man' enough to take on the other more physically demanding CCAs. (Gerald)
>
> Within Arts CCAs, the more physical ones would be more socially valued. Like dance, modern dance, hip hop... Whereas choir always seemed secondary. I've never thought of why it seemed secondary, but I think it might have been because generally everybody in choir was unfit... Probably because... none of us were dominant types. Don't take charge in other situations, that kind of thing. (Simon)
>
> So you know, when you meet someone new, they will ask, "Oh which CCA are you from?" Then I will say choir. So there's always a split second before they ask, "why?" Partly because I'm quite tall. So they are like, "why are *you* in choir? Why are you not in basketball?" Something like that. But also another reply would be "isn't that where all the gay boys are?" (Hamid)

Hamid's response highlights the physical assumptions associated with CCA choice. As a male teenager who was blessed with height (above 1.8m), he was expected to join a CCA such as basketball that could potentially capitalise on his stature. This also suggests that taller boys who could be proficient in sports such as basketball, should not be in choir. Instead, Hamid's choice to join the choir brought forth questions that sought to interrogate a seemingly 'nonsensical' choice. Furthermore, in this case, choir was suggested to be the CCA where homosexual boys joined. Based on such similar responses throughout the interviews, I gathered that male choral singing in school choirs was typically associated with the physically unfit, physically inactive, non-dominant beta personalities, and homosexuals.

[3] '*Guniang*' is the phonetic translation for lady in Mandarin.

Bradley's earlier response on masculinity in schools also directs our attention towards the relationships different CCAs have with each other. From his experience, CCAs such the sports or uniformed groups sits as the "top tier" within a hierarchy of CCAs. However, the gathered responses seems to indicate a complex hierarchy within CCAs, one where CCAs in each type were ranked against each other based on how 'physically demanding' they were.

For the sake of clarity, I will requote Bradley and Simon's responses to illustrate how ranking within a hierarchy for CCAs look like:

> I mean, back then in secondary school, masculinity was very much decided by what activities you were doing. So obviously, *those sports people, your uniformed groups, these are the top tier*. You would naturally sort of associate them with the alpha males, they are the strong ones, you know? All the usual associations of masculinity. So, by comparison, those in performing arts will already be stigmatized in that sense. Because you always feel like, it's because you can't match up to these guys, that's why you end up in these kind of very feminine CCAs, if you will. (Bradley) (Emphasis mine)

> Within Arts CCAs, the more physical ones would be more *socially valued*. Like dance, modern dance, hip hop... Whereas choir always seemed secondary. I've never thought of why it seemed secondary, but I think it might have been because generally everybody in choir was unfit... Probably because... none of us were dominant types. Don't take charge in other situations, that kind of thing. (Simon) (Emphasis mine)

Furthermore, Faiz who participated in both choir and St. John's Brigade, added the following to express how St John's Brigade was not seen as a 'real' uniformed group:

> St John's… did also seem a little bit sissy also to my parents. Yeah, I think people felt that this is not a real uniformed group. Real uniformed groups are like the NS (National Service), like NCC Land, NCC Air, the kinds that you really train very hard, you do push-ups and all those nonsense. Yeah, so that is a real uniformed group. St John's, you go around helping people, like being a nurse like that. Not typically what you would go for, it's not a real uniformed group. Yeah, I mean that was the running narrative in my school. (Faiz)

The above responses by Bradley, Simon, and Faiz illustrate how CCAs can be ranked according to their adherence to traits associated with masculinity - namely physical activity and strength. As a rule of thumb, sports and uniformed groups are placed on the top tiers above the performing arts. However, not all CCAs within the uniformed groups and performance arts are equal, as more 'active' CCAs such as dance outrank choir in terms of social placement and

currency. In other words, males who chose to join CCAs such as sports and the uniformed groups would be seen as more masculine than male choristers.

The parallels between male CCA choice and Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity are apparent. Joining CCAs such as sports and uniformed groups embody hegemonic masculinity, as the most exalted form of being a man. The hegemonic aspect of joining sports and uniformed groups for a male is evidenced by its normative nature, where males are expected to join in order to perform masculinity competently.

4. Labelling and stigmatization

Boys who joined their school choirs were harassed, labelled and stigmatized. Needless to say, the basis of such acts stemmed from the cultural assumption that all males in schools were expected to 'be' and 'act like a man' by engaging in gender appropriate activity. Choir was not an activity that fell within the category of 'appropriate' or 'normal' activities for males. As such, pejorative labels such as 'sissy', 'pussy', 'gay', and '*guniang*' were typically used against male choristers. These labels indicated that femininity and homosexuality were used as an insult, and its purpose was to cast doubt and undermine one's status as a 'man'. Furthermore, this also indicates that gender operates as a dichotomy within this context, where masculinity is defined by the avoidance of femininity. By viewing this labelling act through a Butlerian perspective, the boundaries between normal and the abject identity becomes clear. In order to be a 'normal' man who effectively accomplished masculinity, boys needed to be seen as heterosexual and non-feminine. Failure to do so would result with being placed with the abject identity of failing to accomplish masculinity as a homosexual and feminine man. All 30 interviewees were aware of the labels and stigmas placed male choristers through a combination of first and second hand experiences. Labels that were used in jest, to mock or ridicule, were used either against themselves or their fellow male choir member(s).

Out of all the labels mentioned by the respondents, the term ‘gay’ stood out as a label that could have indicated homosexuality. Hence, I sought clarification of what the term ‘gay’ truly meant when others used as a pejorative label within the context of male participation in school choirs. However, respondents expressed mixed interpretations:

> I use the word 'gay' because it's the same word that people used to describe choir when I was in secondary school. It's nothing to do with homosexuality. It's just very girly. (Kenny)
>
> I think I had been called gay before. Probably, but not in a sense that in a very strictly homosexual way, just feminine. (Gerald)

Some respondents such as Kenny and Gerald dismissed the notion that the term ‘gay’ was used to indicate homosexuality back in their schools. Instead, they argue that ‘gay’ was simply a proxy term used to indicate male femininity. However, other respondents seemed to be on the fence. Some indicated that ‘gay’ was indeed used to suggest homosexuality, while others more commonly acknowledged that there was a confusion and perhaps conflation between the concepts of sexuality and gender performance.

> Q: So what did they actually mean by the word gay? Do you think it has to do with one's sexuality in this context?
>
> Caleb: Not very sure. I think at that point, they were confused between the idea of sexuality and gender performance. I can say with great certainty now. (Laughs) Yeah, confusing the idea of homosexuality which is loving a person of the same sex, versus being feminine which is what gay people are expected to be. Right?

While this study is not able to provide a clear answer on whether male choristers were truly seen as homosexuals – as males with a sexual preference for other males, the varied responses and confusion expressed by respondents indicate a narrow understanding of gender at play. In other words, for males to join their school choir is to be seen as unmasculine, or feminine, and to be labelled as a feminine male runs the risk of being seen as a homosexual. Within the context of the school, appropriate masculinity is narrowly defined as heterosexual, and unfeminine. This theme of homophobia takes a page of out Pascoe's (2007) ethnographic study on the high school environment, specifically his examination of the fag discourse and the

notion of compulsive heterosexuality. In this case, the mention of homosexuality speaks more of the accomplishment of gender than sexuality, where labels such as ‘gay’ served as a repudiation interaction ritual. Furthermore, this blurring of gender and sexuality demonstrates what feminist scholar Judith Butler (1990:24) has argued, that while sex and gender are different, the gendered body is read and performed as a sexed body within a heteronormative cultural matrix.

Whether these labels were used in harsh tones with malicious intent, or simply out of jest, is beside the point. Rather, these labels served to inform respondents as gendered beings that they are stepping out of line from what is normal and appropriate for males to partake in. Thus, labelling and the stigmatization that follows become a mean for others to police and reinforce gender boundaries. As Butler (1993) suggests, the iteration and repudiation of the abject identity is necessary for the creation of gendered beings. By labelling male choristers as such, name callers are assigning the abject identity of failed masculinity, while at the same time affirming their own stakes in culturally appropriate masculinity. In these contexts, failed masculinity is to be associated with femininity and not being a heterosexual.

5. Nonchalant support and discouragement

As part of documenting the interactional exchanges involved in joining a choir, I enquired about the kinds of feedback respondents received from their respective friends and family. I wanted to know how friends and family felt and reacted when respondents chose to sing in their school choir. This included asking about what was said or done during the application process (getting parental approval in some cases), and after officially getting accepted into their school choir as a CCA.

The following response by Kenny is a helpful starting point to encapsulate the attitudes parents have towards their son singing in school choirs:

> My parents were actually pretty supportive. Maybe supportive is not the accurate word. I think it was just nonchalance. You know? Like, "okay, as long as you enjoy it, and just do what you want", right? (Kenny)

Some parents seem to be nonchalant about their participation in school choirs. At the surface level, it would seem that most parents are tolerant of their son's participation in their school choir. Another respondent provided an explanation for his parents' nonchalance as such:

> I mean to them (parents) it was just a CCA. If I had joined something else like guitar or band, I feel that the reaction would have been the same? It was more of something we had to do in secondary school. You can't avoid having a CCA so it didn't really make much of a difference whether I was in choir or in band, or in a uniformed group… when I told my parents that this CCA (choir) is guaranteed me to get the maximum CCA points, then they were like "sure, go for it". (Charles)

The above response provided by Charles' was a fair representation of how some parents responded to their son's choice of choir as a CCA. However, we will never truly know if his parents might have reacted in a similar fashion if he had joined another CCA. When asked to provide evidence or tangible examples for their parent's support towards their choice of CCA, a minority of respondents cited their parents having attended their choral performances on occasion. Based on the 30 interviews conducted, such cases were the exceptions to the norm. Yet, this act of attending a performance seemed to be the only concrete and tangible example of support parents had shown towards their son's participation in their school choir, and even so, the frequency of such examples were rare. In reality, most parents did not attend due to reasons such as busy schedules, and having little interest in choral music. Instead, it was more common to hear friends - specifically classmates, and schoolmates who are choristers themselves, lending support by attending the respondents' choral performances. Such findings indicate a rather muted level of support from parents as the family. There were no accounts of parents actively supporting their son's participation in school choirs in the form of verbal encouragement, or any hints of affirmation.

Furthermore, Kenny explained why his parents' seemingly nonchalant attitude was still considered support in his books that he recognised and appreciated:

> (Support comes in the form of) being genuinely happy when they come for my performances. I'm sure you understand Asian parents have a lot of ways to tell you that they don't approve of what you're doing. They don't have to tell you "hey, do something else". You know, they have their own ways in which when you know that they don't support you. (Kenny)

Through the concept of 'Asian parenting', Kenny suggested that his parents were supportive by coming to his performances. It seemed to indicate that he would 'take what he can get' in term of affirmative behaviour or support from parents.

Yet, Kenny's above response suggests that parents have other ways of showing opposition towards choir as a CCA for their sons. I will now elaborate on the various means by which parents express their opposition, and in doing so, reveal their gendered expectations for their sons.

There seemed to be a much more prevalent and pronounced disdain by parents towards choir as a CCA for their sons. This was evidenced as a large number of respondents revealing how their parents expressed opposition though the use of subtle, passive-aggressive language to second guess or question respondents' choice of listing choir as a CCA. As an example, Asyraf's response describes how his parents wanted him to join a certain archetype of CCA as opposed to choir:

> While we were exploring the CCAs, they (my parents) were … basically saying "Don't be soft, go and join an active CCA." So like, being soft... basically don't be not active. When Malays say being soft, it just means being girly. Don't be not a guy, like join something that is associated with guys and active, like what normal guys will do. (Asyraf)

In other words, they wanted their son to embody the form of masculinity they felt was 'normal' by choosing an active CCA. Specifically, normalcy for a male requires physical activity, not being 'soft' or 'girly'. Such a response indicates that a traditional interpretation of masculinity, one where men are characterised by traits such as strength, aggression and physical activity in opposition to feminine straits of docility and softness, continue to guide males' CCA choice in Singapore schools.

Asyraf's parents pushed back and discouraged the option to sing in a choir with the following:

> I initially put choir as my third choice instead of my second choice. That was before my parents signed the form… But even when I put it as a choice, when the choir option was there, they were already saying stuff like, "Then why you want to join choir?" They didn't actually say that it was for girls and stuff, but there was this negative feeling that I derived from those questions - "Why you want to join". (Asyraf)

His parents' discouragement towards his choice to sing in the school choir came in the form of questions, along the lines of "why choir", or "why do you want to join choir"? A similar conversation took place for Faiz with the following:

> Q: So what did your friends and family say when you chose to sing in a choir?
>
> Faiz: They said I'm crazy. On the get go, their initial reaction was "huh you crazy ah?" They were like "Why? Why did you join (choir)?" Then "You crazy ah, why you join?"… A mixture of bewilderment, puzzled, "Huh why you join that CCA. You never join the uniformed groups? No band? I remember you played instruments" That kind of thing.

In numerous cases, respondents such as Asyraf and Faiz found themselves in a difficult position where they had to justify their choice for choir. They needed to answer such questions because singing in a choir did not align with their parents' notions of masculinity, which expected males to join other 'active' CCAs involving outdoor physical activity such as sports and the uniformed groups. In such situations, "why choir" was expressed with such exclamation that it was akin to a rhetorical question. As such, they felt uncomfortable and awkward having to respond. Thus, topics such as CCA choice and choir became conversational points that had to be carefully navigated, or avoided.

Faiz recalled a situation where his mum would attempt to skirt the topic by omitting his participation in choir.

> For example, when you go for Hari Raya, then afterwards sometimes they will compare. I mean they will… compare things like "Oh what does your child take for secondary 3?" But besides that, they will ask things like "Hey your child which CCA?" Then my mother would… even when I had already left St John's (uniformed group), but she would say "Oh St John's". I mean I would be like "Ma, I already left it, but I'm still in choir". But

> she doesn't want to mention that first. Or if she does, she will be like "Ayah, don't know lah, he like to sing sing sing, whole day choir choir choir". Yeah, so while it wasn't something to be particularly embarrassed about, but it wasn't something that they were proud of? I mean, not that I'm expecting them to be like "wow look at my child, my child can sing!" (Faiz)

Asyraf and Faiz's accounts are examples of how their families expressed their disapproval towards their sons' choice of singing in choir as their CCA. In their parents' eyes, physically active CCAs such as sports or uniformed groups were not only preferred, but the correct CCA choices that embodied the traits associated with normative masculinity. By choosing to join the choir instead of these other activities, respondents such as Asyraf and Faiz were seen as 'crazy'. It might be a stretch to describe what parents felt towards their child as embarrassment. However, parents such as Faiz's were certainly not proud of their child's involvement in choir and were willing to omit choir and instead advertise their son as participating in a more gender appropriate activity such as the uniformed group.

6. Going with or against the flow

At this point, I have discussed the ways in which friends and family have expressed their non-supportive opinions towards respondents when they sang in choir. This ranged from the repeated task of having to justify and answer the rhetorical question of "why choir", the dismissive attitudes towards male choral singing, to the pejorative use of labels such as sissy, gay, pussy, or *guniang*. From a Butlerian perspective, these interactions served the purpose of naming and shaming the respondents with the abject identity. For many respondents, dealing with such red flagging of failed masculinity from their parents and friends was just something they had expected and learnt to deal with quietly. It was an unavoidable cost or side effect of singing in their school choirs as a male which had to be ignored.

However, a minority of respondents found success using certain strategies in response to these dreaded interactions from friends and families. I had the following interaction with

Charles on how he dealt with unfavourable attitudes towards his participation in choir during our interview:

> Charles: I definitely got a few remarks such as "Oh why are you joining the choir, but you are a guy".
>
> Q: How did that make you feel?
>
> Charles: Nothing much, I just told them "Yeah we'll look at the end of the day to see who gets minus 2 points for their CCA".

At a later point in the interview, Charles elaborated on how his friends came to understand his rationale for joining choir.

> They kind of understood why I picked choir in the first place. Yeah, and the CCA points just said it all. They were struggling, they were maybe getting minimum number of CCA points, which ultimately impacted their 'O' Level results. (Charles)

Charles found a successful strategy to circumvent any criticisms related to his participation in choir by positioning choir as a pragmatic choice towards better education admission scores. In other words, Charles highlighted how choir, unlike other CCAs, could be easily used to advance his educational goal of entering a junior college. To elaborate, students are given a grade based on their performance in respective CCAs at the end of their time in secondary schools. Achieving a good grade in a CCA can translate into a better admission score for one's GCE 'O' Level results, which would then be used to apply for further education. From Charles' perspective, joining choir was a sure fire way to achieve the highest grade for his CCA and hence, allow him to have a leg up above his non-choir friends academically. When it became evident that Charles' time spent in choir was going to pay off academically, his friends who questioned his involvement in choir recognised and turned silent. Notions about achieving masculinity seemed to be thrown out the window when they identified real and tangible rewards from singing in choir.

Another interviewee, Caleb, also expressed similar sentiments and dismissed the gendered criticisms that came his way for singing in a choir:

> You know what, if you want to mock me, go ahead. I'm gonna get a shit ton more CCA points than you... Ultimately, I know what I'm doing. I know why I'm doing this for, and if you want to look at my achievement records, it's going to be better than yours. So you can mock me for all I care. (Caleb)

However, his response towards the mockery and pejorative labels was not merely centred on getting good grades or amassing achievements alone. Additionally, Caleb cited a rather unique response, which was unheard of out of the 30 respondents for this study, with the following:

> I think one of these guys were like "Why you join choir? It's so gay". Then I looked at him and said "I spent my last 4 months in CCA with 50 to 60 girls. You spent your last month with 20 guys. Who is the gayer one here?" And then, his face just got so stunned. It was just hilarious at that point in time. (Caleb)

In his response, Caleb used the heteronormative desire expected of males to retort the label of being called 'gay'. This proved effective in silencing the gendered criticisms for singing in the choir as a male. In Caleb's strategic retort, singing in a choir where there are significantly more females did not make him 'gay' or homosexual, but instead, demonstrated the very opposite. As Caleb was in the presence of so many females, his choice to sing in choir was arguably linked to the pursuit of females as romantic partner(s). In contrast, Caleb pointed out that making a choice to join a CCA where males were the majority was a greater indicator of homosexuality. In a context where CCA choice was left up to students, making the choice to be around males as opposed to females was a more apparent and perhaps logical suggestion of one's homosexual desire. More importantly, the use of such a strategy sought to reinstate Caleb's sexuality as undoubtedly heterosexual, and in effect, made his gender identity as a masculine 'man' intelligible to others.

While such accounts to dispute the gendered criticisms of singing in the choir were exceptions to the norm, these strategies can be seen to be yet another way of accomplishing and negotiating masculinity. By disputing the gendered criticisms of singing in a choir, Charles and Caleb managed to regain and accomplish some semblance of masculinity to their peers. In

effect, these boys maintained their identities as 'normal' men who made rational and calculated choices, whether it was reframing the pursuit of choir to accrue an academic advantage, or reframing the choice of choir participation as an expression of compulsive heterosexual desire.

7. Positive experiences of men's choral singing

While the accounts of these 30 men reflect a gendered culture entrenched within the school and family spheres – one that espouses hegemonic masculinity as an avoidance of feminine identified activities(choir), this paper in no way seeks to portray singing in a choir as a negative experience for young men at every turn. Instead, this study simply documents that men's choice to sing in a choir has been flagged with gendered obstacles and pushbacks at various junctures, through seemingly innocuous means of communications and language that seek to police men's activities. As part of a phenomenological approach, this section will seek to document their motivations and success stories that inspired them to continue singing.

As interviewees participated in their respective choirs, many gained positive experiences that affirmed their choice to sing. The effect and takeaway of these positive experiences can be said to be lasting, as interviewees continued to make choral music beyond where they started during their teenage years. For many, choral singing has progressed into an adult hobby and passion. In fact, 22 out of 30 interviewees of this study had gone on to sing in a choir beyond the spaces of their secondary or junior college, while 15 out of 30 interviewees are still singing in a choir at the time of the interview.

Positive accounts of choral singing were expressed at different junctures of the interview:

> It wasn't just a CCA (Co-Curricular Activity). It was more like a place where you hang out with your friends after school. And you kind of build bonds that really last, even until now. (Charles)

> I just remember trying to be very good friends with everybody… They (other male choristers) stayed because of the connection. And eventually, everyone found value in what they were doing… I genuinely enjoy being in the choir. And so, if possible, I wanted to make as many people as I could feel the same way. (Kenneth)

The social aspects of making friends, bonding, and camaraderie played a pivotal role in establishing choir as a positive experience for these young men. Furthermore, one interviewee's response left a lasting impression, as he described his choral singing experience in junior college as the 'best 2 years of (his) life' with the following:

> Q: How was the experience? Did you enjoy it (choir)?
>
> Max: I loved it. It made it (junior college) the best two years of my life.
>
> Q: How was it the best two years of your life?
>
> Max: …So when my batch was just by ourselves, when we were J1s (Junior College Year 1) … we just clicked together really, really well. And every time you go to practice, there will be smiles and laughs… I didn't expect myself to laugh that much every time we practise… There were rocky parts along the way, but then we managed to overcome them pretty well, I guess. So after J1, it came to J2, and when the juniors came in, we kind of infected them with our enthusiasm, and our how we appreciated choral singing. So, it really felt to me like they were the 'Dream Team'… every time you come to practice… you couldn't have wished for a better group of people to be together with, because they get things done really well. There aren't really any big squabbles, and it just feels like everyone clicked together, just nice.

For Max, it was evident that being in a choir meant singing with friends, sharing this love of choral music with new members, and bringing newcomers subsequently on board. At the same time, Max's account also signals the significance of overcoming challenges as a feature of his positive experience.

Not all interviewees were fully on board with their choice of choir as a CCA at the start. As interviewees recalled their times as a newcomer, their journeys were more often than not, paved with challenges that they had to overcome as novices. This was especially true for interviewees who lacked prior musical experience. However, these challenges eventually became the cornerstones of their success stories after much struggle and acclimatisation. Eventually, these interviewees overcame the hurdles set before them, and gained a greater appreciation of the music. The following accounts provide insights into the journey one took as a new chorister:

> So I had previously participated in very individual sports prior to this… Yeah, so I told myself that I would stick with it (choir) for like maybe three to six months, and then see how… Choir was one of these super super tough (CCAs). They demand a lot of you like three times a week, you know? Yeah, so I never knew why some non-sport CCA would demand so much of you. But then, I realized there was this thing called musical excellence, just as sporting excellence. So at the start, I didn't really like it. Like you know, it's just to stand there for two hours singing, and I can't sit. It was pretty crap. It's quite tiring, you know, like... in sports you would be moving right? And I fidget a lot. So it was strange and tough in a new ways. I don't know how to really describe this, but making music is... when the music comes together, it is quite beautiful. (Simon)
>
> I really enjoyed it. The opportunity to make music and to harmonize together as 4 to 8 different sections, I think was quite challenging, because before that, I didn't have any experiences. So I really enjoyed the process where you learnt how to blend first with your section mates, and then to blend as a choir, as a whole, as one. (Damien)
>
> It was good. The experience I had was more of being a part of something bigger than myself. So the difference between being an individual musician and being in the choir, is that in the choir, you're never singing by yourself. Right? If you're singing by yourself, it's only during sectionals. (Sebastian)

As a prior sportsperson, Simon's joined the choir to try something new. He did not plan to stay with the choir for long, especially with his reservations towards a non-sport activity that demanded so much of his time. Similar to other respondents such as Damien and Sebastian, Simon appreciated when 'the music (came) together', and was imbued with a sense of accomplishment that made all the hard work worthwhile.

In other words, respondents enjoyed their time in choir for the beautiful music that they made and were proud of. Interviewees spoke about how they enjoyed learning about their individual singing voices. They were fascinated at how their individual voices were moulded, put together to achieve a musical blend, and in their words, produce beautiful music. To them, their experience of singing in a choir was unlike anything that they could have previously imagined, where their individual efforts were put towards a communal goal – to create and produce music that was greater than the sum of its parts.

While interviewees may have chosen to embark on choral singing in their schools for a different number and combination of reasons, whether it was to attempt something novel, to act against peer pressures, to pursue academic excellence, or to continue their musical

upbringing, these young men found meaning and joy in choir by forging friendships that was purposed towards the communal goal of music-making.

VI. Conclusion

This thesis began with the intention of documenting and understanding the male choral experience in Singapore schools. Additionally, I sought to understand how Connell's notion of hegemonic masculinity was present within the social context of CCA choice in Singapore schools. I was motivated to embark on this research due to my own lived experiences as a male chorister, which informed me that gender as a guiding influence plays a significant role in the stigmatisation of male choral singing as a feminine activity. I was curious to know what it was like for other males to have sung in their school choirs.

In summary, data gathered through interviews has indicated that choir is an unpopular CCA due to the associations with male femininity. Within the hierarchy of CCAs that accords ranks based on masculine attributes, choir is seen as a secondary choice and ranks poorly. This paper has shown that there are a push factors that drive males away from choir, as well as pull factors that attract males towards non-choir CCAs such as the sports or uniformed groups. The reasons are gendered in nature and speak towards the accomplishment of normative male masculinity. Males are expected to act as men, and they do so by participating in CCAs such as the sports and uniformed groups that embody traditionally masculine traits values. In this context, traditional masculinity refers to the antiquated concept of masculinity that is characterised by physical activity, and non-femininity. These values are taught and socialised by people at home and in schools, namely family, friends, classmates and school. For males who are considering or have joined choir, they face the social cost of being labelled, stigmatized, and questioned on their choice of choir. Ultimately, these acts serve to iterate and repudiate the abject identity of failed masculinity.

Unlike localized choral literature on Singapore's choral landscape such as Freer and Tan's (2014) paper, this paper sheds light on how the journey of male choral singing in Singapore schools are paved with gendered challenges, pushbacks and obstacles. All

respondents were acutely aware of the pejorative feminine labels and stigmas placed upon male choristers. While most respondents had to dismiss these criticisms and labels by simply ignoring them, a minority took a stand by arguing choir for its academic benefits, and potential for heterosexual males to express their heterosexual desires towards the female majority in choirs.

In the end, the overall experience of male choral singing as expressed by these 30 interviewees is in no way 'natural' due to innate biology. Boys do not express an aversion or dislike for choir due to their male genitalia or number of XY chromosomes. Instead, boys are taught and socialised through their adolescent years that choral singing is just simply not what a man should be doing. More importantly, they are culturally informed, whether through overt or covert gendered language, that there are more gender appropriate activities for a boy in his pursuit to be a 'man' through sports and uniformed groups. Boys experience an uphill journey when they choose to sing in Singapore school choirs, as they navigate through a socially constructed environment characterised by hegemonic masculinity. The people around these adolescent male choristers, as champions and investors of narrow hegemonic masculinity, iterate what is normal and appropriate, while repudiating the abnormal and abject as feminine and homosexual.

Limitations and future directions

The primary limitation of this study lies in its sample size of 30 interviewees. Themes surfaced from these 30 interviewees may be indicative of larger patterns and trends associated with male choral singing in Singapore schools. However, a larger sample size will be necessary to verify these findings and to achieve generalisability.

The data gathered from this research suggests that factors such as age of choristers, prestige of the school, and reputation of choirs do matter in how choir comes to be perceived

and imagined as a gendered activity. These factors can and will intersect to reshape the experience of male choral singing in Singapore schools. Based on the 30 interviews, gendered criticisms associated with boys singing in a choir seemed to diminish, or were at least were not as deeply felt, when interviewees progressed from secondary to junior college choirs. Interviewees typically framed the pejorative feminine insults dished out as a result of simple immaturity and childishness. These insults were lessened or simply ignored when the people around outgrew them.

Even at the secondary school level, the unequal participation rates between males and females may be mitigated in prestigious schools with reputed choirs that possess greater resources or administrative autonomy. Schools may be able to implement policies and strategies that boost the profile of its choirs. Furthermore, interviewees also reflected that certain junior college choirs were accomplished and reputable to an extent that both men and women had to 'line up' and 'fight' for a place through auditions. Hence, the extent of these aforementioned factors of age, prestige, reputation and even class towards the mitigation of gendered criticisms associated with male choral singing remains largely unexplored and deserves further examination. Future research that examines how school policies, CCA's financial funding, and reputation affect the male gendered experience will provide much a needed insight to advance this field of research.

Another limitation may be rooted in this study's methodology of having interviewees reflect on their past experiences. A social desirability bias may be at play, whereby interviewees consciously or unconsciously choose to present or omit relevant data to myself as a researcher. Within a school choral scene, masculinity may be enacted or embodied in certain physical or material ways that requires a researcher to identify and verify first hand. This could come in the form of minor physical details such as physical dressing, acts of physicality or even

behaviour. As such, participant observation studies using ethnographic data might be suitable to provide further insight on this topic.

Nevertheless, this paper has pulled back the curtain on the mechanics of gender that drive males towards certain CCAs in Singapore schools. It has shown how gender influences exist in a complex and overlapping social environment that reinforces and reproduces the notion that choir is unmasculine and meant for girls. It demonstrates how gendered discourse can translate into real consequences, where boys are socialised to avoid choral singing in school. For these adolescent boys, cues such as the existing level of male representation in choirs, the allure of other CCAs, the stigmatization through labelling, and the lack of affirmation through parental feedback can all come together and signal that joining the choir comes at a cost because is not the 'correct' or 'appropriate' CCA for boys. Consequently, most adolescent boys avoid choir to avoid being labelled as the abject. This begins the vicious cycle anew where other boys pick up on the same set of cues such as the lack of male representation in choirs, which leads to the reproduction of the same gendered message.

One's personal interest or preference in any particular sport or activity may be highly influenced by how individuals and other groups such as family and friends come to define and police appropriate masculinity. It begs the question, 'do adolescent males truly prefer these activities as humans with agency, or are males simply boxed in as gendered creatures who are socially pushed into choosing active CCAs such as the sports or uniformed groups?' This question is exceptionally pertinent when we consider how gender and gendered ideas are socialised during early childhood (Hall 2005). As there is still much room for localised Singapore research to be conducted, I believe and hope that this thesis can be used as a form of preliminary evidence that informs and inspire future research on gender and its formation within Singapore's choral scene.

VII. References

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