2014

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The Self-Perceptions of Young Men as Singers in Singaporean Pre-University Schools

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Abstract
The persistence of young men in choral singing activity has been widely studied in North America, with emerging parallel research in Europe (Freer, 2013; Harrison & Welch, 2012). There has been little such research in Asia. This study, of twelve young men enrolled in Singapore’s pre-university schools, collected both written narratives and drawn imagery to explore participants’ musical identities, perceptions of choral singing, and reasons for continued or discontinued participation in choral music. The report details the analytical methods used for understanding the visual imagery (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Four a priori hypotheses were developed based on relevant, existing literature (Bell, 2001). Findings of the study related to these hypotheses were as follows: 1) individual decisions to enrol in choral music were mediated by peer influence; 2) individual decisions to remain or withdraw from choral singing were influenced by the perception of both individual vocal skills and musical issues within the ensemble; 3) there was no stated relationship between choral music and either masculinity or sexuality; and 4) there was no stated impact of the adolescent changing voice on choral participation or self-perception as a singer.

Keywords
boys, choral, persistence, possible selves, Singapore, singing

Article
The purpose of this study was to gather and analyze the visual depictions and written narrative comments of Singaporean older adolescent and early adult males about their experiences and
self-perceptions as singers. The data were analyzed to explore the reasons of these young men for continued or discontinued participation in school vocal/choral music. This study was designed to contribute to the growing body of related research about males’ perceptions of singing, school vocal music education, and participation in Western-style choral music activity.

Existing, complementary research has been limited to the United States and Australia (Elorriaga, 2011; Freer, 2009; Harrison & Welch, 2012), with some related research in Europe (Freer, 2013; Elorriaga, 2011; Freer & Ververis, 2011). There has been no comparable study in Singapore. Similar to Kennedy’s (2002) study of male students in United States schools, this project sought to examine Singaporean males’ perspectives of their musical skills, knowledge, attitudes, perceptions of singing in classrooms and choral settings, preferred repertoire, and motivations to sing.

The study’s theoretical framework was consistent with the “possible selves” approach to understanding the development of identity characteristics. Possible selves “represent individuals’ ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming, and thus provide a conceptual link between cognition and motivation” (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954). The surveys distributed to study participants followed the protocol developed by Freer and Bennett (2012) to explore self-perceptions of musical identity. Analysis of the resulting visual and textual data utilized the visual social semiotic methods of Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 2006) and Jewitt and Oyama (2001). A secondary analysis followed the mixed methodological approach of Bell (2001), which was developed for the interpretation of visual data.

**Choral Music Education in Singapore**

Singapore is a city-state in Southeast Asia located off the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula. Originally a Malay fishing village, it was converted by Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles of the British East India Company into a key British trading post in 1819. Subsequently, immigrants mostly from China, India and the Malay Archipelago arrived, transforming Singapore into a multicultural society. It became independent from Britain on August 31, 1963 and joined Malaya, Sabah, and Sarawak to form the Federation of Malaysia. The merger, however, did not last long, and on August 9, 1965, Singapore became an independent state, the Republic of
Singapore (Abshire, 2011). Modern Singapore has a resident population of 3.7 million, which comprises Chinese (74.1%), Malays (13.4%), Indians (9.2%), and others (3.3%) (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2010).

Schooling for adolescents is configured differently throughout the world. For example, North American middle schools typically house students in grades 5–8 (ages 10–14), whereas the closest equivalent in Singapore is the secondary school, housing students in grades 7–10 (typically ages 11–16). The North American high school is analogous to Singaporean Junior College with students in grades 11 and 12 (ages 17–18). Junior Colleges offer two year programs for students intending to progress to university studies. Singaporean Polytechnic schools are three-year vocational schools that award professional diplomas and include students from ages 17–19. Graduates of Polytechnic schools may elect to continue their education at the university level.

The Ministry of Education manages education in Singapore, as it formulates and implements policies at the state level. Primary education typically begins at age seven, lasts six years, and culminates in the national Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). Based on the students’ performance at the PSLE, they are streamed into one of the following five tracks: the six-year Integrated Program, four-year Special stream, four-year Express stream, five-year Normal Academic stream, and four-year Normal Technical stream. Students in the Special, Express and Normal Academic streams typically take another national examination at the conclusion of their course. They are then assigned to a junior college or polytechnic based on their performance at the examination and expressed preferences. Students in the Normal Technical stream usually continue their education at the Institute of Technical Education (Singapore Ministry of Education, 2009).

Music education in Singapore can broadly be classified into three categories: music as an academic subject, the general music program, and after-school performing arts ensembles. Music as an academic subject caters to a relatively small proportion of students and is generally offered to students with musical backgrounds. It incorporates the study of Western classical music and Asian musical traditions, performance and composition (Singapore Examinations and Assessment Board, 2012). The general music program is intended to be broad-based and includes the singing and playing of musical instruments, creating, improvising, listening, and the learning of musical concepts and music from diverse cultures (Singapore Ministry of Education,
After-school performing arts ensembles are offered to students as part of their co-curricular activities (CCAs). As a reflection of Singapore’s multiculturalism, a wide range of ensembles are offered, including band, choir, orchestra, Chinese orchestra, gamelan, guitar, harmonica, and handbells. Although participation in these ensembles is not mandatory during secondary school (students may instead, for example, elect sports) and ensembles are usually held outside of curricular hours, students receive CCA points which they may use for junior college/polytechnic admissions and scholarship applications (Yee, 2003).

The choir is one of the core CCAs in Singapore schools (Tan & Yee, 2003; Toh, 2011; Yee, 2003). It has a long history which dates back to colonial Singapore. During the nineteenth century, Christian missionaries brought in Western choral music to Singapore in the form of hymn-singing in churches and mission schools (Tan, 2000). In time, choral singing spread to the local communities and the number of choirs increased sharply, particularly in the 1970s. Chinese choirs headed by pioneers such as Leong Yoon Pin and Tay Lee Howe were especially vibrant (Ting, Leong, & Tan, 1990). By the second half the twentieth century, choirs had entered mainstream schools as an after-school extra-curricular activity (later renamed co-curricular activity or simply CCA). The majority of CCA choral members cease group singing upon completion of secondary school, and “pursuing choral singing for the sake of the art itself is rare” (Toh, 2011, p. 16). Still, choral music in the Western tradition is growing in popularity in Singaporean secondary schools and through a large number of professional and semi-professional choral organizations (Toh, 2011).

The Singapore school choir differs from its American counterpart in two respects: first, it is generally not conducted during academic curricular hours, and second, directors are usually external instructors rather than full-time staff of the school (Yee, 2003). An estimated five percent of school populations participate in school choirs (Tan, 2000). As a reflection of Singapore’s multi-ethnic make-up, school choirs sing in a variety of languages (although English predominates) and learn a wide range of repertoire including sacred music, folk music, popular tunes, musicals and contemporary works. Major activities include school performances, public concerts, and the Singapore Youth Festival (SYF) Central Judging of Choirs, a national adjudication held once every two years whereby choirs are awarded either the rating Gold with Honors, Gold, Silver, Bronze, or Certificate of Participation by an international panel of adjudicators (Tan, 2000; Tan, 2005; Yee, 2003). Schools that consistently perform well are
placed in the choral excellence program, an initiative started by the Ministry of Education in 1987 to groom choirs for the highest standards of artistic excellence (Yee, 2003). Singapore school choirs have risen in standards over the years, as attested by numerous competitive awards in international choral events such as the World Choir Games, the Welsh Eisteddfod, and the Riva Del Garda International Choral Competition. Graduates from school choral programs have gone on to teach music in Singapore schools, direct choirs, and perform with the Singapore Lyric Opera amongst other professional activities.

Participants
Study participants were 12 young men ranged in age from 17 to 19 years old and attended either Junior College (6 individuals) or Polytechnic school (4 at one school and 2 at another). All schools in this study enrolled male and female students, and all choirs open to male singers were mixed-gender ensembles; there were no male-only choirs in these schools. The participating young men were selected by their schools’ music teachers to be divided evenly, with four participants in each of three groups: 1) Consistent singers—those who viewed themselves as musically successful and enthusiastic participants in school choral music; 2) Former choral singers—those who viewed themselves as musically successful participants but who were not enthusiastic about their participation in school choral music and had withdrawn; and 3) Never choral singers—those who had never participated in school choral music regardless of their musical affinities or self-perception of vocal ability.

Method and Hypotheses
The young men were given a survey that prompted them to complete a series of three drawings depicting themselves as singers in the present, as future hoped-for possible ‘singer’ selves, and as future to-be-avoided possible singer selves. The drawings were done with black pencil on white paper. The participants were asked to describe and comment on the drawings in corresponding narrative comments. Each participant therefore contributed three drawing/text pairings. For instance, the first portion of the survey began with the following prompt: “In the space below, please draw a picture of you as a singer. If you sing in a choir, you can include that in the drawing. Include what you like and don’t like about singing. Include anyone or anything that has influenced you to become the singer you are today.” On the next page, the prompt began, “On the lines below, please explain the picture that you drew about yourself as a singer.” The
remaining visual/textual prompts followed a similar format and inquired about “the singer you’d like to be in the future” and “the singer you’d like to avoid becoming.”

The visual and textual prompts in the survey followed the protocol developed by Freer and Bennett (2012) to explore self-perceptions of musical identity in older adolescents and young adults. The visual/textual surveys were distributed and completed during school hours as stipulated by school administrators. The average completion time was just under 28 minutes. All interactions with study participants conformed to strict guidelines approved by the respective Singaporean school administrations and the Institutional Review Board of the primary researcher’s university.

The initial stage of analysis followed the visual social semiotic methods of Kress and van Leeuwen (2001, 2006) and Jewitt and Oyama (2001). The derived analytical data was then examined using the mixed methodological protocol of Bell (2001), in which coded visual qualitative content is subsequently analyzed using quantitative techniques. One element of Bell’s approach is a priori hypothesis development. Based on existing research with boys from Europe and North America, four hypotheses were identified: these Singaporean young men would state that 1) issues of masculinity and/or sexuality influenced their decisions to sing in school choirs, 2) the experience of adolescent voice change influenced their decisions to sing in school choirs, 3) peers influenced their decisions to sing in school choirs, and 4) musical issues influenced their decisions to sing in school choirs.

The visual imagery contributed by the participants provided the primary level of analysis, with the narrative data serving to support and clarify the visual. Visual analysis was rooted in visual semiotics, where semiotics refers to the understanding of signs, or meanings, embedded within the data. In the case of visual semiotics, schema must be devised to interpret these signs and derive meaningful understandings. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) refer to visual imagery as containing both narrative information that relates a process or event and conceptual information that relates stable essences or states of being. Narrative information is primarily conveyed through compositional relationships, called “vectors,” between elements or objects in the image (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 59). In this study’s drawings depicting actions or unfolding events, narrative information was extracted by examining several of the many vectors described by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). These vectors included left/right, top/bottom, and centrality.
within the boundaries of the drawing space. In contrast, drawings that did not illustrate either action or process were inferred to depict conceptual, unchanging information.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2001, 2006) posit that there are four elements of compositional meaning embedded within visual imagery. These include: 1) information value, signified by the placement of the elements in the composition; 2) framing, signified by how the elements are connected or disconnected from one another; 3) salience, signified by the relative prominence of visual elements; and 4) modality, or the congruence of the image with what might be visible in reality (as described by Jewitt & Oyama, 2001, pp. 147–152).

Analysis of this study’s visual imagery proceeded accordingly in three phases. First, images were classified as containing either narrative or conceptual information. Second, narrative images were examined according to the directional vectors of left to right, top to bottom, and centrality. Third, both narrative and conceptual images were analyzed for the four elements of compositional meaning: information value, framing, salience, and modality.

It must be noted that the analysis of directional vectors, particularly that of left to right, can be problematic when conducting cross-cultural studies of visual imagery (Jewitt & Oyama, 2001).

The four official languages of Singapore (English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil) are each written in a left to right orientation, whereas some of the other languages encountered in Singaporean culture employ different directional orientations in written form. The researchers chose to analyze direction using a left to right orientation because all participants were either native English speakers or bilingual, and they communicated exclusively in English for this project.

The Visual and Textual Data

Visual and textual information from the responses of three participants is detailed below, including an analytical discussion of each data set. All images for this study (n=36) were analyzed according to the parameters established by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). The excerpts below present examples of this analysis with references to the supporting information from Kress and van Leeuwen. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

Neo (Consistent Singer)

For his first set of drawings and descriptions, Neo was asked to draw a picture of himself as a singer in the present:
This first image contributed by Neo contains four sections. In the upper left hand corner, two individuals are shown in a verbal altercation. Elsewhere in the top third of the drawing, a choir is shown with an angry individual, perhaps one of the two individuals in the earlier section, in the center of the ensemble, positioned thirteenth from the right in the first row. This same individual is shown in the two scenes in the center third of the drawing, as a solitary figure without community support in the first, and presumably deceased and alone in the third. In each of these two images, other individuals are looking at the central figure but without obvious physical or emotional proximity. The final section, the bottom third of the drawing, shows three facial expressions progressing from happy to sad. These three emotional states may be vertically related to the rest of the drawing: the happy state may relate vertically to images with human interaction, while the sad state may relate vertically to images without human interaction. Neo’s first drawing can be viewed as containing both a narrative description of events (verbal altercation followed by working within a community of singers), and a conceptual description of the benefits of singing with peers. Neo’s portrayal can be read as a left-to-right text in three lines,
or it can be viewed vertically from bottom to top. The most realistic images (altercation, singing in a choir) are presented at the top, with the most abstract images (emotions) presented at the bottom. In Western cultures, drawn images typically contain the most important information at the top (Jewitt & Oyama, 2001). One possible interpretation of compositional meaning within Neo’s first drawing is that singing in a choir both ameliorates daily frustrations and leads toward more persistent states of happiness and satisfaction.

Neo’s written text conveyed thought fragments rather than complete sentences. In his narrative accompanying the initial drawing, Neo focused on the positive aspects of singing in choirs and referenced the left-hand side of his drawing (indicating higher levels of human interaction):

Choir allows us to band together, being able to just immerse oneself in not only the company of valued treasured friendships. The fulfillment and excitement of singing just cannot be described in words. The joy of performing, being in the spotlight. Just the harmony, the resonance and chord progressions of song just always send a chill down my spine every time I hear them. Especially when I sing in the top choirs I am reaching new heights, singing at a world standard. The emotions cannot be explained.

Neo described what he disliked about singing in choirs, referencing the right-hand and lower portions of his drawing:

I do not like substandard singing, cannot be tolerated. Politics and fighting due to dislike behind the scenes, arguments, harming the unity of the choir. Want choir to be a family, how to sing together and feel the song together. Do not like too much competition as in only being in competition focus – must be a holistic value.

Neo was also asked about people or events that influenced his current singing activity. He responded:

To become the singer I am today, living under my brother’s shadow has although demoralized me greatly but pushed me forward. Idolizing brothers or others’ performances. Comparing myself to others and constantly getting reprimanded from younger singers for substandard singing has pushed me further and they taught me not to be able to tolerate substandard singing, giving me a perfectionist character.
Neo’s second image/text pairing portrayed a desire to sing in choir as a stress release from work, but with concern that “the busy hectic life of work and family will, of course, come first, and losing touch with music might make me rusty and, as such, not dare to go back to singing.” His final pairing, where he was asked to describe the singer he would like not to become, evidenced concern that his voice might “mature,” or lose flexibility, while his “passion grows.” His potential actions to forestall this possibility consisted of “work harder, get to different experts in singing to avoid this from happening, and take voice lessons.” Neo’s final, to-be-avoided image was of him singing alone, whereas his earlier images featured him singing in groups.

**Bryan (Former Choral Singer)**

For his second set of drawings and descriptions, Bryan was asked to draw a picture of himself as the singer that he would hope to become:

**Figure 2**

*Bryan’s Second Drawing*

From the bottom upward, Bryan lists several steps on a time continuum from the present to the future: practice, time, opportunities, and good teacher. In the separate box at the top of the
drawing, Bryan notes that his studies “take up a lot of time” and that it is “difficult to juggle both.” Bryan’s accompanying written text:

I think a lot of time, hard work and practice is needed to achieve results for anything, and singing is no exception. A good teacher is also needed because I think it is extremely hard to practice without anyone correcting your mistakes. I think it is extremely hard to juggle both choir and studies. Singing takes up a lot of time and in order to be good at singing, one must practice constantly. However, in Singapore, an emphasis is placed on studies and choral music is not a career. Most people would choose to sing in choir if they could. So what I think that may stop me from becoming a singer are enough time to practice, and lack of opportunities for singers in Singapore, even choral singers.

The drawing by Bryan can be analyzed by applying some of the parameters defined by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). First, there is a clear vector from the bottom left to the top right of the image, rising from what is present or “real” to the future or “ideal” (p. 186). Second, because the image involves stages of development, or phenomena, the hierarchy can be viewed as a transactional process where the person depicted (Bryan) both arrives at and is transformed by each stage (see Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, pp. 67–68). This type of image design can be interpreted to connote a conversion process, much as a runner in a relay race both receives and passes the baton (p. 68). The conversion process shown by Bryan illustrates his desire to progress from his present state as a singer to an idealized state equal to his music teachers, perhaps even becoming a musical leader himself. The external, negative influence of studies may preclude this hope from being realized. The boxed image of “studies” is on a parallel plane with Bryan’s idealized musical self, potentially symbolizing an intransigent problem. In this sense, this drawing’s modality, or congruence with reality (pp. 154–156, 172), connotes its most important point of information: Bryan’s hoped-for possible self as a singer may be threatened by the external realities of his academic pursuits.

Bryan’s view of the problem is found in the totality of his three sets of data. Bryan’s first pairing of image and text showed him singing in a choir, positioned in the center of a large ensemble. He spoke of enjoying choir “because it gave me the opportunity to perform for others, and the feeling after every performance cannot be replicated by any other means.” In contrast, “what I didn’t like was the huge emphasis on awards and competition; I think the focus of choirs in
Singapore is not on learning how to perform the music well, but rather on how to best achieve the honors awards and giving what the judges want.” While Bryan enjoyed “making good music,” he ultimately decided to withdraw from choral singing due to the stress of competition and emphasis on the “group over the individual.” Bryan’s final contributions indicated that he felt there were not “adequate opportunities to go for vocal training” for people who were not in the top choirs, and that he wanted to “spend more time on singing” and learning “skills of vocal technique.”

**Ian (Never a Choral Singer)**

Ian’s initial set of drawings and commentary focused on his current state as a singer. None of the young men surveyed for this project indicated that they disliked singing or that they were not singers themselves. However, one-third of the participants, by study design, had not participated in choral activity. Ian’s drawing and comments focused on singing in non-choral settings.

Figure 3

*Ian’s First Drawing*
Ian’s drawn image shows the influence on singing of both external factors (the television programs “American Idol,” “X-Factor,” and “Sing-Off”), and the importance of individual work, shown here as practicing at home (see the upper right-hand corner). These lead to the image’s primary depiction of singing with and for others. Ian’s accompanying commentary states:

There aren’t many avenues present for a beginner to sing anywhere without getting their dreams crushed real quick. One can dream big, but only dare to sing at home. I like singing because I can express myself, to express my feelings. What I don’t like is my vocal range, and my inability to sing as well as others. Also, there isn’t a real decisive gauge or set of standards for singing, so it’s frustrating to know how to get better. My standards are set by musical reality shows and television shows like “Glee” that inspire me as they prove and show that even normal people get to sing and enjoy themselves musically.

Ian’s first image evidences the element of centrality that Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) found to be common among the work of young artists in Singapore. It is relatively uncommon for
Westerners to position the most important information in the center of a drawing; rather, Western images typically place items on a continuum from left to right, depicting a progression from “given” to “new” information, or from bottom to top as a representation of “real” to “ideal” information (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, pp. 179–181, 186). Here, Ian’s drawing shows two areas of central focus, the guitar and the lead singer. The saliency of these two focus areas is established by their relative size in the drawing; Ian clearly means for these to be the focus of attention (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), with the upper image as dominant due to the weight of its “cloud” frame (pp. 203–203). In his subsequent text descriptions, Ian establishes that he is presently a guitar player (the real) who would like to be a solo rock singer (the ideal). Ian effectively combines both linear imagery with centrally-focused imagery to depict how he might achieve his goal: by watching, analyzing, and learning from successful musicians in popular culture.

Ian’s second set of contributions included a drawn flow-chart of steps necessary to become a “singing star on earth,” including taking voice and dance lessons in private and group formats. He noted that he did not know how he would identify opportunities to engage in these lessons, since “Singapore isn’t really a place that encourages such artistic development” unless “you are already a good singer or the teacher likes you.” Ian’s frustration was further evidenced in his third pairing of image and text as he envisioned his only future musical opportunity being “rap or goth music” that “doesn’t involve high standards of singing.”

**Emergent Thematic Categories**

Both visual and textual data were analyzed for emergent themes. HyperTRANSCRIBE™ and HyperRESEARCH™ software facilitated transcription, coding and analysis. Analysis utilized a Grounded Theory approach (Glaser, 2002; Charmaz, 2006), beginning with open coding, then selective coding, and subsequent theoretical sampling and theoretical coding (Glaser, 1978). Two graduate students at the primary author’s university were employed to ensure reliability of the discourse analysis during the stages of open and selective coding. The primary author first coded the material, and then presented a list of codes and raw transcriptions of the textual data. The two graduate students coded each transcription independently, reaching an agreement level of 90.23%. These two sets of coding were compared to the set completed by the primary author, with agreement levels of 87.92% and 89.11%. The primary author analyzed the text during the
theoretical coding stage, and then presented a list of codes and corresponding text excerpts to the secondary author. Agreement was common, with only minor disagreements resolved through discussion.

Analysis for this study facilitated the classification of narrative data by 24 emergent codes that were subsequently organized by themes. Five themes emerged as important to a majority of these young men as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.**

*Prevalence of themes*

<table>
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<th>Theme</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Notes</th>
<th>Representative Quotations</th>
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| Solo singing versus choral singing   | 100%         | All participants               | “The picture I drew shows me performing live as the vocalist in front of a band. This is because rock music suits my musical taste and I prefer singing songs that I listen to rather than to singing choral songs.”  
*Lim, former choral singer*          |
| Standards of musical excellence      | 83%          | All but two who had never sung in choir | “I do not like frilly, twinkly, light-hearted songs that test the ability of the tongue and thrill too easily.”  
*Ryan, former choral singer*          |
|                                      |              |                                | “I like it when the entire group combines their abilities and sings as one voice. Singing, done well, is an expressive language for when I am unable to express myself due to a dilemma. But, I am a bass and love low notes. I do not like why
### Findings, Discussion and Implications

As stated earlier, four a priori hypotheses were developed in accordance with the mixed methodological protocol of Bell (2001), designed specifically for the interpretation of visual

| Longitudinal experience of singing, youth to adulthood | 83% | All but two who had never sung in choir | “Singing is my hobby and interest. I want to sing, maybe not in choir, with my friends once I become an adult. If plan A (choir) fails to succeed, just proceed with plan B (sing in a band with friends).” |
| Musical issues and/or vocal self-perception as reasons for singing or not singing | 75% | Negative self-perception: All non-current choral singers. | “I do not sing in a choir and tend to look at myself as a bathroom-singer because, the only place I sing is in the bathroom when I am showering so nobody will ever hear me.” |
| Musical issues and/or vocal self-perception as reasons for singing or not singing | 75% | Positive self-perception: One current singer. | “I have been given a rare musical gift.” |
| Friendships and peers as reason for singing | 66% | All who had sung in choir | “I like the fact that I can make a lot of new friends while singing and, of course singing in a whole group of people is also one of the things that I like.” |

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**Joshua, former choral singer**

basses always do not get the main melody part in an SATB choir.”

**Dean, consistent singer**

“Singing is my hobby and interest. I want to sing, maybe not in choir, with my friends once I become an adult. If plan A (choir) fails to succeed, just proceed with plan B (sing in a band with friends).”

**Chua, never a choral singer**

“I do not sing in a choir and tend to look at myself as a bathroom-singer because, the only place I sing is in the bathroom when I am showering so nobody will ever hear me.”

**Zhou, consistent singer**

“I have been given a rare musical gift.”

**Koh, consistent singer**

“I like the fact that I can make a lot of new friends while singing and, of course singing in a whole group of people is also one of the things that I like.”
imagery. In Bell’s approach, coded visual qualitative content is subsequently analyzed using quantitative techniques in relation to pre-stated hypotheses. Based on existing research with boys from Europe and North America, four hypotheses were identified, with the following results from this study of young male singers in Singapore.

(1) Singaporean young men would state that issues of masculinity and/or sexuality influenced their decisions to sing in school choirs. This hypothesis was not supported by the data, as no participant made mention of these topics. This finding is potentially important for at least two reasons. First, much of the existing research base is dominated by these themes, regardless of the types of schools (private or public) or choral ensembles (single-sex versus mixed). This study is a counter-balance to the prevalence of gender and sexuality-oriented views toward the persistence of males in choral singing (see Harrison & Welch, 2012). Second, the present study’s population of Singaporean males reflects a relatively unstudied subset of choral singers. It could be that Western-style choral singing in Singapore does not share connotations of gender and/or sexuality that appear to be prevalent in Europe and North America. It might be that the practice of choral music (rehearsing and performing) is different in Singapore than in Europe and North America. Or, Singaporean males may simply be reluctant to raise issues of gender and sexuality in settings such as a formal research study. Further research is warranted with regard to these issues.

(2) Singaporean young men would state that the experience of adolescent voice change influenced their decisions to sing in school choirs. Again, this hypothesis was not supported by these data as no participant referenced the male voice change process. Though this is a prevalent theme in the European and North American research base, much of that research has linked the average timing of the adolescent male voice change with the often concurrent transition from middle school to high school (see Freer, 2012). Recent research indicates that the onset of male puberty/voice change is trending earlier and now occurs between ages 9 and 10, the age at which many North American boys transition from elementary to middle school (Herman-Giddens et al., 2012). Singaporean students do not typically experience a transition in schools at the same time as the adolescent voice change (they change schools at age 13), and that reason alone may provide a valid rationale for these results. It should be restated here that the age of the young men in this study ranged from 17 to 19 years, so these Singaporean participants had passed through the peak of the adolescent voice change process. However, studies from other parts of
the world have included similar-aged males who reported that their earlier voice change was pivotal to their decision to continue or withdraw from singing activity (e.g. Freer, 2013, 2009; Harrison & Welch, 2012). The implication may be that male attitudes toward choral singing at least partly result from a society’s structure of schooling and how it relates to the developmental stages of adolescent youths.

(3) Singaporean young men would state that peers influenced their decisions to sing in school choirs. This hypothesis was supported as 66% of participants explicitly referenced the influence of peers on their decision to sing, while all but one participant (92%) referenced the desire for peer support or admiration in some aspect of their comments or drawings. All consistent and former members of choral ensembles referenced specific instances of when friends either urged them to join choir or encouraged them to remain enrolled. Conversely, no study participant spoke of negative peer pressure as a reason for withdrawing from or not engaging in choral singing. One possible explanation may be that the school choirs known to these young men were all of high quality. Singing in choir might therefore have been viewed as desirable, with the primary reasons for non-participation being attributable to the potential singer. In other words, decisions not to sing appear to have been less about the choir and more about each young man’s determination of personal vocal ability and/or the demands of other responsibilities and goals.

None of these young men spoke of a dislike of group singing, though each participant who had never sung in choirs referenced a dislike of Western choral music. No participant disparaged singing in choir, with each young man speaking to the match between choral singing and his personal affinities and goals (see Abrahams, 2012). For these young men, decisions to join choir were influenced by peers, while decisions not to sing in choirs were made individually.

(4) Singaporean young men would state that musical issues influenced their decisions to sing in school choirs. This hypothesis was supported, as all participants referenced either the desire to participate in high-quality musical experiences or the perception that their personal musical skills prevented them from participation. Specifically, all those who persisted in choral singing credited the high musical quality elicited by their choral teachers, and all those who withdrew from choral singing spoke of a mismatch between conductor-led ensembles and their desire for musical autonomy—often expressed in conjunction with a desire to become solo pop singers. This corroborates much of the existing literature concerning large ensemble participation in secondary schools, suggesting that while ensemble participation is a positive motivator for some
students, it can be a negative motivator for others (Allsup, 2012; Allsup & Benedict, 2008; Kratus, 2007; Williams, 2011). All study participants, even those who had never sung in choir, related a desire to improve their technical skills of singing. Decisions to not sing were frequently related to a perceived lack of congruity between rehearsing for choral performance and the desire to gain personal singing skills. This skill-based focus is consistent with other research about what young males want to gain from school-based vocal music instruction (Freer, 2013). The data from this study provides support for an array of school-based musical activities designed to engage students with varying affinities and goals.

This study adds to the growing body of narrative research projects designed to address the longstanding decline in male choral participation in adolescence and young adulthood. Spurred by the call of American choral conductor Leonard van Camp (1987) to move from conjecture toward hearing the opinions of boys themselves, the scope of these studies has broadened beyond North America to many of the countries where Western choral music is studied and performed in schools. The survey and analysis techniques employed in this study may contribute to an extension of such research activity to areas of the globe where it is practically difficult to arrange in-person interviews. Though the small sample size of this study ($n = 12$) limits generalization, analysis of this study’s data demonstrated that the combination of visual and textual information revealed greater detail than either would have individually revealed. Yet, if the combination of narrative and visual data is deemed beneficial to ongoing research about boys and singing (or any other topic), theoretically grounded methods and tested procedures must be developed for the analysis of the images. The detail provided in this report is intended to inform this effort.

The Singaporean young men in this study contributed textual and visual data to express their perceptions of school choral music as related to their own personal musicianship. In some ways they were similar to young males studied elsewhere, specifically in the value placed on friendships, camaraderie, and musical quality. They differed from young males studied in other parts of the world in their stated perceptions of the relationship between choral singing and masculinity, sexuality, and the adolescent changing voice. These similarities and differences may be consequential, for they imply that the persistence of males in choral singing might be related to the structure/timing and processes of choral music instruction more than to the repertoire and performance characteristics of Western choral music itself.
References


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1Because of author affiliations, in this article a comparison is made between schools designed for adolescents in North America and in Singapore. Secondary schooling in Singapore extends one to two years beyond the “high school” experience familiar to North American readers. North American high schools typically serve pupils aged 15 to 18. Secondary schools in Singapore serve pupils aged 11 to 16. This article focuses on young men in the first two years of post-secondary school: the Pre-University years. More information can be found at: www.moe.gov.sg