
Representation of *Kathoey* in Thai Song Discourse: A Comparative Analysis of Self-Representation and External Perceptions

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Abstract

This study examines the representation of *kathoey* identity in Thai song discourse, comparing songs by *kathoey* and cisgender singers. Using a combination of corpus linguistics and queer linguistics, this study concentrates on linguistic patterns and thematic representations in two sub-corpora of Thai songs from 2004 to 2024. Key findings reveal that while cisgender singers' songs frequently rely on stereotypes and external observations, *kathoey*-authored songs offer more nuanced portrayals of community dynamics, identity struggles, and lived experiences. This study uncovers novel themes such as intra-group discrimination, hierarchies within the *kathoey* community, and ageism. Additionally, this study critiques the perpetuation of cisgenderism in Thai song discourse, highlighting how language use can both challenge and reinforce existing power structures. Moreover, the increased use of the term *kathoey* in *kathoey* singers' songs suggests an active linguistic reclamation process.

Keywords: *Kathoey* identity; Thai song discourse; corpus linguistics, queer linguistics; cisgenderism; gender representation

Introduction

Recent Thai studies have directly investigated the representation of *kathoey*, broadly referring to transgender women and feminine gay men (Käng, 2012; Wisuttiapat, 2023), in Thai songs across local dialects and genres. These studies highlight a positive shift (e.g., self and social acceptance) and persistent negative images indicative of gender discrimination (e.g., unrequited love in heterosexual relationships; Kothdee et al., 2024; Sakyai, 2022; Thipphana, 2022). However, the unwarranted involvement of heteronormativity in producing *kathoey*-related meta-narratives has been less emphasized,

underscoring critical controversies over sociopolitical apparatuses vis-à-vis cisgender women and men whose gender matches their birth sex (Aultman, 2014)—the non-*kathoey* (Ocha, 2023) singers. Arguably, cisgender men appear to be the dominant singers of the subject matter, such as the song titled *Sai Lueang* (“Backdoor Goers”), perpetuating patriarchal concepts in Thai society (Roopsa-ard & Jantarangsee, 2021). Nonetheless, this study contends that the (mis)representation of *kathoey* individuals in Thai songs also involves female privilege associated with cisgenderism (Lennon & Mistler, 2014) based on the small yet existing number of contributions from female singers.

This study posits that cisgenderism ingrains unhealthy habits of further marginalizing and silencing *kathoey* individuals, perpetuating a distorted perception through unnecessarily homogenized preconceptions of their identity. This language-based critical study thus aims to scrutinize the potentially dominant singers responsible for perpetuating previous representations by comparing two sub-corpora of Thai songs contributed by *kathoey* and cisgender male and female singers focusing on divergent language patterns and thematic perceptions of *kathoey* identity. To explore the intersection of language, gender, and sexuality, this study employs the combination of corpus linguistics and queer linguistics (Moschenbacher, 2018). The research questions are:

RQ1: How do the linguistic patterns and thematic representations of *kathoey* identity in Thai songs differ between self-identified *kathoey* and non-*kathoey* cisgender singers?

RQ2: What do these differences reveal about the perpetuation of cisgenderism in Thai song discourse?

Literature Review

Corpus Linguistics and Queer Linguistics

Baker (2014) defines corpus linguistics as a methodology studying language through large collections of authentic texts, with Baker (2018) noting its suitability for examining discourses of sexuality and revealing subtle prejudices. However, Motschenbacher (2011) argues that quantitative corpus linguistics may reinforce categorization, potentially obscuring problematic cases. This recognition justifies integrating quantitative corpus analyses with qualitative examinations in queer linguistics, which critically examines how language constructs normative notions of gender and sexuality (Leap, 2015; Motschenbacher, 2011). This integration supports a mixed-method analysis to provide complementary perspectives in the examination of discourses (Motschenbacher, 2011, 2018).

While recognizing culturally specific non-heterosexual, gender-diverse identities like *kathoey* in Thailand (McCann & Monaghan, 2019), it is crucial to understand their interaction with queer theory as the underlying fundament of queer linguistics. Jackson (2011) notes that non-normative *kathoey* has emerged as the quintessential representation

of queer identity in Thailand. While referring to *kathoey* as non-normative—transcending the male-female binary (Kang, 2012; Saisuwan, 2016), this study acknowledges the complex interaction of normative and non-normative components in *kathoey* identity performances (Leap & Motschenbacher, 2012).

This study combines queer linguistics with corpus linguistics (Motschenbacher, 2018) to uncover power structures in Thai song discourse about *kathoey* identity. It conducts collocation analysis and examines co-occurrence patterns, emphasizing unique lexical items to capture minority patterns (Motschenbacher, 2018). This study also analyzes concordance lines to elicit thematic representations without imposing rigid categorizations (e.g., as positive, neutral, or negative), reflecting a commitment to avoiding binary discourses. Despite challenges, this research aims to contribute to both corpus and queer linguistics by demonstrating new ways of identifying and analyzing marginalized discourses in Thai language and culture.

Cisgenderism

Having established this study's methodological approach—a combination of corpus linguistics and queer linguistics—it is worth introducing the concept of cisgenderism as a critical lens through which this study interprets the linguistic patterns and thematic representations found in the analysis of the two sub-corpora of Thai songs related to *kathoey* identity. Heavily drawing on Lennon and Mistler's (2014) discussion of cisgenderism, this concept encompasses the denial, denigration, or pathologization of gender identities that do not align with those assigned at birth, creating a hierarchy that privileges cisgender identities and expressions. Notably, the concept of cisgenderism appears to interlink with the term heteronormativity used elsewhere in this study. According to Barnett et al. (2021), failing to identify with or be viewed as heteronormative or cisgender may result in encounters with heterosexism or cisgenderism, phenomena that favor conforming heterosexuals while marginalizing LGBTQ+ individuals and those with non-cisgender identities or manifestations.

This study explores how the songs reflect or challenge the rigid beliefs and rules about gender that cisgenderism enforces. By comparing linguistic patterns and themes between the two sub-corpora, this study uncovers subtle or overt ways in which *kathoey* identity is portrayed as deviant, immoral, or threatening, or conversely, how they are validated and celebrated. In addition, the analysis can shed significant light on how the pervasive nature of cisgenderism in Thai society may influence both *kathoey* and cisgender singers in their lyrical expressions, potentially revealing internalized biases or acts of resistance against this systemic ideology. This study examines how Thai songs, as a cultural institution, may either enable or challenge prejudice and discrimination against the *kathoey* community. By including both queer and non-queer—specifically *kathoey* and non-*kathoey* (Ocha, 2023)—perspectives, this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how these songs reflect broader societal attitudes and power structures.

***Kathoe*y Representation in Thai Song Discourse**

The following synthesizes interconnected studies to offer a holistic understanding of how *kathoe*y individuals have been represented in Thai song discourse. Studies by Thippana (2022), Kothdee et al. (2024), and Sakyai (2022) identified common themes: romantic disappointment, comedic roles, contributions to entertainment, especially in the *Morlam* scene, an emphasis on beauty, and professions related to aesthetics (e.g., makeup artists). Sakyai (2022) further explored social alienation, stereotyping, societal negotiation, and hierarchical structures within the *kathoe*y community based upon factors such as age, economic status, and beauty. Sakyai also highlighted regional variations in *kathoe*y representation across Thailand, emphasizing the importance of local cultural contexts—in central regions as oppressed middle-class individuals, in northeastern areas as culturally integrated through *Morlam* traditions, in northern parts combining Buddhist and local influences for spiritual perspectives, and in southern regions where beauty and femininity are emphasized as idealized traits. Moreover, Kothdee et al. (2024) and Sakyai (2022) noted a significant development within the *kathoe*y community: the growing movement to embrace the term with pride, rejecting its historically derogatory connotations (e.g., Jackson, 2016; Ojanen, 2009; Ten Brummelhuis, 2008) and euphemisms. This aligns with this study's political stance to employ the term *kathoe*y as a self-referential label for the non-normative social actor and supports the argument presented in Huang's (2024) recent work.

However, this study observes that cisgenderism plays a significant role in shaping and constraining *kathoe*y's image. The representation of *kathoe*ys is often constructed by cisgender singers rather than by *kathoe*ys themselves, resulting in an external perspective dominating the meta-narrative. Arguably, a notable omission in these studies is the critique of the singers perpetuating marginalization and othering within marginalized discourse. This is evident from the examples of positive song portrayals where certain cisgender singers lobby the authorities for *kathoe*y rights or sensationalize having a *kathoe*y child, failing to consider cisgender positionality. Thus, it can be contended that these previous studies may inadvertently understate the core debate on sociopolitical systems' treatment of cisgender individuals and admittedly support the continuation of such works by cisgender individuals without acknowledging that they may lack a genuine understanding of *kathoe*y experiences.

Despite positive changes, such as family acceptance and advocacy for equal rights, song narratives can sometimes exaggerate or limit *kathoe*y experiences to specific dimensions. Furthermore, given that Northeastern Thai *kathoe*y in song discourse often shares common themes related to going out to flirt with men and drinking white spirits (Sakyai, 2022), such association with *Morlam* performances appears to reinforce overgeneralization. In particular, referencing Phraekhao (2012), Northeastern Thai *kathoe*y choose *Morlam* performances as venues to articulate their identity and sexuality, fostering a subcultural tradition transmitted across generations. However, one should be aware of

the homogenized practice wherein the *Morlam* performance space significantly influences *kathoey* expression, providing greater sexual freedom with men. While this reflects certain aspects of reality, it can be argued that this practice has the potential to create stereotypical perspectives on *kathoey* identity and experiences for those who do not align with it.

In Thai song discourse, the necessity for a more nuanced and diverse representation of *kathoey* is underscored by this overgeneralization. It emphasizes the need of analyzing the potential contributions of cisgenderism to these simplified representations, as well as the potential for these representations to unintentionally reinforce societal stereotypes or expectations regarding *kathoey* individuals. In light of this, this study aims to document the diversity of Thai song discourse and to challenge the power of cisgenderism by questioning and resisting the normative authority that cisgender individuals impose, despite never having truly experienced life as *kathoey*.

Materials and Methods

This study collected data using two Thai key phrases: *phleng kathoey* (songs by *kathoey*) and *phleng kiao kap kathoey* (songs about *kathoey*) to search on the popular video streaming platform YouTube (Airoldi et al., 2016). The selection criteria included Thai songs with titles featuring the term *kathoey* within the 2004-2024 timeframe, representing two decades of heightened public attention to *kathoey* identity across Thai society (Thipphana, 2022; see Table 1). Of note, the varying time ranges in the table, particularly the extended final period, were deliberately chosen to reflect significant social and cultural transformations in the dominant singers of *kathoey*-related Thai song discourse. However, this study focused on the qualitative aspects of *kathoey* representation rather than the quantitative distribution of music across timeframes; hence, this structure did not significantly impact the research outcomes.

Table 1

Summary of Dataset: Kathoey-Related Thai Songs in the Timeframe of 2004-2024

Year Range	No. of Songs	Top Dialects	Top Genres	Singer Gender Distribution
2004-2007	11	IS: 10, CE: 1	CO: 11	M: 9, F: 2, K: 0
2008-2011	4	IS: 3, CE: 1	CO: 4	M: 3, F: 0, K: 1
2012-2015	25	IS: 10, NO: 12, CE: 3	CO: 24, PO: 1	M: 7, F: 2, K: 15
2016-2019	20	IS: 15, CE: 3, NO: 1, SO: 1	CO: 20	M: 5, F: 3, K: 14
2020-2024	12	IS: 8, CE: 3, NO: 2	CO: 11, PO: 1	M: 1, F: 1, K: 9

Note. Dialects: IS = Isan, CE = Central Thai, NO = Northern Thai, SO = Southern Thai; Genres: CO = Country, PO = Pop; Singer Gender: M = Male, F = Female, K = Kathoey

This study built the final specialized corpus, which consisted of 72 *kathoey*-related songs, totaling 20,044 words. This study further divided this corpus into two sub-corpora

based upon the singer's self-identity: 1) KA (*kathoey* singers): 39 songs#11,307 words and 2) CIS (cisgender singers—men and women): 33 songs#8,737 words.

Notably, while being aware of the authorship and authorial voice of the *kathoey*-related songs, this study focused on singers rather than songwriters for several reasons. Information about songwriters is particularly limited for older or less mainstream compositions. Moreover, the roles of singer and songwriter may converge, complicating their distinction. Of paramount importance is the consideration that even when singers are not the original composers, drawing on the historical stance of Frith (1996) regarding singers as song protagonists, their choice to perform and disseminate songs concerning *kathoey* individuals is a deliberate engagement in the creation and distribution of *kathoey*-related content to the public. This decision, whether deliberated or not, demonstrates implicit acceptance and involvement in the social representation of *kathoey* images, which is a crucial element of this approach.

Data Analysis

This study combined quantitative collocation and qualitative concordance analyses to elicit linguistic patterns and thematic representations using the specialist computer program Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff et al., 2014). Despite lacking advanced features, this program provides fundamental Thai language tools such as concordance essential to this study. However, as a result of occasional inconsistencies in contextual conflation, this study had to balance the necessity for comprehensive verification of source texts with the rapidity of concordance analysis to ensure data accuracy.

In the collocation analysis, this study concentrated on verbs and adjectives (e.g., Baker & Levon, 2016; Motschenbacher, 2019), considering the contextual meanings and implications of these forms. Specifically, collocates were required to occur within five words to the left and five to the right of the node *kathoey* (5L to 5R) to effectively identify related words, provide a sufficient context for analysis and avoid the inclusion of unrelated terms from longer spans or the lack of collocates in shorter spans (Baker et al., 2013). Additionally, collocates should have a logdice score, a statistical measure for identifying typical word combinations independent of a corpus size of 7 or above (Rowson et al., 2023) to make the analysis manageable. Furthermore, this study used the *Thai Dictionary of the Royal Institute 2011* as the reference to verify each word's accurate verbs and adjectives.

After that, this study further expanded the parameters of lexical analysis of collocation by shifting to concordance analysis, focusing on the actual texts and conducting a close examination (Baker, 2006). To elicit the semantic preferences of the node *kathoey*, this study employed a bottom-up approach to enable the identification of categories within the corpus per se (Gillings et al., 2023).

Despite the significant aim of queer perspectives to deconstruct rigid categories, this study employs thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify unique themes in the data. This study acknowledges this tension and approaches the analysis reflexively, striving

to illuminate complex narratives without imposing reductive frameworks. Additionally, this study aimed to balance methodological rigor with a critical awareness of how categorization may impact the interpretation of gender and sexuality expressions in the data.

Results

This section addresses the two research questions posed in this study, summarizing the findings of each substage of corpus linguistic analysis—collocation analysis and concordance analysis—while critiquing the power of cisgenderism in the linguistic and thematic distinctions between KA and CIS.

RQ 1: How do the linguistic patterns and thematic representations of *kathoey* identity in Thai songs differ between self-identified *kathoey* and non-*kathoey* cisgender singers?

Collocation Analysis

Tables 2 and 3 show that verbs significantly outnumber adjectives associated with the node *kathoey*, with only one adjective, *di* (good), found in KA. This highlighted *kathoey*'s actions, states, or experiences rather than descriptive qualities.

However, the adjective *di* (good) appeared to significantly contribute to *kathoey*'s representation when looking at the semantic environments. *Kathoey* could be represented as a 'bad person' when the adjective *di* (good) followed the Thai adverbial *mai* (not), as in *thueng cha mi khrai khao cha mong wa phuak rao mai di* (Even if some view us negatively...) and the Northern Thai word *ba* (not), as in *ma saeo wa kathoey ba di* (Teasing *kathoey* is not good).

Without the negative-indexed elements, *kathoey* could be represented as a 'good person' as in *kathoey di di* (good *kathoey*). These examples might not necessarily refer to *kathoey* as individuals but to people (e.g., *phuak rao#we*)—inevitably reinforcing stereotypical perception of *kathoey*.

Table 2

Collocates with the Node 'Kathoey' in KA

Node	Collocate: verbs and adjectives (translation and #LogDice scores shown in the parentheses)
<i>kathoey</i>	<i>pen</i> (to be#12.41), <i>mi</i> (to have#12.04), <i>ma</i> (to come#11.91), <i>pen</i> (Northern Thai to be#11.72), <i>wa</i> (to say#11.57), <i>koet</i> (to happen/to be born#11.09), <i>pai</i> (to go#10.96), <i>hai</i> (to give#10.71), <i>di</i> (good#10.48), <i>kho</i> (to ask for#9.97)

Table 3*Collocates with the Node Kathoey in CIS*

Node	Collocate: verbs and adjectives (translation and #LogDice scores shown in the parentheses)
<i>kathoey</i>	<i>pen</i> (to be#12.62), <i>ma</i> (to come#12.03), <i>hai</i> (to give#12.02), <i>mi</i> (to have#11.67), <i>wa</i> (to say#11.35), <i>pai</i> (to go#11.29), <i>laen</i> (to run#11.22), <i>mak</i> (to like#10.20), <i>kin</i> (to eat#11.00), <i>hae</i> (to parade#11.00)

The stative verb *pen* (to be), which outnumbered other verbs in both KA and CIS, appeared to contribute to the predictivity of semantic attribution for *kathoey* identity. Focusing on the collocate alone provided limited insight, making it necessary to include more context, aligning with queer linguistic stance by avoiding oversimplification. While remaining aware of the dominant elements contrary to the de-essentializing queer perspectives, this study further explored the implied meanings of the verb *pen* (to be) to elucidate the potentially embedded linguistic data in representing *kathoey* identity across two sub-corpora. The findings showed that the co-occurrence of the verb *pen* (to be) attributed both positive and negative qualities and states to *kathoey* representation in KA and CIS.

Table 4*Two Dominant Patterns of the Verb 'Pen' (to be) in KA*

Pattern of the verb	Frequency	Example (translation shown in the parentheses)
<i>pen</i>		
<i>pen kathoey</i> (to be <i>kathoey</i>)	39	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>koet pen kathoey mai khoey sabai</i> (Being born as <i>kathoey</i> is never comfortable.) <i>pen kathoey chan ko mai thoy</i> (Being <i>kathoey</i> won't back down.) <i>pen kathoey mi kaanseuksaa</i> (To be educated <i>kathoey</i>)
<i>kathoey pen</i> (<i>kathoey</i> is)	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>kathoey (nan) pen mit kap thuk chiwit bon lok bai ni</i> (<i>Kathoey</i> is friendly to all lives on this planet.) <i>kathoey pen tua panha</i> (<i>Kathoey</i> is a troublemaker.) <i>kathoey pen sala phak chai</i> (<i>Kathoey</i> is a resting place for the heart.)

Table 4 shows that the verb *pen* (to be), categorized into the two distinct patterns in KA, appeared in both positive contexts (e.g., strength and resilience, education, and emotional support) and negative contexts (e.g., challenges and struggles). Aligning with the queer stance of nuanced linguistic interpretation, the presupposition of strict positivity was acknowledged. For instance, *pen kathoey tong satrong* (Being *kathoey* must be strong)

might emphasize the difficulties in cisgenderism society, albeit, contextually dependently, its representation of empowerment and encouragement in the *kathoey* community.

Similarly, in CIS, Table 5 revealed ‘ostensibly’ positive contexts (e.g., loyalty in romantic relationships, cultural values—entertaining roles) and negative contexts (e.g., challenges and hardship, and perceived weakness).

Table 5

Two Dominant Patterns of the Verb ‘Pen’ (to be) in CIS

Pattern of the verb	Frequency	Example (translation shown in the parentheses)
<i>pen</i>		
<i>pen kathoey</i> (to be <i>kathoey</i>)	28	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>pen kathoey la ot yak pak mong phu sai bo tok hot</i> (Being <i>kathoey</i> is difficult, men do not fall for us.) • <i>koet ma pen kathoey bo dai prueksa phai</i> (Being born as <i>kathoey</i>, I did not consult anyone.) • <i>thueng chan pen kathoey mai khoei khit tham rai khrai</i> (Even though I am <i>kathoey</i>, I have never thought of hurting anyone.)
<i>kathoey pen</i> (<i>kathoey</i> is)	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>kathoey pen si san farang ma thiao ka pha kin yim poei</i> (<i>Kathoey</i> is colorful; foreigners come to tour and smile.) • <i>kathoey pen panha sangkhom</i> (<i>Kathoey</i> is a social problem.) • <i>kathoey pen phet on ae</i> (<i>Kathoey</i> is a weak gender.)

Additionally, some verbs appeared uniquely in each corpus. The verb *koet* (to be born), preceding the verb *pen* (to be) in both KA and CIS, implied an innate quality of *kathoey* characteristics, as seen in *koet pen kathoey mai khoei sabai* and *koet ma pen kathoey bo dai prueksa phai* (Being born as *kathoey*, I did not consult anyone). This linguistic construction arguably reflected societal generalizations rather than empirical reality, where not every *kathoey* had to experience only the trials and tribulations of life or unrequited love.

In CIS, the verbs *laen* (to run) and *kin* (to eat), followed by the noun *mai* (literally wood yet metaphorically ‘male genital’ in *Isan Thai*), suggested a homogenized sexual act of ‘seeking out or flirting with men.’ Additionally, the verb *hae* (to parade), found only in CIS, may reflect *kathoey*’s association with entertainment. The low-frequency collocate *pen* (to be) in Northern Thai, when examined from a queer perspective, sheds significant light on the predictive nature of semantic attribution concerning specific qualities or stages of *kathoey* identity (see Table 6).

Table 6*Patterns of the Northern Thai Verb 'Pen' (to be) in KA*

Pattern of the verb <i>pen</i>	Examples (translation shown in the parentheses)
<i>pen kathoey</i> (to be <i>kathoey</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>pen kathoey chan ko phumchai</i> (I am proud to be <i>kathoey</i>.) • <i>tangtae pen kathoey bo koei sia khwam borisut</i> (Since becoming <i>kathoey</i>, never lost my innocence.) • <i>koet ma pen kathoey bo koei kuet cha chu</i> (Being born as <i>kathoey</i> never thought of deceiving anyone.) • <i>koet ma pen kathoey bo koei kuet cha chu</i> (Being born as <i>kathoey</i> never thought of deceiving anyone.)
<i>pen X kathoey</i> (to be <i>kathoey</i> 's X)	<i>Ma pen phua kathoey man bo choei</i> (Being <i>kathoey</i> 's husband is not outdated.)

The findings captured the identity and self-perception, such as *pen kathoey chan ko phumchai* (I am proud to be *kathoey*), social experiences and relationships, such as *ma pen phua kathoey man bo choei* (Being *kathoey*'s husband is not outdated), moral and ethical stance, such as *tangtae pen kathoey bo koei sia khwam borisut* (Since becoming *kathoey*, I have never lost my innocence), and existential reflections, such as *thueng pen kathoey bo chai kathoey bo tai* (Even if *kathoey*, there are different grades of *kathoey*). Similarly, the Northern Thai verb *pen* (to be), often paired with the verb *koet* (to be born), as in *koet ma pen kathoey bo koei kuet cha chu* (Being born as *kathoey*, I never thought of deceiving anyone), strongly suggested an inherent trait based on cultural assumptions.

Taken together, it could be contended that analyzing collocates' linguistic data alongside semantic environments contributed to a nuanced representation of *kathoey* individuals in KA and CIS. As such, this study required qualitative perspectives, incorporating contextual analysis using concordance lines for a comprehensive understanding (Motschenbacher, 2018). In particular, this approach necessitated further in-depth analysis to uncover potentially emerging themes—the unexplored elements crucial to this study.

Therefore, concordance analysis driven by data prioritized emerging themes from both sub-corpora, combining, as mentioned, thematic analysis. The following section captures the key findings of the second stage of corpus analysis.

Concordance Analysis

In this stage, the term *kathoey* was used to generate the concordance because it was the focus of this study, the most frequently used term in both sub-corpora, and a culturally specific term in Thai society that encapsulates a unique gender identity concept. This approach enabled a more in-depth contextual analysis, allowing this study to examine how

kathoey individuals were represented in both the internal space of *kathoey* themselves and through the external perception of cisgender individuals.

Comparing Tables 7 (KA) and 8 (CIS), KA provides a more nuanced internal view of *kathoey* experiences, community dynamics, and identity struggles, whereas CIS tended to rely more on external observations, stereotypes, and assumptions about *kathoey* experiences. Although some areas of overlap in perceptions were noted, KA often presented a more complex and multifaceted view of *kathoey* identity and experiences. The following discussion addresses each sub-corpus’s contribution to *kathoey* identity.

Table 7

Thematic Analysis of the Co-text of the Node ‘Kathoey’ in KA

Theme	Sub-theme	Examples of words and phrases obtained from the concordance (translation shown in the parentheses)
Identity and self-perception	Pride in identity	<i>sum hao kathoey di chai chang loei dai pen kathoey</i> (We <i>kathoey</i> are so happy to be <i>kathoey</i> .)
	Body dysphoria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>chai pen ying tae kai pen chai</i> (Female heart but male body) <i>khwam ching kathoey kathoey, bo mi mot luk yang mae ying tha khai dai faen ching ching, ma ao kathoey di kwa</i> (The truth is, transgender women do not have a uterus like cisgender women. If you really want a partner, it's better to choose a transgender woman.)
	Self-deprecation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>mai mi khrai rak phuying plom plom yang chan</i> (No one loves a fake woman like me.) <i>yon su khao bo dai</i> (Cannot compare to them), <i>chon chat</i> (Vagrant)
Community dynamics	Community empowerment	<i>bo wa kathoey sam noi sam yai hai kathoey mae du lae kathoey khuen mai sueb thot kathoey thai pen moradok khong chat</i> (Whether young or elderly <i>kathoey</i> , let the mother <i>kathoey</i> take care of the new <i>kathoey</i> , passing on Thai <i>kathoey</i> culture as national heritage.)
	Hierarchies within marginalized groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>hai kathoey mae du lae kathoey khuen mai</i> (Let the mother <i>kathoey</i> takes care of the new <i>kathoey</i>.) <i>si pha khao wong kan ma prueksa run phi kathoey poramachan</i> (Will bring (you) into the circle to consult the senior <i>kathoey</i> masters.)
	Intra-group discrimination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>(kathoey) haiso khuet wa ko thae no, phuchai lo lo ko khao ma wao nam</i> (Upper-class <i>kathoey</i> think they are so cool.) <i>(kathoey) mueang nok loet yu laeo kha (Kathoey) Thai-laen koet ma ko pen phu-chai</i> (<i>Kathoey</i> from abroad

		are already excellent, while Thai <i>kathoey</i> was born as men.)
Societal Perceptions and Challenges	Destigmatization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>ya pai khae suai choet na kathoey</i> (Do not care, be beautiful and confident, <i>kathoey</i>.) • <i>lai khrang mu hao thuk mong pen tua talok—talok ko ching tae mai talot wela mak len mak muan lang thueak ko mi yu</i> (Many times, we are seen as comedic figures. It is true that we can be funny, but not all the time. We like to have fun and joke around sometimes, but that is not all there is to us.) • <i>thueng khrai cha mong kathoey to lae tae kathoey ko khon mi khwam rusuek chep pen muean khon thuapai. Tae chiwit man lueak koet mai dai chan lueak koet mai dai</i> (Even if some people see transgender women as deceptive, transgender women are also humans who can feel pain just like anyone else. But life does not let us choose how we're born. I could not choose how I was born.) • <i>bo chai maeng bong bo tong tua kong klua wa don laeo cha khan</i> (Not a stinging caterpillar, no need to curl up, fearing that touching will cause an itch) • <i>pai ha kin mai bo ao na ya pai hai khao wao phuen kathoey tha rueang di di choen loei chat loei hao pen kathoey mi kan sueksa loet kha</i> (Do not go looking for men to have sex with, do not let them talk badly about us. For <i>kathoey</i>, if it is about good things, please go ahead. We are well-educated <i>kathoey</i>, excellent!)
	Societal challenges	<i>yak taek sao pho ka rap bo dai</i> (Want to be effeminate but father cannot accept it.)
	Powerlessness	<i>tae chiwit man lueak koet mai dai</i> (But life does not let us choose how we were born.)
Stereotypes and Expectations	Intra-group homogenization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>mop khwam sanuk he ha khue nathi kathoey</i> (Providing fun and laughter is the <i>kathoey</i>'s duty.) • <i>koet pen kathoey tong strong</i> (Being born as <i>kathoey</i> must be strong.) • <i>pen mit kap thuk chiwit bon lok bai ni</i> (Be friendly to all life on this planet) • <i>tong mi chit chai kraeng kla kwa nak rop bang rachan</i> (Must have a mind stronger than the warriors of Bang Rachan.) • <i>mi tae khwam hak thae baep fae fae hai ai thuk thi</i> (Only true fair love for you every time)
Life stages	Ageism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>hen jai kathoey sung wai chan mee hua jai rak chai thuk khon lao khao jao sue hai kin</i> (Have sympathy for the elderly <i>kathoey</i>, I have a heart that loves all men, (I will) buy rice whiskey for you to drink.)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>itcha la kathoey luk ot, phu bao op kot la tae sai khang phon, tut thao hua chai on la</i> (Envious of the young <i>kathoey</i>, the men embrace and caress them over there, while this elderly <i>kathoey</i>'s heart grows weary.)
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Table 7 reveals that *kathoey* singers shared both positive and negative experiences. Positive aspects included pride, community solidarity, and support, albeit scant evidence, as well as the destigmatization of the preconception of *kathoey* identity as ‘struggling,’ ‘exotic,’ and ‘uneducated.’ On the other hand, negative aspects included body dysphoria, self-deprecation, intra-group discrimination, societal challenges, powerlessness, intra-homogenization, and ageism, especially between elderly and young *kathoey*.

Intra-discrimination and intra-homogenization, in particular, revealed intricate issues of marginalization within the *kathoey* community itself. Intra-group discrimination often manifests based upon prevailing beauty standards and educational attainment. Examples like *mop khwam sanuk he ha khue nathi kathoey* (Providing fun and laughter is the *kathoey*'s duty) and *tong mi chit chai kraeng kla kwa nak rop bang rachan* (must have a mind stronger than the warriors of *Bang Rachan*) suggest that *kathoey* individuals who deviate from normative expectations may encounter further marginalization, perpetuating a complex hierarchy of acceptance and rejection within the group.

Table 8

Thematic Analysis of the Co-text of the Node ‘Kathoey’ in CIS

Themes	Sub-theme	Examples of words and phrases obtained from the concordance (translation shown in the parentheses)
External characterization	Othering and Stigmatization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>bo than dai phattad dadplaeng yang pen phuchai thang thaeng ni lae kathoey phan antarai</i> (Have not had surgery to modify yet, still entirely male - this is a dangerous type of <i>kathoey</i>.) • <i>thai ban oen kathoey khwai hun bo khoi hai tae chai pen sao</i> (The villagers call me a buffalo(large) (<i>kathoey</i>); my body may not be great, but my heart is a woman's.) • <i>nuek wa hao maen phi</i> (Thought we were ghosts) • <i>yang pai sai ma hao</i> (Wherever I go, dogs bark) • <i>si thong kap kathoey</i> (Will get pregnant with <i>kathoey</i>)
	Physical stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>klam pen lam lam</i> (Muscular) • <i>bo than dai pha tat dat plaeng</i> (Have not had surgery to modify yet)

Beliefs about <i>kathoey</i> relationship	Behavioral assumptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>khi thuk</i> (Suffering) • <i>tong nang sia chai</i> (Have to sit and be sad) • <i>mai khoei nok chai</i> (Never unfaithful) • <i>tha dai rak khrai laeo chai koen roi</i> (If they love someone, they give more than 100%.) • <i>phrom cha du lae ok hak ma thang ni</i> (Ready to take care of the heartbroken, come this way.)
Societal attitudes	Acceptance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>mi hua chai</i> (Have a feeling) • <i>Muan muan pai loei bo mi panha</i> (Just have fun, no problem.) • <i>Rian ka di</i> (Study well)
Social context	Cultural differences	<i>Noi chai chang loei koet pen kathoey ban nok bo muean kathoey Baengkok</i> (Feel so sorry to be born a countryside <i>kathoey</i> , not like Bangkok <i>kathoey</i> .)
	Socioeconomic status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Tit ni khao</i> (In debt) • <i>Kathoey ban nok klang wen ka ok la het hai het na</i> (A countryside <i>kathoey</i> in the middle of the day goes out to do farming work.)
Perceptions of <i>kathoey</i> identity and experiences	Attributed Self-perception	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Man phit mong dai</i> (What is wrong with being <i>kathoey</i>?) • <i>Phum chai pho chai</i> (Proud and content)
	Assumed internal experiences	<i>Plom khae phiang kai</i> (Only the body is fake.)

Table 8 offers a view of how *kathoey* is perceived by the broader cisgender society. While some positive attributes and acceptance are acknowledged, such as *phum chai pho chai* (proud and content), the CIS corpus includes negative aspects, such as explicit stereotyping and othering, as seen in phrases like *kathoey phan antarai phan an-tarai* (a dangerous type of *kathoey*), and the association of being chronically heartbroken and gender incongruence.

Regarding the aforementioned positive perceptions, they are viewed from a different perspective. Non-*kathoey* individuals, who never experienced marginalization or oppression due to cisgenderism, cannot authentically represent *kathoey* experiences or legitimately express their perspectives. Such portrayals occur within an oversimplified framework in a “tolerant-but-unacceptable” heteronormative Thai society, as in *chan phumijai phojai la thi pen kathoey phai si wao yok yoei ka sang thok woei ka sang thok woei pak khon roet sa yang suai baep othon bo khoei son kham khon nintha bo son dok doe* (I am proud and content being who I am. Let others say what they want, I do not care. I am fabulously beautiful and patient. I have never listened to gossip. I really do not care).

In particular, the *kathoey*-related songs by cisgender singers are seen as reinforcing generalizations, potentially creating intra-discrimination and intra-homogenization among *kathoey* themselves, as evidenced in KA.

In summary, this study also critiques the implicit power of cisgenderism in the language used in *kathoey*-related Thai songs by both *kathoey* and cisgender singers, addressed in the second research question.

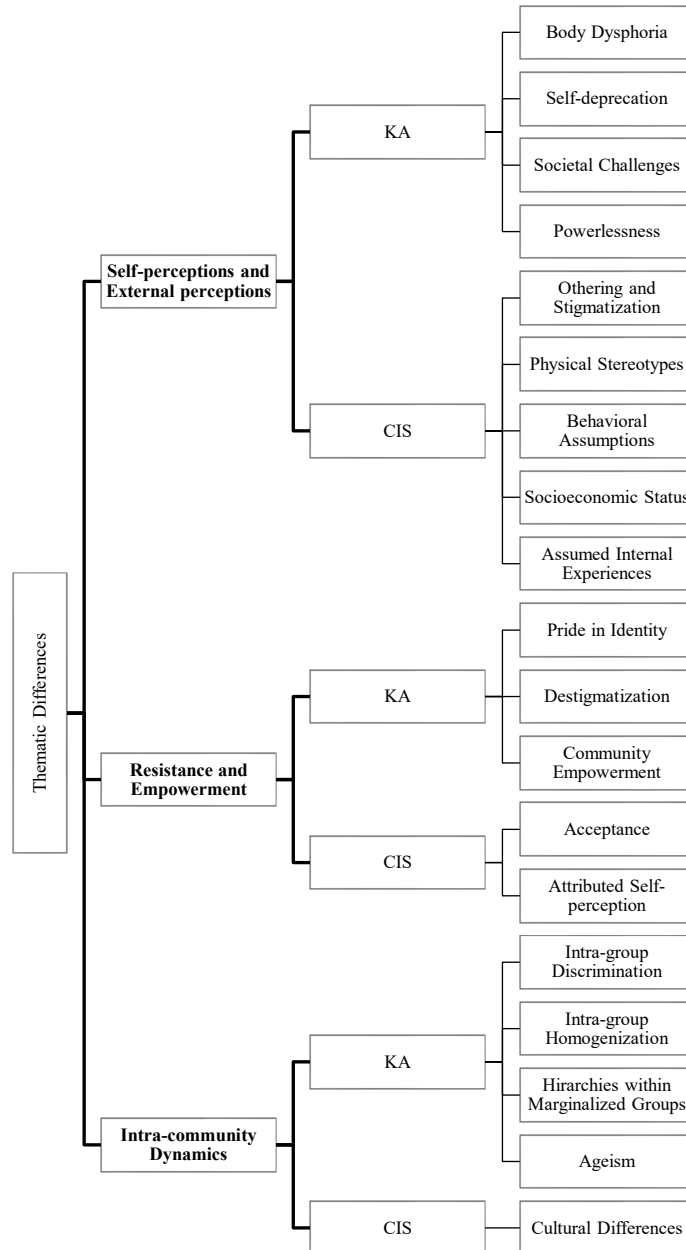
RQ 2: What do these differences reveal about the perpetuation of cisgenderism in Thai song discourse?

This study revealed key distinctions between KA and CIS. While CIS relied on external stereotypes, KA navigated homogeneous environments, offering an achieved equilibrium in non-normative stances and an internal perspective on *kathoey* experiences. Evidence suggested nuanced perspectives on this equilibrium, with texts revealing ongoing struggles against internalized cisgenderism and discrimination. This tension highlighted the complex identity negotiation process within marginalized groups. The study recognized that these textual expressions, while authentic, reflected pervasive societal pressures on *kathoey* individuals. The duality in KA songs' lyrics—alternating between empowerment and social exclusion—demonstrated both challenges and resilience in creating spaces for self-expression and solidarity.

In this stage, Lennon and Mistler's (2014) discussion of cisgenderism was used to address the second research question. The analysis identified three significant themes that underscore the differences between *kathoey* self-perception and cisgender external perception within Thai song discourse. Figure 1 illustrates the three emerging themes derived from Tables 7 and 8. Furthermore, the following discussion addresses the interplay of these themes and their contribution to the interpretation of cisgenderism within this context.

Figure 1

Differences of Kathoey’s Self-Perception and Cisgender External Perception in Thai Song Discourse



In the first theme, the perpetuation of cisgenderism differed in KA and CIS. KA showed internalized cisgenderism through body dysphoria and self-deprecation, stemming from a heteronormative society that privileges cisgender bodies and expressions, leading to the pathologization of *kathoey* individuals within their community. Significantly, CIS reinforced the deliberate marginalization of non-normative *kathoey* individuals through othering, stigmatization, and stereotypical ideas about *kathoey* experiences, such as

physical and behavioral expectations and a homogeneous ‘underprivileged’ socioeconomic status.

The second theme illustrated a conflict in the perpetuation and resistance to cisgenderism. KA expressed pride in identity, destigmatization efforts, and community empowerment as a collective political resistance against cisgenderism. These narratives challenged the pathologization of *kathoey* identity and affirmed their intrinsic worth and validity. While CIS showed a gradual acknowledgment of *kathoey* individuals, the ‘attributed’ perceptions suggested a lingering influence of cisgender perspectives, potentially hindering a full understanding of *kathoey* experiences.

The third theme exposed how cisgenderism permeates even within the *kathoey* community. KA revealed profound internalization of cisgenderism, leading to discrimination and homogenization, especially in ageism vis-à-vis elderly and younger *kathoey* vying for cisgender men’s affection. Meanwhile, KA also demonstrated resistance to cisgenderism through mentorship and mutual support networks between elderly and younger *kathoey* in their community. CIS, on the other hand, accentuated divisions within the *kathoey* community, illustrated by the differentiation between countryside *kathoey* and Bangkok *kathoey*, implying a hierarchy of legitimacy contingent upon geographic location.

Taken together, these themes elucidated the pervasive and multifaceted nature of cisgenderism within Thai song discourse. *Kathoey* voices presented both resistance and internalized oppression, while cisgender viewpoints often sustained more explicit manifestations of cisgenderism through stereotyping and marginalization, particularly manifesting as instances of homophobia and transphobia within the narrative context.

The distinctions between KA and CIS discourses elucidated the mechanisms of cisgenderism at both individual and societal levels, affecting external perceptions of *kathoey* identity and shaping the self-perception of *kathoey* individuals and their community. This is due to the belief that heteronormative society has constructed *kathoey* individuals in this way and, therefore, must be followed. This empirical evidence of cisgenderist power necessitated changes to expand the narrow perception of *kathoey* individuals and address internalized feelings of inferiority within their community.

Discussion

The linguistic and thematic analysis demonstrates both empowering narratives and problematic stereotypes shaping *kathoey* identity. *Kathoey* singers represent themselves through the themes of community empowerment, internal dynamics, and challenges—including body dysphoria, societal stigma, and resilience. External perceptions by cisgender singers, on the other hand, often rely on stereotypes, oversimplification, emphasizing physical attributes and emotional traits while perpetuating cisgenderist beliefs

and occasionally offering ‘ostensible’ positive representation within a framework of othering.

In particular, while echoing Kothdee et al. (2024), Sakyai (2022), and Thippahana (2022) regarding the emerging themes in the representation of *kathoey* in Thai song discourse—such as romantic disappointment, comedic roles and contributions to entertainment, social alienation, and use of stereotypes—this study highlights novel themes that represent tectonic shifts in *kathoey* narratives: community empowerment, hierarchies, discrimination, homogenization, and ageism.

Furthermore, the emerging themes, such as hierarchies within the *kathoey* community and ageism, result in a novel paradigm in *kathoey* narratives, shifting the focus from gender identity representation to a more holistic exploration of lived experiences. This paradigm shift facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of the intersectionality inherent in *kathoey* lives—encompassing sociocultural hierarchies, temporal factors, and the evolving nature of self-identification within Thai song discourse.

Additionally, this study emphasizes community dynamics, as the findings on intra-group discrimination and intra-homogenization within the *kathoey* community add a new dimension to understanding *kathoey* identity formation and community dynamics. This study contends that *kathoey* individuals navigate heteronormativity while being cognizant of stereotypes and often feeling pressured to prove their worth within binary gender paradigms. This paradoxical struggle to demonstrate value in a heteronormative society persists despite the inherent worth of all humans, regardless of gender identity.

The increased prevalence of the term *kathoey* in *kathoey* singers’ songs suggests an active linguistic reclamation process, aligning with queer linguistic theory on language’s role in constructing gender identities (Motschenbacher, 2018). Collocation analysis revealed KA more frequently associates *kathoey* with empowerment and self-determination terms compared to CIS. This linguistic difference highlights how *kathoey* individuals are reshaping the term’s meaning, transforming it from a historically pejorative label into a marker of identity and pride (Huang, 2024; Kothdee et al., 2024; Sakyai, 2022).

Taken together, the analysis of collocation and concordance reveals the contrast between self-representation and external perception, underscoring cisgenderism’s impact on identity discourse. Findings emphasize the importance of prioritizing *kathoey* voices while critically examining cisgenderist influence in both external and internal narratives about *kathoey* experiences. As such, this study advocates for a comparative baseline in the academic investigation of *kathoey* identity, examining cisgenderism (Lennon & Mistler, 2014) to understand the internal perceptions within the *kathoey* community. It demonstrates how language can question and uphold power hierarchies—a primary problem in the field of queer linguistics.

Furthermore, it can be contended that concordance analysis elucidates the contextual nuances of each dominant and unique collocates (Motschenbacher, 2018), revealing homogenizing tendencies in both KA and CIS discourses, as well as empowerment and internalized oppression within KA, alongside stereotypical representations in CIS that might be overlooked in a purely quantitative analysis.

Conclusion

This study encapsulates the tension experienced by *kathoey* individuals between self-empowerment and stereotypical constraints in Thai song discourse. Positive aspects include community solidarity, resilience, increased visibility, and self-representation in Thai, while negative aspects persist, such as stereotyping, othering in *kathoey*-related songs by cisgender singers, internalized oppression in some lyrical texts by *kathoey* singers, and the perpetuation of cisgenderist ideologies in the broader discourse. This study thus underscores the value of examining both *kathoey* insider and cisgender outsider perspectives to fully understand the complex process of *kathoey* representation.

Of the research avenues, future studies should explore *kathoey* representation across larger datasets, timeframes, the inclusion of lyrics and music videos, and consider intersectionality (e.g., class and region) for more nuanced, *kathoey*-centered representations. Accordingly, future research and advocacy should amplify *kathoey* voices and challenge cisgenderist narratives. This study contributes to corpus and queer linguistics by revealing the linguistic constructions of non-Western *kathoey* identity. However, challenges in balancing quantitative analysis with queer linguistic goals persist. Future research should expand the analysis of gender-related terms and incorporate more qualitative analysis of Thai song discourse.

Significantly, by addressing systemic biases embedded in marginalized discourse, both queer and non-queer researchers can work towards a more equitable and inclusive society that supports non-normative advocacy and inclusive pedagogy, where all individuals, regardless of gender identity, are afforded human value.

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