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Do They Sound Gay? Positive Bias in the Promotability of Gay-Sounding Speakers

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Abstract

Gay-sounding men are often perceived as not suitable for leadership roles. However, this bias may depend on the type of role they apply for since gay men are seen as a better fit for stereotypically feminine than masculine roles. Hence, gay-sounding men may have an advantage when applying for feminine leadership roles. In a pilot study, we identified Italian male speakers who were perceived as either gay- or straight-sounding by British listeners. In the main study, we tested the perception and career advancement to more senior roles of candidates who already held managerial positions. British participants (N = 113) listened to foreign (Italian) male candidates who either sounded gay or straight. They then judged their suitability for stereotypically feminine, masculine, and neutral senior roles and rated them in terms of agency and communion. Results showed a positive bias such as that gay-sounding candidates were seen as more suitable for stereotypically feminine senior roles than straight-sounding candidates because they were seen as more communal. Such positive bias was stronger among those participants who reported the lowest level of negative attitudes toward gay men. These findings contribute to the current literature on voice-based discrimination by showing positive stereotyping and positive biases toward gay-sounding men.

Keywords

voice, sexual orientation, gender stereotypes, leadership

Highlights

- Gay-sounding men were perceived as more communal than straight-sounding men.
- Gay-sounding candidates were judged as more suitable for a feminine senior role.
- The positive bias for the feminine senior role was explained by communion ratings.
- The least prejudiced participants showed the strongest positive bias.

Gay men often face discrimination not only when applying for top jobs but also when aspiring to get promoted. Indeed, employers are sometimes hesitant to promote gay employees to senior roles (Avery et al., 2015) and gay individuals are frequently constrained to occupy lower-tier leadership roles (Aksoy et al., 2019). However, this may not always be the case. The hiring or promotion of gay men may depend on whether they are perceived as fitting with the professional role under consideration (see Pichler & Holmes, 2017). The present study aimed to examine the occurrence of 'positive' and 'negative' biases toward gay-sounding managers aspiring to be promoted to senior roles that differ in terms of gender stereotypes.

Gender Stereotyping and Hiring Biases

Gender stereotyping is conceptualised around the notions of masculinity and femininity, which are associated with agency and communion respectively (Martin & Slepian, 2021). Agency is defined as the ability to achieve goals and includes dimensions of competence and assertiveness, while communion refers to the ability to create social relationships and comprises morality and warmth (Abele et al., 2016; Abele & Wojciszke, 2014). Men self-attribute more agency than women and women are usually perceived as more communal than men (see Hsu et al., 2021). Agency and communion play a key role in gender-based impression formation when people think about the division of labour and professions (Sczesny et al., 2018).

The Lack-of-Fit theory (Heilman, 1983) indicates that individuals are commonly regarded as a better fit for job positions that align with stereotypes associated with the social groups they belong to. This has been widely studied in the context of gender stereotypes to show that women are often considered less suitable for managerial/leadership roles because they are seen as lacking masculine and agentic traits that are typically associated with such roles (see Koenig et al., 2011). In line with this, masculine men are seen as more effective leaders than men described as feminine (De Cristofaro et al., 2020). In the context of sexual orientation, gay men are usually perceived as lacking masculine traits and being more similar to women, which in turn leads to them being

associated with stereotypically feminine professions (Blashill & Powlishta, 2009; Hancock et al., 2020). At the same time, they are viewed as lacking stereotypically masculine attributes such as agency that are perceived as advantageous in leadership roles (Salter & Liberman, 2016). When considering promotions, the perception of lack of fit explains the lower likelihood of promotion for gay compared to heterosexual men (Pichler & Holmes, 2017). This is usually regarded as an instance of 'negative' bias. However, there exists evidence of 'positive' bias that is likely to happen when gay men are favoured over heterosexual men because they are seen as a fit for stereotypically feminine roles (Steffens et al., 2019). Indeed, when considering stereotypical professions that are either male- (e.g., mechanic) or female-dominated (e.g., nurse) and associated with masculine or feminine characteristics, Steffens et al. (2019) found that gay male candidates were perceived as more suited for feminine jobs while heterosexual male candidates were perceived as a better fit for stereotypically masculine jobs. This effect seems to extend to the perception of high-status roles such as leadership positions. Indeed, Pellegrini et al. (2020) showed that gay leaders are perceived as more effective within female-dominated organisational contexts, while heterosexual leaders are considered more effective in male-dominated settings. Barrantes and Eaton (2018) further showed that, compared to heterosexual men, gay men were perceived as more suitable for stereotypically feminine leadership roles because they were perceived to be higher in communion. Altogether, this literature shows that the type of (stereotypical) role and the attribution of agency and communion are important in the professional context. These studies all explicitly stated the target's sexual orientation by either describing the person as gay or providing sexuality-related information (e.g., partner's gender) on their CVs. However, in real situations, a person's sexual orientation may be guessed from minimal cues.

Voice and Stigmatisation

Voice is a powerful cue that individuals use to form impressions about others. Listeners quickly categorise speakers' group membership (e.g., age, gender; Bachorowski & Owren, 1999; Skoog Waller et al., 2015), and simply hearing someone saying 'hello' leads them to form an impression of the speaker's personality (McAleer et al., 2014). Listeners also guess more ambiguous social categories such as the speaker's sexual orientation from voice (Kachel, Radtke, et al., 2018; Kachel, Simpson, et al., 2018, Kachel et al., 2020; Munson et al., 2006; Rule, 2017). 'Auditory gaydar' refers to judgments that individuals make about speakers' sexual orientation when voice is the only cue available (Fasoli et al., 2016). Such gaydar judgments tend to be based on the assumption that everyone is heterosexual unless the speakers are perceived as gender non-conforming (i.e., straight categorisation bias; Fasoli, Maass, & Berghella, 2023; Lick & Johnson, 2016). Gender nonconformity is particularly important in how auditory gaydar judgments are made and guides the distinction between gay- and straight-sounding speakers (Kachel et al., 2020; Masi & Fasoli, 2022; Munson, 2007). Interestingly, gaydar judgments occur similarly

regardless of whether speakers are speaking the same language or a different one from listeners (Sulpizio et al., 2015). Although listeners form similar personality impressions irrespective of speakers using their first or a foreign language (Baus et al., 2019), recent studies have shown that the interplay between vocal cues of sexual orientation and nationality influences this first impression formation. For instance, British listeners categorised Italian-accented gay-sounding speakers speaking in English as more likely to be gay and perceived them as more sociable, but less masculine and competent than British-accented gay-sounding speakers (Fasoli, Dragojevic, et al., 2023). While the findings on sociability may be explained by an additive effect or overlap between stereotypes that describe Italian people and gay men as communal (Cuddy et al., 2009), results on competence may indicate a negative bias toward individuals whose voice signals a double minority status (Fasoli & Hegarty, 2020).

Modern prejudice often occurs when minority status is signalled by stereotypical cues rather than being explicitly disclosed (Duckworth et al., 2020). Language attitude literature has demonstrated that non-standard accented speakers are often discriminated against (see Dragojevic et al., 2021 for a review) and recent work has shown that this is also the case when a voice signals a gay sexual orientation (Fasoli & Maass, 2018). On the one hand, gay men who believe they sound gay expect to be discriminated against (Fasoli & Formanowicz, 2024; Fasoli et al., 2021) and report being the target of negative reactions associated with gaydar judgments (Fasoli et al., 2024). On the other hand, heterosexual individuals who believe that it is possible to detect who is gay and who is straight from voice report a tendency to maintain social distance from gay-sounding men (Fasoli et al., 2021). Moreover, evidence of 'negative' biases in hiring decisions has been found when sexual orientation was inferred from voice rather than explicitly disclosed. In studies where participants were asked to take employers' perspective and make hiring decisions about job applicants after listening to them speaking, gay-sounding men were consistently judged as less suitable for managerial roles than straight-sounding men (Fasoli et al., 2017; Fontenele et al., 2023). Importantly, this negative bias occurred because gay-sounding men were perceived as lacking masculinity (Fasoli et al., 2017) or competence (Fasoli & Hegarty, 2020) which are associated with agency. Agency has indeed been found to play a key role in explaining biases toward gay-sounding men applying for leadership roles (Fasoli & Formanowicz, 2024). This negative bias toward gay-sounding men is likely to occur when the leadership roles are perceived as stereotypically masculine, as the perceived lack of agency attributed to gay-sounding men implies a lack of fit with the role.

At the same time, there have been instances in which gay-sounding speakers were perceived as more sociable than straight-sounding speakers (Fasoli, Dragojevic, et al., 2023) in line with the stereotype of gay men being more communal (Kranz et al., 2017). The stronger attribution of communion to gay men has been found to trigger a 'positive' bias in hiring contexts when sexual orientation was explicitly mentioned (e.g., shared

in the resume; Barrantes & Eaton, 2018) but has not yet been examined when sexual orientation is signalled solely by voice. Moreover, the literature has so far focused on hiring decisions neglecting an important step in someone's career advancement, namely promotion (McFadden, 2015).

Overview

In this research, we aimed to test whether positive and negative biases towards gay-sounding candidates for promotion to a senior leadership position occur. In doing so, we focused on how British participants perceived gay- and straight-sounding candidates who were native Italian speakers speaking in Italian, and thus represented foreigners in the UK context. Individuals perceived to be foreigners are usually perceived as lacking competence (Dragojevic et al., 2021; Fasoli, Dragojevic, et al., 2023) and can face negative biases when applying for managerial roles (Horverak et al., 2013). We conducted the research in the UK since the Equality Act 2010 condemns discrimination by perception, implying that discrimination against individuals *perceived* to be gay is not tolerated. Moreover, we considered Italian speakers as a foreign group, given that, in 2021, Italians represented the fourth largest migrant group (Statista, 2024) and 7% of the EU-born residents in the UK (The Migration Observatory, 2023).

We first conducted a pilot study to examine how Italian speakers were categorised by British listeners in terms of sexual orientation. We expected to replicate previous results so that British participants were expected to engage in a straight categorisation bias leading them to assume most of the speakers to be heterosexual (see Fasoli, Maass, & Berghella, 2023). This pilot study also served the purpose of identifying gay- and straight-sounding speakers for the main study. The subsequent main study focused on testing positive and negative biases toward gay-sounding (vs. straight-sounding) Italian speakers when promotion to senior leadership roles were concerned. By focusing on foreigners, we extended previous work (Fasoli & Hegarty, 2020) that only considers sexual minority nationals. Based on the existing literature on gender stereotypes, lack of fit, and voice-based sexual orientation discrimination, we advanced the following hypotheses.

In line with gender stereotypes, we expected the gay-sounding male candidate to be perceived as more communal (Hypothesis 1a) but less agentic (Hypothesis 1b) than the straight-sounding male candidate.

In line with the lack of fit theory, we predicted that the gay-sounding male candidate would be seen as less suitable for masculine senior roles (Hypothesis 2a) and more suitable for feminine senior roles (Hypothesis 2b) than the straight-sounding male candidate, while no difference was expected for the neutral senior role.

We predicted that gender stereotyping would explain positive and negative biases. Being seen as more communal creates an advantage for gay individuals when a feminine senior role is concerned (Barrantes & Eaton, 2018). Also, being attributed fewer mascu-

line characteristics, and specifically agency, elicits discrimination against gay-sounding men applying for masculine leadership roles (Fasoli & Formanowicz, 2024; Fasoli & Hegarty, 2020; Fasoli et al., 2017). Hence, we expected to find mediation effects such that a higher attribution of communion to the gay-sounding candidate would explain the higher perceived suitability for a feminine senior role (Hypothesis 3a – positive bias), while the lower attribution of agency would explain the lower perceived suitability for a masculine senior role (Hypothesis 3b – negative bias).

We also explored whether these biases could be moderated by individual differences and, in particular, sexual prejudice. Heterosexual individuals who hold more negative attitudes toward gay men evaluate gay leaders more negatively than straight leaders (Morton, 2017) and more prejudiced individuals rate feminine (vs. masculine) gay leaders as less effective (Pellegrini et al., 2020). Importantly, highly prejudiced participants are particularly likely to display a negative bias against gay-sounding speakers, whom they consider less suitable for stereotypically masculine leadership roles (Fontenele et al., 2023). These findings raise the need to consider sexual prejudice and explore whether attitudes toward gay men moderate the predicted effects.

Using a similar procedure that involved evaluating job candidates whose voice was the only available cue, this study aimed to replicate previous findings and explore the role of individual differences in biases toward gay-sounding speakers. The study also aimed to extend previous work that focused on recruitment by examining biases in promotion. Recruitment and promotion are distinct processes, each often governed by different policies. Even if employees do not experience discrimination during recruitment, they may still face challenges in career advancement or be confined to specific types of senior roles (see Aksoy et al., 2019). It is crucial to examine promotion, not just hiring, because addressing biases in career advancement is essential for fostering long-term diversity and inclusion within organisations at top levels (see Ivanovic, 2023).

Pilot Study

We ran a pilot study that allowed us to understand how listeners perceived the sexual orientation of speakers speaking a foreign language. Very few studies have tested this (see Sulpizio et al., 2015, 2020; Valentova et al., 2011) and, to our knowledge, none involved British listeners.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 22 English-speaking participants (11 women; M_{age} = 22.55, SD = 4.02) recruited in the UK. Most of them identified as White (n = 91%) and straight (n = 73%). Two participants (9%) indicated they had basic Italian language knowledge.

Speakers

The speakers were all cisgender men, young (age range 22–27, M_{age} = 25.70, SD = 2.35), Italian, living in the region of Veneto. Eight of them self-identified as gay on a categorical variable assessing sexual orientation, and the other eight as straight. During the recording phase, participants were asked to reply to some personal questions including one asking how they felt when spending time in their room when they were young. Asking questions was used to prompt spontaneous speaking rather than reading (for the use of prompts to elicit spontaneous speaking, see Kachel et al., 2023). It implies that the message content could vary (e.g., 'good, it was a room shared with my brother' or 'good, I felt good and at ease', 'it was a bit crowded as I was sharing with my brother', 'I liked spending time in my room as it was a private space'), but it allowed for prosody to better reflect the person's way of speaking. Exposing participants to less controlled and comparable message content could be seen as problematic. However, since participants in the study were unable to process the content of what was being said by foreign speakers, the effects of message content were minimised. The audio recordings were cut to be short and have a similar length (8 seconds). The length was decided on the basis of previous work on audio stimuli length in auditory gaydar research (see Painter et al., 2024) and the audio recording corresponded to the first part of the reply provided by the speaker. This was done to avoid the speaker mentioning any content referring to stereotypical cues (e.g., favourite hobbies).

Procedure and Materials

The study was conducted online, and it was advertised on social media. After participants agreed to participate in the study, they listened to 16 audio recordings, one for each speaker. The audio recordings were presented in a randomised order. Participants were asked to categorise the speakers' sexual orientation both with a dichotomous choice (*gay* vs. *straight*) or on a Kinsey-like scale from 1 (*Exclusively straight*) to 6 (*Exclusively gay*) as done in previous studies (Fasoli, Maass, & Berghella, 2023). Next, we collected participants' demographic information (i.e., age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity) and their ability to speak and understand Italian (none, basic, conversational, fluent).

Results

We approached the data in two ways. First, we compared the categorisation of the groups of gay and straight speakers. Then, we focused on each speaker's categorisation to select the speakers for the main study.

Dichotomous Choice

We first looked at the percentages of correct categorisation. Overall, a pairwise t-test showed that the straight speakers (M = 63.06, SD = 16.12) were correctly categorised to

a higher extent than gay speakers (M = 46.59, SD = 21.54), $t(21) = 2.91$, $p = .008$, $d = .62$. Moreover, t-tests against the chance level (i.e., 50%) indicated that straight speakers were correctly categorised above chance level, $t(21) = 3.80$, $p = .001$, $d = .81$, while accuracy for gay speakers did not differ from the chance, $t(21) = -.74$, $p = .47$, $d = -.16$. The result was confirmed when a Wilcoxon non-parametric test was used to examine the difference in correct answers for the two groups of speakers, $\chi^2 = 2.69$, $p = .007$. We also conducted a signal detection analysis (Stanislaw & Todorov, 1999) that involved considering correct categorisations of gay speakers as *hits* and the categorisation of straight speakers as gay as *false alarms*. This allowed us to calculate a *d'* score indicating the extent of accurate categorisation and a *c* score representing a response bias. In our case, a positive *c* score indicated a general tendency to categorise speakers as straight (i.e., straight categorisation bias). We found a small *d'* (M = .24, SD = .79) indicating a poor correct categorisation of gay speakers and a small tendency to engage in a straight categorisation bias (M_c = .22, SD_c = .34).

We then proceeded to assess how each speaker was categorised. We ran Chi-squares to compare each speaker's correct categorisation against the chance level (see Table 1). Two out of eight self-identified straight speakers were correctly categorised as straight above chance level while the other straight speakers were categorised at the chance level. Two of the eight gay speakers were correctly categorised as gay (above chance level), two were incorrectly categorised as straight (below change level), and the remaining were categorised at chance level.

Kinsey-Like Scale

We first conducted a t-test to examine the overall differences between the ratings for the group of gay and straight speakers. Ratings for the gay speakers (M = 3.43, SD = .70) were higher than those for the straight speakers (M = 2.92, SD = .61), $t(21) = -2.96$, $p = .008$, $d = -.63$. However, both means were below the scale midpoint (ts < -3.78, ps < .001) indicating an overall straight categorisation bias. Next, we ran a series of t-tests against the scale midpoint (3.5) to assess which speaker was correctly categorised (see Table 1). All the straight speakers were rated below the scale midpoint on the heterosexual pole of the scale. Among the gay speakers, only two were rated above the midpoint whereas all the others were rated below the scale midpoint on the heterosexual pole of the scale.

Table 1

Accuracy, Means and Standard Deviations, and Tests Across Speakers

Sexual Orientation	Speaker	Accuracy %	Chi square	*M* (*SD*)	*t*-test against scale midpoint
Self-identified straight	Speaker 1	54.5	χ^2 = .18, p = .67	3.32 (1.46)	$t(21)$ = -.58, p = .56
	Speaker 2	**95.5**	**χ^2 = 18.18, p < .001**	**1.82 (.85)**	**$t(21)$ = -9.25, p < .001**
	Speaker 3	31.8	χ^2 = 2.91, p = .08	3.82 (1.16)	$t(21)$ = 1.19, p = .25
	Speaker 4	68.2	χ^2 = 2.91, p = .08	3.09 (1.27)	$t(21)$ = -1.51, p = .14
	Speaker 5	68.2	χ^2 = 2.91, p = .08	2.68 (1.55)	$t(21)$ = -2.47, p = .02
	Speaker 6	**77.3**	**χ^2 = 6.54, p = .01**	**2.27 (1.28)**	**$t(21)$ = -4.50, p < .001**
	Speaker 7	54.5	χ^2 = .18, p = .67	3.36 (1.50)	$t(21)$ = -.43, p = .67
	Speaker 8	54.5	χ^2 = .18, p = .67	3.00 (1.41)	$t(21)$ = -1.66, p = .11
Self-identified gay	Speaker 1	40.9	χ^2 = .73, p = .39	3.23 (1.31)	$t(21)$ = -1.15, p = .26
	Speaker 2	**77.3**	**χ^2 = 6.54, p = .01**	**4.36 (1.34)**	**$t(21)$ = 2.90, p = .009**
	Speaker 3	40.9	χ^2 = .73, p = .39	3.41 (1.33)	$t(21)$ = -.32, p = .75
	Speaker 4	45.5	χ^2 = .18, p = .67	3.23 (1.31)	$t(21)$ = -.98, p = .34
	Speaker 5	40.9	χ^2 = .73, p = .39	3.36 (1.33)	$t(21)$ = -.48, p = .63
	Speaker 6	22.7	χ^2 = 6.54, p = .01	2.77 (1.31)	$t(21)$ = -2.61, p = .02
	Speaker 7	**77.3**	**χ^2 = 6.54, p = .01**	**4.23 (1.19)**	**$t(21)$ = 2.86, p = .009**
	Speaker 8	27.3	χ^2 = 4.54, p = .03	2.86 (1.17)	$t(21)$ = -2.56, p = .02

Note. Selected speakers for the main study are highlighted in bold.

Speaker Selection for the Main Study

Based on the results above, we selected two speakers who identified and were perceived as straight (straight speaker 2 and 6 in Table 1) and two gay speakers who were perceived as gay (gay speaker 2 and 7 in Table 1). These speakers were correctly perceived as straight and gay, respectively, both on a dichotomous and Kinsey-like scale. We then averaged Kinsey-like ratings for the selected straight and gay speakers and ran a pairwise *t*-test. Results showed that the selected straight (M = 2.04, SD = .92) and gay (M = 4.29, SD = .98) speakers were perceived differently in terms of sexual orientation, $t(21)$ = -6.78, p < .001, d = -1.45.[1] In the main study, we will refer to these speakers as straight- and gay-sounding speakers, respectively.

Discussion

The pilot study showed that listeners were able to make judgments of sexual orientation when listening to individuals speaking a foreign language suggesting that auditory gaydar is not language-specific (Sulpizio et al., 2015). We showed that this occurs when British listeners listen to Italian speakers uttering spontaneous speech. Results demonstrated that listeners engage in the straight categorisation bias (Fasoli, Maass,

1) This result was significant when only participants who identified as heterosexuals were considered in the sample.

& Berghella, 2023; Lick & Johnson, 2016) since categorisation accuracy was higher for straight than gay speakers and there was an overall tendency to rate speakers as straight on a Kinsey-like scale. Interestingly, looking at the accuracy across speakers on the dichotomous choice, many speakers were categorised around chance level. This may have been because Italian speakers, on average, are perceived as more gay-sounding than speakers of other languages (e.g., German speakers, see Sulpizio et al., 2015) and individuals are less accurate in judging the sexual orientation of those who are not part of their national group (Valentova et al., 2011).

Main Study

The main study aimed to examine heterosexual individuals' negative and positive biases toward gay-sounding (vs. heterosexual-sounding) foreign speakers who had the chance for promotion to a senior position.

Method

Participants

One hundred and twenty-five participants completed the study. After excluding those who did not identify as heterosexual (n = 12), the final sample consisted of 113 participants (95 women; M_{age} = 26.01, SD = 12.45) who were English speakers recruited in the UK. Most of the participants identified as White (n = 90, 79.6%), and reported having no knowledge of the Italian language (n = 100, 88.5%), being unable to understand what the speakers said (n = 107, 94.7%), and having no experience in recruitment (n = 84, 74.3%).[2] A G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) sensitivity analysis considering a within-participants design (power = .80, α = .05) with one group and two/three repeated measures indicated that our sample (N = 113) allowed us to detect small to medium effect sizes (f = .11/.13).

Procedure and Materials

Participants were recruited among students at a British University and via social media. After consenting to participate in the study, participants were provided with information about the candidates. They were told that two men who had been middle managers at a company for a few years had risen gradually in rank over their tenure. At this point, they were informed that the company was considering promoting them to an upper management position (40 hours per week, £58,000 salary). Participants were then asked to listen to the voices of the two candidates one at a time. All participants listened to a straight- and a gay-sounding speaker randomly selected from the pool of two gay-

2) Analyses conducted only on participants who did not understand what the speakers were saying showed the same pattern of results.

and two straight-sounding speakers selected from the Pilot Study. The voices of the gay- and straight-sounding speakers in the main study were presented in a counterbalanced order across participants. Speakers' sexual orientation was never explicitly disclosed but participants were told that they were foreigners and, hence, they were going to listen to them speaking in their native (Italian) language.[3] After listening to each speaker, participants were given three job descriptions concerning different upper management roles presented as advisor positions. The positions either described a stereotypically masculine (competition advisor), a stereotypically feminine (social support advisor), or a neutral (records advisor) leadership position that were previously used by Barrantes and Eaton (2018, see Supplementary Materials, Fasoli, 2023). Participants rated the extent to which the speaker was suitable for each advisor position on a scale from 1 (*Extremely unsuitable*) to 7 (*Extremely suitable*). Hence, participants considered one candidate at a time and rated how suitable he was for all positions.

Next, participants indicated the likelihood that each man possessed 8 agentic traits (e.g., active, assertive, intelligent, rational; α_{gay} = .89 and $\alpha_{straight}$ = .91) and 8 communal traits (e.g., caring, trustworthy, understanding, loyal; α_{gay} = .95 and $\alpha_{straight}$ = .94), taken from Abele et al. (2016). Answers were provided on a scale from 1 (*extremely unlikely*) to 7 (*extremely likely*). At this point of the study, participants were presented again with the audio recording of the gay- and straight-sounding speakers and were asked to indicate their sexual orientation on a dichotomous choice (*gay* vs. *straight*) and a Kinsey-like scale from 1 (*exclusively heterosexual*) to 6 (*exclusively gay*) as in the pilot study. They were also asked to indicate how accurate they believe their categorisation of sexual orientation for each speaker was on a scale from 1 (*not at all accurate*) to 5 (*completely accurate*).

Finally, participants completed 12 items (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*) of the Modern Homonegativity Scale (MHS: e.g., 'Gay men have become too confrontational in their demand for equal rights'; Morrison & Morrison, 2002; α = .72), 5 items of the gay community familiarity scale (e.g., 'How often do you see openly gay men?'; 1 = *never*, 7 = *always*; Brambilla et al., 2013; α = .73), and their demographics (age, gender identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, recruitment experiences) and additional information (Italian language ability, whether they understood what the speakers said). Participants were then debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Participants reported low levels of modern homonegativity (M = 2.22, SD = .64; one sample t-test against the scale midpoint: $t(112)$ = -12.72, p < .001, d = -1.20, 95% CI [-1.44,

3) We ran independent t-tests to check any potential difference between the two gay- and the two straight-sounding speakers in terms of perceived sexual orientation, job suitability, agency and communion. No differences were found for the gay- (ts < 1.31, ps > .19) and straight-sounding (ts < 1.60, ps > .11) speakers.

-.95]). Moreover, on average they knew 3 gay men (M = 3.37, SD = 1.55) and reported low levels of familiarity with the gay community (M = 2.94, SD = .95; one sample t-test against the scale midpoint: $t(112)$ = -11.84, p < .001, d = -1.11, 95% CI [-1.35, -.88].

Manipulation Check — We first ran a Wilcoxon non-parametric test that showed that the correct categorisation was higher for straight-sounding (96.5%) than gay-sounding speakers (42.5%), χ^2 = 6.35, p < .001. Also, chi-square tests were used to check whether one social category was more likely to be selected than the other for each group of speakers. While the straight-sounding speakers were correctly categorised as straight by the majority of the participants, χ^2 = 97.57, p < .001, the gay-sounding speakers' categorisation was at chance level since no difference emerged, χ^2 = 2.56, p = .10. Next, we checked if the two groups of speakers were perceived differently on the Kinsey-like scale. A significant pairwise comparison indicated that the straight-sounding speakers (M = 1.91, SD = .86) were rated as more likely to be straight than the gay-sounding speakers (M = 3.05, SD = 1.18), $t(112)$ = -8.51, p < .001, d = -.80, 95% CI [-1.01, -.59]. Moreover, participants reported believing they were slightly more accurate when judging the straight- (M = 2.18, SD = 1.02) than the gay-sounding speakers (M = 1.91, SD = .83), $t(112)$ = 3.68, p < .001, d = .35, 95% CI [.15, .53].

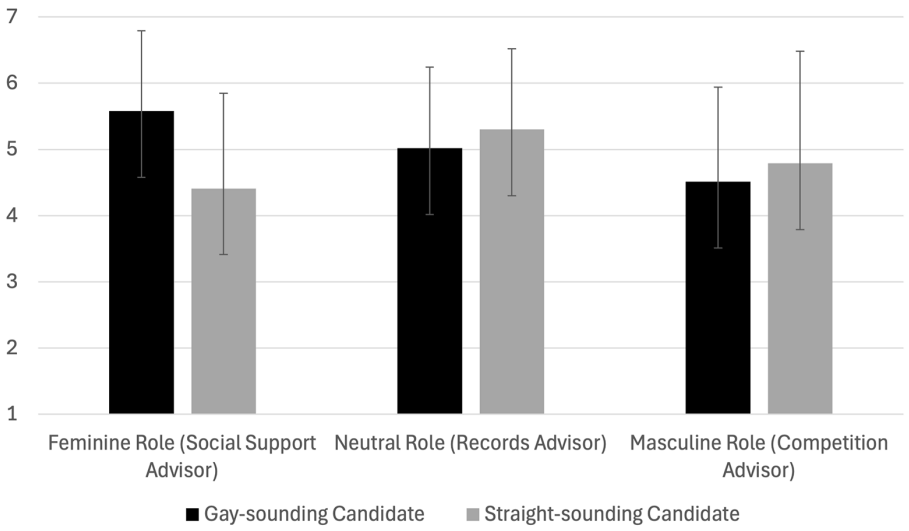
Agency and Communion — A 2 (Candidate: gay-sounding vs. straight-sounding) x 2 (Trait: agency vs. communion) repeated measures ANOVA was performed on trait attribution. The significant main effects of candidate, $F(1,112)$ = 30.45, p < .001, η_p^2 = .21, and trait, $F(1,112)$ = 4.95, p = .03, η_p^2 = .04, were qualified by a significant interaction between the two factors, $F(1,112)$ = 25.48, p < .001, η_p^2 = .18. Confirming Hypothesis 1a, pairwise comparisons (Bonferroni correction) showed that participants perceived the gay-sounding candidate (M = 5.49, SD = 1.07) as more communal than the straight-sounding candidate (M = 4.60, SD = 1.13; p < .001). However, no difference occurred in the attribution of agency (M_{gay} = 5.23, SD_{gay} = .97 and $M_{straight}$ = 5.13, $SD_{straight}$ = 1.04; p = .26) disconfirming Hypothesis 1b. Looking at the difference in the attribution of agency and communion to the candidates, the gay-sounding candidate was perceived as more communal than agentic (p = .007), while the straight-sounding candidate was judged more agentic than communal (p < .001).

Role Suitability — A 2 (Candidate: gay-sounding vs. straight-sounding) x 3 (Role: feminine vs. masculine vs. neutral) repeated measures ANOVA was performed on role suitability. No significant main effect of candidate was found, $F(1,112)$ = 2.09, p = .15, η_p^2 = .02. However, a significant main effect of role, $F(2,112)$ = 12.20, p < .001, η_p^2 = .10, was qualified by a significant interaction with candidate, $F(2,112)$ = 22.18, p < .001, η_p^2 = .16. Pairwise comparisons (Bonferroni correction) showed that the gay-sounding candidate (M = 5.58, SD = 1.21) was preferred to the straight-sounding candidate (M = 4.41, SD = 1.44) for the feminine advisor role (p < .001) confirming Hypothesis 2b. The

comparisons for the neutral (M_{gay} = 5.02, SD_{gay} = 1.22 and $M_{straight}$ = 5.30, $SD_{straight}$ = 1.22; p = .05) and masculine (M_{gay} = 4.51, SD_{gay} = 1.43 and $M_{straight}$ = 4.79, $SD_{straight}$ = 1.69; p = .07) advisor roles were not significant but suggested non-significant trends favouring the straight-sounding over the gay-sounding candidate for these roles (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Suitability Across Roles and Candidates



When examining which role was a better fit for each candidate, we found that the gay-sounding candidate was seen as more suitable for a feminine than for both neutral and masculine roles (ps < .006), and also as more suitable for the neutral than the masculine role (p < .001). The straight-sounding candidate was rated as more suitable for the neutral role than both the masculine and feminine roles (ps < .01), and a non-significant trend suggested he was seen as more suitable for the masculine than the feminine role (p = .06).

Mediation Analyses — We conducted three mediation analyses, one for each role type, using MEMORE (5000 bootstraps) because of the within-participants design. We considered communion as the possible mediator since we observed a difference in the attribution of this dimension to speakers but not in agency. The mediation on the feminine role showed a significant positive indirect effect, b = -.74, SE = .15, 95% CI [-1.03, -.48], indicating that the higher attribution of communion to the gay-sounding over the straight-sounding candidate explained his higher perceived suitability for the feminine role, in line with Hypothesis 3a. The mediation on the neutral role showed a

significant indirect effect on the opposite direction, b = .26, SE = .10, 95% CI [.09, .46], suggesting that the gay-sounding candidate was seen as less suitable for the neutral role than the straight-sounding candidate because of being perceived as more communal. However, the mediation concerning the masculine role yielded a non-significant indirect effect, disconfirming Hypothesis 3b (see Table 2).

Moderation Analyses — We explored whether attitudes toward gay men played a role in the perceived suitability for different roles. We calculated difference scores by subtracting ratings for the straight-sounding candidate from those for the gay-sounding one. Hence, the higher the scores the higher the attribution of communion and role suitability to the gay-sounding candidate. We used PROCESS (Model 1, 5000 bootstraps) to conduct moderation analyses entering the differential score for communion as the independent variable, the differential score for each role (entered one at a time), and MHS (modern homonegativity) as the moderator (see Figure 2). The analysis for the feminine role showed a significant interaction between communion and MHS, b = -.24, SE = .12, t = -2.05, p = .04, 95% CI [-.48, -.007]. Both participants with low and higher prejudice perceived the gay-sounding candidate as more suitable for the feminine role when higher communion was attributed to him, but the effect was stronger for participants reporting lower levels of MHS, b = 1.02, SE = .12, t = 8.36, p < .001, 95% CI [.78, 1.26], than those reporting slightly higher MHS, b = .69, SE = .10, t = 6.78, p < .001, 95% CI [.49, .89]. Regarding the neutral role, the interaction between communion and MHS was not significant, b = .25, SE = .14, t = 1.73, p = .09, 95% CI [-.04, .53]. However, we found a significant interaction, b = .57, SE = .21, t = 2.70, p = .008, 95% CI [.15, .99] for the masculine role. For participants low on MHS, the more they attributed communion to the gay-sounding candidate, the more likely they were to perceive the gay-sounding candidate as less suitable for the masculine role, b = -.74, SE = .21, t = -3.43, p < .001, 95% CI [-1.17, -.31]. This effect was not significant for participants who scored higher on MHS, b = .02, SE = .18, t = .10 p = .91, 95% CI [-.34, .38] (see Table 2).

Table 2

Direct and Indirect Effects of Speaker via Communion (Upper Part) and Moderation Effects of Modern Homonegativity (Lower Part) on Role Suitability Across Roles

	Advisor Role								
	Neutral			Masculine			Feminine		
Path	***b***	***SE***	**95% CI**	***b***	***SE***	**95% CI**	***b***	***SE***	**95% CI**
Speaker ⟶ Communion	-.89***	.14	[-1.17,-.61]	-.89***	.14	[-1.17, -.61]	-.89***	.14	[-1.17, -.61]
Speaker ⟶ Role Suitability	.29	.15	[-.03, .58]	.39	.22	[-.04, .82]	-1.12***	.16	[-1.45, -.80]
Communion ⟶ Role Suitability	-.29**	.10	[-.49, -.10]	-.30*	.14	[-.59, -.02]	.83***	.08	[.67, .99]
Speaker ⟶ Communion ⟶ Role Suitability	.26***	.09	[.09, .46]	.27	.16	[-.04, .60]	-.74***	.14	[-1.03, -.48]
Communion Differential Score	-.86*	.34	[-1.54, -.18]	-1.60**	.50	[-2.60, -.60]	1.39***	28	[.84, 1.95]
MHS	-.02	.27	[-.57, .51]	-.49	.40	[-1.28, .30]	.20	.22	[-.24, .65]
Communion Differential Score X MHS	.25	.14	[-.04, .53]	.57**	.21	[.15, .99]	-.24*	.12	[-.48, -.01]

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

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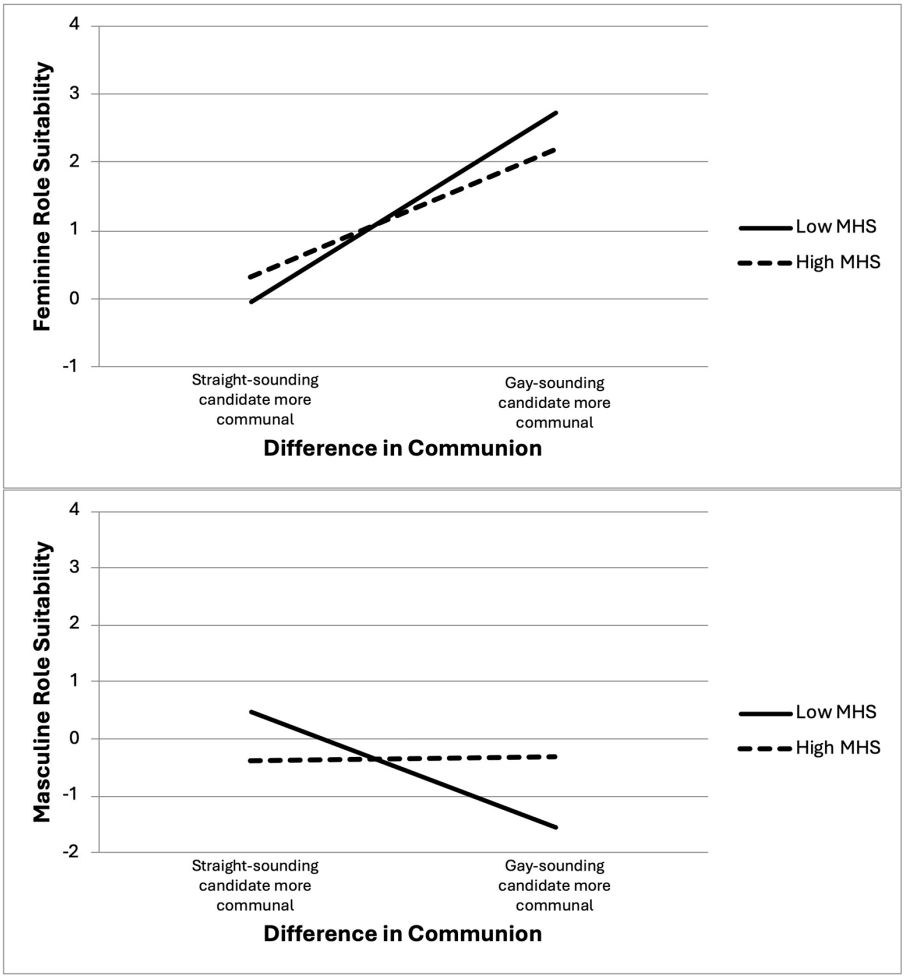
Figure 2

Moderation Effects of Modern Homonegativity on the Relationship Between the Attribution of Communion and Role Suitability (Feminine Role: Upper; Masculine Role: Lower)



Discussion

This research is the first to examine positive and negative biases toward gay-sounding speakers in the context of advancing to senior leadership roles. We found that voice-based perceptions of sexual orientation affected role suitability judgments and that such evaluations depended on the role's gender stereotypicality. Our findings indicated a positive bias that favoured the gay-sounding candidate over the straight-sounding candidate when the senior role was stereotypically feminine, but no difference emerged for

stereotypically masculine or neutral roles. These results mirror those of Barrantes and Eaton (2018) where sexual orientation was explicitly disclosed and only an advantage for feminine roles was found. The fact that we found no negative bias when neutral and masculine roles were concerned is inconsistent with previous results on voice-based discrimination (Fasoli & Hegarty, 2020; Fasoli et al., 2017; Fontenele et al., 2023). This inconsistency may be explained by the study designs. In this study, as in Barrantes and Eaton (2018), participants had to indicate which role was more suitable for the candidate making the comparison between roles salient. In contrast, in previous work, participants judged the candidates against one specific job description with no comparison between roles. Also, in our research, participants were not asked to rank or decide who should get the role—namely a decision-making process that highlights discrimination—but were merely asked to indicate which senior role would be a better fit for each manager.

Gay-sounding speakers were perceived as more communal than straight-sounding ones, with no difference in perceived agency. Differences in communion attributed to gay and straight men have been repeatedly found while agency is sometimes attributed equally or more to gay than straight men (Barrantes & Eaton, 2018; Niedlich et al., 2022; Steffens et al., 2019). Hsu et al. (2021) have shown that the gender differences in agency and communion are larger among heterosexual than sexual minority samples, and this may play a role in how agency and communion are attributed to male members of sexual orientation groups. Wojciszke and Abele (2008) demonstrated that communion is more important than agency when evaluating distant others, but this depends on contextual factors. In our study, both targets were introduced as successful middle managers that the company was considering for promotion. This would have established in participants' minds an impression of the candidates as agentic individuals who had already achieved a lot in their careers. Recent work demonstrated that being seen as agentic buffers negative biases toward gay-sounding men (Fasoli & Formanowicz, 2024). Thus, if the candidates were perceived as agentic because of the career stage they had achieved, vocal cues of sexual orientation may have been less influential in agency attribution. The attribution of communion to gay-sounding speakers in our study may instead be influenced by the fact that the speakers were Italians. British listeners perceive Italian-accented gay-sounding speakers as more sociable than straight-sounding speakers of the same accent (as in this study) but also as more sociable than British-accented gay-sounding speakers (Fasoli, Dragojevic, et al., 2023). Hence, the higher attribution of communion to gay-sounding speakers in our study may be emphasised by the fact that the speakers were Italians.

Overall, our findings only partially support the lack-of-fit model and align more with the effects of positive stereotyping and biases toward gay-sounding men. Higher communion attribution to the gay-sounding candidate explained the positive bias toward him in a feminine role. Unexpectedly, higher communion placed the gay-sounding candidate at a disadvantage when the neutral role was concerned. This effect is difficult to explain

but we suggest that the fact that participants had to rate the candidate's suitability for one role over the other may matter. The neutral role was that of a record advisor who needed to keep track of all company inputs and outputs. Compared to the feminine senior role, the neutral role did not require interacting and developing relationships with employees. It is possible that a gay-sounding manager perceived as highly communal was seen as having valuable skills that would not be capitalised upon in a neutral (record advisor) role, resulting in a potential loss for the company. Moreover, since no difference in agency attribution to speakers was found here, it is not surprising that we did not find negative biases toward the gay-sounding candidate when a masculine role was concerned.

Regarding gender stereotyping, the findings supported previous work. Gay-sounding men were perceived as more communal than agentic, while the opposite was true for straight-sounding men (see Klysing et al., 2021). Similarly, the gay-sounding man was also seen as more suitable for the feminine over neutral and masculine senior roles confirming professional stereotypes that see gay men as a better fit for feminine jobs and female-dominated occupations (see Blashill & Powlishta, 2009; Hancock et al., 2020; Mishel, 2020; Rule et al., 2016).

This research contributes to the literature in several ways. The findings not only replicate the literature on positive bias in hiring decisions or perceived leader effectiveness of gay men (Barrantes & Eaton, 2018; Pellegrini et al., 2020; Steffens et al., 2019) but also extend it to a situation where sexual orientation is inferred rather than explicitly disclosed. We focused on *perceived* sexual orientation rather than explicit disclosure of minority status and this implies studying more subtle forms of biases that may occur in everyday life and so-called discrimination by perception. Studies on voice have so far shown that gay-sounding men are seen as less suitable for leadership roles because they are perceived as lacking masculinity or competence (Fasoli & Hegarty, 2020; Fasoli et al., 2017). Here, differently from previous work (see Fasoli & Hegarty, 2020; Fontenele et al., 2023), positive stereotyping of gay-sounding speakers emerged. Importantly, the research focused on promotions of individuals to more senior roles rather than hiring decisions. This is relevant because national data show that gay men occupy lower-tier leadership roles with more senior roles being held by straight men (see Aksoy et al., 2019) and earn less than their straight counterparts (Drydakis, 2022). Our work suggests that to fully understand career progressions and biases, we need to take into consideration the type of role a person aims for. Indeed, we showed here that the career advancement of a man perceived to be gay can be limited to stereotypical feminine roles. While positive biases like the one observed here can be seen as advantageous, and potentially less discriminatory toward gay men, they risk relegating gay and straight men to stereotypical roles, perpetuating stereotypes, and preventing diversity in the workplace (see Hancock et al., 2020).

We also examine individual differences, a factor often overlooked in this literature. We found attitudes toward gay men to play a different role than that observed in previous research (Fontenele et al., 2023; Morton, 2017; Pellegrini et al., 2020). Interestingly, participants with the lowest negative attitudes toward gay men exhibited a positive bias toward gay-sounding men in feminine senior roles when they perceived them as more communal than straight-sounding men but perceived them as less suitable for masculine roles. This aligns with the literature on positive stereotyping, indicating that attributing certain positive characteristics to a group/individual may come with the cost of perceiving them as lacking other characteristics or being devalued in other contexts (see Czopp et al., 2015). Hence, our least prejudiced participants may have endorsed gender-positive stereotypes leading them to see gay-sounding candidates as suitable for the feminine role while favouring straight-sounding speakers for the masculine role. Alternatively, the least prejudiced participants may have felt that by doing something 'good'—namely judging the gay-sounding candidate as more suitable for a feminine role—they could do something 'bad'—namely judging him as less suitable for the masculine role (see self-licensing, Effron & Conway, 2015). By doing so, they could have felt they were 'egalitarian' as both the gay and straight men could be suggested for promotions to different senior positions.

Limitations and Future Directions

The study is not without limitations. First, the study consisted mostly of women and young participants with no recruitment experience who reported an overall low level of prejudice. Hence, our results cannot be generalised to all individuals. Although no gender differences have been observed among participants judging gay-sounding speakers previously (Fasoli & Hegarty, 2020), women usually consider gay men as more communal and hireable for managerial roles than straight men showcasing a positive bias that does not occur among male participants (Everly et al., 2016). Moreover, young people usually report more positive attitudes toward gay people (Donaldson et al., 2017; Herek, 2002) and, hence, may be more likely to engage in positive biases toward gay-sounding men. Although experience in recruitment does not seem to influence hiring biases based on minimal cues of sexual orientation (see Rule et al., 2016), it should still be considered and controlled for. Future studies should replicate our findings in more diverse samples in terms of gender, age, recruitment experiences, and attitudes.

Second, we exposed participants only to speakers of a foreign (Italian) language. Future studies should examine if the results replicate when the speakers are national (British in our case) and when voice signals intersecting social categories (see Fasoli, Dragojevic, et al., 2023). Vocal characteristics vary among speakers who identify as gay and straight and within each group (Kachel, Radtke, et al., 2018; Kachel, Simpson, et al., 2018) and, thus, a larger sample of voices is needed to generalise our results. Also, the selected gay-sounding speakers were not perceived as gay by participants in the main

study to the same extent as the participants did in the pilot study. This specifically regarded the perception of the gay-sounding, not the straight-sounding speakers. Participants in the pilot study were explicitly requested to perform a task involving the categorisation of speakers' sexual orientation. On the contrary, participants in the main study had to judge the job candidate's sexual orientation only at the end. In the latter case, where sexual orientation discrimination in the workplace is condemned by the law, labelling a candidate as gay may have been seen as stigmatising (see Alt et al., 2020) and participants may have been less reluctant to do so. The other possible explanation is related to the study design. While in the pilot study participants listened to multiple speakers facilitating the comparison between them in terms of perceived sexual orientation, in the main study participants only listened to two speakers. To overcome these issues, future studies should consider different designs, larger voice samples, and measures of social desirability. Third, we solely assessed the perceived suitability of the candidates for the roles, limiting the possibility of detecting discriminatory biases. Previous studies have asked participants to rank or decide which candidate should get the job (Fasoli & Hegarty, 2020) and allocate salaries (Fasoli et al., 2017). Future studies should examine decision-making processes when candidates compete for the same role as well as potential biases in salary determination during appointments.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated that, when sexual orientation is not explicitly disclosed, voice influences suitability judgments for career progressions into senior roles. Gay-sounding candidates were seen as more suitable for stereotypically feminine senior roles due to the attribution of communal traits. The findings hold practical implications for organisations and employers. The existence of such a positive bias toward gay-sounding men illustrates the importance of training hiring managers and young professionals aspiring to work in recruitment or human resources. Such training can be implemented to reduce biases and increase awareness of how stereotypes influence judgments, particularly when sexual orientation is not disclosed. The research also highlights the importance of considering how voice-based stereotyping may impact career progression and hinder efforts to promote diversity in the workplace, especially at the senior levels. Hence, organisations could use the findings to implement fair promotion policies that mitigate reliance on stereotypical assumptions.

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Author Contributions: *Fabio Fasoli*—Conceptualization | Methodology | Investigation | Data curation | Formal analysis | Writing – original draft | Writing – review & editing | Supervision. *Ellen Teasdale*—Conceptualization | Methodology | Data curation | Writing – review & editing.

Ethics Statement: Research has been approved by the Faculty of Health and Medical Science Ethics Committee at the University of Surrey (FT-1819-41). Informed consent has been obtained from all respondents prior to their participation in the study.

Data Availability: The data for the pre-test and main study are available on Open Science Framework (see Fasoli, 2023).

Supplementary Materials

For this article, data and analyses are available (see Fasoli, 2023).

Index of Supplementary Materials

Fasoli, F. (2023). *Voice as a cue of sexual orientation and promotability judgments*. OSF. https://osf.io/wr7me

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