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Beyond Gayle: Queer language use among Afrikaans-speaking queer women and nonbinary individuals in South Africa

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Research on South African Lavender Lexicons has historically focused on Gayle, a variety primarily associated with homosexual men, leaving the linguistic practices of other Afrikaans-speaking queer groups largely unexplored. Unlike Gayle, which developed during periods of legal prohibition when secrecy functioned as a primary motivation, contemporary queer linguistic practices are no longer necessarily driven by concealment. This study examines the role of queer language among Afrikaans-speaking queer women and nonbinary individuals across diverse age groups, exploring its role in the lives of the participants. Using a mixed-method approach, the findings of the study draw on 99 online questionnaire responses and four in-depth interviews with queer Afrikaans public figures across different age groups. Thematic analysis of the data reveals that queer language is central to building and sustaining community, fostering safe spaces and facilitating identity expression, particularly among younger participants. Attitudes are generally positive, although nonbinary participants highlight limitations in Afrikaans regarding gender-neutral terminology and often incorporate English alternatives.

Contribution: This study expands the understanding of South African lavender lexicon by documenting linguistic practices of Afrikaans-speaking queer women and nonbinary individuals, groups previously underrepresented in this field of research. The study highlights how queer language facilitates identity expression, community connection and cultural belonging, while also revealing the limitations of Afrikaans for gender-neutral terminology. The findings provide a foundation for future research on gender-inclusive linguistic innovation and the evolving dynamics of queer language use in South Africa.

Keywords: lavender lexicons; sociolinguistics; queer linguistics; feminist linguistics; South African linguistics; Afrikaans; queer women; nonbinary individuals.

Introduction

Members of marginalised communities and subcultures, such as LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual and more) communities, often have a need to connect with others in the same communities, privately. For these private or secret communicative motivations, gay argots or as defined by Halliday, anti-languages of anti-societies, such as Polari in the United Kingdom and Gayspeak in the United States, take form (Cage & Evens 2003; Luyt 2014). These varieties fall under the umbrella of lavender (queer) lexicons, a subsection of sociolinguistics, which has built on the idea that gender and sexuality are socially constructed (Butler 2004; Luyt 2014). Within lavender lexicons, communication thus enables LGBTQIA+ speech communities to identify one another and interact through shared linguistic practices. In South Africa, the first known variety to serve this purpose was Gayle (Cage & Evens 2003). The use of Gayle resided mostly within the homosexual male community, however, with only a few references to women and no references to nonbinary individuals. For this reason, the study of Gayle has also been focused on homosexual men, as the group of people who typically speak the language. It does mean that the possible use of queer language of other Afrikaans-speaking groups has not been studied before.

Due to this gap, we will focus on Afrikaans-speaking queer women and nonbinary people, and the role that queer language plays in their lives. The aim is to explore the intersections of gender, sexuality and language in more depth, to add to a more inclusive and authentic understanding of South African lavender lexicons (McCormick 2010). Gayle and the studies thereof will be used as a departure point, thereby building on the methodologies and literature within South African queer linguistics.

Conceptual framework

Language is inherently social and can act as a symbol of identity within speech communities (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003). As society becomes more diverse, the role of language in forming individual and collective identities evolves, reflecting cultural habits, traditions, and ideas about gender and sexuality (Pelser & Bosman 2024). As Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003:60) explain, language encodes social meaning, affecting how speakers use semantics and style to express themselves. Within queer communities, language operates as more than a communicative tool. Queer language becomes a means of constructing, asserting and negotiating identity.

The intersection of queer theory and language highlights the ways in which linguistic practices both shape and reflect the lived experiences of queer individuals. Queer theory, rooted in post-structuralist thought, challenges normative assumptions about gender and sexuality, while linguistic inquiry into queer identities examines how language constructs and is, in turn, constructed by queer experiences. This conceptual framework situates queer theory as the guiding perspective, exploring key linguistic strategies and theoretical approaches that highlight the role of language in queer identity formation.

The basis of queer theory and queer linguistics

Queer theory emerged in the late 20th century as a critical response to traditional understandings of gender and sexuality, influenced by post-structuralist thinkers such as Micheal Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler. Queer theory critiques the binary construction of gender and sexuality and challenges the assumptions that these identities are fixed or even natural. Central to this perspective is Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity, which argues that gender is not an inherent trait, but rather a series of repeated social performances shaped by discourse and power structures. Similarly, Sedgwick (1990) highlights how language and discourse reinforce binaries such as male and/or female and heterosexual and/or homosexual, thereby sustaining dominant societal power structures. In this way, queer theory seeks to deconstruct rigid identity categories and advocates for a more fluid and evolving understanding of gender and sexuality.

Language plays a crucial role in queer theory as it both reflects and reinforces social power relations. The ways in which gender and sexuality are encoded in language influence social perceptions and identity formation, social recognition and belonging. From pronoun use to the reclamation of slurs, queer individuals continuously navigate and subvert linguistic norms to assert and legitimise their identities. These dynamics are particularly evident among Afrikaans-speaking queer individuals in South Africa, where queer communities actively reshape and redefine Afrikaans expressions to better align with their lived experiences and identities (Cage & Evens 2003; Luyt 2014). Understanding queer theory provides a foundation for analysing how language serves as both a tool of oppression and a means of resistance within the queer community, while also shaping expressions of identity.

Building on these theoretical foundations, queer linguistics emerges as a sociolinguistic framework that explicitly incorporates insights from queer theory to interpret language use (Bucholtz & Hall 2004). According to Motschenbacher and Stegu (2013), queer linguistics views identity as fluid and actively constructed through language. The framework rejects heteronormative binary categories and challenges traditional assumptions regarding the relationship between gender and language use. Jones (2021:18) further argues for an intersectional approach in queer linguistics, emphasising that language use across diverse gender and sexual identities offers valuable insights into sociolinguistics. This perspective recognises the diversity of linguistic practices within queer communities and highlights how different identities often express themselves outside established linguistic and social norms.

Within the South African context, Afrikaans-speaking queer individuals navigate a linguistic landscape in which gendered language structures and limited queer-affirming vocabulary can be restrictive. Consequently, queer linguistic practices often involve the adaption of existing Afrikaans and English terms, the creation of new expressions and the borrowing of elements from other languages to better articulate gender and sexual identities. In this sense, language becomes a resource through which LGBTQIA+ individuals establish, negotiate and express identities that do not conform to dominant societal expectations. Queer linguistics, grounded in queer theory, is therefore particularly suited to this conceptual framework, as it contributes to a more inclusive understanding of Afrikaans and its linguistic varieties.

Sociolinguistics

Three somewhat interrelated linguistic branches will be used as a background for analysing data in this paper, namely sociolinguistics, queer linguistics and feminist linguistics. Each brings a specific focus to the table and will assist in a thorough interpretation of the results, with queer theory serving as the overarching framework.

Varying across language communities, language serves as a tool for communicating thoughts effectively (Van Rooy 2017:3). It is inherently social and acts as a symbol of identity within speech communities (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003; Otto 2017:366). Language's versatility extends beyond simple utterances to include a range of communicative functions that impact people's lives, emphasising the importance of understanding language in its social context (Gumperz 1974). As society becomes more diverse, the role of language in forming individual and collective identities evolves, reflecting cultural habits, traditions and ideas about gender (Pelser & Bosman 2024). Sociolinguistics theory highlights the relationship between language and society, focusing on factors such as class, race, gender and culture, and the

influence of societal changes on language (Eckert 2005; Otto 2017; Švejcer & Nikol'skij 1986). This theory, as explained by Wardhaugh and Fuller (2015), provides a framework to analyse language use in relation to identity, emphasising the dynamic interaction between language and social context.

Through a queer theoretical lens, sociolinguistics provides a useful framework for analysing and interpreting language use in relation to identity formation and expression, including the experiences of individuals with non-normative gender and sexual identities. The study of Afrikaans queer speech reveals how linguistic choices reinforce community belonging while signalling identity to others within and outside the LGBTQIA+ community. While this study does not include the categories of race, class and geographical location, we do focus on age, sexual identity and gender expression as part of our analysis. This approach will aid in describing and understanding the use of queer speech by Afrikaans-speaking queer women and nonbinary individuals. In addition, this study also looks at how using the same words and expressions may differ in meaning when used in a heteronormative context.

Feminism within linguistics

Building on Sociolinguistics, feminist linguistics further examines how power dynamics and gender ideologies shape language. A feminist lens on the language use of queer women is an important component of this research, especially in light of historical notions of 'real' womanhood and its connection to language. With regards to 'real' womanhood, Kotze and Bowman (2018:5) explain that the concept in early feminist theories did not include homosexual women because of the underlying ideologies based on men's perspective on womanhood.

The modern feminist approach introduced alternative discourses, encouraging researchers to question how best to study gender without assuming a direct link between masculinity and femininity and the binary categories of man and woman (Ehrlich, Meyerhoff & Holmes 2014:5). Milani (2013:274) builds on this discourse by emphasising that individuals actively perform gender through daily interactions, often employing creative linguistic mechanisms. This perspective underpins the investigation of queer women and nonbinary individuals' language use, recognising that language reflects identity beyond biological sex.

The outdated essentialist view of language, gender and sexuality has led researchers to adopt perspectives that challenge binary-led methodologies (Hall, Borba & Hiramoto 2021; Motschenbacher 2007; Svendsen 2019). Influenced by postmodernism and post-structuralist thought, these approaches highlight the complexity of identity and argue that categorising language as strictly 'male' or 'female' oversimplifies and erases diverse identities (Becker, Khan & Zimman 2022; Motschenbacher 2007). Instead, they explore how queer identities are linguistically constructed and seek alternatives beyond the normative binary. Acknowledging the growing recognition of identity fluidity, this study adopts a postmodernist framework to examine how queer speakers use language to construct social meanings and shape their social realities. This phenomenon is evident in Afrikaans queer speech, in which traditionally gendered linguistic features are repurposed to align with nonbinary and queer identities, demonstrating the performative dynamic of the nature of gender in language.

Therefore, the framework of feminist linguistics aligns with queer theoretical perspectives, which emphasise non-normative gender expressions and linguistic strategies as forms of resistance to hegemonic gender structures.

Language and queer identity construction

Linguistic studies have examined how queer individuals use language to negotiate, build and express identity. Cameron and Kulick (2003) highlight the ways in which language contributes to the formation of queer subjectivity. The use of pronouns, neologisms and reclaimed slurs exemplifies how language serves as a tool for both self-definition and activism. Research on nonbinary and genderqueer pronouns underscores the challenges and innovations in linguistic inclusivity (Zimman 2017). Through a queer theoretical framework, these linguistic strategies can be understood as both personal expressions of identity and political acts that challenge dominant discourses on gender and sexuality.

The study of queer theory and language reveals the profound impact of linguistic practices on identity formation, community building and social change. By bridging queer theory with linguistic analysis, scholars can deepen our understanding of how language both shapes and is shaped by queer experiences.

Queer theory provides a necessary lens through which to critique and challenge normative linguistic structures, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and expansive view of language and identity.

Aim and objectives

The main research question of this article is the following: What is the role of queer language in the lives of Afrikaans-speaking queer women and nonbinary people?

In order to answer this question, data collected from Afrikaans-speaking queer women and nonbinary people will be analysed to investigate matters such as the associations participants have with queer language, why they use it or do not use it, whether it is relevant for their identities and cultures, and where they learned it and use it.

Research methods and design

This study followed a mixed-methods approach, including both questionnaires and interviews. Regarding the questionnaires, insights from previous studies on Gayle were considered. The first is the master's dissertation of Cage

(1999) on the use of Gayle by South African homosexual men. Cage further co-authored a dictionary: *Gayle. The Language of Kinks and Queens: A History and Dictionary of Gay Language in South Africa* (Cage & Evans 2003). Later, Kathryn Luyt's (2014) MA thesis provided new perspectives on the use and functions of Gayle, expanding on and contrasting with the findings of Ken Cage.

Both Cage and Luyt collected data with questionnaires. Cage's (1999) first questionnaire was qualitative in nature, but very few participants were willing and able to complete it, saying that it was simply too difficult to come up with terms themselves. Cage compiled an additional quantitative questionnaire that provided participants with a list of terms to indicate, which they recognised and understood, enabling him to collect a substantially larger body of data through this instrument. His focus was mainly on lexical items.

Luyt (2014) also used a questionnaire, including not only quantitative but also qualitative questions. Luyt asked participants to indicate which of the provided terms they used, and to provide a definition of each term. This method enabled her to determine not only which terms were still used but also whether there were any changes in meaning since Cage's study. There were further qualitative questions in this questionnaire to gather more in-depth information about the attitudes and feelings of participants towards Gayle at the time.

For our methodology, we followed a similar approach to that of Luyt (2014); however, we went a step further to include interviews as well for even more in-depth insights into the attitudes and feelings of participants.

Questionnaire

The first section of the questionnaire was aimed at gathering personal information about participants, such as age, identity and whether they identify openly with the queer community. The second section focused on the collection of words and expressions, and on determining the extent to which these are used and by whom. This part of the project does not feature further in this article, however, as the focus is on the final section of the questionnaire, in which more qualitative, in-depth questions were asked about personal experiences, perspectives and attitudes regarding queer language (see Appendix 1).

Interviews

Four interviews were conducted to complement the questionnaire data. The interview questions were based on the questionnaire, aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of individual experiences and perspectives (see Appendix 2). Participants were allowed to deviate from the interview schedule (as long as they remained focused on queer language in general) to facilitate spontaneous discussions led by the participants.

Recruitment of participants

Participant recruitment relied on social media such as Instagram, Facebook and TikTok, on which information about the project and the link to the online questionnaire were shared. People were also encouraged to share them further in their own circles.

Openly queer public figures were recruited for the interviews. These public figures were known to the researchers through social media, publications, performances (e.g. singing or acting) or other public forums. Different individuals were contacted until one from each age group expressed interest in participating.

Participants

The participants sought for this study could be, in principle, any adults with Afrikaans as a first language, who are not cisgender men and not heterosexual, cisgender women. This condition is aimed at including the categories that were mostly excluded from the previous studies discussed.

Participants were divided into four age groups: 18–25 years old (Generation Z), 26–41 years old (Millennials and/or Generation Y), 42–57 years old (Generation X) and 58+ years old (Baby Boomers).[1] This division enables us to track possible changes in language use and attitudes. Participants were also asked to describe their sexuality and gender identity in any terms they preferred. The individual descriptions were then grouped together based on similarities.

We used 99 completed questionnaires in total, which is more than either Cage (1999) or Luyt (2014). This volume was probably enabled by the questionnaire being available and easily accessible online. The questionnaire was open for approximately a week, and all the responses we received at that time from participants within the criteria were used. To preserve participants' anonymity, questionnaire respondents were assigned numerical identifiers (Q1 – Q99). The prefix "Q" indicates that the quotation originates from a questionnaire respondent, while the accompanying number serves only to distinguish between respondents and enable the consistent tracking of quotations throughout the dataset.

Interview participants, by contrast, were assigned unique letter identifiers that refer to the specific individuals interviewed. These identifiers remain consistent throughout the article and represent the following participants:

- H – cisgender homosexual woman (singer)
- B – cisgender bisexual woman (published author and blogger)
- T – transgender queer woman (published author)
- N – nonbinary individual (journalist and academic)

1.Age groups corresponds to the time when the data were collected, which is 2022.

The interviews were conducted with openly queer public figures representing different age groups. Unlike the questionnaire identifiers, which indicate anonymous questionnaire respondents, the letter identifiers (H, B, T, and N) refer to these four specific interview participants throughout the discussion.[2]

Data analysis

A thematic analysis approach was applied to thoroughly examine and interpret the responses to the open-ended questions in this study (see Appendix 3). Accompanying this analysis, a qualitative method was used to identify, analyse and interpret patterns or themes within the datasets (Clarke & Braun 2017:297). The key strength of using thematic analysis in this paper lies in its flexibility, as the analysis is not bound to a specific theoretical framework and can therefore be applied across a variety of theoretical orientations and research paradigms.

The present study adhered to the six-phase thematic analysis process as outlined by Braun et al. (2021). In the initial phases, the data were thoroughly read to begin noting preliminary patterns. Coding was then conducted by using ATLAS.ti version 24.1.1, with relevant data segments assigned codes that captured essential features aligned with the research questions. Each code represented a specific point, idea or recurring element in the participant's responses. These codes captured the most meaningful and relevant features of the data.

Once the codes were generated, they were reviewed and grouped together to form broader themes. This stage involved iterative refinement, ensuring that the emerging themes were coherent, distinct and meaningfully representative of the data, creating clear links to the overarching research questions. Themes were clearly defined and labelled, forming the foundation for a structured interpretation of the dataset. The development of themes involved a recursive process of continuously moving among the data, codes and the emerging thematic structure. Both researchers were involved in the analyses – in which one researcher assigned codes, and the other performed quality control by checking consistency and flagging any potential issues for further discussion until consensus was reached. The themes were determined through the discussion and agreement of both researchers.

Finally, themes were named and described in detail and were used to interpret the data in a way that sheds light on the influence of language on identity within the queer women and nonbinary Afrikaans community. The flexibility of this thematic analysis approach allowed for an inductive exploration of the participant's responses while remaining guided by the study's central questions.

The use of this digital tool provided a structured and comprehensive means to explore complex themes and patterns within data, ultimately enabling an in-depth understanding of the research questions. The chosen methodological approach discussed previously not only supported a thorough and consistent analysis but also offered a platform for developing insights into how language within the Afrikaans community is shaping identity and the expression thereof.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the North-West University Ethics Committee for Language Matters. The ethical clearance number is NWU-01109-22-A7. Written informed consent was obtained from all individual participants involved in the study. The following measures of ethical care were taken to ensure the protection of all the parties involved.

Participation in the project was completely voluntary, and this fact was stated clearly in the recruitment material. When following the link to the questionnaire, participants were taken to a page with a description of the research project and the participants we sought, and the implications of participation. Consent was required before the questionnaire could be opened.

The option of complete anonymity was provided, as the questionnaire was filled out online, and no personal information, such as names or contact details, was required at any point. It was also emphasised that any personal information that they did choose to disclose would remain completely confidential, with only the researchers having access to it. There was also the option to provide contact information if the participant wanted to receive the final results of the study.

Written informed consent to do and record the interviews was provided by each interview participant before the interview, and their identities will not be disclosed to anyone outside of the research project. The professional who was hired to transcribe the interviews signed a confidentiality agreement before getting access to the recordings.

Results

Participants

A total of 99 questionnaire responses from 99 participants were included in the analyses. The total number of responses was 101, but one response was discarded because a specific participant submitted twice, and one response was excluded because the respondent was a gay cisgender man.

The four age groups identified above are not represented equally in the questionnaire data, which must be taken into account when interpreting the data:

- Gen Z (18–25 years old): 47 participants.
- Gen Y and/or Millennials (26–41 years old): 28 participants.
- Gen X (42–57 years old): 17 participants.
- Baby Boomers (58+ years old): seven participants.

2.The age group of each individual will not be disclosed to avoid possible identification of the participants, revealing only that the group includes one from each age group.

Most participants (n = 83) are cisgender women, with two transgender participants each from the two youngest age groups, 10 nonbinary participants from the three younger age groups, and two genderfluid participants, one from Gen Z and one from Gen X.

Regarding sexuality, most of the participants (n = 70) describe themselves as gay or lesbian. There are also bisexual participants (n = 13), participants who identify simply as queer (n = 5), pansexual (n = 5), a demisexual and an asexual. There are also four heterosexual participants (all transgender). For more information, see Figure 1.

Why queer language is used

It is important to understand the context in which queer language is used to explore the key aspects of the language. One questionnaire item asked participants why they use queer language, allowing them to select all applicable options from a provided list (see Figure 2).

The most frequently selected reason for using queer language was self-description, followed by identifying with the LGBTQIA+ community. Two other popular motivations are for fun and creativity, with many younger participants indicating joking as well. This finding shows some measure of light-heartedness accompanying the use of queer language. In contrast, LGBTQIA+ acceptance and secrecy do feature, although not prominently, showing that queer language can still have a protective function too.

Interviewees expanded on some of these reasons for using queer language (Extracts 1–3):

Extract 1

> '*Uhm, en, en funksioneel dink ek is dit baie meer pret*.' (B)
> [Uhm, and, and, functionally I think it is much more fun.]

Extract 2

> '*mens gebruik dit maar eintlik om iets te verstaan om te verduidelik eintlik*.' (H)
> [you use it really to understand something and explain really.]

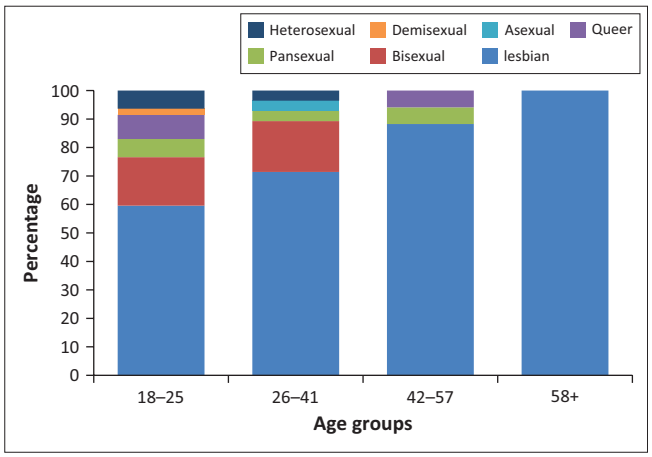


FIGURE 1: Sexual identities of participants.

Extract 3

> '*weet jy, ek kan nie sê dat ek dit sou gebruik om myself te omskryf nie, nee*.' (T)
> [you know, uhm, I, I cannot say that I would use it to describe myself, no.]

Where queer language is used

The next matter we discussed was regarding where the participants use queer language (Figure 3).

The two most prominent contexts for using queer language are with queer friends and with other queer people, while use in gay venues also appears frequently. Additionally, younger participants report using queer language with non-queer friends, while Millennials note using it in their homes. Contrastingly, it seems that the oldest group tends to restrict their use of queer language to explicitly queer settings, rarely using it at work or with strangers, or even less so anywhere and everywhere. Overall, the data suggest that queer language is primarily used within the LGBTQIA+ community, particularly among older participants.

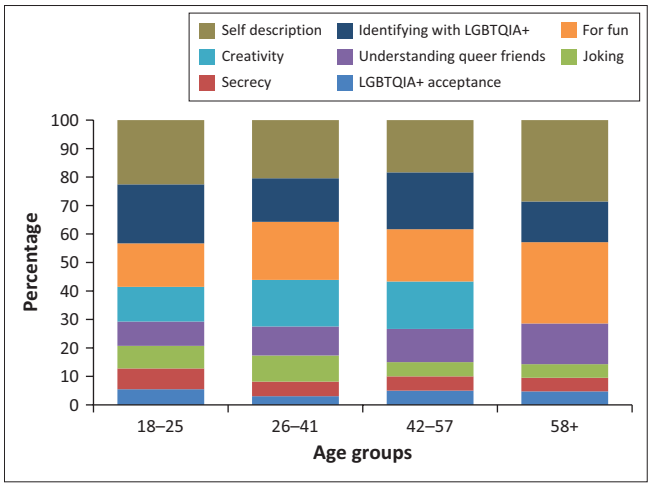
For a more nuanced view, the interviewees indicate that both the situational context and the individuals present play a crucial role in determining whether queer language is used (Extracts 4–7):

Extract 4

> '*By die werk byvoorbeeld, soos met enige code-switching, gaan ek, gaan ek 'n ander tipe taal gebruik, as wanneer ek op 'n Vrydagaand met my tjomme bymekaar is*.' (B)
> [At work, for example, like with any code-switching, I will, I will use a different kind of language than when I'm with my friends on a Friday night.]

Extract 5

> '*Daar's 'n difference in hoe jy sê. Uhm, en dit maak dit nogals tricky as jy, as, as daar soos klomp groepe dan's jy soos aahhh, hoe sê ek nou hierdie*.' (H)



LGBTQIA+, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and more.

FIGURE 2: Why participants use queer language.

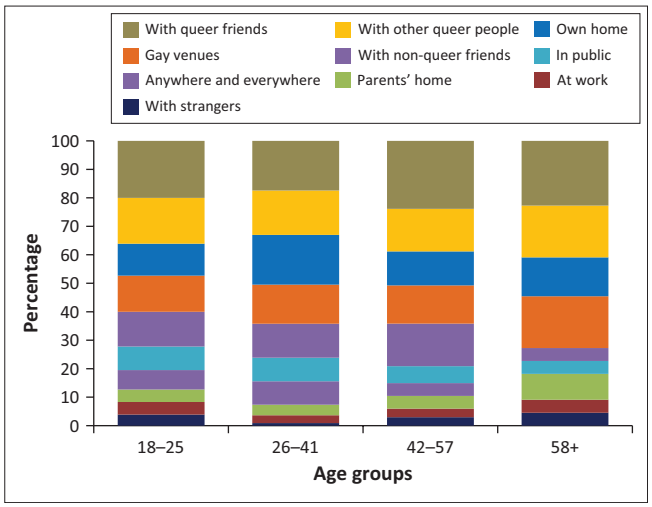


FIGURE 3: Where participants use queer language.

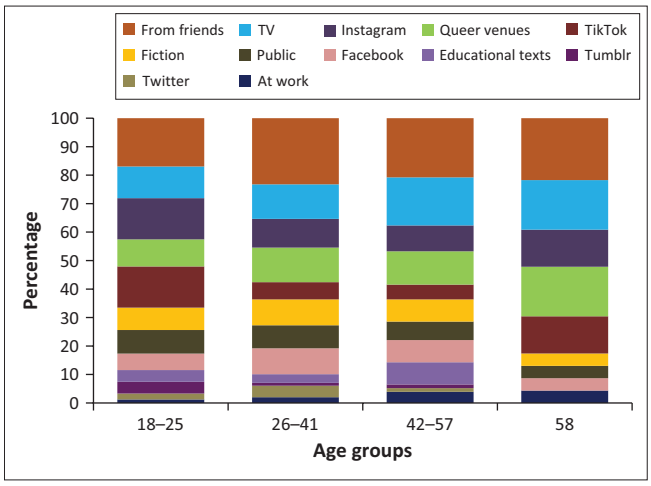


FIGURE 4: Where participants learn queer language.

[There's a difference in how you say. Uhm, and it makes it tricky if you, if, if there's a bunch of different groups, then you're like aahhh, how do I say this now.]

Extract 6

'*Partykeer dan sal ek, dan sal ek goed gebruik en sê rondom mense wat nie dit verstaan nie en nie ken nie. En dan's hulle soos, dan's ek soos, o ja, nie almal praat so absolutely unhinged soos wat ek en my vriende praat met mekaar nie*.' (N)
[Sometimes then I will, then I will say things around people who do not understand it and don't know it. And then they're like, then I'm like, oh yeah, not everyone talks in such an absolutely unhinged way like my friends and I talk to each other.]

Extract 7

'*ek beweeg nie in die kringe waar jy dit sou gebruik nie*.' (T)
[I do not move in the circles where you would use it.]

Participant B explains that, similar to code-switching, different linguistic styles are used depending on the setting, such as work versus socialising with friends (Extract 4). Participant H similarly notes that navigating language and language choices becomes more complex when interacting with different social groups simultaneously (Extract 5). In contrast, participant T indicates limited use of queer language because they do not 'move in the circles' in which it is commonly used (Extract 7), while participant N highlights how extensively queer language is used within their friendship group to the extent that others may not always understand it (Extract 6). Together, these responses demonstrate that queer language use is context-dependent and shaped by both the social relationships and the communities in which individuals participate.

Where queer language is learned

The contexts in which participants use queer language, discussed above, may relate to the contexts in which participants are exposed to queer language (see Figure 4). All the groups indicate that 'from friends' is the most important source of queer language exposure, with television, social media and queer venues having some role to play for all the groups.

The importance of friends, queer venues and social media is echoed in the interviews (Extracts 8–11):

Extract 8

'*Die klubs, ja. Meestal klubs … En, en natuurlik uhm, partytjies en sosiale geleenthede*.' (B)
[The clubs, yes. Mostly clubs … And, and of course, uhm, parties and social occasions.]

Extract 9

'*Ek dink uhm, ek dink queer spaces en sosiale media is obviously massive op dit*.' (H)
[I think, uhm, I think queer spaces and social media are obviously massive on it.]

Extract 10

'*So, dis gewoonlik so 'n soort pipeline, soos sosiale media of Drag Race of YouTube … en dan hoe dit deur trickle en dan natuurlik gebruik ek baie terme wat my vriende ook gebruik*.' (N)
[So, it's usually a kind of pipeline, like social media or Drag Race or YouTube … and then how it trickles down and then, of course, I use many terms that my friends use.]

Extract 11

'*Dit was maar 'n kwessie van mondelingse oordrag van ander individue wat jy sulke kennis opgedoen het*.'
[It was a matter of oral transmission from other individuals where you learned such knowledge.]

Participants consistently described queer language as something acquired through social interaction and shared spaces rather than formal learning. Participant B identifies clubs, parties and social events as important contexts for encountering queer terminology (Extract 8), while participant H emphasises the influence of both queer spaces and social media (Extract 9). Similarly, participant N describes a 'pipeline' through which queer language spreads via social media, RuPaul's *Drag Race*, YouTube and friendship groups

(Extract 10), highlighting how global queer media and interpersonal networks interact in shaping language use. This view is reinforced by participant T's reference to '*mondelingse oordrag*' [oral transmission] from other individuals (Extract 11). Together, these responses align with qualitative findings and demonstrate that queer language practices are largely maintained through social networks, shared spaces and community interaction.

Associations with queer language

Beyond investigating the practical aspects of where queer language is learned and used, it is also important to consider matters of attitude: in other words, what queer people believe and feel about queer language.

A key issue in understanding the role of queer language for Afrikaans-speaking queer women and nonbinary individuals concerns the associations they hold with queer language itself. In the questionnaire, participants were asked to provide the first three words or associations that come to mind when they hear 'queer language' or 'gay speech'. These responses were then grouped together thematically (see Figure 5).

Several participants offered emotional or emotionally loaded responses (both positive and negative), such as happy, *vryheid* [freedom], yes finally acceptance, and *ag genade tog* [oh dear goodness]. Participant T described queer language as *skokkend* [shocking].

Some younger participants also associated queer language with queer actions or cultural practices, such as woman loving woman, drag, *vinger* [fingering], et cetera. Others referred directly to language or linguistic phenomena, mentioning slang, Gayle and simply *taal* [language]. Here, 'language' refers not only to queer language as a collection of terms and expressions, but also to broader reflections on Afrikaans itself and its ability to express queer identities and experiences. In their interview, participant N repeatedly referenced Afrikaans specifically, noting that the language is

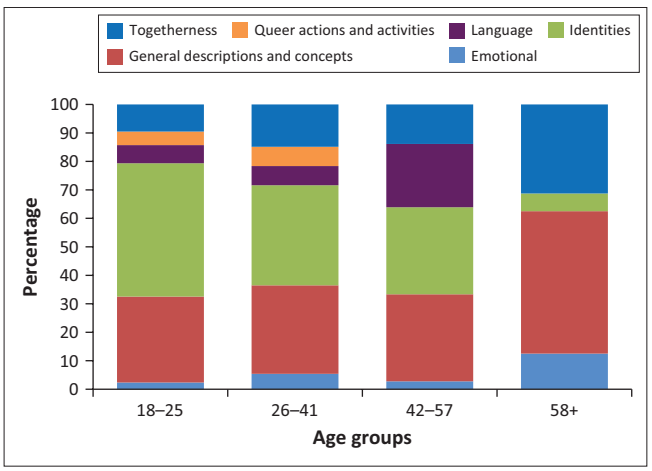


FIGURE 5: Associations participants have with queer language.

not well-equipped to discuss nonbinary individuals. They explained that the absence of gender-neutral terms in Afrikaans, such as a neutral alternative to *vriendin* [female friend] and *vriend* [male friend], can contribute to feelings of isolation and a sense of being linguistically erased. Participant N contrasted this with English, in which more gender-neutral alternatives such as 'partner', 'friend' or singular 'they' are more readily available and socially recognised. Their comments therefore reflect not only perceptions of queer language itself but also broader frustrations with the limitations of Afrikaans as a linguistic system for expressing nonbinary identities.

A slightly more prominent theme across all age groups is reference to togetherness or community. Participants frequently referenced *gemeenskap* and its English equivalent community, as well as (chosen) family. Further references in the category include *vriendegroepe* [friend groups], *mense* [people], *behoort* [belonging], *subkultuur* [subculture], and *konneksie* [connection]. Three of the four interviewees also emphasised themes of unity and community in their discussions. Although this is not the largest category of associations with queer language, the prevalence of these responses suggests that queer language plays a meaningful role in fostering connection within the LGBTQIA+ community, a point to which the analysis will return later.

The second largest category of responses relates to general concepts and broad descriptions, loosely grouped together as a result of their evaluative or descriptive function. One recurring description is *uniek* [unique], accompanied by terms such as *interessant* [interesting] and *anders* [different], as well as more light-hearted associations like fun, *humor* [humour] and *snaaks* [funny]. Although the majority of these responses are positive, a small number reflect negative perceptions, including *kras* [crass], judgement and biphobia.

The final and largest category of responses to this question relates to queer identities: participants frequently mentioned terms such as lesbian, gay, queer and variations of the acronym LGBTQIA+. Participants also referenced specific lesbian identities, such as butch, femme, dyke and chapstick (lesbian), and occasional mentions of (drag) queen. The term moffie also appeared twice. Although this term was historically used as a derogatory Afrikaans term for gay men, it has been reclaimed as a positive in-group label by some in the community. This category shows that many of the participants primarily associate queer language with queer identities and the people who embody them.

The responses to this question in the questionnaires and interviews indicate that participants have a wide range of associations with queer language, the majority of which are positive or neutral, while negative associations also do occur.

Queer language and identity

Shifting from associations with queer language, the next question examined the perceived importance (or not) of

queer language for participants' personal identities (see Figure 6). The question specifically asked participants whether queer language is important for their identity, with the item presented as an open-ended question to allow for elaboration where desired.

A few participants across the age groups have *mixed* feelings about it (Extract 12):

Extract 12

> '*In dat dit taal verskaf vir my ervaring, ja. Maar ek voel nie dit nodig om dit ten toon te stel ten einde my identiteit te bewys nie.*'
> [In that it provides language for my experience, yes. But I do not feel that it is necessary to showcase my identity.] (Q1)

Only one of the participants expressing mixed feelings belongs to the youngest age group, while the remaining respondents with ambivalent views are from older groups. Many more participants answered this question in the negative, including two of the interviewees (Extracts 13–14):

Extract 13

> '*So vir my is dit minder belangrik.*' (B)
> [So for me it is less important.]

Extract 14

> '*uhm, ek, ek kan nie sê dat ek dit sou gebruik om myself te omskryf nie, nee .*' (T)
> [uhm, I, I cannot say that I would use it to describe myself, no.]

A similar sentiment was also expressed in one of the questionnaire responses:

Extract 15

> '*Nee ek gee nie rerag om nie.*'
> [No, I do not really care.] (Q2)

Some participants indicate that while it is not personally important for them, it does not mean that they are negative towards the language itself (Extracts 16–17):

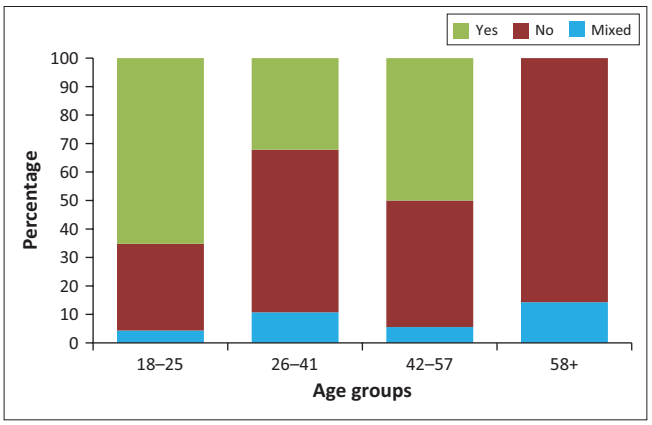


FIGURE 6: Participants' answers to whether queer language is important for their identities.

Extract 16

> '*Nee, dis net lekker om te gebruik wanneer ek tussen mede-queers is.*'
> [No, it's just fun to use when I am with other queers.] (Q3)

Extract 17

> '*Nie regtig nie, ek geniet dit wel baie.*'
> [Not really, but I do enjoy it a lot.] (Q4)

Six of the seven participants in the oldest group responded negatively to this question, as did nearly half of the participants in Gen X and more than half of the Millennials. In contrast, fewer than a third of the youngest participants answered negatively.

This pattern may suggest one (or both) of two possibilities. First of all, the perceived importance of queer language for identity purposes may decline with age, as individuals settle into their established social circles and relationships, while younger participants remain more engaged with rapidly evolving language through social media. Alternatively, the data may also suggest that the changes in society over time facilitate more personally meaningful language use for identity purposes for queer individuals now than they did in the past.

Finally, almost half of the participants answered this question with 'yes', including one interviewee:

Extract 18

> '*Taal is een van die groot maniere hoe ek my eie identiteit ontdek en hoe ek, uh, my eie identiteit kan verfyn, maar ook hoe ek gemeenskap bou.*' (N)
> [Language is one of the big ways how I discover my own identity and how I, uh, refine my own identity, but also how I build community.]

Extract 19

> '*Ja, ek dink dit is belangrik vir my eie identiteit, dit help my om myself te express en kan ook BAIE vinnig vir my wys wie nie deel vorm of wie ongemaklik en/of anti-gay is.*'
> [Yes, I think it is important for my own identity, it helps me to express myself and can VERY quickly show me who isn't part or who is uncomfortable and/or anti-gay.] (Q5)

Extract 20

> '*Ja, dit laat my deel voel van die subkultuur.*'
> [Yes, it makes me feel part of the subculture.] (Q6)

Extract 21

> '*My vriende het die spraak begin gebruik en dit het my gehelp veilig voel.*'
> [My friends started using this language, and it helped me to feel safe.] (Q7)

These findings indicate that the personal significance participants attach to queer language encompasses both self-understanding and identity expression, while also

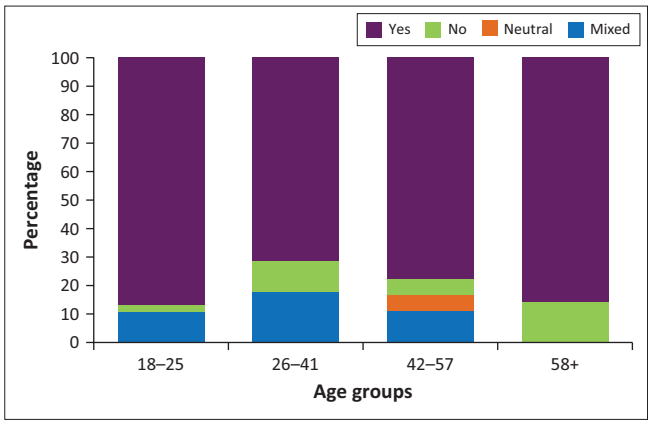


FIGURE 7: Participants' answers to whether queer language is culturally important.

fostering a sense of community and creating safe spaces in which they can freely explore and articulate their identities.

Queer language and queer culture

Closely related to the previous question is the matter of whether queer language holds cultural significance, a point to which the answers discussed above already allude (see also Figure 7).

A small number of participants indicated that *no*, queer language is not important for queer culture. Some of the reasons provided are that it can be restrictive and offensive (Extract 22):

Extract 22

> *'Nee want dit sit mens weereens in 'n boksie wat jou label. Hoe meer aandag mens aan sulke terme gee hoe meer offensive raak dit.'*
> [No, because it again puts you in a box that labels you. The more attention you pay to it, the more offensive it becomes.] (Q8)

A few participants expressed mixed feelings about the importance of queer language for queer culture. While it can foster a sense of belonging, it may also create division (Extract 23) and exert pressure on individuals (Extract 24):

Extract 23

> *'Ja en nee. Dit kan jou help om uit te vind waar jy inval of wil inpas. Maar dit kan ook druk plaas op n persoon wat nog inseker [onseker] is waarmee hul identifiseer.'*
> [Yes and no. It can help you to figure out where you want to fit in. But it can also put pressure on a person who is still uncertain about how they identify.] (Q9)

Extract 24

> *'Tot 'n mate. Die gebruik van sekere terme kan lei tot 'n gevoel dat jy hoort asn [aan] 'n sekere groep maar kan jou ook isoleer uit ander binne die spesifieke subkultuur.'*
> [To an extent. The use of certain terms can lead to feeling that you belong to a certain group but can also isolate you from others in the specific subculture.] (Q10)

One of the interview participants responded as follows:

Extract 25

> *'baie* mixed feelings … *Definitief. Definitief. Dit het meestal te doen met Afrikaans.'* (N)
> [lots of mixed feelings … Definitely. Definitely. It mostly has to do with Afrikaans.]

Apart from one response indicating that the participant did not have an opinion on the matter, the rest are overwhelmingly positive. One strong theme among the positive answers is that it helps to create a sense of community and belonging (Extracts 26–28):

Extract 26

> *'gemeenskap skep deur taal.'* (N)
> [creating community through language.]

Extract 27

> *'Ja, dit skep 'n interne band wat die groep verstaan.'*
> [Yes, it creates an internal bond that the group understands.] (Q11)

Extract 28

> *'Ja, dit laat mens deel voel van ander soos jy.'*
> [Yes – it makes you feel part of others like you.] (Q12)

Linked to community, some participants specifically mention 'inside jokes' (Extracts 29–30):

Extract 29

> *'Ja ek dink so, dis wie ons is, dis ons inside jokes.'*
> [Yes, I think so, it's who we are. It's our inside jokes.] (Q13)

Extract 30

> *'Dit maak mens deel voel van iets. Asof jy deel is van n 'inside joke' wat ander straight mense nie altyd verstaan nie.'*
> [It makes you feel part of something. Like you are part of an inside joke that other straight people don't always understand.] (Q14)

Also linked to community is a sense of safety (Extracts 31–32):

Extract 31

> *'Ja … Dit kan n deur wees na n safe space vir iemand wat dit nodig het.'*
> [Yes … It can be a door to a safe space for someone who needs it.] (Q15)

Extract 32

> *'Dit laat toe dat ons in code met mekaar kan relate op 'n bekende en ook dikwels veilige manier.'*
> [It allows us to relate to each other in code in a familiar and often safe way.] (Q16)

Another important theme from the positive responses is that it provides tools for queer individuals to communicate their understanding of themselves to others (Extracts 33–34):

Extract 33

'*Ek, ek dink dit maak dit maar net eintlik obviously makliker vir iemand om iets te verduidelik*.' (H)
[I, I think it really just makes it obviously easier for someone to explain something.]

Extract 34

'*Ja. Dit is belangrik vir mense om hulleself so duidelik moontlik te kan uitdruk sonder om te veel verduideliking hoef te gee*.'
[Yes. It is important for people to express themselves as clearly as possible without having to explain too much.] (Q17)

It also helps members of the LGBTQIA+ community to identify one another, and other safe persons (Extracts 35–36):

Extract 35

'*Ja, want dit toelaat ons om te sien wie verstaan en wie deel is van die LGBTQ+ gemeenskap*.'
[Yes, because it allows us to see who understands and who is part of the LGBTQ+ community.] (Q18)

Extract 36

'*Ja, want die taal is hoe ons gemeenskap uitken en groei en allies opbou deur hulle te educate*.'
[Yes, because the language is how we recognise our community and grow and build allies by educating them.] (Q19)

Discussion

Key findings

The key findings can be described and organised around the central questions explored through the questionnaires and interviews:

- **Where is queer language learned?** Participants reported primarily learning queer language from their friends, with additional exposure through TV, social media and queer venues.
- **Where is queer language used?** Overall, it is mostly used within the LGBTQIA+ community, particularly among queer friends and, to a lesser extent, other queer spaces and venues.
- **Why is queer language used?** Across all age groups, the most common reasons include self-description, identification with the LGBTQIA+ community, and recreational or playful use.
- **What do participants associate with queer language?** Associations vary by age; identity-related terms are prominent among the youngest participants but decline with age. General descriptions and concepts are valued across all groups, particularly among older participants, and togetherness or community appears consistently, especially among the oldest participants.
- **Is queer language important for participants' own identities?** Almost two-thirds of the youngest group affirmed its importance, while the oldest group mostly responded negatively, with the middle-aged groups showing more variation.
- **Is queer language important for queer culture?** Responses were overwhelmingly positive, highlighting its role in fostering belonging, communication and community within queer culture.

Discussion of findings

One theme that persists throughout the data in all age groups is the importance of community. This outcome aligns with sociolinguistic perspectives that view language as a social instrument shaping identity and social bonds (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003:52; Otto 2017; Van Rooy 2017:3). Participants reported learning queer language from other queer friends and primarily using it in turn with other queer individuals or in queer spaces. This report highlights the role of queer language in creating belonging and sustaining queer culture while simultaneously demonstrating how societal norms and structures shape language use (Saal & Maritz 2022:705; Van Rooy 1996).

Identity is especially important for, especially, younger participants, who use queer language to describe themselves and find it important for their own identities, and associate queer identities with queer language. These findings reflect how language within the scope of queer theory destabilises heteronormative expectations, with identity performatively constructed through language rather than just merely reflecting it (Butler 1990; Motschenbacher & Stegu 2013:552). Older participants mainly use queer language in queer contexts, suggesting that identity-linked use is more critical when establishing selfhood or social networks. There can be different reasons for these generational differences. Younger individuals are being exposed to a greater variety of identities through social media, and society is becoming more accepting of queerness, while the older generation has already gone through the identity exploration process in their youth and may now have other priorities. Older participants, while attaching less personal importance, still recognise its broader role in fostering community and cultural cohesion.

The importance of community, though, is clear for all age groups. The use of gender-neutral forms, playful or subversive vocabulary and community-specific speech practices indicates active negotiation of language to better reflect lived experiences, aligning with feminist and queer linguistic focus on inclusivity and resistance to normative ideologies (Jones 2021:16; Sauntson & Morrish 2010:15). queer language is learned from friends and used with queer people and in queer spaces. Queer language is used for the purpose of finding and building community, is associated with community and is generally regarded as important for queer culture. This activity demonstrates the importance of community for many of the participants – several of those who do not personally attach importance to queer community agree that it is still important for this community to exist.

Overall, the findings suggest that queer language serves multiple intertwined roles. It is a tool for self-expression and identity construction, a marker of community belonging and a

mechanism for challenging normative linguistic and social expectations. The patterns observed across all age groups underscore the dynamic relationship between language, identity and society, highlighting how queer language operates as a socially and culturally meaningful practice within Afrikaans-speaking queer women and nonbinary communities.

Strengths and limitations

This study is the first of its kind in that it did not focus on Afrikaans-speaking queer men, but on queer women and nonbinary individuals. Different sexual and gender identities are represented in the data set, including the questionnaires as well as the interviews. Using a mixed-method approach also allows a broader and deeper perspective than exclusively qualitative or quantitative methods would provide.

Another strength of the study is the development of the questionnaire that could potentially be adapted for future research on queer language and identity in different linguistic or cultural contexts. The questionnaire successfully generated both qualitative and quantitative data, while the open-ended questions allowed participants to elaborate on their own personal experiences and perceptions in their own words.

There are, of course, several limitations to this study. Gathering more information about participants, such as their geographic location and ethnicity, could have been useful to see whether these factors contribute to our understanding of the data. It may have splintered the data too much, but we cannot say at this point because we do not have that information. The study also had limited access to diverse genderqueer identities, which constrained the ability to explore in greater depth how these identities navigate linguistic resources in Afrikaans.

Certain aspects of the questionnaire design can be improved in future research. Although participants were provided with a list of queer-related terms and Gayle terms to indicate familiarity or understanding, their reactions to and interpretation of these terms were not analysed in depth. As a result, the questionnaire was more effective in identifying exposure to terminology than in exploring participants' attitudes towards the terms themselves. Future studies could therefore include more detailed follow-up questions regarding the meanings and perceptions associated with specific terms.

Implications and recommendations

In future studies, information about the location and ethnic identity of participants should be gathered for the perspectives it would add. There can also be an increased descriptive focus to add to our knowledge of not only why queer language is used and what it means but also simply what it looks like.

From the comments made by the nonbinary interviewee, it further becomes apparent that Afrikaans-speaking people outside the gender binary have particular challenges in their use of Afrikaans because of a lack of truly gender-neutral terms for specific roles.

Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that queer language fulfils multiple social and linguistic functions, although these functions vary across individuals and age groups.

For many participants, particularly younger individuals, queer language serves as a means of identity expression, self-description and negotiating belonging within queer spaces. Across all age groups, however, the data consistently emphasise the importance of community. Participants described queer language as a way of building connection, reorganising other queer individuals, creating safe spaces and fostering a sense of shared belonging.

The findings further indicate that contemporary queer language use among Afrikaans-speaking queer women and nonbinary individuals is not primarily driven by secrecy, as was historically the case with Gayle, but rather by social connection, creativity, identity expression and community formation. At the same time, comments from nonbinary participants highlight the limitations of Afrikaans in expressing gender diversity, particularly regarding the lack of widely accepted gender-neutral terms.

As an exploratory study, this research provides a foundation for future work on Afrikaans queer linguistic practices. Future studies could investigate regional and cultural variations in greater depth, while also focusing more descriptively on the vocabulary, expressions and linguistic structures that constitute contemporary queer language. In particular, the challenges identified by nonbinary participants regarding the lack of gender-neutral Afrikaans terminology deserve further scholarly attention.

Overall, this study contributes to a more inclusive understanding of Afrikaans queer linguistic practices and highlights the dynamic relationship among language, identity and community formation within queer South African contexts.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

CRediT authorship contribution

Megan Williams: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Software, Writing – review & editing. Johanita Kirsten: Conceptualisation, Project administration, Supervision, Visualisation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Both authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study, although de-identified and anonymised, are not openly available because of the personal nature of the data and the confidentiality prerequisites stated in the informed consent forms.

Disclaimer

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Appendices starts on the next page →

Appendix 1

Questionnaire

Below are all the relevant questions from the questionnaire:

Afdeling 1:

1. Ouderdom
    - 18–25
    - 26–41
    - 42–57
    - 58 en op

2. Seksuele Identifikasie (beskryf tot jy gemaklik voel met jou eie idetifikasie)
3. Gender Identifikasie (beskryf tot jy gemaklik voel met jou eie identifikasie)
4. Identifiseer jy openlik met die Queer gemeenskap/Indien nie, verduidelik asseblief.

Afdeling 2:

1. Is jy bewus dat daar unieke taalgberuik is in die LGBTQIA+ gemeenskap
    - Ja
    - Nee

2. In watter konteks gebruik jy die terme?
    - Met reguit vriende
    - Met queer vriende
    - Met ander queer mense
    - In my eie huis
    - In die publiek
    - By die werk
    - Queer venues (klubs, ens.)
    - Enige plek/Orals
    - Met vreemdelinge
    - In my ouers se huis
    - As daar nog ‘n konteks is wat nie genoem word nie, verskaf jou antwoord

3. Hoe oud was jy toe jy hierdie tipe terme begin gebruik hte?
    - Tienerjare
    - Jong volwassejare
    - In my later volwassejare

4. Waar het jy die tipe terme gehoor?
    - Queer Venues
    - By vriende
    - In publiek
    - By die werk
    - Facebook
    - Twitter
    - TikTok
    - Instagram
    - Tumblr
    - In fiksie
    - Opvoedkundige boeke/Nie-fiksie
    - TV Programmes
    - As daar nog ‘n plek is wat nie genoem word nie, verskaf jou antwoord

Afdeling 3:

1. Dink jy die tipe taalgebruik is belangrik vir 'Queer Kultuure?'. Verskaf 'n rede vir jou antwoord.
2. Wat is die eerste drie woorde/assossiasies waaraan jy kan dink wanneer jy 'queerspraak'/'gayspeak' hoor?
3. Is die tipe taalgebruik 'n belangrike aspek in jou eie Queer identiteit? Verskaf 'n rede vir jou antwoord.
4. Beskryf kortliks hoe jy voel oor die terme geassossieer met jou seksuele/gender identiteit.
5. Hoekom gebruik jy hierdie terme en frases?

    - Om te identifiseer met die LGBTQIA+ gemeenskap.
    - Om jouself te beskryf/iemand anders te beskryf.
    - Vir die pret daarvan.
    - Om geheimsinning te praat sodat mense buite die Queer gemeenskap nie kan verstaan nie.
    - As 'n grap.
    - Om aanvaar te word in die Queer gemeenskap.
    - Om 'kreatiwiteit' te gee aan jou taalgebruik.
    - Ek wil verstaan wat my Queer vriende vir mekaar se.
    - As daar nog 'n ander rede is wat nie genoem word nie, verskaf jou antwoord.

Appendix 2

Interview Schedule

The interviews included questions that closely corresponded with those used in the questionnaire. This inclusion was performed intentionally to allow for more elaborate, in-depth and spontaneous responses from participants during interviews.

Below are all the relevant questions from the interview.

Afdeling 1:

1. Moet jou identiteit anoniem behoue bly?
2. Wat is jou ouderdom?
3. Wat is jou seksuele identifikasie?
4. Wat is jou gender identifikasie?
5. Hoe lank identifiseer jy al openlik met die Queer Gemeenskap?

Afdeling 2:

1. Is jy bewus dat daar ’n uniek taalgebruik in die LGBTQIA+ Gemeenskap is?
2. Indien daar enige terme/frases is wat jy ken wat nie by bogenoemde is nie, verskaf die terme en.
3. Verduideliking.
4. In watter konteks gebruik jy die terme? BV Om ander queer vriende.
5. Hoe oud was jy toe jy hierdie terme begin gebruik het?
6. Waar het jy hierdie tipe terme gehoor? Bv Sosiale Media.

Afdeling 3:

1. Dink jy die tipe taalgebruik is belangrik vir die ‘Queer Kultuur’?
2. Wat assosieer jy met ‘queerspraak’?
3. Is die taalgebruik ’n belangrike aspek in jou eie Queer Identiteit? Indien nie, wat is?
4. Hoe voel jy oor die terme wat geassosieer word met jou seksuele/gender-identiteit?

Appendix 3

Codes

Below are the open questions from the questionnaire and the codes used to analyse the answers to each question.

Wat is die eerste drie woorde/assosiasies waaraan jy dink wanneer jy 'queerspraak' and/or 'gayspeak' hoor? [What are the first three words and/or associations you think when you hear 'queerspeak' and/or 'gayspeak'?]

- emotional
- general descriptions and concepts
- identities
- language
- queer actions and activities
- togetherness

Is die tipe taalgebruik 'n belangrike aspek in jou eie Queer identiteit? Verskaf 'n rede vir jou antwoord. [Is this type of language use an important aspect of your own Queer identity? Provide a reason for your answer.]

- yes
- no
- mixed

Dink jy die tipe taalgebruik is belangrik vir 'Queer Kultuur'? Verskaf 'n rede vir jou antwoord. [Do you think this type of language use is important for 'Queer Culture'? Provide a reason for your answer.]

- yes
- no
- mixed
- neutral