

Performing the Privilege of Degenderization: The Consumer Construction and Disciplinary Reproduction of Soft Male Idol Images

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Abstract. Facing contemporary feminist awakening, gender expressions in media culture have drawn growing attention. “Degenderized” or “soft” male idols have frequently appeared in talent shows and commercial endorsements. By displaying traits such as gentleness, attentiveness, and strong emotional expressiveness—traditionally associated with femininity—they attract fans, seemingly blurring gender boundaries and promoting gender equality. However, this paper argues that such gender fluidity is highly instrumentalized under the logic of capital and structural inequalities remain embedded beneath the surface. Drawing on feminist theory, Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic capital, Butler’s theory of gender performativity, and theories of occupational gender segregation, this paper examines two cases: first, idol Hu Yetao gained fans through a feminized persona but quickly removed such elements in response to public criticism; second, the beauty brand ELIXIR replaced actress Wan Qian with male idol Chen Linong as its spokesperson. Findings reveal a form of “performative equality”: male idols benefit from degenderized images without fundamentally changing the disciplinary structures confronting women. Future studies may expand into cross-cultural contexts or explore how fan communities’ emotional structures shape the reception and reproduction of gender performances.

Keywords: Gender performativity, male idols, feminist media studies, fan economy

1. Introduction

With the rise of contemporary feminism, discussions on gender performance and identity have entered the mainstream cultural discourse. Male idols, as highly commercialized cultural products, are continually reshaping their gender image. The term “male idols” refers to performative male public figures within the idol industry, whose appeal revolves around visual presentation, personality personas, and emotional connections with fans. Active across music, variety shows, film, television, and social media, they often embody “feminine” traits such as gentleness, considerateness, and emotional expressiveness, forming a “degendered” image. Some scholars argue this soft masculinity breaks down traditional machismo, blur binary gender boundaries, and promotes gender equality [1, 2]. Others note it arises from female fans’ emotional demands and intertwined with consumer logic [3, 4].

However, existing research often stops at categorizing masculinity types, without probing the relationship between capital logic and gender politics. Degendering is seen as female empowerment, yet the commodification of gender symbols within commercial mechanisms—whether this recodes and tames idol femininity anew—remains insufficiently examined. In China, systematic research on the tension between the “degendering” strategy of male idols and feminist discourse remains scarce.

This study asks: how does commercial culture leverage feminist appeals for equality to attract markets, while simultaneously dissipating their emancipatory potential through commodified femininity? Does “degendering” become a new means of gender exploitation? To address this, the article employs case analysis and semantic research on social media to uncover the gender logic and capital mechanisms in idol culture. By reflecting on the depoliticization of gender performance, this study seeks to expose the power structures behind “gender openness” and provide insights into achieving substantive gender equality.

2. Theoretical framework

This study integrates four theoretical perspectives to construct a multidimensional analytical pathway, revealing the “logic of degenderization and gender structural tensions” in male idols.

First, feminist theory provides the analytical framework for examining gender power structures. Drawing on second- and third-wave feminist discussions of the body, temperament, and cultural representation, this study explores how “feminine traits” are commercially packaged as exchangeable cultural symbols. It questions whether this process genuinely advances gender equality or devolves into a performance of pseudo-progressivism [2]. This theory is applied to critique the gender politics underlying the “soft masculinity” portrayed in idol imagery. Second, Symbolic Violence theory emphasizes how dominant classes naturalize power structures through cultural symbols [5]. Traits like tenderness and emotional expression exhibited by male idols, though superficially “feminized,” may reinforce the cultural logic that “emotional provision = female.” This theory is used to identify gender domestication mechanisms within idol culture. Third, the Uses and Gratifications Theory explains how audiences select media content based on emotional needs [6]. Female fans' affection for gender-neutralized idols isn't passive reception but stems from motivations like companionship and emotional projection. This theory will be applied to analyze fan reception mechanisms in social media comments.

Finally, occupational gender segregation theory helps us understand the power distribution dynamics behind male idols entering “female-dominated” industries (e.g., beauty). Men in female-dominated fields often experience the “glass elevator effect,” gaining higher professional status and resources than women. This implies that apparent “gender equality” may mask a trend where capital prioritizes empowering men while marginalizing female practitioners [7]. This theory is primarily applied in the data analysis section.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, combining textual analysis with case-based data analysis to explore the phenomenon of “degenderized male idols” from multiple dimensions.

3.1. Textual analysis

The research collected user comments, fan community discourses, and media reports related to Hu Yetao's gender expression on major social media platforms such as Weibo, Xiaohongshu, and

Douban, focusing mainly on the period of his highly visible “feminized persona” (October 2023 to March 2024). In addition, the corpus includes official endorsement advertisements, related video scripts, and brand communication texts.

Through semantic categorization and coding, this paper identifies frequently recurring narrative strategies in the comments, such as gendered labels of “soft,” “pure,” “delicate,” and “homoerotic fan service,” as well as key issues such as “pleasing female fans,” “instrumental persona switching,” and “disciplinary exemption.” The textual analysis not only demonstrates audiences’ acceptance and resistance toward idols’ gender expressions, but also reveals the complex attitudes of fans toward practices of “gender arbitrage.” This section provides empirical material to support the subsequent critical theoretical interpretation.

3.2. Data analysis

Using third-party databases such as Endata (<https://www.endata.com.cn/>), combined with commercial release information from Weibo and data from brand websites, this study examines trends in spokesperson gender selection among mainstream skincare brands (e.g., OLAY, Anessa, ELIXIR) from 2020 to 2024. Special attention is given to the speed and share of male idols’ penetration into the beauty sector.

This analysis aims to investigate whether male idols, leveraging traffic and symbolic capital, rapidly encroach upon endorsement domains traditionally dominated by women, thereby reconstructing “occupational gender re-segregation” in the field of female consumption. As prior research has pointed out, an increasing number of female consumers in skincare and cosmetics have expressed positive attitudes toward male endorsers. This preference provides data-based justification for brands to employ “traffic-driven male celebrities,” further accelerating their frequent entry into markets conventionally tied to women [3, 4]. Moreover, this paper also examines the gendered narratives embedded in endorsement discourses to clarify how male idols, while exempt from “appearance discipline,” still obtain equal or even greater commercial visibility.

4. Case study and analysis

As “gender delabeling” becomes a buzzword in popular culture today, the presentation, manipulation, and consumption mechanisms of gender symbols in the idol industry have grown increasingly complex. Particularly under the trend of male idols increasingly adopting “feminine traits” to construct a “soft” image, gender performance has become a crucial pivot for commercial value. This section will examine two representative cases—Hu Yetao’s “feminized” persona crafting and the gendered discipline of ELIXIR brand endorsements—to analyze how gender expression is encoded and manipulated within media-capital logic, thereby revealing the power bias inherent in “degendering” practices.

4.1. Case one: Hu Yetao and the “retractable gender softness”

In recent years, idol survival shows have gradually shifted from a competition model based on “professional ability” toward a traffic-driven logic centered on “persona construction.” Stage competition is no longer limited to singing and dancing skills, but increasingly relies on “character labels,” “emotional expressiveness,” and projectable “personas.” Among these, the display of feminine traits and the practice of homoerotic fan service have become especially common. Some contestants attract fans’ emotional investment by presenting images of gentleness, vulnerability, and

obedience, or by engaging in subtle, ambiguous interactions in programs and on social media platforms.

Such degenderized performances blur traditional masculinity, yet in essence serve the logic of traffic arbitrage: replacing professional competence with symbolic gender performance to achieve fan mobilization and commercial monetization. Hu Yetao's adoption of a "feminized" persona—followed by its strategic withdrawal in response to potential risks—provides a typical example of this phenomenon.

Hu Yetao, as a rapidly rising male idol in recent years, has sparked widespread discussion on social platforms due to his "feminized" image crafting. Through his styling, verbal expressions, and interaction style in variety shows, he constructed a gentle, sensitive, and delicate persona, catering to fans' preferences for "non-masculine" traits and earning him the online label of a "feminine male star." However, after accumulating a certain level of popularity, he quickly deleted related content and deliberately avoided such descriptions, triggering broad controversy. Weibo users commented: "His styling back then was clearly leaning toward a feminine look—he deleted the posts after gaining fans. What kind of move is this?" and "He knew this kind of marketing would cause controversy but still went ahead with it. It's clearly calculated." These reactions highlight the fanbase's recognition and resentment toward his "strategic softness"—they perceive his "feminine performance" not as an authentic expression of gender identity but as a controlled commercial maneuver.

As Judith Butler argues, gender is a social construct constituted through repeated performances [8]. Hu Yetao's performance demonstrates the manipulability of gender as a performative strategy—mobilized when it brings economic benefits, and retracted whenever risks emerge. This highlights the falsity of "degenderization" and the unequal power structures behind it: men can freely advance or retreat, whereas women are often trapped within the labels imposed upon them.

Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital is likewise applicable here: Hu Yetao appropriated "feminine traits" and converted them into traffic and commercial value. Yet this capital does not truly belong to women or to female gender identities; rather, it is instrumentalized by male idols and swiftly stripped away at the "critical point of risk" [9]. The result is that the idol industry shifts from "competence-based competition" to "symbolic capital arbitrage," becoming further entrenched in the logic of the valorization of traffic.

4.2. Case two: the replacement of ELIXIR's brand ambassador and the gendered differences in disciplinary practices

In recent years, male idols have shown a remarkable increase in endorsement frequency within markets traditionally associated with female consumption, particularly in the beauty and skincare sector. According to Endata's 2023 White Paper on China's Endorsement Market, male endorsers accounted for 39% of beauty and skincare advertisements in 2023, a sharp rise from 21% in 2020. This trend indicates that brand ambassador strategies are shifting from a model of "professional alignment" to one of "emotional appeal," where traffic-driven male celebrities have become crucial leverage points for capturing women's purchasing power due to their strong fan mobilization and market conversion capacity.

Male idols not only blur the traditional gender boundaries of endorsement, but also enjoy a more lenient form of "disciplinary exemption" in both visual representation and discursive strategy compared with their female counterparts. The replacement of ELIXIR's brand ambassador offers a typical example of this phenomenon.

The Japanese high-end skincare brand ELIXIR, under Shiseido, appointed actress Wan Qian as its ambassador in 2021. The advertising rhetoric focused on “anti-aging essence” and “firming sagging skin,” directly targeting mature women’s skincare anxieties. Coupled with a narrative of “empowering women,” it reinforced the notion that “success also requires anti-aging efforts.” In contrast, in 2023, the brand appointed idol Chen Linong as the ambassador for the same product line. The advertising discourse shifted from “anti-aging” to “scientific ingredients” and “efficiency enhancement,” emphasizing medical metrics such as “boosting collagen production in 48 hours” and “reducing wrinkles in 9 weeks.” This approach created a rational, focused, and anxiety-free usage scenario. In the visuals, Chen Linong appeared with natural skin texture, without concealing imperfections or resorting to “age-defying” rhetoric. The product narrative also avoided triggering appearance-related anxieties.

This divergence reveals that brands adopt different advertising disciplinary strategies depending on the gender of the spokesperson. Women are continuously placed within narratives of “beauty versus the passage of time”; even when they achieve professional success, they cannot escape the “skin judgment.” By contrast, male idols enjoy a form of “disciplinary exemption,” where themes such as “authentic naturalness” and “technological reliability” become the main selling points of their endorsements. This is not only a differentiated discursive strategy of consumer culture but also reflects the unequal distribution of gendered power under capital.

From the perspective of symbolic capital, Wan Qian’s “professionalism” was not highlighted as the central value in the advertisement; instead, the emphasis was shifted to her ability to maintain a youthful appearance. Chen Linong, in contrast, was positioned through the combination of “natural image + career effort,” directly aligned with the technological attributes of the product. As Feng and Sun have pointed out, in a media culture where “appearance equals value,” women’s professional capital is easily overshadowed by standards of beauty; meanwhile, male idols, even without representative works in their careers, can readily obtain endorsement resources through image alone [10–12].

This exposes what may be called a “structural encroachment of resources” in consumer culture: male idols gradually permeate traditional female-oriented consumption sectors, not only occupying endorsement shares but also benefiting from the hidden privileges afforded by disciplinary differences. Such gendered “narrative lightness” intensifies the disciplinary burdens placed upon women’s appearance, revealing that “degenderization” does not lead to genuine equality but instead conceals the unequal structures embedded in gender discourse.

The two cases above demonstrate that “degenderization” is not a liberating practice of de-oppression or de-discipline, but rather a performance strategy manipulated by capital. Idol images have shifted from being grounded in “competence-based evaluation” to operating through “symbolic capital arbitrage,” with platform algorithms assigning valuation matches between idols and brands based on traffic data. As a result, “ROI premiums” are more readily conferred upon male celebrities, granting them higher commercial value.

Female fans, within the structure of the fan economy, may believe that their support for soft male idols contributes to a shift in gender discourse. In reality, however, their emotional investment and purchasing power remain firmly controlled by capital and ultimately feed back into the commercial growth of male idols.

5. Discussion

On the surface, the “degenderized” image of male idols appears to break away from the binary division of traditional gender temperaments, offering more possibilities for gender expression.

However, the case studies reveal that such representations remain deeply embedded in the logic of capital and in gendered power structures. Hu Yetao, for instance, deliberately constructed a “feminized” persona to attract attention, but deleted related content after being criticized for “acting effeminate,” thereby displaying the highly strategic nature of gender performance. He is able to freely shift between feminine traits and mainstream masculine images, maintaining professional security even amid controversy. This reflects Butler’s emphasis on the repetitiveness and contextuality of gender performativity, while also exposing how, once such performances generate commercial benefits, capital transforms them into manipulable symbolic resources [8].

In contrast, women face greater restrictions in their gender expression. In the case of ELIXIR’s endorsement, even for a professionally accomplished actress like Wan Qian, advertising discourse still centered on whether she could “resist aging” or “maintain a flawless appearance,” reinforcing the implicit discipline that “successful women must nonetheless fight against the marks of time.” By comparison, when Chen Linong endorsed the same product, the advertisement emphasized “efficiency,” “technology,” and “professional performance,” with little reference to age or appearance burdens, thereby granting him a form of “disciplinary exemption.” This divergence in gendered narratives demonstrates not only that men are increasingly penetrating consumer sectors traditionally dominated by women, but also that they receive implicit privileges that allow them to evade gendered scrutiny.

These cultural phenomena reflect how capital encodes and redistributes gender symbols as tools. Male idols can enhance their market appeal by adopting feminine traits without bearing the corresponding social costs, while femininity becomes an arbitrageable emotional resource, embedded into male personas to trigger fans’ emotional labor rather than genuinely advancing gender equality. This mechanism, as defined by Bourdieu as “symbolic capital,” exacerbates the misalignment in competency evaluation within the competition for traffic [5]. When the symbolic value of traits such as “gentleness,” “selling homoerotic cues,” or “delicacy” can compensate for professional shortcomings in singing, dancing, or acting, the criteria for idol selection shift away from skill-based evaluation toward a flow-oriented arbitrage logic.

Furthermore, algorithms’ pricing of “endorsement value” reinforces gender inequality. For instance, according to the ROI Star data platform’s 2023 first-half skincare ambassador ranking, top male celebrities’ return on investment (ROI) significantly outperformed that of female celebrities, further illustrating the structural advantages male idols enjoy in capital markets. Under the logic of fan economy, this “purchasing power empowerment” superficially appears to grant female subjects agency in choice. However, in reality, brands continuously guide consumer desires through male idol imagery, turning women’s purchasing power into a target for exploitation.

Therefore, although “degenderization” seems to open up space for gender fluidity, it essentially accomplishes new consumption coding and symbolic exploitation on the basis of maintaining the existing gender power structure. Such seemingly neutral gender expressions often take male subjectivity as a prerequisite, and their fluidity is confined to a scope that does not affect the social power structure. Male idols can temporarily appropriate feminine traits without bearing the long-term cost of disciplinary regulation associated with these traits, nor will this appropriation undermine their legitimacy in endorsement resources or mainstream culture.

This finding aligns with existing research. Scholars have pointed out that brands tend to select male idols with market “affinity” in their spokesperson strategies, and convert this affinity through fans’ emotional consumption behaviors, thereby realizing the indirect manipulation and utilization of female consumption power [3, 4]. At the individual level, male idols gain freedom in the use of gender symbols; at the structural level, however, women not only face more stringent image-based

discipline but are also excluded from resource allocation and narrative dominance. This “quasi-progressive” media representation precisely reflects the dilemma confronted by current gender politics in consumer society

6. Conclusion

This paper, from the intersecting perspectives of feminist theory and media commercial logic, examined how contemporary male idols engage in “degenderization” and the gendered power structures underlying these practices. Comparing Hu Yetao’s “feminized persona” with Chen Linong’s endorsement of a women’s skincare brand, the study demonstrates how commercial systems appropriate “soft qualities” and “cross-gender temperaments” to construct profitable idol images, transforming appeals for gender equality into exploitable capital. Case One shows that the “feminized” label is not a stable identity but a flexible marketing tool, reverting to normative masculinity when commercial risks arise. Case Two highlights the “disciplinary exemption” male idols enjoy in female-dominated consumer sectors, where endorsements emphasize efficiency, confidence, and technology rather than gendered pressures of “anti-aging” or “flawlessness,” reinforcing double standards. Overall, the practice of “degenderization” appears to challenge stereotypes superficially, yet fundamentally operates under capital logic. Gender performance is strategically manipulated to generate traffic and market value, while the underlying gender order remains intact, perpetuating the instrumentalization of feminine traits and limiting women’s professional opportunities.

This study has limitations. Methodologically, the text and social media data do not yet constitute a large-scale corpus. Literature on the “commodification of gender symbols” in China could be further enriched, particularly regarding idol-fan dynamics and algorithm-driven traffic logic. Future research could expand by exploring the role of social media algorithms in promoting and pricing gender dispositions, analyzing how fan groups negotiate or reproduce gender meanings, and comparing male idol “degenderization” across cultural contexts such as Japan, South Korea, Europe, and the U.S. These directions can deepen understanding of the restructuring logic of gender power in consumer culture and reveal structural barriers to achieving substantive gender equality.

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