

Contradictory Coexistence and Intertwining: How Admiring and Stigmatizing Narratives Jointly Shape the Complex Identity of the “Feminine Men” Community in Cyberspace

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Abstract. This paper investigates the complex construction of the “feminine men” identity within the paradoxical environment of the Chinese internet. It explores how this group, consisting of young men expressing feminine identities, is simultaneously shaped by two powerful, conflicting online narratives: celebratory discourses of admiration and consumption, and stigmatizing discourses of moral criticism. Moving beyond a simplistic focus on oppression, this study examines the co-constitutive power of both vilification and admiration in forming a contested social identity. The research employs a qualitative methodology, using comparative case studies of viral online events and key opinion leaders. Through critical discourse analysis of comments and interactions from diverse platforms like Bilibili, Rednote, and Weibo, the paper analyzes the language and mechanisms of these competing narratives. The findings reveal that the “feminine men” identity is not merely oppressed but is actively constructed in the tension between commodifying visibility and persistent prejudice, offering new insights into gender, digital culture, and identity negotiation in contemporary China.

Keywords: Masculinity, Subculture, Intersectionality, Stigmatization, Discourse Analysis

1. Introduction

In recent years, highly developed cyberspace has provided a unique environment for youth subcultures to develop. Within this context, the visible rise of the “Feminine Men” community, which is young men who express feminine identities through fashion and performance is a notable phenomenon. This emergence is closely linked to the society's supportive creative and entertainment industries. The “feminine men” community receives extensive admiration online, with most of the attention focusing on their appearance and the courage they show in wearing feminine clothing. However, while cyberspace development provides a platform for their expression, they still face significant social criticism. Much of this pushback challenges their deviation from traditional masculine norms, creating a tension between their newfound visibility and persistent societal expectations. Scholars argue that social media and the fan economy have created a stage for the performance of diverse masculinities, turning them into consumable media products [1,2]. From a perspective of gender politics, studies often use Western theories, viewing these practices as a form

of "negotiation" or "resistance" to traditional "hegemonic masculinity" [3]. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity provides a foundational theoretical framework for understanding the performative nature of such resistance [4]. However, this subversive potential is often limited and can be "co-opted" by commercial forces [5]. Furthermore, qualitative research reveals the participants' complex personal motivations, including aesthetic expression, self-exploration, and a sense of community belonging. This phenomenon also shows distinct regional characteristics, developing more prominently in cities known for their inclusivity and creative industries, such as Chengdu [6]. In summary, while existing studies effectively frame the issue through media and subcultural lenses, there is a lack of in-depth observation and research on the identity of the "feminine men" community in emerging Chinese online communities. This study will fill this research gap by exploring how the admiring narratives and stigmatizing narratives in cyberspace, as intertwined constructive forces, jointly shape the complex, fluid and tension-filled social identity of "feminine men", and contribute to the realization of gender equality and the fight against discrimination against the LGBTQ community.

2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework constructed in this study integrates Dick Hebdige's subculture theory [7], R.W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity [8], and Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory [9] to analyze the complex identity construction process of "feminine men" in cyberspace. This framework regards online identity formation as a dynamic field co-shaped by contradictory forces: Hebdige's theory reveals how the stylistic practices of "feminine men" are simultaneously subjected to commodification co-optation by admiring discourses and ideological co-optation by stigmatizing discourses; Connell's perspective dissects how the hegemonic order regulates gender transgression through two complementary mechanisms, which are "hard discipline" (public stigma) and "soft discipline" (conditional admiration); and Crenshaw's intersectionality theory provides a deep-seated explanation for this contradictory coexistence: seemingly opposing positions in online public opinion actually reflect the internal tensions that individuals bear across multiple identity coordinates, including gender beliefs, attitudes toward sexual orientation, and subcultural identification. Together, these three theories form an analytical tool for understanding how "admiration" and "stigma" are not simply oppositional, but simultaneously participate in shaping the tensions of gender identity.

3. Methodology

This research uses qualitative discourse analysis to discover the representation and evaluation of "feminine men" identities within online narratives, aiming to answer these questions:

How is the identity formation of "Feminine Male Individuals" shaped and stigmatized by online narratives?

What discursive strategies are used to legitimize or delegitimize their masculinity?

How do these representations reflect broader conflicts between hegemonic masculinity and gender expectations?

4. Case study



Figure 1. A selfie of feminine men blogger Daci Hua on Rednote Note. Adapted from “Crossdressing is my domain” by Daci Hua, 2025, Rednote, Copyright 2025 by Daci Hua. Translated and annotated by the author

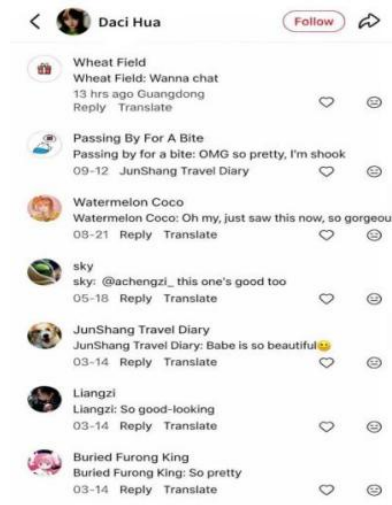


Figure 2. Comments of the selfie of feminine men blogger Daci Hua on Rednote Note. Adapted from “Crossdressing is my domain” by Daci Hua, 2025, Rednote, Copyright 2025 by Daci Hua. Translated and annotated by the author

This case (Figure 1 and Figure 2, the post and comments of feminine men blogger Daci Hua) falls into the category of the adoration of the feminine men’s group. The extension of Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity, "hard discipline" and "soft discipline", can explain the causes of such adoration: Most comments under this post focus on the blogger’s appearance (Figure 2: OMG, so pretty. I'm shook. Babe is so beautiful, and so good-looking). Such comments belong to a "soft discipline." The aesthetic standards implied in online adoration (only feminine men’s groups who are "beautiful" are accepted) and behavioral norms (they must be harmless and cute) constitute a more covert form of discipline. By setting templates of what is "good" and permissible, it tames and

manages those transgressors who cannot be eliminated. Another type of comment aims to frame feminine men's groups as having progressive ideas and the courage to change. These comments usually appear under posts by feminine men groups with ordinary looks, telling them, "You are brave, and those who dare to be themselves are the best."



Figure 3. A post to criticize “Feminine Men Only Exhibition” from blogger Dalamud Chief of the Order on Rednote Note. Adapted from “Chengdu is quite 'advanced'” by Dalamud Chief of the Order, 2025, Rednote, Copyright 2025 by Dalamud Chief of the Order. Translated and annotated by the author

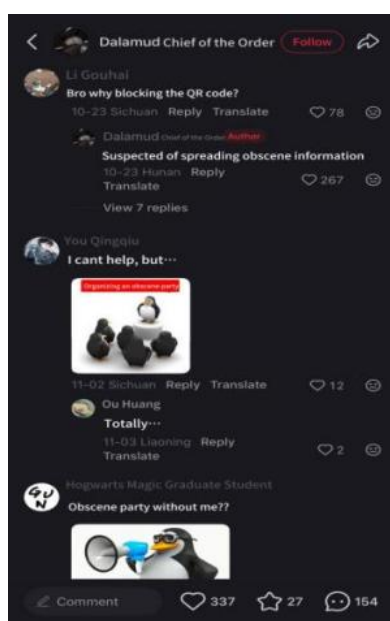


Figure 4. Comments of the post to criticize “Feminine Men Only Exhibition” from blogger Dalamud Chief of the Order on Rednote Note. Adapted from “Chengdu is quite 'advanced'” by Dalamud Chief of the Order, 2025, Rednote, Copyright 2025 by Dalamud Chief of the Order. Translated and annotated by the author

This case study (Figure 3 and Figure 4) of the Chengdu "Feminine Men Only Exhibition" can be understood by combining three key theories. Using Dick Hebdige's subculture theory, the event is a clear construction of style: using anime aesthetics to create a symbolic resistance against traditional

gender norms. This resistance, however, triggered a moral panic, as seen in comments like "WTF. How can this thing be displayed so openly?" From the perspective of R.W. Connell's hegemonic masculinity theory, these criticisms are forms of disciplinary action from the hegemonic order. This includes sexual stigmatization ("organizing an obscene party"), denial of authenticity, and legal intimidation. Finally, Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory reveals that the group's vulnerability comes from their position at a "crossroads" of multiple oppressions: misogyny (disgust for femininity), homophobia, and anti-subculture bias, which converge in attacks like "organizing an obscene party". Thus, the exhibition's style is simultaneously resisted, disciplined, and marginalized through intersecting systems of power.

The contradictory attitudes toward "feminine men" in cyberspace are precisely the result of the intertwining and contestation of multiple social forces over their identity recognition.

First, in line with Dick Hebdige's subculture theory, the unique "style" constructed by feminine men through clothing and makeup is inherently a form of symbolic resistance against traditional gender norms. However, this novel style was quickly captured by the traffic logic of the internet; its rebellious dimension was partially co-opted through commodification and transformed into a consumable aesthetic spectacle, thereby giving rise to adulatory narratives based on "appearance worship" and the "cuteness" aesthetic. But such transgressive behaviors were bound to incur discipline from the dominant hegemonic order. According to R.W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, systematic stigmatizing narratives (such as sexualized stigma and moral condemnation) are the direct "hard discipline" imposed by the hegemonic order on challengers. Notably, part of the adoration itself has also become a more covert form of "soft discipline"—that is, only those feminine men who meet specific aesthetic standards (having good looks and harmless traits) are accepted, thus taming their potential subversiveness. Finally, Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory provides a deeper explanation for this contradictory coexistence: the identity of feminine men lies at the intersection of multiple systems of oppression, including misogyny (contempt for male femininity), homophobia, and prejudice against subcultural circles. As a result, online individuals, based on their different positions across these dimensions (accepting femininity but rejecting homosexuality, or favoring anime aesthetics while adhering to traditional masculinity), project vastly different and even contradictory attitudes.

In the end, online narratives have not shaped a unified identity for feminine men; instead, they have constructed a tense and continuously contested field. They are simultaneously "courageous self-expressors" and "moral transgressors," "objectified aesthetic objects" and "disciplined boundary challengers," and their identities are paradoxically defined in the tug-of-war between adoration and stigma.

5. Possible solution

The complex identities of feminine men place them in immense predicaments and pressures. Most of them only dare to post content online for two main reasons: first, to gain praise and adoration; second, even if they receive attacks, it will not cause any physical harm to them personally. Such groups conceal their feminine traits in real life. Even though not all of them belong to the LGBTQ community, they still face the same pressure of coming out as the LGBTQ community does.

In recent years, scholars have increasingly tended to challenge the practice of regarding Western masculinity theories as universal standards. Instead, they have dug deep into the unique logic of masculinity construction embedded in China's historical and cultural context. Song Geng explains that ancient China did not develop an excessive admiration for hegemonic masculinity by studying the masculinity of the "fragile scholar" in ancient traditional Chinese society. Such admiration

originated from the invasion of Western colonialism. The Confucian cultural tradition tends to place both men and women within the broader social and cultural system [9]. Promoting traditional Chinese masculinity may emerge as a way to address the predicament faced by male-feminine groups.

6. Conclusion

This study conducts an in-depth analysis of the conflicting online discussions about the "feminine men" group and reveals a core paradox: their identity is not shaped by pure oppression or liberation alone, but is paradoxically co-constructed in a tense space where adoration and stigma overlap and interact. Online visibility is a double-edged sword—it brings unprecedented attention and acceptance, yet also leads to more complex and systematic discipline.

First, the study confirms that online praise for this group is largely not true recognition, but often a commodified and aestheticized form of co-optation. As Hebdige's subculture theory points out, the symbolic resistance that feminine men put up through their unique styles often has its rebellious edge captured by internet traffic logic and turned into a consumable spectacle. Second, Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity offers a dual view to understand discipline: besides the open, stigmatizing hard discipline, we need to be more wary of the hidden soft discipline behind praise based on "good looks" and "cuteness" standards. This soft discipline gently tames and controls gender transgressions by setting "acceptable" templates, thus protecting the boundaries of the hegemonic order. Third, Crenshaw's intersectionality theory provides the strongest explanation for these widespread contradictions: the division in online opinions actually reflects the internal conflicts and tensions that people have across multiple aspects, such as gender views, attitudes toward sexual orientation, and subcultural identities.

The theoretical contribution of this study is that it combines these three theories into a dynamic analytical framework, going beyond binary thinking. This allows it to more accurately capture the complex difficulties faced by modern digital identities—especially non-mainstream gender identities—when they gain visibility. In the end, the feminine men group is framed as a group full of internal tensions: they are both "brave self-expressors" and "moral rule-breakers", both "admired aesthetic objects" and "disciplined boundary challengers".

On a practical level, this finding has important implications for promoting gender equality and anti-discrimination efforts. It shows that simply boosting visibility (like increasing representation) is not enough to achieve real liberation; the key is to examine and challenge the power mechanisms hidden behind seemingly positive discourses (such as specific aesthetic standards). Future research and actions should focus more on breaking this "hard and soft discipline" system, rather than just fighting open stigma.

This study also has some limitations. For example, it mainly focuses on analyzing public online texts. Future research can use ethnographic methods such as in-depth interviews to further explore how feminine men themselves perceive, internalize, or resist these conflicting identity constructions. In addition, exploring how to draw on traditional Chinese cultural resources (such as the "gentle scholar masculinity" studied by Song Geng) to find non-hegemonic masculinity models may be a promising way to solve current problems.

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