

From Function to Identity: The Discursive Construction of Masculinity in Japanese Beauty Advertising

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ABSTRACT

Global consumer culture is significantly shifting aesthetic paradigms, yet critical discourse research often overlooks how commercial gender negotiations operate in East Asia. Consequently, the specific linguistic mechanisms driving the commercialisation of masculinity in a Japanese perspective remain opaque. To address this gap, this study aims to reveal how advertising language strategically constructs alternative masculinities. Employing Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, this research examines English-language texts from six representative Japanese beauty video advertisements. The analysis uncovers a three-stage discursive trajectory: advertising language progressively reframes grooming from pragmatic bodily maintenance (the functional paradigm) to a continuous project of human capital enhancement (the self-optimisation paradigm), and ultimately to a consumable form of radical self-expression (the identity commodification paradigm). These findings culminate in the formulation of the "Commodified Strategic Masculinity" (CSM) model. The study implies that consumer capitalism depoliticises complex socio-gender issues, selectively appropriating progressive traits to cultivate new markets while subtly reinforcing male-centric power structures.

Keywords: Commodified Strategic Masculinity; Critical Discourse Analysis; Masculinity; Advertising Language; Consumer Culture

INTRODUCTION

In globalised consumer culture, sociological representations of masculinity are undergoing a profound transformation. Traditional hegemonic masculinity, emphasising physical toughness, emotional restraint, and the strict rejection of feminine traits (Connell, 1995), is challenged by more diverse, alternative masculine identities (Muldoon, 2023). This cultural negotiation is prominent in the expanding male grooming market, where beauty advertising operates as a powerful discursive practice actively shaping alternative gender norms (Tsichla, 2020). As the epicentre of this shift, East Asia has emerged as a global powerhouse for producing new masculine aesthetics, within which Japanese beauty brands provide an unparalleled discursive site. Unlike South Korea's pop-culture-driven flower boy aesthetic (Jung, 2023), Japan leverages deep-seated traditions of the beautiful youth (*bishōnen*) and the contemporary genderless style (*jendaresu-kei*) (Monden, 2018) to pioneer linguistic strategies that naturalise male grooming. Consequently, English-language advertisements from Japanese beauty brands serve as an ideal site for examining alternative masculinities in non-Western contexts (Ainslie, 2017).

Despite Japan's influence, masculinity discourse research remains Western-centric (Grau & Zotos, 2016). To clarify this gap, we must distinguish between general studies on masculinity in advertising and specific investigations of Japanese beauty advertising. While recent research successfully maps how advertising visually incorporates hybrid masculinities (Foster & Baker, 2022; Kenalemang-Palm, 2023), these studies predominantly rely on broad visual or sociological frameworks. What they have overlooked is the specific, micro-level linguistic architecture that rationalises these visual transformations. Although advertisements are multimodal, verbal discourse functions as the primary anchor for ideological meaning (Fairclough, 1995), providing the explicit justifications needed to legitimise new, seemingly feminine consumption behaviours without threatening existing male privilege (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Jung, 2023). This linguistic mechanism remains virtually uninvestigated in Japanese beauty advertisements, where local advertisers must discursively navigate the deep tension between traditional patriarchal norms and progressive gender fluidity through precise lexical, syntactic, and rhetorical choices. Without a focused linguistic analysis in this non-Western framework, the subtle ideological mechanisms driving alternative masculinities remain overlooked.

Arising from this gap, the central problem this study addresses is the opaque nature of the linguistic mechanisms driving the commercialisation of alternative masculinities in the Japanese beauty market. Specifically, it is unclear how consumer capitalism selectively appropriates progressive traits to cultivate new markets while reproducing male-centric power structures (Li, 2020). To directly address this, this study poses the following research question: How does Japanese beauty advertising language strategically construct alternative masculinities, and what are the specific discursive paradigms it employs to navigate the tension between traditional gender norms and modern gender fluidity?

Consequently, the general objective of this research is to employ Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995) to investigate the pivotal role of English-language texts in Japanese beauty advertisements. This study aims to reveal how advertising language constructs alternative masculinities and drives their discursive evolution. By doing so, the research provides critical linguistic insights into the interplay between contemporary consumer culture, gender identity negotiation, and the strategic renewal of patriarchal structures, ultimately conceptualising the underlying commercial logic of this phenomenon.

LITERATURE REVIEW

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF MASCULINITY AND THE EMERGENCE OF ALTERNATIVE FORMS

The critical study of masculinity is grounded in social constructionism, which posits that gender is a fluid social practice and performance (Butler, 1990; West & Zimmerman, 1987). While Judith Butler's (1990) theory of performativity deconstructs biological gender as a social fact built through repetitive acts, its post-structuralist focus often overlooks how these performances are constrained by macro-level hierarchies. Conversely, R.W. Connell's (1995) model of hegemonic masculinity addresses these hierarchies, identifying how a culturally idealised masculinity secures male dominance. However, Connell's traditional framework, relying on rigid binary oppositions, struggles to explain the hybrid, soft, and aestheticised identities within globalised capitalism.

To bridge this gap, gender scholarship negotiates a tension between viewing alternative masculinities (Muldoon, 2023) as genuine challenges to gender hierarchies or as strategic power recalibrations. To understand patriarchal resilience, hegemonic masculinity must be viewed as a

dynamic process of "dialectical pragmatism" (Demetriou, 2001), wherein the hegemonic bloc maintains cultural legitimacy by strategically incorporating elements from non-hegemonic practices (Beasley, 2008). In the contemporary era, this is facilitated through hybrid masculinities, where privileged men appropriate "soft" or "feminine" traits, such as meticulous grooming, to modernise their image (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). This hybridity frequently represents "style over substance", functioning as a protective buffer that distances men from toxic hegemony without relinquishing the substantive "patriarchal dividend" (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). Consequently, these aesthetics, while appearing egalitarian, often reinforce entrenched hierarchies in an exclusive manner. This theoretical shift provides the foundation for examining how advertising language orchestrates masculine paradigms across diverse commercial registers.

CONSTRUCTING THE DISCURSIVE TRAJECTORY: FROM FUNCTION TO IDENTITY COMMODIFICATION

To understand how commercial discourse navigates these evolving boundaries, this study conceptualises a historical trajectory of male grooming advertisements. While previous scholarship maps market expansion, this trajectory is best synthesised through three progressive paradigms: the functional paradigm, the self-optimisation paradigm, and the identity commodification paradigm.

The functional paradigm represents the traditional, instrumental approach, emerging when male beauty consumption faced intense cultural stigma as effeminate (Connell, 1995). Early advertisements circumvented this through a pragmatic logic of biological necessity. Drawing on "technical de-feminisation," commercial discourse reframes skincare from a frivolous luxury into an objective, clinical tool for physiological protection. By categorising bodily conditions, such as sweat, sebum, or clogged pores, as environmental threats or "biological malfunctions," advertising language anchors grooming within masculine domains of hygiene, sportsmanship, and physical maintenance (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Del Saz-Rubio, 2019). Under this paradigm, consumption is rationalised as a pragmatic maintenance ritual, preserving the masculine ego by isolating beauty work from aesthetic vanity (Kenalemang-Palm, 2023).

As the market expanded, the narrative transitioned into the self-optimisation paradigm, driven by neoliberal ideologies that treat the individual as an ongoing project of the self (Foucault, 1977; Rose, 2013). Here, the male body is re-conceptualised as "human capital" requiring strategic investment for mobility. Drawing on "aesthetic capital" theory, advertising discourse frames a polished, well-maintained appearance as a mandatory professional etiquette rather than a feminine concern. In an increasingly visual and digital economy, the male face is reconstructed as a public "digital interface" or a "social asset" that must be filtered and optimised to remain competitive (Jung, 2023). Skincare is thus elevated from a basic hygienic routine to a moral and professional discipline, where terms like "confidence," "focus," and "balance" signify the consumer's compliance with modern social standards.

Ultimately, this trajectory reaches its zenith in the identity commodification paradigm, where consumer capitalism directly intersects with identity politics. Moving beyond functional utility and self-improvement, modern commercial discourse co-opts progressive gender narratives, such as non-binary identities and queer liberation, and repackages them as marketable lifestyles. Utilising a lexicon of "authenticity," "pride," and "limitless" expression, brands position cosmetics as essential mediums for radical self-expression and political courage rather than tools for fixing flaws. However, critical discourse analysis suggests that this apparent gender liberation serves as a "pseudo-progressive" brand strategy (Li, 2020). By converting collective social struggles into

generalised, aestheticised consumer choices, this paradigm depoliticises complex socio-gender issues, ensuring that the widening spectrum of masculinity remains safely managed within and profitable for the commercial market.

MASCULINITY DISCOURSE IN THE JAPANESE CONTEXT

While global alternative masculinities provide valuable frameworks, understanding these representations requires a localised focus beyond Western models (Grau & Zotos, 2016). In contemporary East Asia, the men's grooming market is experiencing explosive growth, influenced by transnational cultural flows like South Korean "soft masculinity" (kkonminam). However, Japan presents a distinct historical and discursive path. Historically, the post-war Japanese gender regime was anchored by the corporate "salaryman" archetype, characterised by stoic discipline and a mandated disinterest in grooming (Dasgupta, 2012). Following the 1990s bubble economy collapse and subsequent economic stagnation, major advertising agencies manufactured new consumer demands, transitioning male identity from the "stoic producer" to the "aesthetic consumer". Throughout this transition, the advertising industry deployed the cultural logic of *seiketsukan* (cleanliness) to reframe skincare not as feminine vanity, but as a moral responsibility and a form of self-governance essential for professional survival (Hiramoto & Kapoor, 2023). This paved the way for the sociolinguistic emergence of *sōshoku danshi* (herbivore men), a younger generation of Japanese males prioritising personal comfort and grooming over traditional competitive drive (Morioka, 2013).

Crucially, to understand how this aesthetics are linguistically naturalised, we must engage with Japanese sociolinguistic and advertising discourse studies. Tanaka (2005) demonstrates that Japanese advertising language relies heavily on pragmatic "weak implicatures" and deliberate lexical ambiguity to negotiate and bypass social resistance. This pragmatic strategy is highly evident in how advertisements utilise *seiketsukan* to "de-threaten" cosmetic consumption. By repackaging male beauty through a language of social etiquette and professional discipline, Japanese advertisements successfully sanitise grooming of its effeminate connotations (Monden, 2018). Consequently, Japanese beauty advertising serves as an invaluable cultural and linguistic text, illustrating how specific micro-level linguistic resources are orchestrated to negotiate gender roles and commodify alternative masculinities in a non-Western commercial context (Ainslie, 2017).

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

To provide a unified foundation, we integrate these diverse theoretical perspectives within a single analytical model rather than presenting them sequentially. Social Constructionism (West & Zimmerman, 1987) serves as the overarching epistemological lens, asserting that gender and consumer behaviours are discursively constructed. Within this lens, Connell's (1995) Hegemonic Masculinity provides the baseline of traditional power relations, while Bridges and Pascoe's (2014) Hybrid Masculinity explains how men incorporate alternative, soft traits to modernise their appeal. Under Neoliberalism (Rose, 2013), this hybridity becomes a market-driven "project of the self" that disciplines the male body as human capital. Finally, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Amzah et al., 2023; Fairclough, 1995) acts as the methodological engine linking these macro-sociological power structures to micro-level linguistic choices in advertising texts.

Unlike descriptive methods like thematic analysis, CDA provides a critical, socio-political lens by positioning language as a site of social struggle and power reproduction (Fairclough, 1995). It offers the necessary tools to deconstruct how micro-level lexical, syntactic, and rhetorical choices in advertisements "naturalise" unequal power relations and depoliticise complex gender issues, transforming them into seemingly common-sense consumer choices.

The principal contribution of this study is the conceptualisation of Commodified Strategic Masculinity (CSM), which extends these established frameworks. Table 2.1 explicitly distinguishes CSM from Hegemonic Masculinity and Hybrid Masculinity across four key theoretical dimensions.

TABLE 1. Theoretical Comparison of Hegemonic Masculinity, Hybrid Masculinity, and Commodified Strategic Masculinity (CSM)

Theoretical Dimension	Hegemonic Masculinity (Connell, 1995)	Hybrid Masculinity (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014)	Commodified Strategic Masculinity (CSM)
Conceptual Origin & Key Theorists	Grounded in Gramscian cultural hegemony and structural gender relations (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Represents the culturally exalted gender ideal that legitimises the global subordination of women.	Grounded in gender sociology and identity practice strategies (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). Focuses on how privileged men selectively borrow marginalised or subordinate gender signifiers.	Conceptualised in this study by integrating Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), gender sociology, and neoliberal critique. Focuses on the corporate-driven, profit-oriented commodification of gender.
Primary Power & Dominance Mechanism	Direct domination, structural marginalisation of subordinate masculinities (e.g., gay masculinity), and the strict exclusion of all things feminine.	Discursive distancing and strategic borrowing (Demetriou, 2001). Privileged men appropriate alternative aesthetics to appear egalitarian while keeping structural power intact.	Commercial co-optation and linguistic re-coding. The beauty industry actively neutralises the political edge of progressive traits, transforming subversion into marketable consumer assets.
Treatment of the Feminine & Aesthetic Labour	Rigid rejection and homophobia. Aesthetic care and grooming are pathologised as "feminine vanity" and a direct threat to traditional masculine authority and the male ego.	Tactical incorporation of alternative traits. Skincare and softness are adopted superficially as "style over substance" to navigate shifting contemporary social expectations.	Profitable re-contextualisation. Subversive queer or soft aesthetics are re-coded through language as "elite discipline" or "authentic self-expression," transforming them into brand selling points.
Role of Neoliberal Capitalism	Capitalism functions as an external structural field; traditional hegemonic masculinity resists the "frivolous" commercialisation and commodification of the male body.	Consumer culture operates as a passive, stylistic medium or toolkit where individual men "borrow" external styles to manage their local social capital.	Neoliberal capitalism operates as the primary, active engine. Grooming is mandated as "aesthetic capital" and "identity labour," converting the "courage to be different" into an "obligation to consume."
Discursive & Sociocultural Outcome	Preservation of traditional, overt patriarchal hierarchies and clear, rigid gender binaries.	Creation of a psychological and cultural buffer zone that successfully protects and maintains the "patriarchal dividend."	A modernised, "pseudo-progressive" preservation of power. It depoliticises complex socio-gender issues into personalised consumer choices, stabilising power hierarchies under the guise of inclusivity.

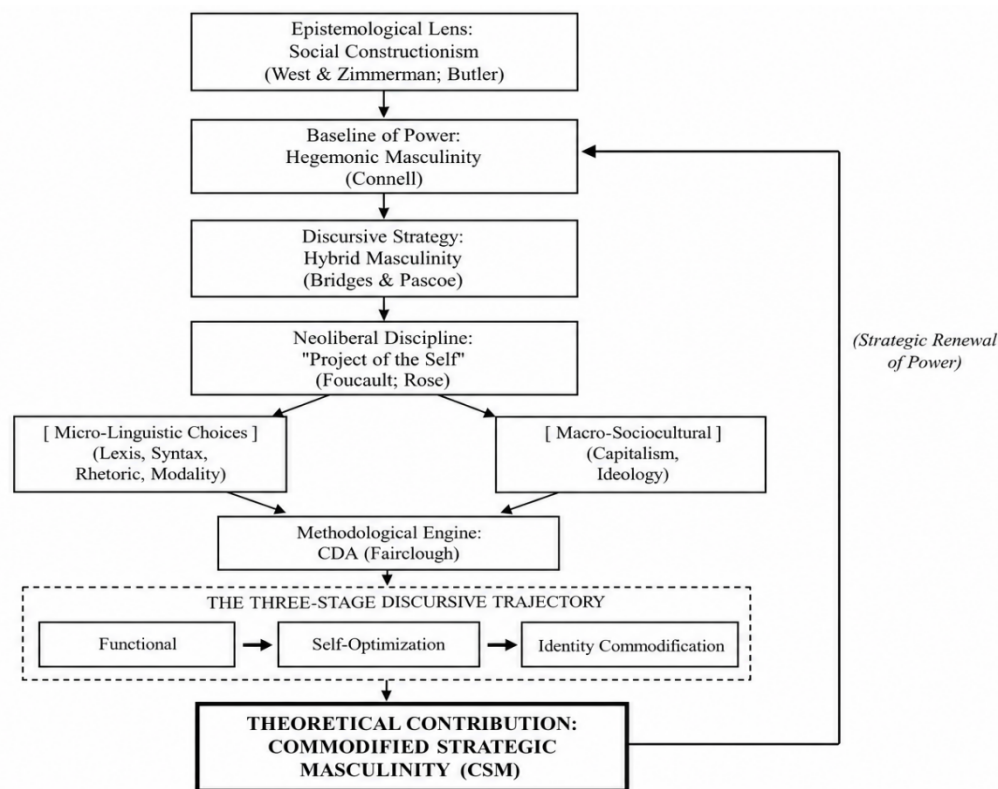


FIGURE 1. The Integrated Conceptual Framework of Commodified Strategic Masculinity (CSM)

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN AND CORPUS SELECTION

This qualitative study employs a multiple-case study approach to interpret the construction of alternative masculinities in contemporary commercial media. A multiple-case design is selected because it allows for the identification of common discursive patterns and strategic variations across different cases (Yin, 2018). The primary analytical tool is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), guided by Norman Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional framework. Utilising purposive typical case sampling (Patton, 2015), the study selected advertisements emblematic of dominant Japanese grooming trends published between 2020 and 2025.

To ensure the findings are robust, persuasive, and directly aligned with the evolutionary trajectory identified in the literature, the sample selection was strictly categorised based on the three theoretical paradigms. A total of six representative advertisements were carefully selected, providing two distinct comparative cases for each paradigm. While a corpus of six advertisements may appear limited from a quantitative perspective, this selection is methodologically justified on several levels. First, qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) prioritises analytical depth and semiotic precision over statistical generalisability (Patton, 2015). The goal of this research is not statistical representativeness, but "information-richness" and theoretical saturation, wherein the selected cases are highly illustrative of the discursive phenomenon under study (Yin, 2018). Second, these six campaigns were selected using a typical case purposive sampling strategy

(Patton, 2015), representing three verifiably dominant market leaders (Mentholatum Men, Curél, and Decorté) that span the entire consumer spectrum from drugstore utility to prestige skincare. Third, although there are only six campaigns, the systematic transcription of their complete spoken voiceovers, on-screen slogans, and subtitles yielded a dense linguistic corpus. A larger sample size would inevitably dilute the rigorous, micro-level close reading (specifically transitivity, lexical choices, and modality) required by Fairclough's (1995) textual dimension of analysis. By focusing on these six highly concentrated cases, this study ensures empirical depth and achieves theoretical saturation, as additional cases would merely reproduce the identified discursive patterns without offering new conceptual insights. Representing the functional paradigm are the Mentholatum Men (JKai) advertisement and the Curél (Edward ZO) advertisement. These cases were selected because their linguistic texts heavily rely on functional and problem-solving lexicons, framing grooming strictly as a pragmatic solution to bodily conditions. For the self-optimisation paradigm, the Mentholatum Men (Arif Aiman) and Decorté (Lay Zhang) advertisements were chosen. Their language notably shifts away from physical problems toward future-oriented narratives of personal growth, professional discipline, and human capital accumulation. Finally, representing the identity commodification paradigm are two Shu Uemura advertisements featuring Kodo Nishimura and En Li. These cases represent the zenith of the discursive trajectory, selected because their monologues explicitly appropriate the language of identity politics to commodify radical self-expression.

DATA ANALYSIS AND CODING TRANSPARENCY

The linguistic texts were analysed systematically across the three dimensions of Fairclough's (1995) model. To ensure methodological transparency, replicability, and rigour, Table 3.1 outlines the specific coding criteria and linguistic categories used to identify and interpret these discursive features.

TABLE 2. Linguistic Coding Scheme and Analytical Framework

Analytical Dimension	Linguistic Category	Coding Criteria & Definitions	Illustrative Examples from the Corpus
Micro-Textual	Lexical Choices (Machin & Mayr, 2012)	Use of specific nouns, adjectives, and technical jargon to categorise grooming and the male body.	"Oil control," "cooling sensation," "sebum" (A1); "sensitive skin," "pores," "Ceramide Care Powdery Formulation" (A2).
Micro-Textual	Syntactic Structures & Transitivity (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014)	Sentence complexity (e.g., interrogatives) and active "Actor" vs. passive "Goal" positioning of the subject.	"I'm all about sports, always active and pushing my limit" (A1); "I keep on testing my limits" (A3).
Micro-Textual	Rhetorical Strategies (McQuarrie & Mick, 1996)	Use of metaphors, hyperbole, and spatial analogies to concretise abstract gender ideologies into commodities.	"secret weapon" (A1's tactical metaphor); "skin lifesaver" (A2's utility metaphor); "limitless" (A6's spatial metaphor).
Micro-Textual	Modality Expressions (Fairclough, 1995)	Use of modal verbs and imperative moods to establish discursive authority and construct consumer obligations.	"Be a better me" (A1's moral command); "watch this magic!" and "prep your skin" (A2's instructional imperatives).
Meso-Discursive	Genre & Intertextuality (Cook, 2001)	Blurring of commercial genres (vlogs, diaries) and interdiscursive links to non-commercial socio-cultural discourses.	Slogan "Be a Better Me" echoing neoliberal self-help literature (A1); vlog-style authenticity in "Oh my god, my pores are gone!" (A2).
Meso-Discursive	Brand-Consumer Relationship (Cook, 2001)	Linguistic construction of consumer-brand interaction (authoritative expert-audience vs. peer-to-peer)	A1's authoritative expert recommendation and instruction vs. A2's peer-to-peer, conversational life-

Macro-Social	Ideological Function (Gill, 2008)	sharing). Analysis of how language depoliticises complex socio-gender issues and transforms them into personalised market choices.	hack sharing. Framing skincare as a mandatory "professional capital," "self-discipline," or "social courtesy" to preserve male privilege (A3, A4).
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TRUSTWORTHINESS AND RESEARCH RIGOUR

To ensure the scholarly rigour of this qualitative linguistic inquiry, we evaluated our discourse analysis against Lincoln and Guba's (1985) established criteria for qualitative trustworthiness: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. First, credibility and dependability were established through persistent observation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), whereby the primary author conducted multiple rounds of close reading and detailed textual deconstruction of the advertisement transcripts over an extended period to ensure the analysis was deeply grounded in empirical linguistic evidence rather than superficial impressions. Second, to minimise individual researcher bias and ensure confirmability, we implemented a rigorous peer debriefing and peer validation process. The second author, a senior researcher specialising in Japanese studies and translation with published expertise in Critical Discourse Analysis, collaboratively reviewed the conceptual coding scheme (Table 3.1) and verified the extracted linguistic categories against the raw textual data. Any interpretive discrepancies regarding the discourse types were resolved through scholarly discussion and consensus. Third, we maintained a detailed, transparent audit trail consisting of verbatim transcripts, explicit coding criteria, and analytical memos to ensure the dependability of our analytical path. Finally, transferability was achieved through thick description, providing detailed context and representative textual evidence to allow readers to evaluate the applicability of our findings to other commercial advertising discourses.

METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

Despite its rigorous design, several inherent methodological limitations of this study must be acknowledged. First, the purposive sample is restricted to six advertisements from three Japanese brands, meaning that the findings represent an in-depth qualitative "snapshot" of leading market discourses rather than an exhaustive survey of all Japanese grooming media. Consequently, these qualitative conclusions have limited statistical generalisability. Second, the analytical scope is confined exclusively to English-language advertisements, which may have omitted specific cultural or linguistic nuances found in advertisements produced in native Japanese, Malay, or Mandarin. Finally, as a critical discourse analysis, the findings focus on the ideological construction of text rather than the psychological internalisation of the audience, as this study does not include empirical reception data or consumer interviews. Recognising these boundaries is essential for evaluating the applicability of our results and provides a clear point of departure for future empirical reception studies.

RESULTS

THE FUNCTIONAL PARADIGM: RECODING GROOMING AS BIOLOGICAL MAINTENANCE

Before initiating the linguistic decoding, it is essential to establish the operational relationship between "paradigm" and "discourse" as utilised in this study. Drawing on the conceptualisations of Kuhn (1962) and Fairclough (1995), this research distinguishes between the two: a paradigm represents the macro-level ideological blueprint, the overarching framework of norms defining "ideal" masculinity in a given era, whereas discourse refers to the micro-level linguistic practices, including lexis, syntax, rhetoric, and modality, through which this blueprint is articulated and naturalised within commercial texts. In this functional paradigm, the primary discursive goal is to de-feminise beauty consumption by anchoring it within the established masculine domains of physical utility, performance, and hygiene. This paradigm is primarily constructed through the "functionalisation discourse" found in the advertisements for Mentholatum Men (A1) and Curél (A2). To provide a systematic overview of the linguistic structures operating within this paradigm, Table 4.1 compares the key discursive features identified in Cases A1 and A2 across their micro-textual, meso-discursive, and macro-social dimensions.

TABLE 3. Summary of key linguistic features in the functional paradigm

Analytical Dimension	Linguistic Category	Mentholatum Men (A1 - JKai)	Curél (A2 - Edward ZO)	Ideological Function (De-feminisation)
Micro-Textual	Lexical Choices	Athletic/utilitarian lexis: "sports," "oil control."	Physiological lexis: "sebum," "pores," "barrier."	Normalises grooming as a pragmatic solution to bodily malfunctions rather than vanity.
Micro-Textual	Syntactic Structures	Declarative sentences; subject as active "Actor."	Interrogative structures; subject managing passive "Phenomena."	Reasserts male agency; frames grooming as active physical maintenance.
Micro-Textual	Rhetorical Strategies	Military metaphors: "secret weapon."	Clinical metaphors: "skin lifesaver," "magic trick."	Reframes cosmetics as essential tactical/laboratory gear.
Micro-Textual	Modality Expressions	Assertive imperatives: "be a better me."	Didactic imperatives: "prep your skin."	Transforms aesthetic labour into an instructional obligation.
Meso-Discursive	Genre & Intertextuality	"Expert-Achiever" model.	"Vlog-style" peer-sharing.	Packages products as pragmatic "life-hacks."
Macro-Social	Ideological Function	Individualises social pressures into bodily problems.	Depoliticises appearance via scientific solutions.	Naturalises grooming without challenging masculine authority.

A deconstruction of the micro-textual dimension reveals how both advertisements utilise pragmatic and technical lexicons to strip beauty products of feminine vanity, reframing them as instruments of biological utility. In Case A1, the voiceover immediately establishes an active, competitive male persona: "Hi, I'm JKai. I'm all about sports, always staying active and pushing my limit," anchoring the grooming act in athletic prowess. The narrator then introduces the product as a functional necessity: "My secret to staying cool and fresh is Mentholatum Icy Charcoal Face Wash. 12 hours oil control with a cooling sensation." The vocabulary here avoids aesthetic claims, focusing instead on tangible physical sensations and quantifiable efficacy, such as "oil control," "cooling sensation," and the performance-based assurance of "12 hours." Similarly, Case A2 targets specific physiological anxieties through urgent interrogatives: "Oily skin? Large pores? Makeup melting too fast?" This lexical strategy categorises skin sebum not as a cosmetic flaw, but

as a biological malfunction requiring scientific intervention. Curél utilises complex technical compounds such as "Ceramide Care Powdery Formulation... continuously absorbs excess sebum... releasing the Ceramide Care ingredient to strengthen your skin barrier for up to 8 hours." By using technical nouns like "sebum" and "barrier" alongside the precise temporal marker "8 hours," the language constructs a discourse of scientific authority, ensuring that the consumer perceives the cosmetic choice as a rational, objective utility.

Furthermore, the syntactic structures and transitivity of these texts reinforce the male subject's active agency. Following Halliday and Matthiessen's transitivity system (2014), the male protagonists in both A1 and A2 are consistently positioned as active Actors in material processes, while the products function as material instruments. In A1, the narrator's declarative statements ("I'm all about sports," "I push my limit") ensure he remains the subject in control of his physical body. In A2, the narrator first identifies his vulnerability ("My skin can get oily easily and I'm always frustrated with my sensitive skin and visible pores"), where the skin acts as the passive Phenomenon causing mental frustration. However, the introduction of the product allows him to reclaim total agency: "But Curél always has the solution... the new powder in balm is totally my skin lifesaver." By linguistically positioning the brand as the Carrier of a permanent attribute ("the solution") and the balm as a physical "lifesaver," the discourse ensures the grooming act is decoded as an active, self-directed intervention. Rhetorically, both ads militarise the products using metaphors, with A1 referring to the face wash as a private "secret" and A2 framing the balm as a tactical "magic trick." Regarding modality, both texts rely heavily on the imperative mood to construct authority. A1 concludes with the forceful command "Mentholum Men, be a better me," which places the moral burden of self-improvement on the individual male, while A2 utilises didactic, instructional imperatives such as "watch this magic," "look at this," and "prep your skin" to reframe beauty consumption as a step-by-step technical tutorial rather than a frivolous cosmetic ritual.

Transitioning to the meso-discursive dimension, these advertisements demonstrate a sophisticated manipulation of genre and intertextuality to produce consumer anxiety while preserving the patriarchal dividend. Both cases rely on a standard "problem-solution" narrative arc but package it through different social registers. A1 utilises an "Expert-Achiever" model, where the professional athlete model (JKai) serves as a figure of aspiration, and the slogan "Be a Better Me" functions intertextually with neoliberal self-help discourse to frame consumption as a moral duty. Conversely, A2 employs a "Vlog-style" peer-sharing model, simulating unscripted authenticity through colloquial exclamations like "Oh my god, my pores are gone!" and "I am shocked." This discursive packaging is highly strategic: it obscures the commercial nature of the text by imitating the peer-to-peer language of digital natives, rendering a potentially transgressive product acceptable as a pragmatic "life-hack." Finally, at the macro-social dimension, this functional paradigm performs a naturalising function through de-feminisation. By discursively bundling skincare with "efficiency," "discipline," and "sportsmanship," the advertising language allows men to adopt intensive grooming without challenging their masculine authority. This discourse effectively depoliticises the male body by transforming collective social pressures regarding appearance into individualised, market-satisfiable "bodily problems," ensuring that any perceived "gender liberation" is commodified into a self-renewal of existing patriarchal and capitalist power structures.

THE SELF-OPTIMISATION PARADIGM: GROOMING AS NEOLIBERAL CAPITAL INVESTMENT

As the discursive trajectory identified in this study progresses, the advertising language shifts from resolving biological conditions toward constructing the self-optimisation paradigm. In this stage, which is systematically developed through the advertisements of Mentholatum Men (A3) and Decorté (A4), male grooming is re-signified as a continuous personal project and a strategic investment in the self. Theoretically, this shift is grounded in the neoliberal concept of governmentality, where individuals are refashioned as self-entrepreneurs responsible for the meticulous management and enhancement of their physical and psychological assets (Foucault, 1977; Rose, 2013). To provide a systematic and accessible overview of the linguistic structures operating within this paradigm, Table 4.2 summarises the key discursive features identified in Cases A3 and A4 across their micro-textual, meso-discursive, and macro-social dimensions.

TABLE 4. Summary of key linguistic features in the self-optimisation paradigm

Analytical Dimension	Linguistic Category	Mentholatum Men (A3 - Arif Aiman)	Decorté (A4 - Lay Zhang)	Ideological Function (Self-Investment)
Micro-Textual	Lexical Choices	Ambition lexis: "goals," "confidence."	Devotion lexis: "steady efforts," "accumulate."	Transforms grooming into "aesthetic capital" for social mobility.
Micro-Textual	Syntactic Structures	Declarative; subject as "Actor" and "Senser."	Epistolary monologue; subject as self-aware "Senser."	Re-scripts the face as a managed "digital interface."
Micro-Textual	Rhetorical Strategies	Athletic quest metaphor.	Journey and accumulation metaphor.	Spiritualises consumption, linking products to personal character.
Micro-Textual	Modality Expressions	Confident, promissory modality.	Reflective, authoritative assertions.	Presents the brand as an inspirational mentoring partner.
Meso-Discursive	Genre & Intertextuality	"Inspirational Athlete" genre.	"Intimate Confessional" model.	Re-codes consumption as productive professional behaviour.
Macro-Social	Ideological Function	Privatises competition via bodily discipline.	Naturalises self-optimisation.	Frames appearance as armour for the self-entrepreneur.

A deconstruction of the micro-textual dimension reveals how both advertisements abandon purely functional terms for an abstract, goal-oriented, and psychological lexis linking skin health to personal ambition and moral character. In Case A3, the voiceover is dominated by keywords of self-transcendence: "I keep on testing my limits... Every drop of sweat brought me closer to my goals. In 2025, I'll keep challenging myself to be a better me." The nouns "limits" and "goals" alongside the comparative adjective "better" construct a future-oriented trajectory reframing skincare as indispensable preparation. The narrator explicitly positions the product as an empowering agent: "Mentholatum Men helps me feel refreshed and ready for the next challenge... my must-have daily essential to boost up my confidence." Here, the abstract noun "confidence" marks a crucial discursive shift from physical utility to a psychological state of preparedness. Similarly, Case A4 utilises a sophisticated lexis associated with long-term devotion, beginning with a personal address: "Hi, future me. I believe that at this moment you are concentrating on creating and moving forward steadily." These lexical choices of "steady efforts," "devotion," and "consistency" shift the focus from correcting flaws to personal growth, suggesting that a polished appearance is not vanity, but a visible index of internal discipline and "aesthetic capital" (Jung, 2023).

The syntactic structures and transitivity of these texts reflect a profound shift toward reflexivity and heightened agency. Following Halliday and Matthiessen's transitivity system (2014), the protagonists are positioned as both active Actors in material processes of striving ("I keep on testing," "moving forward steadily") and conscious Sensors in reflexive mental processes. In A3, the athlete reflects: "Every moment reminded me of the importance of balance and focus," where the mind acts as the active sensor evaluating the self. In A4, the monologue is structured as an intimate letter, declaring: "Because we take our time and make steady efforts, we can gradually accumulate the power that we have surely accumulated." This reflective structure transforms the act of applying serum into a meditative ritual of self-discipline. These complete, contemplative sentences grant the male subject total intellectual agency, presenting grooming as an active, rational choice by a subject "concentrating on creating" his professional identity. Rhetorically, both ads utilise the metaphor of a "journey" toward excellence. A4 draws a direct philosophical parallel between artistic work ethic and product efficacy, suggesting that steady skincare efforts can "accumulate power," a classic manoeuvre in the "spiritualisation of consumption" (Williamson, 1978). Regarding modality, the discourse moves away from direct commands to a reflective and invitational modality, where words like "believe" and "reminded" establish a sincere, authoritative tone, presenting the brand as a supportive partner in the man's journey of self-actualisation.

Transitioning to the meso-discursive dimension, these advertisements demonstrate a sophisticated genre-blurring strategy, merging commercial promotion with self-help and motivational narratives. A3 appropriates the "Inspirational Athlete" genre, presenting success as a synergy of physical effort and mental "focus." A4 utilises an "Intimate Confessional" model, breaking the fourth wall to share a private philosophy of growth. This creates a high degree of intertextuality with neoliberal success literature, framing the "Better Me" as a moral obligation for the modern man. This discursive packaging is critical: it obscures the commercial nature of the text by embedding the product within a narrative of personal merit and social responsibility, re-coding consumption as a rational, productive behaviour that facilitates the "work" of being a successful subject.

Finally, at the macro-social dimension, the self-optimisation paradigm performs a profound ideological function by privatising social competition through the discipline of the body. By discursively associating grooming with "professionalism" and "ambition," these advertisements naturalise the requirement that men must constantly "optimise" their image to remain competitive in a precarious neoliberal market (Gill, 2008). This discourse effectively depoliticises the anxieties of social competition; instead of addressing structural pressures, it offers a personalised "skin solution" promising "confidence" and "readiness." Ultimately, this paradigm achieves a strategic recalibration of hegemonic masculinity, allowing the internal logic of patriarchy to persist by updating male success from a display of raw strength to a display of holistic self-management. The male body is transformed into a site of "identity labour," where the refined, exquisite appearance becomes the new armour for the self-entrepreneur, ensuring that male privilege is maintained through the successful performance of modern, disciplined masculinity.

THE IDENTITY COMMODIFICATION PARADIGM: GROOMING AS RADICAL SELF-EXPRESSION

The final and most radical stage of the discursive trajectory is the identity commodification paradigm. In this stage, which is systematically developed through the Shu Uemura advertisements featuring Kodo Nishimura (A5) and En Li (A6), commercial discourse transcends both physical utility and human capital investment to explicitly engage with identity politics and the active

deconstruction of gender binaries. Within this paradigm, advertising language utilises "identity commodification discourse" to re-signify beauty products as vital mediums for the manifestation of an "authentic," "limitless," and "gender-fluid" self. This stage represents the most sophisticated level of gender negotiation, where commercial interests align themselves with progressive social movements to normalise transgressive aesthetic practices. To provide a systematic and accessible overview of the linguistic structures operating within this paradigm, Table 4.3 summarises the key discursive features identified in Cases A5 and A6 across their micro-textual, meso-discursive, and macro-social dimensions.

TABLE 5. Summary of key linguistic features in the identity commodification paradigm

Analytical Dimension	Linguistic Category	Shu Uemura (A5 - Kodo Nishimura)	Shu Uemura (A6 - En Li)	Ideological Function (Commodifying Identity)
Micro-Textual	Lexical Choices	Explicit, politically charged, and queer-inflected lexis: "monk," "makeup artist," "LGBTQ+ activist," "gender gifted."	Existential and philosophical lexis: "what was I made for," "true colours," "stay true to it."	Re-signifies transgressive, feminine-coded beauty practices (like colour cosmetics) as markers of political courage and spiritual authenticity.
Micro-Textual	Syntactic Structures & Transitivity	High-intensity relational copulas; subject positioned as the absolute, self-governing "Author" of identity.	Concise declarative structures; subject positioned as the active "Seeker" of authentic identity.	Reclaims total male agency, transforming makeup from a surrender to the vanity-driven gaze into a ritual of self-authoring.
Micro-Textual	Rhetorical Strategies	Spatial metaphors of "limitless" identity and the physical metaphor of "unlimited pride" as a shared safe space.	Polysemic double-entendres of "colour" representing both product shade and inner personality.	Seduces progressive consumers by establishing a rhetorical fusion of commodity and identity, where products are tools for liberation.
Micro-Textual	Modality Expressions	Radical, high-intensity modality of acknowledgement; inclusive, collective imperatives: "join us," "celebrate."	Assertive, warm, and reflective modality; direct, declarative instructions: "find your colour, and stay true to it."	Displaces traditional commercial sales pitches with a highly emotional, existential, and activist tone of mutual support.
Meso-Discursive	Genre & Intertextuality	"Brand Activist" genre echoing the LGBTQ+ liberation movement.	"Artistic Manifesto" packaging a youth coming-of-age journey.	Recasts consumption as a form of meaningful political engagement and community belonging.
Macro-Social	Ideological Function	Absorbs the language of queer liberation into individualised choices.	Offers a "market-sanctioned" mode of expression through product purchase.	Transforms collective struggles into aestheticised lifestyles, maintaining male-centric power structures.

A deconstruction of the micro-textual dimension reveals how both advertisements utilise an explicit, politically charged, and queer-inflected lexis borrowed from contemporary identity politics to strip grooming of superficial vanity. In Case A5, the voiceover immediately deconstructs traditional binaries by enumerating intersectional identities: "I am a Buddhist monk, makeup artist and LGBTQ+ activist." The narrator then proclaims: "I am 'gender gifted', one who is able to live beyond binary genders and can inspire others to be more than just what society labels us to be." This transgressive term "gender gifted" acts as a strategic re-signification of language, transforming what has historically been marginalised as a "deviation" into a unique, divine blessing. Similarly, Case A6 utilises an existential lexis to navigate a youth coming-of-age journey: "graduation is the start of the next stage in life... what was I made for?" By employing nouns like

"graduation" and "life," the discourse moves completely away from functional flaw-fixing toward an ontological search for the self.

The syntactic structures and transitivity of these advertisements reinforce the male subject's absolute agency as the "author" of his own identity. Applying Halliday and Matthiessen's transitivity system (2014), the protagonists are primarily positioned in relational processes ("I am...") and mental processes of self-discovery, rather than material processes of labour. In A5, the relational copula "I am 'gender gifted'" establishes an empowered identity independent of societal labels. In A6, the narrator is positioned as the active Seeker in the material process of "finding your colour," where the product is discursively framed as the essential medium. These declarative sentences grant the male subject total autonomy, re-signifying the application of cosmetics as a reflexive ritual of self-authoring rather than a surrender to an objectifying gaze. Furthermore, regarding modality, both texts rely on a radical modality of acknowledgement. A5 utilises inclusive, collective imperatives like "join us on 'unlimited pride' and let's celebrate the courage to be limitless," and "Together we are stronger," establishing a tone of mutual support rather than a commercial pitch. A6 utilises declarative, warm instructions: "find your colour, and stay true to it... stay true to myself and express my true colours."

Regarding rhetorical strategies, the advertisements employ metaphors to establish a symbolic fusion of commodity and identity. In Case A6, the repetitive use of "limitless" functions as a hyperbolic spatial metaphor reframing masculine identity from a restrictive box into an infinite landscape of potential. This strategy utilises polysemy to bridge the product's name ("Unlimited" foundation) and the consumer's ontological aspirations, achieving a rhetorical fusion of commodity and identity; it suggests that the transcendence of gender boundaries is a material act facilitated by the purchase. Similarly, the phrase "true colours" in A6 operates as a double-entendre, referring literally to the foundation shade and metaphorically to the courageous revelation of one's non-conforming identity. In Case A5, the narrator employs the metaphor of a "safe space" to frame the brand as an institutional protector, utilising a promissory discourse where the brand acts as a "liberator." The term "limitless" rhetorically deconstructs the rigid walls of binary masculinity with a utopian promise of self-governance, effectively seducing the socially conscious consumer through shared radical values.

Transitioning to the meso-discursive dimension, these advertisements represent a shift toward "Brand Activist" and "Artistic Manifesto" genres, packaging the commercial narrative as a tool for social change rather than a sales pitch. Case A5's tagline, "Unlimited Pride," directly echoes the LGBTQ+ movement, creating a high degree of intertextuality with global liberation discourses. This discursive packaging is essential for the normalisation of male makeup, re-coding a culturally contested practice as a form of political courage and spiritual authenticity. By inviting consumers to "join us" and stating that "Together we are stronger," the discourse recasts consumption as a form of meaningful political engagement and community belonging, creating a powerful parasocial bond where buying the product is equated with supporting social justice.

Finally, at the macro-social dimension, the identity commodification paradigm performs a profound ideological function: the appropriation and depoliticisation of subversive social movements. By discursively absorbing the language of queer liberation and identity politics, consumer capitalism transforms complex collective struggles into individualised, aestheticised lifestyle choices. This discourse effectively depoliticises gender fluidity; instead of challenging the structural roots of patriarchal oppression, it offers a "market-sanctioned" mode of expression enacted through product purchase. Ultimately, this paradigm reveals how commercial discourse strategically appropriates progressive traits to cultivate new segments while subtly maintaining

male-centric power structures under the guise of inclusivity. This process culminates in a form of masculinity where the "limitless" self is only realised through the "limited" act of consumption, ensuring that even the most radical forms of identity remain within the management of the commercial market.

DISCUSSIONS

The synthesis of the linguistic findings across the three paradigms demonstrates that alternative masculinities in contemporary advertising are constructed through a strategic trajectory of commercial co-optation rather than a genuine shift toward equality. Tracing the progression from the functional paradigm to self-optimisation, this study illustrates how advertising language systematically depoliticises complex socio-gender issues (Gill, 2008). Rather than repeating the micro-level textual evidence, this discussion evaluates the broader implications of this discursive trajectory. Advertising serves as a site of "dialectical pragmatism" (Demetriou, 2001) where consumer capitalism selectively appropriates progressive, alternative traits to expand market reach. By linguistically reframing skincare as a professional asset or a form of moral self-discipline, commercial discourse successfully sanitises grooming of its feminine connotations. This strategic reconfiguration ensures that the patriarchal dividend defined by Connell (1995) remains intact, as alternative aesthetics are recontextualised to serve the demands of neoliberal competition.

However, a more critical and reflexive reading suggests that these commercial representations also possess a latent emancipatory potential that may challenge rigid gender binaries. While driven by commercial imperatives, these advertisements provide a form of "cultural permission," validating alternative gender practices and allowing men to inhabit traits once socially prohibited, such as aesthetic vulnerability and emotional accessibility. By normalising the "soft" and "caring" surfaces of masculinity within high-visibility digital spaces, these commercial scripts may inadvertently loosen the rigid, stoic binaries of traditional hegemony. This reflexive tension, where aesthetic liberation and patriarchal preservation coexist as mutually reinforcing mechanisms, underscores the complexity of contemporary gender performance in a visually saturated digital era.

Beyond these theoretical tensions, these findings offer practical implications for advertising practitioners and media producers. Marketers targeting multicultural markets must recognise the limitations of a monolithic "Idol Aesthetic" and transcend East Asian centrism, embracing ethnic and complexion inclusivity to reduce aesthetic alienation among diverse consumer segments. Furthermore, media producers should move beyond the hyper-curated, flawless aesthetics of idol culture to include more grounded, relatable male figures in diverse professional settings. Finally, rather than resorting to superficial gender-bending, advertising agencies are encouraged to prioritise "technical de-feminisation" and functional benefits, thereby creating safe discursive spaces for male engagement without triggering cultural backlash. Translating these insights into inclusive communication strategies, the beauty industry can foster a more substantive, rather than merely commercial, form of gender equality.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated how Japanese beauty advertising discursively constructs and commercialises alternative masculinities. Linguistic analysis demonstrates that the liberalisation of male aesthetics is not gender subversion, but a strategic co-optation orchestrated by consumer capitalism. Commercial discourse reframes grooming from pragmatic hygiene (the functional paradigm) to professional human capital (the self-optimisation paradigm), and ultimately to consumable self-expression (the identity commodification paradigm).

This trajectory culminates in the conceptualisation of Commodified Strategic Masculinity (CSM), which exposes the high adaptability of hegemonic power. Rather than being dismantled by alternative aesthetics, patriarchy discursively absorbs them to modernise its legitimacy, proving that men can maintain dominance by reframing beauty work as elite, disciplined labour.

Methodologically, we demonstrate that verbal discourse remains the primary anchor for ideological naturalisation. Although advertisements are multimodal, only language provides the explicit rationalisation needed to depoliticise complex gender issues into market choices. While limited to English verbal texts, this study successfully exposes the persistent mechanisms of gendered power, inviting future research to complement this textual deconstruction with empirical reception studies.

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APPENDIX

DETAILED INFORMATION OF ADVERTISEMENTS

No.	Brand Name	Release Platform	Release Date	Main Character	Video Link
A1	Mentholatum Men	Instagram	2024	JKai (Model)	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DERM8zLBsy9/?igsh=MTE4YXJsNjRmM255NQ==
A2	Curél	Instagram	2025	Edward ZO	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DHKjUVEPD3q/?igsh=cGFvdjQwaWJ5eWtt
A3	Mentholatum Men	Instagram	2025	Arif Aiman Hanapi	https://www.instagram.com/reel/DEpEu65hEO9/?igsh=cGhkN3psOWc5bTVp
A4	Decorté	Instagram	2022	Lay Zhang	https://www.instagram.com/p/CjzyQTRtsvv/?igsh=ODcxb3M5cTd1YWWh1
A5	Shu Uemura	Instagram	2021	Kodo Nishimura (Activist)	https://www.instagram.com/reel/CeikZFLjKn-/?igsh=MWU1c3o3eTBiMDYy
A6	Shu Uemura	Instagram	2024	En Li	https://www.instagram.com/reel/C9CXiMTO6X6/?igsh=OTVoeDV4dnk1aHU3