INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
HUMANITIES, PHILOSOPHY
AND LANGUAGE
(IJHPL)www.gaexcellence.com/ijhplMETROSEXUALS IN CHINA'S ENGLISH-LANGUAGE
STATE MEDIA: A (DE)LEGITIMATION ANALYSIS OF
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Article Info:**Article history:**

Received date: 11.05.2026

Revised date: 26.05.2026

Accepted date: 26.08.2026

Published date: 10.09.2026

To cite this document:

Sun, H. (2026). Metrosexuals In China's English-Language State Media: A (De)Legitimation Analysis of Masculinity Reconstruction. *International Journal of Humanities, Philosophy and Language*, 9(35), 23-45.

Abstract:

While previous studies on metrosexuality have mainly focused on participants lived experiences and identity construction, relatively few studies have examined how metrosexuality is represented and negotiated within public media discourse. Metrosexuality refers to a form of masculinity characterized by men's attention to grooming, appearance, fashion, and aesthetic consumption. Addressing this gap, the present study adopts a media discourse approach to examine representations of metrosexuality in China's English-language state media. Drawing on a corpus of newspaper articles, the study combines Van Leeuwen's (2007) and Mackay's (2015) legitimation frameworks with Clarke and Braun's (2018) thematic analysis to investigate how metrosexual men are constructed in state media narratives, what dominant themes emerge from these representations, and what broader sociocultural meanings and implications they convey. Through this integrated methodological approach, the study explores how state media participate in the transformation and reconstruction of masculinity in contemporary China. The findings suggest that state media generally legitimize male grooming, self-management, and appearance consciousness by associating them with professionalism, modernity, competitiveness, and social refinement. However, while these representations appear to diversify and expand acceptable masculine expressions, they simultaneously construct a new configuration of hegemonic masculinity grounded in neoliberal ideals of bodily discipline, self-surveillance, consumerism, and socioeconomic privilege.

DOI: 10.35631/IJHPL.935002

Keyword:

Legitimation and Thematic Frameworks, Metrosexuals, Neoliberalism and Consumerism, Reconstruction of Masculinity, State Media



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Introduction

In recent years, men appear increasingly attentive to their personal appearance than previous generations (Yao, 2021). They engage in detailed grooming routines, using skincare products, cosmetics, and accessories (Yang, 2011), and often adopt fashionable or gender-neutral clothing. This shift has driven rapid growth in the male cosmetics market in China, whose sales rank first globally and even surpass female market growth (Huang, 2019; Chen, 2018). In response, major cosmetic and fashion brands have expanded their male-oriented product lines, accompanied by the rise of male beauty spas offering facial care and body treatments (Lin, 2016). Some men, particularly in appearance-driven industries such as entertainment, public relations, and service sectors, have even turned to cosmetic surgery to maintain a youthful or polished look (Chen, 2018; Nahai & McGill, 2024; Nerini et al., 2024). Meticulous grooming has increasingly become a perceived competitive advantage.

Compared with older generations who associated male grooming with femininity, contemporary men's meticulous attention to appearance has expanded beyond older expectations. While some traditional views criticize metrosexuals as insufficiently masculine, metrosexuals themselves emphasize individual freedom in male grooming practices (Byrne & Milestone, 2023; Magklaras et al., 2023; Yang, 2018). The overwhelmingly positive media representations of male grooming and consumption and the framing of refined male beauty as an expression of identity, lifestyle, or competitiveness (Yang, 2018; Yang, 2011; Yu, 2011) appear to endorse a new form of masculinity by state media. While the extensive coverage of the booming cosmetic market and grooming consumption (Huang, 2019) indicates a transformation of the socioeconomic environment and lifestyle from which both beauty business owners and metrosexuals benefit, these groups occasionally express anxiety about appearing feminine or crossing socially acceptable boundaries (Byrne & Milestone, 2023; He et al., 2023). The coexistence of transformation and tensions indicates that state media actively negotiates and reconstructs masculinity within a transforming socioeconomic and cultural context, underscoring the necessity of the present study. While prior studies document the rise of male grooming practices and the commercialization of metrosexuality through participant-centered approaches, they offer limited insight into the discursive construction of metrosexual

masculinity in public media. Specifically, insufficient attention has been given to how state media negotiate and reconstruct metrosexual identities and how these discourses reflect broader tensions and associations between local cultural context and globalized gender ideals in contemporary China.

In view of the situation above, this study investigates the following questions: how metrosexuals and male grooming practices are represented through legitimization framework, what themes emerge from these representations, how metrosexuality is negotiated and reconstructed by state media and what is socially and culturally implied.

Literature Review

Metrosexuality and Masculinity Transformation

The term “metrosexual” was originally introduced by Mark Simpson (1994) to describe urban men who devote considerable time and financial resources to cultivating their image. Later studies further conceptualized metrosexuality as a form of masculinity characterized by heightened attention to style, grooming, and consumption. For instance, Wickman (2011) further identifies two dimensions of metrosexuality, which are aesthetic and erotic dimensions. While aesthetic dimension refers to men’s intentional enhancement of their appearance through grooming, fashion, and practices linked to vanity, narcissism, and consumption, erotic dimension reflects the media’s portrayal of the male body as a source of visual appeal.

In contemporary usage, metrosexuality is frequently associated with heterosexual men who demonstrate an elevated concern with appearance and lifestyle consumption. As Matthew Hall (2014) notes, the term has increasingly been used to denote narcissistic or appearance-focused heterosexual men who engage in grooming practices traditionally associated with femininity. As such, metrosexuality reflects broader transformations in gender norms, consumer culture, and media representations of masculinity.

Despite the apparent blurring of traditional gender boundaries, many scholars argue that metrosexuality does not fundamentally challenge dominant masculine hierarchies (Dahane, 2026; Hopkins & Giazitzoglu, 2025; Mendick et al., 2023). Instead, it often rearticulates or reinforces hegemonic masculinity in new forms. For example, by examining young Korean men’s narratives on appearance management, (Jung, 2023) finds that young men use neoliberal self to justify their pursuit of power and dominance, reinforcing hegemonic masculinity in a different style. Similarly, using an interview and focus groups, Wolfman et al. (2021) finds that neoliberal masculinities adopt a series of “hollow femininities”, which, through a process of commodification, not only recuperates patriarchy but also possibly informs other social hierarchies and power relations.

Empirical research also highlights the classed dimensions of metrosexual practices. Using interviews, Elfving-Hwang (2021) finds that men engage in aesthetic practices to maintain their in-group membership and reinforce social hierarchies. Body work is highly class specific as the aesthetic labor of white-collar workers is considered as more significant than that of blue-collar workers. Likewise, Tso (2024), using interviews, finds the cruel policing of grooming threatens the privileged white-collar men's place on gendered hierarchies.

These studies collectively suggest that although metrosexuality introduces new forms of aesthetic masculinity, it often remains embedded within existing gender hierarchies and indicates social stratifications.

Metrosexuality in Chinese Cultural Context

Research on metrosexuality in Chinese societies presents more diverse and sometimes contradictory findings (Chiu et al., 2019; Wen, 2021). Some studies suggest that metrosexual practices remain closely connected to hegemonic masculinity. Wen (2021), through an analysis of three men's beauty diaries, finds that although these men enhance their appearance through cosmetic surgery, they still rely on traditional masculinity as a normative frame and negotiate their identities accordingly.

Other studies, however, suggest that metrosexual practices may challenge or transform established masculine norms in constructing distinctive identities. Li & Wu (2025), by examining videos of male beauty vloggers, find three levels of resistance identities, which are resistance of stereotypical masculinity, confrontation of gender-based occupational discrimination, and challenge of heterosexual hegemony. Similarly, Chiu et al. (2019) illustrate that male grooming practices are associated with increased confidence, social acceptance, and improved interpersonal interactions, indicating broader shifts in gender norms and the commercialization of male beauty.

In certain contexts, metrosexuality may even become a dominant masculine form. Using an ethnographic approach, Yang (2014) shows that male students feminize their bodies to resist patriarchal norms within school environments, thereby making feminized masculinity a popular form of masculinity on campus.

These diverse findings reflect the complexity of masculinity in Chinese cultural contexts. As noted by Kam Louie (2002), Chinese masculinity has historically been structured through the interplay between *wen* (cultured, scholarly masculinity) and *wu* (martial, physical masculinity). Contemporary metrosexual practices may therefore be understood as an extension or transformation of the *wen* dimension of masculinity, emphasizing refinement, aesthetics, and cultural sophistication.

To sum up, existing studies have provided valuable insights into metrosexual practices and their relationship with hegemonic masculinity in both Western and Chinese contexts. However, most research has focused on the lived experiences and identity constructions of metrosexual men themselves, often relying on ethnographic methods, interviews, or participants' narratives. Few studies have examined the representations of metrosexuality in state media, and the Chinese socio-cultural context offers unique cultural and ideological characteristics that warrant further exploration.

Media Representation and Legitimation of Masculinity

Media representations are instrumental in shaping social understandings of masculinity by framing certain identities as desirable, legitimate, or problematic. A useful framework for examining such processes is the legitimation framework (Van Leeuwen, 2007). According to this framework, social practices and identities can be legitimized through several key strategies, including authorization (appeals to authority), moralization (appeals to value systems), rationalization (appeals to logic and utility), and mythopoesis (narratives that reward legitimate actions or punish illegitimate ones). Although legitimation analysis has been widely applied in studies of political discourse, policy communication, and media narratives, its application to masculinity discourse remains relatively limited.

Existing studies show that media representations play a key role in constructing and legitimizing certain forms of masculinity. For instance, advertising often aligns male identities with socially desirable values such as success, attractiveness, and consumption, presenting these traits as normative and aspirational (Zayer et al., 2019). Similarly, research on video games illustrates how militarized masculinity is constructed through imagery, gameplay mechanics, and narrative framing that promote ideals such as discipline, heroism, physical strength, and national loyalty (Elyamany, 2024).

Beyond specific media forms, broader cultural analyses emphasize that masculinity is not fixed identity but a socially constructed category reproduced through media discourse (Farci & Scarcelli, 2024; Raun & Petersen, 2026; Sunderland, 2025). Media functions as a central platform for the construction and dissemination of masculinity, simultaneously reinforcing stereotypical forms of masculinity while also facilitating the evolution of masculine ideals in alignment with social transformations (Santos et al., 2026; Simões et al., 2026). For instance, media representations of metrosexual men challenge the stereotypical image of men as tough and unconcerned with appearance, shifting masculinity from rigid external gender roles toward the expression of inner qualities and enabling greater freedom in identity expression (Jha, 2022; Nadirova & Mukhambetova, 2026). Similarly, social media platforms reconstruct masculinity by promoting individual identity, emotional resonance, and refined lifestyle in the marketing of luxury goods through the “little fresh meat” phenomenon (Jiang et al., 2020).

In short, these media representations demonstrate that media functions as a key reproducer and transformer of masculinity, increasingly shaping more fluid and individualized identities. However, relatively little research has focused on how metrosexuality is represented and evaluated in state media discourse, particularly in Chinese English-language newspapers that address both domestic and international audiences. Moreover, discourse approaches that systematically examine the legitimization strategies used to frame metrosexual masculinity remain scarce.

To address this gap, the present study applies a legitimization framework to analyze representations of metrosexual masculinity in state English-language newspapers. By examining how different discursive strategies construct, justify, or contest metrosexual identities, this study provides further insight into the sociocultural dynamics shaping contemporary masculinity in state media discourse in China.

Methodology

Data

The study collects news articles concerning metrosexuality from state-sponsored English-language newspapers in China from 2004 when the articles on metrosexuals emerged to 2024 when the data collection ended. Data were collected using the keywords “metrosexual,” “metrosexuality,” “flower men (boy),” “feminine,” “little fresh meat,” “sissy,” and “niangpao”, chosen to ensure comprehensive coverage of the metrosexuality-related discourse. Each article was then reviewed thematically to verify its relevance to the study’s focus on metrosexual masculinity. A total of 40 articles related to male grooming were collected, irrespective of genre, from China Daily, Global Times, Shanghai Daily, Shenzhen Daily, South China Morning Post, as shown in Table 1. These outlets represent the full range of accessible English-language newspapers in China.

Table 1: Source of the Data

Newspapers	Number
China Daily	20
Global Times	14
Shanghai Daily	4
Shenzhen Daily	1
South China Morning Post	1

Analytical Framework

The analysis adopts an integrated framework combining Van Leeuwen's (2007) legitimation model, the discourse-historical moral layer of Mackay's (2015) framework, which addresses the historico-cultural dimension absent in Van Leeuwen's model, and Clarke and Braun's (2018) thematic analysis, as illustrated in Figure 1. The integration of the three frameworks in this study is justified as follows. While Van Leeuwen's legitimation framework provides useful tools for analyzing legitimation strategies, it does not sufficiently capture their historical and cultural contexts (Mackay, 2015). To address this gap, the historical and cultural dimensions from Mackay's framework are incorporated. In addition, thematic analysis is applied to identify and highlight key themes, facilitating a deeper exploration of their historical, social, and cultural significance.

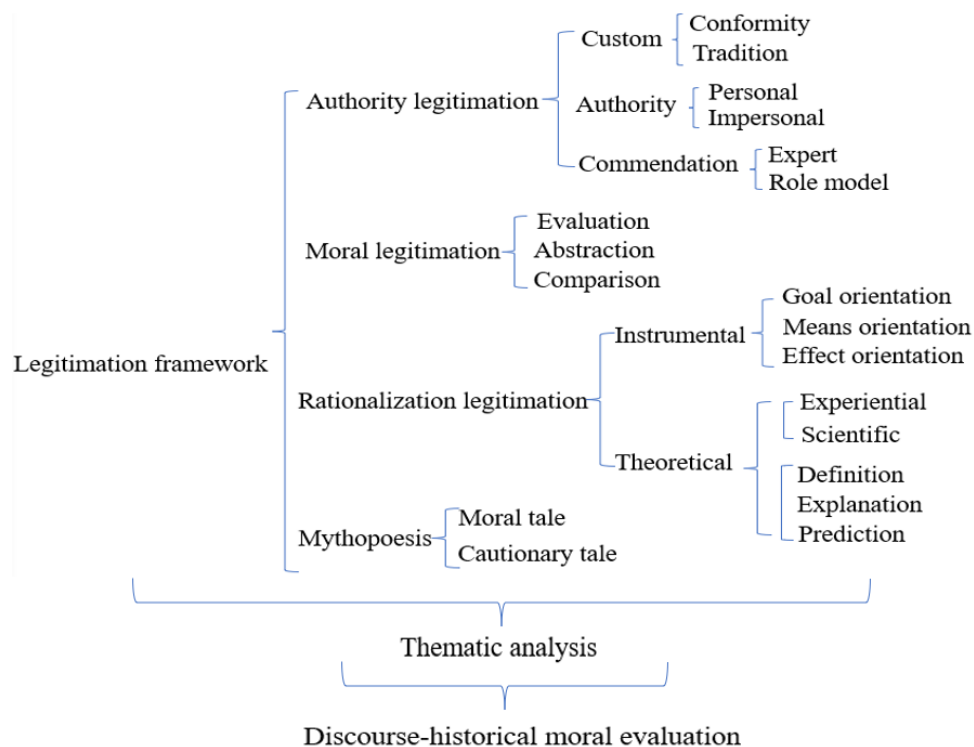


Figure 1: Analytical Framework

The legitimation framework, thematic analysis, and the discourse-historical moral layer are combined to enable a multi-layered analysis of media discourse. The legitimation framework identifies the discursive strategies through which masculinities are justified or contested; thematic analysis groups these strategies into broader thematic patterns; and discourse-historical moral layer situates these patterns within their wider social and historical contexts. Together, these approaches form a three-layer analytical framework that moves from discursive strategies to thematic patterns and finally to broader socio-historical interpretations.

Van Leeuwen's (2007) model identifies four legitimation strategies of authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, and mythopoesis with each comprising multiple subtypes. Authorization involves legitimation through reference to authority, such as tradition, institutions, regulations, experts, or role models. Moral evaluation draws on value-laden judgments, realized through evaluation, abstraction, or comparison. Rationalization includes instrumental and theoretical forms with the former justifying practices through purpose or utility, while the latter appealing to socially accepted truths. Mythopoesis achieves legitimation through narratives that reward compliant behavior and condemn deviant behavior; in media texts where full narratives are absent, evaluative statements performing equivalent functions are coded under this category.

The annotation focuses on the legitimation strategies employed in arguments both supporting and opposing metrosexuality. Annotations are marked according to semantic units. The results of the legitimation analysis are subsequently subjected to inductive thematic analysis to identify and interpret the perspectives and perceptions of different social actors regarding metrosexuality. Finally, a discourse-historical analysis is conducted to examine the historical, cultural, and social implications embedded in these perceptions. The data were coded independently by two researchers using a clearly defined coding scheme. A pilot coding was conducted to refine the categories and ensure consistency. Any discrepancies were systematically discussed and resolved through consensus. Throughout the process, efforts were made to ensure analytical rigor and minimize subjective bias.

Analysis

Quantitative Analysis of (De)Legitimation Strategies

The quantitative analysis revealed that the majority of the articles portray the metrosexual phenomenon positively, with only a single article expressing an entirely negative stance.

Table 2 shows the overall presentation types of data. Among the 40 articles, twenty-eight provide entirely positive representations of metrosexuals. Eight articles are predominantly positive, although they include minor opposing perspectives, while three articles are generally positive but incorporate some confirmation of traditional gender norms. This overwhelmingly favorable portrayal of metrosexuals reflects a broader discursive tendency surrounding the phenomenon, encompassing a diverse range of social actors, including cosmetic brands, beauty business owners, social media platforms, metrosexuals themselves, as well as experts, professors, and researchers in fields such as the beauty industry, consultancy, psychology, sexology, sociology, marketing, and fashion business.

Table 1: Presentation Types

Presentation types	Number
Positive & objective representation	20
Positive objective representation with denial of tradition	8
Predominant positive objective representation with a little conflicting opposition	8
Overall positive objective representation with slight influence from tradition	3
Complete opposition	1

Table 3 presents the frequency and percentage of the broad categories of (de)legitimation strategies. The figure illustrates the overwhelmingly dominant use of legitimation strategies overall, as well as within the three main categories of rationalization, moralization, and authorization compared with delegitimation strategies. Notably, the delegitimation strategy of mythopoesis is the only category that surpasses its corresponding legitimation strategy in frequency. The predominant reliance on rationalization and moralization, applied equally, indicates that metrosexuality is framed as an objective, rational phenomenon that serves practical purposes while aligning with moral values.

In contrast, delegitimation strategies rely more heavily on moralization, with rationalization and authorization serving as secondary strategies, indicating an overall emphasis on moral values in opposing metrosexuality. The predominance of mythopoesis on the delegitimation side reflects the use of disciplinary measures to enforce normative gender values. Both sides draw on moral values, albeit with differing emphases, reflecting variations in underlying gender norms.

Table 2: Frequency and Combined Percentage of Broad Categories of (De)Legitimation Strategies

Legitimation strategies	Frequency	Percentage (%)	(De)legitimation strategies	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Rationalization	219	33.33%	Moralization	34	5.17%
Moralization	213	32.43%	Rationalization	19	2.89%
Authorization	142	21.62%	Authorization	19	2.89%
Mythopoesis	1	0.15%	Mythopoesis	10	1.52%
Total	575	87.53 %	Total	82	12.47%

Table 4 clearly illustrates the predominant use of the legitimation subcategories of evaluation, conformity, comparison, effect, and scientific, showing a gradual rather than sharp decline in frequency. In contrast, delegitimation strategies appear only in a few subcategories, namely evaluation, effect, tradition, and mythopoesis, and occur at much lower frequencies.

The widespread use of evaluation and effect on both sides demonstrates that metrosexuality is perceived less as a social problem and more as an emerging phenomenon, representing a focus on appearance that may intersect with traditional notions of masculinity. On the legitimization side, the predominant application of conformity, comparison, and scientific strategies highlights the mass popularity of metrosexuality, the transformations in male grooming practices relative to tradition, and the portrayal of a thriving male cosmetics market supported by quantitative evidence. Conversely, on the delegitimation side, the frequent use of tradition and mythopoesis underscores the continued influence of normative gender values, which maintain hegemonic control by generating negative responses to perceived violations of traditional masculinity.

Table 3: Frequency and Combined Percentage of (De)Legitimation Sub-Categories

Legitimation strategies	Frequency	Percentage (%)	(De)legitimation strategies	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Evaluation	125	19.03%	Evaluation	30	4.57%
Conformity	88	13.39%	Effect	13	1.98%
Comparison	67	10.2%	Tradition	12	1.83%
Effect	62	9.44%	Mythopoesis	10	1.52%
Scientific	60	9.13%	explanation	4	0.61%
Explanation	39	5.94%	Conformity	3	0.46%
Expert	35	5.33%	Abstraction	2	0.3%
Goal	29	4.41%	Comparison	2	0.3%
Abstraction	21	3.2%	Expert	2	0.3%
Role model	16	2.44%	Goal	1	0.15%
Definition	11	1.67%	Scientific	1	0.15%
Means	8	1.22%	Personal	1	0.15%
Prediction	8	1.22%	Role model	1	0.15%
Tradition	3	0.46%	Means	0	0
Experiential	2	0.30%	Experiential	0	0
Mythopoesis	1	0.15%	Prediction	0	0
Personal	0	0	Impersonal	0	0
Impersonal	0	0	Definition	0	0
Total	575	87.53%	Total	82	12.47%

Functional Analysis of Predominant (De)Legitimation Strategies

Specifically, both sides rely heavily on evaluation, within the broader category of moralization, as the primary legitimization strategy. Evaluation, which involves passing judgment, is inherently subjective and is the most frequently employed strategy on both sides. Compared with abstraction, which typically conveys distilled values that elicit immediate common-sense recognition, evaluation is less explicitly value based. The predominance of evaluation suggests that metrosexuality is either a newly emerged phenomenon that lacks established social values or one that does not challenge or engage traditional notions of masculinity. Accordingly, both

proponents and opponents primarily offer evaluative judgments rather than appeal to widely recognized, established values. For example,

Example 1: Men who possess only the characteristics of the ‘traditional’ male—strength, reliability or trustworthiness—are not attractive anymore. (CD, 28 Oct 2005)

In this example, the negative evaluation “not attractive” challenges the stereotypical image of traditional masculinity and positions an “attractive” appearance as an emerging dimension of masculinity.

Conformity is the second most predominant strategy and is particularly effective in highlighting the rising popularity of metrosexual behavior. This strategy emphasizes how individuals adopt grooming practices that align with emerging social norms, signaling acceptance and participation in broader cultural trends. This aligns with the observation that most articles present a positive and introductory account of the metrosexual phenomenon, emphasizing its increasing recognition among the public. By stressing conformity, the discourse not only underscores the widespread adoption of metrosexual practices but also normalizes these behaviors as part of contemporary masculinity, illustrating their integration into everyday social life and cultural expectations.

Example 2: We are living in a day and age when men are supposed to look more attractive. (CD, 28 Oct 2005)

In this example, the phrase “in a day and age when men are supposed to look more attractive” invokes a conformity by presenting male attractiveness as a widespread social trend that men are inclined to follow.

Comparison is the third most predominant strategy, primarily contrasting metrosexual behavior with female grooming practices and traditional male behaviors that do not involve grooming. By drawing such comparisons, the discourse highlights the novel perspectives and advantages associated with metrosexual behavior, thereby naturalizing the development and evolution of perceptions regarding male grooming.

The fourth predominant strategy of effect emphasizes the outcomes and improvements associated with male grooming behavior, including its impact on career development, gender relations, and overall quality of life. By foregrounding these positive consequences, metrosexual behavior is represented as beneficial and socially advantageous, reinforcing its legitimacy and normalizing its adoption among men. This strategy thus not only evaluates individual actions but also situates them within broader social and professional contexts, illustrating the practical and societal value of male grooming.

The final predominant strategy, scientific legitimation, objectively demonstrates the popularity of male grooming through statistical evidence of the expansion of the male cosmetics market and grooming practices. This evidence-based approach frames the rise of male grooming as an indisputable phenomenon.

On the delegitimation side, evaluation is likewise the most frequently used strategy, serving to convey negative or repellent judgments of metrosexuals and male grooming practices. For phenomena that are relatively new and lack an established value system, evaluation provides the most accessible and direct strategy of constructing an argument.

Example 3: I still can't stand a man who puts on too much makeup. It's not masculine. (GT, 26 Feb 2019)

In this example, male makeup is constructed as unmasculine, reflecting a recurrent evaluative pattern through which male grooming is delegitimized.

Effect, tradition, and mythopoesis constitute the second most predominant delegitimation strategies, with their frequencies relatively balanced. These strategies form a coherent logical sequence where metrosexuals are depicted as violating traditional masculinity norms (tradition), exhibiting feminine traits that are harmful (effect), and consequently becoming targets of mythopoetic critique (mythopoesis). In this way, the core elements necessary for delegitimizing metrosexuals are fully employed. Other delegitimation strategies are comparatively marginal, appearing far less frequently.

Example 4: The public is becoming increasingly worried that the practice will bring about a loss of masculinity and twisted gender identities. (GT, 5 Aug 2018)

In this example, the negative effect of "a loss of masculinity and twisted gender identities" reinforces a recurring theme of diminished masculinity, repeatedly constructed across different strategies of delegitimation.

Each of the predominant legitimation strategies exceed the corresponding delegitimation strategies in frequency. The overall distribution of legitimation versus delegitimation strategies underscores a predominantly positive representation of, and attitude toward, metrosexual behavior.

Thematic Analysis of Metrosexuality

A Redefined Masculinity Characterized by Neoliberalism and Consumerism

The major theme consistently emerging from the data is the acclamation of metrosexual behavior, occurring alongside the growth of the male grooming market. This theme is primarily manifested through strategies of evaluation, conformity, comparison, effect and scientific

rationalization, employed by a range of social actors, including newspaper authors, cosmetic brands and industry staff, metrosexuals themselves, as well as experts in beauty, sociology, and sexology, to highlight the significance of male grooming and the increasing consumption of male cosmetics.

Highlights of this theme can be illustrated by the combined use of legitimization strategies of comparison, scientific validation, evaluation and effect in the following excerpts.

Example 5: This echoed a finding by market research house Euromonitor, which pointed out that the growth of men's beauty and fashion products has outpaced that of women's since 2010, suggesting that men are increasingly becoming interested in shaping their own appearance. (CD, 5 Apr 2019)

Example 6: Beauty products are no longer just for women in the traditional sense but have gradually become an important way for men to gain self-confidence and express themselves. (GT, 7 Jul 2019)

Example 7: A few years ago, it may have been considered sissy for a guy to be fussy about his clothing and appearance. Real men demanded the world accept them on their own uncouth, unkempt terms. But in Asia nowadays, the definition of masculinity is undergoing a makeover—and narcissism is in, thanks to economic growth, higher disposable incomes, shifting gender roles, and fashion and cosmetics industries eager to expand their customer bases. No longer content to be the drabber sex. (CD, 28 Oct 2005)

In these excerpts, the report from the market research house objectively demonstrates through scientific rationalization that the rise and expansion of male grooming and consumption have outpaced that of women (see Example 5). These findings are further interpreted through the evaluative statement that “men are increasingly becoming interested in shaping their own appearance” (Example 5) and the comparison that “beauty products are no longer just for women in the traditional sense,” which are corroborated by the effect that grooming “becomes an important way for men to gain self-confidence and express themselves” (Example 6). This subversion of traditional perceptions is further illustrated through the comparison between the conventional “sissy” view of male grooming and the ongoing transformation of masculinity, incorporating “narcissism” as diversified and individualized expressions of masculinity (Example 7).

The combined use of these strategies demonstrates that state media help construct a new version of masculinity that integrates both consumption and appearance-consciousness as central elements into masculinity—a redefined masculinity characterized by neoliberalism and consumerism (Garlick, 2023; Wolfman et al., 2021).

Appearance Management as Social and Competitive Capital

This transformation of masculinity is framed not merely as a consumption behavior for individualized self-expressions but more as a form of self-management aligned with neoliberal ideals of competitiveness and self-optimization for the aim of professional success, interpersonal desirability, and relational attractiveness. Highlights of this theme can be illustrated by legitimation strategies of effect, evaluation and scientific rationalization. For example,

Example 8. It is not sissy or girly at all, to Chinese men it is a way to look younger, confident and more successful. In a land as competitive as China many think good looks can give them an edge. (CD, 21 Dec 2010)

Example 9. When dating, Chinese males with cleaner faces and better taste in clothes are also more likely to win a girl's heart. Research conducted by data consultancy company Kantar showed that around 73 percent of Chinese males in first-tier cities admitted that appearance matters a lot to them in both the workplace and personal relationships, China Youth Daily reported in 2016. (GT, 16 Jul 2018)

In Example 8, the evaluation that “it is a way to look younger, confident and more successful” illustrates the practical function of male grooming, which is further reinforced by the effect “give them an edge”, underscoring the importance of appearance in generating social and career advantages, providing men with a competitive advantage. This effect is again corroborated by scientific rationalization in Example 9, verifying the importance of appearance for both career development and interpersonal relationships.

Therefore, commercialized neoliberal male grooming is constructed as extending beyond aesthetic enhancement and individual expression to serve practical purposes in both career and social relationships. This instrumental framing signals a shift in masculine ideals, in which attractiveness and self-presentation have become integral aspects of masculine competence, thereby shaping a new form of masculine identity (Kowal & Sorokowski, 2022; Nadirova & Mukhambetova, 2026).

Negotiating Masculinity: Neoliberalism and Traditional Values

The incorporation of self-image into an integral aspect of masculine competence provokes doubt and resistance from traditional masculine norms and male grooming becomes the site at which masculinity is negotiated and reconstructed. The negotiation between traditional values and neoliberal masculinity, as reflected in the anxiety and stigma experienced by metrosexuals, can be illustrated through the delegitimation strategies of effect, evaluation, mythopoesis, and tradition.

Example 10. “However, as this group continues growing, the public is becoming increasingly worried that the practice will bring about a loss of masculinity and twisted gender identities. (GT, 5 Aug 2018)

Example 11. But with the desire to look youthful and dynamic to enhance their competitiveness in the business world comes the fear of being branded a sissy or even called ‘gay-looking’. (CD, 26 Sep 2006)

The control of traditional concept of masculinity is highlighted by the negative effect of male grooming in undermining masculinity in Example 10 and by mythopoesis, which is the potential punishment of being branded a sissy in Example 11.

In contrast to the slight doubt and opposition toward male grooming, positive voices are constructed as an overwhelming majority. Various social actors—including participants in the beauty industry, professionals in appearance-sensitive fields, and experts in sexology—express largely affirmative attitudes toward male grooming practices, challenging traditional gender stereotypes that frame male grooming as a feminist practice and seeking to redefine traditional masculine norms.

Example 12. ...and most of the youths try to be “gender-neutral” just because “it is fashionable or cool” without hindering their “competitiveness”. He Chunrui, a professor ... argues that white-collar male workers tend to become gender neutral in China because they are educated and enjoy social status and financial stability. The corollary is that they do not need to exhibit masculinity to attract women. (CD, 14 Feb 2011)

The gender-neutrality expressed through male fashion and grooming among metrosexuals is legitimized by authoritative expertise as a marker of social status, economic stability, and higher education. This grooming-driven gender-neutrality is framed as a new form of masculine competence, replacing traditional sense of masculinity (Hamshaw & Gavin, 2022; Wojnicka & de Boise, 2025).

Findings and Discussion

In view of the foregoing analysis of legitimation strategies and thematic analysis, the data reveal a landsliding positive orientation toward male grooming, as a product of socioeconomic modernization associated with individuality, aesthetic enhancement, and refined lifestyles, and a strategic means of enhancing confidence, competence, and professional competitiveness (Byrne & Milestone, 2023). Metrosexual men are framed as successful, disciplined, and socially desirable and gender boundaries are increasingly fluid. They exhibit greater acceptance of gender neutrality and regard such practices as expressions of personal agency, often associated with a broader cultural shift toward inclusivity, pluralism, and a progressive social order (Duarte et al., 2025).

Specifically, state media performs a key part in shaping and governing gender norms. Unlike many Western contexts where metrosexuality initially emerged as a counter-hegemonic cultural phenomenon (Barber, 2008; Bridges, 2014), its representation in Chinese state media appears to be selectively incorporated and strategically legitimized. The predominance of legitimization strategies such as rationalization and moralization suggests that metrosexuality is framed as socially beneficial, economically productive, and morally acceptable.

State media construct consumerism as a crucial semantic resource for legitimizing metrosexual masculinity. Many representations emphasize the growing male grooming market, luxury consumption, and lifestyle branding, suggesting metrosexuality has been conceptualized as a form of commercial masculinity (Magklaras et al., 2023; Shugart, 2008). Within this framework, consumption is constructed as a marker of social status, self-identity, and cultural capital (Johnson, 2022). Through legitimization strategies such as rationalization, state media narratives frequently frame grooming practices as practical and reasonable investments rather than signs of vanity.

More importantly, consumption is also moralized. Metrosexual consumption is often portrayed as a responsible form of self-management that reflects discipline, refinement, and social competence. In this sense, consumer practices become moral indicators of modern masculinity, with well-groomed men depicted as self-aware, confident, and socially successful individuals. State media also challenge traditional gender norms by integrating physical attractiveness into masculine competence. Traditional hegemonic masculinity, characterized by physical toughness and emotional restraint, is reconstructed toward a more appearance-conscious and reflexive form (Kumari et al., 2026). In contrast to the overwhelming positive representations of metrosexuality, the limited opposition rooted in traditional masculine ideals is constructed by state media as an obstacle to emerging forms of masculinity. While male grooming and cosmetic markets are depicted as flourishing, men are simultaneously portrayed as constrained by the psychological embarrassment imposed by conventional masculine stereotypes. In this sense, state media help shape male grooming into a normalized component of masculinity. Such representations not only challenge rigid stereotypes of men as unconcerned with appearance, thereby allowing greater expression of individuality and inner qualities (Jha, 2022; Nadirova & Mukhambetova, 2026), but also construct physical attractiveness as a marker of masculine competence associated with social status, economic success, and professional capability.

State media also construct changing gender relations as a crucial factor motivating male grooming, as men increasingly adapt to women's preferences for well-groomed partners in response to women's growing economic independence and social autonomy. Such representations reflect shifting gender dynamics and challenge rigid traditional gender hierarchies (Rosenlee, 2023).

The above transformations in masculinity can be understood within China's neoliberal restructuring. Refined appearance and lifestyle reflect not only aesthetic concerns but more self-management in neoliberal economies (Jung, 2023). Grooming thus serves as a form of self-branding through which men package and present their competencies within competitive labor markets (Elfving-Hwang, 2021). Consequently, metrosexuality is constructed by state media as reflecting neoliberal values of self-presentation, personal branding and self-management, as means of expressing individuality, achieving professional distinction and smoother social interaction. Metrosexuality, constructed as a neoliberal form of masculinity characterized by self-improvement and self-regulation, becomes a marker of successful masculinity.

The positive construction also reflects gender governance in contemporary China, where state media participate in the regulation of acceptable gender identities. By portraying metrosexual men as disciplined consumers, successful professionals, and self-governing citizens, state media align neoliberalism and consumption with national development narratives. In doing so, metrosexuality is constructed in ways that resonate with both global modernity and local ideological priorities of economic development and self-improvement. While aesthetic self-care and consumption are encouraged, these practices are often accompanied by narratives emphasizing productivity, professionalism, and success, ensuring compatibility with dominant social values rather than fundamentally challenging existing power structures (Santos et al., 2026; Wolfman et al., 2021).

This alignment with global neoliberalism is further facilitated by its resonance with traditional Chinese culture. Rather than fully embracing Western masculinity, Chinese state media situate metrosexual practices within culturally familiar contexts. Emphasis on self-discipline, self-cultivation, and personal refinement resonates with longstanding traditions of bodily and moral cultivation (Louie & Edwards, 1994; Louie, 2002, 2012, 2014; Song, 2004). In this sense, metrosexual masculinity can be interpreted as a hybrid formation that integrates global neoliberal consumer culture with elements of traditional cultural ideals.

The positive representations can further be understood from the global orientation of state media. As state media also address international audiences, the positive construction of metrosexuality serves to project China as an inclusive and advanced society aligned with global neoliberal values (Yu et al., 2023). The media help to construct an image of China as modern, cosmopolitan, and culturally progressive, actively participating in global cultural discourse and compatible with international trends of individualism, consumerism, and gender diversification.

Therefore, the representation of metrosexual masculinity in state media illustrates the negotiated modernity and cultural hybridity. On the one hand, metrosexual aesthetics clearly reflect global influences, including global modernity, Western fashion culture and Korean pop culture. On the other hand, these global cultural elements are adapted to local cultural contexts and value systems, serving both global trend and local development.

However, the promotion of highly groomed and aesthetically refined male bodies may incur new expectations surrounding male appearance, potentially generating pressures similar to those historically experienced by women (Hamshaw & Gavin, 2022). Therefore, while metrosexual masculinity is constructed as progressive in expanding acceptable forms of male expression, it simultaneously embeds men within new regimes of bodily discipline and self-surveillance, which may be another form of hegemony.

Further, state media's emphasis of consumption behavior risks reinforcing a neoliberal logic where personal value is increasingly measured through consumption capacity. The ability to purchase grooming products, fashionable clothing, and lifestyle services becomes intertwined with the construction of desirable masculinity. As a result, the ideal metrosexual figure implicitly intertwines with social status and economic privilege (Johnston & Foster, 2025), thereby reproducing the hegemonic ideal of masculine success.

To sum up, the transformation of masculinity and the role of state media in its reconstruction reflect a dynamic hybridization process of masculinity in a globalized media environment. Masculine identities are continuously negotiated through interactions between global cultural flows and national ideological frameworks and cultural background. Metrosexuality reflects an evolving configuration of masculinity that both reinforces and transforms existing gender norms and remains subject to ongoing social negotiation (Jung, 2023; Magklaras et al., 2023; Wolfman et al., 2021).

Conclusion

While previous discussions of metrosexual masculinity have largely focused on Western consumer cultures (Alzeiby et al., 2026; Arigi et al., 2024), this study contributes to existing scholarship on metrosexuality by examining how it is discursively legitimized within Chinese cultural context.

Empirically, the study contributes to the finding that state media actively participate in redefining masculinity in evolving neoliberal consumer culture and social transformations of China by frequently framing male grooming as a rational, modern, and socially acceptable practice, aligning metrosexual behavior with global neoliberalism of self-management and personal development.

The study also contributes to the finding that metrosexuality is negotiated by state media at the intersection of global neoliberalism, consumerism, and local cultural values. Self-management under neoliberalism and appearance care in consumer culture resonate with self-cultivation and aesthetic sensibility in traditional Chinese *wen* culture and Confucianism, which facilitates the integration of metrosexuality into local cultural ideology.

Theoretically, the study contributes to the understanding that state media, while redefining masculinity and expanding masculine expressions, promotes appearance-based grooming consumption that is underpinned by aspirations toward social status and economic privilege, thereby reproducing a new configuration of hegemony and reinforcing social and economic hierarchies through bodily discipline and self-surveillance.

The study also contributes theoretically to the finding that individuality and consumption as newly legitimized factors are incorporated into the semantic reservoir of the legitimization framework. This not only broadens the semantic content of the framework but also highlights the fluid and evolving nature of semantics in response to changing social realities and ideological contexts.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. It focuses primarily on state media representations, which may not fully capture the diversity of masculinity discourses across commercial media and social media platforms. Future research could expand the dataset to include social media platforms to examine how different media systems shape the construction of metrosexuality. Future studies may also conduct comparative studies across Asian societies, as well as between Asian and Western nations, which could further illuminate how metrosexual masculinity is negotiated across different cultural and political contexts.

List of Abbreviations: CD: China Daily, GT: Global Times

Acknowledgements:	The author would like to express her sincere gratitude to her supervisors at Universiti Malaya.
Funding Statement:	No funding.
Conflict of Interest Statement:	The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.
Ethics Statement:	This study did not involve any human participants, animals, or sensitive data requiring ethical approval. The authors confirm that the research was conducted in accordance with accepted academic integrity and ethical publishing standards.
Author Contribution Statement:	The author conceptualized the study, compiled the corpus, conducted the discourse analysis, interpreted the findings, and wrote and revised the manuscript.

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