Korean Genderless Fashion Consumers' Self-image and Identification

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Abstract

The “genderless fashion” style adopted by 20 to 30-year-olds in Korea cannot be ignored in the consumer fashion code. This study investigated self-images of Korean genderless fashion consumers through in-depth interviews. Interview analyses confirmed that Korean genderless fashion consumers express their self-image through clothing. As the theoretical framework, this study used Lacan's concept of desire to classify the types of self-image consumers want to express. The results are classified into three subject types: those who pursue self-fulfillment, those who pursue fulfillment from others, and those who pursue endless fulfillment through a self-image. This reflects various factors and the subjects' desires. Further, a subject's desire to present a specific self-image was an important factor in understanding the genderless fashion style. The study results revealed that modern fashion is an “unconscious” field of self-expression that crucially reflects individual desires. The study also contributes to the understanding of the concept of self-image at large.

Key words: Genderless fashion, Self-image, Clothing, Lacan's concept of desire

I. Introduction

Korea is famous for Hallyu (the Korean Wave). The Korean Wave trend has spread past Asia and into Europe, the United States, and the Middle East. An examination of this trend reveals that Korean fashion is more associated with celebrity styles rather than with traditional Korean clothes. Korean rapper G-Dragon is Chanel's muse, and one of the only Asian celebrities supported by the Chanel brand (Spedding, 2016). It is difficult to distinguish whether G-Dragon's clothing is menswear or womenswear; his style is representative of “genderless fashion” as he freely wears skirts, laces, mesh, and other similar types of clothing. Does his style represent his sexual identity? Is it just the current fashion trend, or is it a part of Korean fashion at large?

Gender is a re-emerging theme in fashion. Currently, it is necessary to redefine masculinity and femininity to illuminate the status of gender identity, because the perception of gender roles are changing as the traditional roles of males and females change. Therefore, both males and females demand equal gender roles due to the obligation to obtain economic power. This phenomenon has also been associated with changes in lifestyle.

“Lifestyle” is defined in many ways. “Lifestyle” is as a characteristic aspect of life, a product of culture, values, popularity, property, and regulation (O'Reilly & Benson, 2016). Clothing is the easiest way to express one's lifestyle, and the garments one wears are the most basic representation of lifestyle—they are not just...
material objects (Hollander, 1993). Clothing is the social phenomenon that most easily reflects the ideas and lifestyle of an era, and that changes in fashion are reflected in the changes in lifestyle (Davis, 1994). For example, in the 1970s and 1980s, the “androgyous” and “glam” looks were prevalent and seen as a leading fashion trend rather than a style accepted by the public, whereas the recent “metrosexual” and similar male masculinity trends have been widely accepted among men (Coad, 2008). This reflects the changes in what is perceived as “ideal” by the public. From the psychological standpoint, by examining the preferences of genderless fashion consumers, one can observe the reasons why colorful and decorative elements of women’s wear are incorporated in menswear or why some preferences even transcend the boundaries of woman and man, as a part of the human being’s internal representation of narcissism (Martin et al., 2017).

Genderless fashion phenomenon can be explained through the increasing trend of self-appreciation among modern people. Additionally, narcissism is more than just vanity which represents the image of fashion. Looking at fashion images is a process of establishing self-identity, which is required for both men and women. To embrace oneself as an attractive object, to see and enjoy oneself, people choose colorful and decorative fashion items. As such, since the 20th century, the desire to appeal to the public has emerged, and in recent times genderless fashion has become prevalent (BoULTWOOD & JERRARD, 2000).

The self is not an independent being separate from all other beings; it is built on relationships and other developments through constant interaction with all that is encountered in the surrounding social world (HATTIE, 2014). In these relationships, we use “self-expression, an act of expressing identity to others,” (LeARY, 1996) to form our own presence. Self-presentation is a concept that focuses on how we see ourselves as an “act” that influences people to respond according to the way we want. And self-presentation aims for a better image of the self in any given situation (BURNS, 1999). Self-image can be understood in the same context as “self-concept”. Self-concept as “the picture of the self” —the sum of thoughts and emotions that an individual has about himself or herself. Human beings exhibit specific behaviors and desires according to their self-concept (Leary & Tangney, 2012). Through the preceding research, self-image can be explained as a concept that represents one’s self-concept and self-identity in a socio-cultural way. Various relevant discussions have been made with fashion theories such as “impression formation” and “appearance management.” This study aims to define the self and self-image within this framework. In SONTAG and LEE's (2004) self-concept, clothing is a component of the self and an aspect of the appearance through which the self is formed and identified. Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1992) point out that apparel becomes an important communication tool in social interaction, providing important clues on the identities of oneself and others. The practical or ideal individual or social self-concept that an individual has about himself or herself is a guide for many product and brand choices (DaSILVEIRA et al., 2015). Their interrelationships can be explained by applying the Lacanian psychoanalytic theory on subject formation, from the perspective of the “gaze” (Lacan, 1968/1998; Miller, 1981/1998). Genderless fashion consumers look at their appearances through the gaze of others; they observe and gaze at their own self-image through the reactions and words of others (BANCROFT, 2012). We can observe the effect of gazing and the gaze of others on the subject. Lacan is a representative psychoanalyst who studied subject formation through the gaze. His structure of the unconscious comprises the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real orders, presenting the three self-concepts: ideal ego, ego-ideal, and superego. Self is mainly expressed by the terms “ego” and “self,” and has been studied in relation to self-concept, identity, self-image, self-consciousness, self-category, and self-worth.

This study is based on the idea that genderless fashion and current trends are related to self-expression rather than interpretation in relation to sexual identity. The study investigated the background of gendered fashion and the background that became widely known, and tried to find out through in-depth interviews what genderless fashion consumers are expressing themsel-
ves in what they want to express.

To grasp the meaning and structure related to these acts in more depth, Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of desire is applied. Lacan states that humans are essentially deficient, and they will always desire something to fill that deficit. Since such deficit can never be filled, they constantly seek and desire something. Hence, desire is a key concept that constitutes society and culture, as a power and essence of human life (Miller, 1958/2019). This desire is the fundamental motive of our actions, and self-expressive behaviors that express identity to others can be regarded as the manifestation of desire (Bancroft, 2012). Therefore, this study intends to grasp the motivations behind self-expressive behaviors in genderless fashion and the kinds of desire that they reveal as well as what the consumers desire to receive through such behaviors. Furthermore, we also want to understand the emergence and consequences of these behaviors.

II. Literature Review

1. Fashion and Sexuality

Clothing is the most powerful expression of sexual identity in humans, and gender identity in clothing is an important factor that characterizes modern fashion (Hollander, 2016). Therefore, sexuality visualizes the social desires, beliefs, emotions, and tastes of people of an age, through the medium of costume, from a socio-cultural point of view (Wilson, 2003). Words that describe sexuality, such as “sex,” refer to the biological difference between men and women, whereas “gender” is constructed not as a bipolar but as a social concept (Bancroft, 2012; Kaiser, 1997). This new perspective has helped to develop a mind that is free from the culturally defined sexual stereotypes for men and women in fashion (Risman & Davis, 2013).

Since the 1960s, the traditional gender roles have changed, and people began to freely express their sexual identities, resulting in various terms in different social cultures in relation to the chaotic aspect of gender (Gould & Stern, 1989). In the 1960s, the most representative term was “unisex” during the 1980s, it was “androgy nous” and in the 1990s “genderless” was the most prominent. Derived from the word “gender,” “genderless” has been acknowledged as an international term in the 1990s, meaning “no distinction of sex” or “neutral.” In addition, in the field of fashion, genderless has been described as a new tendency that is characterized by the destruction of gender and age stereotypes. It is a new concept that is being developed by leading new generations who deviate from societal and gender codes. This notion recognizes and acknowledges benignity, which has been deeply hidden in ourselves, as an equivalent essence or an individual, without denying or excluding any part. It introduces a newly designed world by integrating masculine and feminine aspects, divided by gender, without any norms and regulations (Entwistle, 2015; Mendes & de la Haye, 1999).

In other words, due to the effects of deconstructive feminism, we anticipate a new era of humanity in which diversity and personality, rather than the traditional gender boundaries between men and women, will determine individual behaviors. Fashion is expressed in a style that is far from the concept that was set in the dichotomous culture of the 2000s (Buckley & Fawcett, 2002) as in the cases of the “metrosexual,” “ubersexual,” and “cross-sexual” (Anderson, 2008). In this study, we can see that genderless fashion is inclusive of alternative femininity and masculinity, resistive sexuality, and genderless sexuality.

In modern society, it is interpreted in various ways according to the trend of the times, and it is a genderless style that expresses the neutrality that broke the boundaries of gender in men and women. This is a modern people's reaction against the gender roles as they want to pursue their free right—to express the inner desires of the human being (Boultwood & Jerrard, 2000).

2. Fashion and Self-image

Clothing is a very important part of self-image for mation and represents an individual’s identity, attitude, mode, or self-worth. Certain apparel may express a specific self-concept such as a real self, an ideal self, or a
reference group-self, and can be used as a reference in human communication, role performance, social interactions, etc. (Entwistle, 2015). Davis (1994) pointed out that clothing serves as an important clue for the identity of oneself and others, and as an effective means for communication in social interaction.

Therefore, it has been shown that the practical or ideal individual or social self-concept that an individual has about himself or herself acts as a guideline in product and brand selection (DaSilveira et al., 2015). Additionally, self-concept is very important to an individual, and constantly accepting new fashion trends and accordingly shaping oneself signifies that one is trying to maintain and promote his or her own self-concept (Oyserman et al., 2012).

This study applied Lacan's self-concept to analyze self-images of genderless fashion consumers. Lacan's self-concept, based on the gaze, subject formation, and the unconscious structure, has become an important analytical tool in apparel studies (Bancroft, 2012). The consumer image of the genderless fashion consumer is the self-image of the consumer, and the subject and the external gaze can apply Lacan's concept of desire based on “the gaze.” “Desire” is the translation of Freud's concept of “Wunsch” into French, which refers to the power of seeking satisfaction through continuous objects (Boothby, 2014).

<Fig. 1> represents Lacan's desire formula where “$” is the main subject, “a” is the object which the subject continues to desire, and “◇” is the deficiency that the object never satisfies in the subject's desire. The subject and the object in this formula are never complete, and there is always a deficit between them. Desire cannot be fixed as it is a “metonymy”, its characteristics constantly change and it is unattainable. Lacan argues that the subject existing in the society of the language is composed of metaphors and metonyms, and the unconscious constitutes the rest of the human subject. These semantic functions cause human beings to constantly desire. In Lacan's concept of desire, the human self and subject formation are largely divided into three orders: the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real (Lacan, 2001). These three orders are not completely separate; however, they give meaning to human life by continuing to work together to form human beings, and as a result of human “desire,” these three orders are constantly sustained (Lacan, 2001).

Lacan presented three self-concepts that constitute the above-mentioned unconscious world. The ideal ego of the imaginary order is the idealized self-image of the subject: that is, the image that one wants to be. The ego-ideal of the symbolic order is the element of the gaze that one wishes to incorporate in their self-image, through a staggering call to watch over a person and do their best. Super-ego not only represents a certain unconscious world but also functions as an ethical element of self-criticism, conscience, prohibition, or reproach (Lacan, 2001).

Therefore, this study aims to derive the types and characteristics of the self-image of genderless fashion consumers based on socio-cultural and psychoanalytic studies on the concept of self-image.

III. Methods

1. Research Method

The purpose of this study is to examine the genderless fashion of modern society and to clarify the self-image of genderless fashion consumers through Lacan's concept of desire. The study adopted a phenomenological qualitative research method; individual in-depth interviews were conducted by small-scale personnel to collect data on various genderless fashion consumption motivations. For convenience, participants were recruited only from living in Seoul or its suburbs. To obtain in-depth data on genderless fashion consumers, research participants were selected based on whether they experienced genderless fashion over a long period. The data collection period was from April to October, 2017, and each interview took between 50
and 80 minutes. Interviews were conducted in an easily accessible, quiet space without any disturbances to the interviewees. Before the interview, participants agreed to the interview and the recording of said interview, and they were explained the purpose and process of the study.

To explore the motivations for genderless fashion consumption, the interviewees were asked to speak frankly and concretely, taking care not to induce the researcher’s desired statements, based on semi-structured questions.

The main contents of the interview were as follows. First, the demographic characteristics, age, gender, marital status, occupation, major, genderless fashion first purchase, monthly average fashion product purchase cost, monthly average fashion product purchase number, monthly average shopping time were included in the questionnaire. Second, the interviewees were asked about their understanding of the meaning of genderless, and if the interviewee did know about the meaning, they were prompted to explain what it might mean to them. Third, the participants were asked about their lifestyle and interest in fashion and also asked about the inspiration leading to their first genderless fashion item purchase. Fourth, we asked about trigger of their interest in genderless fashion and the fashion consumption tendencies of their family and memory of school days related to fashion. Fifth, as well as the specific reasoning behind how they would like to be seen through their image, their thoughts about and awareness of the views of others when using genderless fashion items, what they value the most in genderless clothing consumption. In this regard, we asked about the characteristics that appear in fashion consumption and whether there is special behavior after consumption. Lastly, whether they discuss their fashion styles with their social circles and whether they value their opinions. In the interviews, we choose appropriate words when asking questions to avoid bias and leading answers to the intended directions.

2. Participant Characteristics

Participants were recruited through bulletin boards of neighboring universities by advertising for those who considered themselves a genderless fashion consumer. Interview participants were required to have maintained a genderless fashion style for more than five years. Participants were also introduced to this study through word-of-mouth, and the snowball sampling method was used. The ratio of people who came from direct contacts versus the people who were introduced was about 1:1. All subjects were in their 20s or 30s, living in Seoul or its suburbs. There were 22 participants in the final study (Table 1). Of the 22 participants, 13 were women and 9 were men, and only 2 were married. Among them, there were five that identified themselves as feminists, and two who identified as gay or lesbian.

This study examined the reason and background of people's consumption of genderless fashion at the beginning of genderless fashion, so there was a difficulty in recruiting participants. As a result, the demographic backgrounds of participants were broad.

When asked about their first genderless fashion product purchase, two respondents answered that their first purchase was in elementary school, eight answered middle school, three answered high school, and nine answered college or university. Looking at the period during which the genderless fashion style was adopted, we identified three people with five-year retention, nine with 10-year retention, and seven with 20-year retention.

There was the underlying concern that subjects would not frankly speak about themselves by using the term “genderless fashion consumer”, however, to the contrary, subjects were open to talk about themselves and even explained their thoughts and values. Nonetheless, some subjects were reluctant to talk about sexuality or personal stories, and others felt as if they were being dishonest with honest and genuine nuances with their
answers.

All subjects were knowledgeable about the definition of “genderless,” and they were able to express its meaning in their own words. Furthermore, many subjects expressed their own perspective on “genderless-ness.”

By looking at Lacan's concept of desire and the classification of self-images, Lacan's concept of unconsciousness, which forms the self-concept of Lacan, is believed to be viewed from the concept of Lacan's view, the stage of imagination, the view of the subject, the stage of knowing the symbolism, and the real world view of existence and an inner view of the subject. Corresponding to Lacan's (2001) unconscious structure comprising the imaginary self, the symbolic self, and the real self, this study found seven individuals with imaginary egos, ten with symbolic egos, and five with real egos.

### IV. Results and Discussion

1. **Identification with the Admired Subject**

   **1) The Expression of the Desire**

   The “ideal ego” is the idealized self-image of the subject: that is, what they want to become (Lacan, 2010). Of all interview subjects, seven respondents were classified as “ideal ego”; the most prominent feature was that they could identify their own clothing behaviors with that of those they admired—a good example of self-expression in the imaginary order (Lacan, 2001).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>Job</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>First purchase</th>
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ject's ideal style, a 33-year-old female subject explained that her first genderless fashion clothing purchase was inspired by the desire to imitate a certain celebrity. The subject's father was an army official, which influenced her to believe formal or masculine clothes or uniforms were the ideal style. Therefore, when the subject wears such clothes, she tends to stick to her own style rather than follow the current fashion trend. This subject did not like details such as ribbons, floral patterns, laces, etc. in womenswear and wanted to maintain the style of menswear. Her response was as follows:

“Since my father is a soldier, he always wears formal or uniform clothes, which I believe fits him the best. I think I was affected by that, in terms of masculine clothing. I also like male celebrities, and simply just follow their styles.”

A different respondent, who is a 25-year-old female subject, preferred a clean style of clothing which she thought that men would like to see women wear on dates. When asked about what inspired her first purchase of a genderless fashion product, she responded as follows:

“When I was a child, I was prominent in sports. When I was an elementary school student, I saw the short hairstyles of other girls on the soccer team and thought that was a very nice and cool style. After adopting that style and cutting my hair short in middle school, I thought that was the hair that best fit me. I gradually started to enjoy the neutral style regularly.”

The expression of the desire to internalize the commonly admired object (Lacan, 2010) was confirmed by the style of genderless clothing.

A 28-year-old male respondent majors in dance and working in the styling and modeling fields. He thinks that he is a genderless fashion consumer and that the value of fashion is important, because the clothes he chooses to wear emphasizes the philosophy of the brand designer he admires. This subject identified with a neutral image and did not feel embarrassed wearing women's clothing since he was a child. He expressed that he did not feel anything out of the ordinary when he first purchased a genderless fashion product, because he has always casually worn this style. Further, this subject expressed that he did not think of his clothes as womenswear or menswear but rather as “good clothing.” He explained his inspiration as a desire to express his philosophy that is in line with that of certain designers:

“If a designer has been creating established brands or has a certain philosophy, it is expensive. Regardless, you are buying the designer's philosophy. The Maison Martin Margiela brand is a person whose philosophy has been deconstructing itself and reconstructing itself at its own disposal—from the first time it has been created to the present. I am inspired by dance or other various arts while looking at a fashion show or similar. I think that this expresses my philosophy well as art, rather than just my clothing, so I want to “express” using his clothes.”

2) Narcissistic Self

Other features include both the pursuit of the desired self and the narcissistic self. The ideal self is an ideal image of the self that is created by imaginary identification, and it can be seen in an imaginary self and narcissistic ego (Lacan, 1968/1998; Miller, 1981/1998). When a person wears genderless fashion, they believe that their clothes will look very dramatic and trendy, and they are able to find self-gratification and self-satisfaction through the clothes they wear. They also believe that they are the leaders of fashion and that they are the subject of others' desires.

“When I go to work... There are a lot of designers in our building. It's great when they look at me and I feel like I'm overwhelming them. Then I think, "I'm more dramatic than these people".”

“When I dress up with a brand or item others don't know. I feel good to find items that others don't know about, and to decorate me nicely with them.”

Therefore, the interviews that wanted to become what they wanted to admire through genderless fashion. This group tends to express their own desires through self-love and fashion more than other groups.
2. What I Want Others to Think About Me

1) Expressive Style

“Ego-ideal” in the imaginary order is the point of symbolic identification where one observes oneself in the “other” (Lacan, 2001). That is, ego-ideal is the gaze that a person wants to inscribe in their self-image, a watcher who watches them urges them to do their best (Žižek, 1992). Baudelaire (1996) also stated that self-image is determined by the gaze of the other person rather than by will. This is the self and social self in the symbolic order that conforms to the social norms, order, and roles that are named in language. Therefore, the social self is represented by the symbols of roles and the objects of desire of others. The self-image of a genderless fashion consumer can act as an object to stimulate the desire of others and the dream of identification in fantasy. Fashion symbolizes socio-economic status as well as personality, and it involves a unique system of imitation (Davis, 1994). Thus, the social self in genderless fashion creates fantasies about extroverts; however, it simultaneously creates fantasies about socioeconomic status.

In this research, ten respondents belonged to this type. Their self-expression through selective self-expression, seeking clothing image, and expressing desire to fill deficiency in reality appeared as fashion as a method to evoke fantasy in others.

Interview responses related to desire formation through the gaze of others were about how others might think they have value; the expectation that others find them pretty; women’s wearing menswear giving them a more classic fit which makes them look good; how others look at them when wearing certain clothes; and trying to look more sophisticated than others. Some respondents expressed that their shorter height causes them to dress in a way that makes them look taller, and therefore, they purchase more genderless fashion items to look better. They believe that genderless fashion styles better fit taller people with good proportions; therefore, they apply it to themselves. The interviews revealed that the 33-year-old woman, who runs an editorial shop that represents her own fashion style, does not wear or buy women’s clothing. She wears men’s clothes that she believes fit women well. This woman expressed the following about how her friends responded to the clothing they would see on the streets:

“After I established my style, my friends would say, “That is your style”.”

She said that she likes to hear such words of admiration which motivate her to try and maintain her style.

The next subject is a 25-year-old male who majored in make-up and the fine arts, followed by fashion studies. He wants to give the image that he chooses his clothes well and that he is a fashion pioneer.

“It was since middle school. I’ve been wearing clothing that was different from my peers’. My friends were intrigued because of my unique clothing style. The value of clothing for me is that I want to buy clothes with different details than that of others. I wanted to buy something different than others.”

“I believe I am a pioneer. There was a style that I wanted, but because it was not trendy, my friends would give me a hard time. “What kind of guy wears something like that...” It turns out that the very next year that style became a huge trend, and then no one gave me a hard time. It was ridiculous to see people wear the things they were not accepting of before... I try what others do not try at first.”

2) Using Flaws as An Advantage

Body flaws are overcome and turned into an advantage by genderless fashion clothing. For example, instead of wearing feminine clothing that emphasizes the waist to cover up narrow shoulders, wearing an oversized loose jacket helped one participant to hide her narrow shoulders and worked better with her overall ratio. If a man has narrow shoulders, he can wear loose fitting blouses that work better with his shoulders, or he can wear women’s trench coats that better fit his body, to achieve a more sophisticated look. A 23-year-old woman respondent with wider shoulders and a physical complexion stated that she felt uncomfortable and vio-
lated when feminine and masculine labels are used on her. Thus, she had a natural interest in feminism. She has had various experiences in fashion-related activities, such as becoming a campus style icon and participating in various smartphone shopping application activities.

“I value being seen by others. When others look at my clothes, I want them to believe that I put thought into what I wear. If I had to pick out what I am most concerned with in my style, it would be that I have wide shoulders. So, if I wear clothes where shoulder curves are emphasized, my shoulders tend to look even wider, so I look for jackets for men. I guess since I always look for those kinds of clothes, people think I don’t like women’s clothes, but in reality, I wear clothes that can compensate for the flaws I have in my body. I do not deny the hidden positivity. Hearing labeling words like feminine or masculine makes me feel uncomfortable, and it also makes me believe that I, myself, see myself as a man, so I would like to know if that is an easy conclusion to come to.”

These interviews presented full of satisfaction and satisfaction from the way other people looked at them. Through selective self-expression by fashion, he fulfilled his desire to satisfy it and used it as a tool. There was a picture of an ego trying to hide and express his or her physical flaws in genderless fashion.

3. Seeking Endless Fulfillment

Superego is defined as the self, expressing not only the primary instinct but also the unrealistic reality at the physiological and psychological levels (Lacan, 1968/1998). Five respondents belonged to this type. Self-image through genderless apparel can express inner reality. It appears as a fetishism of fashion goods. In the process of seeking alternatives, human desire is constantly purchasing something and trying to find the self, expressing the object “a” which is eventually empty since it is a deficiency. In other words, Lacan defined “object a” as the symbolization of the lack of human existence. This is a theory of fantasy and desire that leads to temporal imaginary identification by satisfying the deficit through consumption; however, the subject disappears into demand. Fantasy is a fantasy, a scene or a scenario from a fantasy, that answers the question, “You are saying that, but what do you really mean when you say that?” This state is generally a way of perceiving Freud’s superego—a cruel, sadistic ethical agent who pours on our unrealizable demands and watches for our failures to do so (Boone, 1998).

The interviews revealed that several respondents experienced states of frustration, pain, and subliminal pleasure through the consumption of genderless apparel. A state of emptiness when pursuing a target “a” was also observed. For example, a 24-year-old interviewee majoring in cultural anthropology had older sisters who were very progressive and had exposed him to more experience, tips, and pointers on genderless apparel. The following is his response to the definition of “genderless,” and his own definitions and ideas on the matter.

“I think I can say that there is no wall in the role of gender in the sex of male and sex in female body. What I mean by genderless is that it does not matter whether a woman is masculine, or whether a male is feminine.”

“Saying that a person is feminine does not associate them with various delicate adjectives. For example, having a sensitive attitude is just a characteristic that a person can have, as opposed to this being a feminine trait. So, if a man has a sensitive attitude, that is just his personality, not because he is a feminine person. I believe that these kinds of traits, which should not get categorized as gender traits, help deconstruct the social barriers and become a part of genderlessness.”

He said that he started studying feminism to understand himself, and that since second grade of junior high school, he has been thinking about sexuality.

“However, when I met people in a gender minority group, to my surprise, they believed that men should be completely masculine, and women should be completely feminine. If men acted in feminine ways, they believed that he would look unattractive. Therefore, men would try to bulk-up their bodies at gyms and try to
dress overly like a man. This was completely the opposite of what I believed in.”

“I used to wear short shorts, but after becoming aware of these things, I stopped wearing them. I couldn’t wear them. So, from that point on, feminism has had a new meaning for me, and I concentrated on and studied it.”

He had a more feminine style; however, to look more attractive to his boyfriend, he tried to dress in a more masculine way.

“Because I studied feminism, I know I should not be seen as masculine, but because I am in the dating service business, I want to be seen as a masculine person. Before entering the army, I did not admit that I wanted to be masculine. Before entering the army, my goal was to discharge with the typical masculine image. I went through all this trouble not to become masculine, but in the army I realized that in order to carry on a dating service business, I had to admit I needed to become masculine. I shaved my hair, I worked out, and I have the basic core of a man, but my clothes… I try wearing what I want to wear. For example, if I wanted to make clothes with a ribbon, I put a checkered pattern into it so that it feels more neutral. I want to make the materials out of chiffon, but I resist the urge and use the checkered pattern to create a more genderless look.”

He said that instead of wearing what he wants, he wears what he thinks is appropriate. If said clothes were hard to obtain, he would make them himself.

“So, generally speaking, I do not wear masculine clothes. I do not buy masculine designs at all. I wear unique clothes that cannot even be defined as neutral or not neutral.”

These interviews showed that the focus of their physical flaws or images they wanted to show was most relevant to their sexual presentation, and they gave a lot of related answers. In particular, there was a denial of being expressed in a specific sex rather than a certain sex. There were physical flaws and psychological reasons for not being a specific sex. Therefore, the self-image that they wanted to express seemed to pursue a neutral, genderless feel.

V. Conclusions:
Fashion - Expression of Desire

Although 21st-century fashion has always been the mainstream of fashion because of the coexistence of various values, in the late 1990s, genderless fashion trends emerged in Korea, surpassing the existing concept of gender as a fashion theme. The tendency of double-sidedness in fashion has been recognized as a tendency in post-modernism since the mid-90s, and the fusion of different styles and heterogeneous materials coexisted, resulting in the emergence of “genderlessness” (Anderson, 2008). The purpose of this study was to examine the characteristics of self-image of genderless fashion consumers in Korea by analyzing, through phenomenological qualitative research using the individual in-depth interview method, the characteristics of the interviewees within the framework of Lacan's concept of desire. The results are as follows.

According to the concept of desire, the human self and subject formation are largely divided into three orders: the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real (Roudinesco, 1997). As a result of analyzing the characteristics of the self-image of the genderless fashion consumer, three types could be derived: pursuing a desired image, pursuing an image that would be desired by others, and pursuing endless fulfillment. Firstly, the type of people that pursue their desired image identify with the fashion style of the person they desire to become. The fashion style that they gazed on was mainly fashion styles of their parents, their favorite celebrities or designers, or even senior members of their soccer teams. “Genderlessness” appeared more often when subjects looked up to the opposite sex. Other features showed a narcissistic appearance which was prominent when subjects were explaining if they had achieved the image that they wanted to become. Narcissism also appeared when the subjects knew that they had a neutral image when they pursued the neutral image. However, most of the contents about consciousness and satisfaction of their narcissism was about fashion style rather than physical satisfaction.

Second, the type of people that pursues images to
which others look up for their desires through others and feed off of their reactions. Therefore, it was found that the self-expression through the image pursued by the characteristics of the people belonging to this type, by the desire of others' reactions. They expressed themselves according to the image standard that they believed was good so that they could receive compliments from their peers such as “they are sophisticated;” “they look good;” “they are stylish;” “they dress well;” “they are cool;” etc. They also know exactly which compliments they wanted to hear. Another feature was to selectively express oneself to pursue what one wants, in other words, to pursue a desire to fill a deficit through fashion. Participants rarely talked about their own shortcomings; only after saying “I like this style image” and while explaining that in detail did they admit to what they perceived as their physical disadvantages such as their narrow or wide shoulders, their shortness or chubbiness, their not-so-good body ratio, etc. Through their desire to supplement, overcome, and fulfill, they selectively expressed their self-image. In this way, the physical disadvantages and flaws were improved. For example, men whose shoulders are narrow would try the cloak of various women's clothing, which is something that others would not do, to get closer to the image that they want to express. Participants also showed a tendency to improve their image through trendy styles.

Lastly, the type of people who pursue endless fulfillment of their own image have realistic images of physiological and psychological phenomena that are faithful to human primary instincts, objects of desire, and cause and internal conflicts. And it was expressed by primary instincts; however, most participants experienced frustration and suffering due to desire, and pleasure through sublimation. They liked to express their own feminine self-image, yet they presented themselves with a masculine image. They showed feminine characteristics through a more feminine image by color and detail.

Participants had an overall interest in genderless fashion; however, they paid more personal attention and gave more importance to certain areas, reflecting various personal factors including their desires. The desire to present a specific self-image was an important factor in understanding the genderless fashion style.

These three types of self-concepts are consistent with the characteristics of the three Lacanian orders. Lacan (2001) can be understood as meaning that human life is made meaningful by continuing to work together to form human beings, rather than three separate phases, each of which is in a separate phase which comes from human desire. The results of this research can be utilized as a new mechanism in various areas of fashion such as design and marketing, to understand the presented types of self-image and the associated characteristics.

The academic significance of this study is as follows. This study contributes to the understanding of the importance of individuals' self-images and desires in modern fashion, as they are demonstrated by expressive behaviors through clothing style, as a reflection of their unconscious world. The studies of genderless fashion so far have been mainly about classification of design elements expressed in certain collections in terms of design (Chung et al., 2018; Kim & Yim, 2015; Kim & Lee, 2016). This study is distinguished from the existing research and has academic significance in that it has enhanced understanding of the genderless fashion consumers through an in-depth analysis of the consumer's self-image of consuming genderless fashion. In addition, this study provides academic implications by identifying the reasons for the pursuit of genderless fashion, which could affect the consumption of genderless fashion.

The practical aspects of this study are as follows. There was a lack of research on the latest trend of genderless fashion consumers. Therefore, this study has practical significance in providing data on what fashion companies should consider in relation to the genderless fashion. Various brands are now launching genderless fashion products. Through this study, we provide useful information in building marketing strategies according to a deep understanding of genderless fashion consumers and the reason for choosing self-image and fashion style to express.

Therefore, the following marketing strategies could be presented.
First, the desire to become the object of admiration for the reason of buying genderless fashion worked. Using the admired images of consumers to develop the product could serve as a desire to purchase the product.

Second, genderless fashion consumption has shown people wanting to hear the responses they want or satisfy their desire for attention through other people. Therefore, using the responses they want to hear as advertising phrases would be another way.

Third, they appeared to be stick to their primary instincts and eager to overcome actual physical imperfection. To this end, it would be a good way to present a design that can maximize the overcoming of physical flaws.

Limitations of this research are as follows. There are many factors that affect the behavior of an individual, including psychological and sociocultural factors (Moen & Minor, 1997). In this study, interviewees have different personal factors, such as age, gender, and job status. So, it may affect their consumption patterns differently. Therefore, considering the various personal characteristics of genderless fashion consumers together, their interpretation and understanding of genderless fashion consumption will be different. Subsequent studies will need to explore genderless fashion consumers through a more diversified approach in light of these considerations. For participant recruitment, we used the public announcement and the snowball sampling methods, which is limited in the sense that it is not a true random sampling method. In addition, this study adopted an inductive method to look at the structure and meaning of phenomena by applying appropriate theory to the analysis of in-depth interviews. Our qualitative analyses have shown not only general characteristics but also specificities; however, it is difficult to judge the whole by only these observed phenomena. Therefore, future studies must be further supplemented with quantitative methods to realize the generalizability of these results.

References


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