

INTRODUCTION

Androgyny is a combination of Greek roots *andros*, “man”, and *gyne*, “woman”. Androgyny can be defined as a blend of both masculine and feminine characteristics or can attribute to neither, being genderless (Prakash et al., 2010).

Androgyny is an adjective most often associated with gender and sex identities, however, in the context of this study I will be applying it as an aesthetic characteristic. Androgynous aesthetic has increasingly made appearances in mainstream pop culture with varying instigations. In the West, androgyny is often a representation of the LGBTQ+ community or feminism, as the concept arose during rights movements for both groups (*Androgyne*, 2021).

Soft masculinity is a sister concept to androgynous aesthetic. Defined by masculine figures taking on a gentle or feminine appeal, soft masculinity has a rooted history in East Asia (Jung, 2010). South Korea has derived much of their concept of soft masculinity from the inter-Asian referencing of various fields of society. Popular derivations of concepts that were integrated into South Korea are Japan’s *Bishounen* (Beautiful Boy), BL (Boy Love) and “herbivore man” (Louie, 2012). South Korea and China had *seonbi* and *caizi* respectively, both meaning “fragile” or “soft” scholar. *Dan* in Chinese plays and *Onnagata* in *Kabuki* Japanese theatre are both roles with which a man cross-dresses and plays the part of a woman (Ho et al., 2021). Jung (2010) parallels the hybridity of South Korean pop culture, which mixes cultural elements to maximize trans-national appeal, to soft masculinity and soft power, a power of coercion that is associated with the ability to attract others through assets such as personality, policy, and culture. Jung (2010) analyzes the fluidity of various aspects of South Korean culture, including the fluidity of masculinity, as an attribution to South Korean soft power. Jung (2010) also points out the repeated enforcement of a what represents soft masculinity, stating that “Through the repetitive and vigorous processes of pastiche, the images have become formulae…evident from its contradictorily layered imagery of a girllike pretty look, a toned and sexy—but hairless—body, and a vulnerable heart combined with an inconsiderate and immature attitude”. Outside of East Asia and into the West, androgynous aesthetic has had several appearances throughout history. The prevalence of the aesthetic has reached unseen heights due to developments in pop culture such as grunge and emo styles and a continuing discourse over LGBTQ+ and women’s rights. Celebrities such as David Bowie, Mick Jagger, Jimi Hendrix, and Kurt Cobain are among the many who sported an androgynous style in Western pop culture history (Belinky, 2019; *Androgye*, 2021).

In this paper, I focus on the androgynous aesthetic of Korean pop (K-Pop) idols in music videos and on social media.

The paper argues that androgynous aesthetic is used by the K-Pop industry as a commercial tactic for a transcultural audience. The argument is built on an analysis of music videos on K-Pop idols known to have an androgynous aesthetic.

The body of this argument is structured as to review initial analysis of the Korean artist Lee Taemin and his music video, “Move”, noting the trends in gendered use of dance, music, and fashion. Following this will be a discussion on the appeal of androgyny in pop culture to audiences. Lastly, I will connect the previous two points to the argument of androgyny being utilized as a commercial tactic as well as identify who is a primary consumer.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This review of literature seeks to contextualize androgyny in South Korea by pulling from East Asian history and preconceived notions of masculinity. In *An Evaluation of South Korean Masculinities*, Sammy Tavassoli (2020) postulates that aesthetic androgyny began to enter mainstream Korean pop culture as a result of popularizing hybrid, or soft, masculinity by means of Korean media. They also propose that the aesthetic androgyny is really a reframing of forms of masculinity in South Korea, therefore more of an appropriation of femininity by the masculine (2020). Kam Louie (2012) in *Popular Culture and Masculinity Ideals in East Asia* points out the trend of feminizing masculinity and, less commonly, masculinizing femininity as an extension of western influence and inter-Asian media exchange. They also theorize the progression of aesthetic derived from the desired skills of a peaceful and modern world, such as cooking and computer savviness. Skills rooted in the feminine get pulled out and adapted to a masculine framework, creating an ideal “beautiful” boy that can do it all by marrying desired skills to a confident and kind personality type. Louie (2012) presumes that the combination of these two phenomena have given a foundation from which androgynous aesthetic can rise from. In terms of a link to consumerism, Tavassoli (2020) figures that the utilization of dualistic characteristics as a way to subtly deviate from the norms allows for broader audience and publicity. From there, we can assume greater publicity is equivalent to greater capital as well. Louie (2012) frames the role of the consumer differently—they say the emergence of the Internet allows for smaller groups or previously taboo groups to form and create a market for such ideologies. In this way, it is the consumer driving the content, and in this case the formation of demand for what is aesthetically androgynous. The freshness of androgyny aesthetic as a subject of mainstream culture and the barrier of language makes studying the origin and upward trend of androgyny aesthetic in South Korea difficult and lacking. There is little detailed discussion on the role and perception of audiences, or the consumer, when it comes to androgyny as a pop culture trend.

ANDROGYNY AS A CONSUMERIST TACTIC AND IT’S EFFECTIVE REDEFINITION OF MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY

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ANALYZING TAEMIN’S “MOVE” AND ANDROGYNOUS AESTHETIC

Beginning with an analysis of choreography, it should be noted that there are anatomical attributes that naturally lead to differences made in movement when dancing, however, it is the highlighting and addition of cultural stylistic elements that allow for clear distinction between masculine and feminine styles of dance. Masculine styles of dance are “often emphasizing leaps, jumps, power, and upper-body strength” while feminine styles are “focused upon flexibility, fluidity, and emotion” (Oliver and Risner, 2017). It should also be noted that a “dancing body, while seemingly apolitical, is inherently political, for each body embodies and communicates the socio-cultural norms of race, gender, and sexuality” (Oh, 2014). Continuing with the analysis of the music video, Taemin matches the sensuality of the song with subtle and effective movements, flowing effortlessly between strong and precise movements to seductively soft and limp-wristed movements. He often takes up little physical space during the dance, yet when he does make larger movements or integrate dynamic movements, they are purposeful and controlled as opposed to being powerful and sporadic. Finger snapping and hand-twirling beckon the viewer in and set a visual beat. Specific moves within the choreography have distinct inspirations from dance concepts created by Bob Fosse, a dancer and choreographer who had a unique and seductive jazz dance style due to his combined experience of theatre, ballet, and growing up in nightclubs. Such movements include turned in knees, creating a “jazz line” with his body, curved shoulders, and finger snapping (Barson, 2021). Taemin also accentuates his hips and buttocks by tilting his pelvis or framing his body with his arms, a feminine movement uncommonly performed by men unironically. Notably, the background dancers are all female, possibly making the vibe of the dance more effeminate. However, the background dancers are largely doing the same dance moves as Taemin and neither party are doing hyperfeminine or hypermasculine movements. The choreography itself is not exceptionally complex; however, the choreographed styles of dance are almost impossibly multi-gendered if not held together by the fluidity and intentionality of the dance. Overall, the choreography in “Move” conveys a seductive, decisive, and emotional image.

Moving on to an analysis of the actual music factor of the music video, the song doesn’t have much lyrical significance in terms of conveying the androgynous. The actual contents of the lyrics don’t have a story and is mostly about watching a person dancing seductively—a generic hypersexualized pop song. Along with the lyrics being hypersexualized, they describe the physical characteristics of this person and prescribe actions for the person to follow. They do not denote an emotional situation, describe personality traits, or speak submissively. In this way, the lyrics themselves are stereotypically masculine in that they are confident and dominant in nature. Curtis Richa, a U.S. based co-writer of the original lyrics, said the original song was meant to be “sexy, sensual, and really mysterious” (Stern, 2017). In the lyrically adapted and recomposed version of the song Taemin and S.M. came to, Taemin sang unlike his normal singing style and was instead breathier, sexier, and calmer with brightness in the chorus. *

Lastly, fashion include clothing, hairstyling, and make-up in the music video “Move” deserves careful examination. Taemin has several “looks” in the main release music video. In terms of clothing, Taemin, as well as the background dancers, are wearing designer clothing throughout the video. Taemin is always in contrast to the background and the background dancers; if the background is bright, he is wearing dark clothing. He distinguishes himself from other dancers by having no design on his clothing when the background dancers do. If they are clad in jewelry, he is not, except for one scene where he is wearing a bejeweled mask and in a golden outfit, forcefully outshining other characters. If they are showing a lot of skin, he will show less. And the opposite idea can be applied for all these examples. Outfits in the music video included the combination of an all-black turtleneck vest and wide dress-pant combination, accessorized by a single bracelet. The wide dress-pant is a formal wear for females, combined with a black turtleneck vest exposing only Taemin’s toned arms while concealing the rest of his body, allows Taemin to utilize suggestive power in this scene quite effectively. Unlike most of the video, Taemin is out of the rain for this scene and his hair is straightened and swooped to the side over his eye. His lips are more tinted than the female background dancers and he has smoky eye makeup. He is wearing almost an identical outfit in another scene, but switches to a white, open-chested blouse that contrasts against the dark background. In these scenes, his skin is very fair and colors are muted. Revisiting the scene where he is wielding a bejeweled mask, he is additionally wearing a loose, golden button-up that is mostly unbuttoned and tucked into skinny jeans. His hair is also dry in this scene but is fluffed up, parted, and styled in way that is more akin to typical male K-Pop idol hairstyle. Visual effects and makeup make his skin appear tanner and more golden in this scene, accentuating his chest muscles and neck. He is wearing a shimmering golden-pink eyeshadow, pink-tinted lips, and blue contacts. Through this outfit and setting we can see, intentional or not, styles and flashiness like that of Prince Nelson. For most of the video, Taemin is in the rain, half the time wearing a loose, open-side tank top and red track pants and for the rest of the time wearing a skin-tight white long sleeve that is soaked and see-through, layered with a black, light jacket with straps going across the chest. This could be labeled as sensual grunge—edgy and sexy. He is also wearing black skinny jeans with a mesh pant over it. The setting of rain throughout most of these scenes add an additional aspect of motion, tighten the fit of certain clothes, and make parts of fabric see-through.

Finally, Taemin’s hairstyle is a striking silver, contrasting him from his surroundings, from others, and from darker face makeup, especially his eyes which peer through his hair. Summarizing the observations made, Taemin frequently wore skinny jeans or wide/flared dress pants and variations of revealing tops, from concealed to fully exposed. Surprisingly, the foundation for many of these outfits are not far outside what is considered a masculine norm, if not just effeminate enough to belong in a definition of soft masculinity. What differentiates soft masculinity from what Taemin is achieving is the singling out of a deviation that breaks the norm without deviating so far that it can no longer be accepted by a widespread audience. Eye makeup was consistently used and is one of the primary feminine aesthetics that Taemin dons. He used this to differentiate from the background dancers as well, who all had winged eyeliner rather than a standout eye shadow. Body makeup, in conjunction with visual effects also created a multitude of possible appearances between masculine and feminine.

Appeal of Androgyny

Androgyny, in the context of East Asia, is able to have great diversity in audience. Those already consuming K-Pop are familiar with soft-masculinity as it is essentially a condition that must be fulfilled as a male K-Pop idol. The hybridization of masculinity described by Jung (2010) as a trans-national appeal can be applied to androgynous aesthetic but with more freedom to hybridize gendered aesthetics and not be exclusive to only men. The proximity of androgyny to soft masculinity makes the jump between the two aesthetics very manageable. Those familiar with androgyny or variations of soft masculinity in media outside of K-Pop such as BL and *Bishounen* are also bound to be receptive. Communities where androgynous aesthetic is common rhetoric or adjacent in fashion is also more receptive. This can include the LGBTQ+ community and individuals who subscribe to a grunge or emo aesthetic (Belinky, 2019). An additional argument for generalized audiences is the representation of a traditionally “other” trait in popular media, weakening gendered boundaries. For example, a female audience seeing a female idol utilizing androgynous aesthetics and exuding confidence and dominance may be inclined to think they could also be like that. The same concept applies for male audiences.

Selling- What and to Who

The first “product” I propose is being sold by the utilization of androgynous aesthetic is the normalization of androgynous aesthetic through repeated exposure and hybridization of gendered attributes. Interestingly, the normalization of androgynous aesthetic does not correlate with a normalization of androgynous sexuality, as heteronormativity is still a standard in Korea and homosexuality closer to a perverted taboo (Tavassoli, 2020). More tangible products are those pertaining to make-up and fashion. Fashion industries get to re-use and re-conceptualize gendered fashion, allowing for a broader audience and remarketing of ideas. *Telfar*, *Eckhaus Latta*, and *Aimé Leon Dore* are among the increasing number of designer clothing brands adapting lines of androgynous fashion (Fox-Suliaman, 2022). Being one of the top beauty markets globally and having a cosmetic industry valued at \$9.4 billion in 2019, South Korea is constantly expanding the beauty industry (*International Trade Association*, 2021). Make-up lines get to expand their audience, normalizing cosmetics as part of a representation of health and catering to even the most hesitant consumers with masculine branding (Liu, 2018). Lifestyles such as skin care routines and diets that prescribe a way of living are sold with intention of achieving a desired aesthetic, with the trends and fads being largely advertised by K-pop idols and social media stars (Haseeb, 2020; *KoreanProductPost*, 2020). In this section of fashion, I would also include the idea of marketing tattoos and androgynous hair styles, which are generally very short. I would also argue that in the unhealthy adaptation of androgyny in non-androgynous settings may diminish femininity, or make the criteria of being hyperfeminine more strict. As the bordering edge of masculinity inches closer to the effeminate, acceptance of the masculine into femininity has not caught up to match this. Therefore, new definitions of masculinity are set, with soft masculinity already capturing a definition of being slightly effeminate. If androgynous aesthetic becomes largely normalized for men in K-pop culture but not women, I would have reason to believe another redefinition of masculinity may occur. In the same line of thought, female individuals wishing to accentuate their femininity are compared to these new definitions of masculinity. This perpetuates a spiral taking feminine qualities to the extreme to stand apart from male counterparts presenting as soft masculine. For example, females have to be skinnier than their already slim male counterparts.

CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, I utilized androgyny as an aesthetic concept and analyzed the music video by Lee Taemin, “Move”, to address common trends of androgynous aesthetic with dance, music and fashion. Then, taking those trends, applied them to a consumerist culture, where a new fashion, make-up, and normalization of androgyny could occur.

Upon expanding the implications of normalization of androgynous aesthetic, I contemplated differing realities given either both females and males are accepted into androgynous aesthetic or if only males in pop culture are accepted, in which case could redefine a newer, more effeminate masculinity than the already existing soft masculinity. I parrot concerns of appropriation of femininity and androgyny in the LGBTQ+ context made by Louie (2012) and Tavassoli (2020), particularly due to strict enforcement of heteronormativity and hyperfeminism. We can also see more clearly the relationship between trend-setters and consumers, of which feed off each other and are essential to each other in a digital, hyper capitalist society. Industries will use the applications of hybridization in several fields, including gendered aesthetics, to appeal to a greater, trans-national audience.

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