

# I N S Δ M

JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY MUSIC, ART AND TECHNOLOGY



**Visual Music:**

**K-Pop's 'CAWMAN' Effect on a Transnational Music Subculture**

Elina Luise Haessler

*INSAM Journal of Contemporary Music, Art and Technology*

No. 8, July 2021, pp. 124–149.

<https://doi.org/10.51191/issn.2637-1898.2022.5.8.124>



I N S Δ M

**Elina Luise Haessler\***  
*Independent researcher,  
Donegal, Ireland*

## **VISUAL MUSIC: K-POP'S 'CAWMAN' EFFECT ON A TRANSNATIONAL MUSIC SUBCULTURE<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** South Korean popular music or *K-Pop* has risen phenomenally in popular music industries around the globe in little under three decades through its unique production method of embracing a combination of both musical and visual artforms. Having gained mass international popularity, K-Pop has established the characteristics of a subculture. The visual emphasis K-Pop producers place in their productions lays particularly in the foreground to its transnational attraction. Primarily in the form of music videos, narratives and aesthetics becoming communicable beyond language mediation.

Using a semiotic theoretical analysis, this paper critically analyses the creation, sustainment and effects of 'visual music' as a foregrounding component of this transnational music subculture. To do so, the focus lies on K-Pop production company SM Entertainment's recently established *CAWMAN* genre, a method of producing music media based on **C**artoon, **A**nimation, **W**ebtoon, **M**otion Graphics, **A**vatar and **N**ovel. With K-Pop's central portal of communication and K-Popular practices being the Internet, this paper explores the effects and critical roles of this new genre of visual music in bringing people together across the globe.

---

\* Author's contact information: [elina.haessler@gmail.com](mailto:elina.haessler@gmail.com).

<sup>1</sup> This paper stems from original, unpublished research conducted as part of the author's MA Ethnomusicology final dissertation in 2021. The original work is entitled *The K-Pop 'Concept': Exploring Semiotic Communication in a Transnational Music Subculture*, under supervision of Dr Colin Quigley at the University of Limerick, Ireland.

**Keywords:** ethnomusicology, online social musicking, popular music, visual music, transnational subculture, semiosis, K-Pop, Korean studies, SM Entertainment.

### **Glossary of Terms:**

Fan (n) – A person may consider themselves a fan if they have a particular love, interest or obsession for, in this case, a particular music or musician.

Fandom (n) – A collective group of fans, who share a love, interest or obsession for, in this case, a particular music or musician.

Idol (n) – The term used to describe an artist who performs ‘idol pop’ in K-Pop.

SNS (n) – ‘social networking site’; social media.

### **Introduction**

A picture is worth a thousand words. Particularly when accompanying song lyrics are incomprehensible due to foreign language barriers. Thus, subtle changes in colour, the placement of property, the camera angle, and the finely choreographed movements of an idol can speak and convey more to the analysing eyes of a fan than any translation or outside interpretation may realise. These signifiers are captured in the form of a music video, enriched from a dance routine and studio recording to the manifestation of a story, brought out through the intricate production methods of visual music.

Korean popular music has largely been defined as a “style of music” (Lie 2015, 96), striving away from the term genre, as Korean popular music encompasses an extensive variety of music types and genres within. The term K-Pop has popularised itself to portray an image of what more accurately is categorised as idol pop (Lie 2015, 103). Its rapid growth in popularity over the past three decades has caused other Korean popular forms of music, including trot, pop ballad, pop-rock, among others (Um 2017, 191), to fall into the shadows of idol pop. Thus, whilst the term K-Pop theoretically encompasses all of Korea’s popular music, the term has become significantly linked to idol pop and, thus, unless otherwise stated, will refer to idol pop for the duration of this paper.

K-Pop as an entity has also been thoroughly explored by Lie (2015) as a “music industry”, due to its rapid growth in popularity, domestically and internationally in the early 2000s, through Korea’s economic advancements in popular media and technology industries (Lie 2015, 96). The advancements made furthermore allowed K-Pop to develop its own significant qualities as a music type,

particularly in its creation of visuality in music. This took the form of the music video, which could be easily accessed internationally through online video sharing platforms. Fuhr (2016) thoroughly explored the ability for K-Pop music videos to enrapture international audiences through its visual attraction. Highly coordinated dance routines, appealing aesthetics and visual images, combined with the easy-to-listen-to melodic structures and genre hybridization of a popular music, meant that the music video quickly became K-Pop's "central media of transmission" (Fuhr 2016, 108-113).

Today, K-Pop continues to become more popularised internationally, with major idol groups, most notably BTS, entering and topping the Billboard Hot 100 five times in just over a year (Billboard n.d.). As technology and particularly social networking sites (SNS) continue to provide international audiences with access to K-Pop, the industry has significantly pushed beyond distributing music videos on platforms such as YouTube but furthermore has adapted its content distribution and promotion to suit fast-paced SNSs such as TikTok and Instagram. Thus, as Parc and Kim (2020) explored, K-Pop has taken the elements (including dance choreographies, charismatic interactions among idols and fans, and common live-concert attractions and rituals) and formatted these onto SNSs, thus attracting audiences to K-Pop's practices in new, digitalised, social and online ways, beyond the music video alone (Parc and Kim 2020, 09-10). Thus, whilst Holt (2011) argued of a considerable loss of value of live music, in aspects of social ritual and interaction through constant media consumption (Holt 2011, 55), the K-Pop industry has seemingly suited itself to these online forms of consumption to become inherently more social and interactive.

Undoubtable today, the leaders in K-Pop are influencers beyond the music, utilising technology and digitalised forms of production and products to appeal to mass audiences. Among these, production company SM Entertainment has further explored the bounds and abilities for *visuality* in music.

For fans of K-Pop, the music, and its forms of production, have become much more than a music type alone. Fans place extensive value and meaning into the music, with their musical and non-musical practices and deep passions for K-Pop, allowing this new form of visual music to function within the context of K-Pop as a musical subculture.

Thus, as I explore SM Entertainment's CAWMAN productions, I aim to portray the establishment of visual music in K-Pop, its production methods, its ability to bring understanding to its diverse audiences, and its effects on this transnational subculture.

## K-Pop as a Subculture

K-Pop, in its now recognised form of establishment, has acquired significant subcultural characteristics. Subcultures, according to sociologist Haenfler (2015), can be described as smaller sections of broader cultures but should by no means be seen as “static things” (Haenfler 2015, 15). “Subcultures are everchanging, [...] guiding and giving meaning to people’s beliefs, values, behaviours, and material things” (Haenfler 2014, 15) which are conceptualised through social experience. Subcultures develop and change as different people enter, exit, or remain within, and with its variable nature it is difficult to pin down to a static definition. Thus, I explore some of K-Pop’s “significant characteristics” of “sub-cultureness” (Haenfler 2015, 16).

Musical subcultures naturally form around a music type, comparable also to that of a music scene. K-Pop’s participants however are embracing much more than the music alone. It is the lived experiences, both individual and collective within their experiential contexts, which give deeper meanings to their actions, habits, and values. Whilst the societal reach of many modern subcultures or music scenes, as Bennett (2004) thoroughly explored, including K-Pop, transcend national boundaries and is home to a diverse set of cultures, backgrounds and ethnicities, the meanings and impressions created are very much collective.

An element which Bennett critiqued on the use of the term subculture, in the context of music, is the “impli[ed] relatively fixed relationship between specific aspects of [...] style and music” (Bennett 2004, 225). He argued that subcultures tend to involve people and youths who frequently shift from one group to another, thus the implied coherency of a subculture is inaccurate. He argued that the term *music scene* better describes youth and broader groupings who find collective values and practices through music (Bennett 1999, 605), without the implied coherency of a subculture.

Whilst I undoubtedly agree that the term *music scene* has similarities and crossovers to subcultures, I still adhere to using the term *subculture* in the context in which I explore K-Pop. Firstly, I acknowledge that the term subculture shouldn’t be seen as a fixed blueprint of a group, but rather a term to find a distinction between those who participate in K-Pop’s practices, styles, values, and beliefs, beyond defining oneself as a casual listener.

Furthermore, I can argue that there is a sense of a fixed coherency that is required among the K-Pop subculture. Whilst people may come and go between this and other subcultures, there is a requirement to remain coherent in one’s practices in K-Pop, in order to gain a fuller understanding of meanings in its productions. If one does not actively and frequently participate, whether in online or local ways, one becomes ‘out of the loop’. Particularly when exploring the

use of signifiers in a semiotic context, as will be further explored in this paper, the consistency of participation to build understanding is vital.

Naturally, not all subculturists (those who participate) can afford time to continuously participate, thus making K-Pop inherently more social, as they rely on content creators and social media platforms to inform them on inner happenings of the subculture. Thus, whilst the term *music scene*, particularly the *trans-local scene* and its understanding of the ways in which “young people appropriate music and stylistic resources in particular local [and globally connected] contexts” (Bennett 2004, 229), is undeniably closely related to the K-Pop subculture, as I further explore in this paper, I remain coherent to the term *sub-culture* here. Nevertheless, its complexities are an element to be further explored in detail, particularly in a context outside of semiotics.

Subcultures are often defined as being disconnected or unhitched from their parent culture or the culture subculturists originate from (Haenfler 2014, 10), as they frequently are an alternative to or escape from mainstream life for them. Undoubtedly, K-Pop has, in the past five years, grown to establish itself in a border area between being mainstream or alternative.

For some fans, the K-Pop they may come across, for example, on Western radio stations, including most notable idol group BTS and their English-lyric songs *Dynamite*, *Butter*, and *Permission to Dance*, as well as Psy’s 2012 viral song *Gangnam Style*, among artists such as BlackPink and Twice, would be considered mainstream, as these artists have notably entered the Billboard charts among other mainstream Western forms of popular music recognition.

However, discourses frequently emerge among fans on SNSs, who consider what seemingly authenticates a ‘real’ K-Pop fan. Commonly, distinctions are made between fans who solely engage with this considered mainstream K-Pop and those who listen to lesser-known idol groups, engage with niche fan practices, showcase extensive knowledge about the subculture and its participants as well as those who own fan paraphernalia. Likewise, it is not uncommon to find viral challenges across SNS TikTok, which aim to authenticate one as a “real K-Pop fan” by how many songs one can recognise in an audio collection. Notably, BTS, Psy, Twice, and BlackPink frequent the lowest or deemed “easiest” categories (see for example, #kpopsongchallenge on TikTok). Whilst content creators and consumers with whom I have spoken with largely aim to discard this judgement of this authenticity, they can’t deny the underlying status markers through specific fan practices among subculturists (Joshua N. 2021. Personal communication, June 02; Leah S. 2021. Personal communication, June 06).

Thus, K-Pop being mainstream or alternative largely depends on the perspective of the fan, the intensity of their fan practice and engagement, with which groups they engage with, and their geographical location. Nevertheless, it is not the fans’ socio-cultural backgrounds and parent cultures which establish

their *understandings* of K-Pop, but rather the intensity of their involvement. The more they interact with K-Pop through its various forms of engagement, the more they come to collectively understand its fan policies and practices.

Thus, within this subculture, the fans' passions and practices revolve around K-Pop as a community, a medium to identify with particularly through the meanings and messages of music videos and accompanying fan discussions across SNSs. K-Pop for many is a place to find a mutual sense of belonging. Through fan practices of analysing music videos, fans can discuss and translate their reception of K-Pop into social communication with people from across the world (Jenkins 2013, 278). Thus, collective ideologies, values and beliefs become established, creating a dynamic for social behaviour expectations, completely unhitched from any parent cultures.

Likewise, and most vital to the exploration of K-Pop's music videos, there is a shared lens or perspective of so-called visual signifiers. These signifiers refer to visual signs and material objects from which fans may establish narratives. Through a fan's active and consistent participation in this subculture and the disconnect from their mainstream lives, fans are able to read visual music video signifiers through their developed and collectively experienced subcultural practices.

I argue it is vital for K-Pop to function as a subculture in order for this understanding through visual signifiers to function, as without the collective experiences, beliefs, values, and consistent practices, a shared lens cannot be sufficiently established nor effectively utilised to gain meaning.

### **The Development of Music Videos in the K-Pop Subculture**

K-Pop's music videos begun gaining attention first within the J-Pop (Japanese popular music) industry, followed by Taiwanese and Indonesian audiences (Lie 2015, 101-102). As these popular music industries were much more nationally and internationally established at the time, Korean production companies took to developing K-Pop's music videos through surrounding Asian popular music industries.

Music videos largely featured young males and females, either in groups or as soloists, singing and rapping in Korean, English, or Japanese. The idols featured in the music videos then wore fashionable Western-influenced clothing, danced in synchrony, and explored themes of love, adolescence, anti-violence and pop-culture, attracting the attention primarily of youths across Asia. Over time, music videos began to include consistent storylines and placed an even stronger emphasis on narrating these visually, rather than relying on lyrics. Thus, music videos started to become conceptualised as visual narratives accompanied

by music, rather than the music being central to the attraction. Thus, idols' rap, song, and dance became tailored to narrate certain stories, ideas, and themes in accordance with the music video's broader concept (see also Um 2017).

Towards the latter half of the 2000s, K-Pop, now much more domestically established, started gaining attention from sparse audiences across North and South America, as well as Europe, with audiences taking greater interest through these visually narrated music videos. The shifted focus from lyrical narratives to visual narratives attracted international audiences, as a major part of the world's population (still today) do not speak Korean.

Whilst popular music videos were already largely established, with the USA's MTV and Korea's Mnet, internationally emerging Internet platform YouTube allowed audiences to constantly access music videos, whenever and how often they wished. An underlying shift could be recognised among the ways in which popular music could be consumed, particularly leaning beyond the ability to only listen, but to consume and experience music visually through these technological advancements, bringing new perspectives on visuality in popular music. Furthermore, this new form of distribution and consumption allowed fans to analyse and explore music videos in immense detail on demand and, furthermore, allowed fans to interact across the globe through comment sections. Music video streaming platforms thus not only became popular for their on-demand, algorithmic content, but also as a social platform, creating an environment for fans to communicate and share mutual passions. Today this is felt even more strongly due to a shift from video platforms showcasing entire music videos to SNSs in which the most important elements from larger videos (in the eyes of fans) are shared and discussed among subculturists in short, fast-paced segments.

Nevertheless, this seemingly solid production method of creating visual music video storylines could arguably be understood in different ways. The diverse socio-cultural backgrounds of fans evidently shape the understandings of signifiers according to Turino (1999). Yet, with K-Pop's subtle transformation into that of a subculture, fans established a method of reading music videos in the context of their subculture. Whilst certain symbols may not be "self-evident cross-culturally" (Turino 1999, 231), they can be read by this diverse audience, as the signifiers gain meaning through fans' collective subcultural experiences, unhitched from their parent cultures.

Thus, these highly manufactured music videos, created using in-depth visual signs of meaning, are highly informative to fans, to whom every expression, action, prop, or sign in music videos may have a completely different meaning to someone outside of the subculture. Music videos evidently become experiences for fans, in which they read, explore, and develop narratives from within and outside of a single music video, incorporating the entirety of their subcultural experience into their comprehension of a music video's story.

## Reading K-Pop Music Videos Through a Semiotic Lens of Analysis

Visual signifiers, being a dominant information source for international audiences of K-Pop's music videos, primarily function through a process of semiosis. Each visual signifier, whether in the form of a prop, clothing item, colour or choreographed movement, provides the viewer with information. Depending on the viewer's frame of context, the viewer may interpret a signifier as a certain type of sign, thus gaining understanding from the signifier.

A frame of context in K-Pop is firstly established in whether or not the viewer considers themselves a fan. How often a fan participates in subcultural practices, whether this is active or passive participation, whether this is within a SNS creator or consumer position, all contributes to one's understanding of a signifier. The intensity of one's participation as well as their knowledge of the Korean language, among other influencing factors, may contribute and alter one's individual understanding of a signifier.

Thus, it is vital to note that semiotics doesn't aim to obtain a common understanding of a signifier, but rather focuses on *how* a viewer may interpret, why and to what effect (Peirce in Turino 1999, 223). In the context of K-Pop as a subculture, meanings may cross over due to the shared experiences fans draw on to establish these meanings, however, due to the polysemous nature of popular music (Lie 2015, 152), we can draw on semiotics to explore the practices and effects of the visual emphasis in K-Pop's music videos.

Drawing on Peircean Semiotic Theory, first developed in the field of linguists, it is today actively used to explore visual and musical semiotics as well. According to Pierce, signs are representations of something (i.e. an object, whether abstract or concrete) to someone (the perceiver) who is able to comprehend or gain meaning in the form of an affect (e.g. an idea articulated and processed) (Turino 1999, 222-223). Signs, in their most basic structure, can be found in the form of an icon, index, or symbol, with semiotic analysis aiming to describe what effect this may have in the form of understanding.

*Icons* have directly established resemblance to objects (Turino 1999, 226). They can be understood literal in their form, with little for perceivers to interpret or derive unintended meaning from. Icons are understood intuitively. For example, in the context of a music video, a prop-vehicle is understood as a vehicle by the perceiver, as it has direct resemblance to vehicles surrounding many of us every day. Therefore, to have an iconic understanding of a sign is to understand its meaning through direct resemblance (Turino 1999, 227).

An *index* or several *indices* are understood through experiences of co-occurrences between object, sign and perceiver and are signs of experience, developed over time (Turino 1999, 227, 235). Through the consistent association of the object and sign, the perceiver develops an understanding of its meaning, whether

instinctively (e.g. when seeing smoke, we may associate fire), or simply through repetition, for example, repeated use of a visual motif in a music video may become an index of a greater storyline. Indices can develop within the context of a single music video, but also commonly across music videos, when a common motif is identified.

Finally, the *symbol* has no direct association to its object but is rather understood through language mediation within the perceiver's and object's socio-cultural environment. Symbols require an explanation of their (often) concrete meanings, or an explanation of why it may be interpreted otherwise (Turino 1999, 228). A symbol's meaning is bounded within certain social agreements, most commonly of cultures, religions and other socio-cultural groups of people, including many subcultures (Turino 1999, 228). In the context of a music video, a frequently repeated index may in fact transform into a symbol as it becomes meaningful to its audience or representative of something greater than its direct storyline association.

Using these three sign forms of analysis, I turn now to look at a recently established visual-music concept by K-Pop production company SM Entertainment. By exploring this so-called "new genre" (SMTOWNe 2021, 13:00) through a semiotic lens of analysis, we can firstly see how this leading production company is bringing visual music even further into the centre of K-Pop's prime production type, as well as explore the effects this visual music form has on its audiences' fan practices.

### **SM Entertainment & Its Construction of Visual Music Through CAWMAN**

Led by CEO Soo-Man Lee, SM Entertainment is a "media production company" which established itself in 1995 (SMTOWNe 2021, 28:12). This company is home to Korea's earliest and current top idol groups such as Girls' Generation, SHINee, Super Junior, NCT and Aespa, as well as solo idols BoA, Taemin, Taeyeon, and Baekhyun, among others.

K-Pop production companies recruit young potential artists, thoroughly train them in dance, song, social etiquette, media relations and language, and commonly after several years of training, may debut the artists as part of an idol group. Only few artists ever manage to debut and build a strong career as an idol, as this training system is known to be extremely intense, both physically and mentally, as production companies hold control over many aspects of a trainee's professional and personal life (Kong 2019).

Here, SM Entertainment established itself as a *media* production company, rather than music production company. Perhaps with their immediate focus on producing visually appealing music videos, among other unrelated-to-music

endeavours later invested in, (Parc and Kim 2020, 12), they strived to omit being labelled as solely a music production company.

Beginning with their earliest boy idol group H.O.T. (1996) and continuing to their most recently debuted girl idol group Aespa (2020), albums and singles are released every few months or years. A music video then frequently accompanies an album or single release. At SM Entertainment, music videos usually run for approximately 3 to 6 minutes, feature the idols dancing and singing in Korean, English, Japanese or Chinese, as well as incorporating a narrative or storyline to feature the idol group's concepts and messages. Idols appear well-manicured, in various costumes, a change in hairstyle and colour to suit the concept and, with no limit to special effects and post-production editing, music videos become an elaborate and highly dense set of signs for fans to experience and analyse (Beaster-Jones 2019, 42).

### **Introducing CAWMAN**

On June 29<sup>th</sup>, 2021, during the SM Congress, in which the company's idols and producers introduce their plans for the coming year, the idea of CAWMAN was first formally introduced. In an interview with idol group Aespa, member Giselle introduced this so-called "new genre", stating "[CAWMAN] stands for Cartoons, Animations, Webtoons, Motion Graphics, Avatar, and Novel" (SMTOWNe 2021, 13:00). It is defined as a "mixed content genre" that best describes the content which SM Entertainment aims to showcase (SMTOWNe 2021, 13:17). CAWMAN draws elements from each of these visual genres and incorporates them into productions, first and foremost within music videos. The production company thus invests extensively into special effects, animation, motion graphics and other tools of visual production in order to portray CAWMAN as a central technique to music video production. CAWMAN, however, should not only be considered a production technique, but rather also a metaphorical vessel for the shifted focus from the musical to visual in music videos. To further explore the development, examples, and outcomes of CAWMAN, I turn to SM Entertainment's idol group Aespa, later to NCT U, as well as to solo idols Key and Taeyeon.

SM Entertainment initially introduced this new genre alongside its newest debuting idol group Aespa, whose group concept or theme was to be heavily focused on avatars, motion graphics and animated content. Their group name *Aespa* is crafted through acronyms for 'avatar', 'experience', as well as 'aspect' (Bosch 2022). The term 'avatar' and 'experience' are to reflect this new CAWMAN genre as part of their concept, with the term 'aspect' aiming to represent the two sides of reality versus digital existence (Bosch 2022).

Aespa consists of four members, NingNing, Winter, Karina, and Giselle, however, commonly this idol group is also considered an eight-member group, as SM Entertainment incorporates the ‘avatar’ concept. Pictured below we see the four Aespa members alongside four avatar characters who each represent themselves in a digital universe. These four avatars, completely crafted through CGI technology, have appeared in all of Aespa’s music videos and largely are considered part of the group as well. This is the first idol group to feature both human and CGI idols and became the first concrete manifestation of CAW-MAN through the creation of avatars.



**Figure 1.** Idol group Aespa alongside their Avatars (Bosch 2022).

Since their debut, Aespa has released five music videos as of April 2022, debuting with their first music video *Black Mamba* in November 2020. In early 2021, the group released *Forever*, followed by *Next Level* in May, and their fourth, *Savage*, in early October. Later in December 2021, the group also released a re-mastered version of S.E.S’ original *Dreams Come True*. *Black Mamba*, *Forever*, and *Next Level* were released as singles whilst *Savage* was released as part of Aespa’s first mini album and *Dreams Come True* as part of a company Christmas album.

Each of Aespa’s music videos are set between a real and digital universe. Throughout all music videos, the aforementioned avatars appear alongside their idol counterparts, to reflect this concept. The digital universe consists of extensive post-production editing, VFX, motion capture and includes almost every element of CAWMAN, from avatars and cartoons to webtoons and novel-like narratives with extensive animated backdrops and settings throughout. As Aespa’s concept draws on the experiential differences between digital universes and live, real-world experiences, the production budget to create a convincing concept was expectantly high in this regard (AWN 2021).

Thus, watching Aespa's music videos emulates a cinematic experience, rather than the focus being placed on the music, as in a traditional music video production. Where traditionally the music is supported by the video, instead, Aespa's releases are video productions supported by music.

As audiences watch these music videos, we can find narratives forming throughout, via the use of visual signifiers. Icons, indices and symbols are used to creatively portray Aespa's narratives. Whilst there are many narratives and representing signifiers across Aespa's music videos and SM Entertainment's broader productions, the two I wish to focus on are the 'butterfly motif' and the 'train motif'. Initially two icons, created in association with CAWMAN, these have, in the past two years, developed their meanings within and surrounding SM Entertainment, its idols, its audiences as well as broader subcultural practices.

### The Butterfly Motif

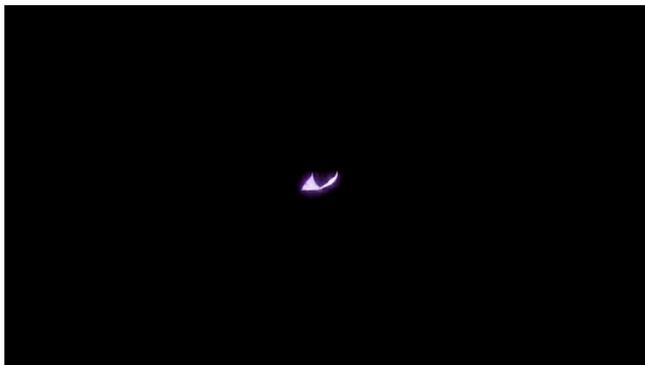
As the name suggests, this signifier is that of a six-legged insect with wings – a butterfly. In order to trace the development of this signifier, we must first return to SM Entertainment's idol group NCT U, who in October 2020 released their music video *Make a Wish (Birthday Song)* on YouTube. This music video was released just over a month prior to Aespa's debut.

In the final seconds of *Make a Wish*, the viewer can observe the following scenes (Figures 2.0-2.2). We see a train carriage, filled with grass and various plants. Sunlight streams through the carriage windows and we can observe a purple glowing butterfly enter this scene and fly into the centre of the image. After four seconds, the screen goes dark, leaving only this animated purple butterfly in the centre of the screen, as the video ends. Here, this butterfly can be considered first and foremost an icon, as it is recognisable as being a small insect with wings, which we may frequent in everyday surroundings. Whilst this butterfly is clearly animated and glowing a bright purple colour, it is nevertheless recognisable as a butterfly, and thus an icon.



**Figure 2.0.** NCT U's *Make A Wish* MV (SMTOWNb 2020, [04:03](#)).

**Figure 2.1.** NCT U's *Make A Wish* MV (SMTOWNb 2020, [04:05](#)).



**Figure 2.2.** NCT U's Make A Wish MV (SMTOWNb 2020, 04:07)

As a common subcultural fan practice within K-Pop, any identifiable icon rarely remains as such when presented to the artist's fans. Jenkins (2013) is adamant about a fans' reception of content to involve many more thought processes, experience reflections and fan discussions in order for its meaning to become clear. As he stated, "for the fan, watching the [content] is the beginning, not the end, of the process of media consumption" (Jenkins 2013, 278). Thus an icon is rarely simply an icon in the eyes of fans.

Fans explore beyond the given content in search of deeper meaning, thus quickly transforming this icon into an index. As an index, this butterfly may gain new meaning over time, in relation to the experiences fans may have with this icon, its appearance contexts and the subcultural practices associated with it.

Focusing further on this butterfly scene, we see it appear in NCT U's video, however, this scene follows only after the main music video ends, following the company logos and credits. Thus we can assume the butterfly isn't part of, nor in reference to, the central music video narratives. Instead, this leans towards being a so-called teaser for something else.

Commonly among SM Entertainment's productions, the producers include hints or teasers towards upcoming content; usually limited to the group in which the teaser is featured. Instinctively, this butterfly signifier may hint towards an upcoming NCT U production, however, on November 17<sup>th</sup> 2020, we find similar butterfly motifs in Aespa's debut music video *Black Mamba*.

Firstly we see idol NingNing in a bright, purple coloured setting, already aligning with the colour schemes of the original butterfly icon. NingNing wears jewelled butterfly accessories in her hair and is surrounded by colourful, cartoon butterflies in this scene, as pictured below.



**Figure 3.0.** Black Mamba's animated butterflies surrounding NingNing (SMTOWNa 2020, [00:31](#)).

**Figure 3.1.** Black Mamba's digital butterfly (SMTOWNa 2020, [02:41](#)).

As the music video continues we find glimpses of other butterfly icons throughout, most prominently at [2:41](#) (Figure 3.1). Once again, the scene is set in the pink glowing room with idol NingNing. She is looking at a computer screen on which we see a purple glowing butterfly, identical to the original in *Make a Wish*. Here, the butterfly icon quickly disappears as the computer screen becomes infiltrated by virus-like icons. This is the final instance in which we see the butterfly motif for the entirety of this music video.

Through the butterfly's reappearance and consistent presence throughout this music video, a perceiver's understanding of the icon can develop. Firstly,

it can be confidently assumed that the butterfly's appearance in NCT U's music video was teasing at Aespa's debut, considering the near-to-identical signifier (and backdrop scenes, which will be discussed later). With the butterfly's frequent appearance throughout *Black Mamba*, perhaps it becomes an index of a greater narrative to Aespa's productions.

Alternatively it could be read more in depth in relation to *where* this motif appears. Firstly, the butterfly always appears alongside idol NingNing, thus perhaps the index is in relation to her. Perhaps, due to its appearance in a computer screen, being covered up by virus-like icons, the butterfly represents the digital versus reality universes in Aespa's narrative, possibly incorporating a good versus evil, as the butterfly motif disappears following this scene. Perhaps it could also be an indexical signifier of CAWMAN, as to reflect its development and content, as the butterfly is crafted in various forms, including avatar (Figure 2.0) and cartoon (Figure 3.0).

These, among other interpretations of the butterfly as an index, are possible, depending on the fans' subcultural experiences and knowledge. These suggestions are certainly not limited to the examples given; however, they aim to show how a fan may interpret an icon as an index within the context of a music video, its various appearances, its associations and its development of meaning.

**Figure 4.0.** Savage's digitalised butterfly (SMTOWNb 2021, [01:52](#)).

**Figure 4.1.** Savage's animated butterfly (SMTOWNb 2021, [03:15](#)).

**Figure 4.2.** Dreams Come True's CGI butterfly (SMTOWNa 2021, [00:36](#)).

**Figure 4.3.** Dreams Come True's butterfly embodiment (SMTOWNa 2021, [02:48](#)).



Aespa's music videos following *Black Mamba* each showcase this butterfly motif. During *Savage*, for example, we see the butterfly again, associated with technology and AI (Figure 4.0), as well as in an animated form (Figure 4.1). In *Dreams come True*, the idols themselves have animated butterfly wings (Figures 4.2, 4.3), they appear in similar flower bed scenes with animated glowing butterflies surrounding them.

The consistency of this motif thus may in fact also develop from being an index (to the viewers of several Aespa music videos) to becoming a symbol (particularly in the eyes of Aespa's fandom). The fact that Aespa physically embody the butterfly (Figures 4.2, 4.3), may reflect their symbolic embodiment of the butterfly as well.

Whilst the name and acronyms of Aespa seem not to have any direct or iconic relation to that of a butterfly, the consistency of the motif may transform the meaning of this butterfly into a symbol of Aespa. A symbol that often only Aespa's most consistent and passionate of fans may understand its entire meaning of. Perhaps the butterfly for some fans may even be a symbol for something greater than Aespa, beyond my own knowledge, but primarily it shows that this meaning is bounded through mediation, understood or arguable only by those who are actively involved in the socio-(sub)cultural environment of Aespa's fandom.

This example shows how meaning is developed and understood by fans through icons, indices and symbols in the context of a subculture. Through music videos alone, icons may extensively develop to incorporate indexical and symbolic meanings for fans. Through SM Entertainment's focused CAWMAN production methods, they clearly aim to narrate these themes and stories extensively through the use of visual signifiers. With Aespa being the first idol group, most prominently produced through CAWMAN, the company explores the bounds and extents to which this visual genre can function as a narrating tool across music videos, with the butterfly motif playing a central role in this.

Whilst butterfly motifs have notably frequented traditional Korean art as well as recent K-drama series, the meanings of the motif need not necessarily overlap. Here the motif becomes encapsulated within SM Entertainment's collection of artists and music videos, presented to be read within the close contexts of its appearance built through pieces of information released over time. Thus, whilst the butterfly appears as a popular signifier among other Korean productions, its individual contexts and meanings will vary. Overlaps might be further explored in relation to frequent motifs across traditional and modern K-culture creations using a semiotic lens of analysis, however, the scope of this research would be much broader than the range of this paper. Nevertheless, the frequent appearance of the butterfly is interesting to note among Korean productions.

## The Train Motif

Whilst CAWMAN originally aired alongside the debut of Aespa, the concept of CAWMAN is also beginning to infiltrate other SM Entertainment idol groups as well. This is particularly evident as icons, indices and symbols begin to become familiar not only among one or two idol groups (as with NCT U and Aespa) but become recognisable across company productions, drawing attention from various groups and fandoms. Fans may find similar visual features, styles and even intertwined narratives among a variety of SM Entertainment's groups. This is seen extensively through SM Entertainment's Train Motif.

Drawing yet again on the aforementioned scene which closes NCT U's *Make a Wish*, the butterfly is seen in what looks to be a train carriage (Figure 5.0). We see typical doors, information screens, lights and handles, as we find in a typical subway carriage. To viewers familiar with subways, this will likely function as an icon to the typical inside of this vehicle.

As we encounter this near-to-identical scene in Aespa's *Black Mamba* music video (Figure 5.1), the train begins to transform into an index. Whilst the storyline may not yet be strikingly clear for viewers, the repeated scene, and frequent use of this train carriage throughout the entire music video, leans towards the development of a deeper meaning, perhaps similarly so as the butterfly. The index becomes more intricate however when the carriage can be seen both as an idyllic scene with flowers and butterflies, and with a juxtaposing dark, ominous, digitalised aesthetic (Figure 5.2).



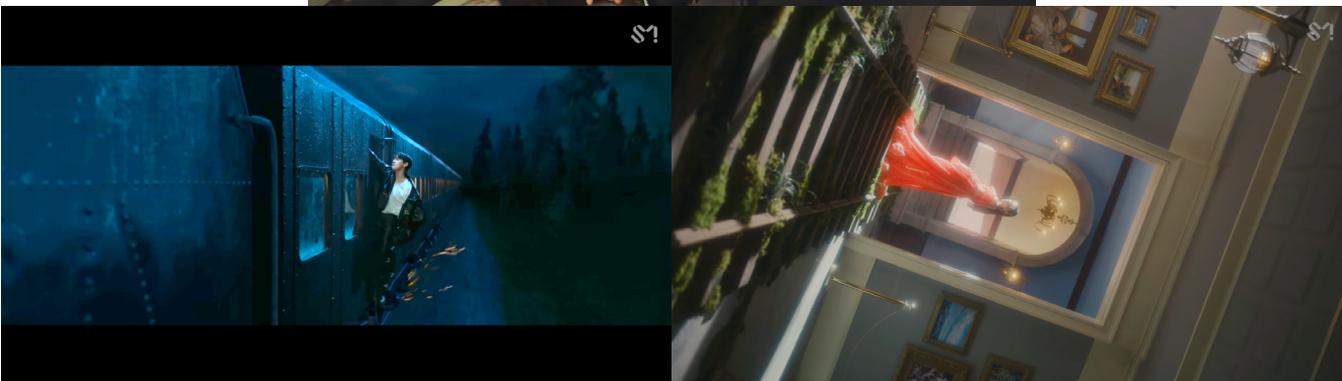
**Figure 5.0.** NCT U's *Make A Wish* Train Carriage (SMTOWNb 2020, [04:05](#)).

**Figure 5.1.** Aespa's *Black Mamba* Train Carriage (SMTOWNa 2020, [00:22](#)).

**Figure 5.2.** Aespa's *Black Mamba* Digital Train (SMTOWNa 2020, [03:25](#)).

Over time, the train carriage does not re-appear in Aespa's music videos, rather the focus being placed on developing the butterfly motif. However, in early 2021, the train motif seemed to frequent several other of SM Entertainment's top artists' music videos.

Starting with SHINee's *Don't Call Me* in late February, we see the boy idol group perform a large part of their music video in a subway setting, wherein which we see a CGI train in the background (Figure 6.0). Following this, solo artist Baekhyun in late March released *Bambi*, set entirely on a train (Figure 6.1). In April, soloist Wendy released *Like Water*, and yet again we see train-related motifs appear in this music video, primarily through the use of train tracks (Figure 6.2). Thus the train may transform into an index of greater meaning for fans who watch music videos company wide. Perhaps the index is connecting the artists and their music videos or, more abstractly, the train is heading for a synonymous destination, potentially related to the greater SM Entertainment company. As with any index, the perceiver's related experiences within the subculture and to these artists will vary the index's meanings.



**Figure 6.0.** SHINee's *Don't Call Me* Train Motif (SMTOWNd 2021, [03:51](#)).

**Figure 6.1.** Baekhyun's *Bambi* Train Motif (SMTOWNc 2021, [03:10](#)).

**Figure 6.2.** Wendy's *Like Water* Train Motif (SMTOWNf 2021, [00:12](#)).

In the latter half of 2021, SM Entertainment announced they would be holding a free virtual concert on New Year's Day which would feature a large selection of their artists and idol groups. This concert would have a concept entitled *SMCU Express – SM (Entertainment) Culture Universe Express* (train). After one year of featuring the train as an icon in a variety of artists' music videos, the train returns as an indexical theme for the company itself.

As a promotional concept, SM Entertainment crafted carriages identical to those first seen with NCT U and Aespa over one year prior, to reflect the various concepts of older and newer groups. The train carriage thus became a vessel to hold the concepts and aesthetics of different groups in a single visual setting. Thus, both older and newer artists, as well as their concepts, became connected and associated with one another through this unifying visual marker.

One promotional photo featuring Aespa (Figure 7.0), in a revised version of their original train carriage, pictured their consistent colour scheme with their original concept as well as the butterfly's colours. Members of NCT are also photographed below, with their own urban school-boy concept portrayed within their train vessel.



Figure 7.0. SMCU's Aespa (MusicPlaza n.d.).



Figure 7.1. SMCU's NCT (하나비라 2022).

During the virtual live concert, some of SM Entertainment's idols were featured singing in their respective train carriages as well. For example, member Key of idol group SHINee performed his recently released *Hate That...* which features member Taeyeon of idol group Girls' Generation. SHINee's train carriage (Figure 7.2) reflects the group's bold, bright, and innovative, characteristics as a leading boy idol group among K-Pop's earliest generations. Girls' Generation's carriage (Figure 7.3) features their signature colours and similarly reflects their elegant and feminine characteristics as a leading second-generation girl group of K-Pop. With the emphasis on this visual genre in production, the two

idols accurately reflect their group's concepts, appeal to their individual fandoms, and simultaneously cross over in collaboration through song, and their identical vessel icons.



Figure 7.2. SMCU's SHINee & Key (Vitamint 2022)

Figure 7.3. SMCU's Girls' Generation & Taeyeon (Vitamint 2022)

As fans read into the connections and overlaps between the artists and their representing visuals, the train may develop indexical narratives, however, the consistent use of the train motif, without any relation directly to any particular artist, has only SM Entertainment as a company as a unifying concept. Thus, this icon or index might in fact develop even further into that of a symbol for SM Entertainment in the eyes of company-wide fans. The incorporation of CAWMAN's visual styles and effects, as well as the train's unlimited vessel-effect across idol groups, company-wide, allows this signifier to establish characteristics of a symbol.

This is furthermore confirmed as the train motif continues to appear in idols' music videos (such as Taeyeon's January 2022 release *Can't Control Myself* (Figure 8.0), thus reiterating the signifier's importance as not only being a motif to promote the concert, but to build itself as a symbol to represent SM Entertainment as a whole.



Figure 8.0. Taeyeon's *Can't Control Myself* Train Motif (SMTOWN 2022, 00:42).

## Moving Beyond Butterflies and Trains

This virtual concert, in my analysis of SM Entertainment's visual music concept with CAWMAN, marks several prominent key moments in its development and establishment.

Firstly, after more than a year, the train motif, first featured in NCT U's music video *Make A Wish* and constructed to tease Aespa's debut, has now developed into a symbol of SM Entertainment as a whole. The motif has come full circle, from being an icon, having developed into a symbol for K-Pop's most active and involved subculturists. This motif, then present in the music video concepts of various idol groups, manages to overlap and intrigue a variety of demographics. Older fans of older groups, such as SHINee and Girls' Generation, may find interest in newer groups such as NCT U and Aespa, as their concepts overlap through this train motif. Along with being featured in a company-wide concert, which was freely accessible to international audiences, it encourages fans to delve into and explore other idol groups within the same company.

Furthermore, as the train motif appeared and continues to appear in various SM Entertainment productions, fans will be encouraged to explore these overlapping motifs in order to gain a greater understanding of the motif itself. Being part of this subculture, motifs are frequently used to tell stories, however, the intricacies of these stories are often only revealed to those who actively and intensely explore K-Pop, company-wide productions, idol groups and music videos. Without a consistent subcultural participation, this motif may not reveal its symbolic nor indexical meanings to fans, and thus may only remain as an icon. SM Entertainment therefore actively encourages fan divergence (granted within one company) by uniting artists, generations, and motifs in music videos as well as events such as this concert, connected through CAWMAN's extensive visual manifestations.

SM Entertainment, as of April 2022, seems to be continuously developing its visual narratives. CAWMAN is becoming a central element to the company's entire concept, most recently even incorporating visual narratives of music videos into an experimental real-world art exhibition. Fans in South Korea could visit an exhibition of Taeyeon's *INVU* album and music video. Featuring large scale photographs, television screens, images, colours and light projections, as well as a variety of props to act as icons, indices and symbols of *INVU*. Once again, depending on the perceiver and their context of experiencing this live, in-person exhibition and re-creation of the album, they are able to read a variety of meanings. Whilst some explanations of the exhibition are provided (in both Korean and English), the setup seems to largely encourage a fans' immersive visual experience to provide understanding and thus the development of meaning through signifiers.

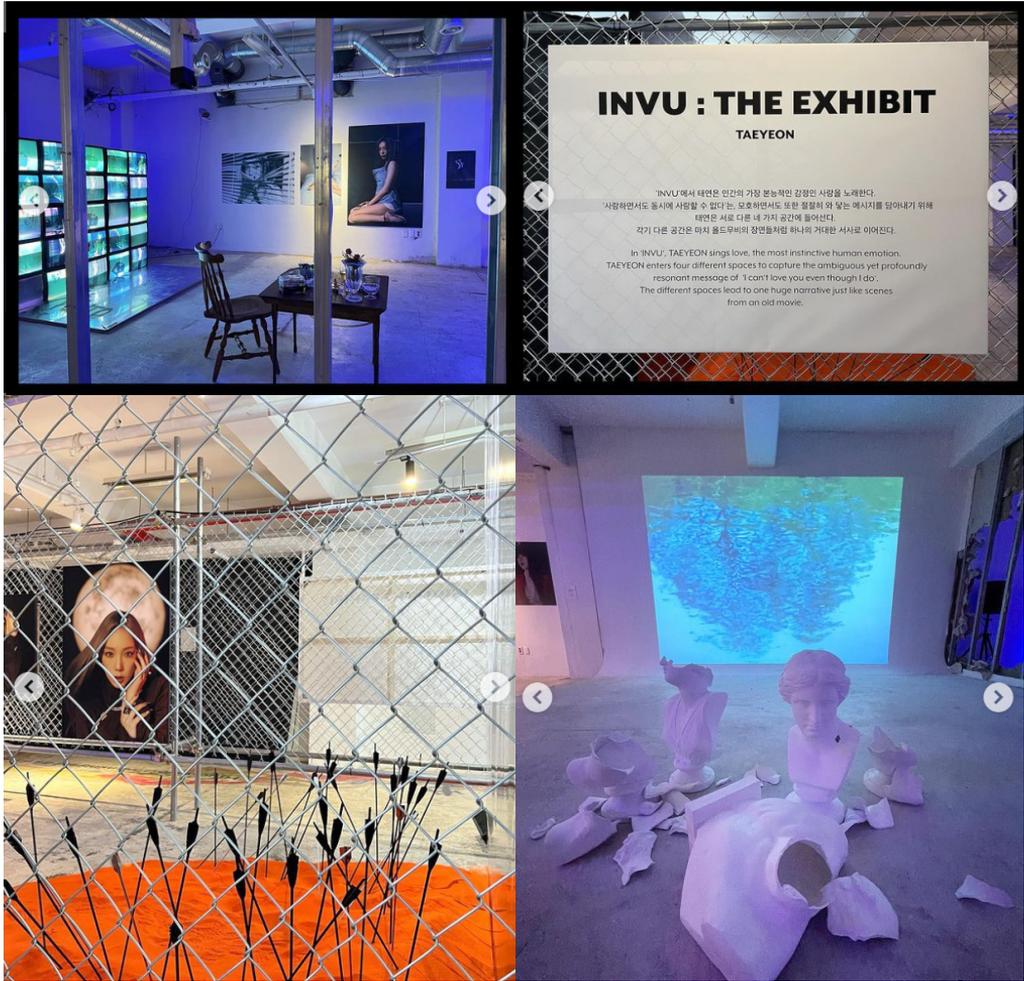


Figure 9.0. Taeyeon's INVU The Exhibition (@taeyeon, February 11, 2022).

Figure 9.1. Taeyeon's INVU The Exhibition (@taeyeon, February 11, 2022).

Figure 9.2. Taeyeon's INVU The Exhibition (@taeyeon, February 11, 2022).

Figure 9.3. Taeyeon's INVU The Exhibition (@taeyeon, February 11, 2022).

## Conclusions

K-Pop as a subculture has the ability to sustain its subculturists' interest and broaden their viewership, particularly within companies, through the use of visual signifiers. Visual signifiers are able to generate meaning with their consistent association to particular idol groups, music video concepts and broader themes. Icons, indices and symbols become meaningful vessels of information to fans, which continue to develop the more fans invest themselves into this subculture's practices.

Likewise, SM Entertainment's artists must not depend solely on language mediation to promote their work. Through the use of visual signifiers and their

elaborate construction through CAWMAN, interest and an eagerness to gain a complete understanding is generated, thus encouraging fans to diversify their K-Popular interests and practices. Visual signifiers now have the ability to connect not only the idols but the subculturists through their shared, exclusive understanding of these tropes within, in this case, a particular production company.

Whilst the music video is undoubtedly a central medium of manifestation for CAWMAN, visual signifiers can also be extensively found among other K-Pop productions and products. Thus it will be interesting to observe how SM Entertainment continues to develop CAWMAN and implement it in different creations, as well as the fan and idol responses to these. As a media production company, will SM Entertainment's musicians ultimately transform into actors? Will the visual mediums of production become so centralised as to dissolve any meaning written into its music? Or perhaps the musical elements will too find their own variations of CAWMAN, potentially utilising sound semiotics to co-create, spread attention and fan practices across SM Entertainment's artists and idol groups.

## List of References

- AWN.** 2021. "K-Pop Meets the Metaverse in aespa's 'Savage' Music Video." Animation World Network, November 16, 2021. <https://www.awn.com/news/k-pop-meets-metaverse-aespas-savage-music-video>.
- Beaster-Jones,** Jayson. 2019. "Linguistic and Semiotic Approaches to Ethnomusicology: From Abstract Structure to Situated Practice." In *Theory for Ethnomusicology: Histories, Conversations, Insights*, edited by Harris M. Berger and Ruth M. Stone, 26–50. Milton: Taylor & Francis.
- Bennett,** Andy. 2004. "Consolidating the Music Scenes Perspective." *Poetics* 32: 223–234. doi:10.1016/j.poetic.2004.05.004.
- Billboard.** N.d. "BTS Chart History Billboard Hot 100." Billboard, n.d. <https://www.billboard.com/artist/bts/>.
- Bosch,** Helen. 2022. "Aespa: Die Etwas Andere Girl Group." *Nolae*, March 17, 2022. <https://nolae.es/blogs/kunstler/aespa-die-etwas-andere-girlgroup>.
- Fuhr,** Michael. 2016. *Globalisation and Popular Music in South Korea: Sounding Out K-Pop*. New York: Routledge.
- Haenfler,** Ross. 2014. *Subcultures: The Basics*. Oxon; New York: Routledge.

- 하나비라 (@NCT\_Mark\_8282). 2022. "SMTOWN LIVE 2022 : SMCU EXPRESS #nct." Twitter, January 1, 2022. [https://twitter.com/NCT\\_Mark\\_8282/status/1477132078538170372?s=20&t=7DWdvcz3BCGmGsT-aj3niQ](https://twitter.com/NCT_Mark_8282/status/1477132078538170372?s=20&t=7DWdvcz3BCGmGsT-aj3niQ).
- Holt, Fabian. 2011. "Is Music Becoming More Visual? Online Video Content in the Music Industry." *Visual Studies* 26, no.1: 50–61. doi: 10.1080/1472586X.2011.548489.
- Jenkins, Henry. 2013. "Conclusion "In My Weekend-Only World": Reconsidering Fandom." In *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, 2nd ed., 277–287. USA: Routledge.
- Kong, Yoo-Jin. 2019. "[Interview] 'Life as K-Pop idol allows no freedom or privacy.'" *The Korea Times*, August 7, 2019. [http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/art/2019/08/732\\_273514.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/art/2019/08/732_273514.html).
- Lie, John. 2015. "Seoul Calling." In *K-Pop: Popular Music, Cultural Amnesia, And Economic Innovation in South Korea*, 96-155. California: University of California Press.
- MusicPlaza. N.d. "2021 Winter SMTOWN: SMCU Express." Accessed March 25, 2022. <https://www.musicplaza.com/en-ca/collections/cd/products/2021-winter-sm-town-smcu-express-aespa-poster-only>.
- Parc, Jimmyn and Shin Dong Kim. 2020. "The Digital Transformation of the Korean Music Industry and the Global Emergence of K-Pop." *Sustainability* 12, no.18: 7790. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/su12187790>.
- SMTOWNa. "aespa 에스파 'Black Mamba' MV." YouTube Video, 03:49, November 17, 2020. <https://youtu.be/ZeerrnuLi5E>.
- SMTOWNa. "[STATION] aespa 에스파 'Dreams Come True' MV." YouTube Video, 03:40, December 20, 2021. <https://youtu.be/H69tJmsgd9I>.
- SMTOWNb. "aespa 에스파 'Savage' MV." YouTube Video, 04:18, October 5, 2021. <https://youtu.be/WPdWvnAAurg>.
- SMTOWNc. "BAEKHYUN 백현 'Bambi' MV." YouTube Video, 04:26, March 30, 2021. <https://youtu.be/8M3WUaeIbOk>.
- SMTOWNb. "NCT U 언시티 유 'Make A Wish (Birthday Song)' MV." YouTube Video, 04:09, October 12, 2020. <https://youtu.be/tyrVtwE8Gv0>.
- SMTOWNd. "SHINee 샤이니 'Don't Call Me' MV." YouTube Video, 04:09, February 22, 2021. <https://youtu.be/p6OoY6xneI0>.
- SMTOWNe. "[SM Entertainment Group] SM Congress 2021." YouTube Video, 01:07:34, June 29, 2021. <https://youtu.be/SsM4QeEdGEM>.
- SMTOWN. "TAEYEON 태연 'Can't Control Myself' MV." YouTube Video, 03:25, January 17, 2022. <https://youtu.be/RccDIpx4ZMM>.
- SMTOWNf. "WENDY 웬디 'Like Water' MV." YouTube Video, 04:31, April 5, 2021. <https://youtu.be/-Ih5UArd4zk>.
- TaeYeon (@taeyeon\_ss). 2022. "INVU : THE EXHIBIT 얼마 남지 않은 전시회 얼른 보러오세요 #invu 오감자극 전시회." Instagram, February 11, 2022. [https://www.instagram.com/p/CZ0ci\\_mv8GQ/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/p/CZ0ci_mv8GQ/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link).

- Turino**, Thomas. 1999. "Signs of Imagination, Identity, and Experience: A Peircian Semiotic Theory for Music." *Ethnomusicology* 43, no.2: 221–255. doi:10.2307/852734.
- Um**, Haekyung. 2017. "The Voice of Popular Korea: Styles, Genres, and Contexts." In *Made in Korea: Studies in Popular Music*, edited by Hyunjoon Shin and Seung-Ah Lee, 191–200. New York: Routledge.
- Vitamint** (@vitamint525). 2022. "SMTOWN LIVE 2022 : SMCU EXPRESS @ KWANGYA. KEY – Hate that... (Feat. TAEYEON) – 후반부 #키 #KEY #샤오|리 #SHINee #シャイニー." Twitter, January 1, 2022. <https://twitter.com/vitamint525/status/1477153450094108673?s=20&t=QQJPY9njTMSWQYp-7BiM-Pw>.

## VISUAL MUSIC:

### K-POP'S 'CAWMAN' EFFECT ON A TRANSNATIONAL MUSIC SUBCULTURE

#### (summary)

CAWMAN – a 'new genre' of music – developed in one of K-Pop's leading production companies, SM Entertainment. As an acronym for Cartoon, Animation, Webtoon, Motion Graphic, Avatar and Novel, CAWMAN was first introduced in June 2021. Established as a technique to place *visuality* into the centre of K-Pop productions, CAWMAN also appears as a metaphorical vessel for the shifted focus from musical to visual production, primarily in K-Pop's music videos. This paper thus explores what *visual music* means in the context of K-Pop as well as the concrete functionality, concepts and effects of CAWMAN since its creation.

In order to trace and analyse the establishment of CAWMAN, I consider K-Pop's development as a subculture, its historical and current methods of music video production and, most prominently, its ability to provide understanding to its international, multi-cultural fandom, through semiotics. K-Pop has "significant characteristics of subculture-ness" (Haenfler 2015, 16), with fans sharing collective social values, mutual beliefs, and meanings, established collectively through their consistent involvement in K-Popular practices, as well as the meanings they read from K-Pop's productions. Collectively they police and celebrate K-Pop as something much more than a music type.

Thus, in the context of semiosis, fans have established a single lens of context to read signifiers. In order for perceivers to gain a collective and concrete understanding of, in this case, CAWMAN's visual signifiers, fans must learn to read signifiers within the socio-(sub)cultural context of K-Pop, disconnected from one's mainstream or parent cultures. As fans are then able to interpret icons, indices and symbols in the context of K-Pop, they can solidify understandings beyond language mediation, allowing the methods of CAWMAN to function.

CAWMAN, first introduced alongside newly debuting idol group Aespa, became and continues today to be a central mode of production. I explore the 'butterfly motif' as a concrete signifier which not only develops semiotically from an icon to a symbol, but also as a concept which explores the bounds and abilities for CAWMAN among Aespa's productions. Secondly, I explore the 'train motif' across the broader production company SM Entertainment itself. Here, this motif is analysed, once again as part of CAWMAN, looking at how it functions as a signifier itself for this shifted focus from musicality to visuality production. Through this motif we can realise the effects this focus on visuality has on its perceivers, contemplate the future directions CAWMAN may take within this company as well as what this may hold for fans and idols alike in the broader subculture of K-Pop.

Article received: April 14, 2022  
Article accepted: May 30, 2022  
Original scientific paper