

# A Visual Analysis of NewJeans' Surprise Debut

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## ABSTRACT

Visual image analysis can be conducted by assessing an image's important elements: 1) its organization and placement, 2) style, 3) source, and 4) content. An image's content, which can include words and numbers, is often used to convey a message. Semiotics is the study of messages communicated through signs. These ideological signs often reinforce the status quo of a culture by promoting images or stories that society has already subscribed to. Such signs are used in marketing a brand, whether it be objects or entertainment groups like NewJeans. NewJeans released a surprise debut music video, through which they conveyed messages to reflect their brand concept. They also released concept photos to reinforce their brand. This research used semiotics and visual analysis to evaluate what messages were conveyed through the music video and concept photos. Understanding the messages can reveal what led NewJeans to effectively establish their brand and gain popularity. While the music video revealed NewJeans' relatability, the concept photos emphasized their idolization. Together, the music video and concept photos conveyed that NewJeans is an alluring group that should be respected and that audiences should look forward to following as they make their official debut.

## Introduction

K-pop girl group, New Jeans, had a unique debut in July 2022 that caught the attention of many viewers and kickstarted their quick rise in popularity. NewJeans' popularity can be attributed to the first impression they gave through the surprise release of their music video "Attention." The music video was crucial in establishing the group's brand image because it was released without any introduction to the members of NewJeans. Thus, the music video communicates important messages about how NewJeans should be perceived by the public. After the initial music video, NewJeans' record label ADOR released concept photos for the first extended playlist (EP) called "NewJeans." The collection of concept photos helped reinforce the brand image NewJeans wanted to embody. The theory of semiotics, or the study of elements that are used for communication, can be used to uncover the messages NewJeans was trying to convey through their music video and concept photos.

## Literature Review

Visual images are often used to communicate ideas. One can analyze how visual images communicate through rhetorical analysis. Rhetorical analysis involves assessing the elements of the rhetorical situation, including audience, purpose, creator, medium, and genre (Texas A&M University Writing Center 2023). To understand an image, it is important to know the intended audience and purpose for creating the image. It is also beneficial to know the creator's background to further understand the purpose of the image. The medium, or means of communication, in this case would be visual and can include photographs or videos. Genre is the type of image (i.e., landscape, action, or portrait) and each genre evokes certain expectations. The rhetorical situation influences an image's style, placement, format, and message.

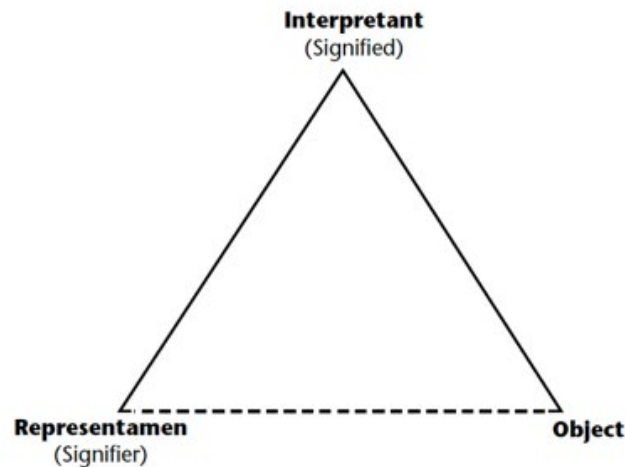
Analyzing a visual image involves examination of how certain elements are used to reach an audience for a purpose. A few important elements to analyze are 1) organization and placement, 2) style, 3) source, and 4) content. Organization is the image's composition, which can include the focal point, background, balance and symmetry, and perspective, all of which contribute to the creator's purpose. Placement is how the image relates to other elements within a page; groupings or use of empty space are often intentional. Style can be considered through the perspective of the viewer or creator. An image may evoke certain emotions from the viewer, while the creator often projects certain attitudes through the image. The style of color and typography also contribute to the image's tone and mood. The source of the visual image, which is where it was reproduced, should also be considered to understand whether it was biased or intended to be scholarly or promotional. An image's content, which can include words and numbers, is often used to convey a message.

## Semiotics and Ferdinand de Saussure

Communication of messages through signs can be further assessed through the framework provided by the theory of semiotics, which is "the study of everything that can be used for communication" (Schneider 2013). Semiotics is rooted in the meaning of signs, whether they be images or words. A sign is "anything that stands for something else." To understand how signs work in a language, the French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure explored the structural features of language and the relationship between a word and the thing it stands for. Saussure's definition of a sign is a "two-sided psychological entity" that links a mental concept of the signified to the sound pattern of the signifier. The signified is the object being represented, and the signifier is what alludes to the object being represented (Mamrol, 2018). For example, a physical piano may be the object that one may want to refer to, and the spoken or written word "piano" assists in drawing that allusion to the physical object. Saussure believed that the nature of such signs is arbitrary (Mamrol, 2018) and the link between signified and signifier is a matter of "collective habit" (Schneider 2013). For example, words often do not sound or look like the phenomenon it describes: the word "piano" does not sound like or look like the object the word alludes to. Although Saussure's work is foundational to the theory of semiotics (Schneider 2013), his view does not take into account the way other types of signs work like drawings or sounds, which are not always arbitrary.

## Charles Sanders Peirce

Charles Sanders Peirce, an American logician, had a different view of semiotics as he believed that there were different types of signs and that the relation between sign and object was not always arbitrary (Schneider 2013). According to Griffin, Ledbetter, and Sparks (2012), Peirce believed that a sign was made of three elements that form a triangle: an object, its representation (representamen) or referent, and its meaning (interpretant). This is called Peirce's semiotic triangle. An object is what a sign refers to and can be a physical object, an action, or even an idea. The representation (representamen) or referent is the sign itself, similar to Saussure's signifier. The meaning of the sign in the mind of the interpreter is the "interpretant" or what Saussure called the signified. For example, an object can be the action of stopping, its representation a red octagonal shape that may have the letters "STOP" on it, and the meaning can be interpreted as a command to stop.



**Figure 1.** Peirce’s semiotic triangle (Griffin, Ledbetter, and Sparks, 2012)

Each link between an object, referent, and interpretant led Peirce to define three different kinds of signs. Schneider (2013) elaborates on Peirce’s first sign: an “icon”, which is a link between object and interpretant. An icon is a sign that looks or sounds similar to the object it represents such as drawings, photos, videos that directly captures the image of the object (Griffin, Ledbetter, and Sparks 2012; Schneider 2013). The second type of sign is an “index,” which is the link between the object and the representamen or what Pierce called the referent. An index sign is connected to the referent by cause and effect and points to the object it refers to such as a siren as an index for an ambulance. The third type of sign is a “symbol” which is the link between referent and interpretant and does not look or sound like the object. A symbol’s representation and meaning are important, but the object is a social convention (i.e. national flags, company logos.) A sign can fall into multiple categories and can become more like one over time, like many Chinese characters which have started as icons and slowly lost direct resemblance, becoming more of a symbol. Overall, Peirce’s semiotic triangle is a useful tool that can assist in interpreting different kinds of signs.

## Roland Barthes

Roland Barthes, a French literary critic and semiologist, is another individual who expanded the view on semiotics to include nonverbal signs. According to Griffin, Ledbetter, and Sparks (2012), Barthes believed that semiotics is about interpreting both verbal and nonverbal signs, and he was mainly interested in understanding the cultural meaning of a variety of visual signs. Barthes studied signs that seemed straightforward but actually convey ideas through connotative meaning and reveal the values of society. Similar to Saussure, Barthes defined a sign as the “combination of its signifier and signified.” He also agreed with Saussure’s claim that words have an arbitrary relationship with the thing it is signifying, but notes that nonverbal signifiers seem to be connected more with their signifieds. Barthes showed that signs do not just stand on their own but that they are part of systems. Whether it be wrestling, designer clothes, or pop music, signs become solidified in a culture as they fulfill what the public expects. Barthes argued that the significant semiotic systems of a culture create the status quo, and its signs display the world as it is today.

Some signs can be neutral while others become emotionally powerful through their connotations. This occurs in a typical semiotic pattern called the connotative system. The connotative system is a semiological system where one sign with a denotation and past historical understanding gets used for a new sign with a different implied meaning (connotation). For example, the first Apple company logo was designed to draw upon and connect to the narrative of Newton and the falling apple, which contextually alluded to the scientific

revolution (The Logo Creative 2018). The Apple logo, then, used this context and changed the meaning of a simple apple to signify a revolution in product quality and its characteristic simplicity of design. According to Barthes' theory, the first system is only descriptive; the signifier image (the apple) and the signified concept (sudden revelation and understanding) combine to make the denotative sign (scientific revolution). The denotative sign (scientific revolution and progress) then becomes the signifier of the connotative system to represent the company's forward thinking, simplicity, and product culture through the reformulated design of the apple with a bite taken out of it.

These ideological signs often reinforce the status quo of a culture by promoting images or stories that society has already subscribed to. For example, an advertisement for a beauty product or for clothing may use models who have lighter skin and who are thinner. These images promote a concept of beauty that was already popular and accepted. Therefore, these images and signs can have a large cultural impact through its mass communication, whether in electronic or print media form. Such information relayed through media can have multiple themes, all of which consumers internalize and respond to. From the previous example, women may internalize the theme of beauty and what defines beauty. They may then respond by evaluating themselves according to that standard or status quo conceptualization of beauty and then feel impelled to purchase the products. Therefore, visual images can not only reveal thematic messages but also prompt certain responses from consumers.

## Visual Semiotics of Music Videos

After its creation in the 1980s, music videos became a significant element of popular culture and the entertainment industry. Music videos are a modern form of visual media that creates relationships between sound and image. Relaying many sounds and images, music videos are, in their nature, sources of many signs. Since signs are used to convey messages, music videos are often analyzed to understand those messages. To analyze music videos, one must notice whether it has a narrative (Bjornberg 1994). A narrative is a story that the music video may portray. However, music videos do not always have a narrative with a clear plot. Instead, music videos often embody non-narrativity such as a "distracted mode of perception" to help the audience interpret the message more quickly (Jones 1988; Larsen 1987; Movin and Oberg, 1990). Non-narrativity is also used to show an escape from reality with an imaginary problem and solution, illustrated through incoherent fragments in a music video (Allan 1990; Aufderheide 1986; Morse 1986). For example, a music video might show a person skydiving, while the next scene shows a different person riding a roller coaster. These two events do not follow a specific plot, but the viewer is able to quickly pick up the message of thrill and adventure communicated through these fragments. Popular music is considered an audiovisual phenomenon, so both the visuals and sounds of music play an important role in signaling messages (Berland 1986; Goodwin 1987; Laing 1985). Signs in music are often understood by social context and convention but also with universal "emotional empathy" (Bjornberg 1994). The different physical feelings of music such as smooth jazz or heavy metal can further convey a message that a wide audience can understand (Bjornberg 1994). In line with Saussure, Pierce, and Barthes' view of signs, Bjornberg (1994) and others have identified the significant aspects of images in music videos which are the non-narrative fragmentary structure, emphasis on fantasy, and the conveying of universal emotions. The images associated with music videos can therefore be evaluated to uncover their signs' messages.

## The Rise of K-Pop

Music videos have been effectively utilized in K-pop (Korean Pop Music), becoming a global sensation in popular culture. The music video *Gangnam Style* was particularly notable in popular culture as it rose to number two on Billboard Hot 100 in less than two months and became the world's most watched video on Youtube as of August 2014, harboring over 800 million views (Jung and Li 2014). PSY's *Gangnam Style* was one example

that contributed to the massive cultural phenomena called the Korean Wave and the popularization of Korean culture. Korea was unique in realizing the economic importance of domestic cultural industries and the export of cultural products (Jin and Yoon 2017). The term *hallyu*, which means “Korean Wave”, was coined by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in Korea in 1999 when it translated a music CD called *Korean Pop Music* in English to *Hallyu - Song From Korea* in Chinese (Jin and Yoon 2017). The music CD was produced to help improve public relations by spreading Korean pop music to China (Jin and Yoon 2017). K-pop and Korean drama success developed along with improved diplomatic relations in South Korea that allowed Korean cultural goods to enter regional markets in East Asia (Jung and Li 2014). For example, during the 1990s, Korean dramas became massively popular in East Asia and the first modern K-pop boy band, Seo Taiji & Boys, became well known. The *hallyu* trend was soon able to break into global markets in the 2000s by taking advantage of social media. As social media gained traction, fans from all over the world were able to access K-pop and Korean films (Jin 2016; Lee & Nornes 2015). Utilizing social media platforms like YouTube to showcase K-pop music videos to the world is effective in communicating cultural signs. K-pop music videos are thus a rich source of visuals that can be assessed using the theory of semiotics.

## NewJeans




NewJeans is a K-pop girl group that debuted on July 22, 2022 with the release of their song “Attention” and gained massive traction thereafter. NewJeans is the first group to debut under ADOR, which is a sub-label of one of the most famous Korean entertainment companies, Big Hit Music. The creator of NewJeans and CEO of ADOR is Min Heejin, who is known for her successful creative direction at SM Entertainment with groups such as Girls Generation, EXO, and Red Velvet (Fernandez 2022). Even from debut, NewJeans conveyed their uniqueness by releasing their first music video without any promotions or information about the group members. The only teasers to the group’s debut were three animated videos of “22,” “7,” and “22” on ADOR’s social media, teasing the date of the group’s launch (Mathew 2022). Thus, the music video itself is incredibly important in conveying the message about who they are, how the audience should view them, and how they are different from other K-pop groups. NewJeans’ popularity can be attributed to their distinguishing themselves from other groups and understanding their market, which were both established in their music video “Attention.” After the surprising music video debut, NewJeans released a schedule chart of their following videos and teaser photos for their first extended play (EP) release (Ha 2022). To help in understanding NewJeans’ quick success after debut, visual semiotics can be used to assess the signs in “Attention” and how they were reinforced through NewJeans’ concept photos.

## Data and Methods

Screenshots were taken of images in the music video that were considered more vivid and captivating. Since these images were all created for the same intended audience (i.e., listeners), with the same purpose (i.e., to draw listeners and create a following) and source (i.e., ADOR record label), they were evaluated according to the organization and placement of elements within the images, their styles, and content. The content was more deeply analyzed to unearth stories, themes, and messages that the images or signs were trying to promote. The images of the concept photos released for New Jeans’ first extended play (EP) were similarly evaluated according to the same three criteria. These assessments were then compared to those made from the music video. As ideological signs promote images and stories that society has already subscribed to, the meanings and messages drawn from the images were assumed to be reflective of what was socially understood and accepted.

## Results

Table 1. Screenshots from the music video “Attention”

	<p><u>Organization and Placement</u> The group heading into a fun social setting.</p> <p><u>Style</u> Retro, young</p> <p><u>Content/Message</u> They know how to have fun in society.</p>
	<p><u>Organization and Placement</u> Girls drawing on the wall with lipstick.</p> <p><u>Style</u> Youth, playfulness</p> <p><u>Content/Message</u> They can have fun by themselves and be playful.</p>
	<p><u>Organization and Placement</u> Inside a concert with people enthusiastically dancing.</p> <p><u>Style</u> Youth, concert, fun</p> <p><u>Content/Message</u> They like having fun and enjoying themselves.</p>



Screenshot 4

Organization and Placement

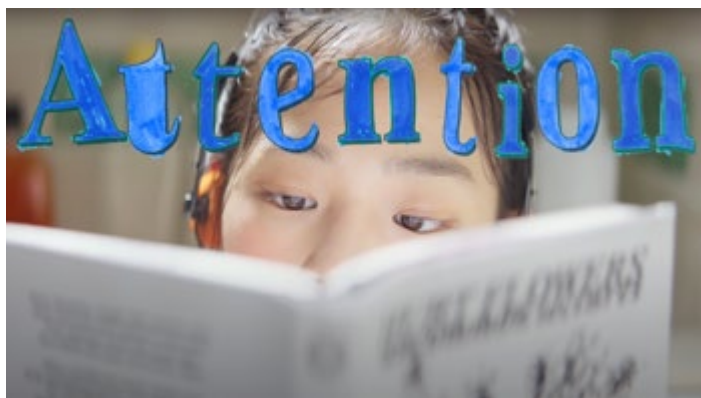
Girl meets a boy at the concert, in the middle of a burst of confetti and crowd of people.

Style

Excitement, young love

Content/Message

They know how it feels to fall in love and become interested in someone, that one person stands out in the middle of a crowd.



Screenshot 5

Organization and Placement

Girl reading a book and listening to music in headphones.

Style

Youth, retro

Content/Message

They know how to spend time doing peaceful hobbies in the daytime. "Attention" is the title of the song and it is written in a blocky, colored-in font which also shows the fun and youthfulness.



Screenshot 6

Organization and Placement

Girls all on their phones in an empty stadium. One girl looks up at the camera.

Style

Youth, brightness, smart phone

Content/Message

Relatable to young teens of the time, they like to spend time on their phones looking at content and keeping up with trends in culture. The girl who looks up shows the shift of focus from phones to the audience, to grab their attention.



Screenshot 7

Organization and Placement

One girl staring into the mirror, other girls in the background checking out clothes and perfume. They are wearing flamboyant clothes, makeup, hairstyles, and accessories.

Style

Fashion, playfulness

Content/Message

They have fun trying on clothes and trying out different style and beauty products. They all have their own style and are not afraid to show it.



Screenshot 8

Organization and Placement

5 girls in the backseat of a car sitting close together, talking, and taking a selfie

Style

Youth, friendship

Content/Message

They are a close friend group, on the way to hang out together.



Screenshot 9

Organization and Placement

The girls are dancing together in a colorful store

Style

Playfulness, carefree

Content/Message

They are playful and you want to dance along with them.





Screenshot 10

Organization and Placement

Girls running down a street together. Two girls turn around to welcome the other two who are coming to join them.

Style

Excitement, friendship

Content/Message

They are excited to be hanging out together. Holding each other's arms shows that they are close friends.



Screenshot 11

Organization and Placement

Girls walking down a street with their arms around each other and wide smiles.

Style

Friendship

Content/Message

They like spending time with friends and enjoy each other's company.



Screenshot 12

Organization and Placement

Girls dancing in sync, wearing bright casual clothes, background is a bright stadium with green grass field

Style

Fresh

Content/Message

K-pop music videos often incorporate the choreography of their songs. This song's choreography highlights the freshness and confidence the girls have.



Screenshot 13

Organization and Placement

Girls posing in front of a mirror with various makeup products and flamboyant styles.

Style

Fashion, beauty, playfulness

Content/Message

They are confident with themselves and like to play with different styles.



Screenshot 14

Organization and Placement

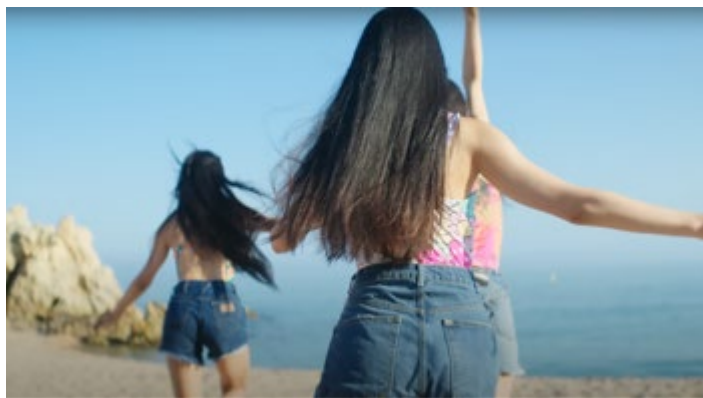
Girls running across a bridge together.

Style

Fun, excitement

Content/Message

They like to have fun exploring new areas.



Screenshot 15

Organization and Placement



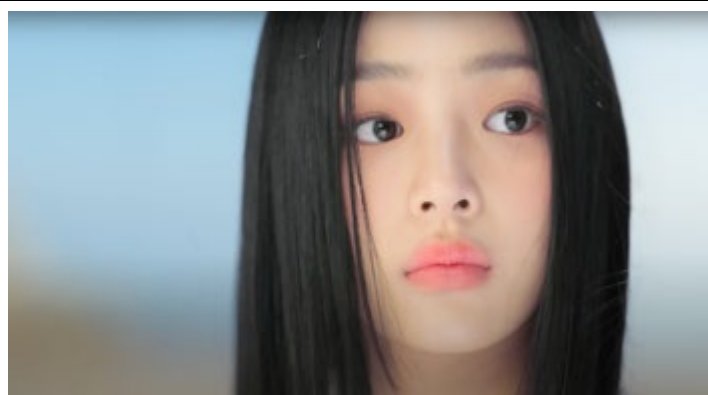
Girls running across a beach.



Style

Fresh

Content/Message

The girls can have fun anywhere they go, a classic summer spot being the beach.

	<p><u>Organization and Placement</u> Girls in bright clothes staring at the camera.</p> <p><u>Style</u> Bright, fresh</p> <p><u>Content/Message</u> Their bright clothes and faces further imply that they are fresh and fun.</p>
	<p><u>Organization and Placement</u> Girl swimming in the water.</p> <p><u>Style</u> Fresh</p> <p><u>Content/Message</u> The girls are fresh and enjoy swimming freely in the water.</p>
	<p><u>Organization and Placement</u> Close up of a girl's face with minimal makeup and natural hair.</p> <p><u>Style</u> Natural beauty, retro close up</p> <p><u>Content/Message</u> This is a throwback of how older Korean music videos had close-ups of idol's faces. The girl's natural beauty is emphasized.</p>

	<p><u>Organization and Placement</u> Close up of girl's face with minimal makeup and natural hair, holding a 1990s film camera.</p> <p><u>Style</u> Natural beauty, retro close up</p> <p><u>Content/Message</u> Another throwback of the retro close-up, also holding a retro camera which brings back the nostalgia of older times. The close up showcases her natural beauty and youthfulness.</p>
	<p><u>Organization and Placement</u> 5 girls staring out in awe and curiosity. One girl holding a phone. Bright sunlight casted on them, all wearing colorful swimsuits.</p> <p><u>Style</u> Natural beauty, fresh, colorful</p> <p><u>Content/Message</u> The girls are bright and colorful, they are young and curious.</p>

**Table 2.** Concept Images of “Attention”


	<p><u>Organization and Placement</u> Photo taken from the ground looking up at a group of girls posing with arms linked. Wearing young, preppy outfits of shirts and skirts.</p> <p><u>Style</u> Candid, friendship, cool</p> <p><u>Content/Message</u> They seem like a cool friend-group.</p>
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Image 2

Organization and Placement

Girls posing at a window showing trees, with bright sunshine, wearing casual and colorful outfits.

Style

Casual, fresh

Content/Message

The girls look beautiful and fresh in casual outfits and natural lighting.



Image 3

Organization and Placement

Girls walking together in bright daylight outside and matching outfits. They are wearing casual white tops with jean shorts and sneakers.

Style

Fresh, friendship, playfulness

Content/Message

They are a close group of friends who like to play and have fun together.



Image 4

Organization and Placement

Wide shot of girls walking around in matching outfits against a white wall, blue sky, and white cloud.

Style

Fresh, bright, playfulness

Content/Message

They are fresh and can casually have fun.



Image 5

Organization and Placement

Girl diving into the ocean, splashing up water.

Style

Fresh

Content/Message

The group is fresh and fun.



Image 6

Organization and Placement

Two girls running into the ocean.

Style

Fresh, playfulness

Content/Message

They are fresh and like to have fun.



Image 7

Organization and Placement

Girls wearing casual, sporty outfits and posing in front of lockers.

Style

Youth

Content/Message

They show youthfulness through their casual, sporty outfits and high school-like background. They seem like a cool friend group.



Image 8

Organization and Placement

Wide shot of girls in flamboyant outfits in a bright parking lot with colorful graffiti in the background wall.

Style

Colorful, unique

Content/Message

The girls are colorful, unique, and confident.

## Discussion

### Music Video

The music video illustrates the group of girls in various settings including a concert, store, car, street, field, and beach. Most of the scenes show the girls as a full group interacting together, emphasizing their close relationship. The few scenes that show them individually (Screenshots 5, 18, 19) showcase their natural beauty and youth by showing them close-up with minimal make-up, doing things that young people do such as listening to music and taking pictures. Whether they are at a lively social setting like a concert (Screenshots 1-3) or by themselves in a car (Screenshot 8), the pictures show them being active and having fun: running together while holding hands, drawing on the mirror with lipstick, dancing with others at a concert, and chatting with each other. The girls are often seen running around and dancing in bright, open areas (Screenshots 9-12, 14-15) which emphasizes their carefree nature. The girls are also shown wearing a variety of flamboyant, casual, and colorful clothes (Screenshot 7, 12, 13, 16) which reinforces their bright, playful, and confident aura.

Seeing the girls from different perspectives reveals multiple aspects of how they should be perceived. There are scenes where the girls are seen from afar (Screenshot 1, 6, 14) which arouses curiosity as to what they are doing. There are also more close-up shots where the girls are posing and looking directly at the camera

(Screenshot 7, 12, 13, 16). They exude confidence which would likely stir viewers admiration and respect. The girls also have many candid scenes that feel more intimate (Screenshot 8-11, 15) so the audience feels as though they are there having fun with them. These images give viewers the sense that they are part of the group, making them want to join in the fun. Seeing the girls doing activities that all young people enjoy, such as running, dancing, and walking together in the streets and at the beach, make the group seem relatable to viewers who also know how to have a fun, carefree time with friends.

The common themes found through the screenshots are that the girls are fun, colorful, and fresh. The “fun” aspect is reinforced throughout the music video as the girls are seen smiling brightly and enjoying the various environments in a carefree and playful way (Screenshots 8-15). The girls are very “colorful” throughout the video with their flamboyant outfits (Screenshot 7, 8, 12, 13, 16) and bright settings which make them seem unique and attractive. Lastly, the girls emphasize how “fresh” they are through the beach and water settings (Screenshot 15, 17) and the close-ups of their faces which showcase their youthful, natural beauty (Screenshot 18-20). It seems that NewJeans wants the viewers to be left with the impression that they are attractive and relatable, relaying the message that people should continue looking forward to their music and performances.

## Concept Images

After NewJeans’ surprise music video, ADOR released concept photos for their debut EP (extended playlist). These images can also be assessed through semiotics and compared to the music video to further understand what NewJeans wants to convey. The organization of Images 3-6 are candid shots, which are images where the subject is seemingly unaware of the camera and does not pose. Within Images 3-5, the girls can be seen hanging out in a bright area and jumping into the water, which exudes a similar fresh and playful feeling as the music video. However, the style, or audience’s view of the girls seems more disconnected, as if the viewers are looking from afar. For example, Images 2 and 5 are shot from above, and Images 3 and 4 are shot from the side. Candid shots from the front and back feel much more intimate because it seems like the viewer is part of the group, but these images from the top and side seem to be telling the viewers that although the girls are fresh and beautiful, they are untouchable and should be respected as celebrities. This message of being “untouchable” is further conveyed through the images where the girls are posing and looking directly at the camera. For example, Image 1 shows the girls linking arms in a circle and looking down at the camera with neutral expressions (not smiling), as if they are above the viewers and out of their league. Image 7 captures the girls from a front view, posing in front of lockers and wearing sporty outfits which accentuates their theme of youthfulness. However, the girls look at the audience with neutral, almost judgmental expressions that portray the message that they are cool and exclusive. Images 2 and 8 are also shot from the front with a wide frame that captures their full bodies. The girls are posing confidently in their flamboyant outfits, which showcases their colorful nature similar to the music video, but with more serious expressions and strong stances that demand the audience’s respect.

## Conclusion

The common message throughout these concept images is that the girls are confident youths that should be admired as celebrities from afar. The music video and images both capture NewJeans’ overall concept, which is youthful, colorful, playful, and fresh. While the music video shows the carefree and relatable side to NewJeans, the concept photos reinforce the idea that they are, in fact, “idols” who should be perceived with awe and respect. Both the relatability and idolization of NewJeans work together to increase their appeal, capture the audience’s attention, and stand out among the new generation of K-pop groups.



## Limitations

Assessments using semiotics rely on connotative systems in which signs have past historical understandings as well as ties to current cultural meanings. Hence, they depend on socially constructed references and meanings that ought to be socially acknowledged and accepted. However, such signs and their intended denotations and meanings may not always be well communicated and, as a result, may be misconstrued. Researchers using semiotics analysis, therefore, face limitations associated with their perceptions. To validate these findings, future research can survey the general population to determine whether the selected images conveyed the messages this research found.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisor for the valuable insight provided to me on this topic.

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