

# Aespa's Kwangya as a New Representative Space for Fans:

Building fandom in the era of Covid-19

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**Abstract** | This study investigated how Korean pop music fans, namely fans of the girl group Aespa, have navigated “Kwangya,” a virtual space first promoted through Aespa’s music. A virtual space such

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as Kwangya is highly popular amongst fans particularly as it utilizes social media sites to build up parasocial relationships between Aespa members and fans during the COVID-19 pandemic. Utilizing question & answer posts on four social media platforms, Twitter, Reddit, UrbanDictionary, and Quora, this study examined how fans interpreted the denotative meaning of Kwangya into their own fandom-specific mythos. Through Barthes' theory on denotation and connotation, this study found that fans have decoded and re-encoded the meaning of Kwangya several times to become a broad, futuristic aesthetic that simultaneously is heavily associated with Aespa as a group, and found that a general consensus on what Kwangya looks like and represents exists amongst Aespa fans.

**Key Words:** Aespa, Connotation, COVID-19, Denotation, Fandom, K-pop, Kwangya, Representative Space

## I. Introduction

Aespa, stylized as *æspa*, is a 4 member K-pop girl group produced by South Korean entertainment company SM Entertainment. The members are Karina, Winter, Giselle, and Ning-Ning, as well as semi-realistic virtual avatars that are meant to represent the four. Debuting in November of 2020 with the song "Black Mamba," Aespa quickly gained popularity both domestically and internationally. At the same time, the word "Gwangya" (광야) spelled by SM Entertainment as "Kwangya" also gained international fans' attention. Kwangya, in Korean, is often found in the Christian Bible, used to reference large swaths of barren or empty land; when translated into English, the original meaning is as follows: a vast and unexplored swath of land,

and it is often associated with similar terms such as rough land, empty field, or desert (KCM, Hanguk Keompyuteoseon Gyohoe). However, even in official translations of the lyrics to Aespa songs from Korean to English, Kwangya (광야) is rendered as “Kwangya,” rather than using synonyms. Aespa has recreated the definition of Kwangya to represent a virtual space within the Aespa lore, one that Aespa can use to virtually interact with their fans through their virtual members. In this study, we will observe how international fans are using Kwangya: Is Kwangya used as a sort of sign which fans can use to identify and communicate with each other? A mediated world? Or is it simply an imaginary virtual space, as it is represented in their music videos?

In this study, we will examine posts from popular social media sites such as Quora, UrbanDictionary, Twitter, and Reddit, to examine how Aespa fans have come to understand the meaning of Kwangya. We will be focusing on Q&A style posts, and picked these four social media sites accordingly; Quora and Reddit are websites where users can upload questions which other users can then answer in a comment thread below the original post. Twitter is a popular social media platform where users can reply to other posts through Tweets, and UrbanDictionary is a popular user-generated slang dictionary that ranks definitions for words by user input. We will be analyzing these question and answer-style posts for questions about the meaning of Kwangya, how Kwangya ties into Aespa, and to examine how fans are discussing Kwangya amongst themselves. Although these sites are user-generated, and therefore have no definite proof behind their statements, we felt that it was more important to understand what connotative differences arise between Aespa international fans and

the denoted meaning of Kwangya. The goal of this study is to further understand how fans are changing the meaning of Kwangya within their fan communities, and what narrative this change follows.

This study follows previous work done on K-fandom<sup>1)</sup> communities; we also will discuss previous work done on connotative lexicons in popular culture. Whereas other scholars have often focused on why international fans, especially those from the West, are interested in Korean popular culture contents (Elfvig-Hwang: 2018, Oh: 2017) we will be focusing on how these communities are shaped by their common vocabulary, using the specific case of Kwangya and Aespa fans. In order to tie the K-fandom discussion in with the linguistic theory discussion, we will specifically focus on how the usage of Kwangya amongst Aespa fans could have contributed to a larger interest in the group during Covid-19. That is to say, while other K-pop groups were inactive or unable to communicate with fans effectively, we will examine how Aespa and Kwangya helped build a fan community internationally despite the fact that Aespa was essentially restricted to the online sphere.

There is yet to be published work on the specific example of Kwangya, considering its recent usage by Aespa beginning in 2020. We felt it was important to explore how this kind of new vocabulary was impacting Aespa's fan community outside of Korea. Further, while

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1) K stands for Korea, and is often seen in the process of filling in "content," or a type of Korean popular culture. For example, K-Beauty, or Korean beauty, often uses the K to talk about Korean cosmetics. In this article, the term K-fandom is used to describe people who like Korean artists.

there are previous works on K-Pop and Korean culture (Oh: 2017) few focus on the denotation and connotation of how Korean language enters international fans' lexicon as "slang" from Korean pop-culture media. A connection has previously been made between an interest in Korean culture and international students choosing to study Korean (Lee: 2017, Batoul & Fawwaz: 2017). Many studies credit the Korean Wave boom to Korean media content's broad palatability to other East Asian cultures (Li: 2022); the popularity of Korean pop music amongst non-Asian fans has been similarly explained through K-pop's many transcultural signifiers and concepts of neocultural selfhood (Kuo: 2022, Messerlin & Shin: 2017, Tan: 2015). We will examine how Kwangya became part of international fans' lexicon, and what impacts this had on Aespa's popularity internationally through the usage of Kwangya. Unlike previous studies on Korean linguistic vocabulary entering non-Korean speaker's lexicon (Brown: 2013), this study specifically ties the usage of a pop culture term to the associated popularity of a group; thus, we find this study is a needed addition to previous work on both topics.

## . K-Pop Fandom Spaces: How Hallyu Impacts International Fans

Kwangya is an example of how celebrities can build a sense of community amongst their fans. Parasocial relationships, or the perceived closeness a consumer feels towards a celebrity, can be powerful in influencing fans even outside of that celebrity's own

content (Elfving-Hwang: 2018, Chung & Cho: 2017, Lim & Kim: 2011, Laken: 2006). Similarly, transcultural fandom spaces such as social media sites like Twitter have been found to help fans build a sense of community amongst each other. Through usage of terminology or references to past events that only members of that fandom would likely know about, these connections are able to grow both fandom size and sense of community (Malik & Haidar: 2020, Saeji: 2021). The tying of the term Kwangya to Aespa created one such reference for the fandom from the beginning; notably, although Kwangya does have a dictionary definition, the international fandom receives it as Aespa presents it, and therefore the term generally has no alternative meaning to international fans as it may for Korean speakers. In Aespa songs, Kwangya is used as a signal to fans; SM Entertainment artists who also use the term Kwangya<sup>2)</sup> are also pulled into the broader discussion surrounding Aespa and Kwangya.<sup>3)</sup>

Particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic, Aespa was able to utilize Kwangya as a call sign to strengthen interest in the group; social media results about Kwangya show that fans had been curious about what Kwangya was, and quickly began to associate it with Aespa. It is quite remarkable that Aespa's fans have built a community around a singular lyric; one that is used to both introduce fans into the greater Aespa storyline, and one that still stumps fans as to its full meaning. Even more remarkable is that this strong community was built during

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2) Examples include the usage of "Kwangya" as a lyric in NCT Dream's "Hello Future", and NCTU's "90's Love".

3) See Appendix B:1 to B:5.

the Covid-19 pandemic, meaning that most fans had no opportunity to see Aespa outside of virtual spaces or pre-recorded performances and commercial work. As noted earlier, Aespa debuted in late 2020, and as of writing, the fandom's usage and interpretation of the word 'Kwangya' has had a strong effect on creating a tight-knit fandom in such uncertain and unprecedented times. If Aespa had debuted prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, they, like other K-pop artists, would have had live performances, signings, and other events where fans could meet directly with the artist. Through this, the parasocial relationship between fans and Aespa members would've had the opportunity to grow in a manner similar to many celebrities prior to Covid-19. However, with Covid-19 completely removing the opportunity for even Korean fans to see Aespa in person and share those experiences to international fans via SNS, international fans had a unique opportunity to interact with Aespa over digital platforms such as virtual albums signings/fanmeets, and increased activity on live streaming platforms.

By being "stuck" with virtual platforms, Aespa was able to build a greater sense of mythos surrounding their concept- one that got fans talking and interacting with each other more than fandoms who were struggling during the Covid-19 pandemic due to reduced live content of their favorite stars. That is to say, as Aespa's fandom had no expectation to see content of Aespa live beyond pre-recorded performances, they, unlike other fandoms, turned inward and began discussing the meaning of 'Kwangya' as a fandom activity. Particularly, we find that Aespa's 'Kwangya' concept being related to a virtual world where Aespa and fans can meet was a large benefit to Aespa's overall

popularity amongst fans and nonfans alike. Even those who were not Aespa fans built 'Kwangya' as a joke term into their vocabulary.

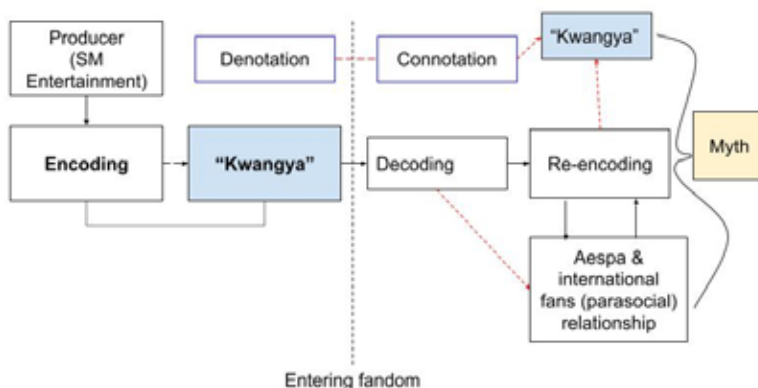
## . Denoted Meaning, Connotated Meaning: Kwangya In Cultural Context

A similar case to this study can be found in Brown's 2013 article on the usage of "Oppa," a Korean honorific term used by younger females to older males; wherein even non-Korean speakers had picked up the term from K-Dramas and had begun to use it as slang outside of its original context and meaning, showing how the Korean Wave can become a powerful driving force for bringing Korean language into international fans' lexicon (Brown: 2013). What makes Aespa's Kwangya such a powerful signifier for Aespa fans to find each other? Using Saussure and Barthes' concept of denotation and connotation, we studied how the meaning of Kwangya was being constructed by international fans. Saussure found that people understand vocabulary through two methods. The first is understanding the vocabulary term through the original or dictionary definition of the word, also called the denotative meaning. An example of this would be understanding the word "apple" as "the round fruit of a tree, which typically has thin red or green skin and crisp flesh" (Mirriam Webster: 2022). Secondly, people can come to understand words through a different method, called connotative meaning, by gaining an understanding of the word from usage amongst members of a society or group. Using the same example "apple," this word can also be understood to



represent the tech company, Apple, which sells mobile phones and computers worldwide; or as a reference to New York City's Manhattan borough, often called "The Big Apple". The context in which the denotative meaning of apple and the connotative meaning of Apple are used helps one distinguish between the different meanings of the same word. Barthes took this concept of denotation and connotation further by applying it to cultural terminology and ideas, arguing that connotation was able to explain cultural contexts and was therefore broader than a term's denotated meaning. Further, Barthes argued that cultural factors in creating connotative meanings have a greater role than the denotative meaning itself by both the implied and explicit meaning. Barthes calls it the process of changing, weakening, concealing, and distorting the symbolic position of context in a given society to become a more familiar and societally relevant lexicon. According to Barthes (1967: 89-94), a common case of connotation consists of a complex system in which language forms the first system. There are two levels of meaning in Barthes' concept of a myth-creation system. The first is denotation and the second is connotation. Connotation is closer to a metalanguage rather than a language; however, spoken words used in different meanings become symbols of the second meaning level. Connotation itself consists of systems, signifiers, signifieds, and the process of integrating the former with the latter. Barthes uses the study of interpretation processes through semiotics or cultural composition. In this sense, myth constitutes creativity, and it is presented as if it is universal and truthful as myths are what people create and believe in for themselves. Therefore, at the level of mysticism, behavior is not different from symbolism in

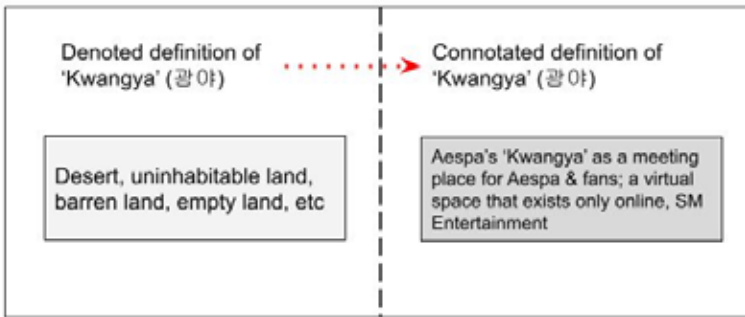
the language system. The only difference is that language-level symbols are transformed into symbols in a mysterious system, serving as media and creating. This is because it is a unique interpretation system formed over the flow of meaning that already exists.



(Figure 1): Encoding, Decoding, and Re-Encoding Kwangya

Applying Barthes' theory to the usage of Kwangya, we can see a similar phenomenon occurring. As the producer encodes Kwangya to have a different meaning, the denoted meaning becomes irrelevant to fans, and thus, they begin to interpret Kwangya from a different starting point than the word's denoted meaning (See Figure 1). Through parasocial communication between Aespa and their fans, the decoded meaning (that Kwangya is a virtual space for Aespa and fans) is once again encoded into a more broad meaning that merely associates the word Kwangya with SM or Aespa. However, this does not serve to weaken the myths around Aespa; rather, the re-encoded

meaning is treated as a surface level association (Figure 2), and fans can still discuss what Kwangya is without needing to stop associating it with Aespa, as Kwangya is commonly referenced through the lens of how fans are decoding SM's original meaning. International fans do not seem to be associating the term with its dictionary definitions, but rather are re-interpreting it through SM's constructed meaning of Kwangya.



(Figure 2): Denoted and Connotated Definitions of Kwangya

## . Social Media Findings: Kwangya & Aespa Fans

In this section, we will discuss our findings from the aforementioned social media sites: Twitter, Quora, Reddit, and UrbanDictionary, to give some merit to our argument that Kwangya is being re-encoded by international fans. This study examined how fans interpret the external meaning of Kwangya as their fandom's unique myth by using

Q&A posts on four social media platforms: Twitter, Reddit, Urban Dictionary, and Quora. These platforms were chosen as see communication between non-Aespa fans and Aespa fans through Q&A, and it has four unique forms of social media. Twitter is a site for users to share, exchange, and discover information. Users can also publish updates to their posts to maintain interconnection. And Reddit is famous for its public characteristics and communities used by various users that allow it to generate various types of content. Urban Dictionary is a dictionary site. It mainly deals with popular slang, and Internet buzzwords. It also contains terms and subcultural expressions used in virtual communities. Finally, Quora is a question-and-answer website that allows users to ask, answer, modify, and organize questions from other users. Although fans are active on other platforms in other languages, it is worth examining these sites to explore how the contents of Aespa's fan communication involving "Kwangya" are occurring. For this study, we compiled three resources from each website where possible; in the case of Twitter, we included two extra tweets to discuss how Kwangya is applied to international artists. In total, this gave us eleven examples of fans discussing, questioning, and re-encoding Kwangya amongst themselves. Although this number may seem small, each resource (excluding UrbanDictionary) has replies, thereby bringing in the discussion surrounding Kwangya. As mentioned previously, we will argue that this re-encoding of Kwangya follows the fandom's interpretation of Aespa contents, songs, and how Kwangya is presented to a non-Korean speaking audience. We looked specifically for posts inquiring about the meaning of Kwangya, posts discussing Aespa "lore," and posts

which associate Kwangya exclusively with Aespa or SM Entertainment. These posts are grouped and discussed by website, with a final paragraph dedicated to examining the different posts together.

## Reddit

We will begin by discussing Reddit, a social media website where users can make posts in specific subchannels that are then voted and commented on by other users. The website does not display how many negative votes a post gets, but because of how the website's search engine works, we were not able to sort these posts by popularity, only by key terms such as "what is Kwangya" or "Kwangya." Reddit operates more as an open forum between users, with the main function of the website being to use the comment section under posts to have a discussion. This is also true for how fans are using Reddit to discuss Kwangya, as we found that Aespa fans are posting explanations of what Kwangya is, as discussed in "Wait 'Kwangya' is an actual Korean word?",<sup>4)</sup> or discussing whether other fans like that the Kwangya concept has expanded beyond Aespa themselves, as mentioned in "Do people really hate hearing the word Kwangya in SM artists' songs?"<sup>5)</sup>

Fans were using Reddit to discuss the meaning of Kwangya beyond the denoted meaning SM Entertainment provided, explaining how Kwangya relates not only to Aespa, but also other groups under SM Entertainment, such as NCT and SuperM. In Reddit user

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4) Reddit user /TrainingAd7191, February 2022. Accessed Sep 29, 2022.

5) Reddit user /TypicalYoungBoi, January 2022. Accessed Sep 29, 2022.

/Sleeplikeasheep's post "Okay so what is Kwangya,<sup>6)</sup>" from 2021, they describe Kwangya as it relates to Aespa as:

*"beyond Flat<sup>7)</sup>, an unprescribed, infinite extent with no rule and form. Black Mamba wanders in Kwangya, which is the intermediary world between virtual Flat (where the aes are) and real world (where aespa members are), and is blocking the "synk" between the two. aes are now going to Kwangya to find out, and it's aespa vs. Black Mamba."*

Another user, /TrainingAd7191 made a post in February of 2022, commented on finding out Kwangya was a "real Korean word," and not just a word SM Entertainment came up with. They also note that the original meaning of Kwangya is translated as "wilderness," but this does not align with the meaning presented by Aespa's music videos and lyrics. In the replies to this post, user /AmountNo368 adds in their comment, "Actually, in sm lore..." that they believe the reason the word is not translated is because SM Entertainment wants to use it to tie together the Aespa lore; noting that Kwangya, as denoted by SM, is still a wide plain<sup>8)</sup>.

We found that Reddit, perhaps due to its format, was mostly used to hold discussions amongst fans about what Kwangya means, how fans interpret it, and as user /TypicalYoungBoi notes in their post from January of 2022, how it is expanding beyond Aespa into the SM Culture Universe (SMCU). They write that while they enjoy SM taking

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6) Reddit user /Sleeplikeasheep, 2021. Accessed Sep 29, 2022.

7) "Flat" refers to a virtual space for aespa's avatars, ae-aespa.

8) Reddit user /AmountNo368, February 2022. Accessed Sep 29, 2022.

Kwangya beyond Aespa's use, their post asks other users to discuss how they feel about the SMCU and Kwangya; one user replied that they felt it was silly to push Kwangya onto other groups when it was originally used for Aespa's concept.

## Twitter

Next, we will discuss the social media website with arguably the most material on Kwangya, Twitter. We used the Twitter search feature to find the term "Kwangya," and sorted these results by most popular Tweets. On Twitter, the discussion surrounding Kwangya seems to follow an aesthetic associated with Aespa's music videos: that is, other SM artists who dress in the same Y2K-grunge style are associated as "having gone to" or "being part of" Kwangya. In this sense, Kwangya is being re-encoded as a particular visual aesthetic popularized by Aespa. Two of the tweets we found referenced foreign artists such as Justin Bieber, with tweets such as "i got my peaches out in kwangya,"<sup>9)</sup> and "girl we going to kwangya?!", referencing Megan Thee Stallion<sup>10)</sup> as being part of Kwangya: these posts associated Kwangya as a colorful, virtual space that can be seen in Aespa's music videos and promotional materials for "Next Level," and "Savage" (Figure 3, 4).

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9) Twitter User @mltfn\_\_tw, Nov 10, 2021. Accessed Sep 29, 2022.

10) Twitter User @1auvender, Jun 21, 2021. Accessed Sep 29, 2022.



(Figure 3): Left: Aespa member Karina photographed for promotional materials for “Next Level.”<sup>11)</sup>

(Figure 4): Right: Megan Thee Stallion for Fashion Nova, via Black Enterprise.<sup>12)</sup>

Particularly, Kwangya is associated with the same futuristic aesthetic as shown in Aespa’s music videos: however, as SM Entertainment uses Kwangya in a more broad sense for other artists, the aesthetic has likewise been used in a universal sense by Twitter users.

Twitter user @thisrainstops notes in their post “not sm making a ‘society if’ kwangya version,” that SM Entertainment is taking this

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11) Bryan Huynh, via Instagram. May, 2021. Accessed September 29, 2022,

12) Thornton, Cedric. “Megan Thee Stallion’s Debut Fashion Nova Collection Draws in \$1.2 Million Within 24 Hours,” Dec, 2020. Accessed September 29, 2022.



“Kwangya aesthetic” and creating contents for all of their artists, comparing a promotional image from SM Entertainment to a popular “perfect society” meme<sup>13</sup>). This would explain the association of Kwangya to any futuristic aesthetic, but notably it is still Aespa or SM Entertainment fan groups who are making this association; the aforementioned tweet associating American rapper Megan Thee Stallion with Kwangya notes in their reply to the tweet that other users were making the same association. We found that as users associate Kwangya more broadly with SM, there is some pushback from Aespa fans in an attempt to remind other users of Kwangya’s “origins.” User @leeholic humorously points out in their post “aespa fighting demons in kwangya while the men are singing and dancing around in turtlenecks,” that while Kwangya has been used much more vaguely for other groups, it is originally a place in Aespa’s music videos where the group must defeat an enemy called Black Mamba— tying in with their virtual reality concept<sup>14</sup>). On Twitter, we found that most users seem to understand their own meaning of Kwangya, that is, the broad aesthetic first associated with Aespa. Kwangya is the futuristic, metaverse space as described by SM, but fans have taken this definition and expanded it to apply to contents which are visually or contextually similar.

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13) Twitter User @thisrainstops, Dec 26, 2021. Accessed Sep 29, 2022.

14) Twitter user @leeholic, Dec 13, 2021. Accessed Sep 29, 2022.

## Quora

Quora, a question and answer website, has many results regarding Kwangya, and the posts we chose for this study were chosen by their content compared to their view count: while Quora, like Reddit, has an upvote function, it does not seem to play as big of a role in boosting the question, rather, the “right” answer. All three posts are from users inquiring about the meaning of Kwangya, and how Aespa’s concept works overall. With 17,000 views, a post from one user, Olivia Hyejoo, inquires about what Kwangya is in their post “What is this KWANGYA that is present in aespa’s Black Mamba and NCT’s Resonance lyrics?”<sup>15)</sup> The most upvoted answer comes from user Lily Hawthorne, stating:

*“KWANGYA is derived from a Korean word “HWANGYA”(황야) [user error] which means wilderness. Kwangya means internet wilderness. Kwangya in SM Culture Universe implies a big place or universe in a different dimension where the evil entity Black Mamba resides.*

It is here that the futuristic, utopian imagery once again appears, with Hawthorne adding an image from Aespa’s “Next Level” music video under this description of Kwangya. This association finally puts a bit of merit behind what we observed on Twitter and Reddit: that while fans associate Kwangya with a futuristic aesthetic, they still have the understanding that it is meant to be a wide expanse of space. However, they are not bringing this association from the original

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15) Quora user Olivia Hyejoo, Dec 6, 2020, Accessed Sep 30 2022.

Korean language source, and are still pulling their material from what SM Entertainment has coded Kwangya to be. Similarly, a post asking what Kwangya's meaning is in Aespa's song "Next Level," the highest voted reply explains that Kwangya is a virtual place where Aespa's "ae" avatars live "What does Kwangya mean in Aespa's new comeback 'Next Level'?"<sup>16</sup>). Even questions about Aespa's concept over turn into discussions about what Kwangya is—such as the post "What is the concept of the Aespa K-pop group?"—break down other aspects of Aespa's lore such as the aforementioned Flat along with it<sup>17</sup>). We found that overwhelmingly fans are bridging the gap between the official lore and their own thoughts to create an image of Kwangya that skirts the line between matching SM's encoded definition, and fans' decoded canon of the Aespa lore.

## UrbanDictionary

Finally, we will discuss the popular internet slang dictionary, UrbanDictionary. The website operates as a user-generated resource that builds a dictionary of internet slang terms, abbreviations used in SMS texting, or other phrases as they become popular with users both online and offline. Posts are ranked by user input— a similar upvoting, downvoting system to Reddit and Quora ranks definitions of the same word, with the most popular definition displayed first. This is because as slang changes, one meaning might fall out of use

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16) Quora user Catherine Zeng, May 18, 2021. Accessed Sep 30, 2022.

17) Quora user Asnita Novi, Oct 28, 2020. Accessed Oct 1, 2022.

while another finds more use; the website is essentially built to handle these changes, but relies on user input to make them. The top three definitions for Kwangya were chosen for analysis, as they have been put in that ranking by fellow fans and other users. The website does not denote these definitions as different posts, and therefore the popularity is subject to change; however, we will provide username and posting date information in footnotes below.

The highest ranking definition of Kwangya comes shortly after Aespa's November 2020 debut, with user Kwangya writing that "Kwangya" is a word used in Aespa's song "Black Mamba," but fans at the time were unsure as to its meaning<sup>18)</sup>. Another user, Nctlife, posts that they believe Kwangya means an "open field," but seem unsure if that is the meaning that Aespa and NCT U's "90s Love" are trying to convey<sup>19)</sup>. The third highest ranked post from user stanloonayall from the same time period recognizes the SM definition of Kwangya, writing "Kwangya[sic] means that the AI members of aespa live there," but noting that they were unsure how Kwangya played into Aespa or greater SM<sup>20)</sup>. As all of these posts come shortly after Aespa's debut, they show that fans have come to understand the meaning of Kwangya over time; and in doing so, have decoded the definition given by SM Entertainment and re-encoded it into their own understanding of what Kwangya is as it applies to Aespa.

The discussion of Kwangya as part of Aespa fandom activities can

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18) UrbanDictionary user Kwangya, Nov 23, 2020. Accessed Oct 1, 2022.

19) UrbanDictionary user Nctlife, Nov 26, 2020. Accessed Oct 1, 2022.

20) UrbanDictionary user stanloonayall, Nov 25, 2020. Accessed Oct 1, 2022.

clearly be seen in these various social media platforms. In this study, the four social media platforms all serve to the decoding and re-encoding of Kwangya through fans postings online. Question and Answer platforms like Quora or Reddit operate on the decoding and re-encoding end of the linguistic process, whereas Twitter and UrbanDictionary serve to inform other users to this re-encoding meaning. Particularly, Twitter plays a heavy role in spreading this re-encoded meaning through fans posting various types of Tweets such as memes, questions, and more general statements about Kwangya. It can also be seen that fans are taking this re-encoded meaning of Kwangya and using it to relate non-Aespa media to Aespa's concept, aesthetic, and activities. Posts with Western stars such as Justin Beiber and Megan Thee Stallion bring outside celebrities into this new meaning of Kwangya and associate their contents with Aespa; arguably strengthening the particular image of Kwangya that fans have created within the Aespa community.

## . Conclusion

It can be concluded that the producer's cultural signal transmission was successful in the response and attempt to understand "Kwangya" amongst international fans. Along with Aespa's popularity, there was also a considerable amount of curiosity surrounding the term's meaning and hidden details. Social conventions, which must be agreed between recipients, can be seen as creating a new fandom community; thus, we can safely say that Kwangya created a considerable stir

amongst fans when it first became popular through Aespa. Kwangya has become a socio-cultural phenomenon: it can be used as another implicit discourse beyond the general word. Therefore, it can be seen that Kwangya has been interpreted through cultural context.

It is a marketing success for SM Entertainment to be able to draw fans and Aespa closer together. There is no border beyond online space, wireless, media, or digital world, and COVID-19 could not stop fans from virtually meeting Aespa. Perhaps due to the success of Kwangya as a sign for fans, earlier this year SM Entertainment announced “Kwangya Club,” an application for fans to see special content from SM artists.

The meaning of Kwangya may be different from the original meaning, but changing the original meaning by looking at it as a symbol of Aespa increases the value of the word and creates a discussion within fan communities. It has created a new platform beyond the usual lyrics that people and fans sing along to, and grown into a specialized meaning known by Aespa fans alone. In addition, fans that embrace this new culture are creating new expressions by creating stories that suit their tastes, such as including other celebrities within the concept of Kwangya.

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## Reference Material

**Figure 1:** Encoding, Decoding, and Re-Encoding Kwangya

**Figure 2:** Denoted and Connotated Definitions of Kwangya

**Figure 3:** Bryan Huynh, via Instagram. May, 2021. Accessed September 29, 2022, [https://www.instagram.com/p/COjlH2gFT7e/?utm\\_source=ig\\_embed&ig\\_rid=39d86701-647a-48f2-9648-9580b65e076b](https://www.instagram.com/p/COjlH2gFT7e/?utm_source=ig_embed&ig_rid=39d86701-647a-48f2-9648-9580b65e076b).

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## Aespa's Kwangya as a New Representative Space for Fans: Building fandom in the era of Covid-19

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본 연구는 걸그룹 에스파의 팬들이 에스파의 곡에 등장한 ‘광야’라는 가상 공간을 어떻게 탐색하는지에 대해 분석하였다. ‘광야’라는 가상공간은 코로나바이러스 감염증(COVID-19) 팬데믹 기간 동안 에스파 멤버들과 팬들 사이의 준사회적 관계를 형성하기 위하여 소셜미디어 사이트를 활용한 것으로 팬들에게 큰 인기를 끌었다. 본 연구는 트위터(Twitter), 레딧(Reddit), 어반딕셔너리(UrbanDictionary), 퀴라(Quora) 등 4개 소셜미디어 플랫폼의 질 의응답 게시물을 활용하여 팬들이 어떻게 ‘광야’의 외연적 의미를 자신의 팬덤 고유의 신화로 해석하고 있는지에 대해 살펴보았다. 바르트의 ‘기표’와 ‘기의’에 관한 이론에 의거하여 에스파의 팬들이 광야의 의미에 대한 해독과 재암호화를 반복함으로써 ‘광야’가 에스파와 긴밀한 관계에 있는 광범위하고도 초현실적인 미학이 되었음을 밝혀내었다. 또한 에스파의 팬들 사이에 ‘광야’가 어떤 모습을 하고 무엇을 대표하는지에 대한 일반적인 합의가 있음을 확인하였다.

| 기의, 기표, 광야, 대표적인 공간, 에스파, 팬덤, 코로나바이러스, 케이팝