



Aespa's Virtual Member Existence in the SMCU Episode 1 "Black Mamba" Short Movie

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ABSTRACT. This qualitative study analyses the phenomenon of virtual characters in "Black Mamba" a short film from SM Entertainment's SMCU (SM Culture Universe) series featuring the girl group Aespa on YouTube, in order to examine the dynamics of communication in new media. The analysis uses Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic framework to explore how signs, objects, and interpretations interact in the film. The findings emphasise SM Entertainment's skilled integration of virtual and physical realms with the SMCU concept. Virtual personas appear to transcend digital boundaries, creating a captivating aura of mystery. Humans form strong emotional connections with these virtual characters, most likely in the real world, giving rise to a feeling of wanting to live together with the virtual characters. In addition, the research highlights the importance of virtual character's interaction in the real-world environment, prompting reflection on technology-mediated human engagement. Incorporating philosophical quotations, particularly those of Jean-Paul Sartre, adds to the philosophical consideration of the narrative. In conclusion, this study offers a profound insight into the role of new media, such as YouTube, in the creation of a distinct narrative experience. It encourages a scholarly discussion of the intersections of semiotics, identity, and technology in today's popular culture.

KEYWORDS: Aespa; new media; semiotics, virtual existence, YouTube

1 INTRODUCTION

The advancement of information technology has made it easy for people to access information through mass media. Today's mass media is consumed to disseminate communication information to the public through media such as the Internet, television streaming, and various information that can be uploaded through the Internet to be the primary source of news, public information and entertainment (Putra, 2019). In addition, new media users can freely choose the media they want to access. While convergence means the process of combining computing and information technology, communication networks, and information content and digital media (Hapsari et al., 2022).

YouTube is a new media used by many users. Based on data from Global Media Insight Indonesia is the fourth-ranked country for YouTube users, reaching 139 million users by the beginning of 2023 (GMI Blogger, 2023). YouTube is used to upload videos, watch videos, and share videos that can be seen by the masses (Tinambunan, 2022). YouTube has become the ground of creativity by displaying audio-visual elements in uploaded videos, and it presents a short film that is globally open and can open up a new culture that will be absorbed by the masses that, makes it a popular form of culture (Wiriany & Pratami, 2019). In addition, films are made of cultures and means of expression that send messages or signals (symbols) that have meaning and signs contained in them (Fauziatunnisa & Hapsari, 2019).

Virtual reality (VR) technology enables users to enter the virtual world and interact intensely in virtual environments that seem in the real world (Musril et al., 2020). The emergence of a perfected metaverse of virtual reality (VR) that is expected to be the future technology with social experiences, the system can get people into the digital world in real life and engage in real interaction (Nuranda, 2022). The emergence of popular culture with new media is increasingly being utilized by many countries. One South Korean country to introduce the Hallyu or Korean Wave culture that is globally spread across countries, to the whole world. Korean wave supported by the Government of South Korea is known by the general public today is K-Pop music, K-Drama (Korean Drama) (Putri et al., 2019).

The progress of the entertainment industry Girl K-Pop Group, is now entering the fourth generation that is categorized as the idol's debut. Starting with the 1st generation (1996-2003) led by S.E.S. Then the 2nd generation (2004-2013) headed by Girls Generation and 2NE1 with the

expansion of entertainment media companies. Next, the 3rd generation (2011-2018) led by Red Velvet, Twice, and Blackpink as the generation that markets music with new media. Up to the 4th generation (2018-2020) is the new generation with unique concepts like Itzy and Aespa (Nuranda, 2022).

Aespa is known as the K-Pop Girl Group that uses artificial intelligence (AI) technology that contains human members and avatars (virtual characters) (Gusti et al., 2022). What distinguishes Aespa from other K-pop girl groups is a futuristic metaverse concept that presents what happens in the future (before the present) (Hamza & Jupriani, 2023).

Advanced technology, with the use of Korean Wave, put SM Entertainment as a South Korean entertainment company to make a short film uploaded to YouTube involving a girl group Aespa and the connectivity concept that Aespa owns, namely the presence of virtual members to create a short movie called SMCU (SM Culture Universe).

Aespa comes from the name "ae", which means "Avatar X Experience" and "Aspect" which means two sides (SM TOWN, 2021). This short film tells how a digital avatar-shaped existence is "ae" formed from an alter ego shaped through data and exists to live alongside the virtual "ae" in the future.

The emergence of the project SMCU (SM Culture Universe) through the story in the short film SMCU ep1 tells where there is a phenomenon of the presence of a virtual member figure from information as well as data uploaded by humans in the real world through social media and other new media (Darmawan et al., 2019).

Existence in the study of communication, according to Abidin (in R.May) mentions several elements of the concept of self-existence: 1) existence as a dynamic process of "the state" or "state" (in virtual: being), 2) humans live in *umwelt* (the world around), *mitwelt* (in the social world), and *eigenwelt* (The world itself), 3) existence means authentic or non-authentic, and 4) existence precedes essence. This research focuses on the virtual existence of members in communication studies based on the *mitwelt* (social world) view, which is a human container for interconnections that have feelings, like or dislikes. It is regarded as a biological necessity and is influenced by human nature and character. Besides, there is an understanding of existence through essence, which means that man can be chosen and determined by himself (Krismasakti, 2019).

2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research methods with descriptive approaches, including documents and words (Purwanda, 2020). The study also uses semiotic analysis based on Charles Sanders Peirce's view that represents a sign with a Triangle meaning consisting of three main elements: a sign, an object, and an interpretant (Darman, 2019). The analysis of the research was used to study the data in the short film SMCU ep1 "Black Mamba" in the new media YouTube which will then be viewed with literature books, journals, and library literature. The objects in the study will observe in depth the virtual existence of Aespa members that appear in the short film SMCU ep1 "Black Mamba" on the YouTube platform that will reveal how the beginning of the appearance of the virtual members Aespa in the SMCU ep 1 short film "Black Mamba" that is depicted in that short film and interact directly with humans.

The research uses two types of data: 1) Primary data used by the researchers is documentation in the short film SMCU ep1 "Black Mamba" in the new media YouTube from the Aespa account uploaded on May 14, 2021. 2) The researcher uses secondary data from journal references, library literature, books, etc. In addition, the researchers also collected data from the short film SMCU ep1 "Black Mamba".

3 FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

3.1 Existence in Virtual Characters In The Real World

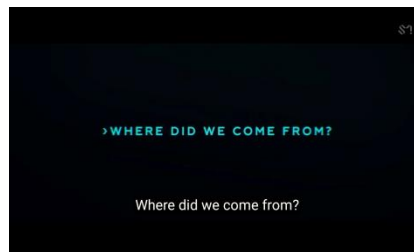
SM Culture Universe is a project to create a "New World" about a fictional universe created by SM Entertainment by uniting the real and virtual worlds in the South Korean entertainment industry. SMCU Project is a Meta Universe (Metaverse) for merging the real world with the virtual world in the entertainment world of the future with various technological advances such as AR technology virtual Concerts, 3D Graphics on Stage, etc (Dikky *et al.*, 2022).

In November 2020, SM Entertainment introduced the girl group "Aespa" as the opening of the SMCU project that marks the beginning of the future of entertainment. Starting with the project SMCU initiated through Aespa, SM outlined that after the 4th Industrial Revolution, the future will face a world that bounces to celebrities, robots, and design Aespa with avatars (Jin-ri, 2021).

SMCU episode 1 "Black Mamba" tells about virtual characters emerging from the real world and interacting with humans. The short film explains how virtual characters can appear in the actual world and how humans respond to such unique phenomena.

Mitwelt based on its existence in the study of communication, according to Abidin (in R. May) has connections with the social world. In its interpretation, *mitwelt* is a human container for interacting (relationships) involving feelings, whether liking or disliking. *Mitwelt* is seen as a biological need and is influenced by human characteristics (Yuliana, 2021). Associate this research with the phenomenon of virtual character appearance, and there are several representations through the five scenes in the table above:

3.1 Scene 1

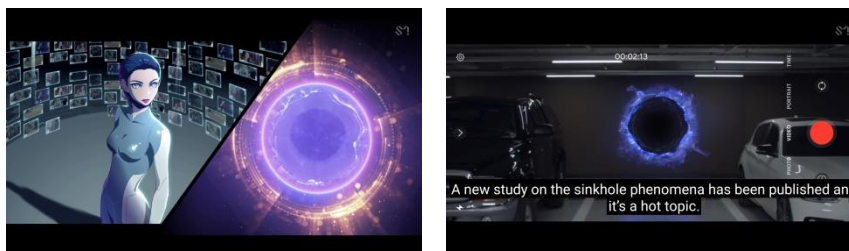


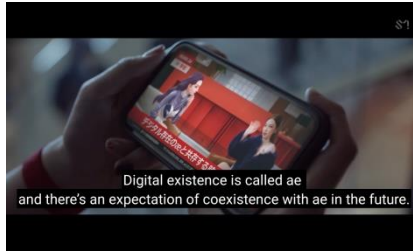
Picture 1: Minute 0:28

Source: <https://youtu.be/vbH4Lk5wYWg>

Scene 1 shows a picture with a dark background and the inscription "Where Did We Come From?" in a light blue. By color, according to Wilfred (1962), black has a connotation of darkness and mystery (Azizah, 2019). While Wilfred (1962), also explains that light blue has connotations of peace, youth, and gentleness (Shofa & Astri Utami, 2017). The analysis of the researchers suggests that there is a mystery in the presence of virtual characters in the real world and on the one hand there is the feeling of peace. The message relates to the *mitwelt* theory described to convey mysterious feelings and peace to the audience.

3.2 Scene 2





Picture 2: 0:46, 0:59, and 1:02
Source: <https://youtu.be/vbH4Lk5wYWg>

Scene 2 shows the emergence of a mysterious hole in the real world in minutes. News coverage from several countries about the phenomenon of virtual character emergence drew the audience's attention. The images show human curiosity about the presence of virtual characters with the emergence of news and human curiosities about emerging phenomena. If associated with existence in the study of communication, it is part of the *mitwelt* theory presented by R. May (1958) that there is a connection between individual humans and other humans in the same environment (Resti Gusti Ayu et al., 2023). Therefore, the phenomenon of the emergence of virtual characters produces interaction between humans themselves.

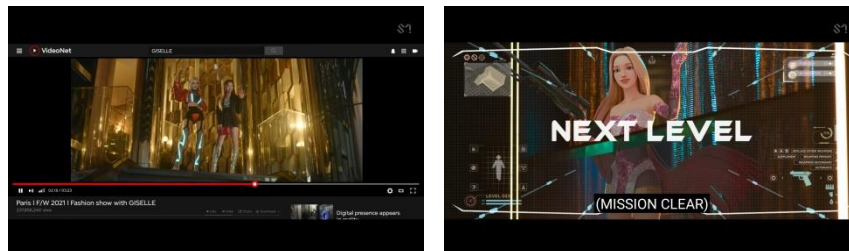
3.3 Scene 3



Picture 3: Minute 2:07
Source: <https://youtu.be/vbH4Lk5wYWg>

Scene 3 shows a human (named Giselle) interacting with a virtual character (ae-Giselle) while Giselle is studying in class. The picture shows an interaction between human beings and virtual characters in the real world. Through the film, the filmmaker also shows Giselle's expressions and movements showing happiness. The researchers' analysis describes that the interaction between human and virtual characters relates to the theory of the *mitwelt*, which is understood by the social world. *Mitwelt* is a relationship between human and human, not a relationship as a dead object (Ferrari et al., 2022). If associated with the interactions between man and virtual character, the interaction phenomenon in *mitwelt* theory is one of the forms of uniqueness in which virtual character is not a dead object.

3.4 Scene 4

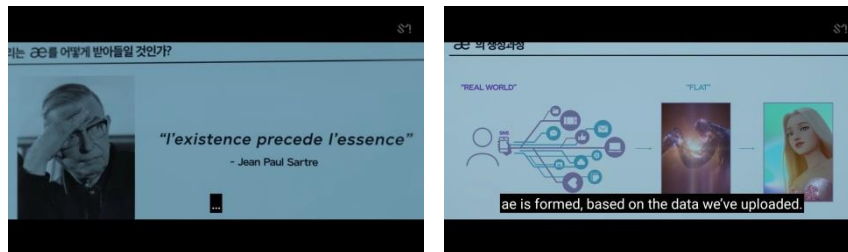


Picture 4: Minutes 2:25 and 3:26
Source: <https://youtu.be/vbH4Lk5wYWg>

Scene 4 shows the superiority of human interaction with virtual characters. Minute 2:25 showed Giselle (human) showing herself in front of the audience with ae-Giselle by showing the

enthusiasm of the community (the community took the picture and uploaded it to the new media), and the picture in minute 3:26 showed ae-Winter playing alongside Winter (humans) through a digital game with a satisfactory end due to the collaboration of each other that resulted in victory. The analysis of the researchers describes that there is a meaning to be conveyed that the human desire to exist and collaborate with virtual characters can be friends and partners in real life. Based on the explanation in the previous sentence, the researchers' analysis suggests that there is such a connection with the theory of the *umwelt* in the study of communication. *Umwelt* is a world where we have to learn to live in the world around us and adapt to the changes in this world (Ferrari et al., 2022). From that, it can be concluded that humans have an *umwelt* attitude by accepting the presence of virtual characters in the real world.

3.5 Scene 5



Picture 5: Minute 4:39 and minute 5:21
Source: <https://youtu.be/vbH4Lk5wYWg>

Scene 5 contains philosopher Jean Paul Sartre's quote, "*l'existence précède l'essence*" at minute 4:39 and minute 5:20. The Professor explains the emergence of virtual characters into the real world. There's an implicit message about a quote by Jean Paul Sartre with a virtual character appearance. The meaning of the word "existence precedes essence" is the essence intended to define itself, and existence is not about what we perceive ourselves as, but what we want to be (Rakhmawati et al., 2022). In conclusion, the essence is something inherent in birth and existence is something you want to show from yourself.

Scene 5 shows the Professor explaining the process of virtualizing characters into the real world at minute 5:20. The film presents the process of forming a virtual character based on data uploaded by humans, which gives rise to a virtual identity of the human character. Based on the meaning of "existence precedes essence" and the explanation of the formation of virtual characters, the analysis of researchers captured the message that virtual character's presence is the existence of the virtual character's desire to meet the human being that is its essence.

According to *mitwelt*, existence in the study of communication has a proposition of existence as a dynamic process. The meaning of dynamics here is to be or to be, so if in the virtual world it is meant to be. The explanation related to the analysis of scene 5 at minute 5:20 it explains the process of the emergence of virtual characters. Researchers' analysis describes a dynamic process (becoming there) to generate the existence of the virtual character in the real world.

There is also an existence in the study of communication that mentions that the existence is personal, whereas another figure cannot replace the figure because the being is personal (Rakhmawati et al., 2022). The previous sentence stated that no one can replace the truth since each individual has their own identity. This understanding also relates to scene 5 when one of the students asks the Professor about the emergence of virtual characters if humans can upload something that is not human in its entirety (non-original/real). The Professor explained, whether consciously or not, that human beings had to face the fact that what they uploaded was part of them. The researchers' analysis describes that the emergence of virtual characters is still a personal part of the human being since each human has its identity and is involved in forming virtual character.

4 CONCLUSION

Results of research on the virtual existence of Aespa members in the short film SMCU episode 1 with Charles Sanders Pierce's semiotic analysis (signs, objects, and interpretant) linked to

the theory of existence in the study of communication science Abidin (dalam R.May). The short film SMCU episode 1 shows the human response to the unique phenomenon, namely accepting the existence of virtual characters and performing activities together. The short film SMCU episode 1 also answers to the appearance of characters, where human beings are involved in creating virtual characters that come to the real world.

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