

## ANALYZING EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT IN ENGLISH K-POP LYRICS: A READER-RESPONSE STUDY OF “WASTE IT ON ME”

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**Abstract:** *This study aims to examine how emotional engagement is constructed in the English-language K-pop song “Waste It on Me” by Steve Aoki featuring BTS from the perspective of Reader-Response Theory. A qualitative literary analysis was conducted using selected lyric lines containing literary devices such as repetition, metaphor, imagery, and imperatives. The results show that artists can use repetition as an emotional trigger to make songs more memorable. Metaphors convey vulnerability and relational meanings. Imagery is used as another literary device to help listeners understand and visualize emotions expressed in songs. The study also demonstrates that meaning is constructed through the interaction between the song and the listener, as individuals connect with the lyrics through their personal experiences. The results indicate that English-language K-pop song lyrics have strong potential to be considered literary texts. This study contributes to Reader-Response and popular music scholarship by providing insights into how literary devices in English-language K-pop songs facilitate emotional engagement and support the recognition of song lyrics as literary texts.*

**Keywords:** *English, songs, emotional, K-pop, lyrics.*

### INTRODUCTION

Lyrics can be considered one of the most significant means of expressing emotions and involving people in cognitive processes, going beyond merely listening to sounds to deliver messages and social and

cultural values (Fiveash & Luck, 2016; Koelsch, 2014). English-language songs by Korean artists, in turn, provide a global platform that enables audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds to engage with texts, understand figurative language, and

receive emotional cues. The international popularity of K-pop continues to grow rapidly; however, academic literature is almost devoid of studies on English-language K-pop lyrics.

The song “Waste It on Me,” performed by Steve Aoki featuring BTS in 2018, illustrates a track in which literary devices such as repetition, metaphors, imagery, and imperatives are used to evoke emotions and encourage participation (Koelsch, 2014). These literary devices invite listeners to identify their own personal experiences in the song lyrics. This is based on Reader-Response Theory, whereby meaning is derived through the dynamic interaction between text and reader (Rosenblatt, 1978).

Previous studies have analyzed the role of literary devices in song lyrics and the emotions generated by music among listeners (Fiveash & Luck, 2016; Giovanelli & Mason, 2018; Koelsch, 2014). Nevertheless, these studies have primarily focused on the aesthetic value and language used in song lyrics or on music-induced emotions, rather than the interpretation of English-language K-pop lyrics as literary texts through readers'

responses. This means that there is limited understanding of how literary devices in English-language K-pop songs enhance emotional engagement and contribute to meaning-making from a Reader-Response Theory perspective. Such a limitation hinders the understanding of how global audiences interpret English-language K-pop lyrics as literary texts.

Under the influence of this theory, the purposes of this study are to:

1. Determine the literary elements found in the lyrics of “Waste It on Me.”
2. Examine how these elements create emotional connections.
3. Explore how listeners' personal interpretive reactions contribute to the construction of meaning.

In this regard, the current study aims to address this gap through an analysis of the English-language K-pop song “Waste It on Me”. Through its contribution to the fields of literature and music, this study sheds light on K-pop songs as literary works. This study helps develop insights for songwriting, teaching, and listener engagement (Amelia & Rahayu, 2025).

## **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

The study of lyrics has emphasized the significance of textual elements in the process of constructing emotions. According to the study carried out by Ara & Gopalakrishna (2021), word selection, sentence structure, and repetition work together in producing emotions that encourage people to think about their own experiences. In addition, Ratu et al. (2024) showed that in popular English lyrics, there is usually positive affective information such as love, loyalty, and anticipation, making it easier for them to engage with music.

When it comes to K-pop lyrics, such figures of speech as metaphors, hyperboles, and imagery serve as tools to enhance emotional impact and enable individuals to draw on their own experiences while interpreting music (Amalia Mn, 2024; Tusino et al., 2026). Repetition and imperatives, especially when they occur in chorus lines, aid memorization and create emotional involvement (Amalia Mn, 2024). These facts prove that lyrics should be analyzed not only as pieces of musical composition but also as literary constructs.

The study is based on Reader-Response Theory, which underscores that the interpretation of meaning lies in the interplay between the text and readers (Amelia & Rahayu, 2025; Rosenblatt, 1978). Moreover, Cognitive Poetics Theory suggests that the linguistic elements and semantics of literary texts influence the emotional and interpretive processes through which listeners engage emotionally with literary texts such as lyrics (Simanjuntak et al., 2023). Additionally, previous studies have established that repetition, tonal variations, and metaphors serve as mediators of emotional responses among listeners (Elchaira et al., 2025; Simanjuntak et al., 2023).

## **METHODOLOGY OF STUDY**

Descriptive qualitative research design was used in this study. Data were collected from the lyrics of the English version of the K-pop song “Waste It on Me” by Steve Aoki featuring BTS. This particular song was chosen because of the literary devices and emotions present in it, which are relevant to the goals of the study. The emotions and literary devices from the lyrics include

repetition, metaphor, imagery, and imperatives.

The data were gathered using close reading and note-taking techniques. The lyrics were read several times to get a full understanding of the content and emotions that are depicted by the lyrics. After that, the lines of the lyrics were analyzed to find out the literary devices and how they help in portraying the emotions. Literary devices found were classified according to the type they belong to, namely repetition, metaphor, imagery, and imperatives. From there, the emotional messages carried through these literary techniques were examined based on the context of the text and the possible reactions of listeners.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Results

The lyrics of "Waste It on Me" have a storyline structure that is emotionally appealing and interpretive. After reviewing the entire text, four major literary devices were identified: repetition, metaphor, imagery, and imperatives. The following table shows literary devices, lyric examples, their

emotional meanings, and interpretations.

**Table 1.** Literary Devices, Lyric Examples, Emotional Meaning, and Interpretation

Literary Device & Lyric Example	Emotional Meaning & Interpretation
<b>Repetition</b> "Waste It on Me"	<p><b>Emotional meaning:</b> Acceptance, persistence, and self-sacrifice.</p> <p><b>Interpretation:</b> The repetition of the phrase highlights how the speaker is ready to take an emotional risk despite being at risk of rejection and makes the song's main message memorable.</p>
<b>Metaphor</b> "Past lovers and warfare"	<p><b>Emotional meaning:</b> Emotional suffering and traumatic experiences.</p> <p><b>Interpretation:</b> "Warfare" stands for emotional battles associated with previous relationships rather than real warfare.</p>
<b>Metaphor</b> "I wanna be your summer"	<p><b>Emotional meaning:</b> Comfort, warmth, and hope.</p> <p><b>Interpretation:</b> "Summer" stands for emotional warmth and the speaker's wish to provide emotional comfort to the listener.</p>
<b>Metaphor</b> "I wanna be your wave"	<p><b>Emotional meaning:</b> Continuity and emotional support.</p> <p><b>Interpretation:</b> "Wave" symbolizes the speaker's wish to stay emotionally available throughout the whole relationship.</p>
<b>Imagery</b> "It's just you and me now"	<p><b>Emotional meaning:</b> Intimacy and closeness.</p> <p><b>Interpretation:</b> The line offers an emotionally vivid picture of a relationship where everything is about the present.</p>
<b>Imperative</b> "Waste It on Me"	<p><b>Emotional meaning:</b> Trust and emotional commitment.</p> <p><b>Interpretation:</b> The imperative invites the listener to become vulnerable in the relationship.</p>

Two major patterns emerge from the analysis. First, metaphor has been observed to be the most common

literary device used in the song to express the singer's emotions of vulnerability, hope, continuity, and healing. Second, repetition has been seen to increase the emotional depth of the song by bringing out its main message, while imagery and imperatives bring out the singer's emotions of intimacy.

### **Verse 1**

The lyrics of the song "Waste It on Me" reveal the emotion of vulnerability from the point of view of the character, who reacts to a person emotionally damaged by former relationships. In the first two lines of the song, "You say love is messed up" and "You say that it don't work," one can identify disappointment and skepticism about love. Thus, the person being addressed does not doubt love for no reason, but from the standpoint of emotional experience.

### **Pre-Chorus**

In the pre-chorus section, the phrases "And I know there's no makin' this right" and "And I know there's no changing your mind" convey acceptance rather than intimidation. The speaker acknowledges that he is unable to make things right, as opposed to denying the emotional hurt of the

other individual. He knows that he cannot undo everything that happened in the past.

### **Chorus**

The chorus is vital to the emotion of this particular song, with the line "*Waste It on Me*" being key. Repetition plays a key role in amplifying the emotional effect of the song. In using the word "*waste*," the message is that if love seems like a waste, the singer would still take it. The symbolism is emotionally fragile in nature, leaving room for interpretation (Dabukke, 2025). In addition, the imperative form of the phrase "*Waste It on Me*" invites the listener to take an emotional risk, reinforcing the speaker's willingness to accept vulnerability despite uncertainty.

### **Verse 2**

Verse 2 shows that the lines "So we don't gotta go there / Past lovers and warfare / It's just you and me now" create a contrast between past conflict and present intimacy. The use of the word "warfare" serves as a metaphor for the emotional turmoil that took place in past relationships, while "It's just you and me now" connotes immediacy and emotional intimacy.

### **Bridge**

The bridge deepens the figurative meaning of the song's lyrics through lines such as “I wanna be your summer” and “I wanna be your wave.” The metaphors express warmth, continuity, and motion, thus enhancing the emotions behind the song (Amelia & Rahayu, 2025; Rosenblatt, 1978). In addition, the line “Treat me like a comma,” paired with “I’ll take you to a new phrase,” suggests continuation rather than closure, indicating that the emotional relationship is ongoing rather than ending (Simanjuntak et al., 2023).

#### **Final Chorus & Outro**

“Waste It on Me” is repeated at the end of the chorus, making it a major theme of the song along with the intensity of its emotions. Repetition, being an effective technique for enhancing memory and listener engagement (Rahmat, 2025), serves here to highlight the emotions conveyed. Overall, repetition, metaphor, imagery, and imperatives work together to strengthen emotional engagement and encourage listeners to construct meaning based on their personal experiences, consistent with Reader-Response Theory (Nurwahida & Mustikawati, 2022).

#### **Discussion**

As can be seen from the results, it is possible to state that literary elements have been used in the lyrics of “Waste It on Me” in order to create an emotional connection that corresponds to Reader-Response Theory. The expression “Waste It on Me” serves as an emotional center, enabling listeners to understand the message and connect it with personal experiences (Ardiantari et al., 2023). In this light, it becomes apparent that repetition in the lyrics does not serve purely as a stylistic element; it also serves as both a cognitive and emotional reference point for the listener’s perception (Rahayu et al., 2025). It is clear, then, that the chorus assumes an important function in this regard.

“Past lovers and warfare” and “I wanna be your summer” are examples of metaphors that play an important role in adding emotion and imagery. As suggested by previous studies, imagery and metaphors help listeners relate emotional experiences to imagery and thereby promote greater emotional engagement (Amelia & Rahayu, 2025; Nurwahida & Mustikawati, 2022). Moreover, such metaphors serve as interpretive links

that enable listeners to relate their relationship experiences to the song lyrics. In doing so, this aligns with Reader-Response Theory, which states that meaning is not static but dynamically constructed.

Another point of contrast in this song is the difference between emotional uncertainty and emotional invitation. Although the concept of love is initially portrayed as flawed and inadequate, the singer nevertheless suggests entering into an emotional interaction. In other words, there is a strong sense of conflict between doubt and hope, which increases the emotional relevance of the lyrics. It is believed that emotions are triggered not by certainty but by emotional conflict (Ali & Peynircioğlu, 2006). The contrast between these two sentiments adds depth to the listener's emotional experience and encourages listeners to confront their emotions and resolve the conflict in order to fully immerse themselves in the song. This emotional conflict further deepens engagement as it reflects reality.

Considering Reader-Response Theory, meaning is generated through the relationship between the text and the listener (Rosenblatt, 1978). The

open-endedness of phrases such as "Waste It on Me" enables varied meanings based on the listener's context. Further, Cognitive Poetics provides an explanation of the mechanisms through which linguistic constructions and literary devices generate emotions, thus validating the results of this study. This implies that the strength of the lyrics is drawn from their openness, since there are many possible interpretations of the song rather than just one. Consequently, listeners participate in creating meaning through their interaction with the lyrics (Nabila et al., 2026).

The results are in line with prior studies, which have demonstrated that repetition improves involvement, metaphors add to emotions, and imagery helps visualize (Amalia Mn, 2024). Nevertheless, what makes the uniqueness of the song "Waste It on Me" is that the lyrics use plain but complex language, making it possible for listeners from different cultures to understand the song's message according to their personal experience (Amelia & Rahayu, 2025). This conclusion adds value to the current study in the area by noting that the use of simple language does not detract

from interpretation but makes it more inclusive and diverse.

Overall, the results indicate that song lyrics can function as literary texts that foster both emotional and interpretive engagement. Through the use of repetition, metaphor, imagery, and emotional contrast, “Waste It on Me” illustrates how meaning is actively co-constructed between the text and the listener. These results further support the relevance of Reader-Response Theory in examining contemporary music lyrics. Moreover, the results of this study indicate that modern K-pop songs, especially when sung in English, have the potential to be literary texts capable of connecting different cultures, thus making them valuable for both musicological and literary studies.

## CONCLUSION

In the song “Waste It on Me”, literary devices including repetition, metaphors, imagery, and imperatives are used to establish emotional involvement and participation of the listeners in the interpretation of the lyrics. Repetitive use of the word “Waste It on Me” increases emotional involvement and memorability of the lyrics, whereas the use of metaphors demonstrates vulnerability and

relational significance. The role of imagery is associated with the visualization of emotions, which allows for the identification of emotions expressed through the lyrics.

In addition, listeners are involved in projecting their experiences onto the lyrics and, therefore, Reader-Response Theory is confirmed in this case. The results obtained confirm that emotional response to lyrics does not depend only on their linguistic structure but also on the role of the listener, which implies the need to consider lyrics as living literary pieces rather than linguistic items.

Regarding theory, this study demonstrates that Reader-Response Theory can be applied to the analysis of contemporary K-pop, specifically English-language songs, thus demonstrating its relevance in dealing with musical literary works. In practical terms, the results obtained during the study may prove useful for songwriters, teachers, and scholars who seek to understand how literary elements can be utilized to improve emotional involvement. Future studies should incorporate empirical methods for collecting listener-related information, which could help

understand different responses to identical lyrical elements.

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