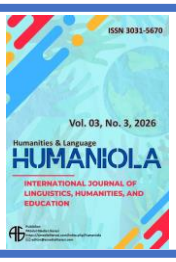
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# The Representation of Emotions through Modes of Signs and Visual Grammar: A Case Study in Ariana Grande's "We Can't Be Friends" Music Video

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*ABSTRACT*

This study analyzes the modes of signs in the music video "We Can't Be Friends" by Ariana Grande using Daniel Chandler's theory (2007). This study aims to explain how modes of signs function to construct meaning and convey emotional depth within the music video, as well as to demonstrate how semiotic theory can help audiences understand messages related to personal struggles, anxiety, loneliness, and mental health issues. The data source of this research is the music video itself, while the data consist of visual elements such as images, settings, gestures, facial expressions, and objects found in the scenes. A qualitative descriptive method is applied by recording and repeatedly watching the video, capturing scenes that contain sign elements, and classifying each sign according to its mode. The analysis is supported by the theory of visual grammar proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), which examines representational, interactive, and compositional meanings to explain how visual elements construct meaning. The modes of sign found are iconic mode, indexical mode, and symbolic mode. Through these three modes, visual elements in the music video function as signs that help viewers interpret emotional experiences and narrative development. These signs show a direct cause-and-effect relationship and serve as evidence of emotional reactions, physical conditions, and ongoing processes within the narrative. Regarding the second research problem about the types of meanings associated with each mode of sign, the analysis shows that there are three types of meaning found, namely representational meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meaning.

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## 1. Introduction

As social beings, humans communicate by using different codes and symbols. Signs play a vital role in this communication process. Unlike straightforward language, signs can have multiple interpretations and often convey hidden messages. Because of this, it is essential to understand signs to enhance our communication skills and gain a deeper insight into the subtle meanings. Music videos, in particular, use signs to express complex messages and provoke emotional reactions. These signs can appear in various

forms, including visual imagery, lyrics, colors, and symbols, each contributing to the overall narrative. In brief, this kind of research belongs to semiotic study.

Several researchers have examined the applications of signs across various media. In music videos, signs are used to tell stories and convey messages. For instance, an analysis of signs in the music video of "Part of Me" by Katy Perry identified 14 visual signs and 6 verbal signs, containing 15 denotations, 21 connotations, and 11 myth meanings (Irmayanti et al., 2023). Similarly, the sign was analyzed in the music video of "Takut" by Idgitaf. There are 4 denotations, 4 connotations, and 4 myths found in the music video (Br. Perangin-angin et al., 2023). Then the signs were also analyzed in the music video of "Prince Ali" by Will Smith. There are 25 visual signs found in the music video, including 9 appearances, 8 manners, 4 activities, 3 props, and 2 settings (Latifah et al., 2023). In addition, the signs were analyzed in the music video of "Heavydirtysoul" by Twenty-One Pilots. There are 16 symbols, 4 indexes, and 2 icons found in the music video (Qurratuain, 2018). From these data, it shows that music videos use many signs like symbols, icons, and visuals to tell stories and share messages. Each music video has different signs, which means they can be understood in different ways and have deeper meanings. Collectively, these studies illustrate that music videos employ signs to deliver their complex message.

As signs are important in music videos, signs in movies are also important in telling stories and in showing deeper meanings. For instance, a study was conducted on the "A Quiet Place Part 2" movie. There are 5 icons, 5 indexes, and 5 symbols found in this movie (Yola & Subagia, 2025). The signs were also analyzed in the "Mr. Harrigan's Phone" movie. In this research, there are 5 icons, 5 indexes, and 5 symbols found (Antari et al., 2023). Then the analysis of signs in the "Hitman's Bodyguard" movie found 3 icons, 5 indexes, and four symbols (Kurniawan et al., 2022), whereas in the "Spiderman: Far from Home" movie, there are 3 icons, 5 indexes, and 8 symbols found (Loi et al., 2022). Just like in music videos, signs such as icons, indexes, and symbols are also important in movies to tell stories and to express deeper meanings. This research shows that each movie had different types, which guide the audience in understanding the message and emotions in the movie. This sign analysis of movies also demonstrates that signs are distributed as a guide for the audience to form emotional shifts and to deliver character development.

Aside from music videos and movies, signs were widely explored in advertisements. For example, the signs were analyzed in the Converse Shoes advertisement. In this research, 7 verbal signs and 3 visual signs were found (Pratama & Budiartha, 2025). Another example, an analysis of the Starbucks advertisement found 6 verbal signs and 6 non-verbal signs (Casmita et al., 2024). The application of signs was also found in the Rexona Clinical Protection advertisement, that result 6 verbal signs and non-verbal signs (Arinata et al., 2022). The signs were also analyzed in the toothpaste advertisement, and it was found that 6 verbal signs and 7 non-verbal signs were employed (Kartiawan et al., 2022). There are also 20 verbal signs and 7 non-verbal signs found in skincare advertisements (Suwitri et al., 2021). This data shows that advertisements use signs to promote products and services. Each advertisement used both verbal and non-verbal signs to deliver messages and attract consumers.

Similar to previous research, this research also analyzed the signs. The difference between this research and previous research is the theory and the object. This research used the theories proposed by Daniel Chandler, Gunther Kress, and Theo van Leeuwen, while previous research mostly used Peirce's theory. This research also used the music

video of "We Can't Be Friends" by Ariana Grande (Grande, 2024) as the object of research. Although previous research has identified various signs, they have not thoroughly explored how these signs convey messages about issues like anxiety, loneliness, and emotional challenges, which is exactly what this research will do.

The way "We Can't Be Friends" uses visual elements to talk about personal struggles is important for both media studies and society. This research could help as an example of how signs play a role in music videos, such as addressing sensitive topics through visuals, potentially changing how mental health discussions are handled. The impact is not only for media studies but also for society. "We Can't Be Friends" music video highlights the importance of mental health for teenagers today. By discussing issues about mental health openly, the "We Can't Be Friends" music video encourages viewers to seek help when they need it.

In conclusion, looking at how Ariana Grande uses different visual elements in "We Can't Be Friends" helps us understand the changing role of music videos today. This analysis shows how artists can use visuals to raise important discussions about mental health, especially for younger audiences who may face similar struggles. Looking at how Ariana Grande shares these messages, we can learn valuable lessons about effective storytelling in music videos. At last, this research aims to show how music videos can be effective ways to raise awareness and build understanding in society.

## 2. Method

Research methods are essential for conducting research. They outline how to collect and analyze data. In this research, the method can be divided into three steps: determining the data source, data collection, and data analysis. Each method is essential for keeping the research structured and focused (Gapur et al., 2018).

The first method is determining the data source. The data source was the music video entitled "We Can't Be Friends" by Ariana Grande. Ariana Grande released the music video for "We Can't Be Friends" in 2024 with a total duration of 4 minutes and 44 seconds, and it quickly gained popularity. The data used in this research are in the form of images, expressions, colors, and others.

The data in this research were collected using a qualitative method. The first step in collecting the data was recording the music video and watching it multiple times to ensure a full observation of the narratives delivered through this music video. A total of 14 scenes containing the signs were captured. The timestamps of the scenes captured were also noted to mark the precise time of the signs. Then the raw visual frames were described by using words to document the visual properties and to prepare them for the analysis process.

After the data had been classified, the last method was data analysis. In this method, the data found in the music video were analyzed using the theories of Chandler, Kress, and van Leeuwen. There were two stages in analyzing the data. The first stage was to ensure the modes of signs through the coding process. In this process, Chandler's specific criteria for each sign were applied to analyze the data entries. The second stage was to interpret the signs using Kress and van Leeuwen's theory. The focus of this analysis was on how meaning is constructed through the three metafunctions. They are the representational, interactive, and compositional meanings. For example, there is a character wearing a specific color, which can be identified as a symbolic mode. The color represents emotions such as love, anger, or sadness, depending on the context.

It can be categorized as a symbolic mode because color is determined by social or cultural agreements. Colors are a symbolic mode because people associate certain colors with specific meanings, which is why colors are considered a symbolic mode rather than an iconic or indexical mode. This analysis helps explain how the signs work in the music video to tell a story or convey messages.

## 3. Result and discussion

The data were obtained from the music video "We Can't Be Friends" by Ariana Grande, consisting of scenes that contain iconic mode, indexical mode, and symbolic mode. The analysis was conducted in two stages. First, the signs were identified and classified based on Chandler's (Chandler, 2007) theory to determine the modes of signs. Second, the meanings of the signs were analyzed using Kress and van Leeuwen's (2005) theory, focusing on representational, interactive, and compositional meanings.

Table 1. Modes of signs and their meanings

| No | Modes | Meaning Types | Frequency | Timestamp Distributions |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Iconic Mode | • Representational meaning: conceptual representational, narrative representational.<br>• Compositional meaning: framing, salience, information value. | 4 | 0:36, 3:02, 3:41, 3:43 |
| 2. | Indexical Mode | • Representational meaning: conceptual representational, narrative representational.<br>• Interactive meaning: the image, act, and the gaze, social distance.<br>• Compositional meaning: salience, information value. | 5 | 0:31, 1:29, 3:28, 3:56, 4:26 |
| 3. | Symbolic Mode | • Representational meaning: conceptual representational, narrative representational.<br>• Compositional meaning: salience. | 5 | 0:15, 0:33, 1:04, 1:23, 3:52 |

Based on the table above, each mode of sign can have more than one meaning at the same time. An iconic, indexical, or symbolic mode not only shows one type of meaning, but can also include representational, interactive, and compositional meanings depending on the scene. This happens because the visual elements in the music video work together to deliver a clear message, so one sign can give several meanings at once. Therefore, the modes of sign and types of meaning are connected and help viewers understand the story more easily.

### *3.1. Iconic Mode and Its Meaning*

As mentioned in the previous chapter, iconic mode is where there is similarity between the sign and what it represents. According to Chandler (2007), a mode in which the signifier is perceived as resembling or imitating the signified (recognizably looking, sounding, feeling, tasting or smelling like it) – being similar in possessing some of its qualities: e.g. a portrait, a cartoon, a scale-model, onomatopoeia, metaphors, realistic

sounds in 'programmed music', sound effects in radio drama, a dubbed film soundtrack, imitative gestures. Iconic mode represents objects mainly by their similarity, allowing viewers to easily recognize the meaning because the sign visually imitates the real object.




Figure 1. Paintings of leaves

The painting of the leaves in the right and left corners of the scene (at 0:36) functions as an iconic mode. According to Chandler, iconic mode is a mode in which the signifier is perceived as resembling or imitating the signified, being similar in possessing some of its qualities. In this scene, the leaf painting looks like a real leaf or plant found in the real world. The leaf painting represents nature in the room, but only in visual form. People may choose to use plant paintings instead of real plants for practical reasons, since paintings do not require daily care such as watering, sunlight, or fertilizing. This scene also suggests that the workers are busy, as indicated by patients waiting in the area. In such a setting, real plants that need regular care may be less practical, which supports the use of plant paintings instead. The paintings are also more suitable for indoor spaces with limited light or areas that are difficult to maintain. As a result, the use of leaf paintings in the scene can create a natural atmosphere while still keeping the space simple and easy to manage. If we look deeper into the psychological layer, the leaf paintings symbolically reflect nature to construct a sense of peace.

Based on Kress and van Leeuwen's theory, the leaf painting functions as representational meaning through conceptual representation. The leaf painting does not show any action or movement, but presents a stable visual element. In this scene, the painting places the concept of nature inside a hospital without showing real natural elements. Rather than presenting nature as something lived, the painting presents nature as a visual concept that supports the atmosphere of the room. The leaf paintings placed on both sides of the wall also reflect compositional meaning, specifically framing. Positioned at the edges of the frame, the paintings visually enclose the waiting room space and help create a balanced composition. Rather than standing out as the main focus, they function as background elements that frame Ariana in the center.




Figure 2. Drawing of a birthday cake

In this scene, the drawing of a birthday cake (in 3:02) functions as an iconic mode because it visually resembles a real cake. The shape, candles, and decorative details allow viewers to easily recognize the object through similarity. Ariana places the drawing inside a memory box containing objects related to her past relationship, which indicates that the drawing directly imitates a real-life object that once existed in her experience. This sign indicates the struggle faced by Ariana related to her happy memory that was fading away. Even when she erased her memory, she experienced anxiety about losing her happy memory.

The drawing of the birthday cake functions as representational meaning in the type of conceptual representation because it does not show any action or movement in the drawing. In this scene, the birthday cake represents a happy memory related to Ariana's past relationship. The drawing is placed together with other objects in the memory box, which shows how memories are collected and stored. It also suggests that even when Ariana wants to erase her past, it is difficult because some memories are still meaningful and emotional.

*3.2. Indexical Mode and Its Meaning*

Indexical mode refers to a type of sign that has a direct connection with what it represents. According to Chandler (2007), an indexical mode is a mode in which the signifier is not arbitrary but directly connected in some way (physically or causally) to the signified e.g. 'natural signs' (smoke, thunder, footprints, echoes, non-synthetic odors and flavors), medical symptoms (pain, a rash, pulse-rate), measuring instruments (weathercock, thermometer, clock, spirit-level), 'signals' (a knock on a door, a phone ringing), pointers (a pointing 'index' finger, a directional signpost), recordings (a photograph, a film, video or television shot, an audio-recorded voice), personal 'trademarks' (handwriting, catch-phrases).. This means that the sign appears as evidence of something that exists or has happened. In the music video "We Can't Be Friends," several scenes show indexical signs through expressions, actions, and visual elements that indicate emotional conditions and past events.

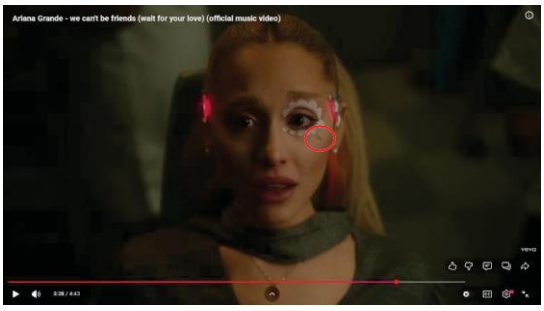



Figure 3. Tear falling

The tear that falls from Ariana's eye (at 3:28) serves as an indexical mode. Indexical mode, according to Chandler (2007), is a mode of sign that has a clear cause-and-effect relationship between the sign and its object. The tear appears as a physical response to her emotional condition, making it evidence of the feeling she experiences at that moment. Her shocked facial expression shows that the emotion appears suddenly and unexpectedly, indicating that the emotional pain cannot be fully erased even though her memories are being removed.

Referring to Kress and van Leeuwen's theory, the tears function as representational meaning, specifically as a narrative representation. The tears visually show an emotional reaction that is taking place at that moment. As part of a narrative process, the tears involve visible movement as they fall down her face. This movement indicates that an emotional process is actively happening. The reaction makes her emotional experience visible and emphasizes the intensity of the moment. Therefore, the tears represent an ongoing emotional process. This scene also reflects interactive meaning through the type of image, the act, the gaze, and social distance. Ariana appears in a close-up shot and looks toward the camera, creating a demanding gaze that invites viewers into an emotional interaction. The social distance where the close framing reduces the distance between Ariana and the viewers also produces a sense of intimacy and vulnerability. There is also compositional meaning through salience in this scene. Ariana's face is placed at the center of the frame, and this helps viewers notice her emotions and makes her the center of attention in the scene. Therefore, the scene not only builds a direct emotional relationship with viewers but also draws attention toward Ariana's facial expression.



Figure 4. Fire

The fire (at 4:26) functions as an indexical mode. The fire appears after the worker presses a button on the machine, which activates the device and causes the fire to start burning the memory box. This shows a clear cause-and-effect relationship, where the action of pressing the button directly leads to the appearance of the fire. The fire indicates that the objects inside Ariana's memory box are being destroyed, indicating that the memories connected to those objects are being permanently erased.

Referring to Kress and van Leeuwen's theory, this scene functions as representational meaning, specifically as a narrative representation. The fire is shown actively burning the memory box, creating visible movement and change. As the fire grows and spreads, the memory box is slowly destroyed. The burning of the box represents an ongoing act of erasing memories. The fire represents the final stage of the memory removal process.

### *3.3. Symbolic Mode and Its Meaning*

A symbolic mode is a mode of sign that has a semiotic relationship with the object it represents based on social convention or agreement. These signs have no natural link to what they represent, but instead rely on systems that people have agreed upon. According to Chandler (2007), a symbol is a mode in which the sign does not resemble the signified but which is mentally founded, arbitrary, purely conventional, so that this relationship must be agreed upon and learned e.g. language in general (plus specific languages, alphabetical letters, punctuation marks, words, phrases and sentences),

numbers, morse code, traffic lights, national flags. In the music video "We Can't Be Friends," some visual elements become symbolic signs because their meanings are based on common understanding and emotional meaning. The following analysis explains how symbolic mode appears in the scenes and how it contributes to the overall message of the music video. The meaning exists only when people follow the same agreed-upon rules of interpretation.




Figure 5. Nurse uniform

The nurse's uniform (in 0:33) functions as a symbolic mode. In society, a white nurse uniform is widely recognized as a symbol of medical care, professionalism, and responsibility within a healthcare environment. When we see the uniform, we immediately know that the setting is a hospital or medical facility without needing further explanation. In this scene, the uniform not only marks the nurse's identity but also emphasizes that Ariana is under medical supervision and treatment.

According to Kress and van Leeuwen's theory, this scene functions as representational meaning, specifically as a narrative representation because there is movement. The nurse is shown entering the room and walking toward Ariana, creating visible movement within the scene. This action shows that a situation is actively taking place and indicates the continuation of the medical procedure.

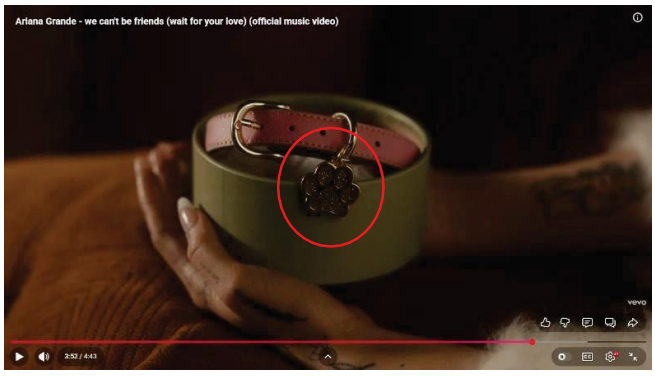



Figure 6. Paw charm

The paw charm (in 3:52) functions as a symbolic mode. In social agreement, a paw symbol is commonly associated with pets, especially dogs. At first, this scene is a necklace from Ariana's ex, changing into a dog collar with a paw charm. It means that Ariana's emotional attachment is changing from a romantic relationship to a form of unconditional comfort and loyalty, which is commonly associated with pets. This means that Ariana's psychological condition was too complex. In that case, to make her better,

replacing all things related to her ex becomes the coping mechanism. This replacement also shows that Ariana's romantic relationship gave her deep emotional trauma.

Based on Kress and van Leeuwen's theory, the paw charm functions as representational meaning, specifically as a conceptual representation, because the paw charm does not show any action or movement. In this scene, the paw charm symbolizes a meaningful connection and emotional attachment to memories. In addition, the paw charm also functions as a compositional meaning through salience. Its placement at the center of the frame, the close-up camera distance, and the gold color make it visually stand out from other elements. This visual emphasis makes the paw charm the main symbolic focus in the scene.

## 4. Conclusion

Based on the analysis that has been discussed, it can be concluded that the music video "We Can't Be Friends" by Ariana Grande contains various modes of signs. The modes of sign found are iconic mode, indexical mode, and symbolic mode. Through these three modes, visual elements in the music video function as signs that help viewers interpret emotional experiences and narrative development. These signs show a direct cause-and-effect relationship and serve as evidence of emotional reactions, physical conditions, and ongoing processes within the narrative.

Regarding the second research problem about the types of meanings associated with each mode of sign, the analysis shows that there are three types of meaning found, namely representational meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meaning. Representational meaning appears in both narrative and conceptual representation, showing how the music video visually represents Ariana's emotional experiences, mental health journey, and the memory erasure process. Interactive meaning is also found in several scenes, especially through close-up shots and direct gaze, which help create a stronger emotional connection between Ariana and the viewers. Compositional meaning is also present in the data through salience, information value, and framing, which guide viewers to focus on important elements and make the visual message clearer and easier to understand.

This research explores mental health issues shown through Ariana's emotional journey after her breakup, where she struggles to forget her ex, to heal herself, and to move forward with her life. Through the data analyzed, the music video not only presents visual signs but also reflects feelings of loneliness, loss, and the desire for recovery, which are experiences that many young people can relate to today. By showing how Ariana tries to erase painful memories and rebuild herself, the music video shows the reality that healing is a difficult process, but also a necessary step for personal growth. Therefore, the findings of this research are meaningful for young audiences because they raise awareness about emotional struggles, encourage self-reflection, and remind viewers that moving on and prioritizing mental health are important parts of growing up and continuing life more healthily.

While this research provides a combination of signs and visual grammar, the limitation of this research lies in its exclusive focus on the visual elements. Therefore, the complex relationship between visual cues and acoustic or linguistic cues is beyond the scope of this study. Future research should expand the complete multimodal analysis.

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