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Songwashing Occupation: Zionist Collaboration with the K-pop Music Giant HYBE Corporation

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Abstract

The article analyses the neoliberal political economy of K-pop and its collusion with Israeli propaganda. Employing K-pop music giant HYBE Corporation as a case study, it is argued that the company is engaging in “songwashing” with the increasing collaboration of K-pop idol groups and solo artists with Israeli and Zionist music producers and songwriters. Songwashing is explored as a form of neo-Zionism, which targets the growing global music market of K-pop to disseminate Israel’s soft power to manufacture consent and whitewash Israel’s occupation and genocidal campaign in Palestine while establishing Israel as a culturally productive and legitimate state. The commodification of K-pop idols as soft power tools in diplomacy forms the essence of this phenomenon. However, this soft power strategy can also transform into soft disempowerment through K-pop fans’ protests on social media platforms such as X, Instagram, and Weverse, demanding HYBE’s divestment from Israeli cultural goods.

Keywords: *songwashing, soft power, political economy, manufacturing consent, neoliberalism, Israel-Palestine, K-pop*

“Songwashing” Occupation: Zionist Collaboration with the K-pop Music Giant HYBE Corporation

Since the 1990s, a rapid expansion of Korean cultural products has allowed K-pop to enter the lexicon of global popular culture through the visual appeal of idols and their performances. The South Korean government is, in some ways, at the heart of the synergy created between K-pop and cultural industries for expansion in overseas markets, enjoying an “undisturbed honeymoon with state-capital power” (Choi & Maliangkay, 2014, p. 3). With the early 2000s, the scope of involvement of international music producers in K-pop and overseas fanbases has gradually widened, along with the increase in frequency of overseas concerts and songs sung in Chinese, Japanese, and English, to appeal to audiences en masse. As part and parcel of the construction of idol groups is their image of the band as a whole, through a “highly rationalised and systematic business practice” (Kang, 2014, p. 57). At the helm of this are a handful of Korean entertainment agencies that mass-produce, command, and merchandise idol bands, namely SM, YG, JYP Entertainment, and the focus of this case study, HYBE Corporation.

HYBE Corporation, previously known as Big Hit Entertainment, is a powerhouse agency that debuted the global K-pop group BTS in 2013, and later the boy group TOMORROW X TOGETHER (TXT) in 2019. Big Hit was met with rapid growth with the rising popularity of its first boy group BTS, reportedly earning ₩92.4 billion in revenue in 2017, with an estimated market value of ₩700 billion in 2018 which rose to approximately ₩1.28-2.22 trillion by 2019 (Palondongan, Mase, Mongan, Jaya, & Halik, 2024). Big Hit expanded its business into labels, solutions, and other platforms, rebranding as HYBE in 2021, striving to produce “content” that leads global trends and with “fans” as customers meant to be satisfied. The company has since then, operated as a record label, talent agency, music production company, event management, concert production company, and music publisher. The chairman and founder Bang Si-hyuk operates the company on a multi-label, monopolistic regimen, acquiring other smaller labels such as PLEDIS Entertainment, managing the group SEVENTEEN and TWS, Belift Lab managing ENHYPEN and ILLIT, Source Music managing GFRIEND and LE SERRAFIM, KOZ Entertainment managing BOYNEXTDOOR and soloist ZICO, and ADOR, until recently managing NewJeans, to incorporate under the umbrella label of HYBE. Since its rebrand in 2021, HYBE has acquired American music mogul Scooter Braun’s Ithaca Holdings, which allowed Braun to join HYBE’s board and become the CEO of HYBE America. Expanding into the Latin American music market, HYBE acquired Exile Music,

forming HYBE Latin America while also launching a label services business in Japan. With 64% of the company's revenue coming from outside its home market in Korea, HYBE aims to be a major global player in the music arena (Tencer, 2024). Given the expanding influence of K-pop in the global music market with HYBE as a major industry powerhouse, it is necessary to problematise the creative and managerial involvement of Zionism in the K-pop industry, using HYBE Corporation as a case study.

Statement of Research

The manner in which the media, in this case the music industry, can be employed to artwash, or "songwash," and manufacture consent for illegal occupation and ethnic cleansing, partake in soft power, maintain cultural hegemony of the U.S.-Israel neoliberal partnership in relation to the South Korean political economy of culture and media is analysed. While existing research delves into the "dark side" of the K-pop industry with the exploitation of idols by their labels and the mechanical production of art, as well as Israel's *hasbara* (propaganda) project into the arts as a stratagem to naturalise its existence and occupation of Palestine, there is no study that scrutinises the developing collaboration between K-pop and the infiltration of the Zionist agenda within the said industry.

Literature Review

Previous scholarship on songwashing by Marco Biasioli (2023) discusses how popular music has been consistently used by state actors for internal legitimation and external soft power promotion. The article explores how popular music appropriated by Russia legitimised Vladimir Putin's election and manufactured consent for Ukraine's full-scale invasion vis-à-vis Russia's hosting of 2019 summer festivals and participation in Eurovision 2021. Music, which is employed as a form of escapism, which can lead to political consolidation, can form the basis of songwashing. They define songwashing as the "state utilization of the allure of music to cover up such domestic political problems as its own legitimacy, civic discontent, and questions of minority rights, while promoting a different, positive image abroad," (p. 683) and is a "musical version of whitewashing" (p. 685). It is argued that non-state actors resisted and countered these songwashing goals, even though at times they also supported them, engaging in a constant struggle over inscribing dominant meanings to music and its performance. Similarly, my study extends this definition to the use of K-pop industry by Israeli *hasbara* and Zionists to legitimate the occupation of Palestine in some way by concurring the Asian music market.

Marc Kosciejew (2025) draws on Biasioli's (2023) research, studying the example of Israel's entry to the Eurovision Song Contest 2024 during Israel's war on Gaza, which had killed over 34,500 Palestinians at the time of the contest and was facing international condemnation over its actions in the war. Kosciejew argues that when a state like Israel suffers from political problems or a poor image both domestically and internationally, they engage in whitewashing to distract their audience to a more positive outlook of itself. Songwashing involves, either participation in cultural/musical events and/or creating/altering songs. However, the songwashing as a reactive soft power strategy (Nye J. S., 2008), also possess the ability to transform it into a soft disempowerment, understood as actions of states that alienate others, leading to a loss of credibility and attractiveness for the intended audience, achieving the opposite of cultural diplomacy (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018). Omar Barghouti also comments (2021) that "cultural boycott campaigns to convince cultural institutions, writers, and artists to stop artwashing Israel's human rights violations," (p. 117) have a significant place in history with the Boycott, Divest, and Sanctions (BDS) movement.

My research relates the aforementioned to the growing collaboration between Israeli producers and songwriters as well as brand ambassadorships with brands on the BDS list, in relation to the K-pop industry, which is in this case the soft power target of Israeli *hasbara*. These strategies of neoliberal Zionism that draw on specific kinds of neoliberal rationalities in order to garner support for the State of Israel by marketing its cultural value and attempt to sanitise its occupation of Palestine (Getzoff, 2020) is a form of Neo-Zionism (Dayan, 2019) to divert support for the colonial and occupational project without criticism. According to Inkyu Kang (2014), the neoliberal political economy of the K-pop industry meets the standardisation, rationalisation, and commodification necessary to make unlimited profit. The study aims to relate the research on the political economies of Israel and K-pop, focusing on HYBE Corporation, that provide fertile ground for collaboration.

Theoretical Framework

Joseph Nye (2011) in *The Future of Power* differentiates between two types of powers: hard power and soft power. They are equally important in international politics. Hard power involves persuading people to act in contrast to their initial preferences and strategies through the use of coercion, threats, and violent inducements. On the other hand, soft power is to induce the desired outcome via attraction rather than coercion (Nye J. S., 2008). In a postmodern era, hard power is more financially and politically

costly, whereas soft power requires fewer substantial resources and incurs little to no consequences in cases of failure. Soft power, however, is not always positive in its intent and purposes, when used in the form of propaganda. Its use presents the possibility of cooperation, not through military prowess, but through the power of ideas and thought. It is employed by neoliberal democracies as a solution to the problem of war while employing its economic resources to influence the behaviour of states that are economically weaker. Utilising the example of the U.S. and its influence on institutions such as The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, Nye (2005) goes on to affirm that states collude with other neoliberal institutions to promote a country's values, ideas, and policies with other countries, legitimating the actions of the state.

Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky's (2002) seminal work, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, relays a propaganda model, which suggests that there are five factors or filters inherent in modern media structures i.e., ownership, advertising, sourcing, flak, and anti-communism, ensuring that the media product serves the interests of the power elites. This is due to a small number of large media corporations dominate the lion's share of production and distribution on the global scale. As part of the liberal market system, the media owners share common ground and values with other profit-oriented businesses and the government, who directly impact operational profit through policy. The media filters bear influence on the media product. The propaganda model is not conspiracy on part of the media teams but a natural result of market forces that prioritise profit over the "truth." This gives way to media outputs in which "money and power are able to filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public" (p. 1).

Research Questions:

The following are the research questions:

1. How do the neoliberal political economies of Israel and the K-pop industry complement one another?
2. How does the use of soft power by Israel collude with the soft power the K-pop industry exhibits?
3. In what ways does HYBE Corporation collaborate with Israeli propaganda to songwash and manufacture consent for its occupation of Palestine?

4. To what extent does soft disempowerment and the BDS movement impact the use of *hasbara* in the K-pop industry and HYBE Corporation?

Research Methodology

The research methodology is descriptive in nature, attempting to familiarise the reader with another form of artwashing, which is, songwashing. Through a comparison between the neoliberal political economy of Israel and its collaboration with the K-pop industry, the study focuses on the music industry giant HYBE Corporation. The study draws on theoretical concepts of manufacturing consent, soft power, soft disempowerment, and neoliberal political economy while referencing news articles, Tweets, Instagram posts, and press releases to formulate the argument.

The Neoliberal Political Economy of Israel and the K-pop Industry

The settler colonial state of Israel, which has been occupying Palestine since 1948 and engaging in an active and indiscriminate bombardment and starvation of Palestinian people since October 7th, 2023, has been dubbed as the Start-up Nation by the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), a U.S. based think tank with a history of its influence on foreign policy, politics, finance, education, media, and culture. In this manner, Israel is portrayed as a geopolitical asset for the U.S., representing the Zionist state as neoliberal (Getzoff, 2020). The Zionist ideology is built on claiming Jewish people as a unified national people, with the right to self-determine, allowing them to build an organisational structure to settle in Palestine while ethnically cleansing its indigenous population, with the aid of the U.S. and European powers, fuelled by an inverted form of anti-Semitism (Machover, 2018). This framing relies on Israeli cultural ingenuity and economic exceptionalism, wherein “the building of the nation-state is itself marked by entrepreneurial energy, creativity, and innovation,” (Getzoff, 2020, p. 813) selling it as the model state for economics.

The frame is more of a performative discourse, to present it in contention with nation-states, such as Palestine, who lack an entrepreneurial culture, marking Israeli superiority, and “wastefulness” of the indigenous people of Palestine. The Arab nation, hence, stands as an antithesis to neoliberal Zionism. The discourse consistently celebrates Israeli society, representing it as a secular, Western, capitalist nation. This allows for reconfiguration of Zionist historiography, emphasising the “role of the military in creating a unique Israeli “culture,” and frames Arabs and Palestinians as inferior, due to their perceived lack of entrepreneurial activity” (p. 814). There is major investment in Israel’s *hasbara* to legitimise itself as a productive state. U.S. hegemony

and Israel's legitimacy are tied together through imperial protection, control, political, and media agenda. In the political economy of media and culture, ideological hegemony of Antonio Gramsci (1971) prevails, defining and setting the boundaries of public discourse. Social institutions such as the mass media help elicit and legitimise support for hegemonic relations through communication and material rewards, in this case the K-pop music industry. Dominant social forces incorporate real material interests of the subordinate group, fanbases, to garner consent, e.g. with the release of a new album, merchandise, or brand deals. This is how consent is manufactured (Artz & Murphy, 2000).

As part of South Korea's political economy of media, standardisation, rationalisation, and commodification provide insight into the production system of K-pop. Political economy deals with issues of power and inequalities that are associated with "the allocation of resources and the formation of wealth" (Baldwin, Longhurst, McCracken, Ogborn, & Smith, 2000). The political economies of culture and media deal with the commodification of the two, to be sold in the marketplace. The two work in conjunction, feeding each other, working as Louis Althusser's (2024) ideological state apparatuses that maintain the status quo of cultural order by naturalising and reproducing the social relations of culture. Other than the *mélange* stylistics and industrial multidimensionality, the functional variability of K-pop stretches beyond popular music, which is why its role in aiding and abetting Israel's soft power strategies in conjunction with its own, becomes relevant.

K-pop's Soft Power and the Israeli Propaganda Machine

Songwashing is a way in which Israel is able to exercise soft power, entering a relatively new global market of K-pop. According to Joseph Nye (2008), soft power is a means of gaining international influence (ideological and economic) via non-militaristic means, as opposed to hard power which involves the use of military prowess. Koscieljew (2025) argues that when a state suffers from a poor image, domestically or internationally, it resorts to whitewashing or "songwashing" to distract or redirect focus to more positive imagery, as a form of soft power. This involves manipulating music, a form of media, to improve the image of the states and diminish the denunciation of their agenda. It can be a reactive or proactive move on part of the state, which can also have a "disempowerment" impact through criticism or unwanted attention. This can also include hosting, sponsoring, and/or participating in cultural/musical events domestically and internationally e.g. Israel's participation in The Eurovision Song

Contest. According to Biasioli (2023), songwashing represents the “musical branch of soft power,” (p. 686) to legitimise itself in the eyes of others and encounter less resistance from others. If its culture and ideology are attractive, it will attract others, establishing preferences acclimated with power resources such as culture, ideology, and institutions, justifying state actions through the use of diverse cultural resources.

An example of this can be found with HYBE’s increasing collaboration with Israeli and pro-Israel producers with artists under its labels, post-October 7 attack in 2023 by Palestinian rebel group Hamas on Israeli territory spurring the genocide of Palestinians into motion. This includes BTS’ J-Hope’s 2024 solo album “Hope on the Street,” crediting an Israeli producer Omer Fedi for one of its songs. Another Israeli record producer, songwriter, and former IDF soldier, Johnny Golstein, is a recurrent collaborator with HYBE idol groups such as ILLIT’s “I’LL LIKE YOU,” ENHYPEN’S “Romance: Untold Daydream,” TXT’s “The Star Chapter: Sanctuary,” and again J-Hope’s 2025 solo release “Sweet Dreams.” The collaboration is not just restricted to songs but also the theatrical release of concert films in the apartheid state of Israel. For instance, in 2024, HYBE was set to screen BTS members’ Jungkook’s documentary titled ‘JUNG KOOK: I AM STILL,’ and SUGA’s “SUGA: Agust D Tour D-Day the Movie” in Israel. What has emerged here is a form of neo-Zionism (Dayan, 2019), diverting massive investments to garner support for its colonial project, supported by the onset of globalisation and neoliberalism, which works in conjunction with the political economy of K-pop cultural products. This sort of collaboration diverts attention from the negative imagery of Israel’s atrocities in Gaza since October 2023 and places focus on the cultural value attached to Israeli artists.

Manufacturing Consent through K-pop

Moreover, the Zionist project is a social formation which is not limited to just the nation-state but encompasses all facets of society and culture, including media. As an adaptive social formation, its constituencies have changed over time and become attuned to the “zeitgeist of the era,” (Dayan, 2019, p. 23) which is the highly profitable K-pop industry. Media ownership is tantamount to this collaboration. For instance, Lee Jason Jaesung, CEO of HYBE Korea publicly donated to the Friends of the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) (Zionists in Kpop (@zionistsinkpop), 2024). Additionally, Scooter Braun, former CEO of HYBE America (now just an executive board member), has been repeatedly accused of lobbying for Israel while legitimising Israel’s war on Gaza through his Instagram posts. In December 2023, he personally met the Prime Minister of Israel and spoke at a rally in Tel Aviv to condemn October 7 attacks by Hamas (Aladam, 2024) while also regularly

posting Israeli propaganda on his Instagram page. Additionally, the official Israeli embassy of Korea's Instagram page follows Scooter Braun and Bang Si-hyuk, with the official Israeli X account displaying their gratitude for his *hasbara* efforts (Zionists in Kpop (@zionistsinkpop), 2024). As per Noam Chomsky's proposition, the media serve and propagandise on behalf of social interests of the power elites that control and finance them. He mentions a selection of "right-thinking personnel" who have internalised the priorities and values that conform to the institution's values, with Lee and Braun being the "right thinking personnel," in this case, contributing directly and indirectly to Israel's genocidal cause. The structural factors involved in the propaganda model are of ownership and control while also depending on other funding resources such as advertising who have similar interests at hand. With globalisation and centralisation of media industries, transnational conglomerates or media giants emerge, shifting the global balance of power towards commercialism in line with the neoliberal world order. This has allowed for a displacement of the political public sphere by "depoliticised consumer culture," (Herman & Chomsky, 2002, p. xviii) where support for illegal occupation and genocide becomes "personal sentiments" than an occasion for condemnation. The entertainment industry, as an extension, becomes not only a tool of selling goods but also selling an ideology, manufacturing consent for certain actions on part of the state, leading to political apathy and preserving the status quo.

HYBE's lack of reprimand for Braun's Zionist sentiments stems also from the label's need to globalise Korea's highly rationalised production system, especially the American market. Seabrook (2012) discusses SM Entertainment's "manual of cultural technology" that "catalogued the steps necessary to popularize K-pop artists," (p. 93) in not only the country of its origin but also other countries, with Lee Soo Man of SM Entertainment saying that Asia is in the works to become a cultural centre (Korea Times, 2010). HYBE's business practices are an extension of that mindset. K-pop has essentially gone under the McDonaldisation of the music business and the globalisation of neoliberal practices wherein profit and efficiency takes precedence. Max Weber, on whom Ritzer's (2013) McDonaldisation arguments are built on, saw rationality as central to capitalism. The U.S., as per Kang's argument, has played a prominent role in spreading neoliberal ideas since the 1980s, and South Korea has been its faithful follower. That is why, it can be argued that globalisation is synonymous with "Americanisation" (Kang, 2014). The media cannot be separated from capitalist political economy, instead, it is a central part of it and its marketing system (McChesney, 2008). The American market and its resources are a gateway to success, and Braun has continued to lead the pathway for

HYBE.

Furthermore, it has been argued by Kang (2014) that since the late 1990s, South Korea's cultural industry has embraced a similar philosophy. Meanings and values like creativity, morality, and social awareness, which were the norm, have significantly weakened. Crook et al. (1992) explain the depletion of meaning as symptomatic of hyper-commodification, which is referred to as "the spread of the commodity form into all spheres of life, negating the distinction between commodified and non-commodified regions" (p. 61). Kang claims that South Korea views K-pop idols as one of their multiple export products, similar to Samsung smartphones and Hyundai mini-vans. The country is, moreover, "excited by what this new musical export could do for its image – and its economy" (Williamson, 2011). This notion extends to the luxury brand deals that come with being an idol, making the idea of a boycott interesting.

The Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS), has existed since 2005 as coalition of Palestinian Civil Society organisations, activists, academics, intellectuals, and trade unions petitioning for a cultural and material boycott of the state of Israel, "in the spirit of international solidarity, moral consistency, and resistance to injustice and oppression" and to implement this call "until Israel meets its obligation to recognize the Palestinian people's inalienable right to self-determination and fully complies with the precepts of international law" (Ananth, 2013, p. 129). Despite the BDS call for boycott against luxury brands such as Bally, Bulgari, Chanel, Dior, etc., as well as food chains like McDonald's and Starbucks for their support to the Israeli cause (BDS Movement, 2024) not just artists under HYBE but celebrities across the board continue to act as brand ambassadors e.g., ENHYPEN's McDonald's Japan advertisement campaign (Tokyo Hive, 2025), the BTS McDonald's Happy Meal collaboration (Lopez, 2025), and BTS V's being named the new face of Coca-Cola Zero in South Korea (Images Staff, 2025). These endorsements ensure that the complicit brands continue to make profit in the face of material and cultural boycotts and dwindling public support due to fan loyalty idol ambassadorships, thus potentially weakening the de-legitimising network that aims to supersede the Zionist model.

The radically rationalised and standardised business model based on selling a brand image gives way to unparalleled efficiency and productivity, as directed by George Ritzer's notion of McDonaldisation, vis-a-vis neoliberal business practices, where BDS takes a backseat and profitability and marketability of idols comes first. While idols do serve as multifunctional brand ambassadors as well as artists, acting as the face of

brands on the boycott list, it would be disingenuous to lump all of Korean society under one label, especially when BDS Korea has vested efforts against Zionist political ideology, which it says is closely related to the U.S.-based Cold War regime (BDS Toolkit, n.d.). The question of cultural commodity and consumption, nevertheless, cannot be separated from the K-pop industry as it can commodify several other cultural goods as pseudo avatars of idols, as they are hailed by fans, whether it be cosmetic, fashion, gastronomic, and digital products, endorsed by idols and deceptively associated with their songs and brand image (Choi & Maliangkay, 2014), becoming a faithful ally to the reign of neoliberal capitalism and commodification of culture, which monetarily benefits the Zionist regime.

The use of K-pop idols does not just restrict itself to monetary gains for tangible global influence. What is also relevant here is the use of K-pop idols as public diplomats for the purpose of expanding soft power. Previous examples of this include K-pop groups EXO's participation in the opening and closing ceremonies of Pyeongchang Olympics 2017, Red Velvet holding a special performance in North Korea in 2018, EXO meeting U.S. President Donald Trump during a presidential visit to South Korea, BTS meeting U.S. President Joe Biden at the White House, and BTS giving a speech at the United Nations (Shafie, 2025). A most recent example features SEVENTEEN, also under HYBE labels, being appointed as UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador for Youth in 2024 (UNESCO, 2024). Soft power, in this way, is operationalised to include the country's reputation and national image. Promotion of K-pop idols brings in revenue, which brings in international influence, and hence, soft power privileges. On the flipside, it is worthy of note that K-pop idols are politicised for soft power gains but remain de-politicised in the face of being embroiled with Zionism, restricted (by choice or under company policy) from commenting on the genocide and occupation that they are inadvertently aiding and contributing to in form of the label's commitment to songwashing and direct monetary investment and affiliation.

Soft Disempowerment and the BDS Movement

Soft power can also backfire, weakening state goals via "actions, inactions and/or policies of states that ultimately upset, offend or alienate others, leading to a loss of credibility and attractiveness" (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018, p. 1151). This perversion or aversion to the message can result in critiques, protests, boycotts, sanctions, and other-state movements in connection with non-governmental, media outlets, civil society, and corporate entities, which undermines the state's soft power. According to

Barghouti (2021), cultural and material boycotts such as Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) “convince cultural institutions, writers, and artists to stop artwashing Israel’s human rights violations” (Kosciejew, 2025, p. 2). In response to HYBE’s growing relationship with Israelis and Zionists, fans of idol groups under the label have launched an online protest on X and Instagram with the hashtag “HYBEDivestFromZionism,” sending protest trucks to the HYBE headquarters in Seoul, and mobilising for boycotting new music releases on official platforms, buying albums, merchandise, or any monetary support for the company. The fans also post infographics to fundraise for civilians suffering in Gaza as part of fan projects. There were, additionally, calls for former HYBE America CEO Scooter Braun to step down from his position for perpetuating his Zionist agenda on social media (Rahman, 2024). Social media profiles such as “Zionists in K-pop” regularly update any Zionists in the entertainment industry collaborating with K-pop groups or solo artists. This fan-activism which is defined as “fan-driven efforts to address civic or political issues through engagement with and strategic deployment of popular culture content,” (Andini & Akhni, 2021, p. 41) stand in direct contrast to the non-action of the celebrities they passionately follow, influencing and changing existing power relations. In the age of new media, K-pop fans are not just audiences passively receiving the celebrity endorsements and collaborations but a part of civil society with the digital skills to be motivated by political goals and collective identity as citizens of their respective countries and the highly globalised world.

While the boycott movement against HYBE is yet to bear substantial fruit as the company recorded an all-time high annual revenue in 2024 (HYBE, 2025), the company’s response has been one of waiting to let the momentum of calls for a boycott against them die out. For example, in a leaked report of internal documents in November 2024 (Malay Mail, 2024), it was stated:

Recently, there has been an intensifying political intervention campaign led by overseas fandoms around brands like Starbucks and McDonald’s in relation to the Israel issue. Although I previously mentioned this, South Korea isn’t a country involved in the conflict, so the wisest choice is likely to wait for the issue to pass. However, with the Golden Disc Awards as a turning point, Indonesian fans have been heavily promoting this issue to other fans on platforms like Weverse. There was even an incident where Jake (ENHYPEN) agreed with a post by an overseas fan urging people not to support Starbucks, responding with a reflective comment, which has stirred some controversy.

This depicts an acknowledgement of the movement but no proaction to course correct

while waiting for the boycotters to embrace protest fatigue. The HYBE owned platform Weverse here becomes important, a key part of monetising direct fan-idol interactions through messages and livestreams. Universal Music Group recently invested in Weverse, as part of HYBE and UMG'S 10-year exclusive distribution deal, facilitated by Scooter Braun (Tencer, 2024). UMG's CEO Lucien Grainge is a staunch supporter of the Friends of the Israeli Offence Forces, while his wife funds the Zionist Federation and the Conservative Party. UMG is also associated with Creative Community of Peace, which has participated in lobbying musicians like Alicia Keys to perform in Israel in the aftermath of BDS campaigns demanding to pull support in solidarity with the Palestinian cause (PressTV, 2022). HYBE's close association with the Israeli lobbying groups, emphasises its role in normalising the presence of Zionists in the global music industry, hence softening the image of the country as part of a "peace" project.

The use of the platform Weverse proves to be contentious, as it is where fans engage in fan-activism and mobilise to "educate" idols on the Palestinian cause but also continue to contribute to its usage, thus generating revenue for HYBE and its subsidiaries. It is also a platform where idols can subtly communicate their stance, with Jaehyun from BOYNEXTDOOR liking pro-Palestinian fan letters (Korea Boo, 2024) to Jake from ENHYPEN apologising for drinking the boycotted Starbucks (Malay Mail, 2024). While this barely existent celebrity advocacy does little to dismantle the growing presence of Israeli cultural investment in the K-pop industry, specifically HYBE, it offers a slight break in the highly standardised, commodified, rationalised, and one-dimensional reading of K-pop idols as simple cogs in the machine who are part of a highly exploitative system themselves, and the passivity of their fan spaces. This is revelatory of the "contradictory characteristics of fan activity that may influence both the positive and negative decision-making processes of consumers and the K-pop industry as a whole," (Jung, 2012) relaying the complex nature of the political economy of the K-pop industry and its interaction with the Zionist movement.

Conclusion

The political economy of K-pop provides ample breeding ground for Israeli neoliberal cultural expansion. Examining the case of HYBE Corporation and the synergy between the company's activities and HYBE America CEO Scooter Braun, it can be argued that the company is engaging in songwashing with the proliferation of inclusion of Israeli music producers and songwriters for new music releases of K-pop idol groups. The exploitation and hyper-commodification of K-pop idols as soft power tools in cultural

and political diplomacy is at the crux of this phenomenon. Songwashing is a form of neo-Zionism, targeting a growing global music market as part and parcel of Israel's soft power. This aids in the normalisation, consent manufacturing, and whitewashing of its genocidal campaign in Gaza and establishes Israel as a culturally productive, legitimate, and valuable state. However, this soft power strategy can also prove to be disempowering through the fans' use of social media platforms such as X, Instagram, and Weverse, with demands of HYBE's divestment from Israel and boycott campaigns.

Limitations

The scope of this study is limited to an analysis of only HYBE Corporation and its collaboration with Zionist ideology and Israeli propaganda model. While the wider K-pop industry has also observed an influx of collaborations with boycotted brands and the Zionist entity, HYBE's direct affiliation with Israel in its leadership and music production processes, made it the ideal case study.

Future Implications

Future research would benefit from strengthening the connection between HYBE and Israel through primary research. Audience perception and resistance of the collaboration could also be a focal point that would be better explored in a different study surrounding social media activism, fan behaviour, and their engagement with the BDS movement.

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