Research Article

Emotional resonance and participatory misinformation: Learning from a K-pop controversy

In today's digital media environment, emotionally resonant narratives often spread faster and stick more firmly than verifiable facts. This paper explores how emotionally charged communication in online controversies fosters not only widespread engagement but also the participatory nature of misinformation. Through a case study of a K-pop controversy, we show how audiences act not just as consumers but as co-authors of alternative narratives in moments of uncertainty. These dynamics reflect a broader trend where emotionally driven discourse increasingly shapes public perception, challenging the role of facts in public debate.

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Research questions
- How do audiences engage in the creation, amplification, and reinterpretation of unverified information and conspiracy narratives during emotionally charged online controversies?
- How does emotionally resonant communication during high-profile public disputes influence shifts in online public sentiment?
- What rhetorical and emotional strategies contribute to the reframing of public narratives in digital spaces?

Essay summary
- Emotionally charged rhetoric in digital spaces can rival, or even surpass, the persuasive power of factual argumentation.
- Online audiences are not passive consumers of rumors but active participants in creating, shaping, and amplifying misinformation and conspiracy narratives.
- Comment sections operate as emotional amplifiers, not just reflecting sentiment but actively steering the direction of discourse.
- Emotional authenticity, particularly in moments of perceived vulnerability or resistance, can rapidly shift public perception and narrative control.

- Online misinformation thrives in environments of uncertainty, where emotional cues fill in gaps left by ambiguous or contested facts.

Implications

In today's digital media environment, emotionally resonant communication can dramatically shape public opinion, often more powerfully than factual information (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Brader, 2006; Papacharissi, 2014). This dynamic is especially significant in the context of misinformation, where emotional appeals not only influence individuals' perceptions but also the participatory spread of unverified claims. Misinformation is commonly defined as false or misleading information (Lazer et al., 2018; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017); however, recent work shows that misinformation also involves the processes through which the public (emotionally) interprets and circulates information amid uncertainty (Lühring et al., 2024; Martel et al., 2020; Starbird et al., 2019; Starbird et al., 2023). We use *participatory misinformation* to describe how audiences actively co-create, reinterpret, and amplify unverified narratives (Grass, 2021; Starbird et al., 2019; Starbird et al., 2023), and *emotional resonance* to indicate the persuasive power of affective appeals that influence people's interpretation (Dillard & Seo, 2012; Papacharissi, 2014).

This study investigates the recent controversy between the South Korean entertainment company HYBE Corporation and Min Hee-jin (hereafter referred to as *Min*)—former CEO of ADOR, a subsidiary of HYBE—as a case study to explore how emotionally resonant communication and uncertainty structures interact to shape the construction and spread of participatory misinformation. Rather than taking a position on the validity of either party's claims, this paper focuses on the public's perception of the conflict. Appendix A summarizes major figures and events.

Emotionally resonant speech can serve as a powerful intervention point in narrative construction, even when the facts remain contested. This case underscores the volatility of public sentiment, especially in celebrity and corporate controversies. The rapid reversal in public perception toward Min, driven largely by a single press conference, illustrates how emotional resonance and perceived authenticity can reshape audience interpretation and challenge initial media narratives, retaining wide-reaching consequences— an effect reflected offline as HYBE's financial stock fell 5%, losing 437.4 billion KRW (approximately $328.1 million USD) (Kim, 2024). Understanding these shifts is critical in an era where misinformation can rapidly amplify and influence public opinion, often outpacing factual correction (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

Misinformation must be understood not only in terms of content, but as a participatory and interpretive process. In the vacuum created by distrust in HYBE's response, conspiracy theories flourished as people actively created rumors with almost no evidence beyond Min's emotional appeal. Following Min's press conference on April 25, 2024, claims of HYBE's ties to the Dahn World cult,[2] accusations of political motives, and the plagiarism scandal involving ILLIT (another K-pop group under HYBE) surged. Despite minimal evidence, audiences pieced together vague cues and speculation to fill narrative gaps. This reflects a broader pattern of participation in digital spaces where emotionally activated publics construct meaning by assembling, reshaping, and amplifying alternative narratives (Martel et al., 2020; Papacharissi, 2014; Starbird, 2017).

Public credibility is shaped not just by what is stated, but by how the delivery is emotionally performed and received. Prior to Min's April 25 conference, 63% of negative comments on YouTube explicitly targeted her with criticism about greed, betrayal, or disloyalty. However, following her emotionally charged and vulnerable press conference, only 25% of negative comments remained focused on her, while

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[2] Dahn World (also known as Body & Brain or Dahn Yoga) is a controversial organization founded in South Korea by Ilchi Lee in the 1980s. While it promotes meditation, yoga, and personal development, it has faced longstanding allegations of cult-like behavior, including coercive recruitment practices, financial exploitation, and emotional manipulation (Woo, 2011).

the bulk redirected blame toward HYBE's corporate practices and alleged media manipulation. Commenters began praising Min as a "true artist," a "visionary," and some even described the press conference as "'GOAT-level' (an acronym for 'Greatest of All Time')"—evidence of how tone and delivery contributed to a reframing of her public persona. This contrasts with HYBE's approach, which was to present their position primarily through media statements that were mostly fact-based (Cho, 2024; Koreaboo, 2024).

This case highlights how emotional performance influences assessments of credibility. Commenters celebrated not only Min's points but her emotional delivery—visible frustration and raw sincerity with crying and cursing. While existing research has shown that emotional appeals enhance persuasion in politics and crisis communication (Brader, 2006; Kim & Cameron, 2011) and that high-arousal emotions drive engagement (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Brady et al., 2017), this case extends those findings to popular culture. Emotionally resonant appeals grounded in perceived authenticity can be equally persuasive in the realm of popular culture. Min's perceived sincerity significantly shaped how audiences reinterpreted the narrative, and that shift reveals how emotional credibility can shape opinion in digital spaces.

Finally, the role of online comments should be understood as active sociotechnical engines of discourse. Comments sympathetic to Min or critical of HYBE were more likely to receive likes, replies, and higher visibility, reinforcing dominant narratives and creating emotional echo chambers. These micro-patterns contributed to the shaping and amplification of public sentiment.

These findings suggest several practical implications for platform design and use. For instance, platform designers could develop features to offer contextual prompts during high-intensity events. Public relations professionals should attend to tone, delivery, and perceived vulnerability, addressing speculative vacuums quickly to discourage misinformation-building and anticipating how official comments could be remixed by social media users. Educators can help learners recognize emotionally viral content and understand how emotional cues often fill interpretive gaps, encouraging more critical engagement during initial periods of crisis post-events.

Understanding misinformation in emotionally charged environments requires attention, as narratives fueled by personal rhetoric and amplified by digital platforms can rapidly reshape and redirect perception, not only in politics or crises but also in pop culture. Entertainment controversies are no longer confined to fan communities or niche media—they now unfold as high-stakes events with significant cultural and economic consequences.

Evidence

This study analyzes how public sentiment and discourse evolved during the HYBE vs. Min Hee-jin dispute, focusing on the impact of Min's April 25, 2024, press conference. On April 22, 2024, HYBE accused Min, CEO of its subsidiary ADOR and the executive behind the girl group NewJeans, of attempting to take control of ADOR. The allegation triggered an internal audit and intense backlash against Min, with accusations of betrayal and ambition dominating the discourse. However, her press conference dramatically shifted public sentiment, redirecting criticism toward HYBE and its chairman, Bang Si-hyuk (hereafter *Bang*).

The narrative shifted again on May 17, 2024, following Bang's public response to Min's conference and a petition from NewJeans members supporting Min. Prior to this, discourse was largely centered on Min's press conference and various unverified claims, including HYBE's alleged connection to the religious group Dahn World and plagiarism controversies involving the girl group ILLIT. After May 17, however, the attention shifted toward Bang and NewJeans, with less focus on Min herself (see Appendix A for details).

This study draws on a dataset of 36,297 YouTube comments between April 22 and May 16, 2024, sourced from press conference recordings and news coverage. The analysis includes both qualitative sentiment assessment and thematic coding to explore how public narratives emerged and evolved during this period.

Sentiment shift: From betrayer to mom of NewJeans?

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the dramatic shift in public sentiment surrounding Min's April 25 conference. Before the event (April 22–24), sentiment toward Min was overwhelmingly negative: 82% of comments were negative (see Figure 1) and 62% of those specifically targeted her (see Figure 2). Common accusations included "Min betraying HYBE" and "Min stealing NewJeans." Notably, these reactions were largely speculative and not accompanied by concrete evidence, reflecting how uncertainty enables rumor formation in emotionally charged misinformation contexts (Starbird et al., 2019). Many commenters echoed phrases like "I knew it!" and cited their impressions of Min's past behavior or ambition as justification, relying on preconceived notions rather than verified facts about the current situation.

After the press conference (April 25–May 16), public discourse shifted sharply. Positive comments rose to 17.3%, and negative comments dropped to 61.6% (see Figure 1). Crucially, most of the negativity was redirected at HYBE, while 87% of positive comments directly supported Min (see Figure 2), describing her as a "true artist," a "visionary," and someone "fighting alone against a corrupted system." One comment noted: "She was at rock bottom, but in two hours, she turned a press conference into a fan meeting and convinced the nation—this is GOAT-level." This transformation, from betrayer to "Mom of NewJeans," reflects the power of moral, emotional, and identity-based language over facts in times of uncertainty.

Sentiment Score (Apr 22 – Apr 24, 2024)

Positive 1.3%
Neutral 16.7%
Negative 82%
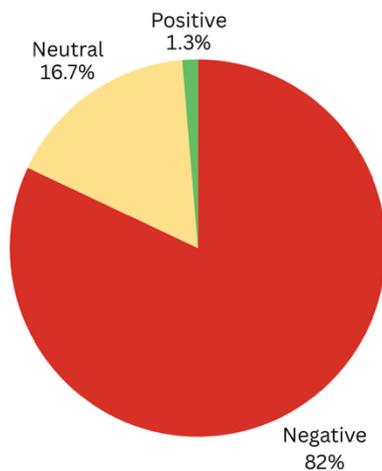
Sentiment Score (Apr 25 – May 16, 2024)

Unrelated 2.5%
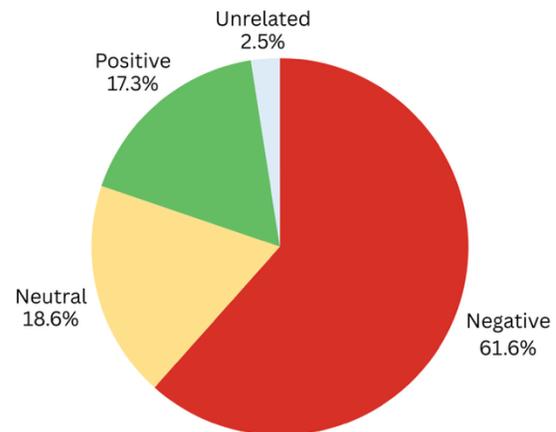Positive 17.3%
Neutral 18.6%
Negative 61.6%

Figure 1. Overall sentiment distribution before and after Min Hee-jin's press conference. *This figure shows the overall distribution of sentiment in randomly sampled comments before and after Min Hee-jin's press conference. Sentiment here reflects the general tone—positive, neutral, or negative—without reference to any specific subject. Comments categorized as "Unrelated" include those that do not express discernible sentiment, such as timestamps, emojis, or vague remarks without explanatory content.*
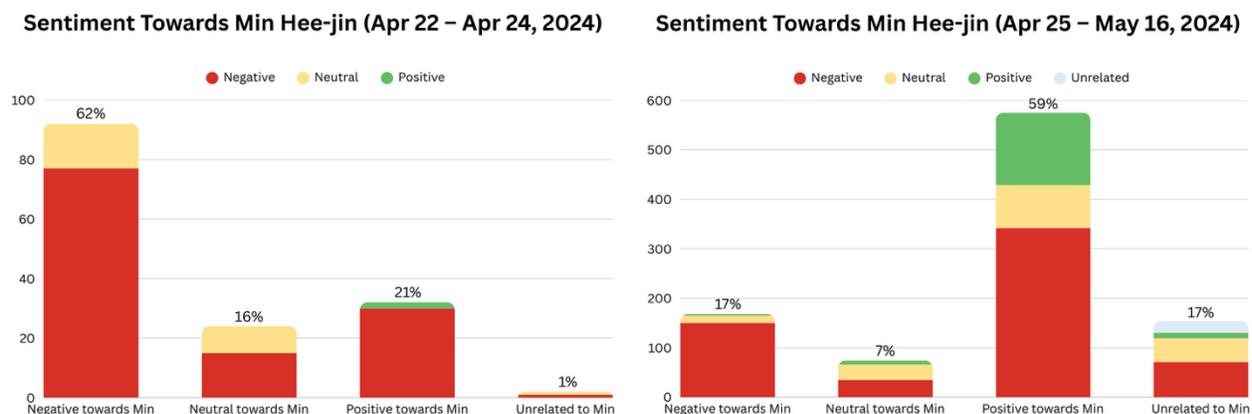
Sentiment Towards Min Hee-jin (Apr 22 – Apr 24, 2024)

Sentiment Towards Min Hee-jin (Apr 25 – May 16, 2024)

Figure 2. Direction of sentiment toward Min Hee-jin before and after the press conference. *This figure shows the direction of sentiment specifically toward Min Hee-jin before and after her April 25 press conference. Each bar reflects the proportion of comments categorized as positive, neutral, negative, or unrelated to Min Hee-jin. The color within each bar indicates the general tone of those comments, not considering the subject. For example, before the press conference (left), 62% of comments targeted Min negatively. Of those, 84% were strongly negative in tone (e.g., "So, is it now a norm that (Min) makes one successful idol, stabs the company in the back, and then leaves?"), while others were neutral in tone but still critical (e.g., "The only reason I paid attention to NewJeans was because of HYBE"). After the conference (right), 59% of comments expressed support for Min, showing a clear reversal in sentiment.*

Emotional persuasion and rhetorical power in Min Hee-jin's press conference

While the quantitative shift is clear, qualitative analysis reveals the emotional and rhetorical strategies driving it. Table 1 identifies four recurring themes in positive comments, and these themes reflect how commenters interpreted the press conference and why they found it persuasive.

Table 1. *Key aspects of Min Hee-jin's press conference and their impact on public perception.*

Key themes in positive comments	Impact on public opinion
Genuine emotion	Her visible emotions and unpolished appearance were interpreted as sincerity, reshaping her image from manipulative to authentic.
Logical, articulate speech	Her reasoned delivery balanced emotion with logic, prompting audiences to reassess her credibility.
Courage against HYBE	Her public confrontation of corporate authority symbolized defiance and moral integrity, strengthening sympathy for her position.
Artistic integrity and identification	References to creative passion and overwork resonated with audiences who viewed her as relatable and hardworking.

Genuine emotion. Commenters frequently cited Min's visible frustration, tears, and vulnerability as evidence of sincerity, interpreting them as signs she was being truthful, aligning with research on emotional appeals in other communication (Brader, 2006; Kim & Cameron, 2011). One wrote, "Even if this was a performance, you can't fake that level of naturalness." The public largely received her emotional

expression as authentic rather than performative, fostering trust even among previous skeptics (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Min Hee-jin speaking at the April 25 press conference. *At this conference, Min Hee-jin tearfully appealed, stating that she is "only here to protect NewJeans," while accusing HYBE's executives by saying, "These gaejeossi [개저씨; slang for boorish middle-aged men] are trying to destroy me." Her emotional expression, combined with confrontational language, became a critical point of public interpretation and a turning point in the controversy. Image from Wikimedia Commons (TV10, 2024); contextual description based on Jeong (2024).*

Logical and articulate delivery. Despite the emotional weight of the event, many commenters noted that Min maintained a reasoned and structured tone throughout. One comment noted, "She crushed them with facts, not emotions," while another said, "Look at the video title. It makes it seem like she just cried and ranted for two hours, but actually she explained everything so logically." This rhetorical clarity led some viewers to reassess earlier assumptions, framing her not just as an emotional figure but as someone capable of presenting a coherent argument.

Courage and defiance. Her willingness to challenge HYBE was perceived as symbolic resistance. Several commenters admired what they saw as her bravery: "The egg actually crushed the rock," one wrote, while another stated, "A subsidiary CEO standing up against the head of the parent company… This takes courage!" Whether or not it involved real risk, the perception of courage reshaped how she was viewed.

Artistic integrity and identification. Audiences also highlighted her passion for NewJeans and her work ethic. Min was frequently described as someone deeply invested in the creative development of the group and in broader artistic principles. One comment noted, "Hearing her talk about NewJeans' future made me focus more on her claims because she's the one who actually created them." Others connected with her remarks about living on food delivery app Baemin and constant overwork: "How can anyone report someone who just worked so hard? She just ordered from Baemin and supported a group (NewJeans)." These references to exhaustion and everyday labor strengthened identification with her as an overworked creator rather than a corporate insider.

This framing may have resonated with broader frustrations about the perceived commercialization of K-pop and the erosion of creative integrity (Uribe, 2024; Valge, 2019). As Min appeared to embody sincerity, artistic labor, and resistance to corporate control, HYBE was increasingly portrayed as profit-driven and detached from creativity. Together, these interpretations show that credibility hinged less on verifiable information than on authenticity and shared values, which in turn fuels both trust in individuals and skepticism toward institutions.

The rise of conspiracy and speculation

Alongside the shift in sentiment, the dispute also gave rise to a wave of conspiratorial and speculative narratives. The most prominent was the "HYBE and Dahn World" theory, which appeared in approximately 9.9% comments post-conference, despite being entirely absent beforehand. It claimed that HYBE had ties to a religious cult, citing supposed clues such as hand gestures in choreography, visual motifs in music videos resembling religious iconography, and alleged symbolic language used in branding. Other speculative themes included "HYBE's political motives" and "ILLIT (a rival girl group) copying NewJeans," often drawing on side-by-side video comparisons, similar outfit designs, or shared production styles.

These narratives were identified through thematic coding of randomly sampled comments and were co-constructed within the comments section by participating users. Users drew connections between disparate elements: visual cues from previous music videos like "OMG," past interviews, ambiguous lyrics (e.g., the use of "Jiwon" in the song "ETA*,"* which some claimed was referring to Jiwon Park, the former CEO of HYBE), and subtle patterns in interactions among the artists. While factually unverified, this collective sensemaking reflects participatory misinformation dynamics (Starbird et al., 2019; Starbird et al., 2023), in which participants reconcile emotional responses with a perceived lack of transparency from HYBE.

In such contexts, determining factual status is often impossible: when competing parties advance conflicting "truths," audiences are left to interpret events through emotional and rhetorical cues, using perceived sincerity and authenticity as proxies for credibility. This condition of contested truth is vital to misinformation studies, as it enables unverified claims and rumors to spread without factual resolution. Accordingly, contestation over truth does not negate facticity, but instead causes factual and non-factual information to circulate and be consumed in similar ways, complicating our ability to discern what is actually true. Similar to what Lee et al. (2022) observed in the BTS ARMY fandom, fans' emotional investment and shared community identity can intensify collective information work, both amplifying and attempting to manage rumors and misinformation within participatory networks. This aligns with Jin (2016), who shows that K-pop fandoms' affective and interpretive labor often turns uncertainty into shared meaning and emotionally grounded narratives.

This participatory process extended beyond comment sections into wider public attention. Google Trends data (n.d.-a; n.d.-b; see Appendix B) show a sharp surge in searches for "단월드 (Dahn World)" in South Korea following Min's conference. The top and rising related queries in 2024 included "HYBE," "Bang Si-hyuk," "NewJeans," and "ILLIT"—a pattern absent in 2023, when searches centered on yoga and meditation. This shift suggests that speculative associations first discussed in online comments quickly diffused into mainstream discourse.

The speed of this diffusion underscores the volatility of online discourses and the dynamics of participatory misinformation (Martel et al., 2020; Starbird, 2017): In uncertain contexts, communities construct and amplify unverified narratives, filling gaps left by institutional silence or distrust.

Methods

We collected 36,297 comments from Korean-language YouTube videos addressing the dispute between HYBE and Min Hee-Jin. From this dataset, we used Python to randomly sample approximately 50 comments per day, yielding a final sample of 1,130. This sample size was chosen to balance interpretive depth with analytic scale. YouTube was selected for its central role in distributing key content, including Min's two-hour press conference, and capturing public reaction. While platforms like X (formerly Twitter) have historically served as hubs for pop culture discourse, recent platform changes and diminished user trust have reduced their visibility and influence in this context. TikTok, though globally significant, was

only recently legitimized in Korea through K-pop fandom and continues to have a growing but demographically skewed user base (Abidin & Lee, 2023).

Data collection took place between April 22 and May 16, 2024, using the YouTube Data API. We collected comments from 23 Korean-language videos relevant to the dispute, identified using targeted search terms tied to key figures and themes (e.g., "Min Hee-jin Press Conference," "HYBE Accusation on Min Hee-jin"). These included full press conference footage and news coverage from major broadcasters in Korea. See Appendix C for full selection criteria. Metadata, links for all collected videos, and comments are available in the supplemental materials.

Sentiment analysis

We initially conducted a quantitative sentiment analysis,[3] but the tools consistently misclassified sarcasm, indirect criticism, and emotionally coded language as "neutral." Neutral sentiment appeared to dominate—63.2% before and 75.3% after the press conference—yet manual review suggested otherwise.

Given these limitations, we adopted a qualitative, aspect-based sentiment analysis approach (Liu, 2012; Schouten & Frasincar, 2016) to better capture context and nuance. Using a random sample of 1,130 comments, all three coders used ATLAS.ti software to annotate each comment for general sentiment (positive, negative, or neutral) and directional sentiment (e.g., "positive toward Min," "negative toward Min," "neutral toward Min"). The first author coded the entire sample, and two additional inter-coders independently co-coded 20% of the dataset to assess consistency. All coders worked from a shared codebook and engaged in multiple rounds of comparison and consensus-building. The intercoder agreement rate reached 95.2%.

Qualitative thematic analysis

In addition to sentiment, we conducted a thematic analysis following Braun & Clarke's (2006) framework. Our goal was to identify recurring narratives, emotional framings, and rhetorical strategies that shaped public interpretation of the dispute—particularly those related to misperception, speculation, and trust. The analysis was grounded in a hybrid approach: while initial coding was inductive, theme development was guided by our research questions about misinformation, emotional resonance, and shifts in audience perception.

The coding framework was developed by the lead author in collaboration with two-trained inter-coders, all fluent in Korean and English. Coders completed four phases: (1) initial open coding to identify recurring concepts, (2) intercoder reliability checks using a shared codebook, (3) collaborative comparison and refinement of emerging categories, and (4) final identification and definition of dominant themes. A full list of identified themes is available in the supplemental materials.

Limitations

The timeframe, from April 22 to May 16, 2024, reflects an early phase of the ongoing HYBE-Min Hee-jin controversy. As the situation developed, new developments could have reshaped the narrative after we completed data collection. The findings should be understood as a snapshot of an unfolding event. Future research could extend this analysis to capture longer-term shifts.

Although qualitative coding followed shared protocols and achieved 95.2% intercoder agreement, interpretations involve subjectivity. Comments were nested within users and videos, but because our

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[3] Models included pre-trained Korean-language models (KoBERT, KcBERT) and rule-based approaches using KoNLPy paired with VADER and TextBlob.

focus was on comment-level patterns, we did not account for this dependence. Additionally, while gender and feminist framings were present in audience reactions, especially around emotion and power, they fall outside the scope of this paper.

Finally, our analysis of rhetorical and emotional strategies relied on audience perceptions rather than direct coding of Min's press conference itself. Future research should attend to the official comments made by Min and associated actors to aid in a holistic understanding of what drove audience perceptions and shifts in discourse.

Despite these limitations, this approach provided a nuanced understanding of how emotion, sentiment, and narrative evolved across a high-profile cultural controversy. Combining sentiment classification with thematic interpretation showed not just what people felt, but how they expressed and shared it.

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Competing interests
The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethics
This study did not involve human subjects, clinical trials, or animal experiments requiring institutional review board (IRB) approval. All data analyzed consisted of publicly available online comments. No personally identifiable information was collected or analyzed. As such, informed consent was not required. This research did not report or classify ethnicity or gender of participants.

Data availability
All materials needed to replicate this study are available via the Harvard Dataverse:
https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/YRSCAK

Appendix A: Case study background

Key individuals and groups

- *HYBE Corporation (HYBE):* South Korean multinational entertainment company established in 2005 ("Hybe," 2025). HYBE oversees multiple subsidiaries—such as ADOR, Belift Lab, and Big Hit Music—and is well known internationally as the management company behind BTS.
- *ADOR:* South Korean record label. It was founded in 2021 as an independent subsidiary under HYBE and was formally led by Min Hee-jin ("Hybe," 2025). ADOR is the label behind the girl group NewJeans.
- *Min Hee-jin:* South Korean music producer, art director, and graphic designer. She is the former CEO of ADOR, a subsidiary of entertainment company HYBE Corporation, and the former executive producer of K-pop girl group NewJeans ("Min Hee-jin," 2025)
- *Bang Si-hyuk:* South Korean music executive, record producer, and songwriter who is a founder of the record label Big Hit Music and the chairperson of HYBE Corporation. He is often referred to as "Hitman Bang" ("Bang Si-hyuk," 2024)
- *NewJeans:* South Korean girl group formed by ADOR. The group is composed of five members: Minji, Hanni, Danielle, Haerin, and Hyein. Mainly produced by Min Hee-jin, they debuted in 2022 ("NewJeans," 2025).
- *ILLIT:* South Korean girl group formed by Belift Lab. The group consists of five members: Yunah, Minju, Moka, Wonhee, and Iroha. The group debuted in 2025 ("Illit," 2025)
- *Dahn World:* A controversial religious organization (also known as Body & Brain or Dahn Yoga), founded in South Korea by Ilchi Lee in the 1980s. While it promotes meditation, yoga, and personal development, it has faced longstanding allegations of cult-like behavior, including coercive recruitment practices, financial exploitation, and emotional manipulation (Woo, 2011). HYBE was speculatively linked to it in online discussions surrounding the controversy, though no verifiable evidence has been presented.

Summary

In April 2024, a management conflict emerged between HYBE and Min Hee-jin (Min), CEO of ADOR, the subsidiary responsible for launching *NewJeans*. On April 22, 2024, HYBE accused Min of attempting to seize control of ADOR, triggering an internal audit and widespread media coverage.

According to Min and ADOR executives, prior to April 22, they submitted a whistleblower letter to HYBE raising concerns that HYBE's new girl group, ILLIT, had copied aspects of NewJeans. Shortly afterward, on April 22, 2024, HYBE publicly accused Min Hee-jin and other ADOR executives of attempting to seize control of ADOR, leaking business secrets, and making unauthorized personnel requests, launching both an internal audit and a broader investigation.

Min publicly denied these claims in a two-hour-long press conference on April 25, 2024, where she presented her account of the dispute.

The controversy quickly expanded beyond the official dispute into a broader public issue. Online commentary introduced unverified narratives and speculative claims, including alleged ties between HYBE and the religious movement Dahn World, accusations that ILLIT copied NewJeans' style, and speculation about political motives behind HYBE's actions.

The conflict played out through press conferences, petitions, court proceedings, and public statements, attracting intense national and international attention due to HYBE's central role in the K-pop industry and NewJeans' global prominence.

The dispute remains unresolved, and many conspiracies circulating at the time have not been verified. This case study focuses on the period from April 22 to May 16, 2024, capturing the initial emergence of the conflict, Min's April 25 press conference, and the wave of public commentary and unverified narratives that followed. The study does not extend beyond May 16 because on May 17, 2024, HYBE chairman Bang Si-hyuk issued a public response, which triggered a new wave of statements, conspiracy claims, and petitions. These later developments expanded the controversy substantially, but they fall outside the scope of this analysis.

Timeline of key events

- April 22, 2024: HYBE accuses Min Hee-jin and other ADOR executives of attempting to seize control of ADOR, leaking business secrets, and making unauthorized personnel requests. HYBE initiates an internal audit.
- April 25, 2024: Min Hee-jin holds a two-hour press conference denying HYBE's allegations and presenting her account of the dispute.
- May 17, 2024:
  - Bang Si-hyuk makes his first public response.
  - Members of NewJeans submit petitions to the Seoul Central District Court in support of Min, opposing HYBE's attempt to dismiss her as ADOR CEO.

Appendix B: Google Trends data and visualizations

This appendix shows the Google Trends results illustrating how online attention to 단월드 (Dahn World) in South Korea shifted from wellness-related contexts in 2023 to entertainment- and controversy-oriented contexts in 2024. The comparison integrates "interest over time" charts and tables of top and rising related topics and queries.

Search term and parameters

- Query term: *단월드* [Dahn World]
- Region: South Korea
- Time range: January 1–December 31, 2024 (n.d.-a) and January 1–December 31, 2023 (n.d.-b)
- Category: All categories
- Search type: Web search

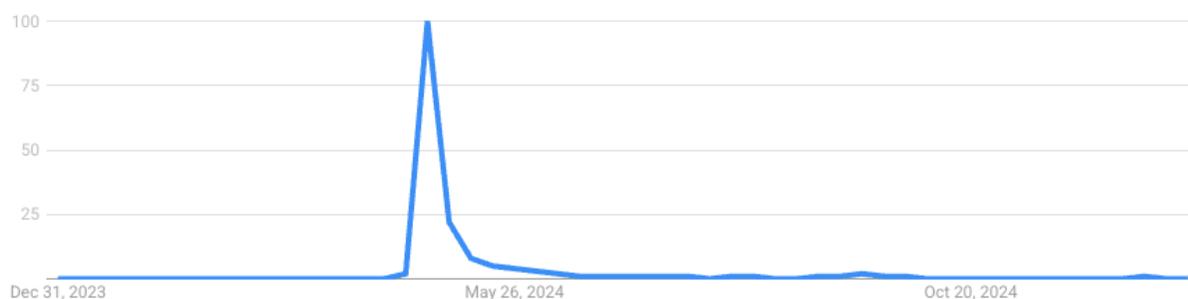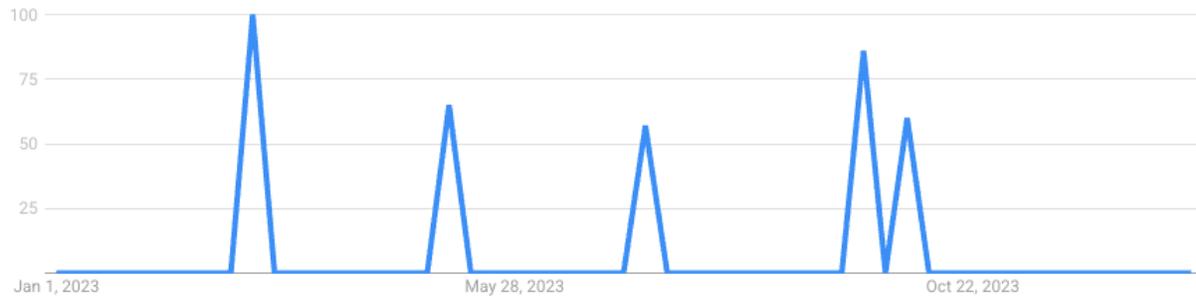*2024 Search interest and associations*

Figure B1. Google search interest over for "단월드 (Dahn World)" in South Korea (2024).

Figure B2. Word cloud of top and rising related topics and queries for "단월드 (Dahn World)" (2024).

In 2024, search interest for "단월드 (Dahn World)" peaked sharply in late April, aligning with Min Hee-jin's press conference and the viral controversy that followed. As shown in Figure B1, public attention was highly concentrated. Figure B2 presents a word cloud generated from a combined dataset of top and rising

related queries and topics from Google Trends (n.d.-a). The semantic focus in 2024 reflects a shift toward K-pop and speculative associations: prominent terms include "HYBE", "NewJeans," "OMG," "ILLIT," "BTS," and "GFRIEND," alongside enduring terms like "Pseudoreligion" and "Religion."

2023 Search interest and associations

Figure B3. Google search interest over for "단월드 (Dahn World)" in South Korea (2023).
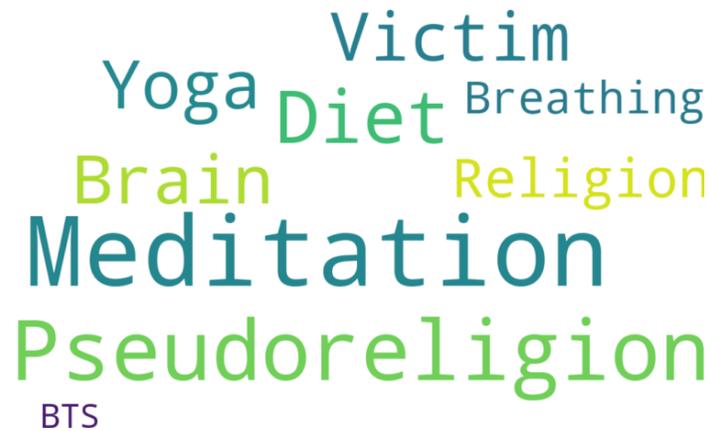

Figure B4. Word cloud of top and rising related topics and queries for "단월드 (Dahn World)" (2023).

Search activity in 2023 followed a more dispersed and routine pattern, with short-lived spikes in attention across the year (see Figure B3). Figure B4 visualizes a word cloud derived from a combined dataset of related queries and topics (Google Trends, n.d.-b). The language framing "Dahn World" in 2023 reflects wellness and alternative health discourses: "Meditation," "Yoga," "Diet," "Breathing," and "Brain" are prominent. While terms like "Pseudoreligion," "Religion," and "Victim" reflect ongoing critique rooted in cult-related perceptions, these associations remained relatively marginal in 2023. Although "BTS" appeared in related terms, the speculation had not yet escalated.

Source links

- 2024 dataset: Google Trends. (n.d.-a). *단월드* [Dahn World]. Retrieved October 28, 2025, from https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=2024-01-01%202024-12-31&geo=KR&q=%EB%8B%A8%EC%9B%94%EB%93%9C&hl=en
- 2023 dataset: Google Trends. (n.d.-b). *단월드* [Dahn World]. Retrieved October 28, 2025, from https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=2023-01-01%202023-12-31&geo=KR&q=%EB%8B%A8%EC%9B%94%EB%93%9C&hl=en

Appendix C: YouTube video selection criteria

To analyze sentiment, themes, and participatory discourse during the HYBE-Min Hee-jin controversy, we curated a dataset of Korean-language YouTube comments drawn from 23 highly viewed videos. This appendix outlines the process used to identify and select those videos.

Search process and terms

Video collection took place between April 22 and May 16, 2024, using the YouTube Data API. The initial list of search terms was developed from early media coverage and trending topics and was expanded using YouTube's auto-suggest feature and frequently co-occurring phrases in user comments. The following Korean-language search terms were used:

- 민희진 기자회견 [Min Hee-jin Press Conference]
- 하이브 민희진 고발 [HYBE Accusation of Min Hee-jin]
- 하이브 민희진 감사 [HYBE Audit of Min Hee-jin]
- 뉴진스 탄원서 [NewJeans Petition]
- 아일릿 표절 [ILLIT Plagiarism]
- 하이브 단월드 [HYBE Dahn World]
- 하이브 입장 [HYBE Response]

These search terms were selected to capture the breadth of narratives, actors, and themes in circulation during the initial stage of the controversy.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Videos were included in the dataset based on the following criteria:

- Original upload by credible sources (e.g., news organizations)
- Korean-language audio
- Had an active comment section at the time of data collection
- Showed high levels of engagement (e.g., views, comments, likes)
- Were surfaced through targeted keyword searches and confirmed for relevance via manual review

Excluded content included:

- Shorts or vertical videos
- Performance-only music-related uploads
- Reuploads or duplicates of existing footage
- Videos with comments turned off
- Non-Korean content

Video types and media sources

The 23 videos in the final dataset included:

- Full-length footage of Min Hee-jin's press conference
- News reports by major broadcasters
- Investigative and commentary segments

Media outlets represented in the sample include:

- JTBC News
- YTN
- MBC NEWS
- Channel A News
- SBS 뉴스 [SBS News]
- 연합뉴스 Yonhapnews
- KBS News

Framing diversity

To ensure representational balance, videos were manually reviewed to assess their framing. The dataset includes a mix of pro-Min, pro-HYBE, and neutral/mixed perspectives. Framing labels were validated through spot-checking video titles, comment sentiment, and presenter tone.

Supplemental video list

A full list of the selected videos, including URLs, channel information, and engagement metrics, is available in the supplemental materials.