

# **Performative Ethics and the Manufacturing of Consent:**

## **International Sanctions as Mechanisms of Global Hierarchy Maintenance**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the intersection of performative ethics, media-manufactured consent, and international sanctions regimes as interconnected mechanisms that sustain asymmetric global power structures. Drawing on cognitive dissonance theory, critical international relations scholarship, and empirical analysis of UN Security Council sanctions data, we argue that virtue signaling divorced from factual grounding not only fails to advance genuine moral progress but actively undermines it by providing psychological cover for complicity in systems of structural violence. Using the UN Consolidated Sanctions List as primary evidence, we demonstrate how sanctions function as a codified global caste system that sorts nations into "opportunity" and "punishment" categories along predictable geopolitical lines. We propose five testable hypotheses and experimental designs for measuring the relationship between performative ethics and substantive moral action, with implications for peace studies, conflict resolution, and international policy reform.

**Keywords:** performative ethics, virtue signaling, sanctions, manufacturing consent, moral licensing, hegemony, DPRK, Korean reunification

### **1. Introduction**

In December 2024, a consumer announced on social media that they had sold their Tesla vehicle and purchased a Volkswagen, citing concerns about Elon Musk's political gestures which they interpreted as Nazi-adjacent. The irony—purchasing a vehicle literally designed by Ferdinand Porsche at Adolf Hitler's personal direction, manufactured by forced labor including concentration camp prisoners, to replace a vehicle made by a man who made an awkward salute—encapsulates the central paradox this article addresses: the growing disconnect between performative ethical displays and substantive moral reasoning in contemporary public discourse.

This is not merely an amusing anecdote about consumer confusion. It represents a broader epistemological crisis in which meme-based moral reasoning has displaced fact-based ethical analysis, creating what we term a "virtue theater" that provides psychological satisfaction while obscuring—and often enabling—genuine structural violence. When the same populations that enthusiastically share social media posts about human rights remain largely indifferent to sanctions regimes that, according to recent research published in *The Lancet*

Global Health (Weisbrot et al., 2025), cause approximately 564,000 deaths annually, we must interrogate the relationship between moral performance and moral substance.

This article proceeds as follows: Section 2 reviews the theoretical frameworks underlying our analysis, including cognitive dissonance theory, the propaganda model, and critical international relations theory. Section 3 presents our analysis of the UN Consolidated Sanctions List as a mechanism of global hierarchy codification. Section 4 examines the media's role in manufacturing consent for these structures. Section 5 proposes testable hypotheses and experimental designs. Section 6 discusses implications for peace studies and reconciliation efforts, with particular attention to Korean reunification. Section 7 concludes with recommendations for bridging the gap between performative and substantive ethics.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Moral Grandstanding and Virtue Signaling**

Tosi and Warmke (2016) define moral grandstanding as "the use of public discourse for moral self-promotion," identifying manifestations including piling on, moral one-upmanship, and excessive emotional displays. Their philosophical analysis has been empirically validated by Grubbs et al. (2019), who developed and validated the Moral Grandstanding Motivation Scale (MGMS) across six studies with over 5,000 participants. Their research found moral grandstanding associated with narcissism, status-seeking, and paradoxically, greater moral conflict—suggesting that those most invested in appearing ethical may be least equipped for genuine ethical reasoning.

The phenomenon intersects with moral licensing research, which demonstrates that performing small ethical acts can paradoxically license subsequent unethical behavior. Monin and Miller's (2001) seminal work established that moral credentials can license prejudiced attitudes. A meta-analysis by Blanken et al. (2015) of 91 studies found a moderate effect size ( $d=0.31$ ) for moral licensing across contexts. Field studies have shown this effect operating at scale: Tiefenbeck et al. found that water conservation feedback reduced water use by 6% but increased electricity consumption by 5.6%, with licensing effects potentially offsetting targeted efficiency campaigns.

### **2.2 Manufacturing Consent in the Digital Age**

Herman and Chomsky's (1988) propaganda model identified five filters shaping media content: ownership concentration, advertising dependence, reliance on official sources, flak as discipline, and fear ideology. Recent scholarship has updated this framework for the digital era. Fuchs (2019) argues all five filters remain operative in digital contexts, with Silicon Valley platforms functioning as new gatekeepers. MacLeod's (2019) edited volume includes Chomsky's own assessment that "the internet and social media changes the propaganda model not at all."

The extension of this model to entertainment media is particularly relevant. Stahl's (2022) documentary research using FOIA requests revealed that the Pentagon and CIA have exercised "direct editorial control over more than 2,500 films and TV shows" since the late 1940s. Löffmann (2013) documents how the Department of Defense Entertainment Media Unit exercises direct editorial control over productions seeking military cooperation, using films to popularize military superiority discourses. Jin and Kim (2023) have developed the concept of "Netflix imperialism" to describe how streaming platforms extend cultural

hegemony, with Korean producers becoming increasingly dependent on Netflix for global distribution.

### **2.3 Critical International Relations and TWAIL**

Robert Cox's (1981) foundational observation that "theory is always for someone and for some purpose" provides essential grounding for our analysis. His distinction between problem-solving theory (which takes existing power structures as given) and critical theory (which interrogates their origins and potential transformation) illuminates how mainstream sanctions discourse functions ideologically.

Third World Approaches to International Law (TWAIL) scholarship further enriches this framework. Anghie (2004) demonstrates that the colonial project lies at the heart of international law, suggesting that contemporary sanctions regimes may reproduce colonial hierarchies under new legitimating discourses. Mutua's (2001) analysis of the "savages, victims, and saviors" dynamic in human rights discourse maps directly onto sanctions rhetoric, where sanctioned populations are simultaneously demonized (as threats) and pitied (as victims of their governments), while Western states position themselves as saviors.

## **3. The UN Consolidated Sanctions List as Codified Global Hierarchy**

### **3.1 Structural Analysis of the Sanctions Regime**

The UN Security Council Consolidated Sanctions List, examined for this study in its December 2024 iteration, contains over 51,000 lines of XML data cataloging individuals and entities subject to asset freezes, travel bans, and arms embargoes. Our analysis reveals striking patterns in the geographic distribution of sanctions targets.

Security Council Report analysis indicates that 8 of 14 UN Security Council sanctions regimes target African states—a geographic concentration that supports critiques of bias in the sanctions architecture. The veto power structure further illuminates the political economy of sanctions: since 1946, Russia/USSR has exercised 120 vetoes (41% of total), while the United States has been the most frequent vetoer since 1970, predominantly to protect Israel from censure. As the *Alberta Law Review* notes, the veto power "is inherently undemocratic," placing the P5 "on a different playing field from the other 187 UN member states."

### **3.2 Humanitarian Impact and Collective Punishment**

The human costs of sanctions regimes have been extensively documented. Gordon's (1999) foundational ethical critique characterizes sanctions as "collective punishment" where "the person punished is separate from the wrongdoer," noting that the United States initiated two-thirds of post-1945 sanctions "to maintain regional and global hegemony."

Recent quantitative research dramatically underscores these concerns. Weisbrot et al.'s (2025) analysis published in *The Lancet Global Health* estimates that unilateral sanctions cause approximately 564,000 deaths annually based on analysis of 152 countries from 1971-2021, with the majority of deaths occurring among children under five. The *Yale Journal of International Law* (2024) documents that Trump-era secondary sanctions on Iran led to 186% and 125% price increases in food and healthcare respectively, despite humanitarian exemptions theoretically remaining in place.

Counterintuitively, Peksen and Drury's (2010) cross-national analysis found that sanctions increase political repression even when aimed at promoting liberalization—suggesting that the stated humanitarian rationales for sanctions regimes are empirically undermined by their actual effects.

### **3.3 The DPRK Case Study**

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea represents perhaps the most comprehensive sanctions regime in human history, making it an essential case study. Smith's (2020) analysis in *Critical Asian Studies* applies just war theory's *jus in bello* framework to conclude that DPRK sanctions were "never likely to result in denuclearization" and that 2017 energy sanctions meant "the country could no longer feed about a third of the 25 million population."

38 North (2019) documented that "at least 4,000 North Korean lives could have been saved" without sanctions-related delays in humanitarian assistance, noting an average 99-day approval process for humanitarian exemptions. This bureaucratic delay—nearly three months to approve medicine or food aid—illustrates how even "targeted" sanctions with humanitarian carve-outs functionally operate as collective punishment.

For citizens of sanctioning countries, the implications are personal. Under Canada's Special Economic Measures Act and United Nations Act, Canadians face criminal liability including imprisonment for providing material support to sanctioned persons or entities. A Canadian citizen sending money to a relative in the DPRK, or a humanitarian organization attempting to provide medical supplies, risks criminal prosecution. As the Just Security analysis (2023) notes, 2022 SEMA amendments creating asset forfeiture "may be impermissible under international law" including expropriation without compensation.

### **3.4 Secondary Sanctions and Extraterritorial Jurisdiction**

Perhaps the most striking feature of the contemporary sanctions architecture is its extraterritorial reach. Meyer's (2009) analysis in the *University of Pennsylvania Journal of International Law* provides foundational legal analysis of secondary sanctions, which face criticism as "illegally extraterritorial" under traditional principles of international jurisdiction.

The *Journal of Conflict and Security Law* (2022) documents that the European Union "consistently views extra-territorial application of unilateral sanctions against European operators...to be in violation of international law," citing a 184-state UN General Assembly vote expressing concerns about the Helms-Burton Act. The UN Special Rapporteur on unilateral coercive measures stated in 2023 that "the United States has for years been imposing sanctions on individuals and entities without national criminal jurisdiction...a clear violation of due process rights."

This creates a remarkable situation in which allies like Canada, the European Union, and others effectively subordinate their own foreign policy sovereignty to American sanctions policy, with their citizens and businesses facing secondary sanctions risk for engaging in transactions that may be entirely legal under their own domestic law. The question of why ostensibly sovereign nations accept this subordination—and why their populations largely acquiesce—brings us back to the role of media in manufacturing consent.

## **4. Media, Entertainment, and the Manufacturing of Enemy Images**

### **4.1 News Framing of Sanctioned States**

Zollmann's (2017) research documents "dichotomised news framing" that presents official enemies as "pariah states" while Western states appear as "benign forces." Cambridge research (2024) found that nation-framed news ("Russia invades") produces worse impressions of entire populations than leader-framed coverage ("Putin invades"), suggesting that framing choices systematically manufacture hostility toward civilian populations who are simultaneously the primary victims of sanctions.

Maier's (2021) analysis of news coverage determinants found that human rights abuse is a weak predictor of media attention, ranking 7th of 16 determinants—suggesting that coverage correlates more with geopolitical alignment than with actual human rights conditions. This finding aligns with Herman and Chomsky's original distinction between "worthy" and "unworthy" victims.

#### **4.2 Entertainment as Soft Power**

The role of entertainment media in normalizing geopolitical narratives deserves particular attention. The documented Pentagon-Hollywood relationship represents explicit coordination, but subtler dynamics operate through streaming platforms. Research on "algorithmic orientalism" (2023) demonstrates that Netflix's recommendation systems promote content presenting adversary nations through American-mediated lenses.

The cumulative effect is a population that has consumed thousands of hours of entertainment depicting certain nations as threats requiring containment, while remaining largely ignorant of the humanitarian costs of the policies enacted in their name. This is not conspiracy but structure: market incentives, government cooperation benefits, and audience expectations combine to produce predictable content patterns.

### **5. Epistemological Degradation and the Shield of Absurdity**

A crucial dynamic protecting existing power structures involves the weaponization of conspiracy theory discourse. Perini and van Schie's (2024) research on the "conspiracy crisis" documents how the "conspiracy theorist" label is strategically deployed to delegitimize heterodox views, noting that beliefs in conspiracy theories have not increased over time despite media narratives suggesting epidemic growth.

This creates a peculiar epistemological shield: genuine concerns about elite impunity become associated with absurd claims through a process of narrative contamination. A real problem (elite networks engaged in illegal activity) gets distorted through internet transmission, becomes an absurd caricature (drinking blood in basements), the caricature gets debunked, and now raising the original real concern marks one as a conspiracy theorist.

The Jeffrey Epstein case illustrates this dynamic perfectly. His crimes were documented, his connections to powerful figures were real, his 2008 sweetheart deal was a matter of public record. Yet for years, raising these concerns invited dismissal as conspiracy thinking—until his arrest made denial impossible. As *Small Wars Journal* (2024) notes regarding elite accountability, during the 1980s S&L scandal over 1,000 bankers were imprisoned; after 2008, only one. The structure of impunity is real; associating its observation with discredited theories protects it from scrutiny.

### **6. Testable Hypotheses and Experimental Designs**

We propose five testable hypotheses emerging from this analysis, with suggested experimental approaches:

### **Hypothesis 1: Performative Ethics and Substantive Action**

**H1:** Public virtue signaling about international human rights will negatively correlate with substantive behavioral engagement with human rights causes.

*Design:* Longitudinal survey tracking social media posting behavior about human rights issues alongside behavioral measures (donations, volunteer hours, policy engagement). Conjoint analysis to isolate relative importance of signaling versus action.

### **Hypothesis 2: Moral Licensing and Sanctions Acceptance**

**H2:** Exposure to "ethical consumption" messaging about products from sanctioned nations will increase acceptance of harmful policies toward civilian populations in those nations.

*Design:* Experimental design with control and treatment groups; treatment receives messaging about ethical consumption choices, followed by measurement of policy attitudes toward sanctioned nations. Between-subjects design to avoid demand characteristics.

### **Hypothesis 3: Media Framing Effects**

**H3:** Nation-framed news coverage (e.g., "North Korea threatens") will produce more negative affect toward civilian populations than leader-framed coverage (e.g., "Kim Jong Un threatens").

*Design:* Randomized exposure to differently framed news articles about identical events, followed by feeling thermometer measures toward civilian populations. Replication across multiple national contexts.

### **Hypothesis 4: Hierarchy Maintenance**

**H4:** UN Security Council sanctions disproportionately target periphery and semi-periphery nations while leaving core nation human rights violations unaddressed.

*Design:* Quantitative content analysis of UN Consolidated Sanctions List using Wallerstein's world-systems classifications. Regression analysis controlling for objective measures of human rights violations (e.g., Political Terror Scale scores).

### **Hypothesis 5: Information Degradation**

**H5:** Accuracy of information about sanctions' humanitarian effects decreases through social transmission chains, with inaccuracy biased toward justification of sanctions.

*Design:* Serial reproduction paradigm (Allport & Postman) applied to factual information about sanctions effects. Measurement of systematic distortion patterns across transmission generations.

## **7. Implications for Peace Studies and Reconciliation**

### **7.1 The Korean Reunification Imperative**

The Korean Peninsula represents perhaps the most significant opportunity for applying insights from this analysis. The division of Korea—now entering its eighth decade—was imposed by external powers and maintained through a combination of military force,

economic pressure, and information control. Korean reunification would benefit the Korean people on both sides of the DMZ while removing one of the most dangerous flashpoints for potential great power conflict.

Yet the same dynamics documented throughout this article obstruct progress toward reunification. Performative anti-DPRK sentiment substitutes for genuine engagement with Korean perspectives. Media framing ensures that Western audiences view the peninsula through strategic rather than humanitarian lenses. The sanctions architecture criminalizes even humanitarian contact between Koreans and those who would support them.

Meaningful progress requires what might be termed "radical factuality"—a commitment to grounding discourse in verifiable reality rather than inherited narratives. This does not require adopting any particular political position on the DPRK government; it requires acknowledging that 25 million human beings live there, that sanctions demonstrably harm them, and that the path to peace runs through dialogue rather than isolation.

## **7.2 Bridging as Praxis**

The analysis presented here suggests a particular role for individuals who can operate across ideological divides—what might be termed "bridge figures." Such individuals are characterized by ideological unboxability: they do not fit neatly into tribal categories, allowing them access to conversations that partisans cannot enter.

The emerging political realignment, in which traditional left-right distinctions increasingly fail to capture actual policy coalitions, creates opportunities for such bridge figures. Skepticism of interventionism, concern about elite impunity, and frustration with performative politics can be found across the political spectrum. Building coalitions around these shared concerns—rather than around tribal identities—offers a path forward.

## **8. Conclusion: Truth as Foundation**

We cannot build anything real on foundations of comfortable lies. The Volkswagen anecdote with which we opened this article is funny precisely because it crystallizes a broader absurdity: moral performance that is not merely disconnected from but actively contradictory to moral substance.

The UN Consolidated Sanctions List is not a neutral technical document; it is a codification of global hierarchy that sorts humanity into those who matter and those who do not. The media ecosystem that manufactures consent for this hierarchy is not a conspiracy but a structure—one that operates through market incentives, professional norms, and accumulated cultural assumptions.

Hypocrisy is not sexy. Virtue signals mean nothing when they are based on memes rather than facts. We cannot make our way forward—upwards and onward—without reconciliation of truth and reality, separating idealistic hopes and dreams from infeasible lies.

The more we consume objectively false narratives through Netflix and news media alike, the worse our society and economic realities will become. This is not a call for cynicism but for rigor. The problems are real: elite impunity exists, sanctions kill civilians, media manufactures consent. Addressing them requires the courage to name them accurately and the discipline to verify claims before amplifying them.

For those of us in sanctioning countries like Canada, this analysis implies personal responsibility. We benefit from and are complicit in a system that demonstrably harms millions. The criminal liability provisions that threaten us for helping sanctioned populations are not natural features of the universe but political choices that could be changed. Whether we pursue that change—or merely perform concern while enjoying our Volkswagens—is the question performative ethics poses but cannot answer.

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