**[Reality bites](https://www.dawn.com/news/1835720/reality-bites)**

[Muna Khan](https://www.dawn.com/authors/1320/muna-khan) Published May 26, 2024

ONE of my high school teachers, an American middle-aged man, used to poke fun at us for being clueless. He would often reference student protests in the 1960s as great examples of attempts to disrupt the system. Students were unafraid of consequences, he’d say and after any example from that time, he’d add “I know, I was there”. Because he worried about our disconnect with the world, he talked to us about apartheid in South Africa — how boycotts can make a difference on all levels and why it should matter to all of us. I remember him making me feel proud of my passport for not recognising South Africa and Israel. We celebrated years later when Nelson Mandela was released in 1990. We were there, now clued in, and would go on to witness the country move to post-apartheid reconciliation.

I’m witnessing something similar, which I can’t yet put a name on for fear I’ll be woefully wrong. So, I’m calling it a shift from ‘don’t care about the world’ to ‘I’m not drinking X because it supports Israel’s war on Gaza’. It’s inspiring.

Generation Z is relentless. They recently upped the ante last month with Blockout 2024, a digital boycott of celebrities for their silence on Gaza.

This began on May 6 on the day of the Met Gala in New York, an annual fashion fundraiser where a ticket costs $75,000, and garners a lot of media attention. Social media was filled with images of the red carpet amid the violence in Gaza. It was a strange juxtaposition and did not go down well. Influencer Haley Kalil’s TikTok video received a lot of backlash as she posted images from the gala lip-synched to ‘let them eat cake’, a reference to Marie Antoinette’s phrase which demonstrates an insensitivity to the challenges faced by the poor, or in this case, the Palestinians. It was tone deaf.

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Social media users responded by calling for a digital guillotine of celebrities and influencers for their silence on Gaza. The distinction must be made between simply unfollowing and blocking; the latter has an impact as the audience blocks seeing any content from the celebrity. It threatens their brand and potential to earn more.

This year’s Met Gala occurred against a backdrop of genocide and famine in Palestine, and global unrest and food insecurity. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, between the third quarters of 2020 and 2022, median global inflation soared from 1.9 per cent to 8.8pc. To watch singer Camilla Cabello walk the red carpet carrying a $22,000 purse made of ice is mind-boggling. That is a little over six million Pakistani rupees — for a block of ice with some flowers in it.

Celebrities and influencers are, to borrow from Karl Marx, today’s opiate of the masses. He was criticising religion in the 19th century when he held it responsible for distracting people from reality. Celebrities don’t just distract, they control. It is materialism at its grossest.

In the West, celebrities have been successful in promoting a pro-Israel narrative, one that is so firmly cemented that Pakistani artists trying to make it big in Hollywood, for example, have been tight-lipped since Oct 7. This includes award recipients of the Oscar, Grammy’s, as well as big Marvel success. And Malala Yousafzai too, who despite many clarifications and statements on X denouncing Israel and calling for a ceasefire, was not spared the ‘digitine’.

We’ve all gone down a celebrity-induced rabbit hole but in our defence, we can’t escape it. News about celebrities — actors, sports people, influencers, Prince Harry, Heeramandi — takes up too much space.

The real problem, of course, is the system that continues to separate the haves and have nots. Celebri­ties join the ranks of Big Tech, Big Banks, Big Money, Big Real Estate, Big Armies, Big Mafias at the top of a tier that controls wealth and power. Generation Z sees how this plays out in Palestine and wants to break this unjust system that allows for internet personalities to succeed by virtue of living on the internet.

Young people have understood the power they hold in their hands that enables celebrities to profit. And they’re reclaiming it with this Blockout.

It is wrong to disparage this moment as internet activism with no impact. We should be supporting our children boycotting brands instead of saying X is not on the BDS list so it has no meaning. Every action counts — fundraising, lobbying, blocking, boycotting — because they are all attempts to reclaim power. Clicks and likes and engagement feed the news and celebrity machinery. Depriving them of their oxygen is a powerful action.

I was there and saw a post-apartheid world and am hopeful I will witness a shift in how Palestine is seen and dealt with — by people and policies.

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