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Internet *Mukbang* (Foodcasting) in South Korea

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As the saying goes, “We are what we eat”; food is closely related to one’s identity. Recently in Korea, Internet users have shed new light on eating through online content called *mukbang*¹. *Mukbang* is primarily known as an online broadcast genre of Afreeca TV², the largest MCN (Multi-Channel Network) in Korea. Individuals called BJs (Broadcasting Jockeys) can broadcast whatever content they want, and viewers can tune in to any channel and enjoy watching them while chatting with the BJs. At the time of writing (2016), about 3,500 channels are on air every day and typically 150-300 thousand users access the live broadcasts. Afreeca TV provides a virtual space for people to communicate whatever they want.

After Afreeca TV began service in 2006, it gained sudden popularity during the anti-US beef import protest of 2008.³ *Mukbang* appeared on Afreeca TV the same year, and has since then expanded dramatically in numbers and formats. Today, 10-15 per cent of all the channels offer the *mukbang* genre, with many BJs displaying their own styles of eating and broadcasting.

The fact that BJs earn a great deal of money by eating on screen surprised the media. They covered this new phenomenon with great attention, especially its economy system: Afreeca TV has a unique profit system entailing the “star balloon”, a type of currency within Afreeca TV. Viewers send star balloons to BJs as a sign of appreciation. One star

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160622 먹방 거대 대형 빅사이즈 초밥 (Big size sushi 巨大醋一)

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balloon costs 10 cents, and viewers can send them to BJs as much as they want while watching a program. Afreeca TV usually gets 30-40 per cent of the profit, while the BJs get 60-70 per cent. Through this process, popular *mukbang* BJs can earn as much as thousands of dollars a night.

As *mukbang* has gained in popularity, television programs have adopted its terms and ideas, and new programs appropriating features of *mukbang* have been successful. This phenomenon provides an interesting case of Internet subculture transforming the legitimate discourse produced by conventional media.

This article examines *mukbang*, as provided by Afreeca TV, and analyzes its implications on contemporary Korean society. Defining *mukbang* as a new and unique phenomenon developed in a specific socio-historical context of Korea, we will discuss its aesthetics and ethics, which break the norms of traditional food culture and challenge the social norms governing the body and subjectivity. Furthermore, this

study addresses the question of how cultural practices on the Internet have challenged the legitimate food culture on TV programs.

Eating in the wonderland of *mukbang*

BJs, the eaters

“The Diva”, an attractive young woman with a perfect body, is one of the most famous *mukbang* BJs. Nearly every day she eats in front of the camera, live broadcasting this for about three hours. Her meals usually consist of multiple courses with abnormally large portions. For example, she eats five portions of noodles and a kilo of chicken in two hours, or four different kinds of large pizzas. Sometimes she stimulates her viewers’ senses via sounds sizzling of meat, chewing, or the dripping of sauce. This usually accompanies her description of the food’s taste.

Besides the Diva, over 1,000 BJs provide *mukbang*. We observed 30 *mukbang* BJs who are currently active, and tried to clarify some of their typologies. The first type can be called the “big food fighter”. BJs of this type have a large, over-sized physique. They frequently launch food challenges: one of them once attempted to finish five bowls of Chinese-style Korean noodles in a very short time. Another has finished ten bowls of this noodle dish in ten minutes, which is a record no other BJ has yet broken. Another has eaten a hundred pieces of sushi at one sitting. And so it goes.

The second type is the “calm eater”. Calm eaters rarely make a fuss, instead only focusing on eating. They do not attempt any extreme challenges, but they do eat quite large portions of foods neatly and with great delight. They provide information about the food and kindly answer viewer questions. Some give detailed information about a new brand or new food on the market, as well as a highly analytical explanation of the food. Others show unique layouts on the screen in order to stimulate viewers’ visual and auditory senses.

The third type is the “weirdo”, who broadcasts eccentric behaviors. An overweight person displaying a grotesque and tough eating style is considered so hilarious that it is even known among foreigners. A man wearing strange makeup demonstrates odd *mukbang*, such as wrestling with a large octopus while cooking or popping corn in a frying pan, causing it to pop all around the room, which appeals a great deal to viewers.

The fourth type is the “cook”. Cook BJs actually cook and eat the foods they make, explaining the recipes to the viewers. Some have previously worked as cooks at hotels or other institutions. Making use of their experience, they provide both *cookbang*, and *mukbang*.

The fifth type is the “pretty boy/girl”. BJs of this type usually focus on their looks and communicate with their fans. *Mukbang* seems to be a subordinate theme here, since they do not eat much and talk very little about food. They set up the lighting to make their facial complexion look fair. Female BJs wear heavy makeup and sexy outfits, and some male BJs show their pretty faces and slim bodies as well.

Fried chicken and convenience stores:

The social implications of food in mukbang

Fried chicken appears the most frequently on *mukbang*. In Korea, fried chicken is popular as a late-night snack and is usually delivered. There are two crucial moments that have formed people’s particular perception of fried chicken. The first was in 1997, when the economic crisis struck Korea. Many of those who lost their jobs at the time opened fried chicken stores with their severance pay; otherwise, a great number of these people would have been ruined. Since then, there is a perception in Korea that fried chicken stores are one of the last solutions for those who have been fired or retire from their careers. Furthermore, during the 2002 World Cup, the demand for fried chicken increased dramatically as Koreans consume it, along with beer, while watching football matches on TV. As a result, the number of fried chicken stores soared from 10,000 to 25,000, creating the conception of fried chicken as the most popular delivery food.

Many BJs also consume foods from convenience stores, buying instant foods, and even ingredients such as eggs and onions, there. According to Jeon (2013), the convenience store is an emblem of the “McDonaldization of society” and is a new urban infrastructure in the highly individualized contemporary society. Korean cities, especially Seoul, are full of so-called “homo nomads”, students and workers living apart from their families. To these people, convenience stores provide food efficiently and comfortably, since they are stocked with all kinds of items. In another sense, the convenience store is an impersonalized space that economizes one’s efforts.

Besides fried chicken, a variety of delivery foods are consumed in *mukbang* – not only pizza and Chinese food, but virtually everything, is deliverable in Korea, from hamburgers to sukiyaki. Recently, the term “nation of delivery” was coined for Koreans, portraying the country’s excellent food delivery system. According to Choi (2013), Korea’s delivery system reflects the society’s exhaustion, whereby people are obsessed with finishing things as quickly as possible.

In sum, what BJs eat contains multidimensional meanings that reflect the current history of Korean society. The prevalence of impersonal relationships and individualization are materialized in their menus. Even though they are consuming junk food, eating this food appeals to many viewers and elicits empathy.

The aesthetics and ethics of *mukbang*

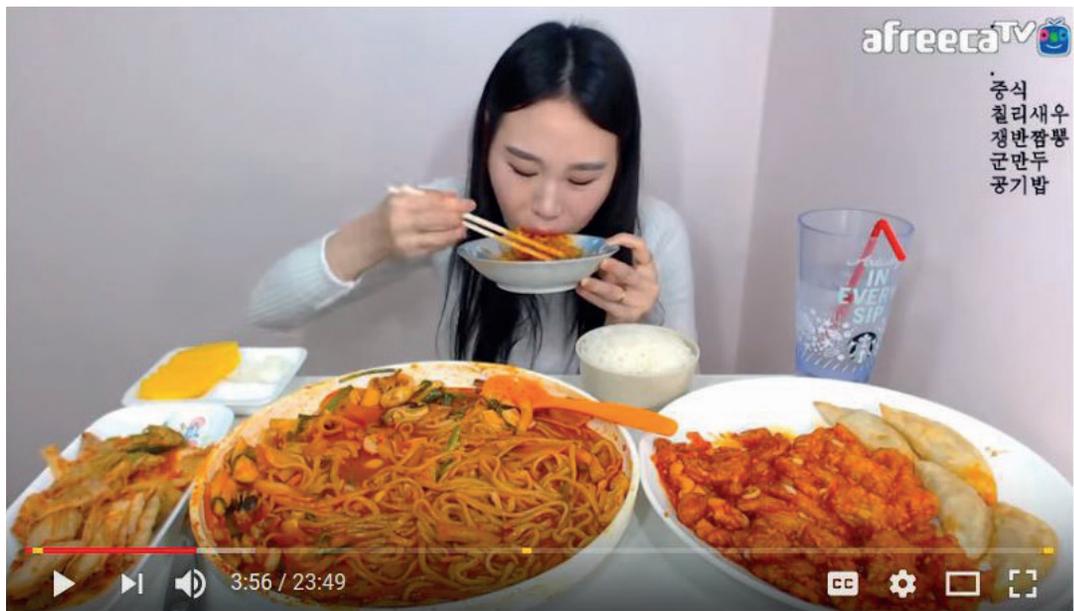
Mukbang exhibits unique aesthetics and ethics, which transgress the conventional norms of the food culture in Korea. First of all, it detaches itself from traditional values regarding meals, such as healthiness and sincerity. Before 2008, all Korean TV food programs concentrated on healthiness: they usually introduced high-quality foods provided by legitimate restaurants, regional foods with a long history, healthy recipes for homemade meals, and information about healthy ingredients. The foods presented by the media were attractively prepared and served in a pleasant atmosphere with many people gathered around. These are fundamentally important aspects of the Korean traditional table, and the media did their best to support them.

However, *mukbang* values neither the good nutrition nor the cozy sentiment that comes from whole-hearted food. It encourages viewers to enjoy instant meals, frozen foods, and junk foods that are easily affordable at convenience stores. Also, BJs mostly eat spicy or greasy foods with a high caloric content. Therefore, the *mukbang* menus are far from what conventional food programs would portray. A few BJs do cook the food themselves, but they still lack the cozy sentiment of the traditional table and the common sense of cooking. For example, a BJ called Mr. Jaw makes popcorn in a frying pan, enjoying the corn popping all over the place, and BJ Pooh makes onigiri that is as big as his head.

Secondly, *mukbang* reverses table manners by showing people grabbing or shoveling food, and devouring it sloppily. Since BJs con-

tinuously communicate with their viewers, they frequently talk with their mouths full. They do not hide the sounds of their eating, but rather emphasize them to deliver a liveliness and stimulate viewers' senses. Some BJs moan, cough, and curse while they eat spicy foods. They don't mind blowing their noses, burping, or even spitting. While some viewers express disgust at these behaviors, most accept them as natural and authentic reactions of the BJs. These rude table manners are typically detected among male BJs. This strengthens the gender stereotype of eating, in which men are allowed to eat wildly but women are expected to maintain their grace. Even though some female BJs are known to eat large portions of food and shovel it in their mouths, they still manage to look pleasant.

Thirdly, BJs repetitively challenge themselves to eat extremely spicy food, which looks quite sadistic. They moan, cry out, cough, and have a runny nose while eating these foods. Many viewers find this funny, and



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ask them to eat other, new spicy foods or add more capsaicin powder to increase the spiciness. This aspect is interesting, as it also shows a gender difference: it is usually male BJs who challenge themselves to eat foods in a sadistic way. They continue adding spiciness for fun, or in desire of conquest: the more spiciness they endure, the more viewers will like them and the more manly they believe they look. A few female BJs enjoy eating spicy foods, but they hold back their pain or express it in a calmer way. Sometimes they look erotic while eating this type of food, breathing heavily and moaning, thereby exciting some viewers and earning balloons from them.

Lastly, *mukbang* portrays BJs swallowing masses of calories of food, neglecting the social pressure to have a slender body. In other words, BJs explicitly show themselves abusing their own bodies. In contemporary Korean society great attention is paid to body size, but *mukbang* BJs do not seem to care about this tacit social requirement on body. Many of them consume tens of thousands of calories at a time, usually at night. Yet most female BJs are slimmer than the average Korean woman. Many viewers find this surprising, and frequently ask about their weight. This transgresses the universal law that the more one eats, the more weight one gains.

The social context of *mukbang*

Single-person households

One of the most noticeable changes in Korea's social structure is the increase in single-person households. According to 2015 population statistics, there are about 5.2 million single-person households; this accounts for 27 per cent of all households and is the first household type to surpass the traditional four- or three-person household. It is predicted that this figure will rise continuously, to reach 34 per cent in 2035. This change is partly attributed to the increase in senior citizens living alone due to aging, but also to the increase in young people in their twenties and thirties living alone, reluctant to marry due to their unstable careers. These young single-person households have affected the industry and consumption structure to such a degree that the term "single economy" has appeared.

This change serves as an important background to the advent of *mukbang*. It is not pleasurable for single-person households to prepare

Table 1. Number and percentage of single-person households in Korea

Year	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015
Number	382,743	660,941	1,021,481	1,642,406	2,224,433	3,170,675	4,142,165	5,203,440
Percentage	4.8	6.9	9.0	12.7	15.5	20.0	24.9	27.2

Source: Statistics Korea (2015). Demographic Trend Census

food only for themselves and eat alone in silence, as this lacks the cozy atmosphere of a family gathering. So they tend to face the TV or a computer monitor while eating, with *mukbang* serving as their “meal mate”, soothing their loneliness during mealtime. People usually access *mukbang* around mealtime or late-night snack time.

The particularity of the Asian table culture can be a complementary explanation for the advent of *mukbang*.⁴ Since the staple food of Asian countries is rice, a culture of side dishes has developed. Therefore, unlike Western countries, Koreans serve several kinds of side dishes and consume them together. So regardless of whether one lives with family or not, one has to set a table consisting of several dishes; this is a great burden to single-person households, most of which contain people in their twenties to early thirties, who lack the knowledge, ability and time for cooking.

Mukbang fulfills both the physical and sentimental hunger of single-person households. First, it fulfills viewers’ physical hunger by providing simple recipes or tips for eating alone. BJs introduce newly released small-portion foods that can be prepared easily. Also, while people living alone often cannot order diverse menus at one time, many BJs are gourmands who eat a great deal of diverse foods in one sitting, thereby offering viewers a vicarious satisfaction.

As Georg Simmel said, “the shared meal... lifts an event of physiological primitivity and inescapable commonality into the sphere of social interaction” (Probyn, 1999), while eating alone lacks social interaction. Food definitely plays a social role that creates bonds between people.⁵ Many single-person households are in want of this bond, but are sufficiently individualized to have given up finding someone to share a meal with. Instead, they try to overcome their sentimental hunger through the interactive nature of *mukbang*. They soothe their loneliness by eating in front of a computer and communicating via the keyboard.

Therefore, *mukbang* is a channel that somewhat drags people out toward social communication. Still, the question remains as to whether this can create a sincere bond and serve a communal function.

Internet, the surplusage generation, and media culture

As Korea entered an information-intensive society within a very short period, the Internet became a very powerful media tool that influenced society in general. The collective power formed in cyberspace satirizes the mainstream culture; and people strengthen their online networking with the object in which they can be immersed, weakening offline networking (Lee, 2010). These characteristics are backgrounds to the Korean Internet culture that began appearing in the 2000s.

Korea's Internet culture accompanied the recent phenomenon of "surplusage culture". "Surplusage" ("잉여; Ying-Yeo) is a neologism indicating a person wandering around cyberspace, creating parodies, compounds, and distorted expressions, investing their abundant time capital. These activities that seem tedious and useless make up a great cultural stream on the Internet. Surplusage culture is characterized as useless, extreme, trivial, stupid, reckless, and immature.⁶ Kim (2011) defines the activity of surplusage as something that is done with a great self-satisfying passion but is not given any value at all in a social sense.

Mukbang is definitely an activity of surplusage in the sense that Kim explains. *Mukbang* BJs consider themselves surplusage. Their food challenges and eating in front of strangers are completely useless things, except for a few BJs who earn enough money to allow them not to have to hold other jobs. Most BJs start their broadcasts solely for their own satisfaction and fun. *Mukbang* viewers consider themselves surplusage as well. They are conscious that they have nothing to do except watch the dumb behavior of other surplusages and sneer at themselves.

In contemporary Korean society, the young generation is suffering from severe competition and high unemployment rates. Many young people find themselves without a job or affiliation after a long education, and feel lost. Officially, most of them can be classified as NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training). The number of NEET in Korea has increased to 1.63 million, which accounts for 17 per cent of youth aged 15 to 29 years. Some 42 per cent of these young NEET

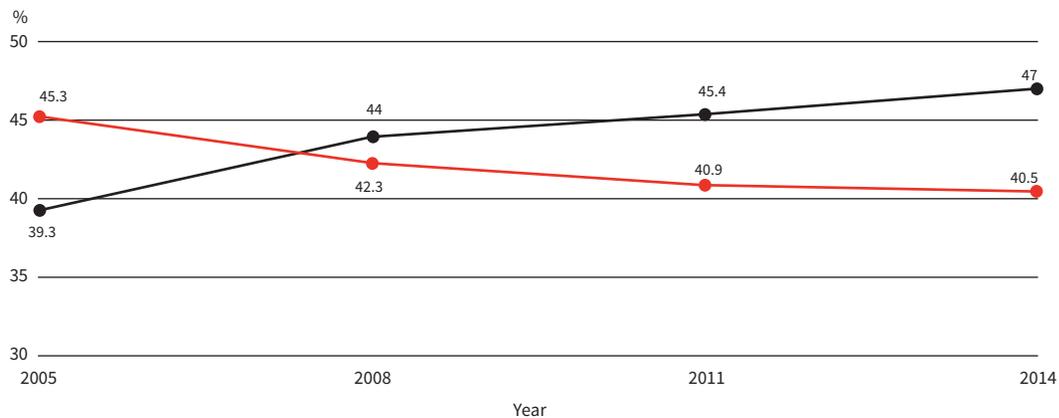


Figure 1. Rate of students and employed among non-NEET, aged 15 to 29 (per cent)

Source: Hyundai Research Institute (2015). Characteristics and Implications of Young NEET.

are without a job for more than a year. Graph 1 indicates the rate of students and employed among the population aged 15 to 29, and shows that the rate of students is rising while that of those who are employed is decreasing. This implies that a growing number of students in their twenties postpone graduation, failing to find a decent job. Since their student status gives them a feeling of belonging or stability, they tend to remain students. Thus, the percentage of the NEET could be more than statistics indicators, and the fear of NEET being their near future is a shared sentiment among the young population.

The parent generation of the NEET had to survive the post-economic crisis of 1997, with many opening fried chicken or convenience stores as their last resort, as mentioned. The NEET, who are in the aftermath of the economic crisis of the late 2000s, do not even dare start a business. The prevalent sense of “social loser” among young people and their socioeconomic status as NEET sustain the online surplusage culture. Consuming fried chicken and convenience store foods on camera, and watching it, might be one of the ways of enduring this time of defeatism.

Conclusion:

Subcultural power and the hegemonic process

As *mukbang* gained in popularity, a hegemonic process taken on by conventional TV is observed: new TV food programs have recently appropriated the culinary aesthetics and ethical attitudes developed by Internet *mukbang* (Hong & Park, 2016). Conventional food programs have typically introduced fancy foods cooked by professional chefs, or exotic foods that are not available in everyday life. Also, they have always emphasized the healthiness of foods and recipes. But, as they embrace the ethics of *mukbang*, they have started portraying junk food such as instant, frozen, and high-calorie foods. The standard of excellence concerning food has been altered as well. Its excellence was originally evaluated based on taste, presentation, the elaborateness of recipes, and the professionalism of chefs. But after *mukbang*'s influence on TV, it is judged only by the eater's satisfaction. If the eater is content with the food, it does not matter how much fat or spice is used to prepare it. Thus, the hegemony of judgement for cooking and food has shifted from top-class chefs to ordinary eaters.

TV programs do not exactly copy the formats of Internet *mukbang*, but rather adapt them to the television platform by negotiating with the norms of conventional food programs: they are either aired on a cable channel (which requires less public responsibility than terrestrial channels) or aired late at night on terrestrial channels; and they omit, dilute or rework the components of Internet *mukbang*.

Also, TV appropriates Internet *mukbang*, rearticulating the dominant differential system of gender into a new format. In traditional food culture it is the woman who cooks for the family, with the exception that the man does the cooking when it comes to "creation".⁷ This role division between the sexes seemed nullified in Internet *mukbang*, with women and men eating on both sides of the screen and the cooking diminished to an instant boiling or replaced with delivery foods. But in the *mukbang*-influenced TV programs most cooking guests are men, and professional male chefs are considered sexy; on the other hand, men as everyday cooks and nurturers are portrayed as effeminate. This representation still holds onto the dominant ideology of the sexual labor division between the creator/producer and the re-creator/reproducer.

However, we can still say that it is a remarkable phenomenon that *mukbang* is imposing negotiations for TV to deal with a new system of value regarding the food culture, even though it is contrary to the justified and consensual values of good nutrition. This proves how powerful the influence of the Internet media culture on contemporary Korean society is. *Mukbang*, marked by its special expressivity, resonates with the social and communicational needs of the surplusage generation, the majority of them living alone and eating alone. The generational dimension of Internet *mukbang* and its anti-conventional aesthetics and ethics toward the body and the diet permit us to interpret it as a unique subcultural practice. The self-consciousness of viewers' NEET situation and of the nature of the time-consuming "useless" activities they are practicing through *mukbang* creates a subcultural potential for the youth.

Notes

1. Abbreviation for food broadcasting in Korean, which can be translated to 'food-casting'. It includes all kinds of programs on TV and the Internet showing scenes of eating as an important part of the content.
2. Abbreviation for 'Any Free Casting' TV.
3. During the protest, thousands of people occupied the streets and police took action to control the demonstrators. People who were angry at the police brutality started filming with their portable recording devices to deliver lively scenes and expose the violence. In the process, Afreeca TV was mobilized as a main platform for these recordings.
4. The high rate of single-person households alone cannot explain the advent of *mukbang*, since Western countries also have a great deal of single-person households. In Northern European countries such as Denmark, Norway and Finland, the share of single-person households reached 40per cent in the 2000s. (URL: http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/People_in_the_EU_%E2%80%93_statistics_on_household_and_family_structures)
5. The word "companion" originates from the meaning "person who eats bread with someone else". In Korea as well, there are some words that indicate the importance of food in human relationship, such as "*bapjung*", an attachment that grows between people who share meals for a long time.
6. For example, some count the number of strawberry seeds in a strawberry yogurt pot, collect all the bones after eating chicken, or hack a certain Internet server for no reason.
7. The extreme majority of professional chefs are male.

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