

# Consuming: 'Mukbangs'

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Until the creation of *YouTube* in 2005, the most common form of marketing, advertisement and entertainment was through television (Sinclair, 2012). Due to *YouTube's* rapid growth, it became one of the biggest platforms on the internet, attracting 2 billion users monthly. In 2009 the internet experienced a large inflow of YouTubers and bloggers which initiated the influencer phenomenon, allowing individuals to create careers through platforms such as *YouTube*. The ease of sharing and accessing videos through social media has meant that *YouTube* has enabled a vast number of videos to go viral (Broxton *et al*, 2013). This expansion of the viral phenomena, also considered as 'the cultural politics of network culture' (Taylor, 2001), gives viewers the power to both create and spread viral content.

According to Ford *et al* (2015) viewers play a pivotal role within the 'spreading' of media and serve as 'passive carriers of viral media', meaning that they determine the creator's value. Ford *et al* (2015) also highlights 'ruinous fads and foolish fashions' with no rationalised evaluation, transferring through content creators in a bid to go 'viral' and enabling mass exposure. Furthermore, Davenport and Beck (2001) argued that latemodern day society has transitioned to a society where obtaining attention is a new form of capital. A creator economy is built of over 50 million privatised content creators using methods such as monetisation and software design to enhance growth and exposure (Bhargava, 2022) and

has enabled the rapid growth of small businesses (Vega, 2007).

An individual who has power over their product within craft consumption is referred to by Campbell (2005) as the craft producer. This individual incorporates their individuality and mass produces their product creating a more personalised brand. A recent study on what American children wanted to be when they grew up found that becoming a

YouTuber (29%) was more popular than being an astronaut (11%) (Leskin, 2019). This new form of power, where the many watch the few, is referred to as the synopticon as opposed to the few watching the many, which is referred to as the panopticon (Mathiesen, 1997). Mathiesen (1997) proposes that we have

evolved into a 'viewer society' where the few are surveilled, expressing synopticon as a great amount focusing on something condensed.

A *mukbang*, otherwise known as an eating show, originated from South Korea in 2010 (Hong, 2017) and is an online broadcast of a host/creator consuming food while also 'interacting' with the audience (McCarthy 2017). This trend went viral (rapidly traveled across the world) giving creators new content and a means of banking in on a new trend producing millions of views, and making *mukbang* a high income career (Burgess and Green, 2018). Typically, a *mukbang* is prerecorded,



however, creators do live-stream *mukbangs* on platforms such as *YouTube*, *Twitch* or *TikTok* (McCarthy 2017), while also expanding their presence on these platforms.

*Mukbang* creators have the power to individualise their content to accommodate their viewers' preferences and requests (Balakrishnan and Griffiths 2017; Kircaburun and Griffiths 2018). *Mukbang* creators also understand the correlation between the type and amount of foods consumed and the amount of views generated (Gibson, 2022).

Recent studies have demonstrated the various reasoning behind viewing content such as *mukbangs*. First, for entertainment reasons: Choe (2019) argues that viewers have individual gratifications from viewing *mukbangs*, including the pleasure of viewing the *mukbanger* making eating sounds such as chewing, swallowing and slurping (or ASMR - Autonomous sensory meridian response) (Young and Blansert, 2015), which are thought to heightened viewers' emotion of telepresence (Woo, 2018). Second, they can be an escapist compensatory strategy where viewers use *mukbang* as an escapism of stress, while others would use it as a utensil for observing other individuals eating foods that they personally would not have access to (Hakimey and Yazdanifard, 2015).

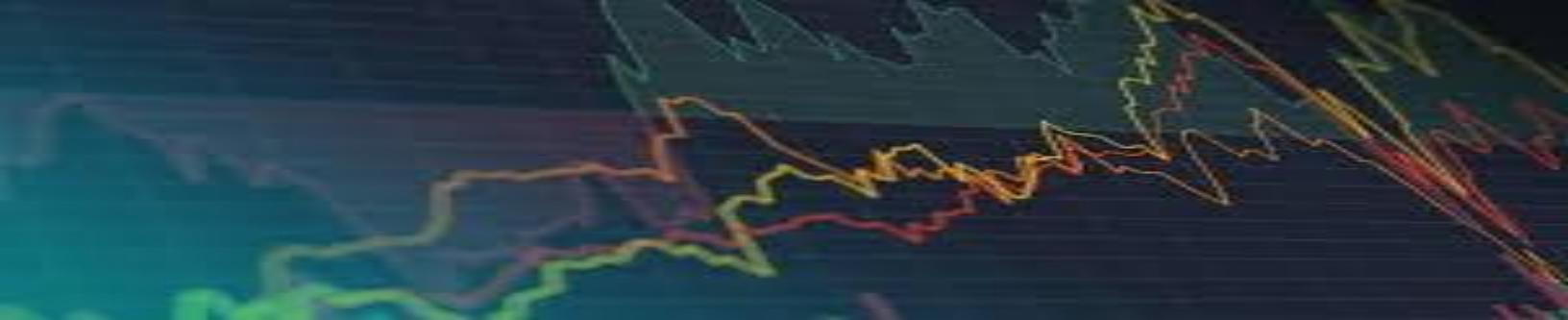
Third, sexual reasons feature as *mukbangs* may be seen as fetishising women eating (Schwegler-Castañer, 2018) and the possibility of sexual objectification of the female body and the reinforcement values concerning consumerism and thinness (Kirkpatrick, 1978). Fourth, social reasons propel viewers as *mukbang* videos can counteract isolation and loneliness through enabling interaction

with a virtual community who share similar interests (Schwegler-Castañer, 2018). Finally, food management strategies: Hakimey and Yazdanifard (2015) argued that viewers watched *mukbangs* to help food cravings and to eat vicariously through *mukbangers* if they were on diets, Choe (2019) further stated that *mukbangers* assisted with food cravings. However, Gillespie (2019) argued that the main factor driving viewers watching *mukbangs* was the 'magical eating fantasy' (eating without suffering the consequences).



Watching *mukbangs* has been shown to have both negative consequences (such as addiction of *mukbang* watching and increased disordered eating) and positive consequences (such as a reduction in disordered eating). Psychological therapies such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) have been argued to be effective in overcoming eating disorders (Brownley et al. 2016) or reduce compulsive sexual behaviours such as watching pornography (Sadiza et al. 2011), and could potentially be applied to problematic watching of *mukbangs*.

A typology of participant and viewer perspectives can be established using comments left by viewers under videos of *mukbangs* (Strand and Gustafsson, 2020). For the participant perspective, viewers comments were categorised into sections similar to those addressed previously - reduction of guilt of viewers' own eating, increased eating, obsessive and self-destructive behaviours - whereas the viewer perspective involved body shaming, amazement, envy, and trend development (Kircaburun et al., 2021). Viewers' main attraction to *mukbangs* is the amazement of the amount of food consumed (Kircaburun et al., 2021). There is a clear correlation



between the amount of food consumed and the ‘unhealthiness’ of that food and the most watched and least watched videos (Kircaburun et al., 2021). This implies the viewers prefer watching a large amount of food being consumed (Strand and Gustafsson, 2020).

For a *mukbanger*, this means that they get stuck in a vicious cycle of putting their health at risk to generate and maintain views on their channel and conforming to viewers’ requests, as without these views the creators would not be making money, the creator becoming a prisoner to the viewer, since if the creator stopped making extravagant, ‘unhealthy’ content, then they could lose everything they have worked for, in addition to risking their own mental and physical health. Creators can become consumed by the number of views (which translates to money) generated therefore making it harder to break the cycle of this arguably ‘easy’ method of earning money (Ramage, 2022).



A prime example of the creator being a prisoner to their viewers is *Mukbanger* Nicholas Perry who is known as *Nikocado Avocado*<sup>1</sup> (Ramage, 2022). Perry’s health issues have resulted in him having to use scooters and oxygen tanks, yet he still exploits these serious health issues with videos captioned ‘*My New Diet As A Disabled Person*’ (Nikocado, 2021). Perry has been criticised as ‘slowly killing himself for views’ and that he is ‘throwing away his health, his wellbeing, his happiness for the sake of some *YouTube* views because his audience continues

to eat it up.’ (Penguinzo, 2021) and that he is ‘capitalizing off of drama (surrounding his health) for views’, thus catering to the consumer society (Goodwin et al, 2013) by acknowledging the presence of a synoptic surveillance society (Gouck, 2018). ‘If you make three to five thousand pounds from advertising revenue—sometimes five to twenty

thousand—off the back of your videos, ask yourself: would you stop?’ (Ramage, 2022: n.p.).

Giddens (1991) described modern society as one in which we are faced with risks based upon the personal decisions we make throughout our lives. He suggests that due to

individuals’ class, their trajectories are obstructed or uplifted, meaning regardless of the free-willed choices made, it is still influenced by wealth and class. Giddens (1991) also addresses the observation behaviour of individuals within society by other individuals as being a key factor of reflexive modernity (Lash, 1993). Due to the growth and progression of society (late modernity) which influences individuals’ ways of life, for example, risks provided through late modern society including hazardous waste materials, pollution, and labour markets (Cottle, 1998). Beck (1992) calls this the ‘risk society’, arguing that the individual has the power to evaluate the potential risks posed to them and to decide if those risks are worth taking. This argument can be applied to the *mukbanger* knowingly consuming mass amounts of food for views knowing the risk factors that may come with that choice.

<sup>1</sup> Perry has over 5.5 million subscribers to his channel and will regularly receive over 1 million views on his videos. Perry, who weighed around 155 pounds at the beginning

of his mukbang career, now weighs over 400 pounds as a result of consuming food through performing (Ramage, 2022).

In summary, *mukbangs* illustrate the popularity of surveillance and consumerism. This reflection has examined the rise of *mukbangs* and the effects it has on both the viewer (consumer) and the creator, and the risk factors that accompany the individual's decision (from both sides) to partake/interact within this social media trend/community.


Creators are watched by viewers due to the content of *mukbangs* being deemed interesting to them, while the risks to a *mukbang* creator can be high, as illustrated with the case of Perry. Creators can become consumed by the amount of views (money) generated, making it hard to break the cycle of this arguably 'easy' method of earning money (Ramage, 2022).



The Best KOREAN MUKBANG Channels Ever 🍜🍗

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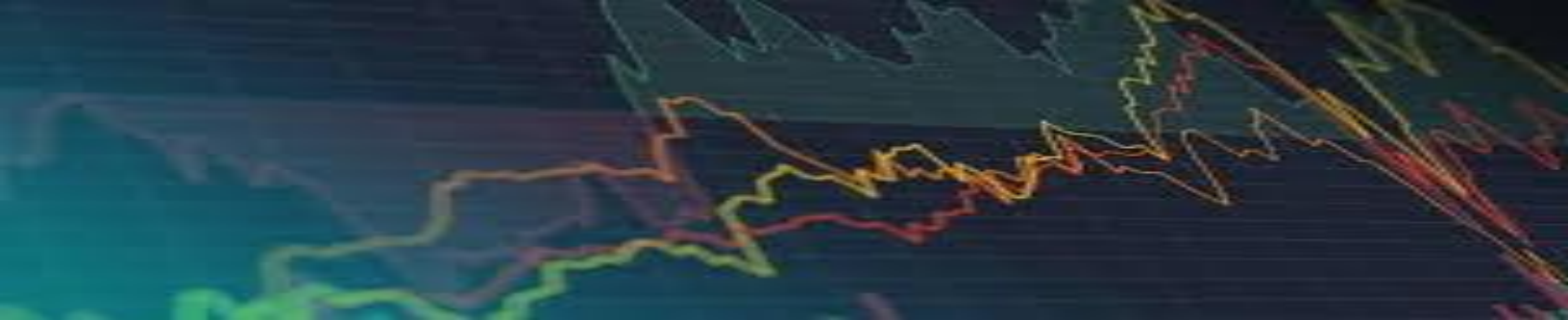
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