

Introducing Korean Popular Culture

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Chapter 23

Precarious Eating

Young Koreans' Digital Practice of Mukbang

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23 Precarious Eating

Young Koreans' Digital Practice of Mukbang

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Given the phenomenal popularity of mukbang (a live-streamed eating show) among young people, first in Korea and now globally, it is no longer a secret that they like to watch other people eating and cooking in the digital age. This chapter provides an overview of the evolution of mukbang culture in Korea while exploring the sociocultural meanings of this new cultural phenomenon. The chapter suggests that mukbang as a social phenomenon is deeply rooted in the precarious contexts of Korean youth, also known as the *ingyeo* generation. Young people's increasing engagement with mukbang illustrates how a shifting sociocultural structure engages with an emerging affective structure through digital mediation. Young Koreans' negotiation of their precarious present and future through vicarious experiences of binge eating implies how the basic needs of eating are mediated, spectacularized and resignified as a subcultural practice.

Mukbang Goes Global

A friendly looking South Korean (hereafter Korean) woman in her 20s broadcasts herself gobbling up 240 sushi pieces in one sitting on her personal channel on the Korean live-streaming platform AfreecaTV. This young woman, known as Tzuyang, is among many other Internet influencers that frequently perform binge eating on their personal channels. In each video, Tzuyang eats various types of food extravagantly – far more than the amount a person would consume weekly. By binge eating for an anonymous audience on the Internet, she has become a microcelebrity, or influencer – that is, an ordinary person who becomes popular online and is committed to “deploying and maintaining one's online identity as if it were a branded good” (Senft 2013: 346). After her debut in 2018 at the age of 21, Tzuyang became a pioneering eating show performer. Amid her stardom in 2020, viewers accused her of using undisclosed advertising (known as backdoor advertising or *dwitwanggo* in Korean) in her content. Tzuyang publicly apologized for the controversy and announced that she was quitting her online broadcasting career, although she returned to the job after a three-month break (Lee and Abidin 2021). Her channel regained popularity. As of August 2022, Tzuyang's YouTube channel has 6.75 million subscribers, and it is estimated that she may earn as much as a million US dollars annually.

Tzuyang's anecdote reveals important aspects of the digital mediation of gastronomic practices in 21st-century Korea. Increasingly, young people are showing how and what they eat to anonymous viewers through digital platforms. Their desire in presenting and performing eating online is to be microcelebrities who attract large audiences and make large profits. This desire is subject to the continuous pressure of sharing, commodifying and marketing their lifestyle – especially eating and cooking – to others. Furthermore, as Tzuyang's involvement in backdoor advertising shows, the digital performance of influencers' seemingly ordinary practice of eating

is often interwoven with the commercial interests of corporations that seek to promote their products through “ordinary” user-generated content. On the other side of the camera, a large audience of young netizens follows eating shows in search of pleasure, comfort and meaning. Through digital platforms on which user-generated content is flourishing and shared, young people watch other people’s everyday practice of eating, which is now globally referred to as *mukbang*. Mukbang, an initially Korean phenomenon and term referring to “eating” (*muk*) and “broadcast” (*bang*), has become so popular globally that *Oxford English Dictionary* registered the term as a Korean-origin English word in 2021. The dictionary defines mukbang as “a video, especially one that is livestreamed, that features a person eating a large quantity of food and addressing the audience.” Indeed, mukbang has increasingly become a global phenomenon, as has the term’s use. Numerous global vloggers and stars have engaged with the digital practice of mukbang. This digital gastronomic culture reveals how the mundane activity of eating becomes a social practice with complex cultural meanings. In particular, young Koreans’ engagement with mukbang involves affective, networked, multisensory and commodified experiences of eating (Kim 2021).

To understand the meanings behind this global phenomenon, it is essential to examine mukbang’s emergence, development and cultural politics and explore how it engages with young people’s participatory culture. Thus, this chapter examines how and why mukbang flourished as a popular digital media genre among Korean youth, especially in the 2010s and 2020s, and the phenomenon’s implications for understanding young people’s negotiation of the precarity involved in digital capitalism.

Evolution of Mukbang

While mukbang had already emerged in the 2000s – specifically, through anonymous Internet users in 2009 – the trend became significantly popular in the 2010s. Its popularity grew even stronger via the global platform YouTube in the 2020s (Kim 2018). The mukbang phenomenon has also been observed in the overseas social media landscape. The global popularity of mukbang is evident in the increase in Google Trends’ data on mukbang as a search term. The English term “mukbang” has increasingly been searched worldwide since 2015; interestingly, the search frequency rapidly picked up at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. The term appeared in Korean news media in the early 2010s, followed by overseas media coverage in the mid-2010s. Taking the example of several mukbang influencers, who have attracted large numbers of subscribers/followers and made significant profits, Korean and overseas news media have described mukbang as a cultural export of Korea that constitutes a newer phase of the Korean Wave, or *Hallyu* – the global dissemination of Korean media and popular culture (Cha 2014; Ellis 2018; Lee 2018b). Although mukbang was initiated and advanced by Korea’s vibrant technological and socioeconomic contexts and Internet users, the genre has quickly become a “borderless meme” (Ellis 2018). After originating along with AfreecaTV, mukbang evolved as a global genre of vlog through YouTube. YouTube-based, vlog-type eating shows are referred to as second-generation mukbang, compared to the original mukbang that emerged primarily in interactive, live-streaming videos (Rüdiger 2020).

Mukbang has been growing on the Internet and particularly on YouTube. Many mukbangers have been among the most influential YouTubers in Korea. For example, mukbang channels were ranked highly among Forbes Korea’s Korean Power YouTubers in 2021 (Lee 2021). The best-known mukbang channel, Jane ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response), was ranked at the top of the list, followed by two other eating channels, HongYu ASMR and Hamzy, ranked second and third, respectively. As of August 2022, each of these channels has over a million subscribers – Jane ASMR (16.8 M subscribers), HongYu ASMR (13.8 M) and

Hamzy (10.2 M). Most videos on these channels have been viewed at least a million times, and several videos have been watched more than 100 million times. Given their large subscriber bases and video view counts, these mukbangers are ahead of many Korean celebrities and K-pop stars, including IU, who is especially popular among young people (8.05 M subscribers) and is known for her vibrant social media presence.

Drawing on content analysis of mukbang channels, Hong and Park (2017) have provided a typology of the five most common live-streamed mukbang videos: (1) the “big food fighter,” who binge eats; (2) the “calm eater,” who eats quietly and with great delight; (3) the “weirdo,” who broadcasts eccentric eating practices; (4) the “cook,” who cooks and eats the food they make; and (5) the “pretty boy/girl,” who focuses more on his/her looks than eating itself while seeking to chat with his/her fans. Among these types, the most common components of mukbang are binge eating by an attractive young woman.

Mukbang uniquely reflects how and what young Koreans desire to eat, actually and imaginarily. In terms of *how to eat*, mukbang’s primary characteristics are “to eat a lot, to eat fast, and to eat with relish” (Bruno and Chung 2017: 159). The popularity of watching binge eating implies that viewers may desire to derive vicarious pleasure from watching the excessive and extreme consumption of food. Early mukbang broadcast jockeys (BJs) on the Korean-based AfreecaTV platform also popularized the binge eating practice as a simple method of attracting more viewers for a longer time (Bruno and Chung 2017: 159).

In terms of *what to eat* in mukbang, junk food has been favored by both BJs and their fans. According to Kang et al.’s (2020) extensive analysis of mukbang videos on YouTube (drawing on a sample of 5,952 videos viewed more than 10,000 times), over 90% of mukbang videos portray the consumption of food purchased rather than food cooked by mukbangers, while 83.5% of the videos show overeating. According to the study, the food consumed in mukbang includes fast/junk food (15.7%) or instant food (18.4%). That is, the food culture portrayed in most mukbang videos is distinguished from the middle-class culinary culture that implies sophistication, moderation and elegance (Kim 2021: 112). Fried chicken, a popular nighttime snack and delivery food item among Koreans, appears to be the most frequently consumed food item in mukbang videos (Hong and Park 2017). The kind of food consumed reveals the shifting gastronomic culture of Korea, where instant, fast and delivered food has become prevalent compared to homemade, family-oriented food (ibid.).

Another common component of mukbang videos is the online interaction between mukbangers and their viewers/fans. Since its emergence as a form of personal broadcasting on the AfreecaTV platform, mukbang has been associated with live interactions between video creators and viewers – often through live chat. To attract viewers and compete with other eating shows, mukbangers would actively and immediately interact with their viewers, often while sharing exaggerated or extreme content. Such interaction enabled mukbang BJs, especially on AfreecaTV, to develop their character and content (Song 2018). Mukbang videos on YouTube are not live-streamed but uploaded after editing, rendering mukbang on YouTube a subgenre of the vlog. Like other vloggers, mukbangers on YouTube try to interact with their viewers by utilizing several conversational strategies in their video monologues (e.g. the use of imperatives) or in the comment box (Rüdiger 2020). The mukbang genre has been characterized by its “interactive, spontaneous and fluid construction of narratives and behaviors in the show,” in which the creator’s authorial agency and viewers’ ontological status are not necessarily fixed but rather interwoven (Park 2020: 91).

These common features, such as the binge eating of instant food while interacting with viewers, are exemplified with variations in the aforementioned popular mukbang channels. For example, Hamzy is a young mukbanger in her early 30s who eats various comfort foods in ordinary settings – especially in her home. Hamzy’s videos highlight the mukbanger’s eating

process (and sometimes cooking process) in close-up shots. She consumes a single food item or experiments with an interesting combination of items (e.g. instant noodles and octopus). In comparison, Jane ASMR and HongYu ASMR emphasize ASMR components and thus do not even show the mukbanger's whole face. Instead, their videos show close-ups of the mukbanger's mouth consuming food, differentiating them from other mukbang channels that present the mukbanger's face. Despite their different styles, these mukbangers share their effort to maximize the multisensory presentation of eating processes – through facial expressions and/or natural sounds. These three most popular mukbangers focus more on eating and ASMR than on speaking about food. However, on many other mukbang channels, talking about food and other topics while eating constitutes an essential component of the content (Park 2020; Rüdiger 2020). For example, Tzuyang, introduced at the beginning of the chapter, discusses the food items she eats in her videos. Moreover, Hamzy created a spin-off channel documenting her everyday life, probably to complement her mukbang channel, which does not involve direct verbal communication.

Overall, mukbangers' gastronomic activities look simultaneously *ordinary* and *extraordinary*. Similar to other lifestyle vlog content, the mukbang videos are *ordinary* because mukbang reveals what ordinary people do every day (e.g. eat) in a casual setting (e.g. a dining room or a kitchen). Meanwhile, many mukbang videos are *extraordinary* in that they present an excessive amount of food consumed by seemingly ordinary people – mukbangers and their fans often refer to binge eating as a “challenge” or “fight.” The combination of ordinariness and extraordinariness may be a factor behind the rise of mukbang, as viewers and fans may want to see how ordinary people eat extraordinarily.

While the mukbang phenomenon has evolved on digital platforms that allow users to produce and share content, the traditional network TV industry has also adopted the concept and format of mukbang (Hong and Park 2017). Korean lifestyle TV shows have extensively incorporated mukbang components – eating, cooking, or talking about eating/cooking – since the mid-2010s. The increasing number of network TV eating/food programs has contributed to mainstreaming the practice of watching others eat on screen and has, in turn, facilitated the exponential growth of mukbang content online. Although the eating components have been rapidly popularized in network TV programming, the principal format of mukbang is still user-generated video (vlog or personal broadcast). Instead of watching network TV-produced eating shows, young viewers have appeared far more excited about personal mukbang broadcasts online, especially on AfreecaTV and YouTube (Seo 2022). Through user-generated mukbang content, young viewers may explore “the excessive aesthetics of frugality” and enjoy the “deviant mood,” nuanced against the dominant dietary culture (Kim 2021: 111). Undeniably, user-generated mukbang has introduced the pleasure of vicarious eating to Korea's media landscape while questioning traditional social norms related to eating and food (Hong and Park 2016).

Technological and Sociocultural Factors behind Mukbang Culture

Watching someone eating on screen is a relatively new phenomenon that has emerged along with the increasing influence of digital platforms, such as AfreecaTV, YouTube and Twitch. The mukbang phenomenon may symptomatically reveal how Korean youth in the 21st century utilize digital technologies to cope with a shifting sociocultural structure. Arguably, mukbang was initiated and facilitated by interwoven factors – primarily technological and sociocultural factors.

Above all, Korea's vibrant digital environments have contributed to the emergence of the mukbang phenomenon. Korea has not only been a testbed for digital technologies but has also

generated uniquely localized platforms that open a new door to an interactive digital culture. In particular, AfreecaTV has played a significant role in popularizing mukbang, especially among Korean youth, since its launch in 2006 – five years before its American counterpart Twitch (launched in 2011). AfreecaTV, which stands for “Any FREE broadCasting TV,” allows any individual to be a BJ running their channel by live-streaming while interacting with viewers via live chat. The platform encourages BJ–viewer interaction. BJs’ incomes are based on the amount of digital currency (called “star balloons”) donated by their viewers/fans. As of 2016, the platform was running 3,500 channels with 300,000 simultaneous users daily, with mukbang being the most popular genre along with gaming (Hong and Park 2016). AfreecaTV’s live-streaming based on interactivity attracted many young netizens to this platform throughout the 2010s. However, due to several factors, such as the platform’s high commissions (20–40% when viewer-donated digital currencies are transferred to BJs) and the increased risk of mediated interactions between BJs and abusive users, famous BJs began to leave AfreecaTV for YouTube or began running channels on both platforms in the late 2010s (Bae 2019).

Meanwhile, YouTube has become the most popular video-streaming platform in Korea and a common outlet for Korean and global mukbangers in the 2020s. Despite the BJs’ exodus to YouTube, AfreecaTV in the 2010s significantly contributed to the emergence of mukbang culture among young people by attracting them to the specific form of interactive personal broadcasting in which the daily activity of eating became broadcasting content (Kim 2018). Moreover, BJs as mukbangers on AfreecaTV enabled ordinary netizens to become microcelebrities (Song 2018).

Of course, the advanced technological environment alone cannot fully explain the rapid rise of the mukbang phenomenon. Sociocultural factors have also been influential. As critics have argued, showing and watching eating online is symptomatic of what Korean youth desire and how digital technologies are appropriated to address particular social desires (Kim 2018; Song 2018). The rapid individualization of Korean society has been considered the social background behind the emergence of mukbang. Indeed, the society has witnessed a rapid increase in single-person households – especially among those in their 20s (Song 2018) – which partly explains the growing popularity of user-generated online eating shows. As of 2021, one-person households constitute 33.5% of all homes in Korea, which is a noticeable increase from previous years (e.g. 27.9% in 2016) (Korean Statistical Information Service 2022). According to a 2020 survey, most single-person households are concerned about issues such as finances, loneliness, safety and eating (Jung and Oh 2020). Watching mukbang can be interpreted as young Koreans’ response to such concerns derived from individualization. That is, young people who live and dine alone may watch mukbang to avoid feelings of loneliness and isolation (Park 2020). The virtual practice of eating together with (a) virtual other(s) is appealing to those who eat alone (Hong and Park 2017; Kim 2018; Choe 2019) because eating alone (*honbab*) has been considered a taboo in Korea, where eating together – sharing a table and the same dishes – has crucial meanings as a practice of sharing *jeong* (locally based intimate and affective feelings) (Chung 2015). In Korean food culture, where each meal consists of rice and several dishes, preparing a meal can be especially burdensome for single people in their 20s and 30s. In this regard, mukbang may fulfill the physical and sentimental hunger of young people living alone (Hong and Park 2017).

In 21st-century Korea, the affective structure that increases the virtual and mediated sense of togetherness through digital practices, such as mukbang, has been triggered by the shifting social structure that has accelerated individualization (Kim 2018). The country’s socio-economic structure has rapidly transformed since the devastating Asian financial crisis in 1997 through intensive neoliberal restructuring of the national economy, primarily forced by the International Monetary Fund (Chang 2019). The labor market’s high flexibility has intensified

young people's competition for employment, leaving many without a stable full-time job and having to move from one contract position to another. In response to the rapid neoliberalization of the socioeconomic structure, young Koreans have had to enhance their employability through fierce resume-building activities (Cho 2015). This precarious labor market condition has been so frustrating that the youth even self-deprecatingly call themselves the *sampo* generation that has given up three basic elements for living – namely, courtship, marriage and childbirth – due to a lack of financial resources. In this precarious context, arguably, “young people's lives are seen to be reduced to the act of satisfying the self by cooking and eating alone” (Kim 2018: 231).

Meanwhile, young Koreans coping with the precarious socioeconomic condition playfully yet seemingly unproductively (from a dominant socioeconomic perspective) have been referred to as *ingyeo*, especially on the Internet. *Ingyeo* is Korean Internet slang that literally means surplusage and actually refers to “a person wandering around cyberspace, creating parodies, compounds and distorted expressions, investing their abundant time capital” (Hong and Park 2017: 119). *Ingyeo* is a digital subject who “has nothing to do or no desire to do anything” (Song 2018: 3). Mukbang can be considered a cultural practice invented and explored by this new type of youth subject, who is regarded as engaging in seemingly useless, extreme and immature activities (Hong and Park 2017: 119) and as having left behind the utopian discourse of the advanced digital nation (Song 2018; Kim 2021).

Overall, the explosive increase in user-generated content in 21st-century Korea shows how young Koreans cope with precarious social contexts by engaging in digital subcultural practices. Indulging in mukbang may be an attempt to escape or to question dominant sociocultural norms. However, this unconventional mukbang culture is not entirely free from the ideology of neoliberal capitalism. That is, mukbang implies the contradictory meanings of a new generation of Koreans' digital responses to precarious social contexts. They may playfully resist the dominant sociocultural norms of gastronomic activities yet be involved in the extensive com-modification of their everyday lives as part of digital capitalism.

Cultural Politics of Vicarious Eating

Mukbang has been considered a symptomatic practice that reveals “the reality and fantasy of Korean society, encompassing young people's need, desire, anxiety and pleasure” (Kim 2018: 233). This user-generated genre and its subculture may not remain a mere symptom of contemporary Korean society but also have significant sociocultural effects. Therefore, it is important to examine what mukbang *does* to its stakeholders – creators, viewers and the larger society. Overall, mukbang entails sociocultural meanings as a challenge to the dominant social norm and a facilitator of digitally driven consumer culture.

First, the mukbang phenomenon surprised the public, news media and the government in Korea and overseas in the mid-2010s and has since facilitated discussions about the new genre's sociocultural influence. Mainstream media coverage of mukbang in Korea has often sensationalized it and its creators by emphasizing the binge eating practice, distinguished from ideal gastronomic practices presented in conventional food-related lifestyle TV shows and public discourses. News media have also paid attention to the celebrity-like fame of “ordinary” young mukbangers, who do not seem to have particular career skills and experience. The sensationalization of mukbang has evolved as a form of media panic, compounded by medical discourse in which mukbang is associated with unhealthy (if not pathological) behaviors, such as surfeit and obesity.

According to Kang et al.'s (2020) content analysis of Korean news reports on mukbang in the 2010s, news outlets first addressed the emergence and popularity of mukbang by focusing

primarily on the entertaining features of this new user-generated culture but gradually noted the harmful effects of mukbang (e.g. health issues related to overeating junk food). The news media, the government and academics have raised concerns about the social impacts of mukbang. For example, the Korean government announced anti-obesity measures including a plan to establish guidelines against media content encouraging excessive food consumption by 2019 (Lee 2018a). The news media interpreted this announcement as the introduction of government-led control over mukbang content, among others, and thus aroused controversy over media freedom. However, the government has not introduced any particular regulation of mukbang content. Interestingly, government regulation of mukbang was implemented in a neighboring country, China, in 2021, as part of an anti-food waste law prohibiting the creation and sharing of videos of binge eating (Qu 2021).

Meanwhile, Korean news media's coverage of negative aspects of mukbang culture has increased, along with scientific studies addressing correlations between mukbang viewing and physical/mental health (Oh 2022). Overall, in response to the rapidly rising popularity of mukbang, the government, the news media and academics have circulated the discourse of health crisis through regulatory discourses (Lee 2018a) and scientific data (Yun et al. 2020; Yoo et al. 2021), imposing biopower over the *ingyeo* generation's vicarious practice of binge eating. This has made individuals' gastronomic practices a matter of public concern and has defined them as a "biopolitical problem" necessitating the state's control over individuals' bodies and health (Mayes 2017).

Second, the mukbang phenomenon has been incorporated into and facilitated digital media-driven consumer culture. Some critics have associated the vicarious pleasure of mukbang with the fetishism of commodity (abundant food) and body (young women's bodies) (Donnar 2017; Schwegler-Castañer 2018), while others have considered the mukbang culture a force that accelerates the commodification of everyday lives that were not extensively marketized prior to digital platform-driven capitalism (Kim 2018, 2021; Lee and Abidin 2021). On the surface, mukbangers' consumption of an abundance of food can be regarded as a symbolic celebration of consumerism through which excessive consumption is sought and encouraged (Donnar 2017). Mukbang has been referred to as "food porn" that focuses on "excessive and immediate sensations around the act of eating" (Kim 2021: 111; see also Donnar 2017). Some mukbang videos partly hint at sexual implications by reinforcing the voyeuristic pleasure of watching and objectifying young, attractive female mukbangers' bodies (Schwegler-Castañer 2018). Mukbang as an eating spectacle involves vicarious and voyeuristic pleasures, especially by revealing young women's appetites and desire for excessive eating that are often repressed in the dominant ideology of the ideal slim female body (ibid.). In particular, young female mukbangers' binge eating appeals to female fans, who "not only enviously celebrate a performer's capacity to eat to excess while remaining thin, but also watch to avoid actual eating" (Donnar 2017: 125; see also Moon et al. 2017).

Mukbang BJs and YouTubers also voluntarily participate in and disseminate mukbang-driven consumer culture in search of commercial interests. Betraying the viewers' pursuit of virtual togetherness through the consumption of mukbang, some popular mukbangers seek to maximize their profit by exploiting the commercial logic of digital platforms. They tend to collaborate with sponsors to promote particular products (e.g. food items and restaurants), sometimes without informing their viewers and fans. Many famous mukbang BJs have been criticized by fans for dishonesty and secret collaborations with commercial sponsors. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Tzuyang was accused of backdoor advertising in her videos presenting seemingly ordinary yet sponsored eating. Another popular mukbanger, Banzz, received criticism for dishonesty and misleading advertising of diet products. Individual mukbangers' commercial interests and secret collaboration with sponsors have been recurring problems.

Mukbangers have been exposed to the interests of sponsors that seek to commercially exploit the user-generated content of mukbang.

Many famous mukbang BJs and YouTubers present their authentic and ordinary practices of eating in their own house or room. However, the settings of mukbang videos are, in fact, staged to look ordinary. Popular mukbangers are no longer generating do-it-yourself (DIY) content but are assisted by talent agencies that brand them and their channels. Mukbang's "staged fun" is a common strategy adopted in vlogging practices (Song 2018). The seemingly ordinary yet staged fun contributes to the popularity of mukbangers as intimate microcelebrities who are not very different from the viewers – the *ingyeo* youth frustrated with the prevailing socioeconomic conditions – while questioning the dominant cultural norm of social or familial eating. The authenticity and ordinariness that mukbang promises may provide these young people with parasocial (or pseudosocial) experiences to fulfill their emotional hunger as a way of negotiating the physical and social realities of isolation. The young viewers may, on the one hand, desire the practice of mukbang freely (and excessively) and, on the other hand, be envious of mukbangers as microcelebrities who gain significant financial capital in the digital attention economy without engaging in conventional resume-building activities.

Performing and watching eating shows eventually serve the profit-seeking mechanism of digital capitalism, which conveniently exploits participation and playful interactions as a form of labor. As Kim (2021) insightfully explored, mukbang consists of "free labor," where mukbangers and viewers produce content and data and, in doing so, serve the platform-driven attention economy's pursuit of surplus value without necessarily due rewards. Eating show BJs tend to compete with others to survive in the attention economy of AfreecaTV and YouTube; for attention, they control their gastronomic practices (e.g. eating a lot and rapidly).

Overall, mukbang has been more than a symptomatic reflection of the precarious conditions that young Koreans face. This phenomenon has also had significant sociocultural effects in Korea for the past two decades. It offers a vivid example of a digital subculture for digitally savvy youth, who remain marginalized in the dominant socioeconomic order. The parasocial connections and vicarious pleasure of mukbang are articulated with the ways in which everyday practices and emotions of eating are digitalized, shared and commodified. While mukbang performance is often excessive and extreme, and thus seems to potentially challenge the dominant gastronomic norms, the circulation of mukbang as a live-streamed video or a lifestyle vlog is not free from digital capitalism, in which netizens' free labor is extensively exploited and incorporated into the seemingly entertaining digital playground without clear boundaries between work and play or between public and private.

Conclusion

The mukbang phenomenon implies how the seemingly mundane activity of eating is resignified as an entertaining and interactive digital culture that reveals young people's negotiation of precarious social conditions. The new modes of personal broadcasting (on AfreecaTV) and vlogging (on YouTube) are relatively easy to participate in as they draw on the quotidian practice of eating. With variations, many mukbangers primarily eat, which does not require particular skills or knowledge. According to Maslow's (1943) famous pyramid of needs, eating is one of the basic needs to be satisfied for higher needs, such as self-actualization. Mukbang reifies vicarious desires to gaze at and share how basic human needs are satisfied.

Arguably, mukbang is more than a form of food porn that reinforces immediate pleasure; it is a cultural practice that engages with multiple sociocultural meanings. As discussed in this chapter, *ingyeo* youth in Korea may cope with precarious social conditions and immerse themselves in the playful digital culture of mukbang (Song 2018). Moreover, they challenge the

norms of social or familial eating in Korea (Hong and Park 2016). Mukbangers and their viewers eat alone and a lot while not necessarily conforming to the ideal norms of social or familial eating. Furthermore, by consuming relatively accessible junk/fast/comfort food, mukbang appeals to young people who cannot access high-brow culinary culture due to their limited resources in the precarious socioeconomic conditions of the highly neoliberalized Korean society. In the 21st century, young Koreans are forced to eat alone while participating in networked and mediated spaces of virtually eating together.

The mukbang phenomenon has been rising globally as a digital subculture. Its globalization reveals how people's basic needs and seemingly mundane eating practices are widely mediated, resignified and monetized in the digital attention economy. User-generated eating shows that have been especially popular among young people across different digital and physical spaces reveal how youth playfully negotiate the dominant sociocultural structure while exploring sub-cultural practices. As shown in the Korean *ingyeo* generation's seemingly "useless" doing and watching eating shows (Hong and Park 2017; Song 2018), global youth may question the precarity of neoliberalizing worlds through the vicarious, networked and digital consumption of food; however, in doing so, knowingly or unknowingly, they may be incorporated into the digital attention economy that reinforces the precarity that they face and attempt to challenge.

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