# The Mukbang Culture: An Anthropological and Nutritional Perspective on Binge Eating

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**Abstract**
Available literature in this field provides insight as to the psychological effect of watching live streamed binge eating videos, also known as mukbang. This study is designed to better understand the anthropological perspective and allude to the nutritional approaches on mukbang. The larger anthropological context includes understanding the influence of media in distributing and popularizing what was considered a trend in Korea and contextualizing social unity. In particular, there is an emphasis on the cultural shift away from the social norm of eating and socializing together to contentment in eating alone. In terms of the nutritional perspective, this includes putting into perspective binge episodes, the promotion of overeating and encouragement of poor eating habits streamed across the internet, and the effects on an individual's metabolism as a result of a high intake of food in one sitting within a short frame of time. This research endeavor is in efforts to understand how college students at Penn perceive binge eating and how normalized it has become in response to trends and shifts in culture to embrace mukbangs as an accepted form of content creation. Methods include a survey (n=58) to collect both qualitative and quantitative data on perceptions and preconceived notions towards mukbang and the global sensation surrounding it. Findings and conclusions reflect the complexity of this topic and the depth and range of opinions and perspectives that individuals bring regardless of their race and ethnicity.

**Background**

Mukbang is a live-streamed video that features an individual consuming a large amount of food in one sitting. The word originates from two separate Korean words: "meokneun" (translated to eating) and "bangsong" (translated to broadcast), both of which the first syllables have been taken and combined to form mukbang (Kircaburun et al., 2021). This trend originated in Korea, a country known for their food scene, high beauty standards, and weight control maintenance. Mukbang began in 2010 but now has expanded and pervaded to other countries starting in 2014 where millions of people "access the internet every single day in order to view this publicly available content" (Kircaburun et al., 2021).

The international popularity of mukbang can be traced back to the Fine Brothers Entertainment (FBE), or more recently known as React Media. Founded by two brothers Benny and Rafi Fine, React Media have been creating content, most well known for their React video series (Spangler, 2021). With millions of subscribers and a large audience, FBE uploaded a video

in 2015 that had popular YouTubers react to mukbangs. This intrigued people and began the international popularization of mukbang, prompting a new wave of American content creators to create their own mukbang videos. Since then, other mainstream and well known YouTubers including The Try Guys and PewDiePie among others have hosted their own mukbang shows (Shin, 2023).

These live streamed videos involve participation from both the "eater" and the "viewer." The eater 'speaks' to viewers via providing the visuals of the lavish amount of food and autonomous sensory meridian response, referred to in today's day and age as ASMR. On the other hand, viewers 'type' and communicate to each other as well as directly to the eater via a live chat (Choe, 2019).

For many individuals behind the camera engaging in the large consumption of food, this has completely changed their lives. Just as Korean idols are a popular commodity and esteemed by the public, mukbang has become a full-time career and a way for these individuals to gain celebrity-like status in Korea. For instance, mukbanger Park Seo-yeon quit her day job to pursue mukbang, broadcasting up to 3 hours per day (Gibbs, 2015). The average mukbanger with around 100,000 subscribers was projected to make at least $10,000 a month or $120,000 a year, reaching six figures (Park, 2022). But just like Korean idols and the high Korean societal beauty standards, mukbang hosts feel pressure to maintain a small stature and remain slim even while engaging in extremely unhealthy eating behaviors (Gibbs, 2015). Mukbangers maintain body weight and composition despite disordered eating behavior by staying in range with their caloric intake in the form of one large meal every three days and spend the rest of their time exercising or eating healthy foods like fruits and salads (Park 2022). Though in public it seems as their sole job is online content creation and live streaming their eating, part of their job also requires them

to be cognizant of their health and maintaining their figure. Compared to other individuals in social media who pursue a streaming career, mukbangers have to take into consideration the consequences of consuming copious amounts of food.

In South Korea, the food scene is dynamic: well-seasoned, full of flavor, and most notably spicy (Thacker, 2017). Not only is it popular but also recognized globally and easily identifiable (Kwon and Shin, 2010). However, more than the food itself, eating in Korea is viewed as a social activity that friends and or family partake in together. Typically, ordering at a restaurant involves eating family style, featuring one large communal dish to share with many side dishes, also called "banchan" (Thacker, 2017). Eating has become a "centerpiece for conversation" among the people who share that sensory experience and dine together (Thacker, 2017). This is starkly in contrast to mukbang, which now provides a community for those who are eating alone.

**Streaming and Putting on a Show**

The advent of more advanced technology as entertainment sources has led to video streaming becoming increasingly convenient to engage with and reach global audiences simultaneously. Live streaming has created a new community source that fosters social engagement (Hong, 2017). This is particularly because viewers now have this common and shared experience of being present with others who are engaged at the same time. To no surprise does this apply to the mukbang experience. Findings from prior research endeavors reveal that most mukbang viewers watch during mealtimes and oftentimes alone for three primary reasons: to seek connection with others, to experience "vicarious pleasure of the multisensory experience", and for the "performative spectacle" (Hong, 2017). The largest point that has been studied is the illusion that mukbang provides of an eating companion and community of others

who are also eating alone (Gibbs, 2015). As the generational landscape changes in Korea and the number of single-person households increases over time, fewer people are sharing meals with family but find themselves at the table alone (Kang et al., 2020). Watching mukbang videos have therefore become a source of comfort and an eating mate, feeling "vicarious satisfaction" through the mukbang creator's engagement of sensory details such as eating close to the camera and using a microphone to pick up sounds while eating (Kang et al., 2020).

**Psychological Influences**

A large focus in the available literature related to mukbang is the psychological influences on mukbang viewers and the consequences of mukbang watching (Kircaburun et al., 2021). The feeling of dining with someone alongside the co-presence of other viewers who are equally if not more engaged, specifically commenting and chatting within the live stream, has created a new culture of eating. Watching and engaging with mukbang live streams creates an emotional connection via a virtual experience eating together, which has built a community to overcome alienation for those who live alone and seek social companionship (Kircaburun et al., 2021). A research study has found that 10% of viewers stay on a live stream even after the host has finished eating to chat about different topics related to their daily life. These chat interactions contribute to developing empathetic relationships between mukbangers and viewers as well as between viewers. Viewers are in particular attracted to mukbangers' effort to create a social presence through showing more of their personal side, reacting to comments, and pausing to thank viewers who send gifts (Kircaburun et al., 2021). However, the irony is this: a rather unhealthy engagement with food mentally satisfies viewers and has been found to cope with loneliness but leads to mixed conclusions about eating habits and behaviors.

Types of food portrayed and advertised through mukbangs and manner of eating that is shown for public engagement has significant health consequences for viewers. Not only do mukbangers performatively overconsume, but they also eat what may be referred to as "irritating foods" or try new foods and products via advertisement means and publicity (Kang et al., 2020). Watching other people eat makes viewers more susceptible to consuming more than they normally would or should for their own health. The concept of "vicarious satisfaction" best captures how people have perceived the effect that consuming mukbang content has, though from person to person this perception may not be ubiquitous (Kang et al., 2020).

Watching someone eat, in particular a copious amount of food, can have profound psychological effects. One study has concluded that mukbang videos have the capability to damage viewers' relationship with food and hunger by "normalizing conspicuous consumption and consumption of different foods that were not historically welcome in South Korea such as western fast food" (Kang et al., 2020). Another research endeavor sought to understand the effect of mukbang on dieters, concluding that people who watched mukbangs reported lower satiation levels and expressed a higher desire to eat foods shown in the video. In particular, dieters developed less of an interest in eating after watching videos compared to non-dieters (Xu, 2019). They also considered the effect that mukbangs would have on women who were on diets, which found that this specific population would develop a stronger desire to consume foods upon watching (Xu, 2019).

Many different research questions have been asked and pursued with profound and significant conclusions that contribute to further understanding the influence that mukbangs have on people. One particular research study used a compensatory internet use model (CIUM) to explain the psychological characteristics of, broadly speaking, engaging in online activity and

therefore sought the internet to compensate unattained offline needs through specific online activities (Kircaburun et al., 2021). Though all are nuanced in their own ways with a wide variety of conclusions and findings, one commonality remains: there is an inherent psychological response to watching someone eat that we cannot ignore (Anjani et al., 2020).

**My Research Questions**

This thesis seeks to answer the following two questions: (1) What are the cultural influences and pervasiveness of this global trend? And (2) What are college students', specifically undergraduates students at Penn's, understanding and perception of this phenomenon and how influential is it?

Current literature already has addressed some aspects of these questions that I have posed above and significant findings have already been outlined in the background section. However, there are still gaps in the literature that this research endeavor aims to address. For example, one study conducted research on university students in Korea and the effect that watching mukbang on YouTube had on their dietary life via questionnaires involving demographic characteristics, status of watching mukbang content, perceiving diet change, and self-diagnosing dietary habits. In particular this study introduced the difference between cookbang and mukbang, the former being an extension of a mukbang where the mukbanger shows how they prepare the food they will consume. Some findings included that participants felt viewing cookbangs improved their diets rather than worsening it, which prompted viewers to cook at home more of their foods. On the other hand, participants who watched mukbangs developed worse diets instead of improving them because consumption of this form of media encourages viewers to eat more unhealthier

foods that can be found in convenient stores and delivery food (Yun et al., 2020). There have been few to no studies conducted on this topic at universities in America.

**Methods**

My approach to this research question seeks to better understand and obtain how undergraduates at the University of Pennsylvania perceive mukbangs. Race and ethnicity in correlation to their perception of mukbang was of high importance to understand the globalization of this phenomenon. This approach suggests the analytical power of applying both quantitative and qualitative methods, or mixed methodology approach, to examine the opinions undergraduates hold about mukbang videos. My research ultimately contributes and furthers the literature, shedding new light on the very different experience and perceptions that undergraduates hold about binge eating, which may be relevant and common in varying degrees because of stress and other influences from society. This endeavor informs broader discussions on the implications that this form of content creation has on college students and may be influential in addressing how potential problems related to binge eating culture can be mitigated.

I distributed a survey created through Google Forms to as many students as possible over the course of a week to understand the perspective that undergraduate students at Penn hold about mukbang. The first three questions inquired about general background information such as class year, gender, and race/ethnicity. More notably, the third question about race/ethnicity had six options in total: Korean; Asian (not Korean)/Pacific Islander; White; Hispanic/Latino; Black or African American; and Native American or American Indian. It became of significant consideration to make a distinction between students who identified themselves as Korean as compared to Asian since mukbang has its roots and most likely is more influential in the country

it started from and then spread internationally. The following eight questions ask about mukbang videos from the most broad to inquiring for what they perceive to be specific reasons. Questions included whether they have watched mukbang videos before, asking participants to watch a short mukbang clip and inquiring how it makes them feel or what their initial reactions are, and how mukbang affects their driveness for food. The survey was intentionally kept brief with only two short response questions for further explanation in efforts for greater engagement and completion of the survey in its entirety.

Outreach efforts to reach students will be through convenience sampling by distribution via word of mouth, dorm newsletters, and link distribution to class group chats. There was an emphasis on making sure all undergraduate years were as evenly represented as possible.

**Findings**

58 undergraduate students completed the survey, comprising 32 (55.2%) seniors, 10 (17.2%) juniors, 8 (13.8%) sophomores, and 8 (13.8%) freshmen. Of the 58 students, 36 (62.1%) identified as female and the remaining 22 undergraduates (37.9%) were male. As for race and ethnic diversity, 14 (24.1%) identified themselves to be Korean, 23 (39.7%) Asian (not Korean)/Pacific Islander, 14 (24.1%) white, 4 (6.9%) Black or African American, and 3 (5.2%) as Hispanic/Latino.

The following eight questions pertain specifically to mukbang and requested participants to watch and share their experiences. 48 students (82.8%) have watched a mukbang before, 4 (6.9%) have never, 4 (6.9%) are unsure if they have watched, and 2 (3.4%) did not know what mukbang was. A significant number of undergraduate students, specifically 42 of them (72.4%), came across the mukbang video through social media (YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter)

while 7 students (12.1%) were personally interested in it. The remaining 9 students (15.5%) either have never watched or had a different circumstance in which they came across the video.

I asked survey participants to watch around 10-20 seconds of a mukbang clip taken from YouTube and asked how it made them feel and what their initial reactions were. A majority, 31 participants, in their response expressed discomfort from the sound or ASMR of the chewing while 3 individuals enjoyed the sound captured while the mukbanger was chewing loudly intentionally. 15 participants mentioned in their response that the sheer amount and quantity of food either impressed or horrified them, 8 expressed some form of hunger while or after watching the video clip, and 2 individuals commented on their surprise that this video had over 30 million views.

The questions that followed the video were in attempts to gauge how watching a mukbang may influence perception and subsequent behavior in audience members who were undergraduates. The first inquired whether students were interested in trying the food that was shown and results show that 28 students (48.3%) were interested, 23 (39.7%) were not, and 7 (12.1%) were unsure. 36 (62.1%) of students said watching the mukbang made them more hungry, 8 students (13.8%) upon watching the video were more satisfied, and the remaining 14 (24.1%) made them feel less hungry or expressed that watching mukbangs were disturbing. 23 undergraduates (39.7%) were not interested in watching another mukbang, 17 (29.3%) were interested, and 18 (31%) were unsure. While 26 students (44.8%) were not interested at all in creating a mukbang video for themselves if given the chance, 14 individuals (24.1%) expressed interest and 18 undergraduates (31%) would highly consider it. The final question that asked why, in their opinions, mukbang videos became popular will be discussed in the following

discussion portion of this thesis. Overall, the survey collected a lot of information that will be further analyzed and put into perspective in the discussion section below.

**Discussion**

The data collected through the surveys are wide in spectrum as a result of the mixed methodology approach in asking questions that are both quantitative and qualitative. Almost all of the quantitative findings are presented in the findings section as described above. This discussion will involve critically analyzing some of the qualitative data from the open ended questions where participants had a chance to express some of their personal thoughts and opinions about mukbang. In addition, some correlations between race/ethnicity with specific responses to questions will be considered.

Survey question number six that asked participants to watch 10-20 seconds of a mukbang clip and evaluate how they felt or what their initial reactions were garnered intriguing responses. As mentioned in the findings, the majority of participants commented on how uncomfortable they felt listening to the sound of eating. One participant started off their comment with "I personally don't like the eating sounds," but then continued to express that "watching her eat makes me feel appreciative of food. I feel glad that there are videos that counteract the healthy eating culture, showing people that they can enjoy themselves with their favorite food sometimes." Though this is an extreme example of what appears to be "enjoying themselves" and what students expressed as a form of "gluttony," it was clear among respondents that they could understand how watching a mukbang video can be comforting for those who are experiencing loneliness. A handful of respondents commented at the quantity of food, sometimes in amazement as one individual remarked, "How is she able to eat all of that!!!!" One individual

in particular was surprised at how popular the video was as they "didn't quite understand how it has 30M views." However, the general consensus that can be drawn from all 58 responses either expressed "discomfort watching someone eat and make eating noises" or was surprisingly "comforting and made me kind of want to eat that too."

The second open ended question that I posed in the survey was as follows: "Why do you think mukbang videos have become popular?" This elicited a wide range of responses, some of which I have selected to expand upon and drawn conclusions from. A few students had mentioned that COVID and the period of lockdown forced us to be in isolation, which made mukbang most definitely more popular and popular. Quarantine, which we all globally experienced nearly two years ago, could have also been monumental in this shift to normalizing eating alone while watching eating live streams. One individual said, "Being at home made people want to eat new and different foods they do not have access to, so they watch videos of it instead."

But it was not just COVID that personified a shift towards eating and our attitudes towards it. In general, students have expressed that we as humans are just curious as we're "simply interested in seeing what people eat in a day, and we're also more open minded to new foods now due to globalization and pop culture. Because of this open mindedness, we're more curious about seeing and trying these new foods." One interesting point that was brought up was the following: "Our culture loves food in an unhealthy way… perhaps people watch them to satisfy the foodie cravings of looking at food without actually buying it and consuming it, especially more so if it's unhealthy." The culture of restriction and excess that we see influence people globally has now permeated to the type of entertainment that we seek. One respondent put it well and reasoned that "It's kind of why we watch vlogs. Most people are voyeurs and are

interested in someone else's life. It's our curiosity that brings them there. However, these creators though seem 'perfect' end up being more 'relatable' by sharing their vulnerabilities. The creator seems like a friend, cool but non-judgemental. They let you in their lives in their relaxed manner. It's more of escapism but no different than watching a web series and feeling connected to it." Our intrinsic desire to relate with others as well as be entertained by feeling satisfied drives the popularity of entertainment such as mukbang that is not just personal but can be satisfying in its own way.

One additional element that I wanted to look into was the correlation between identifying as Korean and what their responses were to mukbang especially since it could hit closer to home. After sorting the survey, 14 (24.1%) identified themselves to be Korean and their responses to the survey questions were surprisingly mixed. Though many interestingly made a comment about the spiciness of the food, which not a lot of others who identified with other races/ethnicities brought up, about half of the Koreans in my survey liked and regularly follow mukbangers while the other half did not enjoy viewing and hearing the "loud chewing and food ASMR." A future area of study could be how Korean Americans' opinions or perceptions towards mukbang may be different from Koreans who were born in Korea.

All of these findings bring an individual's unique experiences and thus these opinions shared via the survey are subjective by nature. This brings into conversation one's beliefs, perceptions, and values, all of which can be factored into better understanding how people perceive mukbang, specifically in this case undergraduates at the University of Pennsylvania.

**Conclusions**

This thesis sought to better understand the cultural widespreadness of mukbang in addition to the perception and attitude towards mukbang among university students. This is because current literature available in this field alluded to the lack of research and attention given to mukbang among scholars and researchers though it has been rising in popularity (Kircaburun et al., 2021).

So why do we engage with mukbangers and why do people keep on watching mukbangs? This may even open greater areas of psychological research related to how important it becomes to feel a connection to streamers on a more personal level, which was suggested in some survey results and may be another growing area of research for this field.

There are some limitations to this paper that should be addressed: the quality of data collected is mostly theoretical and not necessarily empirical data, which means a lot of discussion is speculative and may not have been entirely explained. The drawbacks of attempting to keep the duration of taking the survey brief came at the price of more substantial findings and conclusions. In addition, there was little to no research currently available about the nutritional implications of mukbang, which made it difficult to cater research questions in that direction. Future studies can potentially incorporate evaluating or even changing one's diet when watching mukbang videos and understanding the impact it may have on food choices and behaviors.

Yet, this research endeavor in its mixed methodology approach has proven yet again that the influence mukbang has especially on a college audience is complex. This is not a phenomenon that is approached with a simplistic solution and explanation and most definitely not a cause and effect relationship. Rather it involves many factors, most of which are circumstantial based, and cannot be as well understood without proper context.

Future areas of study include understanding the nutritional implications of mukbang and how it has a role in metabolism, gastric emptying, and appetite or satiation signals in hunger stimulating or repressing hormones such as ghrelin and leptin. Such endeavors may include putting into perspective binge episodes, the promotion of overeating and encouragement of poor eating habits streamed across the internet, and the effects on an individual's metabolism as a result of a high intake of food in one sitting within a short frame of time. This would be interesting to study in juxtaposition with the psychological impacts of hunger and what drives people to eat large quantities of food. Further studies could potentially attempt to understand timing of watching mukbangs in relation to when an individual eats their meals and whether duration of the mukbang live stream affects how long audience members stay engaged during one livestream. The unanswered questions are endless and simply prompts us to further engage and seek answers.

So why have mukbang videos become an international sensation? One of the respondents from my survey put it well: "Perhaps because they introduce people to new foods, the people eating have entertaining personalities, or they feature beloved foods you'd like to try yourself or eat with friends." Maybe it's the sheer quantity of food that astonishes us or the community of people who come together to engage with one another in efforts to feel less lonely. Or maybe we're getting hungry and it's time for us to eat.

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