Virtual Commensality: Mukbang and Food Television.

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Abstract/Résumé

This thesis presents an exploration of the relationship between YouTube broadcasts, affect and food through an in-depth analysis of mukbang, a South Korean form of live eating broadcast that has risen in popularity since the late 2000s. Starting with an exploration of the technological and social infrastructures necessary for the cultural production of these broadcasts, this thesis traces the affective potential within the communities that form around mukbang and the related YouTube genre of ASMR videos. Using the concept of virtual commensality – the act of sharing food together – this thesis analyzes how communities form around sensory-based, eating-centered YouTube videos. Against claims that community does not exist online, this thesis demonstrates the specific ways in which mukbang videos create the conditions for community formation around shared practices of eating, opening a discussion for further research into how the ways we consume food informs our understanding of sociality, intimacy, feeling and fulfillment online.

Cette thèse présente une exploration de la relation entre la diffusion, l'affect et la nourriture via une analyse profonde des émissions de télévision mukbang, un type d'émission Sud-Coréenne qui est devenue de plus en plus populaire après les années 2000s. Commençant par une exploration des infrastructures technologiques et sociales nécessaires pour la production culturelle de ces émissions, cette thèse trace le potentiel affectif dedans les communautés qui se forment autour des mukbangs et dans un autre genre relié au mukbang sur YouTube, l'ASMR. En utilisant le concept de la commensalité virtuelle – l'action de partager la nourriture en compagnie, cette thèse analyse comment les communautés forment autour des vidéos centrées sur la nourriture et où les sensations sont toujours en focus. A l'encontre de l'argument que la communauté n'existe pas sur l'internet, cette thèse démontre les façons spécifiques dans lequel les mukbang créent les conditions pour la formation d'une communauté autour des pratiques de manger, ouvrant une discussion pour de la recherche future au sujet de comment la façon dont on consomme la nourriture informe notre compréhension de la socialisation, l'intimité, la sensation et l'accomplissement en ligne.

Statement of Original Research

This thesis is an entirely original work written by solely by the author, and no part of this work has been previously published.

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Introduction: Setting the Table

South Korean food broadcasts known as "mukbang" – a play on words on the Korean phrase "meokneun-bangsong," meaning 'eating broadcast' – consist of a broadcaster eating excessive amounts of food over webcam that is viewed by a large, live and interactive audience (Donnar 122), some of whom also eat while they are watching. Even though their creators and viewers do not occupy the same physical space, these videos nevertheless enable forms of socialization that allow for the formation of virtual commensality, the act of sharing food together. This process of virtual commensality is facilitated by the participatory culture of online food broadcasts, where viewers post comments and "like" images, sounds and the broadcaster's narrative while eating. Hosts sometimes respond in turn to viewers' comments and likes.

According to anthropologist Mary Douglas (1972), some of the most significant social connections happen around food and feasting (see also Levi Strauss 1964). As the large audiences of mukbang consume this digital content, they also form social connections with others, serving to fulfill the human desire to socialize and share food. The aim of this thesis is to examine this variety of food television to better understand what forms commensality takes in internet broadcasting. Additionally, I analyze the infrastructural and social conditions that shape, and make possible, mukbang broadcast, examining how changes in digital infrastructure, emerging methods of food consumption and human foodways contribute to changes in the ways we live, work, and eat.

Communications as a field focuses its attention on human communication and social behaviour, and food studies is an interdisciplinary field that seeks to determine where food fits in to our lives – that is, how food relates to our politics, our identities, social relationships, and

environment. Research in communications increasingly focuses on social media and online socialization, as these become evermore important elements in daily life in a digital world. A lot of content on social media now include food – images of what people ate for lunch, shared with friends at dinner or prepared at home with family. This has drawn communications studies closer with food studies to better understand how food has become a vehicle and a facilitator for human communication, socialisation and digital interaction. Food is, after all, an integral part of life. Communications research is suited to approach these interconnected subjects because of its unique ability to allow for the critical analysis of typically understudied topics in academic research. Communications can bring together quality research from television studies, food studies, and technology studies and create a new space for analysis. Additionally, meals themselves are often mediated by forms of communication like storytelling in the oral tradition, or texting at the dinner table in the modern era. Food studies and communications are both fields that can document cultural change as we share more of our lives online, and the points at which they intersect, including food broadcast, are worthy of further academic study.

This thesis explores how specific modes of communication are used within social communities online surrounding the consumption of food. The main sites of inquiry for this research are South Korean food broadcasts known as "mukbang," alongside food centered ASMR communities on YouTube. ASMR refers to Autonomic Sensory Meridian Responses, which are characterized by the stimulation of physiological shivers and sensations in the body through aural stimuli including but not limited to the sounds produced by eating and chewing. Mukbang broadcasts began around the year 2009 in South Korea and have continued to grow in popularity around the world due to their newfound availability on YouTube. Autonomic Sensory Meridian Response has come to define another category of food media on YouTube where the

sounds of another person moving, whispering, or eating are used by viewers to experience pleasurable sensations and experiences. Like mukbang, ASMR videos also involve key social elements in the affective interactions they enable between fans and creators. I include ASMR and mukbang in the category of food television, analyzing some of their differences across the platforms they use, the food they present and the fans they attract.

What are mukbang?

As stated above, the simplest definition of a mukbang would be an eating-centered, social online television program, where one broadcaster consumes large amounts (often several portions) of food during a livestream over a webcam to an audience who tunes in through an online platform. Mukbang were originally limited to the South Korean website and mobile television platform AfreecaTV which hosted the live broadcasts. AfreecaTV will be explained in further detail in Chapter One, as it is a crucial platform in the early distribution and popularity of mukbang. The creators of mukbang broadcasts are known as "broadcast jockeys" or "BJs" in Korea, where this abbreviation is often attached before their performer name (BJ The Diva, BJ Fitness Fairy etc.). The lucrative nature of these productions soon drew many new creators and imitators outside of South Korea.

One of the most famous mukbang presenters before her current hiatus was BJ The Diva, whose real name is Park Seo-Yeon and who "was implicitly presented as the face of the phenomenon in western media reportage" (Donnar 122). Her AfreecaTV page is still available for viewing though she has stopped making videos: http://afreecatv.com/vol33lov. Her followers number over three hundred thousand people, with over ten thousand donating to her broadcasts, and her total views at over one hundred and thirty million. These numbers do not include her followers and subscribers on YouTube, where her videos have also been uploaded.

My interest in food broadcasting began five years ago when I first encountered mukbang broadcasts in my YouTube suggestions. At the time I was completing a degree in East Asian Studies and Book and Media Studies and found mukbang to be a perfect blend of both of disciplines. I found that the model mukbang use, and the one that made them successful is similar to that of early entertainment-focused cooking and eating shows; no fan or audience wants to feel left out, so personal appeal is important in order to make strong connections between broadcaster and audience, and to do so quickly. I will outline my chapters and methodology before exploring a short history of food television more generally in this introduction to set up mukbang within this larger genre.

As an introductory chapter, Chapter One explores the material and social infrastructures necessary for mukbang's emergence in South Korea and their further distribution globally through platforms including AfreecaTV and later YouTube. This includes an analysis of the historical development of Internet and Communications Technology infrastructures tied to state economic policy as a condition of possibility for mukbang. Further, Chapter One connects modern transit infrastructures to the act of mobile television viewing resulting in highly mobile television cultures conducive to content like mukbang food broadcasts. This connection allows for the conclusion that physical and social infrastructures work together in the cultural production of mukbang, and understanding their relationship is crucial to the study of their resulting communities. Finally, the social issue of digital accessibility will be addressed as an important barrier for inclusion in this digital trend.

Chapter Two follows with an affective exploration of food and intimacy in ASMR, a second trend within YouTube consisting of videos centered on food and social behaviour that will serve to guide further analysis on mukbang as ASMR-adjacent media. This chapter argues

that in ASMR, much like in mukbang communities, affect and feeling circulate and repeat in such a way that causes not only physical sensations in the body, but also strong feelings of emotional connection between fans, content and creators. This works to solidify what would otherwise be diverse and geographically dispersed audiences into social communities. This research focuses on how affect theory can be applied to mukbang and ASMR broadcasts as highly sensation-oriented media.

Chapter Three presents the argument that mukbang communities are virtual places and YouTube is the space that acts as their condition of possibility. This chapter continues with the assertion that mukbang communities form around specific affective practices on YouTube which contribute to their place-making abilities. These three chapters demonstrate that mukbang bring diverse communities together online through their means of mobile distribution and their infrastructures, the intimacy they create in their audience address and interactions, and that the fluidity and mobility of this social space which have a positive ability to create tangible social communities online drawing on fan affinities for food, companionship and sounds.

Method

The primary research for this thesis includes analysis of food centered mukbang and ASMR videos uploaded to YouTube, a platform whose ability to archive videos is important as they can be re-watched for closer analysis. The initial idea for this research stemmed from a fourth-year thesis project that began in September 2016 and was completed April 2017. During this time, I spent many hours watching mukbang videos in the Korean language with English subtitles. This thesis stems from this earlier research. For my thesis research, I identified and analyzed the most popular and widely known mukbang and ASMR channels from 2018 and 2019. Many of the online personalities who create these videos use a repetitive personal style in

order to ensure the originality of their videos and shape the personal "brand" they exhibit on their channels. I examined a number of videos from a key group of distinct mukbang producers, which I selected based on their overall popularity, their history or time spent as mukbang producers, and the style in which they broadcast themselves including how they address and interact with their fans. Through an analysis of these videos, I demonstrate how mukbang represent unique forms of food media that enable deeply affective, networked forms of social bonding. Mukbang, through their style, modes of delivery and distributed forms of interaction, enable virtual commensality and socialization between mukbang broadcasters and audiences, and between audience members.

This thesis begins by explaining where mukbang videos sit in relation to other food television, and by defining mukbang as a genre of broadcast. Chapter One will then present a historical account of South Korea's economic development focusing on the growth of internet and communications technology infrastructures and treating mukbang as a form of cultural production enabled by infrastructure. In this chapter I draw on historical analysis from texts that chronicle the rise of internet and communications technology in South Korea, and South Korean economic and social history. The methodology in Chapter Two includes a comparative analysis of ASMR videos as a close companion to mukbang broadcasts on YouTube, and a review of the literature on ASMR as an affective practice. This analysis will be supported by the work of discourse analyst Margaret Wetherell whose work on affective practice will be used as a framework of analysis for ASMR. Using affect theory as a method is important in making sense of these complementary online communities because their interactions take place in a highly mobile and often changing space online. In this use of affect theory in my methodology, I borrow Wetherell's use of the term "practice" because of its suggestion of a replicability in the analysis

of what can seem like ephemeral communities, whose interactions can be anonymous or inconsistent. This methodology analyses the practices of community members visible in their interactions with one another and extrapolates these feelings into a structure of community membership. Chapter Three draws on an analytic framework for studying space and place in human geography and social anthropology, which I use to examine how YouTube functions as a space and place marker for mukbang communities. The materials I include in this analysis are mukbang videos and the forms of commentary and interaction which occur around them on YouTube, including live comments and reactions between creators and fans. I pay particular attention to the comment sections from YouTube videos around which there is intensive interaction among fans and community members. I also identify and examine interviews with community members of mukbang videos that are available in the news and other online sources. I also identify how users' "likes" get referenced as transactional materials in the context of YouTube commentary, demonstrating the ways in which the affective reactions between fans become part of a transactional economy between broadcasters and the larger fan community in its relationship to the content they share and consume.

Introducing Food Television

As television programming became available twenty-four seven, and watching television began to take up more of our free time, scholars have worried that this behaviour will make humans less sociable, and cause us to retreat into our bedrooms, living rooms and kitchens. As specialty cable channels moved to capture specific markets using demographics, this projected fear increased, even more so once the Internet allowed viewers to stream television on their mobile devices, wherever they have an Internet connection. Many researchers have published works warning of the death of our ability to socialize as a result of watching too much television.

Much of this concern about social isolation focuses in particular on the end of the shared family meal, around which children and parents communicate on a daily basis (Johnson 2013). Other researchers note that technologies like mobile television change, but do not destroy, people's socialisation (Hampton 2015). They change the contexts of such socialization and can enable new forms of closeness, taking geographical distance out of the equation with email, instant messages and video-calling. What better way to explore social changes around the dinner table than through online food television with its strong emphasis on themes of closeness, the importance of commensality and its simultaneous encouragement to watch television and enjoy food programming? Through the changes in food-centered socially-driven food television, we can trace changes in social behaviour, gender norms and much more. Mukbang are a prime and highly relevant present example of this content and context. As an emerging and highly popular trend, they can provide an important contribution to research in this area.

Mukbang food broadcasts are a quirky and home-made alternative to broadcast television shows surrounding food and eating, which include cooking shows and cooking competitions. They are no less sensational in their use of visual and sound effects, no less valuable in terms of their production values and obvious advertising sponsors, and they are just as produced, edited and catered to audience tastes. Unlike the fast pace of most food television shows, mukbang broadcasts emphasize eating slowly, savouring the food so the crunching and slurping noises are audible in a closely-placed microphone. They also emphasize eating over a long period of time. Most mukbang focus on two cuisines, Korean and American fast foods. Due to the global 'hansik' campaign and efforts by the South Korean government to place Korean traditional foods like kimchi (pickled cabbage) and bibimbap (rice bowls) on a world stage (Cwiertka 2014), these foods are becoming more recognizable outside of Korea. As foods consumed in mukbang videos

become more recognizable to larger audiences, their feelings of vicarious indulgence translate more easily. As mukbang as a whole become more recognizable, they have a greater potential to influence our understanding of online television, and how humans communicate, socialize, stimulate and engage with each other through food.

Where are mukbang in the food television genre?

Food television is a popular site of inquiry, particularly since the global popularisation of specialty cable channels like *The Food Network* since the 1990s, and *Gusto* the recent Canadian equivalent. Pauline Adema points to the success of the American cable network *The Food Network* because of its shift in the 1990s from *instructional* cooking shows to *entertaining* cooking and eating shows, where hosts' personalities became as important as the food they were creating (114). This included audience engagement of both the live studio audience and the audience at home (115). Pioneers in food television such as Julia Child and Emeril Lagasse made a name for themselves because of their interesting on-screen personalities and the connections viewers made with them and their cooking. The cookbooks, cookware and branded houseware collections that accompanied these personalities widened their personal influence and helped popularise the shows they represented. Early food television personalities like Julia Child focused on cooking as a means of providing for the family, while others focused on how cooking could be understood as art or science. Their popularity demonstrated the ability of food-centered media to become highly profitable, and endless iterations of cooking and eating shows grew out of these early efforts.

Mukbang broadcasters are a new kind of food celebrity. The earliest mukbang broadcasters from the late 2000s have been eclipsed by a new generation of YouTube mukbang stars, who reach wider audiences by connecting Instagram, Twitter and Facebook pages to their

YouTube profiles, and interacting with their fans across social media space. Michelle Phillipov points to the increasing sophistication and complication of the relationship between food and the industry that produces and promotes it, visible within the product placements increasingly used in food television (3). Mukbang have similar signifiers of their place within the food industry, as broadcast jockeys can gain product sponsors once their online following becomes significant. For Phillipov, this represents an example of media convergence (3). They do this by eating from sponsored restaurants and wearing merchandise belonging to certain brands. As this thesis demonstrates, mukbang present an understudied example of virtual commensality, online community formation, and an important contribution to fan studies because of the unique social communities they encourage. As Burgess and Green argue, "underlying fan studies is a commitment to the idea of everyday life as a site of potential creative resistance" (12). My thesis shows how mukbang serve as a key example of this creative potential. Chapter One will begin to explain where mukbang originated from, and how an environment focused on the development of digital infrastructures affected their cultural production and their spread as an online genre.

Chapter One

Infrastructures and Mukbang: Wi-Fi Accessibility, Commuter Television and Networks of Consumption in South Korean Food Broadcasts.

In order to frame this thesis, this chapter focuses its attention on South Korea as the origin point for the popular online food broadcasts known as mukbang. I examine the conditions that enable their worldwide popularity today by analyzing the material and social conditions that shaped their emergence in this particular context, supported by a deeper discussion of the convergence of cultural and technological infrastructures necessary for their existence. The cultural significance, affective potential and social communities that formed around mukbang became possible in part because of the Wi-Fi capabilities and new mobile phone technologies that were available for users.

South Korea is often studied as one of the most digitally connected countries in the world because of its state-led emphasis on the development of Internet and Communications Technology (ICT) infrastructures. Seoul in particular is commonly cited as one of the most forward-thinking and 'smart' cities on the planet because of the ways governments and city planners have integrated mobile Internet technology into daily life. This chapter will examine this history of infrastructure building beginning from the state's first attempts to place South Korean cities on the world stage through the development of digital infrastructures. I will argue that South Korea's advanced Wi-Fi and transportation infrastructures facilitated the creation of mobile television broadcasts and the online viewing practices that developed around them. In this context, the new cultural forms of South Korean eating broadcasts known as mukbang came into being. Mukbang are an example of a unique cultural media genre enabled by changing infrastructural conditions. To understand mukbang, it is crucial to understand how infrastructural

configurations shape their conditions of possibility including their production, accessibility and on circulation online. The impact of mukbang on digital culture is growing, as their broadcasts reach new audiences outside of their initial market through broad social media distribution and video aggregation platforms such as YouTube.

In order to demonstrate that material and social infrastructures are a condition of possibility for this online phenomenon, this chapter explains the historical context of infrastructure building in South Korea with a focus on the role of industry and the manufacturing sector first. I then explore Korea's economic relationship to internet and communications technology infrastructures, and the social consequences of this development will follow. I then address the emergence of mukbang and their relation to transportation infrastructures, Wi-Fi and commuter culture in South Korea.

Historical Context

> *Infrastructure does not grow* de novo*; it wrestles with the inertia of the installed base and inherits strengths and limitations from that base (*Star 382*)*

South Korea's search for 'smart city' status has had unforeseen social consequences one of which was the production and popularization of commuter-connected, mobile-based cultural forms like mukbang. It is well known that "rapid technology development in the area of digital network and telecommunications has a significant effect on contemporary urban infrastructure planning" (Lee et al 283). Infrastructure systems include transit, internet broadband and Wi-Fi accessibility that have an increasing impact on the social and material experiences of South Korean cities. The capital Seoul will be an important focus of this chapter. South Korea's history of infrastructural development is complicated by its history of imperial and colonial occupation, war, financial crisis and American military presence. For my purposes in this chapter, I will

focus on Internet, transit and social infrastructures in order to understand how the culture of mukbang and mobile television practices came to be. I will begin by tracing this history of infrastructure and how it relates to processes of nation building with a more general focus on the technological and economical developments of South Korea in the late twentieth century as a key set of conditions for the emergence of mukbang.

The language used by the South Korean state and its observers surrounding its technological development after the 1980s relies on a narrative of miraculous recovery, dynamic symbiotic relations between government and big business, and cutting-edge technology. This history needs to be complicated so as not to conceal the work required to make this country one of the world's leading markets and proponents for ICT infrastructures. The success of South Korea's industrial development was indeed a surprise to many:

> [A] reason for surprise at South Korea's development is that it grew from the utter destruction of the 1950–1953 Korean War, which followed half a century of colonial occupation by Japan. Consequently, the nation's development under President Park Chung Hee became known as the "Miracle on the Han," named for the river which today bisects the modern, vibrant and digitally "smart" city of Seoul. (Larson and Park 345)

As Larson and Park detail, many of Korea's physical infrastructures were destroyed by the war. In the 1950s the Korean War brought destruction to many of Korea's most important material infrastructures, particularly physical infrastructures like buildings and roadways. The 'miracle' many refer to is the fast recovery from this destruction accomplished in the following decades. While both the Japanese and American occupations brought forms of infrastructure building, one

must ask how South Korea could emerge from these difficulties to become one of the most digitally connected countries in the world.

To understand how this repair happened, it is worth noting Korea's unique socio-economic class system, whereby powerful families known as *chaebol* hold major sway over industry and processes of governance including companies like Samsung and Hyundai. These families hold sway by leveraging their economic resources to influence policy: "by encouraging the formation of the large conglomerates that accounted for large percentages of the Korean economy, the state in effect became "mutual hostages" with the *chaebol*" (Kang 117). C*haebol* have significant power, and hold, on Korean industries, and the familial foundations of this partnership has been historically significant to South Korea's economic recovery.

Youngjin Yoo et al explain this unique feature of the Korean economy: "[*chaebol*s] are large industrial conglomerates which consist of a family of large companies owned and managed by family (clan) and their relatives" (Yoo 335). The relationship of the state to these clan-centered conglomerates is a complicated one. As James Larson and Jaemin Park explain, there are two sides to this relationship: "On the one hand these large groups, epitomized by Samsung electronics, have become the main driver of Korea's export-based economic growth. On the other hand, their dominance contributes to weakness in Korea's service sector" (357). This 'weakness' refers to the fact that it is more difficult for competing firms to survive in the face of powerful chaebol conglomerates, lessening consumer choice. In this specific case Larson and Park refer to the "cell phone shock" in South Korea experienced with the arrival of smartphones in 2009, around the same time mukbang became popular through mobile TV. Conglomerates caused this "shock" as they were afraid of allowing the iPhone into Korean markets as a competitor to their own handset technology, causing years of delay before it was available in South Korea (Larson

and Park 357). This delay in the iPhone's availability in such a technologically advanced country was a 'shock' for many consumers and business leaders.

It is worth noting that corruption due to the close relations of government and big business is also blamed for a number of infrastructural failures which claimed many lives in Seoul and other major cities in the 1990s (Shwayri in Karvonen 277). These disasters include the Seongsu bridge collapse in 1992, the Sampoong mall collapse in 1995, and the Daegu gas explosion in the subway in 1995 (Kim and Hong, 2017). These failures strongly problematize the narrative that South Korea's economic development was "miraculous," when so many lives were lost as a result. To understand mukbang we need to understand the labour involved behind the scenes in building and maintaining this media system. Mukbang are an unexpected result of state emphasis on technological development and the convergence of infrastructures, and it is important in this work to emphasize the people who make them possible and the relationships that sustain their communities, a discussion which will follow this chapter.

Alongside complex cooperation with the *chaebol* system, Korea's increasingly developmental state focused heavily on infrastructure. In this case, "developmental" refers to the South Korean state's intense focus on nationwide economic planning and involvement in every possible realm of economic productivity (Chibber 310). Significant in the history of ICT infrastructure, Korea's government was at its most developmental from the 1970s into the 1980s, when the state was very involved in shaping the economy. Larson and Park explain the far-reaching nature of this influence:

> the role of the state was so powerful that…it was the only leading actor in the telecommunications sector. That role included not only policymaking and its

> implementation but actually decisions about who should manufacture what and how, what to test for the testers and what to use for the operators. (349)

In the 1980s, Korea's industries changed dramatically after the slow recovery from the Korean War. The Korean government saw the potential in "high-tech industries including semi-conductors and telecommunication equipment as major targets of industrial policy" (Yoo et al 335). By the end of this decade, because of the success of these industries, policy related to telecommunications became focused on economic development (Yoo et al 336). In fact, Larson and Park explain that had Korea not started the process of manufacturing electronics at this time, including switches and material parts necessary for large networks, future advances in the ICT sector would not have been possible (352). These reforms, they say, "laid the groundwork for the internet era and mobile communication developments of the 1990s" (352).

Towards the end of the twentieth century Korea experienced financial collapse alongside the International Monetary Fund crisis, a crisis addressed in part through investment in industries like ICT. During this time, the rate of economic growth in Korea declined significantly; however a few industries continued to excel. "Automobile, shipbuilding, steel products, and chemicals, not to mention the ICT-producing industries such as semiconductors and mobile handset equipment, have greatly strengthened their international competitiveness in the past decade" (Jung et al 293). These sectors helped Korea to recover, and brought increasing wealth, particularly as they were adopted globally, and their export became highly profitable. Korea's government managed to turn a struggling economy into a technological manufacturing powerhouse.

A major step in this process was the development of 2G infrastructures through changes in policy in regard to the telecommunication industry (Yoo et al 336). Before the new

millennium, mobile phone service was limited in Korea, and the majority of phones were not produced domestically. “A little over a decade later…South Korea has become one of the hotbeds of innovation in mobile services, with over 75% of the population with mobile phone services” (Yoo et al 325). Smart phone and mobile services became a significant part of how citizens stayed informed and maintained social connections. Widespread phone use and the infrastructures it relies on helped support mobile television, and the genre of mukbang.

As Lee et al (2008) detail, public initiatives were key to ensuring the infrastructures that were so crucial to the state’s narrative of miraculous recovery and strength-after-hardship were accepted by the public and fostered civic participation. These initiatives began as early as the 1980s and were used to promote computer literacy as part of Korea’s “information society” (Larson and Park 357). At the end of the twentieth century the “Cyber Korea” project focused on equipping citizens with personal computers while the “E-Korea” project made the internet more accessible (Lee et al 2008, 287-288). These initiatives were spearheaded by the Ministry of Knowledge and Economics, whose portfolio includes “industrial policy to facilitate diffusion of ICT and technological convergence” (Jung et al 304). Through these policy frameworks and initiatives, the state invested in a vision of a digitally connected society on a national level. As will be explored later, digital access had interesting consequences in the production of culture, including mukbang food broadcasts.

Once the manufacturing of necessary material infrastructures was initiated, networks of smart technology and ICT infrastructures became possible, including the platforms that would come to host food broadcasts now known as mukbang. Broadband services for mobiles began in 2000, and since this time, broadband penetration has become almost complete for the entire country (Yoo 340). As Duncan McLaren and Julian Agyeman argue, this increasing

connectedness has changed the ways urban societies "share": "with the presence of smartphones and other technologies, we are witnessing a morphing of…social *cultural sharing* toward *mediated sharing*" (emphasis in the original 28). The authors point to the ways state investments in Internet infrastructure was being imagined in social terms: as one bound up in relationships of exchange and other meanings of sharing (see e.g. Johns 2018). They argue that the practices associated with what we call "sharing" is increasingly done through technology and in online social environments. This is relevant to mukbang's cultivation of virtual communities, as the sociality they allow for is mediated by technology including personal computers, smartphones and webcams. In this way, South Korea offers an important case study for examining how infrastructural development shapes particular modes of cultural production.

Based on the above historical context, we can start to understand the historical conditions that would come to support mobile television and digital content through South Korea's infrastructural development in the area of internet and communications technologies. Not only was this industry heavily financed by the government, but efforts were made to encourage civilian use and participation in a digitally-focused future. As Ok HyeRyoung explains:

> What accounts for the unique Korean experience is the overarching public discourse on the sociopolitical importance of ICTs, which underscores the strong institutional and systemic push for digital media literacy. As in most developing countries, rapid technological development has long been one of the most urgent collective goals in Korea." (221)

The public played a large role in Korea's adoption of new technologies helping to ensure that this industry could thrive and that Korea to become an exemplary model for how ICT infrastructure can be researched, promoted and ultimately adopted at a national scale. In many

ways the digital literacy of the general population reflects the extent to which people embraced mobile technologies and used them in their daily lives, moving from a luxury technology to an essential part of everyday life.

ICT infrastructures create some of the key material conditions for online television and digital broadcast. Media convergences – around telecom industries, mobile phone companies, and online platforms – thus create some of the conditions for digital culture, its creation, distribution and consumption. For a full exploration of this cultural production, one further infrastructure whose parallel development alongside ICT that is necessary to understanding the emergence of mukbang and online television viewing and related streaming practices is Korea's transit systems. The two have now become integrated such that Wi-Fi and cellular data are available on transit platforms and inside subway cars themselves. The result of this simultaneous development and pairing of ICT infrastructures with commuter culture is an interesting economy of mobile television that can be consumed while in transit, and where the history of mukbang food broadcasts begins.

Watching mukbang: Transit and commuter television

Eating and the preparation of food provide an important and significant social function that is intimately linked to online media culture. As some argue, it shapes our very understanding of the social. Claude Fischler describes how "Commensality produces bonding. In apparently all cultures, eating the same food is equated with producing the same flesh and blood, thus making commensals more alike and bringing them closer to each other" (533). Today, practices of food sharing are directly connected to digital media production and use, including on recipe blogs, cooking web series, mukbang broadcasts and eating journals among many examples. Mukbang originated in Korea sometime in the mid-to-late 2000s. They are a form of live video broadcast

involving the consumption of vast quantities of food by a lone host, who accumulates followers through their popularity, and who speaks to their audience as though they were sharing a meal together.[1] Viewers can write in questions and comments through a chat function or by using the comment section on YouTube, which the hosts answer live. Occasionally they will include instructional content with regard to the preparation of the food they are eating, with some mukbang operating as hybrid cooking shows in addition to their genre as eating shows.

Mukbang food broadcasts have an interesting relevance to the oral tradition in communication studies because of the way they include personal monologues and storytelling as part of their affective appeal to audiences. Hosts are expected to chat with viewers as they eat, and this helps to build their fan base as they share food and their life with others online by addressing the audience as if that audience was eating alongside them. To "share food" here means one is eating in company via mukbang broadcasts, though they cannot actually share food in person. The food-sharing aspect of mukbang is only one of the many layers of communication and closeness they involve. Mukbang thus provide an example of the ways Internet-based food television is organized to connect people in the context of their movement through dense sprawling cities like Seoul, which as some argue, can make many people feel alone (Laing 2012).

The use of these platforms and the popularity of these viewing practices are strongest among young people. In Korea, the participation of young people in online activity is tied to its provision of an emotional outlet, "where alternative play culture and the democratic communication structure across generations tend to be repressed in real life" (Ok 325). Self-

[1] A traditional example with English subtitles: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vGbmnpla7yM

expression and recognition from others are the two strongest motivations noted by researchers in the production of user-created content online, particularly among women of college age (Ok 337). On the side of the viewers, living alone is often identified as a common motivator for the consumption of these videos, particularly in relation to the experience of eating alone.

Mukbang provide an outlet for people who do not want to eat alone but find themselves living solitary lives, as do many of Seoul's urban residents. Claude Fischler explains, "In many or most cultures, eating alone generally is frowned upon," including in South Korea which has a very social eating culture (539). He explains that solitary eating is by nature not a social activity, and so someone who exhibits this behaviour "incurs suspicion for excluding him-/herself from communal eating: suspicion of some sort of treachery, poisoning or spell of some kind; suspicion of undue eating (without sharing)" (Fischler 540). Similar research by Wookyoung Cho et al found that the largest demographic of mukbang viewers, college-age students, associated solo eating with loneliness and boredom (Cho et al 526). Research finds that: "Sixty percent of Seoul's inhabitants live in apartment buildings. The director-general of the Seoul Innovation Department, In Dong Cho, sees these densely populated spaces as critical in rebuilding a sense of community" (McLaren and Agyeman 72). Students living in dorms are another common example.

The notion of "recapturing community" is a common discourse surrounding modernity and our relationships with technology. In the mean time, I examine a set of strategies specific to Korea's ongoing efforts to manage urban density and encourage optimal functioning of intertwined infrastructures, specifically through transit and communication.

What are significant in considering Korea's technological development are the ways in which it has focused on transit infrastructures intended to help ease capacity issues of dense

urban cities. Reports show that from 1950 to present day, Asia had one of the highest rates of rural to urban migration. South Korean cities are at present "home to 82.7 per cent of the population" (Shwayri in Karvonen 271). Seoul, Korea's capital city, "is home to more than 10 million people living within 234 square miles. With a population density almost five times that of New York City, public issues such as traffic congestion, parking, and housing shortages are magnified" (McLaren and Agyeman 71). These issues with density are compounded by the fact that for a long time in Seoul there were many single-use zones as "zoning codes did not develop over a long span of time; in a rapidly changing world, there was little time to try new strategies, abandon what did not work, and adopt what did work" (Stephani 121).

In South Korea, density in living spaces and urban neighbourhoods is mirrored by density in internet exchange points. All four of Korea's exchange points are located in Seoul (Murray 117). Exchange points are the physical servers through which internet traffic is exchanged between internet providers and networks. Their location in Seoul demonstrates the crucial role the city plays in the convergence of ICT infrastructures. This means that a great deal of human traffic is mirrored by a great deal of internet traffic, and increasingly the two are happening simultaneously as commuters use the internet to occupy their time. Urban planners have to consider terrain and density issues in future projects, while also protecting these exchange points or "hubs." Governments interested in managing this urban density need strategies to ensure the proper circulation of people and goods. This management of space and time necessitates a great deal of resources and power, particularly when communication systems are what tie the state together.

The industrialization of information and communication infrastructures presents challenges for Korea with its large population and small territory, "particularly…where the

mountainous terrain makes it nearly impossible to create contiguous suburban communities like those in the West" (Stephani 121). For this reason, instead of being organized around highways as typical access points, communities in Seoul are organized around its mass transit systems, specifically that of its bullet train (Stephani 122). The subway system in Seoul opened in 1985 towards the end of an economic period focused on industrial development (Nelson 15). The time spent on these transit systems is significant: "Seoulites spend an inordinate amount of time on public transportation, making more than three trips a day on average, with many residents spending over two hours in transit" (Park and Hong 162). For this reason, commuting acts as a key form of social organization in daily life, and, as such, these transit systems are increasingly being equipped with Wi-Fi, including buses and subways.

In a study by Yanqing Cui et al. mobile television use was associated with commuting as a means to "kill boredom", and they cite long commute times in Korea as a reason for the initial interest in this medium (Cui et al 197). Mobile television began in Korea when "TU Media, the South Korean telecommunications operator launched the first commercial live Mobile TV service in May 2005" (Cui et al 195). AfreecaTV, a popular online television website and early host for mukbang broadcasts, launched in 2005, only a few years before mukbang entered popular culture around 2009. Mukbang are well suited to these commutes as they last on average between thirty to forty minutes with longer broadcasts reaching over one hour in length, and AfreecaTV in particular is popular for commuters (Cha 2014). This corresponds to the average commute time in South Korea according to the OECD, which sits around one hour of commuting time each way to work or school (2016). Because of the higher user traffic during rush hour for transit Wi-Fi systems, some networks are not as accessible as is ideal, and Korea plans for the

future to include LTE and better-quality high-speed internet access to tackle the issue of network congestion (Sohn 2017).

Online viewing is one practice where the time spent in transit, which would otherwise remain "empty," can be reclaimed and put to use: "online viewing was idealized as an access point to a wide range of content and increased viewer choice" (Evans et al 417). Not only is it useful for safety and navigation to offer Wi-Fi service alongside transit systems but doing so also allows for social interaction and consumption to continue while occupying the "in-between" space of the daily commute. As this push for smart technology, digital-connectedness and open access to Wi-Fi increased, so did the presence of online cultures reliant on these infrastructures, and mukbang are now joined by other forms of food broadcast. For individuals, access to Wi-Fi on transit provides a means to participate in social interaction during a time that is typically solitary. For corporations, access to Wi-Fi and online viewing platforms during a commute also means the shopping day is lengthened.

As societies come to include online viewing practices in their daily lives, access to this content begins to structure their consumption patterns. This can be seen in the genre of food broadcasts which many fans describe watching on their way home from work or when eating alone once at home as a form of sociality. Earphones can be used during commutes to ensure the broadcast can be heard and provide a small amount of privacy from interaction with others in a crowded subway car. In this way, these infrastructures help to build and organize the habits of communities that rely on them. Through this organization, they can participate in meaning-making: "As actors who belong to different communities construct meanings around technologies, these technologies become socially constructed and simultaneously community shaping" (Yoo et al 328). As Lisa Parks explains, in considering together the social and

technological connections of these systems we can start to understand "infrastructure as part of human organization" (Parks 380). Leading the adoption of new technologies are youth who grew up playing online video games, chatting in internet cafes and reading and distributing manga (comics) online. Youth culture in this way was one of the main drivers for how quickly ICT development was embraced and also a means of cultural production: "Korean scholars unanimously confirm the centrality of participatory youth culture in the establishment of Korean new media space across every ICT sector" (Ok 338).

Mukbang and Platforms

Online viewing, particularly on mobile devices, is therefore especially suited to the digital environment in Korea. Mukbang were originally limited to the South Korean website and mobile television platform AfreecaTV, which stands for "any free broadcasting," which hosted the broadcasts live. AfreecaTV is known for hosting e-sports, gaming and meokbang all on one platform and describes itself as a person-to-person "technology-based video streaming service" (Wikipedia). The creators of mukbangs are known as "broadcast jockeys" or "BJs" in Korean, and the increasing popularity and lucrative nature of these productions soon drew many new creators and imitators outside of South Korea. The way in which broadcast jockeys can profit from AfreecaTV's model is unique: as viewers watch, they are given the opportunity to donate money during the live broadcast by way of "star balloons" which appear on screen to the viewers and the broadcast jockey live (Duboc 2015). Balloons are usually worth around ten cents each, but they accumulate quickly, particularly with a wide viewing audience (ibid). AfreecaTV, in return for providing a broadcast platform, takes a cut of the profits made in each broadcast as a form of subscription fee for using their services. The earliest mukbang rely on this system of crowd funding and are only available in the Korean language.

Once this phenomenon became more popular, it was more profitable for mukbang creators to host their content on YouTube, because it enables both live content for regular fans, and archived content for new fans once a live broadcast is finished. Since the original Korean broadcasts appeared on YouTube, countless channels have emerged that attempt to copy their style, many of which are more representative of North American genres and styles. Complications arise in the cultural analysis of this phenomenon once it began to be replicated by a wider international audience, as the foods and languages of mukbang grew more diverse, but what remained the same was the complex connections with ICT infrastructures. As Elizabeth Evans et al explain:

> Uses of the Internet by the screen industries as a distribution platform creates a complex relationship between the infrastructures and services facilitating online dissemination of film and television (TV), and the consumption practices of geographically and temporally dispersed connected viewing audiences. (Evans et al 409)

This complex relationship means that broadcasters rely on distribution platforms to host their content and make it accessible to fans, but access by audiences depends largely on where they are and what distribution is available in their areas.

Seoul's government sees the potential for information and communication technology infrastructures to help rebuild a sense of community, or as Jung et al describe a kind of "social potential for technological convergence" (Jung et al 304). Sharing City, Seoul is one such social project implemented and funded by Seoul's metropolitan government which: "aims to make sharing activities accessible to all citizens by expanding physical and digital sharing infrastructure, incubating and supporting sharing economy startups, and putting idle public

resources to better use" (MacLaren and Agyeman 72). The project aims to develop a sense of community around rapid urban migration and industrialization efforts. The social elements to mukbang require content platforms such as AfreecaTV and YouTube, but also spaces in which to consume these videos on the go, physical metro station platforms, cars and buses. Mukbang are not only watched in transit, but are also consumed at home, sometimes requiring additional devices, internet connections and cable connections. These are the physical infrastructures that mukbang rely on most visibly, and that support the social infrastructures that form around their consumption. It is significant that mukbang are watched across a diverse range of physical spaces because it makes their reach greater as they become ubiquitous across the networked infrastructures that make them available. Viewers can also join and leave broadcasts as desired. This allows for a freedom to enter and exit mobile broadcasts like mukbang when convenient, enabling users to more easily incorporate them into the rhythms of daily life.

Not only do mukbang rely on visible material infrastructures such as internet cables, satellites, and data centres required to host online platforms, but they also rely on more complex but less-visible social infrastructures as well. It is important to study both, as the virtual of infrastructure – physical and social. Live broadcasts by nature rely on the assumption of uninterrupted internet service, for both broadcasters and the fans trying to access their content. How this liveness is maintained is in large part due to the operation of infrastructures, both technological and social.

How are mukbang an example of infrastructure at work?

As Ok HyeRyoung notes, "the strong connectivity between online and offline reality defines the Internet as an inextricable part of techno-culture in Korea" (Ok 324). Online broadcasting has connections in offline life, including in the social infrastructures it relies on.

These include relationships maintained in order to produce content, including the social exchanges between broadcasters and food delivery services, delivery personnel, managers for rental studio space, content moderators for broadcast channels and sponsors for advertising. It is important to think about the network of media infrastructures needed to produce the online viewing practices that are popular in Korea today.

Lisa Parks categorizes media infrastructures as "the material sites and objects involved in the local, national and/or global distribution of audiovisual signals and data" (356). Mobile viewing naturally requires a mobile device, but also a supportive mobile network to provide Wi-Fi and data signals. This is particularly important in cities heavily dependent on transportation infrastructures to commute to and from busy urban centres into semi-urban peripheries. As stated above, these infrastructures integrate mobile networks and transit transportation systems that in turn support the increase in mobile viewing practices in Korea. As Yoo states: "Each time a new layer of technology is added, mobile services gain new meaning, inviting yet more opportunities for other actors to join the network" (Yoo et al 327). As mukbang expand as a viewing practice, the infrastructures upon which their existence relies also expand, including social infrastructures. In considering what Parks calls a "theory of media infrastructures," which accounts "not only for the bodies of actors that appear on screen but for those involved in supporting acts such as the trafficking of content, the flow of electrical currents, and the policing of audiovisual signals," it is important to consider the larger structures of social relationships that the existence of mukbang rely on (Parks 370). For this reason, we can examine not only the individuals involved in filming mukbang and content creation and their audiences, but also the technicians and infrastructural systems they rely on to support their creative process, including fans.

Smaller-scale social relationships also serve as forms of infrastructure that are often left out of many studies of the production of culture. In Korean food broadcasts these include networks made up of takeaway food services, restaurants and online ordering platforms. Equally, social infrastructures also support small time broadcasters as word of mouth is largely what is relied upon to draw mobile television viewers to newborn channels. When broadcasters begin to attract a larger audience, they can mobilize advertising revenue services for sponsorship to support their efforts, requiring further uninterrupted access to internet and communication infrastructures. This means human involvement is also needed to monitor the servers that host content on platforms like AfreecaTV and YouTube. As well, people do the work of removing content that is deemed to be in violation of community guidelines (Gillespie 2018).

Understanding these relationships of reliance requires what Parks calls an "infrastructural disposition": "that is, when viewing/consuming media we must think not only about what they represent and how they relate to a history of style, genre, or meaning but also think more elementally about what they are made of and how they arrived" (357). This disposition allows us to consider not only how mukbang came to be – the historical context of Korea and its internet and communications technology development − but also how mukbang are preserved/survive in YouTube's archival process. Additionally, we should consider how this media's genre, style and form compares to other kinds of food-centered broadcasts and television programs as part of a larger media ecosystem. My framework of analysis draws from an awareness of these larger structural relationships to focus on how mukbang fans and creators define digital spaces in which they interact, and the bonds and the communities they form through their use of mukbang online.

As Star describes: "We are still stuck with the problem of where online interactions fit with people's lives and organizations offline" (384). This will be explored in the following

chapter, particularly with regard to the personal bonds formed online as a result of mukbang's emphasis on food sharing and how those practices translate to offline forms of social connection. Social infrastructures give us an important insight into this online/offline relationship. As will be explored in a final chapter, the connections of mukbang watching, commuter cultures and urban density and forms of social loneliness are only one of a variety of motivating conditions for consuming and creating mukbang food broadcasts, and it would be incorrect to assume that only one explanation exists for this phenomenon. As well, mukbang are only accessed and consumed by a portion of the general population in Korea and now abroad, and it is worth discussing why some might be excluded from this phenomena's potential for social connection online. In the next section I will examine the relationship of ICT infrastructures and issues of access as a possible barrier to the participation in mukbang and digital community membership.

Problematizing ICT- The Digital Divide

Mukbang are a popular phenomenon, enabling social connections between diverse audiences in South Korea and around the world, but the infrastructures that enable their distribution and consumption are not equally available to everyone. Despite the increase in scholarship naming Korea as a leader in smart city research, Evans et al remind us that "Unevenness in the 'maturity' of connected viewing environments means looking beyond broad national infrastructural conditions" (Evans 414). While numerous Korean cities and large urban areas are becoming increasingly networked into highly advanced technological systems enabling constant access to Wi-Fi and ICT infrastructures, inequality still exists in this system in both access and ownership. While Korea may have achieved almost one hundred percent broadband penetration, Sofia Shwayri writes: "The intoxicating powers of ICT are compounded by the belief in its almost instantaneous transformative powers" (Karvonen et al 275). Shwayri

criticizes the belief that employing ICT infrastructures is the same as enabling social change because it ignores the underlying social inequalities that prevent certain groups from accessing technology and therefore knowledge and power. “With large-scale city-wide urban developments such as transportation projects, citizen participation becomes merely a non-expert presence with limited access to highly technical data, thus demonstrating the persistent inequalities of power and knowledge” (271).

Seoul was one of the first cities world-wide to implement smart technologies on such a scale, investing early in the use of personal data from smart phone use and devices with location services (McLaren and Agyeman 74). It is estimated that almost eighty percent of Korea’s population had access to the Internet in 2009, around the same time that mukbang became a cultural phenomenon in this country (Woyke 2009). It is clear however that many are left out of this ICT infrastructural advance: the elderly, those with disabilities, citizens living in rural settings and persons with low incomes experienced half this rate of access at the time of Woyke’s study (2009). As Seungmin Lee outlines seven years later, “traditional indicators of the digital divide such as gender, age, economic status and education level” and “external indicators such as economic status still affect the generation of the smart divide in the adoption of smart devices” (Lee 2016, 262). Elizabeth Woyke suggests that Korea’s government does not see this fact as an infrastructure problem, rather as a matter for outreach and education efforts in order to raise the levels of access in these communities. Knowing this, it is useful to return to the words of McLaren and Agyeman who believe that “Online platforms can open up innovation processes to new ideas and new approaches, but only where a culture of collaborative sharing and learning exists” (McLaren and Agyeman 52).

Since the time of these statistics in 2009, Korea has since achieved nearly complete internet coverage for its population: “By 2014, 98% of Korean households were connected (the highest proportion worldwide), whilst penetration of fixed and wireless broadband reached 38% and 105%, respectively” (Evans et al 411). Due to such focused efforts at ensuring access, people’s literacy with smart devices now characterizes the digital divide more so than access to smart devices such as mobile phones and personal computers. “The ability to use smart devices has become one of the factors generating a gap between members of society,” encompassed by what Lee calls the “smart divide” (Lee 2016, 260). Lee elaborates on the “smart divide” by characterizing the difference between “ICT users and non-users (a vertical divide) to the differences in the quality and intensity of use among ICT users (a horizontal divide)” (261). This horizontal divide describes the access issues for those unfamiliar with or unable to use smart devices and personal computers.

Shwayri posits that this inattention to a full representation of societal diversity categorizing the digital divide may be due to “the sheer scale of the project, its complex, long-term impacts on economic growth and its management at the metropolitan government level as opposed to the district and neighbourhood levels” (Shwayri in Karvonen 271). Inattention to difference means some will be left out in a one-size-fits-all approach to digital access. It is in smaller communities where this social change may actually be possible, in part because it can happen in a more focused and public-oriented manner such that “inclusivity [is] a prerequisite for the promotion of successful sustainable living” (Shwayri in Karvonen 271).

It is worth asking about issues of access in this context because the social benefits of broadcasts such as mukbang, such as social inclusion, feelings of commensality and food sharing, depend upon access. Likewise, the creation of these videos regardless of their chosen

platform requires camera and recording equipment, finances for purchasing food, lighting, makeup and renting studio space. For this reason, we can understand those who participate in mukbang as being personally invested in their communities because they invest time, money and energy in ensuring the sustainability of this genre and the success of its broadcasters.

As the influence of these videos is increasingly far-reaching, there is fear that they will have a negative impact on their viewing audience, particularly with their focus on binge eating. As Nelson explains, because of war and economic difficulties: "Up until quite recently, hunger was a common season of the year for many people in South Korea…Hunger is a recurrent theme in individual memory and popular representations of the past" (71). Increasingly, hunger is becoming a theme of the present as well but for different reasons. It seems increasingly clear that the South Korean government is hinting that mukbang are not what they had in mind when encouraging their citizens to participate in digital culture. There have been concerns in the mukbang community that the government is considering cracking down on content it considers harmful to public health and are associating mukbang with a larger societal issue of obesity (Choi 2018). While concrete regulations have not been tabled, the state did begin monitoring this content to study its correlation with health issues last year (Lee 2018). Many fans would argue that mukbang videos provide an outlet for consumption without actually eating and help them maintain healthy diets because they can consume vicariously through these broadcasts (Lee 2018).

Now that mukbang have migrated from AfreecaTV to YouTube, this trend does not show signs of slowing down, particularly as international audiences discover mukbang and these video blogs become tied to other niches of YouTube such as ASMR (autonomic sensory meridian response). This community relies on the sounds produced by eating and consuming food to

stimulate pleasurable sensations in the body, and researchers who study affective communities on YouTube are interested in the relationship between audience and sensory experience. Research into ASMR videos will serve as a gateway into understanding the complex relationships of feeling and affinity that define mukbang communities as larger social organizations. Having described in this chapter the conditions of possibility for mukbang as a cultural form, the affective ties available in these videos will be used to set up a discussion about virtual communities. As these social communities emerge, it will be interesting to see how they interact and define themselves against other fandoms, as international borders are increasingly being crossed and circumvented by digital content, and diverse communities of YouTube are being drawn together by food.

Conclusion

Through an intense process of infrastructure building between governments and economic elites, and an emphasis on public participation through several policy initiatives, South Korea was able to recover from a long period of war and the aftermath of colonial occupation and develop into a major player for information and communications technology infrastructures and manufacturing on a global level. While an emphasis on these industries was good for the economy historically and continues to be so in the present, issues of access to knowledge (and therefore power) persist where these technologies are implemented unevenly, with little regard for the social differences and inequalities they produce at the level of digital literacy. For activists, this requires a reframing of the smart narratives surrounding infrastructural development as they often gloss over the digital divide created by these same technologies and initiatives.

Despite the continued challenges of this technological development, mukbang food broadcasts as a cultural phenomenon in South Korea would not be possible without this country's state-led focus on the development of information and communications technologies, and the infrastructures these require. They present an interesting case study as a mobile viewing practice because of the way they interconnect material infrastructures with social infrastructures, where infrastructure becomes the condition of possibility for the community-building and socialisation enabled by mukbang. It is significant that mukbang can not only be tied to modern realities of urbanization and industrialization, but also to Korea's social and political history. As this digital viewing practice emerges, its ties to commuter culture and youth culture in particular become obvious. The profitability of this trend inspires its imitation in other cultures and the reproduction of its themes in different contexts. Because mukbang are a recent and ongoing cultural phenomenon, it remains to be seen what kind of transgression these processes of exchange and imitation will enable. Future research may focus on the use of mukbang and other highly social broadcasts in connecting isolated populations, including rural populations and seniors, as social programs continue to emphasize the need to connect these same populations into the digital landscape.

Chapter Two
Is there Affect in a Honeycomb?

What do the act of eating fresh honeycomb and a simulated in-flight safety presentation have in common? They have both recently been the subject of ASMR videos on YouTube. Media scholars familiar with YouTube will acknowledge that autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR) has increasingly come to characterize the platform's present cultural moment. It is difficult to study YouTube without being drawn into this genre, regardless of how or if one studies or experiences ASMR. This can be seen in how ASMR is commonly featured as a 'tag' in some of the most popular trending YouTube videos, including in mukbang broadcasts. This phrase now appears regularly, sometimes ironically, in the taglines of many well-known YouTubers, who attempt to capitalize on its growing popularity by recreating its themes in their own content. "ASMRtists," (ASMR artists) the fan-given name for the creators of these videos, focus on providing their viewers with tingling sensations sometimes referred to as "braingasms" through the use of aural stimuli and the dedicated creation of intimate affective environments. An examination of the complex and intimate nature of ASMR as a sense-focused media production and its loyal following online will help guide my analysis of mukbang as a similar phenomenon. I am interested in how the feelings mukbang elicit are put to use and help sustain the kinds of digital social community that form around mukbang broadcasts and broadcast jockeys, a topic I analyse further in Chapter Three.

This chapter analyzes two forms of ASMR videos available on YouTube using literature from affect theory in order to argue that in ASMR, much like in mukbang communities, affect and feeling circulates and repeats in such a way that causes not only physical sensations in the body, but strong feelings of emotional connection between fans, content and creators. This works

to solidify what would otherwise be diverse and geographically dispersed audiences into social communities around the kinds of feeling structures produced by the genre of mukbang broadcasts. Margaret Wetherell's work on affective practice will be used in conversation with Sara Ahmed to analyze the kind of work affect does in ASMR videos. In doing so I will show that ASMR videos and their communities represent a conscious effort to seek out and feel affect. Affect is circulated, cycled and reproduced through ASMR as a particular organization of bodily sensations. As well I examine how ASMR troubles the distinctions drawn in some affect theory between autonomous affect, discourse and emotion. As someone interested in understanding how affect operates in mukbang and food television, it is important for me to examine ASMR in order to understand the role affect plays in online communities formed around sensory experiences. This is significant in my research because ASMR are very closely tied in style to mukbang; they share similar modes of production, fans, and crowd funding models, making it possible to apply similar analysis to both.

This chapter will focus its analysis on specific YouTube channels that represent two clear but related categories: traditional ASMR videos that include the channel Gentle Whispering ASMR, and food ASMR, which is now part of the mukbang genre, including the channel SAS-ASMR. These channels are relevant to this chapter because they have high subscription rates, millions of views and a wide range of comments and fan interactions that can be analyzed to illustrate the varied affective impacts of this genre and how they can be related to similar interactions in mukbang. They each have a well-established history of content going back several years and will equally be used to trace existing and emerging patterns in this phenomenon.

I have watched close to three dozen of the most popular videos by the channels SAS-ASMR and Gentle Whispering each and analyzed the patterns they exhibit. I chose these videos because they have the highest number of likes, comments, and fan interactions that I could draw from for my analysis. To analyze these videos, I assessed how they were produced using a comparative framework to determine in what ways they were different from and similar to mukbang broadcasts. I am specifically interested in how the broadcasters use sensory experience as part of their videos. Through my analysis I argue that all ASMRtists who eat and consume food to create sound are essentially participating in mukbang, whereas not all mukbang creators are aware of or choose to participate in the ASMR community.

Mukbang originated in South Korea in the late 2000s. They involve live broadcasts by an individual creator who produces videos that focus on the consumption of large portions of food in front of an audience (see figure 3). Mukbang can produce sounds that are pleasurable to listen to for ASMR viewers, particularly from mukbang broadcasters who have chosen to capitalize on ASMR's popularity and make use of it in their work. Not all mukbang are ASMR, because ASMR is understood as the practice of seeking physiological responses to sounds that are not necessarily related to eating or food.

YouTube and Affective Practice

In establishing a better understanding of ASMR as a sensation-focused media on YouTube, we can gain insight into mukbang who share the same platform. YouTube is commonly referred to as a "community of practice," and this practice translates to its most affective media including ASMR and mukbang (Burgess and Green *Society Series*, 78). ASMR videos demonstrate Margaret Wetherell's theory of affective practice, providing a tangible example with which to explore this model. In her seminal work *Affect and Emotion: A New Social Science*

Understanding, Margaret Wetherell outlines an approach to affect theory that synthesizes prominent theories on affect, emotion, discourse and the body in order to define what she describes as affective practice.

> Affective practice focuses on the emotional as it appears in social life and tries to follow what participants do. It finds shifting, flexible and often over-determined figurations rather than simple lines of causation, character types and neat emotion categories. (4)

I use the term affective practice in relation to ASMR and mukbang because these are media focused on emotion and feeling in everyday life. Mukbang are highly mobile communities, requiring a sense of their flexibility in their analysis for a better understanding of how their affect works. For Wetherell, affective practice complicates prior notions of how affect works on the individual and the collective, how it can be a transformative and exert force, and how it works in the brain and in the world. Wetherell states "By affect, I will mean *embodied meaning-making.* Mostly, this will be something that could be understood as *human emotion"* (emphasis in the original, 4). Affect in this view is not autonomous from emotion, and Wetherell clarifies this so as to counter Brian Massumi's work *The Autonomy of Affect*, which sees affect and emotion as having separate but not completely independent logics (Massumi 88).

As an analyst of ASMR videos and social communities on YouTube more broadly, a complex definition of affect allows me the freedom to interpret complex social organizations and intimacies online without leaving out the individual emotions, reactions and motivations that draw viewers to this content. Reading the comment sections for example, I cannot always identify where the feelings a commenter is expressing are coming from, or how they might

change in relation to this content. A theory of affective practice is useful in making sense of what is often a mobile and changing space online. I agree with Wetherell's use of the term affective practice, where "Practice conjures forms of order but recognises their 'could be otherwise' qualities (Edwards, 1997). Affective practice focuses on the emotional as it appears in social life and tries to follow what participants do" (4). This model of affective practice is important to my work as it acknowledges the importance of studying participant behaviour and practices, my prime research material. By examining the social life of viewers, I am most interested in the extent to which their feelings exist and do work to create communities than on whether they can be neatly ordered into a heuristic of affective types. This will be important in a following chapter which explores how these feelings work to create concrete communities online.

Borrowing Wetherell's use of the term "practice" also suggests the use of a replicable and consistent methodology in such analysis that still makes room for a broadened definition of affect. This methodology analyses the practices of community members visible in their interactions with one another and extrapolates these feelings into a structure of community membership. For this reason, a wider definition of affect including affective practice is important to my research because YouTube communities can seem ephemeral, their interactions anonymous or inconsistent, so their analysis must be as flexible as their membership in order to understand how small interactions around likes, comments, and tags provide openings onto the larger social communities formed around mukbang.

What is ASMR?

Only in recent years has ASMR become the subject of scientific study, in part due to its rise in popularity, but also because these autonomic responses affect only a small portion of the

general population. The sensations of ASMR have grown popular among a specific community of practice both on and offline, who use ASMR videos to relax, alleviate stress and sleeplessness, and who circulate these videos as a form of support and solidarity with other who experience the same embodied ASMR responses. A more general community of individuals aware of their content has grown through their overall popularity on platforms such as YouTube. By "specific" and "general" communities, I refer to the degree in which these communities consume and rely on this content as part of their personal daily and social routines. The term "community" allows us to consider how the specific and most strongly dedicated ASMR consumers and fans not only rely on this content but also circulate it among themselves to encourage more ASMR responses and use the videos as a form of social exchange. We see this in comments such as "this video worked great for me, it might work for you too". Sherry Turkle argues that "Communities are constituted by physical proximity, shared concerns, real consequences, and common responsibilities," and this is true of ASMR and mukbang (239).

ASMR and mukbang construct physical proximity in how they are produced, such that the online social organization they display can have an offline social impact, resulting in friendships for example, or relationships of care between a viewer and the ASMRtist they rely on to sleep. Communities form through the shared concerns of the fans surrounding the interests they share and their preservation. ASMR discussion groups are also very similar to online support groups, offering information to newcomers on the best videos with ASMR sensations that help with stress, sleeplessness, and anxiety. ASMR and mukbang fans form communities through their members' inter-reliance, visible in how viewers share content and depend on one another for social interaction, and viewers' own self-definition as communities, they need to be

analysed as communities made possible by the spatial separation and online networking of their members.

ASMR videos usually involve a lone speaker who performs activities and scenarios designed to create the sensory triggers necessary for these responses to manifest. The most popular examples of triggers include whispering, slow movements, and soft repetitive sounds (Baratt et al 6). Many ASMR creators use two microphones in their video recordings in order to produce a binaural sound experience that viewers are meant to listen to wearing headphones, creating a more "immersive headphone experience" (Andersen 691). This sonic experience is heightened when the viewer uses noise cancelling headphones which increases the intensity of the sound such that it comes into contact not only with the ear drums and inner ear, but also with the head, producing sensations and shivers that travel along the outer surfaces of the skin, completely enveloping that person into ASMR's environment. Mukbang that are part of food ASMR use this model to produce ASMR responses using the sounds made from eating and chewing.

Emma Baratt and Nick Davis surveyed participants who claim to experience ASMR with the interest of determining whether ASMR can have real effects on the management of symptoms such as stress, pain, and anxiety. An overall conclusion from their study was that ASMR can positively improve mood and pain management (8), a benefit commonly cited by those in the community to explain their loyal consumption of these videos. The strongest relationship in their research was between those who experience 'flow state' and having more ASMR triggers (9). These researchers describe a state of flow as one of "intense focus and diminished awareness of the passage of time" (3). Equally, Baratt and Davis acknowledge that "devoting specific time to engaging in ASMR, watching relaxed scenes play out and sitting

quietly could be considered a form of mindfulness" (11) which aligns with many of the meditation and relaxation scenarios that traditional ASMR rely on (spa sessions, massage etc.). Further studies have found that, unlike the broader category of mindfulness, ASMR does result in clear physiological responses in those claiming to experience the "shivers." Research findings by Stephen Smith et al "provide empirical support for anecdotal claims that ASMR videos promote pleasant affect and reduce negative affect in people who self-identify as having ASMR" (8). For these reasons, current studies on the neuroscience behind autonomic sensory meridian responses demonstrate that for those who experience ASMR, the sensations are real and can produce positive effects.

This chapter will continue with an exploration of where these sensations come from, and the complex online social relationships that they produce. I argue that ASMR's circulation and repetition of affect and feeling causes not only these measurable physical sensations, but also enables strong emotional connection between fans, content and creators which works to define and concretize this genre's sense of social community.

Affective patterning in the genres of ASMR and mukbang

The recent history of ASMR videos on YouTube is complicated by this platform's profit motive, as an increasing number of YouTubers seek to profit from this trend by contributing (with mixed results) to its canon. The result is a wide range of potential YouTube channels as objects of study, all claiming to provide ASMR-centered experiences. But only some come close to what could be understood as 'traditional' ASMR. Initially, channels and YouTubers who focused on ASMR came out of a longer tradition of forums on Reddit and other websites interested in the connection between sounds and pleasurable forms of tingling in the scalp and

spine. Giulia Poerio points to the first instances of the term 'ASMR' appearing in 2007, and the first ASMR YouTube video being uploaded in 2009 by user Whispering Life (Callard et al 122). Commonly cited examples in this genre before the use of the acronym 'ASMR' include massage and mediation tutorials, and white noise compilations often used in spas (Andersen 684).

One early example is found in Reddit threads on autonomic sensory meridian response, which are now tagged with "intentional," "unintentional," and "roleplay" in relation to their ASMR content.[2] ASMR users themselves can be seen to do the majority of the work in terms of sorting and categorizing this diverse content (https://www.reddit.com/r/asmr/). ASMR is characterized by its emphasis on the use of sounds to produce physiological responses in the body. Poerio et al (2018) separate what they call "aesthetic chills," brought on by particular music or experiences of awe and characterized by increased heart rate and excitement, from ASMR, which are associated with feelings of relaxation and calm (2). The closest comparable research object to ASMR is synaesthesia, described as a "'crossing' of the senses where a sensation in one modality (e.g. seeing the letter 'A' – called the inducer) is automatically accompanied by, or elicits, an experience in another modality (e.g. seeing the colour red – called the concurrent)" (Callard et al 124). This is a phenomenon that is also limited to a certain subset of the general population but has been more widely studied than ASMR. As Joceline Anderson points out, distant intimacy in ASMR is created not only through the spatial distance of the viewer and creator, but also temporal distance, as viewers can consume the content of a creator long after it has originally been uploaded (691). This is true for mukbang as well, and these similarities help guide my discussion of affect in mukbang and ASMR.

[2] Intentional refers to content produced with the intent to stimulate ASMR, unintentional refers to content that is not connected with ASMR or its community but happens to produce ASMR because of the sounds it contains.

Like ASMR, mukbang broadcasts have an observable pattern in how they unfold. Mukbang open with the host seated at a table facing their webcam, and a spread of food displayed in front of them (see figure 1). The host is seated closely to a microphone, and as soon as a live broadcast begins they greet their fans. Some hosts who use recorded content like Stephanie Soo and hyuneeEats have an opening line they use commonly, or a short musical introduction like KEEMI and Dorothy who use a recipe film sequence to show their food's preparation (see figure 4). Each item that they are going to consume is listed, either vocally or by the inclusion of a menu in the form of a text block in the upper corner of the broadcast (see figure 3). Most mukbang broadcasters try each item individually and describe its taste, presenting their chosen foods to the camera for closer inspection by viewers. This allows viewers to discern texture, colours and steam/temperature more clearly. The structure of the discussion that happens during mukbang, if they are not silent like many ASMR mukbang, is directed entirely by the host who can decide to answer viewer questions live, or address comments and fan requests from previous videos. For example, mukbang broadcaster BANZZ reads a fan request to "eat the last dumpling with soya sauce so it will taste strong" in his video on Korean dumplings (mandu), and he does so (21:52)[3]. Many mukbang broadcasters also choose to narrate events from their life, similar to ASMRtists, which works to break up periods of sensing and feeling with discussion. These conventions in the production and style of filming of mukbang are similar to ASMR; and help to structure the interactions that they enable and the connections they form between viewers and creators.

Returning to Wetherell's concept of affective practice as relating to the emotion in the social interactions of everyday life, I argue that affective practice becomes recognizable over

[3] (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xIVzoHt2qgI)

time in ASMR and mukbang through the patterns participants in this community exhibit in their interactions with other viewers and with creators. As these patterns are established, it becomes more evident that the emotions and feelings in ASMR and mukbang are significant enough to support the existence of their communities. Patterns are visible through the structures these interactions build – networks of support, friendships, collaborations among artists and YouTubers among others. This patterning, and the return of viewers to effective content helps to build the reach of the channels like Gentle Whispering ASMR, known to her fans as 'Maria', who now boasts one point five million subscribers, and her videos receive millions of views, helping to establish ASMR as more than simply niche content.

This high viewership is due in part to dedicated fans who repetitively view the videos that they find provide the most effective ASMR triggers, as many of the comments responding to the videos demonstrate. On a video by SAS-ASMR, commenter Rita Liao writes "Who is still watching this video one year later?" receiving 313 "likes" in just two weeks. Comments begin to reveal the patterns of feeling ASMR videos model and shape in viewers' experience. The repetition in ASMR, and the return to the most highly affective videos is similar to the patterning Wetherell describes as being characteristic of affective practice, and of the work of those who analyze affect.

> An affective practice can be made up of cycles of recurrence of affective activities over days, weeks and months… Cycles of affective practice might persist for a short period or they may last, and be reworked, over many hundreds of years (12).

According to Wetherell, "the study of affect is inextricably to do with the study of pattern" (16). In ASMR, how long an affective response to a video lasts depends on how it touches its viewers.

If a video produces a strong affective response, its circulation is increased over time and so are the patterns of behaviour it produces. Wetherell describes this as a cycle of affective practice: "An affective practice can be made up of cycles of recurrence of affective activities over days, weeks and months, like the Christian year, or the cycle of 'work on the self' as good intentions lead to determined resolutions, to failures, to guilt, to the berating of self, to giving up, to self-indulgence, to good intentions, etc. Cycles of affective practice might persist for a short period or they may last, and be reworked" (12). One cycle of a viewer/participant in ASMR can be traced from physiological responses, to the sharing of content, to trending content, to overstimulation, to burnout, to rediscovery, and so on. In this way, the affect in ASMR follows a pattern or at least shows some kind of structure or organization. Here I see a useful connection to the textures of honeycomb where so much of this affective expression seems focused and where I will return to later in the chapter.

Storytelling in ASMR: building distant intimacy

As a part of this affective patterning, ASMR videos construct feelings of intimacy that draw viewers back to re-watch effective ASMR content, continuing the circulation of affect. Storytelling plays a role in how ASMRtists build intimacy with their viewers. Storytelling works in traditional ASMR in a different way from videos labelled as food ASMR, and in the mukbang genre of YouTube eating videos. Food ASMR do not contain the same focus on care service industries as do traditional ASMR videos, nor the same elements of narrative continuity in their built scenarios, marking them out as a distinct genre of ASMR-related video making (Anderson 694). Mukbang, like ASMR, often employ storytelling in the form of a personal monologue to establish social closeness with their viewers. Mukbang's reliance on an element of storytelling suggests that discourse plays a significant role in the affective practice of this video form as it

does in ASMR.The pleasure of mukbang lies not only in the imagining of physical closeness, but also from the consumption of food in company. The meal is the object of focus for this discussion, often in priority even over the identity of the person making the food broadcast. Broadcast jockey KEEMI says: "[This looks] So good! This is why people, you gotta eat your favourite foods, it just makes you happy. It brightens your day" (Sea of Cheese Mukbang, 2017). The food in this video is said to provide happiness in its consumption and guides the storytelling of the creator, articulating the food as an object of emotion. Affect is generated in its circulation around how it is shared and consumed.

Wetherell strongly believes that theories that treat affect and discourse separately disadvantage our understanding of affect theory in practice. ASMR videos demonstrate the blurring of these categories, as ASMR discourse or storytelling in the form of speech and whispering produces not only emotional affects, as it often evokes a relationship of care, but also physiological affects, or "the shivers". Emma Bennett points out "ASMR is less a question of biological autonomy than linguistic agency – of a body felt, a self experienced, through language" (Callard et al 31). Criticizing Brian Massumi's tendency to treat these as separate, Wetherell says: "On the contrary, I shall argue that it is the discursive that very frequently makes affect powerful, makes it radical and provides the means for affect to travel" (19). Discourse as both text (subtitles) and verbal speech (whispering) is what allows for the intimacy to form. The comments and other interactive functions of YouTube videos allows for the creation of a social discursive environment. This environment supports the feelings ASMR consumers have of being immersed within this experience as they listen along with others and comment to express their relaxation.

Affect and discourse in the study of ASMR are not separate from one another. Even in ASMR videos that do not rely on whispering, subtitles and descriptions are still used in the description box to convey information and maintain conversations between ASMRtists and their viewers. One of the reasons many return to Gentle Whispering ASMR and other channels that focus on traditional ASMR is how they build intimacy with their viewers, placing emphasis on personal compliments, and speaking words of encouragement and kindness.[4] Gentle Whispering ASMR/Maria compliments her viewers frequently, who express gratitude in return. One commenter, "darkwing dirk," posts: "I've received more compliments in this video than I have in my entire life" (Sleep inducing Haircut ASMR | Shampoo | Page Flipping | Scissors, 2018). The element of care in this video is clear through Maria's focus on personal attention, continual references to the viewers needs, wants and personal comfort. She is careful in the language she uses to seek permission from an audience who will not always answer, but some may use the comment section to express their appreciation for her attention to detail. Smith et al found in a study of self-proclaimed ASMR experiencers that not only was personal address significant, but that: "participants reported that the intensity of their ASMR tingles was larger when the actors in the videos addressed the viewer directly rather than depicting a scene from a third-person perspective" (Smith et al 362). This indicates the significance of how broadcast jockeys perform intimacy with their audiences through direct address, and the care their audiences feel as evoked by their commentary.

As Elspeth Probyn points out: "through the media, and now the Internet, we are daily faced with questions about how we care for others who are not 'one of us', e.g. part of our

[4] See: Gentle Whispering. "~Simple Pleasures~ ASMR Soft Spoken Personal Attention." *YouTube*, 10 April 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8jUVci17vE.

communities, families and circles of kith" (38). Mukbang and ASMR present one option for where this caring for others can happen across diverse and mobile audiences. Creators can 'care' for their fans, and fans can demonstrate care for one another in their interactions including in the comments. Michael Reagle writes "[the] positive power of online comment is that it allows people to connect with and support another, even if briefly and from afar" (122-123). Smith et al in their study of ASMR experiencers found that

> In addition to the effect of ASMR videos on pleasant affect and physiology, ASMR videos in Study 1 were also associated with increased feelings of connectedness. This suggests that an additional benefit of ASMR may be that of increased connectedness, most likely because of the social and interpersonal context in which ASMR is triggered. (14)

This care is part of the intimacy built by ASMR's affective patterning, and one element that helps to solidify social communities from within these diverse audiences. A powerful and emotional example can be found as user Julie writes "I have an eating disorder and sometimes when I refuse to eat I watch this and after a while I start getting hungry lmao so ty",[5] expressing her gratitude for SAS-ASMR's work. She received over three hundred likes for this comment, a significant expression of community agreement for this sentiment (ASMR Seafood Boil + Bloves Sauce (EATING SOUNDS) | SAS-ASMR, 2018). Moving from an analysis of pattern and relationships of care, the next section in this chapter will address how these relations are maintained despite the mobility and physical separation of these communities through affect.

[5] Lmao so ty signifies "laughing my ass off so thank you"

The circulation of affect in mobile communities

Mobility in viewing audiences means that affect in ASMR and mukbang works on bodies that are separated spatially but are also intimately connected through the closeness of their digital interactions. ASMR share similar affective characters and patterns of viewership (commenting, re-watching, returning to 'feel' a video again) with mukbang. Wetherell's work can provide a summary of the character of the affect in ASMR, particularly around her definition of affect as episodic. "Affect is always 'turned on' and 'simmering', moving along, since social action is continually embodied. But, affect also comes in and out of focus. The ongoing flow of affective activity can take shape as a particular kind of affective performance, episode or occasion" (Wetherell 12). The affect in ASMR embodies particularly well Wetherell's claim of affect's "episodic" nature, particularly as YouTube videos by ASMRtists and mukbang broadcasters are typically structured as episodes (79). Affect in this definition can be more than one thing at a time, which is supported by the multiple understandings of affect available through the ASMR communities on YouTube. Wetherell emphasizes that "we also need to locate affect, not in the ether, or in endless and mysterious circulations, but in actual bodies and social actors, negotiating, making decisions, evaluating, communicating, inferring and relating" (159). With this in mind, we can see how affect is not only located in ASMR videos, it is built into and constitutes their very structure and feel of these videos as a genre. It works on the bodies that make and consume them, as well as the researchers who study the sensations they produce.

ASMR share production aesthetics with mukbang which help to tie their models of affective circulation more closely together as they come to resemble each other in style. This includes how their creators place themselves in their videos, seated close to a microphone, and the kinds of food they consume in order to produce pleasurable responses. One object which now

increasingly embodies the affect of ASMR and mukbang videos and the excess of food ASMR is honeycomb. In it's oozing, sticky and messy nature, honeycomb can come to serve as an apt illustration of the complicated layers, pockets and structures of affect in the ASMR community. Using Sara Ahmed's work, one can relate her concept of the stickiness of emotions to the actual stickiness of substances used to make sounds in ASMR videos, particularly in food ASMR.

On the most obvious level, that of sonic experience, traditional ASMR and food ASMR are very different from one another. Food ASMR often involve no speech whatsoever in order to place emphasis on the sound produced by the foods included within, yet they produce ASMR, and are increasingly used for this purpose. Stickiness in these videos is a quality often exhibited by foods or materials manipulated as a means of production of noise, but which also relates to the feelings connected with such noise. This noise is what produces a connection as it stimulates the ASMR responses. Ahmed clearly relates the concepts of stickiness and disgust, two qualities that she says are "linked if not reduced to each other" (89). However, she says stickiness involves a "form of relationality" (91); for viewers of ASMR stickiness is both a satisfying and a potentially disgusting feature of the sonic dimensions of the videos.

Ahmed describes "working with a model of disgust as stickiness, I suggest that disgust shapes the bodies of a community of the disgusted through how it sticks objects together" (15). The stickiness of the foods in these videos provides a form of relationality between what is being eaten i.e. the object, and the affective and emotional responses produced in its consumption, because it is the stickiness that viewers can hear so clearly in the consumption of food in ASMR. It is important to note that as Ahmed states: "disgust is deeply ambivalent, involving desire for,

or an attraction towards, the very objects that are felt to be repellent" (84).[6] The stickiness of the objects in mukbang and ASMR is both what can make them seem disgusting to watch, and also acts as a powerful draw for viewers to return to watch them.

In food ASMR, the consumption of food for the production of sound and the pleasure of sharing in this experience become linked in complex ways. Honeycomb is one of the most popular foods eaten by ASMRtists because of the sticky and satisfying sounds it produces upon consumption.[7] Affect can be located in this object because it has come to be circulated as an image representing this community, particularly in food ASMR, just as Ahmed theorizes that circulation of affect increases its intensity: "The sign is a 'sticky sign' as an effect of a history of articulation, which allows the sign to accumulate value" (92). The honeycomb, once found to be ASMR-worthy on one channel, circulates amongst other ASMRtists, and is repetitively articulated, increasing its presence in this community. This also relates precisely to the sign "ASMR" having accumulated value in its circulation on YouTube as a tag and signifier of a broader genre of videos. Its monetary value is reflected in the wide range of videos that it now 'tags' or 'sticks' to. Mukbang sit somewhere in between the categories of traditional ASMR and food ASMR, their content often being tagged as both, and therefore representing multiple fan bases because of their blend of content. The blending this allows for because of the mobility of this genre is part of what helps to draw these diverse audiences into social communities surrounding this content, and storytelling play an important role in the relationships this creates.

Just like stickiness, disgust is a powerful feeling that circulates in ASMR and mukbang; it can fascinate some viewers, and repel others, and its management is important in this genre. As

[6] See Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger* for further discussion on the ambivalence of food (1966)
[7] See https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=honeycomb+asmr

described earlier, food ASMR seems to connect two separate categories of videos on YouTube, mukbang and ASMR. This may be why it can be shocking in a visceral way to move from one strain of ASMR to another. The soft, repetitive sounds of towel folding, hair brushing or gentle tapping of traditional ASMR and its focus on eye contact are replaced by the intense slurping and crunching noises produced as a someone eats noodles or aloe vera leaves. To traditional ASMR viewers, this can be frustrating and the behaviour disgusting and almost *too* intimate in comparison to the softer gentler aesthetic of Gentle Whispering for example. We can return to the comment on SAS-ASMR's videos that she "chews too fast," ruining for some viewers the potential for ASMR in this video. As Ahmed points out "the speech act is always spoken to others, whose shared witnessing of the disgusting thing is required for the affect to take effect" (Ahmed 94). As this commenter articulates their feeling that chewing too fast is disgusting it influences other witnesses, who may read this comment and be influenced by it in their own consumption of a video.

What is interesting about ASMR, especially among food ASMR, is that behaviours that would normally be considered 'disgusting' because of how they have become coded in Western society – eating with your mouth open, slurping, smacking one's lips – have been instead reclaimed, often with a specific focus on this part of the body. SAS-ASMR and food ASMR blogger Hungry Cakes choose to focus their cameras on only their lips and upper torso, appearing as a disembodied mouth, rather than a full human form. The 'shared witnessing' among this community reframes these objects of disgust as objects of enjoyment around which the food ASMR community draws pleasure, while others from outside of the food ASMR community often find the videos odd and cannot comprehend the enjoyment some draw from their content. This feeling of connection to food objects like honeycomb, and sensations drawn

from this niche media help cultivate feelings of connection between these audience members and connect these audiences into social communities marked by their enjoyment of the sounds and looks of stickiness, responses of disgust and the experience of unusual tastes. This image of honeycomb is useful to keep in mind in continuing a discussion of the sensations that ASMR bring about.

Bodily sensations in ASMR are more important than feelings of shared commensality, a clear deviation from mukbang. SAS-ASMR is one of the most popular food ASMR channels with over 3.8 million subscribers. Her videos, while wildly popular, focus explicitly on the sounds of foods, and many do not contain talking or other speech, relying instead on subtitles to convey information and context. Verbal speech is not always necessary in this genre to convey information. Biel and Gatica-Perez's analysis of non-verbal cues in video blogs on YouTube provides an important frame of reference with which to analyze these eating-focused ASMR/mukbang videos. These researchers studied the personality cues that could be read from vlogs based on elements such as closeness to the camera, and time spent talking versus completing other activities. They found that "nonverbal behavior is effectively used to express aspects of identity such as age, occupation, culture, and personality, and therefore it is also used by people to form impressions about others" (Biel and Gatica-Perez 41). In her "no-talking" videos, SAS-ASMR uses gestures (pointing, touching) and facial expressions (smiling) to convey her feelings and enjoyment of the food she is eating. The most common criticism she receives in the comments of her videos is that she chews too fast (RAW SEA GRAPES, 2018).[8] Mukbang are a separate trend on YouTube but both communities are increasingly being drawn

[8] SAS-ASMR. "ASMR RAW SEA GRAPES (EXTREME CRUNCH EATING SOUNDS) NO TALKING | SAS-ASMR." *YouTube*, 25 April 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6qZyi9ZA2ss

together because the repetitive slurping, chewing and crunching sounds are found to be pleasurable in a different way to the ASMR community than to the mukbang community. Whereas for mukbang followers, sounds of enjoyment help immerse them into shared eating experiences, these same sounds are described as triggers for autonomous sensory meridian responses among the ASMR community. This demonstrates that while the sensing profiles may be different for fans in these genres, the feelings of emotional engagement and connection that they produce can work to form larger social communities organized around these sensations.

ASMR is an interaction that relies on digital media, and for this reason it is worth keeping in mind Wetherell's point that: "Sensations are mediated, however immediately they seem to work on us" (25). In one of the most popular styles of ASMR videos, ASMRtist Gentle Whispering ASMR guides viewers through a simulated haircut appointment. In the video entitled "Sleep inducing Haircut ASMR | Shampoo | Page Flipping | Scissors" the comments are filled with gratitude for the content she provides: commenter "Anthony James" writes: "You have to be a special kind of person to have the patience to do two of the same videos, in different languages, for over an hour each. Thank you so much for all you do!" (2018). On the same video in one of the most popular comments user "Laura H" says "I came here to judge how weird ASMR is after learning about it through a Netflix special, and now I'm hooked. I didn't expect to get anything from this in a million years, but now I'm a darn regular at the hair salon" (September 2018). This comment received over two thousand five hundred 'likes' from others, demonstrating how much this sentiment resonates with the community. Comments such as these display a level of personal engagement and connection with the ASMRtist despite their mediation.

One of the reasons that the affect in ASMR helps create online communities is because as a genre of affective digital media, ASMR reveals how interlinked affect and emotion are.

> At first glance, ASMR seems to be an excellent case by which to examine affect divorced from emotion, as a pure instance of excess of sensation uncolored by emotional connection. However, although ASMR is not merely a physiological experience of pure affect, it is just as clearly linked to the emotional associations created through the experience of public intimacy. In the case of ASMR, affect and emotion exist hand in hand, tethered by intentionality, memory, and nostalgia. (Anderson 685)

Part of the affective strength of these videos comes in their attempt to stimulate the feelings of touch and contact through a primarily auditive environment. This creates the "distant intimacy" that characterizes many ASMR videos (Anderson 685). The effectiveness of the format of ASMR videos come from their ability to speak to the individual and the crowd simultaneously by creating an atmosphere of intimacy. This is what Paddy Scannell calls a "for anyone as someone structure," referring to a communicative structure and mode of audience address where the content seems to speak to the viewer as an individual even though they are part of a larger audience (5). ASMR and mukbang create the impression of a one-on-one interaction by addressing their audience in the singular and constructing scenarios of interaction that assume person to person contact, but in the context of YouTube, a site open to anyone with an internet connection, these videos appeal to a broader public of spectator listeners. Their means of distribution opens them up to consumption by many, creating the conditions of intimacy felt by a larger community of ASMR "feelers," and the distribution of mukbang online is also similar. In the next section, I will turn to a discussion of the use of storytelling in ASMR as a critical

element in its affective circulation and cultivation of social closeness amongst dispersed and mobile audiences.

The "distant intimacy" as described by Andersen in her analysis of ASMR has a different character in food ASMR: "The quest for immersivity suggests the desire to transform distant intimacy into a more immediate experience" (Anderson 696). In food ASMR, the intimacy is created through the act of food sharing. So too in mukbang, which are characterized by personal address to fans and liveness, adding layers to their interactive capacities. As Theresa Senft explains, "A moment possesses immediacy when there is no editing process to come between the viewer and the viewed – when the viewer has the sensation of experiencing events as and how they happen" (62). This is the style of mukbang which has been adopted in food ASMR, as mukbang are known as a live broadcast format, and so are intended to seem unedited.

ASMRtists and their fanbase share in affective activity as part of a larger environment on YouTube, circulating affect and emotion between them in a give-and-take relationship. ASMRtists produce content, their fans respond, sometimes with encouragement and other times with critique, becoming a kind of evidence of the affective practice and relationship present in mukbang broadcasts. A general trend among ASMRtists and mukbang broadcasters is that they seem to learn from these interactions as a kind of feedback loop, such that they work together with their fans in a symbiotic relationship to continue this affective and productive cycle. For example, user "Jessica Bagg" comments in 2018 on a video from three years earlier: "2018 people where you at!? I watch this almost every night so relaxing, your voice is so soothing and comfortable to listen to. Your [sic] by far the greatest Asmr YouTuber ever!" (ASMR Aviation Sleep Destination, 2018). When fans review content favourably and provide concrete suggestions on how to modify behaviour to better the ASMR-experience and increase tingles and

responses, content creators listen and respond. In catering to fans, creators help encourage emotional connections, just as fans use comments for the same purpose.

ASMR users have not only emotional responses to ASMR, but also emotional connections to ASMRtists who they feel closest to, and whose channels they return to most frequently as demonstrated by repetitive viewing practices. When Poerio et al conducted their first clinical study of ASMR, they found the following:

> The parallels between aesthetic emotional experiences and the psychological state of ASMR suggest that ASMR is likely to be characterized by a strong emotional response when sensory stimuli produce a distinct emotional profile (tingling, relaxation and calmness) in response to ASMR triggers. This response may be one that naturally occurs but is harder to inhibit in individuals with ASMR. (3)

ASMR can, then, relieve certain physical symptoms including anxiety and stress while also fostering viewer/listener's emotional investment to "play along" with its storytelling, a clear involvement of affect and emotion. This is what helps to build social communities surrounding this content. Wetherell's concept of affective attunement is useful here for understanding how ASMR can have varying effects on audience members that blend affect and emotion together: "Affective attunement combines with social processes that carve out who we pay attention to, whose affect we are open to, and whose experience becomes our experience" (150). Fans who identify with a creator strongly, Maria from Gentle Whispering being one example, attune with her content in a way that is similar even though the audiences are diverse. This shared attunement is what can bring fans together into communities of feeling.

As Carolyn Pedwell suggests: "the fact that sensing can be turned into an activity indicates how habituated affect can 'engender a heightening of experience' rather than its diminution" (152). ASMR experiences are made all the more powerful with combinations and repetitions of just the right triggers. Yet some participants in ASMR studies said they can "use up" the effectiveness of certain videos and can lose ASMR responses altogether. In discussing the potential for ASMR "burnout," characterized by the loss of sensations previously available through certain videos, Joceline Anderson remarks that "Variety…operates as a kind of stand-in for interactivity that preserves distance, where alternate renditions can be sourced from other whisperers rather than encouraging a reaction from the preferred whisperer" (696). This not only produces a search for constant new content with which to experience ASMR, but also a nostalgia for those prior experiences of ASMR that are made visible in the comments under certain videos. YouTube user "Kori M" comments on a video from Gentle Whispering: "I've been watching Maria for years and I've lost track of how many times I've watched/listened to this video" (January 2019), suggesting that the potential for such a strongly sensing-focused activity is meant to be, and desired to be, repeated, in ways that ideally retain its ability to produce the same strong affective reactions. Some commenters express regret that the strongest sensations they once consistently felt are no longer producing the same feelings. Gentle Whispering has a video specifically addressing what to do to "get your tingle on again" (2012). In this video she recommends avoiding overexposure to ASMR and using a variety of ASMRtists and ASMR categories to ensure you can maintain your sensitivity to 'the tingles'. Where, then, do affect and emotion go when they are 'used up'? And how does talk *about* ASMR structure the very sensory responses people have *to* ASMR videos?

One feature of ASMR and mukbang that is crucial to how they work is imagined presence. The presence of another body is imagined, and affect is conjured through sounds, producing sensations in another body. This is why so many ASMR roleplay scenarios involve imagined physical contact such as visits to the salon, the dentist or other care providers. Anderson points out: "As Cavarero (2005, 4) writes, the voice is the unique product of the vibrations through a body that always indicates "someone in flesh and bone who emits it"" (691). These shivers give us the opportunity to locate the affect of ASMR in the brain and body simultaneously. In the address of an ASMRtist to their audience, Emma Leigh describes:

> Here a curious doubling takes place: a thing is being addressed as if it were a person, and via the mediation of a screen, a digital interface, a person (me) can experience this address from the position of the thing. This might explain what I feel to be an odd displacement of my personhood, I am being addressed *as if* I were a person, but my position, my viewpoint, is that of a thing (Callard et al 134).

Leigh describes the feeling of being both an object and a subject simultaneously and posits that this might be why some find ASMR so relaxing – they provide a release from our state of constantly having to 'embody' our bodies (2015).

I believe Wetherell's work on affect can be used to suggest that the viewing experience of ASMR ties the body and the brain in complex relationships to one another, such that the stronger distinctions some affect theorists make between brains and bodies can be re-evaluated. If we understand affective practice as including cycles as discussed earlier, the example of ASMRtists learning from and producing positive returns for their fans exemplifies the relationships between brains and bodies in ASMR, similar to a feedback loop. Viewers consciously seek out triggers that will manifest sensations in the body that in turn effect pleasure

centers in the brain. Wetherell concludes: “Brain/body responses are autonomous only in the most limited senses and for all intents and purposes cannot be meaningfully separated from the rest of the assemblage that includes cultural, cognitive and conscious elements” (62). ASMR viewers and creators rely on patterning of affect that is felt in the brain and the body simultaneously in order to produce the physical sensations emphasized in their content, and also the stronger more visible connections among members as they solidify into online communities. Chapter three will address these communities, delving deeper into the social practices that delineate them as specific social places within cyberspace.

Sara Ahmed’s work on affect is useful to draw into the conversation of locating affect in ASMR. Sara Ahmed’s idea of “impressions” (6) can be used to expand this relationship and is useful to think about the ways that ASMR videos rely on the ability to impress viewers and in turn be impressed upon. This bodily impression is accomplished through fulfilling audience requests for pleasurable sounds and role play scenarios, and the physical sensations these triggers enable. Ahmed writes: “If the contact with an object generates feeling, then emotion and sensation cannot be easily separated” (6). How can this be understood in the context of ASMR, when one person is physically coming into contact with (being impressed by) an object (foods, a hairbrush, a stethoscope etc.) and sensations are being produced in another?

Perhaps it is worth understanding affect as the force that connects emotions and sensations in ASMR particularly as they are often spatially disconnected. What is more difficult to explain in this context is the feelings, if any, that ASMR produces in the YouTubers creating this content, and how they are impressed upon by their viewers. Moonlight and Naoham, two mukbang broadcasters interviewed by Natalya Anderson for the *Globe and Mail* describe a variety of motivators for watching mukbang.

> Everyone has a different reason for making the videos and everyone has a different reason for watching…Some people watch just for the company. Some experience true ASMR with certain sounds. Some people are weirdos and this is their way of subscribing to underage porn. For some, it's vicarious eating. There are people on certain diets – for weight loss, or health reasons or religious reasons – and they can't eat certain food. The other day a girl told me she'd just had all her wisdom teeth out. I had just done a candy video, and she said, 'Thank you so much. I am so satisfied.' (Anderson 2018)

This quote demonstrates that viewers have a wide variety of motivations for watching, but for creators, one kind of validation can come in knowing that their content has made a difference in someone's life.

I have discussed ASMR as a form of exchange of feeling, sensation and conversation involving affect, but what does a creator receive in return? In an interview with Drew Ambrose of Al Jazeera English, mukbang broadcast jockey Fitness Fairy describes her broadcast schedule as happening nightly to around one thousand dedicated fans. Daily exercise is required to keep her figure, as her eating broadcasts can last up to three hours, taking a huge physical toll on her body, and prompting questions of what motivates people to engage in this genre. When asked about her fans' motivations for watching mukbang, she cites a vicarious need to eat through her show, as Korea is such a health-conscious society, and mukbang are used as an outlet for watching unhealthy behaviour. Fitness Fairy sees her show as having positive side effects because it has encouraged viewers to take up physical fitness as they watch and admire her figure on screen; she is an anomaly because her show it a crossover between mukbang and bodybuilding videos (Ambrose, 2015). She acknowledges that without her strict training

schedule in the gym, broadcasters can easily gain weight and become very unhealthy. This is a concern shared among the food ASMR and mukbang community. Money is also clearly a strong motivating factor for broadcasters, and she quotes her income as between six hundred and four thousand dollars a week.

An AfreecaTV spokesperson, a live Korean broadcast platform offering mukbang and ASMR broadcasts, reports that there are approximately five thousand mukbang broadcasters in Korea, and they represent a large community tied by employment and unique means of social interaction (Ambrose, 2015). The same spokesperson claims that to prevent unhealthy lifestyles AfreecaTV places warning messages at the beginning of broadcasts as a form of public service announcement telling viewers not to overconsume and may look into closer monitoring of content and checkups for broadcasters if their content becomes too extreme. These broadcasters enjoy social benefits from membership within their community as they share similar concerns such as maintaining their health, privacy, and income, which contribute to their social interaction as they seek out others who share their experiences (evidenced in collaboration videos). If ASMRtists also experience ASMR responses for themselves, then the creation of triggering videos may be in and of itself a form of stress relief alongside this potential for friendship and collaboration.

What is clear from these examples is that ASMR is still developing. The preciseness of ASMR is not perfect. When an ASMRtist describes brushing hair for example, where is a viewer supposed to locate their head? In the frame? Close to the screen? For some this “glitch” adds to their enjoyment of the experience: “The representational conventions of the ASMR role-play are not quite established, still buzzing around the edges, and I like those moments when the joins are visible because they intensify the intimacy, the sense of colluding in a fiction” (Callard et al

133). In its ongoing development, it is worth remembering Wetherell's words: "There can always be a new, alternative, currently unfelt and unformulated, way of figuring what we are about" (129). In order to figure out ASMR and by extension mukbang, affect theory becomes a useful and expandable tool with which to analyze the intricacies, sensations and habits of this YouTube trend, particularly because these broadcasts exemplify an affect that is not autonomous from emotion and discourse nor one that is unconsciously experienced (despite 'autonomic' being in its name).

Conclusion

ASMR are a highly affective media that introduce a perspective on mukbang food broadcasts and represent an important cultural moment in the study of YouTube. We can use ASMR to understand how the feeling and affect in ASMR communities circulates and repeats in patterns visible in their production, mode of address and genre conventions. This works in such a way to enable not only physical responses in the form of physiological sensations in the body, but also strong feelings of emotional connection between fans, content and creators, solidifying what would otherwise be diverse and geographically dispersed audiences into digital communities of feeling. Using the work of Margaret Wetherell this chapter examined the objects and functions of affect in the autonomic sensory meridian response communities on YouTube including their traditional and more recent interpretations. Where Wetherell was not sufficient alone, specifically in understanding the performative nature of disgust in food ASMR, Sara Ahmed was placed in conversation with her work along with those who have directly studied ASMR.

This analysis of ASMR through affect theory is useful because ASMR provides a window into the affect of food ASMR and mukbang broadcasts because ASMR videos represent

similar communities of care focused around food and pleasurable sensations. This community's distant intimacy and complex circulations and repetitive patterns of affect open up existing theory to alternative interpretations of just how affect and emotion, touch, physical sensations and physiological responses can be understood alongside one another. Wetherell's theory of affective practice becomes both a method of investigation of ASMR, and a way of examining this phenomenon without becoming trapped by more fixed theories of affect. Increasing focus is being placed on ASMR, not only as a popular and lucrative trend on YouTube, but also as a potential means of therapeutic practice for patients suffering stress, anxiety and sleeplessness.

Chapter Three

Click to Subscribe! Mukbang and Communities: The Potential of Virtual Commensality

The first chapter in this thesis opened with a discussion of the internet and communications technology infrastructures necessary for the emergence of mobile television as a condition of possibility for mukbang. Chapter Two introduced ASMR as a mukbang-adjacent YouTube genre and used ASMR to open an exploration of the complex affective dimension of online social interaction present in mukbang. ASMR videos were are used alongside mukbang to demonstrate how affect and feeling circulate and repeat in these online media, creating not only physical sensations in the body, but strong emotional connections between fans, creators, and content. This chapter expands on these fan-creator relationships to argue that specific affective practices constitute mukbang as social communities on YouTube contributing to their place-making ability on the internet. I analyze mukbang videos using a framework from human geography social anthropology to analyse how notions of space and place get connected to and are part of the discussion of mukbang communities. I understand mukbang as generating virtual places in the space of YouTube, a platform which is one of their conditions of possibility.

The significance of these new cultural forms not only demonstrates changes in popular culture, but also in the organization of time surrounding our commute, work-life balance, family dynamics and personal relationships in an increasingly digitized, mobile and urban landscape. Some ties established online are strong enough to encourage meeting face to face in person, and collaborative work among YouTubers and fans alike. I choose to understand the differences between traditional and virtual communities as less relevant than the strong feelings they inspire regardless of which side of the screen you are on. I believe mukbang and ASMR present a concrete example of an internet phenomenon that allow simultaneously for the paradoxes of

solitary sharing, collective individual feeling, and true community online. In this way, mukbang present a new way of studying space and place online for future studies of like phenomena because the fluidity of their genre and viewing audience allows them to encourage social connections and communal food sharing opportunities.

The community practices exhibited in mukbang are evidenced by a number of patterns and social practices; To examine these community practices, I focus in particular on the comments and likes that are generated by these videos. The idea of the mukbang community as a place in the geographic sense enables me to analyze the relationship between mukbang communities and more "traditional" place-specific notions of community more typical of human geography, a field commonly used to define communities. Mukbang form distinct communities based on a common desire for virtual commensality as mobile and web-based food-centered media. These broadcasts also present one possible way to analyze digital media using a framework usually applied to offline social practices and community building, opening up possible changes in our understanding of community and social interaction online, one that runs counter to interpretations of online culture as lacking in community.

I focus my research on mukbang channels that include archived content that is subtitled in English, making it accessible to someone not fluent in Korean and living in another time zone. There are two types of channels I focus on: first, Korean broadcasters who originated on AfreecaTV or other live streaming platforms in Korea and who have since moved to YouTube. These include BANZZ, Shoogi, Fitness Fairy, and The Diva. Second, I also examine international broadcasters who began and continue their careers exclusively on YouTube including KEEMI, hyuneeEats, SAS-ASMR, Yuka Kinoshita, and Dorothy.

Over the period of three years since this project began I watched roughly one thousand mukbang broadcasts, including nearly three hundred for the purpose of this chapter. I chose to study content that is publicly available because it reflects the same viewing experiences of the majority of fans interested in mukbang and food ASMR. The videos I chose were most often from the "Popular Uploads" section on a YouTuber's channel homepage, as these videos have the most views, likes, and comments, and therefore have the greatest number of viewer interactions on which to focus my analysis. Popular uploads are more likely to have been translated or subtitled into English, making them the most accessible to me when their original broadcast language was not English. There are other sites for online communities such as fan pages on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter and social media pages within YouTube that are members-only, but these are limited in their scope and membership. Publicly accessible content includes YouTube videos and their comment sections, and the live comments shown in AfreecaTV broadcasts uploaded to YouTube on which I focus my analysis (seen in figure 3).

My methodology builds on a form of virtual ethnography (Hine 1994, 2000; Boellstorff 2012) of the communities being studied. Michael Strangelove states: "A media ethnographer is one who deeply participates in the community being studied and actively uses the media technology under investigation" (9). My role in this analysis is as an active participant in this community who uses this technology, but who is not a creator. This means I actively consume and analyze mukbang by watching the videos and reading their comment sections, though I do not post comments myself. Based on this familiarity and experience, my analytic framework looks for patterns in how fans and creators interact, and how these patterns reveal affective attachments that offer evidence of community formation. Staying active in this community as a participant and analyst involves searching for newly released videos and keeping track of

updates in the lives and channels of the creators that I return to most. Relationships and dynamics of social interaction are very significant in this community and any change is worth noting to understand larger shifts in community discourse and identity.

I wish to consider the extent to which the appropriate term for the social groupings that form around mukbang and ASMR are communities. As Chris Kelty explains: "Terminology such as virtual community, online community, cyberspace, network society, or information society are generally not theoretical constructs, but ways of designating a subgenre of disciplinary research having to do with electronic networks (22)". My research addresses this subgenre of electronic networks, but I also approach virtual community as an extension of offline community in my understanding of mukbang. This is significant in my research because I treat mukbang as online communities to better study the social behaviours they exhibit. I do not seek to prove that they are like or unlike traditional communities. I instead use virtual community as a term to distinguish mukbang as a community that exist primarily but not exclusively within online networks and on social media, most notably YouTube.

I define the framework of space and place in relation to the mukbang community using the work of Tim Cresswell because of his focus on the role of space and place in cultural practices such as mukbang. Cresswell's work focuses on mobility, a key feature of mukbang communities in both their infrastructures (transit, Wi-Fi), and their communities. This will be supported by theorist Michel de Certeau, who is also concerned with human mobility across space, and I will use his concept of social practice to explain how mobility in a medium like mukbang structures it as a place online. I begin with a discussion of YouTube, which functions as a space and condition of possibility for mukbang and enables the social practices that bind mukbang communities together. I then examine mukbang communities as places by discussing

the feelings that bring a community together within the particular space they inhabit, that is, as a way in which community structures notions of place on YouTube. I argue that mukbang represent places for the people who are part of their communities – places of social gathering, places for commensality and shared experiences with others. Place in this definition is created by the feelings and affective environment in mukbang videos which extends to the transactional qualities of the social exchange happening in this genre. Furthermore, this place is maintained by mukbang's internal logic, including the constraints that hold mukbang communities together online and the practices that define them.

Situating space on YouTube

As previous chapters outlined, in mukbang and ASMR it is the strength of their affective appeal that bring together individual fans into something more than a disparate and diverse audience. But what kind of spaces are required to allow for this community building to happen, and how is YouTube well suited for mukbang as a form of affective food television? YouTube is the main habitat for mukbang culture and as such provides the potential for its communities. In the definition of space and place used in human geography, spaces exist and are necessary for human social interaction as space become places over time with patterns of human activity. When defining mukbang communities as a place on YouTube, it is important to first define how YouTube functions as a space, and therefore a condition of possibility for these communities. Cresswell writes; "[Yi Fu] Tuan defined place through a comparison with space. He develops a sense of space as an open arena of action and movement while place is about stopping and resting and becoming involved" (20). The idea of space as an arena is useful in an analysis of YouTube because crowd-funded broadcasts like mukbang require elements of competition and spectacle. YouTube acts as an arena for the public to broadcast themselves to others and compete

for audience attention and this is built into their business model. Audience attention in turn can produce celebrity, social capital and financial gain, strong motivators for creators' participation in this space.

In addition to the space of the arena, YouTube can be understood as a social gathering space and a space of digital archiving. In terms of understanding YouTube as a social gathering space, this platform is similar to self-contained chat rooms or message boards, which are most commonly cited as early examples of gathering spaces of virtual community. But it also has many more functions. YouTube is interesting because it is a medium – messages are transmitted through it in the videos it contains and the channels it hosts. It is a performance space, allowing users to define themselves by the content they upload and share, and it is a social media platform, allowing for interaction between users with comments, likes, shares and tags similar to Facebook or Twitter. As it allows for both previously recorded and live broadcasts, it can enable social interactions in real time and archive them for future engagement and use, for example when a fan returns to an old video to comment in present day reinvigorating past discussion, or edits their own previous comment changing the context of the responses that once followed. Tracing these changes are part of the process of collecting evidence of a community's presence and the social practices it exhibits over time. YouTube is also an immense digital archive, and the boundaries of its physical location online is marked in part by the content contained within it – we recognize for example that a hyperlink containing "YouTube" signifies its content is located somewhere specific. That content changes and is part of larger infrastructures, but its space is more defined compared to the infinite expanse of Google for example.

Alongside its function as social media, one element that is central to YouTube's identity as a space is amateur video. This can be in the form of home movies, confessionals or video

blogs ("vlogs"), which are most similar to the style of mukbang and ASMR. As Jean Burgess and Joshua Green argue, vlogging is "fundamental to YouTube's sense of community" (94). This is in part due to the personal nature of the content vlogs include, and the intimacy they attempt to construct. As explored in the previous chapter, personal address to fans, simulated personal contact and eye contact are all part of the creation of this distant intimacy (Andersen 2015). This intimacy is formed through the cultivation of feelings and affinities among viewers and between viewers and creators. Seeing YouTube as a condition of possibility for the formation of online communities, we can think about the kinds of specific affective practices and social interactions it enables and why they are significant to mukbang. In the next section I will discuss the genre characteristics of mukbang as these are what make mukbang videos recognizable and familiar as spaces of community to their members.

Genre characteristics of mukbang

Mukbang broadcasts are a particular genre within the space of YouTube and are identifiable by several genre-specific characteristics that define their affective practices. Among the videos tagged as "mukbang," there are noticeable trends in their features and looks, and the sounds they emphasize. Looking first at the thumbnails of mukbang videos as these are encountered first in a general search, the food is displayed in bright colours; many titles are capitalized for emphasis, often including the word "cheese" or "spicy" (both popular characteristics of Korean street foods and snacks), and bold tag lines describe the video. Reflecting the diversity of the fan community participating in this trend are the faces that appear in the thumbnail's images of mukbang broadcasters, which are increasingly Caucasian, Black and Latinx. Increasingly, mukbang as a search term is also associated with the corporate logos of

American chain restaurants like McDonald's and Taco Bell because of their sponsorship and ad placement within these broadcasts.

Mukbang's visual conventions are tied to their production patterns including the placement of food, and the organization of domestic space around the video camera. Since the original Korean broadcasts from AfreecaTV appeared on YouTube, countless channels have emerged that attempt to copy their style. Mukbang are unique in how they compare to other styles of videos available on YouTube. The visual conventions defined by these production patterns define mukbang as separate from other food television trends on YouTube, and which have a direct correlation with the affective practices these patterns encourage. What does a typical mukbang look like, and how is it structured? First, mukbang broadcasters shoot their videos from fixed locations that restrict their movement to keep them close to their video cameras and microphones. In Chapter Two I established how soundscapes in food are very important to their overall aesthetics and appeal of mukbang. The appeal of mukbang for many fans is in the sound broadcasters make while eating. Many fans also comment that they want to feel appreciated by broadcasters, so broadcasters ensure that they stay engaged with their audience by using direct modes of address – looking and speaking directly into the camera for example, and making sure they are audible over microphone. To do otherwise would negatively impact the affective possibilities in this genre of food television.

We can trace production patterns as constitutive of community spaces through the videos of two famous YouTube stars who became popular through mukbang, Yuka Kinoshita and BANZZ. Yuka Kinoshita is a popular mukbang broadcaster from Japan who started as a competitive eater and transitioned to become a mukbang broadcaster. She has almost five million subscribers on YouTube. Like BANZZ, Yuka provides subtitles, however they are often

imperfect in English. Many examples can be found in comment sections where fans express that while they cannot fully understand what the presenter is saying, they are watching anyway and enjoying sharing in their enjoyment of eating.[9] This is important because what is being said is less important for some fans than the interactions and socialisation they are drawing from the content regardless of whether they can understand it. One commenter Cherry Bleach says below one of her videos "There are so many languages in the comments, we are all brought together by food" (February 2019). This shows that regardless of the platform on which they are hosted, it is mukbang themselves that enable communication and social connection because of the unique interactions they encourage based on fans' dedication to the content they enjoy and the affinities they share with one another. Eating, talking, cooking, socializing and spending money all happen simultaneously in an environment that is assumed to be live, and in a way that could only be compared to a bizarre yet strangely attractive infomercial on the shopping channel.

Yuka Kinoshita's videos are short in comparison to most mukbang, lasting on average between five and ten minutes. Yuka keeps hot tea, water or other drinks beside her while she consumes on average more than five kilograms of food during one mukbang. Because of these large portions, she edits her videos carefully. She starts by introducing what she will be eating, sometimes mentions where the idea came from, such as a fan suggestion on twitter, and then shows the steps of her cooking process. The footage of her eating is sped up in places and only stops when she makes short comments in between bites. Due to this editing style, Yuka does not communicate live with her fans via video chat. Instead her social interaction happens across

[9] Under a video of BANZZ eating spicy Korean rice cakes known as tteokbokki, commenter Mafer Preyes refers to their inability to understand Korean but their enjoyment nonetheless of BANZZ's video: Mafer Preyes. Comment on "밴쯔▼ 독특하게 맛있는! 신가네매운떡볶이 먹방." YouTube, 9 July 2015 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fWN1ynuW2pM

social media platforms. Yuka's format of shorter, edited broadcasts that are not released live is similar to the formats of many other broadcasters who gain more control over their content by not releasing it live.

The production style of live broadcasts are better demonstrated by BANZZ, who is one of the most popular male mukbang stars as his YouTube channel boasts over three million subscribers. Unlike other early mukbang stars, he has not taken a hiatus from this career and remains one of the most consistent Korean mukbang broadcasters on YouTube whose content was originally limited to AfreecaTV. Like Yuka and other broadcasters, his videos have patterns in how they are produced, in part working to make them more familiar to their community. BANZZ's broadcasts are consistently close to one hour in length, and he begins each video by introducing the food he is going to eat and presenting it to the camera. His videos are streamed live so he can interact with fans through a live chat system, and he answers questions, makes comments and reacts to fan comments during his broadcasts. Additionally, he displays a menu in the upper corner of many of his videos listing what he is eating. He also keeps a drink nearby, sometimes yoghurt if what he is eating is spicy (Spicy Volcano Yeoptteok Mukbang, 2018). When the food requires heating up or cooking, a large hot plate or grill takes up a large portion of BANZZ's screen, which he can be seen filling up with ingredients in the example of his spicy volcano video (see figure 1). BANZZ's first broadcasts were from his bedroom in front of a webcam like many others, including Shoogi and KEEMI. However he has followed the trend of moving mukbang out of the home and into restaurants and dining rooms, with high definition cameras and production software.

Layers of sociality are included in this new style of mukbang which is filmed outside the home, because the host interacts simultaneously with their fans, viewers, camera, restaurant staff

and accompanying friends, all while eating incredible amounts of food. This heightens the sharing quality of these videos and increases the chances that fans will feel a kind of simultaneous affinity with one another through the live "presentist" nature of this content.

Most fans would agree that mukbang have come a long way since their early days on AfreecaTV. The amateur nature of their earliest video streams on this platform is apparent in their grainy images, cameras placed too close to the face and awkward body placement. This is in contrast to mukbang's presence on YouTube, whose increasing push towards promoting less home-video style productions and more flawless camera editing causes these live food broadcasts to evolve and resemble more closely highly edited broadcast food television. This is not to suggest that mukbang videos are not well produced, only that they are usually produced in very different conditions than most mainstream cooking and eating shows. Part of their charm is the ability to make their content feel "normal" to at-home viewers or commuters on the subway, so it will be interesting to follow their potential transformation as mukbang broadcasters try to fit in with YouTube's sleek and competitive business model.

The way spaces are filmed in mukbang contribute to their place making practices. The same spaces are returned to regularly and in a way work to contain the affective circulation within mukbang to these spaces, so that it does not become endlessly productive. These spaces – bedrooms, kitchen counters, round dining tables on the floor - become highly relatable for fans because they exist so commonly in mukbang and in the lives of the fans consuming mukbang. These spaces are individualized by what is visible within them: BANZZ for instance, is known for having figurines in the background of his videos shot from his bedroom (see figure 1). The Diva has a large Doraemon (a Japanese cartoon character) stuffed animal visible in most of her videos on the right of the screen (see figure 7), while KEEMI's dog often wanders into the frame

of her videos. These personal touches make the individual spaces in which they film their mukbang more relatable on a community level because viewers expect to see them time and time again while watching; they also become part of a mukbang broadcaster's aesthetic. These markers of personality are replicated in different ways by most, if not all, mukbang broadcasts. These unique qualities visible through an analysis of production techniques and genre conventions also encourage the unique kinds of community interactions to which my analysis will turn next.

Place-making through community practices: the importance of the comment section

Genre conventions and community practices help make familiar the space of mukbang videos on YouTube to their fans. The next section examines the place-making practices within that space through their affective interactions. For this analysis I have chosen to examine a set of videos that have been available online for a longer period of time so that the comments have time to "settle". Comments are very important in mukbang, and as Joseph Reagle points out "comment is communication, it is social, it is meant to be seen by others, and it is *reactive*" (2). Waiting for comments to settle down or become less 'reactive' is one way in which to analyze a comment's affective staying power, because the more "likes" it receives the more likely it is to remain at the top of a comment feed. This means that new viewers will see that comment first when they click on a video. In a very newly uploaded mukbang, the comment section has not yet been organized by YouTube's popularity ranking system. I am interested in how this ranking created by viewers creates a sense of "order". For example, in a video released only five hours before by Yuka Kinoshita, viewers make comments on many different subjects, saying hello,

complimenting Yuka, asking questions, and making observations about the food, and all have an equal number of likes (figure 5).[10]

In another example someone has commented in English and asked others to like their comment so that it does not "drown in an ocean of languages" (see figure 6), demonstrating the process through which the comment section gets organized according to popularity via likes.[11] It also demonstrates the ways in which commenters want to be seen by others. Over time, comments that are liked the most stay near the top of the comment page, making them more visible, and they become associated with the video they are attached to. The comments that get attached in this way shed light on which interactions and feelings in the comments encouraged the strongest responses or feelings of affinity because a greater number of viewers chose to interact with them and supported the feelings they express by giving them likes and attention.

The comment section and the like button provide visibility for smaller channels to assert their presence and gain followers borrowing from the success of other more popular channels and introducing new members into the community. This behaviour can be found on mukbang channels going back years and is now a mainstay of many mukbang comment sections. Less popular mukbang and food ASMR channels often appear as some of the first comments under a newly released video from a more established YouTuber. This acts as a means of self promotion for their own channels and as a way of saying "I do this too, come check it out." On one of SAS-ASMR's videos, multiple ASMR focused channels post comments in the comment section, revealing their fanbases that range from eight hundred subscribers for Ida ASMR, to three

[10] Kinoshita, Yuka. "MUKBANG Starbucks New Strawberry Very Much Frappucino!! Red & White [16Items] 6129kcal[Use CC]." *YouTube*, 26 April 2019.
[11] Kinoshita, Yuka. "【MUKBANG】 Over Juicy!!! 50 Giant Shumai!! & Simple Chinese Porridge [7.5Kg] 11860kcal [Click CC]." YouTube, 28 September 2017.

hundred and eighty thousand for Kim&Liz ASMR (SAS-ASMR, 2019).[12] This demonstrates a desire to be seen for smaller channels who benefit from associating their content with more popular and established channels like SAS-ASMR. It also reveals the practices of self-promotion that broadcasters rely on to support themselves, and which in turn make them more visible to new fans, sustaining the community at large through their presence in the comment section.

In mukbang, returning to popular videos and the repetition of content are what help carve out a place for their community, they also work to differentiate mukbang as a unique cultural phenomenon compared to other places on YouTube. One of the most noticeable patterns in mukbang on YouTube is their repetitive format based on what I would describe as transactions. First, there is the very common fan practice of "sending love" from their home countries in the comments (see figure 5). Mukbang broadcaster Dorothy, who has over two million YouTube subscribers, receives comments of love, thanks and support from Algeria, Turkey, America, Vietnam, Chile, and Mexico in her video on marinated crab (Ganjan g-gejang Yangnyeom-gejang Mukbang [Dorothy], 2019). Many notes of thanks and appreciation are posted alongside comments providing suggestions to mukbang broadcasters on what kind of food to eat next. When such suggestions are followed, and popular eating requests are met, fans again post comment about their appreciation. Not only does this practice express how fans feel about this community, but it also demonstrates how they feel cared for in return by broadcasters. Cresswell describes how places can include elements of care around a bond, one that "is fundamental to the idea of place as a 'field of care'" (20). Mukbang enables transactional relationships between many viewers and mukbang broadcasters, exchanging their attention for the "personalized"

[12] (ASMR Savory DANGO (CHEWY STICKY EATING SOUNDS) NO TALKING | SAS-ASMR, 2019)

attention of the broadcaster, along with feelings of commensality and friendship with other community members.

A second repetitive practice demonstrates the transactional nature of mukbang videos and is included within the transactional element of "likes" in the comment section. Many mukbang videos' comment sections are filled with individuals "spamming" the comment feed with noodle or other food related emojis. A viewer might comment under a mukbang video about noodles that "for every like I get I will post an emoji" (see figure 8). These commenters feel validation from others who like their comments because the more likes they receive the more popular their comments become, allowing them to remain at the top of a comment feed.

What is interesting is that comment sections change weekly on mukbang videos, as new comments are added, and practices repeat themselves, functioning, as Cresswell argues, as "reiterative social practice" where "place is made and remade on a daily basis" (39). For this reason, I find the assertion that "the virtual community does not include identification with place" limiting (Driskell and Lyon 375). The virtual community does require identification with virtual place, but community members themselves, in which I include fans and creators, do not seem to define themselves by where they are found, rather by the practices through which they define themselves and the content they choose to consume. As a follow up to the importance of the comments section, I will discuss content moderation as a form of place-making practice that has an effect on what comments are changed, removed or circulated in connection with mukbang broadcasts.

Content moderation and fan labour as place-making practices

In addition to the act of commenting, another mukbang community-specific affective practice that constitutes fan-creator relationships is the volunteer labour fans do to subtitle videos and oversee chat function moderation. In BANZZ's earlier content, fans often did the work of translation and subtitling, demonstrating their affective commitment to this content as "it is affect which drives this affective, immaterial and digital labour," as it is affective attachment that compels a fan to commit labour and time to a pass time they care about (Spence 2). This fan effort works to break down language barriers and helps allow BANZZ's content to reach wider audiences. Fans in this way rely on one another for access to content they enjoy and help one another to participate in BANZZ's success, a mutually supportive labour between fans and many mukbang broadcasters who express gratitude when fans do they labour of translating their content.

A second fan labour practice is content moderation done within the chat functions on mukbang broadcasts. The president of broadcaster Hanna's fan club was interviewed by Charlet Duboc for Vice news. He says that his role is as a moderator for the chat function on her broadcasts enables him to protect Hannah from profanity directed towards her in the comments, and he takes this responsibility very seriously. In this role, he can block users who are abusive in their language, in the hopes that Hanna will remain encouraged by a more positive environment and continue to produce videos. This labour demonstrates the affective attachments fans can form towards broadcasters, this specific example involving a parasocial relationship between this club president and the person he imagines himself to be protecting. Understood together, these two forms of fan labour demonstrate the affective bonds fans form in their interactions with creators and one another. Fans are bonded affectively to the creators they admire, and to one another in the work they do to support and sustain the communities they are all a part of. Fan

labour ensures the continued popularity of this phenomenon, and its accessibility to others who have not yet discovered these videos, as mukbang become available in more and more languages online.

A form of binding for mukbang communities that is related to practices of commenting and fan labour are the behaviours and rules regulating the existence of this community. As Cresswell notes, "Laws and rules pervade place" (35). Mukbang broadcasters and ASMRtists are part of a community of creators who, like fans, have common ties to one another but work in different ways to regulate the behaviour in the places they create. The behaviours of cooperation they exhibit in support of virtual communities are seen in how they reference and tag one another in their videos, collaborate with other channels[13] and share tips for newcomers. This draws viewers to other channels as well and supports their collective niche as a whole whether that be ASMR, mukbang or both. A second point working to hold together mukbang's sense of place is content moderation. Driskell and Lyon argue that "Due to the lack of face-to-face contact and the weak ties, virtual communities in cyberspace, unlike the local place or shared space community, have only limited liability for their members," however this is untrue particularly for creators (382). Content creators rely on fan communities for financial support and on each other for emotional support, so they are very careful not to use other creators' content without permission. Similar to traditional communities, conflict within this community can lead a YouTuber's exclusion or expulsion, particularly on this medium where issues of copyright infringement can lead to demonetization of channels, being kicked off the platform permanently, or blacklisted by

[13] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CliYLbGH7tY (stephanie soo and veronica wang), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MJbDlG4tEN8 (BJ Shoogi and BANZZ)

fans for bad behaviour[14]. On the side of fans, community is managed in part from within. On one of Shoogi's broadcasts, multiple commenters can be seen chastising other commenters for negativity by downvoting comments that they feel disrespect the broadcaster ([Shoogi's Eating Show] chicken mukbang, 2015). This content moderation and constraint binds the mukbang community together more closely as it attempts to retain some clear definition and boundaries in what is a very mobile and fluid phenomena. Having established the genre conventions and production methods of mukbang, including how fan practices help sustain mukbang as a genre, the next section turns to how mukbang communities socialize.

The sociality of mukbang communities

The significance of YouTube in mukbang's accessibility to viewing audiences and their capacity for socialisation have to do with mukbang's nature as face-to-face and screen-to-screen media. By this I mean that mukbang enable mediated socialisation characterized by viewers and creators being able to face each other through the direct address of broadcasters and the ability of fans to comment live. In this section I will discuss how mukbang enable socialization, and counter the argument that communities do not exist online.

Many have questioned whether the Internet and digital media can provide positive social benefits, and early studies of Internet culture suggested that it would make humans less social. However, Kenichi Ishii believes that "The Internet supplements the pre-existing forms of communication and appears to be a positive force in social capital formation" (350). This 'social capital' refers to support and communication within interpersonal relationships. While some

[14] YouTube creator Shookbang, known largely for parodies of mukbang broadcasters and other YouTubers, was recently banned from the platform after receiving three copy strikes, causing a great deal of discussion among the community about fair use laws.

question whether computers and machines allow for successful human social interaction, mukbang do not make their users less social or their communications less productive. As Patricia Lange explains, “some studies assume a binary opposition between so-called “face-to-face” and mediated interaction” (72). She explains that face-to-face interaction is often privileged because of its association with “warm, concentrated attentiveness” (72), and mediated interaction is assumed to have the opposite qualities. Mukbang might be thought of as mediated interaction experienced as face-to-face interaction due to the multiple forms of live communication happening simultaneously which help viewers to feel more involved in the broadcast.

Mukbang exist at a crossroads, where due to technology like real-time streaming services, webcams and instant messaging, viewers and creators may experience their viewership as face-to-face interaction through the screens on their phones and laptops. An important feature of mukbang are that viewers can send messages to a creator directly. These chat messages appear on an instant message based live feed on AfreecaTV usually in the upper corner of a broadcast (see figure 3), and in sending them viewers can capture a broadcaster’s full attention, even if they are in competition with other fans to do so. Returning to Scannell’s concept of a “for anyone as someone structure,” capturing someone’s complete attention in this way makes all the difference in fans’ ability to believe that they are the individual being addressed at a personal level by a broadcaster despite being part of a larger audience. We can see when a comment has captured the attention of a broadcaster because they often respond in real time, looking towards the comment feed as it scrolls on their computer or phone screen (see figure 3). This has strong impacts on the personal and emotional investment fans put into the content they care about, because capturing a broadcaster’s attention is noteworthy, and fans often give thanks in the comments underneath a video when their comment is referenced in the video they are watching.

As YouTube channels become integrated with Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat accounts, further person to person interaction becomes possible across social media space. Additionally, because mukbang create contexts for virtual commensality, another measure of social closeness, these broadcasts provide for forms of interaction that can feel close, perhaps more so than earlier online communities and chat spaces.

Glen Donnar for instance argues that "meokbang evidences the ways in which new media permits more intimate and immersive interactions between fan and celebrity body" (125). Donnar's analysis reveals that:

> the intimate, everyday viscerality of eating in meokbang facilitates – as well as the alienation and distance that mark the voyeuristic gaze – subjective closeness and community. In this way, meokbang encourages active fan cultures, whose agency bears witness to and constitutes the performer's celebrity. (125)

Not only do fans feel closer to celebrities because they are "sharing meals" together with them, but they are also making meaningful bonds with other fans, a form of interaction that Donnar argues maintains celebrity in this genre. These communities in this way redefine the spatial possibilities of YouTube around the unique conditions of meal sharing with others via mukbang. The social and affective practices exhibited within them transform a space into a meaningful gathering place, and one where real-life personal relationships and bonds of affinity can and do exist. In the next section of this chapter I delve into a conceptualization of mukbang as a place-making practice and phenomenon.

Mukbang and the work of place-making surrounding food and meals

Mukbang bring diverse communities together online through their means of audience address and interaction because of the fluidity and mobility of this social space. Their unique forms of online interaction mean they can also benefit from a location-based frame of analysis. Tim Cresswell writes that the "most straightforward and common definition of place" is a "meaningful location," one that humans have given meaning to through their activities within it (7). Part of this meaning-making, what turns a space – YouTube – into a place – the mukbang community, are the affinities fans share in their enjoyment and consumption of this content. Mukbang as a place is held together by feelings of affinity among its users. This place-making is particularly important in a time when many theorists are writing about the decline of community, and the decline of place simultaneously. Much like fears surrounding the decline of traditional communities, loss of place is equally an important topic of discussion in urban contexts, and the fear that "it was becoming increasingly difficult for people to feel connected to the world through place" (Cresswell, 44). While composed of geographically and socially diverse audiences, it is important that mukbang communities are held together by material limits like food and media systems just as much as by subjective limits including shared feelings, affinities and desires for companionship and vicarious eating. Their style of place-making is in fact what differentiates them from other niches of YouTube because they are so mobile and yet continue to be held together by intracommunity regulations and rules, and popularity within other communities including their crossover with ASMR.

YouTube as a media and infrastructure works as a space for social gathering, and food is a necessary material condition for the existence of mukbang. The connections fans form around food can be understood as part of what organizes these fans into communities based on taste. Personal identity, including social class, has long been associated with personal tastes, including

how we judge the taste and quality of food. As Pasi Falk points out: “eating constitutes a receptive relationship to the outside world in terms of representations” (11). The connection of mukbang with social taste and with taste as one of the five senses is obvious. The physical sense of taste in mukbang and food ASMR is less important than its aesthetics through which taste is communicated to others. As Falk argues, “taste sensations never exist divorced from the realm of representations” (13). In mukbang, so long as we imagine the food to taste good, and the right sounds of enjoyment are produced, it is more important that the food look and sound good in order for fans to want to participate in its consumption. The addition of aural sounds of enjoyment add to this desire; slurping and lip-smacking are part of the expression of a food’s good taste. This is unlike other food television, whose emphasis tends to be on the processes of food’s production (for example cooking or preparing food), where viewer attention is rarely drawn to the sound a food makes upon eating it.

In terms of taste as personal preference, Pierre Bourdieu is often credited with an early exploration of the relationship of food to social class. Since the publication of *Distinction* in 1984, taste has come to be described as more transgressive of social boundaries than Bourdieu assumed. As Probyn argues “eating and taste are more fluid than Bourdieu gives credit” (28). She believes that “the taste or distaste for certain foods is both the hardest thing to change, and also the most visible index of the capacity to change” (29). Mukbang are so interesting because they have introduced new audiences to Korean cuisine. They have also redefined the boundary of what makes a meal. Their emphasis on fast foods and snacks are not easily associated with a particular social class, at least in the context of these videos and their community aesthetics. ASMR also straddles the line between delicious and disgusting foods, in a complex focus on producing sound and communicating enjoyment that crosses class boundaries.

Mukbang are sustained by the "small-scale social relations" of a community. For Mary Douglas meals are coded social events, the social event being coded in this sense would be the mukbang, or food broadcasts more generally, and the hierarchies presented by which foods are included, how they are eaten and what kind of social interaction they encourage between participants. She treats a code as a "set of possibilities for sending particular messages. If food is treated as a code, the message it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed" (66). The message derived from such a code, particularly in the case of food, "is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries…Food categories therefore encode social events" (Douglas 61). Douglas studies these social events with a particular focus inside the home, but mukbang exist as both inside and outside of domestic space. Outside the home they are increasingly filmed in restaurants, film studios and even inside cars in parking lots. Inside the home, they range from their more traditional setting of a bedroom in Korean mukbang, to wide marble kitchen counters in North American mukbang, but rarely in a dining room.

Food is an important material condition for the existence of mukbang and their communities. A significant question to answer with regard to mukbang communities is whether or not the food eaten in ASMR/mukbang constitutes a meal, and whether or not this changes the meaning of these videos. Anthropologist Mary Douglas defines a meal in a variety of ways. First, she believes a meal "puts its frame on the gathering" (66). The casual style of a meal may suggest a more casual gathering, further positing that the nature of the foods in mukbang and ASMR, often fast food and snacks, frame a more casual and less-rigid social gathering. Mukbang often involve the vast consumption of fast food. Researchers found that while fast food is generally thought of as a meal rather than a snack, in East Asia fast food is consumed more often

in a group to enable sharing, and time spent in the restaurant is longer than for North Americans (Kobayashi 406). In mukbang, the consumption of fast food aligns with this study, as broadcasters are focused on providing a social and comfortable eating environment where others can join in. As Cammie Sublette explains, fast food has also taken on globally recognized significations from the food to its origin point, as she says: "Even if the specific brand is unfamiliar, most diners can spot a fast-food restaurant by its design and architectural features" (43). In mukbang when broadcasters consume hamburgers, fried chicken and noodles, they are consuming in a 'language' easily understood by a global audience.

Despite much of it being fast food, the food in mukbang is far from "ordinary". Some videos may focus on instant ramen or easily accessible and affordable fast food items, but all rely on purchasing and consuming such great quantities of food, that fan donations are used in part to pay for groceries. Mukbang would be very different media without these quantities of food, which inform the issues of access surrounding them. There is a powerful desire in the space of mukbang for participation in the eating, and the more food that is consumed the more this desire is prolonged over the course of a video. Fans and creators are ultimately producing a space together through their shared affinities for food and its enjoyment, but their practices and activities are done separately.

When considering what defines a meal, Douglas points to the need for "a table, a seating order, restriction on movement and on alternative occupations," all of which mukbang and ASMR roughly contain (66). Usually a small round dining table is set with many dishes of enticing food. Here, "the physical space delimited by the shape of the table is a social space. The arrangement of participants around it both reflects and determines relationships between them…The round table allows maximal equality and exchanges between participants in the

meal" (Fischler 534). The broadcaster, particularly if they are live, often sits first in preparation of eating, and their fans tune in as the broadcast starts, but viewers may also sit first in anticipation of an upcoming video so seating order is flexible.

An affective practice that ties together fans and creators and which reflects social exchange in mukbang is when broadcasters "offer" food to their fans while eating, particularly at the beginning of a video. BANZZ can be heard saying "you can have this first" (Yuptteok Red Combo, 2015), before he begins to eat, drawing viewers into the broadcast with an enticement of food and intimacy.[15] This action shows off the food to the camera in closer detail and supports the feeling of commensality in these videos, as fans are included explicitly into the performance of shared eating. Likewise, hyuneeEats offers her fried chicken to the camera before she begins eating (POPEYES FRIED CHICKEN | MUKBANG, 2017) and her catchphrase "Let's dig in because I'm so hungry," is suggestive as well of shared eating. Douglas argues that "the grand operator of the system is the line between intimacy and distance…the meal expresses close friendship" (66). If we define mukbang foods as meals, then they also contain the possibility of expressing close friendship in these terms, and the act of regular meal sharing represents a community practice. Mukbang can create friendships, as demonstrated by collaborative videos between creators, and the fan groups that have formed through mukbang and a love of food (Ambrose, 2015).

Pasi Falk, addressing claims surrounding the decline of the community states:

> the modern condition does not only imply a collapse of an eating-community as a structuring principle of social life but it also manifests a tendency towards a

[15] BANZZ. "BANZZ▼ [ENG SUB] When You Want Spicy Food, Yuptteok Red Combo is your choice 151007." *YouTube,* 28 October 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gEO5NklVxHw

> marginalization of the meal, even when conceived of as a less collective social event…the decline of the meal is accompanied by the rise of different forms of non-ritual eating (snacks). (29)

Mukbang can be understood as part of an effort to recapture the eating-community Falk refers to, as they recenter the meal. The large quantity of food consumed may make mukbang into meals despite the foods themselves often being considered snacks. The shared company, too, can provide these videos their potential for commensality.

Food and affinity

Fan affinities surrounding food and eating that mukbang support among their viewers is central to their deeper community formation. Affinities in this definition represent shared likes and dislikes and are demonstrated in the comments and likes that a video receives. It can be argued that mukbang are part of what Patricia Lange describes as videos of affinity:

> Videos of affinity attempt to maintain feelings of connection with potential others who identify or interpellate themselves as intended viewers of the video. The interpellative process is important because attention, at a basic level, is a managed achievement that requires work. Videos of affinity are, in short, useful objects of study because they inform explorations of how social networks are negotiated through video. (71)

Fans of mukbang interact using these feelings of connection, and by finding affinity with like others. This is, in part, demonstrated by the practices they share and comment on, demonstrating patterns in their behaviour, like the cycles of affect discussed in Chapter Two, or the content moderation and fan labours I discussed earlier in this chapter. This affinity is also expressed as

mukbang create communities of fans surrounding particular broadcast personalities or broadcast jockeys like Hanna's fan club as previously mentioned.

YouTube is made for this kind of interaction and affective circulation because of its comment functions, the shareability of links with other fans, and the ability for community members to direct newcomers to previous content and recreate that content on their own channels. The element of liveness in mukbang is one example where this active communication channel is maintained. Mukbang because of their repetitive social practices, are not understood by their fans as an end point. Creators might finish one meal, but it is expected that they will share their next as well. For example, hyuneeEats often ends her videos saying, "I'll see you in my next video, bye!" suggesting an ongoing relationship.

> Videos of affinity have observable characteristics such as a presentist focus that aims to transit feelings of connection and maintain an open, active communication channel…Seen not as a cinematic end point, but rather as a mediated moment in an ongoing social relationship, the videos help maintain connections between individuals and groups of people in a social network" (Lange 83).

Videos of affinity like mukbang help maintain the connections Lange discusses because of their focus on personal modes of address and the social relationships they enable. This remains true of communities surrounding mukbang as they moved from AfreecaTV to YouTube and continue to spread to Instagram and other social media.

Mukbang as place-based communities

Following this discussion of mukbang as videos of affinity and place-making, I want to address the specific features of mukbang that constitute them as place-based communities.

George Hillery examined ninety-four definitions of community from the field of sociology from which he drew approximately sixteen different concepts that could be considered theoretically (113). The only point of agreement was that "all of the definitions deal with people. Beyond this common basis, there is no agreement" (Hillery 117). The first requirement in Hillery's model is physical space, but how we define space can affect the ability for a place and community to exist within it. So long as a webpage exists, a YouTuber's channel page for example, or a forum of discussion on Reddit, it can be returned to. If bookmarked, it literally becomes a place-holder for community members to gather and return to online. Cresswell argues that place is never 'finished,' and can continue to grow and change over the length of its existence, in this way, it is "constantly being performed" (37). This aligns with the theory of Michel de Certeau who believed that everyday practice imbues a place with meaning (39). I wish to borrow his idea that practice and repetition are what make a place meaningful in human life. This includes ideas of habit, return and established patterns of behaviour.

Once we have established that mukbang communities have identifiable social practices – in that they can be seen, evaluated and analysed by researchers outside of these communities - and that these practices allow for online place-making, it is worth pausing to ask what relationship this time spent online has to offline life. Many scholars have written about the use of food and food media as an escape from daily life. In this line of thinking, the reason for the meaningful formation of communities online may be to escape a reality that can no longer support traditional communities, returning to a vein of social studies concerned with the decline of traditional community. As Tony Blackshaw states: "it was only when we were no longer sure of community's existence that it became absolutely necessary to believe in it" (8). Rather than seeing a community bonded together by food as a form of escape removed from places of

traditional community, we can see them as choices to participate in non-traditional places for their own enjoyment.

Vicarious pleasure is commonly cited as a motivator for watching mukbang videos, but it is worth asking what exactly this food provides an escape from, aside from habits of restrictive eating. Pauline Adema writes "growing numbers of viewers are tuning in to and watching food television because it feeds a hunger for emotional and physical pleasures vicariously gratified by watching someone cook, talk about and eat food" (114). One type of vicarious eating is tied to dieting. Schwegler-Castaner suggests mukbang might provide a form of liberation for women as they "contest bodily suppression" which is particularly common in famously health-conscious Korea (783). Vicarious pleasure is commonly cited as a motivator watching for this content, but it is worth asking what exactly this food provides an escape from, aside from restrictive eating. Elspeth Probyn is critical of those who describe food as a cure-all because this ignores societal difference: "food is represented as a respite from the realities of postmodernism, post-industrialism, postcolonialism and even post-feminism. In its sincere, authentic mode, food writers by and large serve up static social categories and fairly fixed ideas about social relations" (26). The food in mukbang is not necessarily a cure; it can also be understood as a symptom of larger societal changes like issues of urban density and growth as discussed earlier, and the only way to fully understand mukbang communities is to avoid the fixity Probyn describes and broaden our understanding of why they exist and are popular.

Cresswell points out that some anthropologists believe postmodernity causes the formation of 'non-places,' characterized by "transience – the preponderance of mobility." I would argue that platforms like YouTube allow for communities to form around common interests and are stronger places because of their transience and mobility, not as non-places but

as place-making communities of practice (45). This mobility, the changes in audience demographics, and changes in space of interaction – from Reddit pages to chat rooms to social media, AfreecaTV to YouTube – demonstrate the staying power of this community. The fact that so many commenters return to videos and continue to comment on them years after their first release, demonstrates the feeling of connection they had to that world in that moment and continue to feel in the present. Those practices also make the place of that community in online, platformed discourse.

The world of mukbang might not be defined by a particular geographic location, but smaller worlds might be possible within the confines of mukbang's domestic space, like Shoogi or BANZZ's bedroom, Stephanie Soo's kitchen, and Yuka Kinoshita's living room. These are places that enable personal connections to the world the creator is presenting, but also connections to other parts of the world at large as their webcams allow for glimpses into different cultural, social and gastronomical spaces. This shows that places can exist at different scales within this community. Mukbang are in my analysis the primary place, supported by smaller domestic places which coexist within the space of YouTube and are bonded together through feelings of attachment.

Unlike some who argue that YouTube qualifies as a non-space, the practices I analyse define the community not as fake but as quite real. Jodi Dean's stance is that "Affective attachments to media are not in themselves sufficient to produce actual communities—bloggers are blogging but the blogosphere doesn't exist" (21). Dean continues:

> Affective networks produce feelings of community or what we might call 'community without community'. They enable mediated relationships that take a

> variety of changing, uncertain, and interconnected forms as they feed back each upon the other in ways we can never fully account for or predict (21).

Yet as I state, mukbang do demonstrate cycles of affective practice, and so they feed back on each other in ways that we can begin to predict, even if they are not always consistent. From this we can understand that regardless of how others might define a community, they do exist online, albeit often in motion and open to change. Mukbang are unique within the genre of food television because of the relative fluidity of the communities they produce. What binds them together works both in spite of and because of this fluidity. Their interactional space holds them together: YouTube, and the places that fans and creators participate in making together and surrounding what they care about. Continuing from this idea of affective attachment, what separates a casual fan from a more dedicated member of a community, as Henry Jenkins outlines, is that a casual fan borrows "the community's modes of interpretation (perhaps by reading recaps on a popular blog) without feeling a strong affiliation with its social norms or might encounter one fan text (a fan remix video on YouTube) unmoored from the larger tradition that inspired it" (Jenkins in Booth 18). These occasional viewers are also referred to as "lurkers" by those familiar with the study of online communities. While they might go so far as to leave the occasional comment, it is more difficult to measure their affective attachment to a particular social community online. Despite their often sporadic involvement in this community, they also make up the bulk of mukbang's viewership.

What separates the 'dedicated' members of virtual communities of fans from other kinds of viewers, then, might be affect: "in this discussion of active fandom, I'll use "affect" to distinguish the complex layers of experience that often separate the fan from a more casual viewer" (McCormick 372). The layers of experience Casey McCormick describes can be

understood as the levels of engagement that a fan pursues in comparison with a non-fan or casual observer of this phenomenon. The mukbang and ASMR fan is part of a dedicated community of viewers, sometimes to a particular broadcaster or channel. They engage by watching broadcasts live or as soon as they are available, they donate money, time and energy into this pastime, participating actively in the success or failure of trends. As McCormick notes: "since active fandom is fundamentally an affective phenomenon, we could say that the impulse to activity really has nothing to do with digital technology; rather, these technologies are vehicles through which fan affect manifests and, importantly, spreads" (372). YouTube and AfreecaTV are the vehicles described: platforms for affective and social behaviour that translates into "likes," comments, discussion boards and more in a social community supported by media convergence.

Mukbang encourage the formation of offline relationships as fans connect in person over what they enjoy. As Strangelove points out "online communities often exist as a continuation of offline communities" (104). Due to this media convergence, online communities can and do enable offline communities of fans who seek one another out through similar interests regardless of their level of engagement. For example, mukbang fans are able to connect in person because of the relationships they form online, and many of them meet in person because of interactions they have had in the comments of videos. Fans may meet in order to explore restaurants together, try the foods they like to watch most in mukbang broadcasts, or cook those foods together after having first established friendships through time spent watching and commenting on mukbang (Duboc, 2015; Ambrose, 2015).

Conclusion

Michael Strangelove reminds us that shared interest is not the only defining characteristic of communities online (105). YouTube in particular allows for what he calls "multiple communities" because diverse individuals can see themselves reflected in different ways in its many types of content (105).

> They invest time in it and develop relationships through it. A community, virtual or real, is something that people care about. As they care about their communities, they also are seen to defend them and debate their values and goals. Indeed, according to the anthropologist Mary Douglas, it is this very process of debate that constitutes a community and perpetuates its very existence (105).

There are many examples of fans and users voicing support for the legitimacy of their communities against their dismissal by outsiders (and often academics) on YouTube and other platforms. Their work demonstrates the reality and existence of these communities including for mukbang and ASMR, and the work they do to support them. This self-definition is constantly changing based on community norms and influencers taking a greater role in how such a community is understood by its members. As Benedict Anderson argued "Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (6).

It is clear that the growing popularity of mukbang and food ASMR videos speaks to a fundamental change in how we understand consumption not only of food but also of what we see on screen. Mukbang communities are virtual communities but they are held together by material and social limitations that ensure the place they create on YouTube endures despite their fluidity. These videos are examples of virtual food sharing, and they play with liveness, interactivity and storytelling to create something altogether different than stereotypical video blogs or food

television. I have used ‘food television’ as a general term to describe their genre, however they no longer resemble broadcast television as it has been understood as a medium. Instead, mukbang present a totally new genre, one that opens up our perspective for the study of space and place in online environments as highly social, food-centered media. Mukbang’s communities are highly mobile and interactive, but their interactions are revealed through the practices of virtual commensality and key social interactions happening in the comment sections of these videos. To dismiss mukbang and online spaces as incapable of producing feelings of community membership is to ignore the important work that remains to be done in understanding the relationships of affinity they produce, and the complex networks of fandom, consumption and desire they enable.

Conclusion

This thesis has presented an examination of mukbang food broadcasts as spaces of virtual commensality that began in South Korea on mobile television platforms and have since become a popular phenomenon on YouTube. Chapter One showed that mukbang as a cultural product in South Korea relied on a series of infrastructures developed over decades through state policies including public initiatives surrounding the economics and social impact of internet and communications technologies. These infrastructures, which include public Wi-Fi, transit and social networks, enabled the digital platforms like AfreecaTV that mukbang would one day rely on as forms of mobile television. They were also conducive to social infrastructures that fostered relationships between mukbang broadcasters and networks of food delivery persons and fans, creating the early conditions necessary for community formation as people began to connect in social relationships through this medium.

Chapter Two built on the analysis of these social infrastructures to explore another mukbang-adjacent genre on YouTube that also incorporates the use of food and sound in how it builds intimacy and sociality - ASMR. This chapter examined the affect that circulates among online communities and that works to demonstrate the strong emotional connections of fans to broadcast personalities and the content they produce around sensory experiences – both of which are highly relevant to the study of mukbang. It concluded that the feeling and affect that circulate within ASMR and mukbang work to hold together diverse online fan groups who are dispersed geographically and socially, into their own distinct communities.

After establishing how these communities form surrounding patterns of affective interaction and circulation, Chapter Three used a framework on space and place to determine that

mukbang communities are sustained through their highly mobile nature, fostering a community that is at once open to change while also operating under a set of shared community practices and policies of self-governance. These affective practices are evidenced through the comments, 'likes', collaborations and social interactions that mukbang videos encourage between viewers and creators, and among viewers and fans.

Increasingly, discussions about my research on mukbang and other food-centered internet cultures have led to conversations with peers and strangers who also enjoy watching food television, particularly mukbang or ASMR, and many of whom have never spoken to another person about this hobby before. Similar to myself and other fans I have encountered, both creators and consumers of these online phenomena find ways of connecting outside of cyberspace. Whether in meet-ups between fans and broadcasters, social groups of foodies who have met through their love of eating, or online ASMR communities seeking better sleep or less stress, fans reach out to one another through common interests and shared affinities.

Mukbang are now also a part of YouTube's evolution: "The website's visual design is consistently dominated by thumbnails of videos, not user profiles, groups, or conversations; groups are far from easy to find using keyword" (Burgess and Green 63). This is still true today, ten years after Burgess and Green's book was published. For all its potential as a social network, for those outside of the YouTube community the social behaviours taking place around its content can be difficult to identify, study, and participate in, which has been one of the challenges of this research. Since Burgess and Green's 2009 publication, YouTube has incorporated live video chat which at the time was unavailable because of "privacy risks" (64). Live video chat aided by live comment functions are what have made YouTube more social in recent years, particularly in the example of food broadcasts and eating shows that I have

discussed. These examples show that the collaborative and collective participation some saw YouTube as lacking in its early years may have improved as the platform expands its available means of communication. Mukbang have a clear relation to this trend.

The contribution of this thesis is significant to academic work in food studies, fan and celebrity studies, and the study of affective community formation online. This thesis demonstrates one of the first detailed examples of virtual commensality, working through concrete examples in mukbang and ASMR to prove that food sharing can happen remotely through online environments. It clearly outlines the infrastructures and platforms that carried this trend from a niche South Korean phenomenon to a worldwide food and sound community. I believe that my analysis of mukbang and ASMR can be used for future research on similar communities forming on YouTube.

It is clear in searching through dozens of mukbang channels and analyzing the spaces that they appear in that these videos are at once symbolic of consumption and growing neoliberalism in global markets, but also of the hunger for connection that develops under these conditions. This relationship is worthy of further study. In concluding a discussion of this phenomenon, we cannot ignore that mukbang and ASMR embody excess in the spaces they occupy, and future research should explore the relationship between the desire for consumption and the fear of being consumed by an increasingly unbalanced and fast-paced work-life. The food in mukbang is not primarily eaten for sustenance. The amount of food consumed goes above and beyond what the typical human needs to consume in any given day, let alone a single meal. Even in food ASMR, to maximize the sounds produced when eating, large portions must be consumed to prolong the listening experience for viewers and increase chances of ASMR responses. Additionally, the

ways in which the food is eaten purposefully breaks rules of social politeness and civility that are typically expected around the dining tables in many places.

This consumption is not without value as a research object, then. As Sidney Mintz argues "Consumption…is at the same time a form of self-identification and of communication…this act of choosing to consume…can provide a temporary, even if mostly spurious, sense of choice, of self, and thereby of freedom" (13). Both YouTube as a corporation and mukbang communities could not exist without consumption, and it is practices of consumption around which the potential for the kinds of social interaction studied here are enabled. Returning to Mintz's words above, the option to consume alongside mukbang or to consume vicariously through mukbang is a choice and can be understood as a form of freedom, which is reflected in the space that structures YouTube. Mukbang are contrary to many norms including how we typically understand socialization, communal eating, and how many societies perceive the "allowable" or "normal" amount of food that can be eaten in one sitting. Consumption is how many people choose to express themselves, including with whom they choose to break bread. While we can recognize the issues that might arise in a media like mukbang that ties food, fame, and social relationships so tightly together, we can also look at their potential for encouraging different social configurations and forms of communication online. For these reasons, future research in this area could be significant to our understanding of human behaviours associated with eating and digital socialization.

There is also great potential to study the specific impact of mukbang and ASMR viewership in relation to rates of loneliness and isolation experienced by single-occupant homes, and the kind of self-care practices people use in their daily lives. Equally, researchers could more closely examine the ways in which sound recording may be used as a therapeutic practice in

relationship to ASMR and mukbang videos, which provide great feelings of relief and comfort for some viewers.

I predict that mukbang will continue to become more and more sensational as broadcasters compete for audience attention. In the current trend of SAS-ASMR videos, Stephanie Soo and EAT WITH KIM on YouTube are examples of mukbang creators who use chocolate fountain machines with alternative fillings as performance pieces in their videos. These machines are filled with cheese, alfredo sauce, spicy red seafood sauce and other sweet and savoury options and are part of one pattern emerging as the field of mukbang performance becomes more popular and requires ever increasing extravagance to stand out.

One of the challenges in this work has been the analysis of a community that, like all virtual communities, is harder to pinpoint to one specific place and time due to the kinds of freedom and mobility they enable. Mukbang represent a community focused on freedom for a lot of their fans: freedom of consumption, freedom from social norms, freedom of enjoyment and satisfaction through food and socialization, and the freedom of membership. By freedom of membership I mean that members are free to come and go from within this community without fear of being rejected or prevented from returning. While this could be beneficial to community membership, as a researcher studying the behaviour of community members it is challenging to interpret why some fans choose to make accounts for themselves and comment regularly, and others do not, choosing instead to remain anonymous as I did during my interaction with and analysis of this research object. There is enough of a pattern within the genre to ensure fans (and researchers) who do take breaks from mukbang can return to the content without a knowledge gap preventing them from easily participating in the culture again. These patterns, as I have

discussed previously, were of great help in identifying community practices and production practices that identify mukbang as distinct from other media.

A final limitation of my research was the inability to predict when comments and other signifiers of affective interaction between fans will change, seeing as they can be deleted, edited or added to after their initial posting. If a user changes their username for example, it can be very difficult to search the comments for a comment attributed to their previous title. These communities and the feelings they nurture are complex and worthy of study. They do and mean many different things for so many different people. I hope that this work has provides an accurate representation of the particular structures of feeling and relation that occur on ASMR and mukbang video platforms, ones that I found so compelling when I first stumbled onto this networked food media phenomenon.

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Appendix

(All figures are screenshots taken by the author of this thesis while watching these videos)

Figure 1 The beginning of BANZZ's volcano mukbang with a menu in the upper left corner.

BANZZ. "BANZZ Spicy Volcano Yeoptteok Mukbang." *YouTube*, 2 March 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ykyYBz5eSSU

Figure 2 an example of the end of a mukbang with menu shown on the right side.

BANZZ. “Banzz▼Famous in Insa-dong! All kinds of dumplings and cold noodle from Bukchon Handmade dumpling!.” YouTube, 20 September 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r_dYnh0LfHM

Figure 3 Example of a mukbang on AfreecaTV with live comments shown in the upper right corner.

슈기님 (Shoogi). “Bodram Fried Chicken 1/2+Sea Nail Noodles+Fried Squid Mukbang!” YouTube, 28 July 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gbabb97V0pE

Figure 4 A recipe mukbang showing Keemi's instructions

KEEMI. "(recipe mukbang) Fire Noodle Spicy Rice Cakes Mukbang!!." YouTube, 16 November 2018 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9TWL6HFplGs

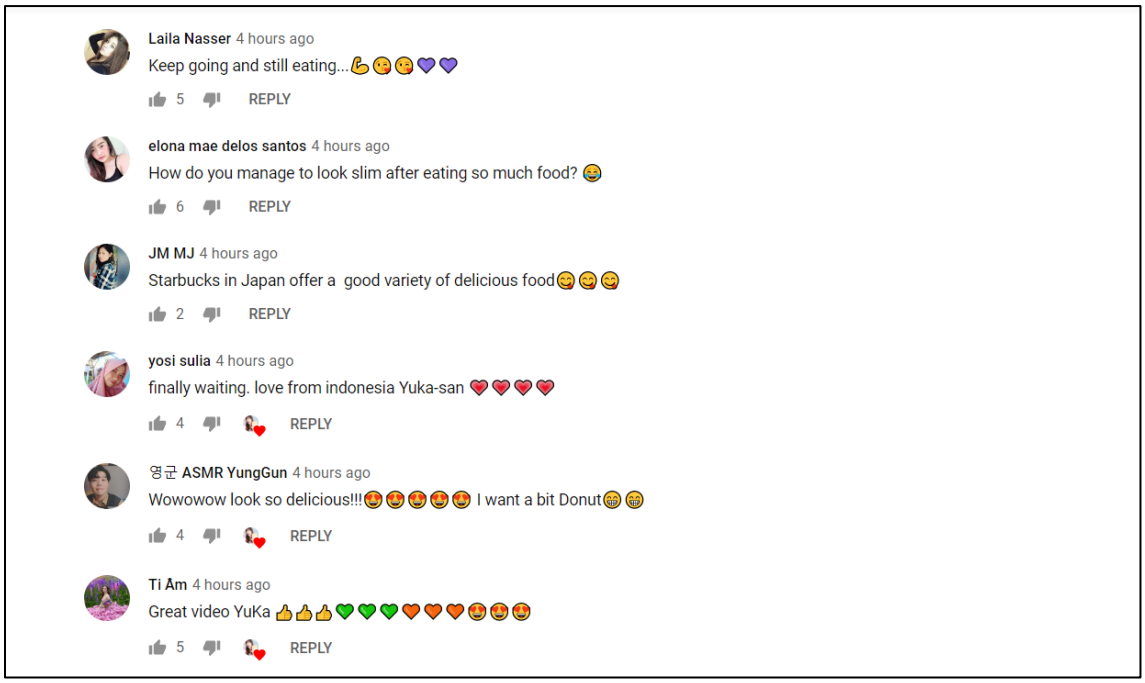

Figure 5 showing the early comments on a mukbang broadcast with equal distribution of likes.

Kinoshita, Yuka. "MUKBANG Starbucks New Strawberry Very Much Frappucino!! Red & White [16Items] 6129kcal[Use CC]." YouTube, 26 April 2019 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pIAJn_FPcwU

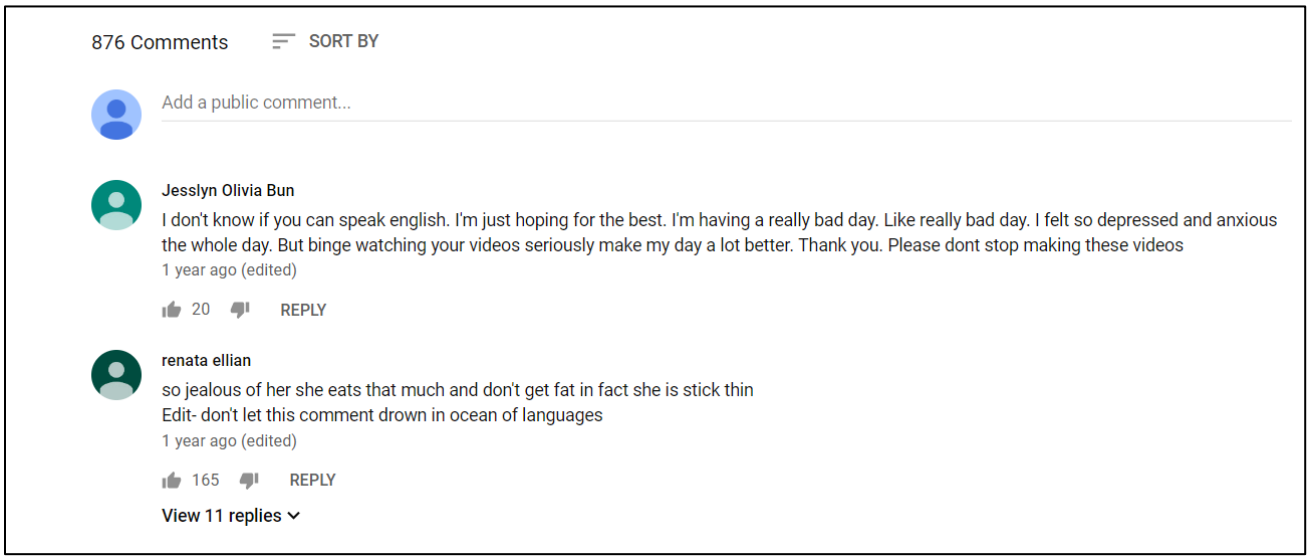

Figure 6 showing fan reactions to one of Yuka Kinoshita's videos.

Kinoshita, Yuka. “【MUKBANG】 Over Juicy!!! 50 Giant Shumai!! & Simple Chinese Porridge [7.5Kg] 11860kcal [Click CC].” YouTube, 28 September 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HTChI2ScZ0E

Figure 7 BJ The Diva shown with her blue Doraemon stuffed animal, a common symbol in her early broadcasts.

The Diva. “더디바 : The디바 (탕수육,팔보채,양장피,고추잡채,짬뽕국물) 131113 part2 The Diva.” YouTube, 12 February 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A1dmuzR9JsU

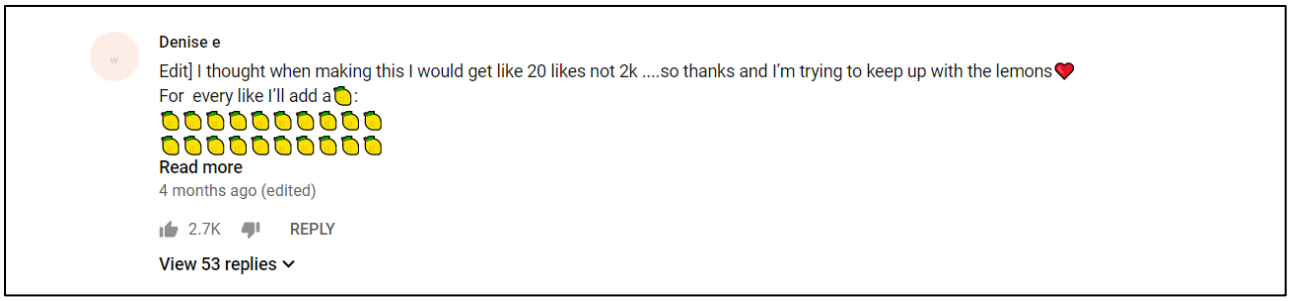

Figure 8 A photograph showing a commenter’s post providing emojis in return for ‘likes’.

SAS-ASMR. “ASMR Wild BERRY EXTREME CHALLENGE *RAW ONION + LEMON + KIWI (EATING SOUNDS) | SAS-ASMR.” YouTube, December 5, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RSrp0iMK1lw