

## Regarding the mains of others

The spectacular bodies of mukbang videos

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## Regarding the mains of others The spectacular bodies of mukbang videos

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### **Abstract**

*The platformed logics of social media favor unique and spectacular content and thus encourage the production and display of unique and spectacular bodies. In the realm of social media, attractive and unattainable bodies have emerged as the norm rather than the exception. This article, however, sets out to investigate how a specific type of spectacular body comes into being by turning to the phenomenon of mukbangs. We explore how excessive food consumption, audiovisual aesthetics, media technologies, and platform logics all become constituents of the spectacular body's performance. Our analysis will focus on two tendencies: First, the platformed body is distributed and comes into being through its entanglement with non-human agents, such as the microphone enhancing eating sounds, the camera and image composition displaying the food's excessive quantity, and the food's entanglement with the body through a spectacle of excess. Second, mukbang videos cater to a spectating body ready to be affected by the exceptional body capable of extreme eating and how this bodily performance transcends the medium, and the videos produce disgust or cravings.*

### **Keywords**

*mukbang, ASMR, affect, contagion, youtube, eating bodies*

## Hungry eyes

In a video shared on YouTube by competitive eater Matt Stonie, we see Stonie digging into a huge mountain of fries, chili, and oozing nacho cheese. The video, with the title *Epic Chili Cheese Fries!! (10,120 Calories)* (Stonie, 2018), initially displays Stonie assembling his meal and then aggressively shoveling piles of fries drenched in chili beans and cheese into his mouth. The eating itself is played at high speed. Occasionally, the video slows down to a normal speed so Stonie can share his immediate response to the eating experience. During the whole eating session, the chili and cheese around Stonie's mouth is not wiped away, leaving his face glistening with grease. In the end, an exhausted Stonie finishes the whole tray, and even scoops up a large spill of excess cheese from the countertop. Since the video was uploaded in March 2018, it has gathered more than 108 million views and is a testimony to the distinct popularity of mukbang videos. Just prior to the actual eating, Stonie presented and assembled the dish: nine large orders of french fries, one family-size can of chili beans, and one giant can of nacho cheese. Stonie repeatedly emphasizes that the pile of food is a 10,000-calorie meal. Eating is staged as an athletic performance, and Matt Stonie is the ultimate athlete.

### *The spectacle of the mediated eating body*

Eating is many things. First of all, it is fundamental to all living creatures: Eating gives life. Eating is also an easily recognizable social and cultural practice absorbed in cultural and social codes of conduct. Further, eating accentuates the difference between the inside and outside of the body (Abbots, 2017, p. 15). In this vein, Abbots appropriately asks where in the body eating takes place: in the social space? in the oral cavity? While "eating" identifies the intimate encounter of body and food, the substance of the food is subsequently broken down through the process of digestion and becomes a part of the body, it shapes and molds the body. However, this article is not only about eating – it is also about watching others eat and the spectatorship that mediated eating entails.

The Internet has already conjured up the notion of *food porn* (Dejmanee, 2016), which refers to a visual fetishizing of food imagery. Food porn is mainly distributed through the medium of the image favoring the visibility of food and the visual aspects of eating. In mukbang videos, wide-angle lenses magnify the visual appearance of the food. Mukbangs, which are also called "eating shows", celebrate the eating body and the activity of eating. Eating sounds are amplified through the advanced technology of the microphone: The crunch of deep-fried foods, the chewing, the cutting into different consistencies. The almost-inevitable bodily reaction to the audiovisual material foregrounds the spectator's own embodiment (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 16 f.). Significantly, a multi-sensorially speculating body is less commonly addressed on other social media platforms, which tend to emphasize the body's controllability in "becoming image" (Coleman, 2009). Through these stimuli, mukbang videos elicit a distinctly physical reaction. Despite their limitation to the audiovisual, they employ the digital apparatus to evoke taste, touch, and smell in

close-up images of handling the food or the eating sounds of the so-called bjs (broadcast jockeys), as the following analyses will show. This means that mukbang videos do not restrict themselves to the stimulation of audio and visual senses, but the proximate senses of “taste” and “touch” are synaesthetically addressed via “hearing” and “seeing”.

Through analyses of the phenomenon of mukbangs, we explore 1) *how food consumption, audiovisual aesthetics, media technologies, and platform logics all become constituents of the bj’s spectacular bodily performance*; and 2) *how mukbang videos cater to a spectating body ready to be affected by intimacy, desire, pleasure, and disgust?*

In pursuing these research interests, we follow a three-part structure. In the first part, “Hungry Eyes”, we introduce and motivate our analyses of selected mukbang videos, situate our work in the relevant societal and research contexts, and lay out how we draw on aesthetic theory about the notions of *empathy* and *contagion*. In the second part, “Digging In”, we present our empirical material. Our analysis in the third part, “Digesting”, is then structured around our two research questions. This analysis emphasizes our dual focus on the construction of the spectacular body and on embodied spectatorship. We develop an inquiry into how the bodily performances in the videos produce disgust or cravings. Notably, cultural conceptions concerning the pleasure and disgust of eating are deeply entangled with *performances of gender*. We will therefore explore how the embodied practice of eating in our chosen material corresponds with hegemonic notions of gender.

Two themes crystallize from our analysis and will be discussed conclusively: first, *excess* as it concerns the food’s excessive quantity and its entanglement with the body through a spectacle of excess; and second, *control* and *loss of control* as central themes when exploring the (gendered) politics of food consumption. Finally, we discuss the spectacular body of mukbang videos as a utopian body – a body that can perform in seemingly impossible ways.

In conceptualizing the body, we are inspired by posthumanist and new materialist accounts that emphasize the body as a state of becoming through intra-action with other nonhuman material-discursive actors (Barad, 2007). What we refer to as the spectacularity of bodies is tied to their appearance as well as to their actions: They perform eating in specific, spectacular ways. They eat excessive amounts of food, eat in an eye-catching fashion, and use a technical apparatus to explicitly appeal to the spectators’ embodied responses. Further, these spectacular bodies are situated within an attention economy in the digital age. Thus, spectacularity implies the capacity to generate attention.

We build on scholarship within digital media studies that explores the body’s status, staging, and performance online. Researchers such as N. Katherine Hayles (1999), Anna Munster (2006), and Mark B. Hansen (2006) challenge the traditional understanding of the body as unmediated and explore the complex corporeality of the body in the context of digital media. Of more recent accounts, Kember and Zylinska (2012) argue that

media can be understood as performative, thus breaking with the notion that media are representational. Additionally, we draw on studies of mediated bodies, particularly studies focusing on intimacies, affect, and the body's sensory and affective capacities. In particular porn studies (Paasonen, 2011; Schaschek, 2013), but also more recent studies on ASMR (Andersen, 2015; Smith & Snider, 2019).

### ***Mukbang and the spectacular platformed body in context***

Mukbang is an Internet phenomenon – the practice of so-called bjs who record and broadcast themselves while eating (and, in some cases, preparing) food. Quite often, but not always, the food is excessive in amount. Similar to influencers and other Internet personalities, the bjs share their staged practice of eating online and profit from this, depending on their ability to accumulate views and attract commercial partnerships. On some platforms, users can donate virtual currency to their favorite bjs. The bj can subsequently exchange the virtual currency for real money (Kim, 2018). Similar to the professionalization and commercialization of Internet culture in general, mukbang content was initially produced by amateurs, but mukbang bjs have increasingly become professional content creators (Kim, 2018).

The phenomenon originated in South Korea more than a decade ago (Evans, 2015). The word mukbang is a contraction of the Korean words for eating (*muk-ja*) and broadcasting (*bang-song*). Originally, mukbang content was broadcast on the Internet channel Afreeca (short for “Any FREE broadcasting”) but has now hit mainstream media circuits and is widely distributed on platforms such as YouTube and TikTok.

Cultural studies scholar Yeran Kim points out that within normative social conventions, mainstream mukbang content can be characterized as “lowbrow, inappropriate, and even vulgar” (Kim, 2021, p. 3). Mainstream culture has indeed been puzzled about the oddity of mukbang content and has sought to explain the phenomenon through sociocultural accounts of East Asian culture. Thus, it has been widely reported that mukbang videos satisfy the social demands of a South Korean society in which young people increasingly battle loneliness (Bui, 2020; Lavelle, 2018). Other voices read mukbang in the context of the South Korean cultural obsession with perfect female skin and female body image; consumption of mukbang videos can thus be viewed as an outlet of resistance against narrow ideals concerning body politics (Kim, 2018, p. 233). Within academia, the phenomenon of mukbang videos has been studied within a variety of perspectives. A significant number of studies focus on the language used in mukbang videos and how it produces informality (Rüdiger, 2021) or collectivity, rapport, and intimacy (Choe, 2019; Harris & Jones, 2020). Other studies explore the intersection of thinness, overconsumption, and femininity (Schwegler-Castañer, 2018), while some aim to identify the motivations of the audience (Anjani et al., 2020).

***Embodied spectatorship: Contagion and empathy***

To grasp the spectacular mukbang bodies in relation to their audiences, we rely on a theoretical framework that ranges from aesthetic theory on *contagion* and *empathy* to reflections on the contemporary *attention economy*. These concepts are meant to help us explore the seemingly immediate physical reactions to watching videos, such as the one of Stonie described at the opening of this article: a distinctly embodied dimension of spectatorship. In line with our own focus on the genre's emphasized corporeality, Kim argues that mukbang videos are *carnal videos* (Kim, 2021). Further, we rely on this aesthetic terminology for perspectives on the contagious nature of affects, as they circulate between bodies.

The notion of *contagion* aids our intention to emphasize *embodiment* in the act of looking at other bodies eat, on the one hand. On the other hand, contagion highlights the *relational* quality of such spectatorship. From the Latin *contāgiōn-em*, contagion combines *con* [with, together] and *tangere* [to touch]. The term's implication of physical contact suggests an intimacy with what one is being touched by.<sup>1</sup>

While disciplines from neuroscience, psychology, anthropology, philosophy, and affect theory all employ the term, "contagion" is primarily used in medicine and biology, especially within pathology. This implies that contagion opens for negative associations: we might be touched by contagion without our knowledge or consent and might suffer from this touch and its consequences. Theatre scholar Fintan Walsh highlights the term's relational impetus and its defiance of boundaries. He envisions the medical, psychological, and affective conditions and phenomena contagion produces "along a sliding spectrum, running from illness to ambience, the former denoting bodily disease and the latter experienced environment and mood. In between these points hover a range of physiological, psychological and affective experiences that pass – or seem to – between people, cultures and things" (Walsh, 2019, p. 4). Concerning the transmission of such experiences in mukbang videos, we conceive of the analysed videos as examples of how contagion and empathetic connectivity can be strengthened when viewers are presented with *spectacular* bodies.

That empathy – the experience of "merging with the object of one's contemplation" (Foster, 2011, p. 127) – is increased by high physical stakes or danger was addressed by aestheticians already in the eighteenth century. Influenced by Locke's writings, the eighteenth-century aesthetician Jean-Baptiste DuBos conceived of the mind as being particularly drawn to dangerous, lively images (Foster, 2011, p. 137). DuBos referred to his contemporary rope dancing performances when he argued that the immediate danger the dancer was in evoked her audience's particular attention and captivation. He believed this empathetic response to the precariously positioned dancer was spontaneous and mechanical: viewers' perception and feelings were determined by the real risk of the scene. Similarly, the eating bodies in our examples attract their viewers' attention and produce physical empathy by performing an everyday activity in an extraordinary



fashion. Mirroring the rope dancer, what makes bjs' bodies extraordinary is not primarily their appearance (slim despite the large food intake), but their actions and abilities (to eat sometimes-inconceivable amounts of food). As such, they fit into an unlikely category that draws its members from the heterogenous fields of ballet, *Jackass*, and the circus.

Foster refers to how "perception is profoundly affected by our history of movement practices" (2011, p. 168). Regarding our inquiry into watching people eat online, all mukbang viewers will be able to draw on their own embodied experiences of eating. But rather than strictly individual experiences, it is of particular relevance to this piece of research that consuming mukbang videos also relates to the extreme and socially acquired emotions that food and eating can trigger: following Ahmed, the delighted or disgusted reactions to food that characterize embodied spectatorship in this article are exactly *not* gut feelings (2004, p. 83). The receptiveness to the contagion of a particular imagery, and the empathetic response to it, is culturally conditioned and not identical for all humans.

### ***The attention and affective economy of digital platforms***

The logics of contagion and empathy are crucial when making sense of the bodily encounters we investigate here. We therefore want to explore how empathy and contagion play into the increasing value of mukbangs in the contemporary digital economy of attention. The attention economy (Goldhaber, 1997) is an economic logic defining the Internet, in which attention is understood as the one scarce resource producers of content desire. Social media platforms, in particular, are geared towards the production of content conforming to this economy through presentations of subjects as spectacular – or at least singular (Reckwitz, 2017).

During the noughties, when the Internet became increasingly social, some content producers proved to be very savvy at attracting attention and gaining a large traction of followers. These were bloggers (Rettberg, 2013) and camgirls (Senft, 2008), who Internet researchers labeled *microcelebrities* (Senft, 2008; Marwick, 2013) and later influencers (Abidin, 2015). While the mukbang bjs operate within a different cultural domain, the market logics are similar: Attention is the valuable currency, and their success depends on their ability to generate this. Thus, the market logics of the platform's structure, of their *affordances* (Bucher & Helmond, 2017), encourage the production of *spectacular* content, worthy of sharing and linking to – the means of distribution on social media platforms. Different types of Internet personalities apply different strategies for attracting attention and, even more importantly, *sustaining* this attention: Influencers seek attention and engagement from followers through the production of personal affective narratives (Abidin, 2015) and make use of a confessional mode, often combined with interaction with commodity goods. Gamers livestream their gameplay on platforms such as Twitch and seek attention by performing a curated personality during gameplay (Maloney et al., 2018). Meanwhile, intimacy, proximity, and affect seem to be at the center of mukbang

content, the eating body becomes a vehicle for spectacularity and specific modes of calling upon the spectator through contagion and empathy.

## Digging in

### *Reflections on spectatorship and analytical position*

Before moving to the analytical segment of the article, we want to lay out how we understand the mukbang videos as performances to be engaged with. We want to clarify our position concerning the activity of the spectator as well as our own analytical practice. Digital media studies offer a variety of approaches to digital media, for instance, affordances (Bucher & Helmond, 2017) and produsage (Bruns, 2008), which both emphasize the active role of the user. Because we are interested in the embodied aesthetic relation between video and spectator, our primary focus lies elsewhere. We therefore turn to analytical approaches from performance studies. These highlight the *encounter* between diverse elements, including performing and spectating bodies, spoken words, and various props in a specific situation. In our inquiry, staged food is the defining prop; the “situation” can be more specifically determined as the (usually solitary) domestic viewing experience and possibility for written commentary that YouTube offers as a platform.

To inquire into how the mukbang videos resonate with their spectators, we set out to identify how the spectating body is “touched” by the spectacle of the eating body. We pinpoint response-inviting structures in the videos and suggest that this identification goes beyond our individual embodied readings. Rather, the mukbang videos’ contagious capacities and their explicitly staged invitation to experience empathy emerges from the platformed bodies. Our research inquiry emphasizes intimacy, desire, pleasure, and disgust and how these become affective modes of connectivity. In scholarship about affect and emotion, intimacy, desire, pleasure, and disgust are often conceived of as embedded in the individual and are thought of as a personal matter. Yet, cultural theorist Sara Ahmed (2004) interferes with the individual and psychological understanding of emotion and claims that emotions are both social and individual.<sup>2</sup> Sedgwick (2003, p. 37) highlights how, for instance, shame is a social and cultural issue. The notion of shame is applicable when a socially or culturally inappropriate event has taken place, but shame is, on the other hand, revealed in the individual body through sweating palms or blushing cheeks. Taking Ahmed’s politics of emotions into account when framing our analysis of modes of empathy, our reading of the mukbang videos do not merely represent our personal reception of the videos, but resonate, following Ahmed, with broader cultural sense-making.

### *Chosen mukbang content*

The videos studied in this article are all found on YouTube. The three bjs share mukbang content through their channels on the platform. Our criteria in choosing the mukbang content for our analyses were as follows:



First, *eating* – not preparing – food was our main focus. This is because the *incorporation* of food and the potential for pleasure and disgust that comes with eating resonates with our ambition to engage with spectatorship as embodied. Second, *popularity* was a significant factor, because we were interested in exploring a mainstream account of the phenomenon of mukbang as well as content resonating with an audience of a certain size. Popularity is revealed through the subscriber count and view count of each video. The three bjs we included in this study had 306,000 subscribers (MoonASMR), 600,000 subscribers (Steven Sushi), and 14.9 million subscribers (Matt Stonie). Third, we were interested in a certain variety in our selection of mukbang bjs, in terms of gender and a more general consideration of type of content. The stereotypical mukbang video displays an eating body that consumes food and interacts with the spectators, either by answering questions and comments from spectators or by merely talking about the food and everyday life (Choe, 2020). We chose one bj, Steven Sushi, whose content resembles the stereotypical mukbang content, while the remaining two bjs, Matt Stonie and MoonASMR, are quite unconventional. They will allow us to focus on different ways mukbang content can cater to the spectating body through the framework of eating as a source of proximity and intimacy and the affective production of pleasure and disgust. MoonASMR draws on equal mukbang and ASMR conventions in her videos and permits us to move beyond a restrictive definition of mukbang content. Fourth, mukbang is an Internet phenomenon originating from South Korea. It has leaped into the Western mainstream conscience during the last five years. It is from this context of mukbangs produced in the West and/or for a (primarily) Western audience that we select our examples. While we recognize the origin of the genre, we will not make any claim to grasp the cultural legacy from South Korean culture.

Following this, we present the three mukbang channels we base our analysis on.

### *Steven Sushi*

American bj Steven Sushi started his mukbang channel on YouTube in 2015 and has accumulated 600,000 subscribers. Sushi uploaded *DOMINOS Pizza + Hot Wings MUKBANG* (Sushi, 2019) in March 2019. It has since received 6.8 million views. The video chronicles close to 14 minutes of Sushi consuming the better part of a large pizza, six small tubs of ranch dressing, and a few dozen chicken wings.

The video commences with a seated upper-body shot of Sushi. Between him and the camera is arranged, in usual mukbang style, a large Domino's pizza and a cardboard box with around 20 chicken wings. Sushi fills a large water bottle, which makes the brand of his sponsor visible throughout the video. He opens three of the ranch dressing containers, arranges them amongst the other foodstuff, and announces that whoever does not "like heavy breathing, smacking, moaning, just – getting wild for food" might as well "get the hell out of here". He dunks the first slice of pizza into the dressing and takes a large bite, which is followed by animalistic grunting sounds, smacks, orgasmic shrieks, and spasmic



Screenshot from Steven Sushi: "DOMINOS Pizza + Hot Wings MUKBANG"

hand gestures. Sushi greedily takes a second dunk and bite, all the while staring intensely into the camera. His intense bodily reaction is repeated after each bite and expresses itself in emphatically squinting his eyes, banging his body into the wall behind him, and baring his teeth in anticipation of the next bite. He lets parts of the third bite of pizza fall out of his mouth again, before he begins helping himself to the chicken wings. After biting the meat off, Sushi holds the first chicken wing close to the camera and nods approvingly. He sucks the last pieces of meat off the bone before returning to the pizza.

The video gets messier when a large pizza slice slips out of Sushi's hand onto the box of chicken wings as he is trying to dunk it in more dressing. Sushi begins shifting between dressing containers, ripping pieces of pizza apart, spilling dressing on his beard, handling pizza and chicken wings simultaneously with his increasingly greasy fingers, and holding half-eaten bits of food up close to the camera. Halfway through, the video shifts in pace: After a thus far high-speed and intense eating performance, Sushi stops and briefly reflects on how terrible and bloated Domino's pizza always makes you feel. He belches and proceeds to open another ranch dressing. His eating, smacking, and licking of his fingers is paced more slowly for the remaining video, and interspersed with Sushi expressing feelings of guilt and repulsion about the food he consumes, as well as fantasies and failed attempts of sticking to a healthier diet. The video ends with Sushi leaning against the wall behind him with his eyes closed, breathing heavily, belching and rambling on about his digestion.

### *MoonASMR*

The YouTube channel MoonASMR has 306,000 subscribers and posted the first video in February 2020. The channel is run by an East Asian woman (she replies to a commenter that she is "half white half korean") who does not reveal her formal identity, but only uses

the handle of her YouTube channel as a means of identification. Further, the strikingly loud eating sounds are indicative of elaborate sound engineering and root the video production firmly in the ASMR community.

The video begins with a close up of a transparent cake collar that is lifted from a creamy chocolate cake. This lets a thick chocolatey custard engulf a ring of chocolate sponge cake. The surface of the creamy custard is dusted with raw unsweetened cocoa and the instant the cake collar is removed, the oozing of the custard is highlighted by the moving cocoa dust – the direction of the moving custard is traced by the powder forming patterns of movement. The video is titled *CHOCOLATE LAVA CAKE ASMR MUKBANG (No Talking) EATING SOUNDS* (MoonASMR, 2020b) and is uploaded by the mukbang channel MoonASMR in May 2020. The video depicts the bj eating the chocolate lava cake with a wooden spoon. The eating session has a duration of almost eight minutes of the bj scooping up the thick creamy custard and cutting through the moist spongy cake. The consumption of a large lava cake is a staple of the mukbang genre – most often petite Asian women eating a full lava cake. MoonASMR's lava cake video, however, is not a traditional mukbang video of a bj eating, but rather a video produced within the very particular aesthetic framework of MoonASMR.



*Screenshot from MoonASMR: "CHOCOLATE LAVA CAKE ASMR MUKBANG (No Talking) EATING SOUNDS"*

MoonASMR applies a recognizable visual aesthetic in her video production, only revealing the lower part of her face to her viewers. Her lips are characteristically painted red in all of her videos and are an obvious point of focus when the eating takes place. The presentation of the food is similarly distinctive. The cake is eaten in one take and only eating sounds are audible, while the bj a few times communicates satisfaction to her viewers by showing a silent thumbs up. Her mode of eating is emphatically controlled and thus distinguishes itself significantly from Steven Sushi's messy mode of eating. As dictated by the genre, the food is placed front and center of the visual frame captured through a wide-

angle lens, making the food appear bigger. The videos are also distinct in the construction of a platformed body, as the bj never speaks, but only communicates verbally through written comments on the screen or replies to comments on YouTube. However, the audio dimension of the videos stands out, as the eating sounds – the crunching, chewing, licking, and swallowing of the food – is enhanced by an advanced microphone. As the channel name reveals, the videos are in fact a mashup of the traditional eating show and ASMR videos aiming to produce so-called triggers for its viewers.

### *Matt Stonie*

This article opened with a description of Matt Stonie's most-viewed video in which he consumes an overwhelming pile of chili cheese fries. The remainder of Stonie's video production plays out in a similar fashion and displays Stonie in a kitchen setting consuming hazardous amounts of food or snacks, such as 4044 M&Ms or 100 Eggo waffles. In his videos, Stonie is typically portrayed in his kitchen behind the countertop. Stonie typically emphasizes the number of calories, both by almost shouting the number when introducing the imminent meal and by displaying the numbers on the screen. Stonie's videos also make use of the grandeur of orchestral music emulating dramatic sequences in mainstream movies. As opposed to Steven Sushi and MoonASMR, the pleasure of eating is not emphasized, but the amount of food is an obstacle to be overcome.



*Screenshot from Matt Stonie: Epic Chili Cheese Fries!! (10,120 Calories)*

Stonie is a competitive eater, meaning he enters eating competitions. Stonie made his debut in the US competitive eating league, The Major League Eating, in 2011. Since 2015, his ranking has fluctuated between second and fifth (Major League Eating, 2021).



## Digesting

The videos evoke a sense of physical intimacy, which contributes to the seemingly immediate bodily reactions of pleasure and/or disgust we experience when watching them. In this final part of the article, we analyse the mukbang content. We engage with the construction of intimacy and proximity, how pleasure and disgust are evoked, and how the spectacular performances are entangled with the performance of gender. The analysis tends to the embodied spectatorship and the various embodied responses mukbang videos evoke. As suggested above, we want to make the case that these reactions are socioculturally determined and that mukbangs stage platformed bodies in ways that invite such empathetic responses. Finally, we arrive at our concluding reflections on *excess* and *control*.

### *Intimacy and proximity in mukbang videos*

In the videos of MoonASMR, the sound qualities are the primary mode of engaging the spectator, who is invited into an intimate space of the bj's eating. There is no distortion, and the sound seems to be compressed in post-production to create the immersively detailed soundtrack. The eating sounds are enhanced by the qualities of the microphone, and the visual dimension of the videos further support the production of proximity. The bj remains completely speechless during the whole eating process, which emphasizes the non-verbal sounds her mouth produces. The clarity of these sounds emulates a physical proximity: the eating utensils digging through the different textures of the food; the crisp sounds of a hard surface cracking; or the slippery quality of noodles grabbed by chopsticks. The food becomes tangible, we recognize its textures, and we might even experience contagion as physically "being touched", leading us to desire and a feeling of hunger. This is reflected in the commentary through comments such as "As usual, I feel hungry right now" (MoonASMR, 2020a) posted by the user "Zetul Jeff".

While the food itself is in focus and presented as appetizing through the wide-angle lens of the camera and hyper-aestheticized styling, the bj herself has only the lower part of her face visible. But through the video's eating sounds, her body is present, and the spectator is invited – or forced, given the impossibility to "shut one's ears" – into the oral cavity of her mouth when the eating commences. In the previously described video, in which the bj consumes a full chocolate lava cake, the thick consistency of the chocolatey custard becomes physically manifest as it is slurped. In other videos, the crunch of teeth digging into the hard shell of deep-fried foods emphasize a different consistency and make it palpable for the viewer. The technological apparatus magnifies the encounter of food and body and immerses the spectator in the bodily experience of eating. The technologically produced intimacy entails that viewers come (perhaps a little too) close (in) to the eating body.

Intimacy and proximity are also significant factors in the videos of Steven Sushi. While MoonASMR never speaks and attempts to act as a "blank canvas" for eating sounds,

Sushi is present in an entirely different fashion. The pleasure produced by eating, by his body's encounter with the food, is loud and excessive. Within conventional Western eating etiquette, Sushi's style of eating would be considered vulgar and transgressive. But it is the exact vulgarity, the unmistakably embodied and explicitly pleasurable eating experience, which creates intimacy. Witnessing the spectacle of Sushi's encounter with the food feels like a voyeuristic practice, because the transgressive nature of Sushi's eating resembles ways of eating one would only engage in when being completely alone. The lack of control and manners become shameful to watch. While MoonASMR attempts to isolate the eating experience through technological apparatus – the visual composition omitting the top of her face, the “no speaking” policy of her videos, and the compressed soundscape – Sushi's video production is seemingly not relying on the technicity of video production. The camera is a documentary camera, and in some videos, his sister comments off-camera about his food, his eating, or something else, giving the impression of a backstage view.

Not unlike influencers and other Internet personalities who capitalize on emotional narratives of everyday life, Sushi's *modus operandi* emerges as one of confession. For influencers and YouTubers, the mode of confession is used strategically as a way to create rapport with their followers and construct an exclusive “backstage”. During many of his videos, Sushi engages in a confessional mode when addressing his followers. The confessions he makes mainly contemplate the (large) amount of food he consumes, and the way it produces a feeling of discomfort and disgust.

Matt Stonie, whose video we introduced in the beginning of the article, produces intimacy through excessive eating in an altogether different way. While MoonASMR magnifies the sensory capacities of eating and Steven Sushi performs an excessive and transgressive bacchusian eating fashion, eating in Matt Stonie's videos is staged as an athletic discipline. Consequently, the eating body is an athletic body capable of extreme performance. Steven Sushi and MoonASMR both emphasize the pleasures of eating, while pleasure is abandoned completely in Stonie's grotesque eating show. Intimacy with the performer is evoked here rather as a sense of being on the same team. As the eating contests he stages for himself advance, we begin to feel his fullness and a sense of intimacy evolves around seeing another body lose control.

Platformed mukbang bodies, then, evoke intimacy and proximity in a number of different ways. This makes them resonate with other digital media bodies which have been shown to conjure up notions of intimacy, without traditional understandings of intimacy that are associated with physical closeness and heterosexual relationships (Andreassen et al., 2018; Jamieson, 2005). In our examples, intimacy appears to be counterintuitively enhanced by the solitary viewing position in front of a screen at home. Social co-eating situations, as the traditional circumstance under which one would observe another person's eating, limit viewers' possibilities to immerse themselves in the visual and aural stimulation produced by fellow eaters. While the need to follow social codes of polite



interaction, rather than indulge in a fellow eater's production of eating sounds and images (and one's own body's reaction to those) – this is not the case in front of a screen.

### *Encounters of pleasure and disgust*

In the previous section, we argued that the mukbang videos cater to the spectating body through their production of intimacy and proximity. In this section, we want to reflect further on the embodied spectatorship of being invited into such intimate spaces by taking a closer look at the three bjs' various strategies of attracting attention. One of the authors of this article has shown MoonASMR's videos to her students during class. The students' reaction was unambiguous: They found the videos to be disgusting, with several saying they had to turn them off after just a few minutes of viewing because they felt physically sick. On the other hand, the comments section under MoonASMR's videos are equally unambiguous – just on the positive side. Commenters praise the productions, and most consistently applaud the videos' ability to awaken desire and pleasure in comments such as: "When ur eating.. WHY DO I KINDA SMELL CHICKENS OMFG- maybe i was dreaming-" (MoonASMR, 2020a). This and similar reactions are not surprising, as they tap into the discussion about the configuration of pleasure and disgust that the mukbang videos elicit. And not least how the videos' contagious and empathetic capacities create patterns of affect. Thus, all three bjs have the capacity to invoke both pleasure and disgust depending on the spectating position.

The proximity of MoonASMR's eating performance is forced on the viewer, and the students in class had not sought out the videos themselves. Consequently, the closeness of the videos – their touch – becomes unwanted and disgusting. Sara Ahmed identifies disgust as "a matter of taste as well as touch" (2004, p. 83). It seems significant that these are senses that require proximity to the body. As demonstrated by the reactions just mentioned, the digital transmission of pleasurable and disgusting interactions with food in mukbangs ensures that the viewer feels touched by these interactions. Immersive pleasure or fear of contamination become acute for the viewer as food enters the bj's body. Similar to what Susanna Paasonen (2011) notes concerning pleasurable experiences of disgust in pornography, it seems that mukbang videos thrive on "articulations of disgust and that such articulations are knowingly sought out, evoked, provoked, and formulated by both the producers and consumers" (p. 209). While MoonASMR attempts to remove the practice of eating from a recognizable social setting, Steven Sushi situates himself within a matrix of pleasure, guilt, and self-hate, which is closely associated with food consumption in a Western cultural context. Sushi's eating performance oscillates between pleasure and disgust. Consequently, when watching Sushi's eating show, one is similarly seduced by the food: As he commences the eating, and increasingly as he consumes more and more, our bodily response empathetically mimics his. Akin to our initial desire for the displayed food, we slowly start to feel his fullness – we feel his disgust and self-hate. Our spectatorship becomes embodied in the sense that the spectating body is *infected* by the perform-

ing body's sensational and affective capacities through the cultural dynamic of contagion. Sushi's uncontrolled desire for food becomes disgusting in its excessiveness. It is relatable and recognizable. Within the confines of contemporary body culture's fatphobia, Sushi becomes the repulsive "other". And the dynamics of embodied spectatorship make it quite difficult to delineate Sushi from the spectating "me"; the spectating body becomes afraid of being touched, being infected by his vulgar engagement with the food, perhaps because we can sense similar desires.

Matt Stonie, on the other hand, rejects the notion of shame and evokes admiration in his eating performance, which is spectacularly staged as an athletic contest. Stonie's competitive eating can appropriately be characterized as extreme eating. Similar to Moon-ASMR's eating performance, Stonie attempts to remove the social dimension of eating. Eating is framed as a clinical objective event: The calories are counted, and if possible, the edible items are counted (number of M&M's, 125 cupcakes, and so on). But during the eating – or downing – of the food, Stonie becomes more and more exhausted from eating. He is full, and consuming the remaining food is grueling, greasy, messy, and the very opposite of clinical. When he finishes, he is proud, though debilitated from his effort. Similar to Sushi's videos, an empathetic mode of spectatorship occurs when the eating commences. Instantaneously, the messy scenario of Stonie's extreme eating evokes shame and disgust through the experience of "merging with the object of one's contemplation" (Foster, 2011, p. 127). Again, we are put in a spectating position in which Stonie's body becomes our body.

Our analysis suggests that viewing situations are crucial when making sense of mukbang videos. Film scholar Joceline Andersen reminds us of viewers' predisposal to affective reactions through intention when consuming mukbang videos (Andersen, 2015, p. 686): When spectators turn on an eating show, they are ready for the transmissive power of pleasure or disgust to touch them. But when the mukbang videos are watched in a (albeit digital) classroom, the intended solitary viewing position is replaced by a collective one, which may explain the students' response of disgust, embarrassment, and repulsion.

### *Eating as a gendered practice*

Platformed bodies and their doings as pleasurable and/or disgusting are fundamentally linked to another issue in the videos: performances of gender. Here we may add that our analytical remarks on this complex matter relate to the three bjs we have chosen for analysis, while other, sometimes radically different approaches to performing gender also exist as part of the mukbang genre. While we cannot make any general conclusions based on our study, we want to unfold how the three bjs' eating performances resonate with hegemonic conceptions of gender.

Within scholarship on food and gender, there is a general agreement that the construction of gender is a significant factor when making sense of (practices relating to) food and eating. Lapiņa and Leer point to the "gobbling of meat" (2016, p. 90) as a crucial

component in the construction of (traditional) masculinity. Meanwhile, postfeminist scholars understand eating within the disciplinary framework of feminine labor of maintaining an ideal body, e.g., that the practice of so-called “clean eating” will give the body a certain, desirable “glow” (Elias et al., 2017, p. 30).

Sushi’s staging of an animalistic body out of control is easily identified as a performance of a traditional notion of masculinity. However, his massive food intake and exorbitant pleasure derived from food reads as an ambivalent performance of masculinity. Traditional notions of masculinity are simultaneously displayed and challenged: The excessive consumption of food can be read as a masculine big-bodied capacity to consume large amounts of food, while the performance of pleasure challenges the notion of stoic and controlled masculinity. Further, Sushi’s recurring verbalizations of shame and self-hate in his mukbangs complicates gender normativity by performing feminine notions of constant self-surveillance and regulation of the body’s food intake. In the second half of the video described above, he exclaims about his most recent loss of control: “I’m on keto, I feel good, I’m on low carbs – and then I’m over here ordering Domino’s pizza [...] What kind of nonsense is that?” (Sushi, 2019). Concerning intimacy and the bj’s relatability, guilt and shame about consuming large amounts of food are emotions many viewers recognize. But the expression of these emotions is traditionally associated with the performance of femininity. Further, and in contrast to his expressed uncontrollable desire for food, Sushi repeatedly displays significant concern with his bodily appearance: In the described video, he explains how the camera “adds 10 pounds” and makes a point of clarifying that he looks much slimmer in real life. Similarly, many of his other online appearances are noticeably posed and include references to his dieting intentions or illustrations of how he is not obese. This hyper-awareness of one’s image, in addition to expressing guilt about food consumption, associate the staging of his body with performances of femininity.

In contrast to Sushi, Stonie’s competitive-athletic performance makes an attempt at divorcing his food consumption from the emotional realm. Instead, it is staged as a performance within the masculinized sphere of athletic achievement combined with the *Jackass*-like celebration of stupidity and ignorance, or even childish fantasies, of enormous amounts of sweets. In general, all three bjs’ performances of gender can be characterized as ambivalent, highlighting eating and food’s complex relationship with the cultural matrix of gender.

The spectacularly staged eating body in MoonASMRs videos is characterized by a hyper-aestheticized approach to food and its consumption. In MoonASMR’s videos, the female bj is consistently extremely meticulous in the handling of the food and eats quietly and controlled, as opposed to the male bjs in Stonie’s and Sushi’s mukbangs, who both eat in a loud, messy, and greasy manner. MoonASMR performs constraint and only expresses pleasure through showing a thumbs up to the camera or written statements on the screen such as “omg it’s super crispy” (MoonASMR, 2020a). She is sure to remove any

traces of food around her face and on her fingers off camera. While MoonASMR far from lives up to the feminine ideal of “healthy” or “clean” eating, this aestheticization of food, her mannerisms, and her impeccable red lips point to the laborious burden of feminine eating practices. This is corroborated by the frequent display of female labor in MoonASMR’s videos when preparing the food.

## Conclusive reflections on control and excess

Our analysis attempted to reveal how contagion and empathetic responses result from the interplay of the mukbang bodies’ constituent parts. From these observations, two factors emerge as central in staging the platformed mukbang body, and we want to conclude by reflecting on them: the body as *controlled* vs. *uncontrollable* and notions of *excess*.

A staging of *control* over the platformed body, or lack thereof, emerged as key in the three considered bjs and their respective wider production. MoonASMR stages a decidedly controlled body: The measured pace of the bj’s eating and her carefully painted mouth create the body as emphatically restrained. The aesthetics of the videos on the channel further distinguish themselves in this vein through meticulously staged edibles and backgrounds. In Matt Stonie’s videos, it is the athlete-like discipline that signifies control; and the loss of control over his body the closer Stonie comes to concluding his consumption of the 10,000-calorie meal. Conversely, the body in Steven Sushi’s mukbangs is characterized as explicitly *uncontrollable* in its encounter with food. Sushi groans, shrieks, and burps and refers to the interactions on his YouTube channel as “getting wild for food”.

Such staging of an (un)controllable body relates directly to the *excess* that characterizes the analyzed mukbang performances. The bjs all eat excessively large amounts of food and/or do so in excessive ways. This “too-muchness” of their engagement with food furthers the bodies’ spectacularity and emerges as particularly striking, because it arguably reads as a sharp contrast to the appearance of the performing mukbangers. Despite their inconceivable food intake, they are all relatively slim – Stonie even skinny. Some of the genre’s popularity and fascination might thus be explained with this staging of exorbitant consumption without visible consequences. Their eating excessive amounts of food without getting bigger reads as impossible in a fatphobic culture that links food intake directly with fatness and thinness, despite research suggesting otherwise (Oliver-Pyatt, 2004; Kolata, 2007).<sup>3</sup> This perceived impossibility might even suggest the platformed bodies of mukbang as *utopian* bodies (Bork Petersen, in press). Notions of the utopian are evoked, on the one hand, in the sense of playing with the impossible: Like elite athletes, the mukbangers do something with their bodies that we cannot fully understand as physically possible – and yet we see them do it in front of our eyes (Greek *outopia*: no place, what is – under current circumstances perceived to be – impossible). On the other hand, the bodies displayed in MoonASMR’s, Steven Sushi’s, and Matt Stonie’s videos engage

in extreme eating practices, yet escape looking how our culture deems they “deserve” to look, suggesting them as unfathomable “good bodies” (Greek *eutopia*: good place). Further, the media technology arguably assists in the construction of the mukbang body as utopian. This is most clearly exhibited in MoonASMR’s magnified soundscape and visual composition (displaying only her mouth and the food front and center). But also, Sushi and Stonie both use jump cuts in order to depict the duration of the eating process within a feasible video length on YouTube. Additionally, Stonie applies the technology of high-speed play when displaying the eating process. This technological dimension opens for questions of whether bjs manipulate with the recordings, which is not insignificant for spectatorship.

### ***Mukbang bodies as players in multisensoric capitalism***

Considering the points we made in this article about the spectacular bodies of mukbangers and embodied spectatorship, several issues crystallize that are of relevance for both research and wider society. The important roles played by excess and control – and their entanglement with performances of gender and affective states of pleasure and disgust in the videos – suggest that mukbangs negotiate important issues about the staging of bodies in our time.

Arguably, bodies – and explicitly embodied spectatorship – are becoming no less important now that social interaction has significantly moved onto digital platforms. On these platforms, attractive and unattainable bodies have emerged as the norm rather than the exception, as seen in the realm of influencers and other Internet personalities (Elias et al., 2017). Rather than unattainable bodily appearance, what was at stake in the analyzed mukbangs were bodily *acts* as spectacular and unattainable. The platformed body’s excessive eating was staged as intimate – and pleasurable or disgustingly contagious for the spectator. Kim (2018) refers to online eating cultures in terms of *multi-sensoric capitalism*: We are dealing not only with an economy of *attention*, but a bodily, sensoric economy that commodifies the body capable of manufacturing a commodified embodied experience. The market logics of social media platforms appropriate not only the realm of subjectivity, but the realm of bodily experience as well.

Beyond broader social implications, this opens new perspectives for scholarship on spectatorship and online bodies. For this investigation, we considered it productive to be able to draw on our double research backgrounds in Media Studies *and* Performance Studies. We hope to have shown that these fields can be fruitfully employed to tackle mukbangs as a contemporary online phenomenon dominated by cultural logics of contagion.



## Notes

- 1 It may be worth emphasizing that the touch of contagion does not need to be haptic: Roland Barthes (1981) and Juhani Pallasmaa (1996) have pointed to how we “touch” with the eye, as well as the hand.
- 2 In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag (2003) discusses the spectatorship of war photographs as determined by social factors in particular. While there is no basis for comparison between the imagery of agonized suffering bodies in the photographs Sontag addresses in her book and our subject matter, her discussion of spectatorship with regards to issues such as shame, shock, and voyeurism bears some resonance with the explorations we are concerned with here.
- 3 It should be added here that this staging of slim bodies in mukbang videos is a pervasive characteristic of the genre. While eating shows with much bigger bjs exist and enjoy considerable popularity, slim mukbangers can be argued to be the genre’s norm.

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