

Audio file

[ubvo seminar thao dam HT22 edited.mp3](#)

Transcript

Well hello.

Today I'm going to present my talk about Mukbang, excessive entertainment, Mukhbang and theatrics of eating for an online audience. This is a very big honour for me to be here because during my Masters year this was really where I started my relationship with food and anthropology, and it's since transcended into doctoral studies still with Stanley, albeit a little far away. So it's very nice to meet you virtually.

So this talk is divided into four parts. I wouldn't say the size of the parts are exactly equal, but thematically they are bite by bite, so I'm going to be going over how food kind of traversed into the digital on a superficial level. Hopefully you all have been following this series and have read these different scholars that I'll be talking about. Next I'll be going into what defining mukbang is, like, what are the definitions? I'll be grounding this work and how people have teased apart different variations of it, and the genres of what you could call food media. And food shows. Next I'll be looking at kind of the disciplinary entanglement. So what is everyone doing? What are they saying in different disciplines and how they all relate together, if not divergent or convergent moments? And then the last section would be kind of, I wouldn't say it's a speculation, but it's kind of just thoughts and trajectories on digital food, eating commensality as based on these case studies, scholars and referencing. So here it goes. Byte by byte, how we got here.

Across the years, many, many, many decades, we've always talked about this big thing called the technological turn, or the technical turn. Lots of different scholars, in philosophy, anthropology, sociology, STS studies more recently, like we're really focused on how our life has been transformed by the increased presence of digital devices, technological devices, the different virtual realms that they are related to. And as a result, much of our life is mediated by these technologies. We are starting to experience different sensory things, you know, eating, or like smelling, tasting, touching through virtual interfaces and like entities. Therefore it kind of helps us ponder what are these different ways that we experience the world and navigate the world through these technologies?

Even in terms of, you know, human rights and, you know, the right to different things that people, including the World Bank, as well as a lot of other entities, have considered access to the Internet as kind of the human right and something that everyone should have, because in our digital world, well, when you're without broadband or Internet connection, you might be disadvantaged. According to the stats by the World Bank in 2022, broadband and high speed Internet access is not a luxury. It's a basic necessity for economic and human development in all types of context. So therefore, as we proceed into this, you know, rush of the technical turn, if not the rush, of embracing the virtual realities of our lives, it becomes necessary to have the baseline connection. You know, because of this integration of technologies in virtual realities in our lives we start to, we experience and reimagine basic things, and when I say basic things, I say it very casually, like, I'm looking through a virtual screen at all of you. We're having a conversation. We're having dialogue, and in other ways I'll be thinking about what I'm going to eat later and I'll be looking at apps for recommendations on what to eat. So even some of the most visceral basic functions of human

existence, for example eating, has become exceptionally digitally mediated, and this has also been reflected and explored in a lot of our, you know, speculative fiction, in our media, it's become so commonplace. Doctor Tanja Lewis wrote this wonderful article that I love very much and talked about, kind of like the digital padlock. And she writes from home cookery to restaurant, going from farming to food politics, the world, the world of food is being quietly colonised by an array of electronic devices, online content and information.

So you know, it's all building up. It's all making sense, right? All the technology, everyone living life through technology, everything we experience, mediated by technology. But from its design to its applications, technology is not necessarily neutral at all. And what does that mean and what are the implications of that? So my favourite example of food technology would have to be from Willy Wonka's chocolate factory. This is one of those little kind of examples of how life and worlds, and the experience of eating, can be so changed by the inclusion of technologies, so I'm going to play this. All right, so when we conceptualise digital food or food technologies, it goes hand in hand with food science, and the way that we position food in relation to technology is very different depending on how we're oriented, of course. So there are many different ways people actualize this. You could look at gastronomy. How we make these choices and prepare things, so right here on the left we have, for example, a cooking robot. Very, very interesting. Making things, doing the techniques, making delicious dishes, hopefully in some standardised form, and then on the right we have what I think is one of my favourite inventions of all time. Not that I've used it, of course, because it's way out of my budget, but on the right is a Thermomixer, which is a piece of food technology where you can curate your grocery ingredient shopping, you can pick recipes. It can recommend recipes for you and you just put the things in and it makes it. We can do souffle, we can do sauces, we can insta-pot things, there are slow cooked things. It's all self-contained and very totalizing. And there's even a digital repertoire of recipes.

Also, like most interesting ways that people have been delving into digital food technologies, is kind of the replication of taste experiences. Right here is a picture of the TV which is called like Taste the TV, which is a lickable screen, which has developed, been developed, by a professor at Meiji University in Japan, and the way that works is that there are 10 capsules which have set chemical recipes for a certain taste or flavour. And the person using it would essentially select what flavour they like and then the canisters will spray this recipe of a certain flavoured taste onto a biofilm in which the user clicks. So that we can see very concretely that not only are we mediating things, we're just, we're just all about technology when it comes to food. And of course, this has spurred many different scholarly studies written and curated by some people you may recognise in our audience and our seminar organisers. But because of this, we're starting to think about how food politics and sociological concepts may enter the digital world and how we, you know, interact with food and how we're preparing food and how we're thinking about food is very much so digitally mediated through virtual spaces.

And because there's such an influx of different types of food media, there's also a lot of scholarly studies about why people are using food media, how they're using food media, and what that means about our different societies and context. I know that Doctor Emily Contois has been teaching a wonderful food media course and has since written a lot of books that have come out recently about food on Instagram or gender and sexuality as it relates to food, media and culture, which I think is kind of a natural progression, and there's many other scholars who've done this. I just chose her work in particular because I just recently read some of it and I was really excited.

Now we're going to head into Mukhbang. What does it mean? What does it entail? Is it just eating food? Is it just eating large amounts of food? Is it eating a certain type of food? What are the origins

of this term that has been so casually tossed around and used for so many different types of food related media content.

So Mukhbang is kind of a portmanteau. The connection of different words in Korean. So Mukhbang content creators - and please don't make me laugh or I'm going to make myself laugh – they are referred to as broadcast jockeys or BJ's. Yes, they are BJ's. There is a lot of different qualities and different types of Mukhbang, but initially when it started in the 2010s or so, was kind of, I want to say, like the origin point where people started to recognise the fad. It's an emphasis on multi sensorial presentation. So there's a lot of visuals of beautiful food spreads and focus on food related sounds, like the breaking of the shell of some seafood, or the crinkling of packages, the cracking sound of opening a canned beverage, things like that. And there's this stress of interactivity and this interactivity and this interaction through the social media spheres and stuff it, it's fundamentally rooted in chat rooms or comment sections which are actively going. It's very much a live stream. Like life response orientated, sort of thing. And some Mukhbang have added different genres, of concepts of food media, that you know, sometimes they carve out their own spaces and people are very diligent about separating it. But for me, I definitely think of it as just kind of layers and layers of all these interrelated things. So we have food selfies. Which is very self-explanatory. You know, a picture of you, a person eating. With your food. There's ASMR, there's food porn, which is just focusing on the food in excess amounts, like the cheese is stringier and pullier, and the fries look very crispy or the pancakes and the cake look very soft and spongy, like these are things that characterise food porn. Food shows definitely sprang out of Mukhbang, it's instead of just eating the food, it shows kind of like the whole process and the mundane aspects of meal preparation and meal selection. So perhaps shopping and recipe selection as well as, even unpackaging food to prepare it to be eaten, this falls under food shows. And then lastly, there's cookbang, which is highly related to food shows in that it focuses more on the cooking preparation aspect in addition to the eating of the meal afterwards.

You might be wondering. Hmm. So who, what types of people watch mukhbang? What types of people does this kind of media cater to? Well, slightly unsurprisingly, but I thought it was surprising. It's mostly university students. Most of the studies that have been conducted relating to Mukhbang in any particular way often have a demographic of age 18 to 30. So university students that are away from home, that may be learning how to cook and navigate eating on their own for the first time. They very much lean in to mukhbang media. There's a lot of different trends. It's when people are looking for their mukhbang. Yes, it has a lot to do with algorithms. If people tag things as long or any of their related tags like food porn or something, they'll be a lot of suggestions. But according to the studies conducted in 2022, they found people who watch mukbang just developed their own taste for the media, so they'll watch things with foods that they already like, or foods that they would like to eat. And it's very much a personally curated experience. And in the cases when they were recommended stuff, a lot of the participants said that, ooh, well, you know, I see the recommendations, but I'm not interested and they more often than not would not listen to the recommendations. So there's many different types of trends within mukbang media. First of all is trying a new food product. So for here example we have BJ Stephanie Soo who's on YouTube. I think she's super funny and super sweet. She often eats large meals of, you know, different food like fast food related things and then talks about serial killers. It's a very unusual crossover. It's like, here are all these new fast food products that I'm trying. Oh, and here's a story about that serial killer from that random Midwestern town in the US. And these are just some of the trends that kind of differentiate, I want to say like non-Korean mukhbang content makers, because she is based in the United States. A lot of the kind of characterization of mukhbang in Korea, South Korea specifically, is mostly related to eating in front of the camera and then talking. But now we also have versions of

mukhbang which are prerecorded and pre edited. So like the people who are typically like not in Korea when they make the content, which is very, very common by the way, even though people categorise their content as mukhbang, it's not specifically isolated to South Korea. Many different people across the world do it and what differentiates them, the non Korean mukhbang content producers is their interest in highlighting fast food products. Most of the Mukhbang creators in South Korea definitely do local foods or homemade foods or comfort foods really, versus in non Korean countries where they try to explore these new food products. And eventually as you can imagine, this leads to a lot of food branded sponsorships and that's how a lot of these mukhbang BJ's make their revenue through sponsorships and like. Through subscription or actual companies giving them different perks. Initially in 2014, I believe in one of the documentaries that I was reviewing for this talk, they said that in Korea the highest paid BJ at the time made about \$10,000 a month solely from donations of their fans. So in addition to sponsorships, you could see that this could be a very, very lucrative and kind of exciting way to earn money in the digital age. Another trend I noticed was mukhbang for specific dietary movements or choices, like lifestyles, so this is cheap lazy vegan. I love Rose as well. She has a lot of amazing recipes. So she does this thing called Mukhbang Monday where she talks about issues and like her opinions and certain food politic topics, all while eating like a mukhbang sized portion of a vegan dish. And I saw this also with other movements and other choices like keto, like different dietary choices and pathways. So we have keto, we have Atkins. We have other low carb things. We have Paleo, and you know it's just another sphere for people to kind of show the diversity and creativity of their dietary choices and their dietary habits.

Another trend is local dishes. As I briefly mentioned before, which I really do love across the board, we have on the right, we have this woman who is from, I think, NOLA, like New Orleans, and she does, like, the seafood boil. It's very much a sphere of showing off what's local around you and it allows the viewer to consume vicariously these localised experiences with food and for the mukhbang BJ's to kind of share that information with others. And going off of that, we also have mukhbang content that is directly related to regional foods and sharing of cuisine. So think of it as like a culinary exploration and education for the viewers and the sharing once again by the mukhbang BJ's.

Another thing that I noticed was the kind of fixation on one type of food. So seafood for its ASMR properties and its high allergen situation, people love to watch people eat seafood. It sounds good when you crack it open, you might have an allergy, like Ohh I long for in the night the taste of shrimp or lobster or shellfish or something like that. And that was a very, very big trend I noticed when I was looking through the media and it's been widely documented within mukhbang academic studies as well.

A little bit more as I like jokingly say, like aesthetic Tumblr-esque kind of organisation of mukhbang would be the colour schemes. So they'll be like entire mukhbang dedicated to an array of different foods, with no connection to each other in terms of like flavour, scope or taste, but other than the colour, so like you see here, you have blue tacos and fire noodles which have been dyed blue. And then we have on the bottom, we have like Jelly doughnuts, which are blue marshmallow and candy corn and popping corn. All these things together, grouped simply because of the colour.

And then there's ASMR, which personally doesn't give me the same feeling as people who do appreciate ASMR. But in the Mukhbang media, it's very much - low talking. So we're going to watch a few seconds of this and I will explain further.

Many of the reasons that people watch mukhbang have to do with ASMR in terms of therapeutic properties, proclaimed therapeutic properties of it. Like why is it so popular? Well a long standing belief and like documented thing within the literature is that it's an appeasement of loneliness.

Being the demographic is mostly aged 18 to 30, lonely people away from home, really missing their families would like the digital company of other people while they're eating meals. And with our hyper capitalistic society and hustle culture, it's very hard to have a sit down meal with friends or family all the time. So given the demographic of the popularity of mukbang, when you're a student, and when you're really stressed out, if you have the chance to eat, it's probably just something in passing. You're probably with your phone, and that tends to be the gateway into which people watch mukbang, mostly on their phones. There is a desire to participate in group meal commensality, there's also that fascination with vicarious association. So if you can't eat something and you really, really want to, if you're on a diet or not, then mukbang is for you, because you know if you can't eat it, at least you can look at it with your eyes and feel and hope your heart and maybe one day you'll get to eat the same thing. And that kind of feeds into just, you know, having a desire to eat things that are not immediately available, those local dishes, for example, that seafood boil. I don't think I could get that in the same way in Torino. Or, I have a few friends who are allergic to like for example peaches. Maybe they would watch a mukbang involving all peach related things because it's like, a very interesting way to experience something secondhand. Another reason why it's very popular is that mukbang content also falls into for some, mostly in China, according to one study, intangible cultural heritage. So these processes of selecting, eating and preparing these foods like these local foods and dishes in large amounts, it's kind of a sharing of this intangible cultural heritage with others. There's also cultural education with the regional food sharing, there's product marketing outreach, there is the ASMR stimulation. Some people even reported that they watch mukbang right when they're about to fall asleep because they like to turn their brains off and just listen to the sounds or just look at something very mundane, and then they fall asleep. And there's also this need to kind of create and sustain parasocial relationships with the mukbang BJ's, because you know, the demographic who watches this are self identified as very lonely and they speak in the chat with other people who watch and they speak to the BJ's themselves and they feel very seen and very heard and very supported. When they are alone, it makes them feel like they are there with them. And I would like to say that there are many different platforms where people are doing mukbang or related topics and content.

So it initially started in the 2010s as I mentioned previously, and it started on this Korean like live stream server kind of interface called AfreecaTV, and eventually as it became more popular because of different regulations. The literature has noted that mukbang BJ's and content has had a great migration to Twitch and YouTube and other streaming services, so I grouped these all together to make it a little bit easier. So on these platforms, mukbang is very live stream centred. The video content is eventually catalogued so people can go back and reengage or continuously engage, even though the broadcast has ended. And they do this through live chat rooms or comment sections which continuously update themselves and respond. There's a lot of monetization options. There's a subscription service and I misspelt sponsorships. But hello, sponsorships, and that's done through cash and donation tokens like for AfreecaTV they have these star balloons that each balloon is worth about \$0.10 in U.S. dollars. And people will get like, you know, thousands of these balloons at a time. So there's also mukbang on Instagram and TikTok and you might be wondering, if Mukbang is all about eating a meal and sharing it with others in live time, how does Instagram and TikTok cater to that? So there's been this really big analysis of what shorter media content means and how important it is to quote young people. And it turns out that shorter length videos and content is very popular and actually more popular of a mukbang like type than all the other types. The longer broadcasts people get very bored, they get very like, this is taking forever. Or perhaps they eat faster than the mukbang BJ and they feel like this awkward tension. So on mukbang on Instagram and TikTok, it's very heavily curated and edited because of the short length period, it could be anywhere

from one minute to 3 minutes. The content mixes elements of, you know, eating broadcasts with food shows and micro blogging. So short little tidbits of what you're eating, what you're buying, how you're preparing it, and then only the best highlights of the eating experience, like the pull of the cheese, the stretch of the noodles, all of those different things. There tends to be a kind of repetition or chain reaction of certain viral recipes on Instagram and TikTok. So if one mukbang person will try this, like you know, recipe hack, viral recipe sort of thing, then the rest of the mukbangers will also do the same thing.

There is also, instead, like a focus on a certain type of audio. So like I mentioned earlier for like streaming services, it might be conversation, it might be descriptions of what they're eating or it might be just sounds, ASMR. The audio tracks for Instagram and TikTok are very much memes in audio form and if there's like a Fire in the Hole audio, a lot of TikTokers will just make it into a joke and like contribute to this ongoing meme. And then, mukbang on Reddit, which is one of my favourite places on the Internet. There's entire subReddits dedicated to mukbang and sharing content. I screenshotted this like earlier in the week and every day there tended to be like another different person mukbang BJ regardless of how popular they are submitting this, so there's like a constant catalogue of new creators and different spaces where you can get the latest on who's eating what. And you can see the difference like of the trends I mentioned before, where it's like what KFC mukbang and the first time trying the beyond chicken Nuggets, which is the KFC version of vegan Nuggets, there is the ASMR, with apple tapping and the slicing of the apples. There's branded types of mukbang content as Kettle brand potato chips, which are very special or regional types of explorations with Korean snacks, and then at the very bottom, which I thought was very interesting, what I would like to see more of in our research and people's research on mukbang is kind of the sexualization aspect, which has been explored in like food and sexuality related studies. Very briefly though, it's never been exactly studied so far.

And now we're going to move on to entanglements, like what everyone is saying. So what I really found out is that mukbang has been heavily studied within kinds of the lens of public health. And looked at through different lenses, for example disordered eating. So we have different BJ's of different body sizes. But there's also determined that mukbang host size matters and that thin models could lead to body dissatisfaction and influence kind of negative eating behaviours. Versus like general food media that is not mukbang, with hosts of different sizes and shapes. What's what's odd about mukbang is that the hosts, the BJ's tend to be really skinny and really young. So like a really skinny person, really young eating so many things at one time. And you know, this was kind of connected and saying that it really, you know, could promote problematic eating practises. It could really exacerbate these symptoms of dissatisfaction with people who already have that problem. But what I found out was very interesting when I started looking at TikTok content. But I also noticed that people who use the mukbang tag also worked on addressing their eating disorder. For example, on the right here you see someone who's a mukbang BJ on TikTok recording their binge eating recovery. So like having that aspect of eating with someone you know virtually and kind of sharing that journey of recovery is very popular as well. For more disordered eating things that it's a parental fear it's turned into this like, ohh dear my child is watching mukbang. What can I do and how do I handle that? And a lot of this has to do with the possibility of, you know, damaging, like young viewers eating behaviours by modelling maladaptive behaviour and perceiving it as socially acceptable. It's normal, it's on TikTok, it's on Instagram. So therefore it's fine. More often than not, no, it's not fine. And for all, for all our trying to cope with disordered eating, there was one study recently that came out where they talked about how a bunch of food show watching people, young people in China specifically. They, because they watched food content so often, they they didn't like the over exaggerated things. They didn't like the large spreads. They really actually enjoyed watching

quote healthy eating behaviours and that sort of categorization comes even at a technical level where some of these streaming platforms actually have content warnings to not promote binge eating or excess eating.

When you talk about obesity, which is this big, nebulous concept of sorts, a lot of the studies noted that watching mukbang frequently, like may cause people to consume more than normally because the consumption norms are changed or also just by just focus. And they eat a lot of large foods, so you're just sitting there eating your dinner. And you're like, hmm? This BJ is still eating. I guess I could eat more and it's kind of that subconscious, and also like, translation into action. And also you know when we consider BC, which cannot also be reduced, of course, to just eating overeating, of course. The draw of Mukbang or the way that people really get their foot into becoming a mukhbang BJ is that they eat large amounts of food because that's what the general conception wants. So unfortunately, many of these mukbang BJ's have to, like deal with really, really intense dieting. They sit there and they eat for their job, large amounts. So in order to meet that and not become, you know, unhealthy or like unhappy with themselves, they tend to do really, really intense dieting. So it's like they will starve themselves up to a certain point. So they're able to eat more or they will excessively exercise like 5 to 6 hours a day. And it's just a very unsustainable thing. There's also been research about mukbang as it relates to fiction, often with technological addiction, hand in hand, and there's only been a few studies, where they noted that some individuals who watch mukhbang content like they say like four or five times a week, maybe an hour or more each day within their routine they have addiction like symptoms, so they they have like the relapse, conflict, mood modification, withdrawal symptoms from not watching enough mukbang. And a lot of this has to do with, because you are using the Internet to like vicariously eat and vicariously experience these foods, it just becomes intertwined with just not meeting your needs in real life, so it becomes like the only source and it becomes like a very sexy, very invigorating thing to experience. Thus creating this addiction kind of whole. And I would have liked to see like within my review of the literature and food studies and media studies, a little bit more, and I say a little bit more, I was very shocked when I was looking up and through topology or ethnography in relation to mukhbang. I didn't really find any studies, and if anyone knows any, please share with me, but so far it's been mostly food studies and media studies. Relating to cooking guidance, how mukhbang can be used for like cooking technique, education sharing, food knowledge and then expanding like networks between consumers and corporations through mukhbang with like the eater promoting different brands and whatnot. So the kind of thing I noticed when I recorded is that there's a lot of policy repercussions, so mukhbang and all these tangential binge eating production activities are actually banned in South Korea and China to some extent. And they've done this regulation with fiscal and infrastructural restrictions for streaming sites. So you can't make as much money doing mukhbang. Or maybe you'll have a limited amount of time of how much content you can put out and stuff. It will actually kind of go through the media and censor things because the states had organised this as a public health crisis and concern for food waste and food security, especially with COVID-19 in a lot of countries. We were trying to kind of secure and make sure that the population had access to food, and people were not just wasting it. And that has spurred a lot of different reactions from people, not only the BJ's, but also the wrong content. With questions about bodily autonomy and why does the state get to tell us how much to eat and what to eat? And it kind of infringes upon the question of individual freedoms. It's like, why are you in my fridge? Why are you telling me what to eat? I'm hungry. I'd like to eat more. And also lots of different visions to parenting resources on how to navigate potentially harmful virtual practises and spaces, mostly involving mukhbang, because it's related to Internet addiction, sedentary lifestyle, which people often conflate as being, you know, perpetrators of unhealthy behaviours and different conditions that are dietary related in different groups. And

where I see this personally is that we're going to have, as a result from COVID-19 pandemic, of course this is a great example, UBVO seminars online increased digitization of events and experiences relating to food, so tasting courses, cooking lessons and parties. We'll see further regulation of digital activities like food rationing and limitations on purchase. As I mentioned before, in South Korea and China relating to food security and food waste concerns, and I imagine we'll have increased medicalization of digital activities, especially as they relate to food and that they'll be categorization of risky activities. Into different hierarchies which would result in different content warnings, which would also result in who gets to decide whether something is dangerous or not, and what types of institutions of power or sociocultural ideas about certain bodies and certain people, and certain eating habits are going to be manifested through this process of policy and categorization. So yeah, I hope that this talk has given you kind of an idea of what the digital food has become through mukbang, what mukbang is and what types of things you can get from it and what those implications are. Thank you very much.