Mukbang Cooks, Chews, and Heals

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Abstract

Welcome to Next Gen sound studies! In the month of November, you will be treated to the future. . . today! In this series, we will share excellent work from undergraduates, along with the pedagogy that inspired them.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Article, Asian And Asian American Studies, Cultural Studies, Food, Internets



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Welcome to Next Gen sound studies! In the month of November, you will be treated to the future. . . today! In this series, we will share excellent work from undergraduates, along with the pedagogy that inspired them. You'll read voice biographies, check out blog assignments, listen to podcasts, and read detailed histories that will inspire and invigorate. Bet. –JS

Today's post comes from Binghamton University junior David Lee, former student in SO! Editor-in-Chief J. Stoever's English 380W "How We Listen," an introductory, upper-division sound studies course at Binghamton University, with a typical enrollment of 45 students. This assignment asked students to

> *write one researched, multimedia blog post on our class WordPress in the style of Sounding Out! on a sound studies topic of interest to you (approximately 1500 words). Your post should involve an issue involving power and social identity, use our in-class readings as a springboard and quotes and analyzes at least 2 in the post, relate our course topic at hand to a contemporary event, conversation, or issue and includes evidence of research of that topic (3-5 quotations/ links to credible online sources), include audio, visual, and/or audio-visual elements as a key part of your analysis (this can include recordings, still photos, you tube clips, videos, etc.) and follow SO!'s submission guidelines on form, style, tone, and content: (https://soundstudiesblog.com/to-blog-2/).*

For the full assignment sheet, click How We Listen_Final Blog Assignment For the grading rubric, click Blog Assignment Grading Rubric (1). For the full Fall 2018 syllabus, click english-380w_how-we-listen_fall-2018

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Mukbang is the newest wave in trends for ASMR; it is an online audiovisual broadcast in which the host enjoys his/her food while interacting with the audience. Adopted from Korea, Mukbang's literal translation is a portmanteau—it is a combination of two Korean words: "mukja" (let's eat) and "bangsong" (broadcast). The first time I watched these eating broadcasts was in 2018, before major surgery. Prior to the surgery, I could not eat for twenty-four hours. It came to the point where I was so hungry that I would chew up the meat and spit it out and I would make a mental list of foods that I wanted to eat after the surgery. In an effort to satisfy my hunger, I watched a lot of videos on the Tasty network and stumbled upon Mukbangs. I had heard of the term prior to that day but had never watched the videos myself. The experience could be expressed as an oxymoron: sweet torture. I remember salivating uncontrollably but at the same time watching someone eat began to ease my own stomach.

In recent years Mukbang has blown up on streaming sites like Youtube, and has been met with a subsequent huge audience growth. Mukbang was most notably referenced in the company's Youtube Rewind 2018 video:

https://youtu.be/YbJOTdZBX1g

Interestingly, Mukbangs have only been considered ASMR once they were adopted by American content creators. According to journalist Matthew Sedacca, viewers explain that they experience what they call a "braingasm", described as a tingling sensation down one's spine from the sounds of cooking and eating. The sizzling sounds of the broth or the slurping sounds of noodles are what is said to relax the listeners. In *Touch the Sound*, Evelyn Glennie communicates that to hear is to also touch. Likewise, the viewers experience a sensation of touch from the audio and visual elements that the video stimulates. The sounds of food that many associate with tingling, pleasant sensation can also provide viewers with a sense of comfort and reassurance.

In today's busy society, it is hard to have a formal meal with our family and friends, so oftentimes we are found eating alone. Watching Mukbangs can mitigate the feeling of loneliness through the presence of what Steve Connor calls the vocalic body, so while we are eating alone, the presence of another is real and felt. According to Connor, "[t]he principle of the vocalic body is simple. Voices are produced by bodies: but can also themselves produce bodies. The vocalic body is the idea—which can take the form of dream, fantasy, ideal, theological doctrine, or hallucination—of a surrogate or secondary body, a projection of a new way of having or being a body, formed and sustained out of the autonomous operations of the voice" (35). The voice in these videos takes the form of a body sitting next to us, eating and talking to us.

Simply put, viewers are watching another individual enjoy his/her meal, but Mukbangs have a greater social implication. The rise in popularity of Mukbangs coincide with the rapid technological advancements occurring in society and the shift in entertainment focus on streamable content. Eating is a routine and everyday experience, so Mukbangs portray a vital aspect of life where viewers can passively watch while experiencing the sensory feeling that sound evokes. When the host visually and audibly enjoys his/her meal the viewers can feel the presence of a body ,which accounts for the chills down one's spine characteristic of ASMR videos. As this phenomenon demonstrates, sound can lessen feelings of loneliness by bringing the audience a sense of human comfort.



"the cook has to eat alone" by Flickr user Joseph Choi, CC BY 2.0

Mukbangs are also helpful to those who have restrictions in their diet. For someone who may be deadly allergic to shellfish, he/she can imagine that experience by watching another person enjoy the dish. While it is not the same as twisting off the claws of a lobster and eating the meat, watching and listening to another person do just that allows the viewer to be a part of that experience. Moreover, a deadly food allergy may keep someone from sharing a communal meal with friends; the sounds of a Mukbang video could recreate that experience. Lastly, and no less important, Mukbangs act in opposition to the unrealistic beauty standards of society; while society's expectations push us to always keep our figure, a Mukbanger's response is to eat senselessly. Therefore, Mukbangs embody our fantasies; we live vicariously through the broadcaster.

Mukbangs have introduced a new format for cooking shows. Rather than emphasizing cheesy background music and eccentric hosts on cable tv, Mukbangs strip all these effects away, so that viewers can truly appreciate the essence of cooking in the kitchen: it's not just about what the dish tastes like in the end, but also the auditory experience. On cooking shows, a lot of the focus ends up on what the plate looks like, or what steps go in what order—it is a visual experience, in general. When it comes to Mukbangs, people watching the videos get to enjoy the relaxing sounds of cooking, and the focus is not on copying the recipe: Sedacca states, "with ASMR it becomes more about the sound than the taste." The alternate format promotes cooking to a larger audience instead of gearing towards stay-at-home moms. Mukbang cooking videos tend to be more of a minimalist everyday perspective rather than displaying cooking as a luxurious commodity. Mukbangs show us that it is no longer about becoming the cook, but appreciating the cooking being done, and the sound adds to the intimacy of the event. With Mukbangs it is as if your mom were cooking in the kitchen.



https://youtu.be/JzKE6f3DiwQ

In doing so, Mukbangs can also advocate for cultural awareness, as viewers are exposed to different foods that the host enjoys. By seeing a host they trust enjoy foreign food, it encourages the viewer to possibly try that food or visit that country in the future. A popular example of this would be when kpop idol Hwasa from group Mamamoo went on a South Korean tv show called I Live Alone and ate gopchang (cattle intestines) at a nearby restaurant. After the video went viral, the Korean BBQ restaurant industry exploded within a day, so much so, that the dish was reportedly sold out in all of Seoul, Korea.



https://youtu.be/7EgfgI5H29k

As for me, nowadays I watch Mukbangs when I miss home. Now that I am away at college, many of my meals consist of dining hall food. Where I go to school, Korean restaurants are scarce and do not taste the same as home. There is something about a well-cooked Korean meal that Korean restaurants at school cannot replicate. So, when I am away at college, I often watch Korean Mukbangs to tap into the comfort of home, through sound and images.



https://youtu.be/5wjXJL6ZwLk

Mukbang watchers have an array of audience members; people watch it to lose weight, for ASMR, or simply when they are eating alone. Mukbangs challenge social norms; although it may be rude to slurp spaghetti noodles in public, Mukbang is evidence that some people enjoy those exact sounds. Likewise, as more people begin to live individualistic lives, the eating broadcasts make up for this difference in human interaction. For those trying to lose weight, Mukbangs offer the option of seeing someone "eat their feelings" without you yourself having to overindulge or feel guilt.

More importantly, Mukbang is a relevant example that listening can be a tactile experience: through vibrations and also from sensations through the body. It challenges the listening audience to be present and appreciate the essence of food, and cooking as a sustaining artform. The aforementioned is especially true for cooking shows where the audience listens for the calming sounds that come with cooking instead of listening to what seems like a sales pitch to best copy the recipe. Mukbang makes cooking and, consequently, eating into healing activities instead of something that is reserved solely for those who have the time. Mukbangs are making a social difference by promoting Korean culture, spreading cultural awareness through food, and helping to lessen the feeling of loneliness. While Mukbangs were previously seen as fetishized or weird they are now challenging our preconceived notions on how, what, and with who we should enjoy food.

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Featured image: "Korean Food – Korean Kimchi and BBQ Cooking Meat (Creative Commons)" by Flickr user Sous Chef, CC BY 2.0

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