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Mukbang and the Progression Toward Digital Commensality

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The significance of meals and mealtimes has historically been, and continues to be, a biological, historical, and sociocultural constant. Eating and its encompassed practices collectively act as arenas for education and engagement with central societal norms and values. What we eat and how we eat is telling of our sociality; consumption is an entry point to understanding wider themes embedded within a given society. In essence, food and eating instigate and perpetuate numerous forms of exchange and interactions among all associated actors. To eat is to consume, to consume is to interact, to interact is to exchange, and to exchange is to engage in one's existence.

Food and eating are inherently linked to interactions and exchanges between entities, thus within this perspective, sociality is central to both. Commensality, which describes the act of eating with others, can be understood as a facilitator of bonding between individuals, their peers, and the environment(s) around them. Often presented as an idyllic, definitive, trait of meals and mealtimes, commensality has been considered the inherent standard within definition of a true "meal" or "mealtime". There has been much contention concerning eating alone as constituting a "meal" or "mealtime" because eating alone does not fulfill characteristically social aspects of meals and mealtimes (Gronow and Holm, 2019: 96). Activities related to food and eating tend to be legitimized through sociality, thus creating a dichotomy which alienates eating alone from normative notions of commensality.

Due to a number of sociocultural shifts as the result of modernization, commensality has reoriented itself in a number of new ways, especially in the context of newer technologies and the digital. Society has become increasingly mediated through the use of digital information and communication technologies; this has shifted the ways in which humans relate to themselves, each other, and conduct their lives. The increase in technological and digital engagement in domestic life has resulted in many changes across society, but especially so in areas related to food, agriculture, eating, and nutrition (Lewis, 2018: 212). Aside from improving the efficiency and safety of the food system, technology has re-oriented perspectives around food, cooking, and eating, especially in relation to means to eat, cook, and consume in modern society. Food is being re-worked, re-imagined, and re-explored.

Mukbang (먹방), short for *muknunbangsong* (먹는방송), is a Korean portmanteau which in colloquial use refers to "a broadcast where people eat"; *mukbang* broadcasts involve a solo eater known as a "broadcast jockey" (BJ) who consumes a wide variety of food in exorbitant amounts for live-video stream, all whilst interacting with their audience through real-time chat rooms (Choe, 2019: 173). Originating from South Korea, *mukbang* has expanded rapidly beyond the borders and limitations of both real and digital realms; garnering interest from audiences around the globe.



Mukbang BJ Park "The Diva (더디바)" Seo-Yeon



Youtube Mukbang BJ SIO ASMR



Youtube Mukbang BJ Raphael Gomes



Youtube Mukbang BJ It's So Good

While there is no “correct” way to generate *mukbang* content, it is often characterized by its hyper-fixation on the visual and aural experiences of eating food. Close-ups which demonstrate the food’s texture, as well as heightened microphone settings allow for sounds of mastication to be heard clearly. As a result, *mukbang* is increasingly popular among people that experience Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR), and among those seeking satisfaction for their voyeuristic tendencies. In addition to living (and consuming foods) vicariously through BJs and ASMR, *mukbang* provides viewers with a means of experiencing foods they are not able to. Whether because of allergies, geography, or financial inaccessibility, *mukbang* allows individuals to encounter and explore edible delights that are seemingly out of reach (Stanley, 2019).

Through the multi-sensorial presentation of food and its overconsumption, *mukbang* creates a commensal relationship between the BJ and their audiences. Through providing sensory stimulation that transcends beyond solely the visual, *mukbang* generates a state of multi-sensorial vicariousness, progresses it towards a form of digitalized eating or consumption, namely a digital commensality. As *mukbang* viewer audiences consume *mukbang*-related media, they enter a digital arena of shared food-experience(s). As BJs consume their large meals and interact with their viewer audiences, there is an elevated sense of intimacy and closeness that develops between the two entities. Through sharing a meal “together”, as well as making conversation through chats or comments, both *mukbang* BJ and viewer audiences form various types of relationships. Many *mukbang* broadcast-centred social media platforms, such as YouTube, Twitch, and Afreeca support subscription-based systems between their content producers (BJs) and their viewer audiences. Not only do audiences have the ability to interact socially with *mukbang* BJs, but they also have the ability to support them financially through general viewership, paid subscriptions, and or by purchasing individually-branded merchandise.

What separates commensality from specifically *digital commensality* is rather simple. While traditional conceptions of commensality stress the presence of others and the consumption of food “together”, such conceptions strictly imply a physical “presence” and “togetherness”. *Digital commensality* or “the consumption of food and drink with others that is mediated by digital technologies, platforms, and spaces dedicated to user sociality and community”, acknowledges the growing relevance of technology and the digital in everyday life, as well as the transformations they have made to eating practices and mealtimes. Unlike the restrictions imposed by logistics when considering commensality as feasible solely through physical circumstances, digital commensality highlights the numerous possibilities afforded by digital technologies that allow people to eat together in new and innovative ways. *Mukbang*, though originating from a means of coping with technologically-induced isolation and or heightened digitalisation of everyday life, provides a method of makeshift commensality in the digital realm. Digital commensality, in some ways, can therefore be perceived as an inevitable outcome of modernization.

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Mukbang BJ

Stephanie Soo

<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=Mukbang+BJ+Stephanie+Soo+crab&&view=detail&mid=767A86E73AD54224CCBF&&FORM=VRDGAR>

Park "The Diva (더디바)" Seo-Yeon

[https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=BJ+Park+%e2%80%9cThe+Diva+\(%eb%8d%94%eb%94%94%eb%b0%94\)&qpv=BJ+Park+%e2%80%9cThe+Diva+\(%eb%8d%94%eb%94%94%eb%b0%94\)&view=detail&mid=A7676F5B3504EF7E749FA7676F5B3504EF7E749F&&FORM=VRDGAR](https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=BJ+Park+%e2%80%9cThe+Diva+(%eb%8d%94%eb%94%94%eb%b0%94)&qpv=BJ+Park+%e2%80%9cThe+Diva+(%eb%8d%94%eb%94%94%eb%b0%94)&view=detail&mid=A7676F5B3504EF7E749FA7676F5B3504EF7E749F&&FORM=VRDGAR)

Raphael Gomes

<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=Youtube+Mukbang+BJ+Raphael+Gomes+&&view=detail&mid=8D596F3D6B765BD75FEE8D596F3D6B765BD75FEE&&FORM=VRDGAR>

It's So Good

<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=Youtube+Mukbang+BJ+It%e2%80%99s+So+Good&&view=detail&mid=D5132D2EBDD1587704E4D5132D2EBDD1587704E4&&FORM=VDRVRV>

SIO ASMR

<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=Mukbang+BJ+SIO+ASMR&&view=detail&mid=303DC38F9BBE48C505C3303DC38F9BBE48C505C3&&FORM=VRDGAR>