

The Hidden Pleasures of 'Meokbang'

I guess most people, especially online broadcasters, understand what a *meokbang* is. The word *meokbang* comes from the Korean words *meokneun*, which means "eating," and *bangsong*, which means "to broadcast." Undoubtedly, it's a show where the host eats a large quantity of food while being watched live by viewers from around the world. Sometimes as they eat, the host will also talk or chat with their viewers, who've joined the show's chat room. This begs the question as to why *meokbangs* have grown into such popular shows, where viewers just can't turn them off? In my opinion, the answer lies amid the the hidden pleasures that both the host and the viewers gain from *meokbang* shows.

I would say that the word "pleasure" here should not only be seen as a satisfaction of a need, but should also be recognized as a result of the productivity of a cultural product. This connotes the idea that, as a cultural product, *meokbangs* offer entertainment to their viewers. There's a process that happens when the host and the viewers are interacting during the show. The pleasure of both is unlike.

From the perspective of the viewers, the pleasure arises from the experience of having an encounter with the host and the enjoyment of being included in the show. There's an emotional involvement with an object of enjoyment. Then come the vicarious pleasures. *Meokbang* shows share the experience of the act of eating through one's imagination. Perhaps in real life, they couldn't fulfill their craving for certain foods or they don't have anyone with whom to eat. They satisfy their desire for the food and compensate their loneliness by watching the host eat without any feeling of guilt and without gaining weight. What an impeccable reward!

The trade off of pleasure doesn't stop with the imagination. Sometimes, viewers increase their demands for more than just watching the host eat. The host is expected to eat the food ferociously. For example, when the host is eating spicy noodles that can feed a family of six, they have to show how they can eat and finish the huge quantity of spicy noodles within a short period of time. The sound of the slurping and gargling from the host's mouth is sometimes the best aspect of a *meokbang* show. Despite the fact that this reaps controversy, the shows must go on.

Just as the viewers get an emotional compensation while watching, the host also achieves a lot of advantages by being watched. Through the *meokbang* shows, the host becomes very popular and can change into a star. The more viewers who watch, the more money they dig up, not to mention the host's chance to promote a food brand. They will earn a lot of money and become even more popular as a celebrity.

Since *meokbangs* have gone viral, there's no doubt that the show style will win international interest. On YouTube, *meokbang* shows are growing in viewer numbers all around the world. This means that the host receives recognition as well. In addition, the hosts reinforce the acts by airing *meokbangs* again and again. When this happens, they acquire pleasure.

Culturally, eating in Korea is a social activity. When a host eats, they realize that they are connected to society online. As social beings, they need to have a relationship with other social beings. Therefore, through the show, the host fulfills this innate need. When viewers pay attention to them, they feel satisfied, especially when they know that their job as a *meokbang* host is worth doing.

Not only are Korean viewers glued to *meokbang* shows, but international viewers are also enthralled by this eating show on online media in general, as the hosts of *meokbangs* are transformed into stars. Indeed, *meokbang* fandom has reached the

entire world through online broadcasts. Accordingly, the hidden pleasures of both, the viewers and the hosts, pays off.

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Liliek Soelistyo
English Department
Petra Christian University