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THE ENJOYMENT OF WATCHING OTHER PEOPLE EAT: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF YOUNG TURKISH MUKBANG VIEWERS' MOTIVATIONS*****

BAŞKALARININ YEMEK YİYİŞİNİ İZLEMekten KEYİF ALMAK: GENÇ TÜRK MUKBANG İZLEYİCİLERİNİN MOTİVASYONLARININ NİTEL BİR ANALİZİ

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ABSTRACT

With the introduction of social media into our lives, we are faced with different trends and themes of user-generated content. Mukbang videos, which are one of these contents published on social media platforms such as Instagram or YouTube, are remarkable in that they include a style of eating that may be enjoyable for some and disturbing for others. Mukbang is a video format that started in South Korea and quickly became a global phenomenon, where individuals interact with viewers while consuming large amounts of food. These contents, where food is used as a means of demonstration and social bonding, are an academically interesting and important research topic because they include many social and cultural dimensions such as digital consumption, social interaction, food culture and body perception. Based on the fact that these videos can also earn money for their publishers on digital platforms, this study examines the tendency to watch Mukbang videos from the perspective of young people and tries to understand the motivations of young people to watch these videos and what kind of pleasures they get in return. The data obtained from semi-structured interviews conducted with fourteen Mukbang followers that were selected by using a combination of purposeful and snowball sampling approaches, were analyzed in the MAXQDA program. As a result of the analysis, it was determined that young people learned about Mukbang videos through the "For You Page" of social media platforms, started watching these videos out of curiosity, watched them with the motivation to accompany or relax, gained virtual and spiritual satisfaction, and got acquainted with the dishes of different cultures that attracted their attention.

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Özgün Araştırma Makalesi (Original Research Article)

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ÖZET

Sosyal medyanın hayatımıza girmesiyle birlikte kullanıcı kaynaklı içeriklerin farklı trendleri ve temalarıyla karşı karşıya kalmaktayız. Bu içeriklerden biri olan Instagram ya da Youtube gibi sosyal medya platformlarında yayımlanan Mukbang videoları kimileri için keyifli, kimileri için ise rahatsız edici olabilecek bir yeme biçimini içermesi açısından dikkat çekicidir. Mukbang, Güney Kore’de başlayan ve hızla küresel bir fenomen haline gelen, bireylerin büyük miktarda yiyecek tüketirken izleyicilerle etkileşime geçtiği bir video formatıdır. Yiyeceklerin bir gösteri ve sosyal bağ kurma aracı olarak kullanıldığı bu içerikler; dijital tüketim, sosyal etkileşim, yemek kültürü ve beden algısı gibi birçok sosyal ve kültürel boyutu barındırdığı için akademik olarak ilgi çeken ve önem taşıyan bir araştırma konusudur. Bu videoların yayıncılarına dijital platformlarda para da kazandırabildiği gerçeğinden hareketle bu çalışma, Mukbang videolarını izleme eğilimini gençlerin bakış açısıyla inceleyerek gençlerin bu videoları hangi motivasyonlarla izlediğini ve karşılığında ne gibi hazlar elde ettiklerini anlamaya çalışmaktadır. Amaçlı ve kartopu örnekleme yaklaşımlarının bir arada kullanılmasıyla seçilen on dört Mukbang takipçisi ile yapılan yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmelerden elde edilen veriler MAXQDA programında analiz edilmiştir. Yapılan analizler sonucunda gençlerin Mukbang videolarını sosyal medya platformlarının “Sizin İçin Sayfası” aracılığıyla öğrendikleri, bu videoları merak sonucu izlemeye başladıkları, eşlik etme ya da rahatlama motivasyonu ile izledikleri, sanal ve manevi doyumlar elde ettikleri ve farklı kültürlerin ilgisini çeken yemekleriyle tanıştıkları tespit edilmiştir.

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INTRODUCTION

The ubiquity of social media platforms has transformed the landscape of food consumption, production, and representation. From meticulously curated Instagram feeds showcasing aesthetically pleasing dishes to immersive cooking tutorials on YouTube, digital spaces have become integral sites for the dissemination of culinary knowledge and gastronomic culture. Sharing food on digital platforms either as cooking (giving recipes) or as eating has proliferated on the online realm. Moreover, restaurants and also individual users started to share attractive portrayals of food they cook/serve and they are about to eat. Food has become like a product of the show culture on social media.

In recent years, the phenomenon of mukbang has emerged as a prominent cultural practice, particularly within the realm of social media. Originating in South Korea around the early 2010s, mukbang, derived from the Korean words for ‘eating’ (muk-ja) and ‘broadcast’ (bang-song), entails individuals consuming copious amounts of food while interacting with their audience through live streaming or recorded videos. What began as a niche trend has rapidly evolved into a global sensation, captivating millions of viewers across various online platforms such as YouTube, Twitch, and Instagram.

The allure of mukbang lies in its multifaceted nature, intertwining elements of entertainment, gastronomy, and social interaction. As viewers tune into watch mukbang creators devour elaborate meals ranging from traditional Korean cuisine to fast food extravaganzas, they partake in a vicarious dining

experience, often accompanied by lively commentary and personal anecdotes. This fusion of food consumption with digital storytelling not only satiates the audience's visual and auditory senses but also fosters a sense of intimacy and companionship in an increasingly interconnected yet isolating digital landscape.

However, mukbang's meteoric rise has sparked a myriad of debates and inquiries regarding its sociocultural implications. Critics argue that the glorification of excessive eating promotes unhealthy dietary habits and exacerbates issues surrounding food insecurity and wasteful consumption. Moreover, concerns have been raised regarding the psychological well-being of mukbang creators, who may face immense pressure to maintain a certain image or engage in extreme eating challenges for the sake of content creation.

Conversely, proponents of mukbang assert that it serves as a platform for cultural exchange, allowing individuals from diverse backgrounds to share their culinary traditions and foster cross-cultural understanding. Additionally, mukbang has been hailed as a form of digital performance art, challenging conventional notions of spectatorship and culinary aesthetics while providing a source of livelihood for creators in an increasingly competitive online marketplace.

Mukbang videos now gained an international popularity and content that does not only come from South Korea. Beside India, Egypt, USA and other countries, in Türkiye as well, there are famous mukbangers such as “munchies ASMR, Selen ASMR, Deniz ASMR, Nerom ASMR, Ozzy Choi ASMR, Kavu ASMR, Cookie ASMR, Bso ASMR, Govher ASMR, ASMR Mysterious Girl, ASMR Mersin, Lorin ASMR, Selim ASMR, Bekolatte ASMR” and so on. This is a trend also attracted Turkish academics. Kircaburun and his colleagues (2021a) conducted a study on 236 university students and developed the Mukbang Addiction Scale. Şenel (2023) researched motivations generated by Mukbang videos. Doğan and Yaman (2022) made qualitative research on university students, aiming to understand their experiences on watching ASMR food videos and its effect on their eating behaviors. Karaaslan and Çoğal (2023) on the other hand analyzed general ASMR videos in new media.

The most prominent features of Mukbang videos are the sounds of eating and the foods that may seem different to the audience. Relatedly, through in-depth interviews with 14 college students living in Yalova, this study aims to determine with what motivations young people at higher education level in Türkiye watch mukbang videos and what gratifications they get in return. The current study is different from the previous studies in terms of examining the motivations of mukbang watching from a uses and

gratifications perspective and reveal how prominent the elusive sense of satisfaction that is obtained from watching mukbang is for social media users.

1. Uses and Gratifications Theory

The Uses and Gratifications (UGT) approach, which Herzog (1944), Schramm (1954) and Maslow (1970) took the first steps was later advanced by Blumler, Katz and McQuail (1969, 1974). This approach emerged with the study of radio listeners, and in essence, it argues that the media consumer is active, contrary to mass society theories and impact studies. Accordingly, individuals use the media for certain purposes, to meet some of their needs, knowingly and willingly. Individuals can use mass media for various purposes such as seeking information and education, identification with the characters presented by media content, social interaction, a sense of belonging to a community, getting away from the stress of daily life or simply having fun (Katz & Foulkes, 1962).

UGT emerged in the mid-20th century as a response to the dominant mass communication models that portrayed audiences as passive recipients of media messages. Developed within the fields of communication and sociology, UGT posits that individuals are active agents who selectively use media to gratify specific needs and desires. Rather than being mere consumers of media content, audiences are viewed as active participants who engage in purposeful media consumption behaviors. UGT developed by Katz and his colleagues (1974) claim that individuals' habits of media consumption are guided by some socio-psychological needs that they seek to gratify.

McQuail, Blumler and Katz categorized four gratifications obtained from using media: self-appreciation, social interaction, excitement, and entertainment (Fiske, 1996, p. 195). To explain these categories in examples, people watch quiz programs for self-appreciation; programs with in-studio audiences for social interaction; crime dramas or horror movies for excitement; and music and entertainment programs for entertainment.

UGT represents a significant paradigm in the field of media studies, aiming to elucidate the dynamic relationship between media audiences and the media they consume. In other words, the UGT approach is shaped within the active audience thesis. It is thought that the audience, which is claimed to have an active role in the relationship with the mass media, also has the ability to decide how to use the said tools and in line with what needs. In other words, people choose, receive and use the information they get from the media that serves to meet their own needs (Güngör, 2013, p. 122). The UGT approach

focuses on what the viewer/user does with the media, not what the media does with the viewer/user. The message presented by the sender becomes meaningful with the needs and satisfaction of the user.

Basically, UGT is a media effects approach that considers the media audience as active agents. This approach that entered the field of communication decades ago has become more valid for digital platforms that we use extensively today: “*As new technologies present people with more and more media choices, motivation and satisfaction become even more crucial components of audience analysis*” (Ruggiero, 2000, p. 14). Although this theory was mostly based on television contents back in time, it is quite appropriate to claim that the new media environment also easily (and maybe even more truly) provides those gratifications categorized before. For instance, the Internet provides several platforms for all kinds of interactive communication which brings social interaction, video games bring excitement, online quiz games bring self-appreciation, video content platforms such as *Youtube* bring entertainment.

As one of the important and widespread trends in social media, it would be quite appropriate to examine the Mukbang phenomenon from the perspective of uses and gratifications. In order to understand and make sense of this cyber trend, it is necessary to consider the origin and popularization points of the movement. For this reason, in the next section, it will be explained how the mukbang phenomenon emerged and became widespread on social media.

2. Unraveling the Evolution of Mukbang: From South Korea to a Global Social Media Sensation

The Mukbang phenomenon is a South Korean online broadcast of eating. The word Mukbang comes from the Korean words of “meokneun” (*eating*) and “bangsong (*broadcast*)” (Anjani et al., 2020). “*From a ‘technical’ point of view, mukbang can be described as a pre-planned binge eating episode staged and performed for a virtual audience (sometimes also with a monetizing purpose)*” (Strand and Gustafsson, 2020, p. 605). This phenomenon started in South Korea’s Afreeca television broadcasts in 2008 and became popular in social media as a popular American *YouTube* star commented on this trend in one of his videos. After that, Mukbang phenomenon went quickly worldwide: “*This phenomenon provides an interesting case of Internet subculture transforming the legitimate discourse produced by conventional media*” (Hong and Park, 2017, p. 112).

According to Aslan (2020, p. 380), “Mukbang” videos include sharing broadcasts that people eat big portions of meals with loud noises, mouth smacking or sounds that indicate flavor and turn the food into an object of sexual desire. Mukbangers also talk to their audience sometimes about the taste, smell,

texture and the appearance of the food they are eating (Anjani et al., 2020). Mukbangers usually eat their food in a messy way with bad table manners and loud eating sounds such as slurping and chomping (Kircaburun et al., 2021b, p. 270).

Mukbang videos are also called and known as ASMR videos by some titles and individuals. ASMR is the abbreviation of “*autonomous sensory meridian response*”. ASMR videos “*seek to trigger a tingling sensation through the use of specific aural and visual stimuli*” (Buckley, 2022, p. 29). Beside several video contents like nature sounds, soap cutting, slime, etc., mukbang videos are accepted as one of the sub-contents of ASMR videos (Bayraktar; 2022, p. 116), and as Buckley (2022, pp. 34) states, the most popular ASMR channels are mukbang channels regarding the eating sounds they provide. As Jenging and Mohamad (2022, p. 80) states; “*ASMR evokes a light and pleasurable tingle, sparkles and fuzziness or waves of relaxation in the head, neck, spine, and the rest of our body. This ASMR is triggered by the mukbanger when they speak softly or whisper and create a chewing sound of eating food*”.

The audience of Mukbang videos are mainly young people who are students (Zhong, 2020, p. 34). It is important to note that having mealtimes with other people (commensality) as a social activity is a characteristic of South Korean culture (Anjani et al., 2020). However, as leaving family home and living in single-person households became common in South Korea since 2015 (Hong and Park, 2017, p. 114; Park, 2017), Mukbang videos are interpreted to be providing social interactions to those single-dwellers while eating (Hong and Park, 2017): “*Korea has a culture of eating together... In this generation, watching mukbang via online broadcasting is an alternative way to satisfy the yearning for communal eating*” (Kang et al., 2020, p. 2238). Moreover; “*Mukbang fulfills both the physical and sentimental hunger of single-person households*” (Hong and Park, 2017, p. 118).

Many studies on Mukbang videos focused on the problematic/addictive mukbang viewing (Kircaburun et al., 2021c, 2020) and its consequences such as “disordered eating, internet addiction, distortion of eating and table manners, and adolescent obesity” (Kircaburun et al., 2020). This study on the other hand aims to find out for what uses young people in Türkiye watch mukbang videos, and what gratifications they get in return. The method used to reach this aim will be explained in the following part.

3. Research Method

In this study, a semi-structured in-depth interview method was applied in order to determine the motivations of young mukbang viewers of higher education age for watching these videos and the

gains/satisfaction they think they have achieved. Semi-structured interview method is a research technique that the researcher conducts with participants in order to collect in-depth information about a certain subject. This method has a structure in which the researcher directs the participants to a predetermined series of questions but gives the participants the opportunity to express the answer to the question more freely. Semi-structured interviews help the researcher understand participants' experiences, attitudes, and opinions, while also providing participants with the opportunity to express and explain their thoughts on the subject in depth (Dömbekçi and Erişen, 2022, p. 145).

Similarly, in this study, in line with the information obtained from the literature review and the targeted data, participants were asked additional questions in addition to 18 predetermined questions in order to obtain more detailed data according to the course of the interviews. The interviews were audio-recorded via the Zoom platform, lasting approximately 20 minutes each, and after the interviews were completed, the participants' statements were transcribed verbatim. Then, the interview texts were examined repeatedly and common themes extracted from the statements were determined and the findings were analyzed by titling the themes in question with descriptive analysis method. Also, the data of the interviews were coded under themes and sub-themes in the MAXQDA Pro analysis program and its word cloud, code system, code statistics, code frequencies and code schemas are presented at the Findings.

4. Findings

In this part of the study, interview findings and inferences derived from the findings are included.

First of all, the word cloud consisting of the most used words by 14 participants are presented below.

Code System	Memo	Frequency
Code System		274
Watching gratifications		0
Cultural curiosity		46
Turkish mukbang		13
Guilty pleasures of ASMR		43
Watching motivations		0
Accompaniment		15
Triggering hunger and appetite		40
Appearance concerns		25
The way they eat		13
Civilization matters		47
First Encounters		0
Coincidences		16
Platform preferences		16

Table 1: Code System

	Frequency	Percentage	Percentage (valid)
Watching gratifications	0	0,00	0,00
Watching motivations	0	0,00	0,00
First Encounters	0	0,00	0,00
Turkish mukbang	11	73,33	78,57
Accompaniment	8	53,33	57,14
Triggering hunger and appetite	14	93,33	100,00
Appearance concerns	11	73,33	78,57
The way they eat	8	53,33	57,14
Civilization matters	13	86,67	92,86
Coincidences	13	86,67	92,86
Platform preferences	13	86,67	92,86
Cultural curiosity	13	86,67	92,86
Guilty pleasures of ASMR	13	86,67	92,86
Encoded DOCUMENTS	14	93,33	100,00
Uncoded DOCUMENTS	1	6,67	-
ANALYZED DOCUMENTS	15	100,00	-

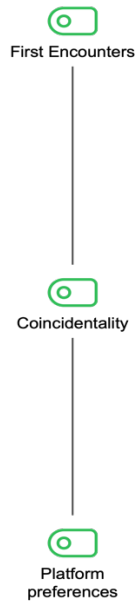
Table 2: Code Frequencies

As seen from Table 1 and Table 2, all documents are analyzed and “Triggering hunger and appetite” is the most frequently coded theme in all interview data. Following this theme, “Civilization matters”, “Coincidences”, “Platform preferences”, “Cultural curiosity” and “Guilty pleasures of ASMR” are the most coded themes in the interview data. On the other hand, the least coded data from the interviews are from the themes of “Accompaniment” and “The way they eat”. These frequencies reveal

that, according to the participants, mukbang videos mostly increase appetite and trigger hunger. Afterwards, it was observed that almost all of the participants discovered mukbang videos by chance on social media and stated their platform preferences. Finally, it seems that the least important motivations for the participants about mukbang videos is their eating style and accompaniment.

To elaborate the themes appeared as a result of coding and their meanings, each theme will be descriptively analyzed at following titles.

4.1. From Involved Encounters to A Constant Habit



4.1.1. First Encounters

4.1.1.1. Coincidences

All of the participants stated that they came across videos containing mukbang culture through the suggestions they came across on the For You/Explore pages while browsing various social media platforms. In this context, it has been revealed that the most important social media platforms that enable people to meet mukbang are Instagram and YouTube, and then mukbang content is consumed on other platforms:

P1: I discovered it randomly while browsing YouTube, then I started watching it alone.

P2: I came across it while browsing Reels videos on Instagram. Later, I started watching the longer version by searching on YouTube.

4.1.1.1.1. Platform Preferences

After gaining the habit of watching mukbang videos, some of the participants prefer short videos because they want to watch different/various content and continue to watch these contents on Instagram or TikTok:

P13: I watch more actively on Instagram... it is shorter, I can watch different videos in a row instead of sitting and watching for a long time.

Participants who want to watch longer/full content and the preparation stages of both the shooting and the meals prefer YouTube, where the elements of parasocial interaction and companionship with mukbanger come to the fore:

P7: You know, on YouTube, the cooking phase, the preparation phase, the market shopping, etc. it is immersive... Then, there is the cooking phase, the eating phase, the table setting order... I love their layout.

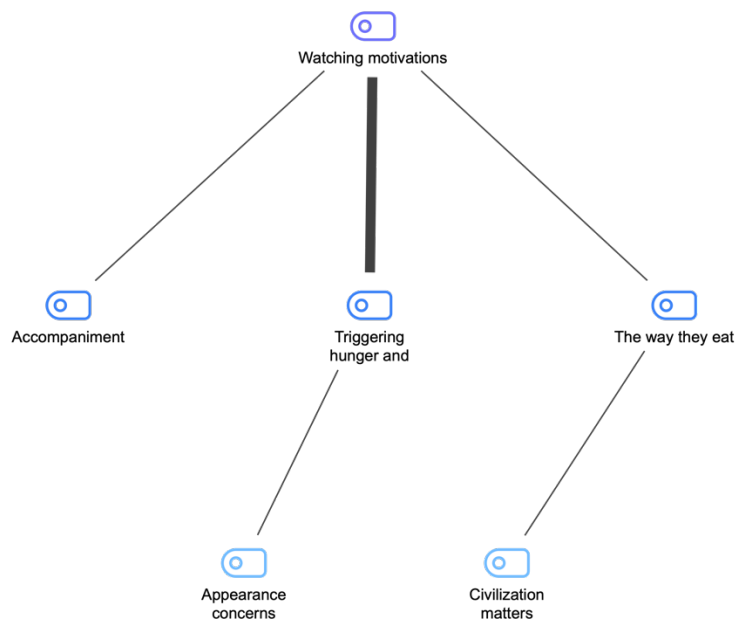
As an additional information, when asked about viewing frequency, most participants stated that they watch mukbang videos more than once every week:

P9: I would say twice a week, that is, two or three; Maybe more when I come across it.

Moreover, most of the participants stated that they did not follow any mukbanger, that they came across a lot of such content in their For You Pages anyway and that was enough. This actually shows that the action in the content and how it feels are more important to the participants than the mukbangers themselves and the social media accounts they have already constantly recommends them mukbang videos:

P6: I do not follow anyone. The algorithm already brings them across me frequently.

4.1.2. Watching Motivations of Viewing Mukbang



4.1.2.1. The Way They Eat

When the majority of participants think about the reasons for watching mukbang videos, they state that the way the food is eaten by mukbangers is very interesting. At this point, the element of curiosity, shock and amazement comes into play:

P4: Okay, I love food, but I'm watching it out of curiosity, actually it's very interesting... For example, in the last video I watched, it was like; One Chinese female mukbanger threw a whole egg down her throat and swallowed it. I said, how is this possible? And she didn't do it once, I mean, she had a tray of boiled eggs, you know, and she swallowed them all.

4.1.2.1.1. Civilization Matters

Although participants find mukbangers' way of eating shocking and interesting, one side of them is also aware that mukbang content are against the rules of civilization like table manners. Most of the participants stated that they do not like to watch others eating in social life, and that they would even be disturbed if someone else ate next to them while making noisy eating sounds, as in mukbang videos:

P7: I can say that I like watching. But I can never accept such a thing beside me...

P12: I would be very disturbed if someone else ate the same way next to me. I would warn them. But there is no problem while watching videos, I like it.

Moreover, most of the participants stated that they watched Mukbang videos alone, which contained content contrary to the silent and closed mouth eating style determined by the rules of social politeness, and it was observed that the participants watched these videos secretly and with pleasure mixed with a feeling of guilt:

P6: I watch it when I'm alone. I don't think these are videos to sit and watch with someone else.

Some participants, on the other hand, show the feelings of curiosity and surprise they experience with mukbang videos to people close to them, namely people who will not judge them:

P9: I have a friend, my best friend, and we actually like to watch it a lot. Sometimes we turn it on and watch when we are together... I always watch it with the sound on, to be honest.

P11: When my mother and brother come to visit, I show them to watch it too. They feel weird when they see different dishes that look interesting like lobster.

Even though they enjoyed watching it so much and knew that it was also a way to earn money, almost all of the participants stated that they would not consider shooting their own mukbang videos one day:

P4: It's nice to watch but I can't do it... I'm not a fan of showing off what I eat as I am from the Turkish culture. They don't belong to my culture, so I see them outside of this thought.

Relatedly, some participants think that others watch mukbang content because it appeals to humans' basic instincts:

P5: I think it's all about impulses in general, it appeals to the very basic instincts of humans. Because I don't know, when I think about it logically, I think I should feel sick while watching this, but most of the time I don't.

As can be understood from the data obtained from the interviews, the participants are aware that mukbangers are in a show business and that what they watch is not real-world behavior, and they see the mukbang trend outside their own culture. For this reason, it can be seen that they watch mukbang content, which they would never want to do when they think about real life, in order to satisfy their primitive urges by moving away from the rules of civilization.

4.1.2.2. Triggering Hunger and Encouraging to Eat More

When asked about the gratifications they get from watching mukbang videos, most of the participants stated that they felt a strange feeling of fullness, relief, and satisfaction while watching mukbang videos, and that they also felt hungrier and more inclined to eat regardless of the time:

P4: If I'm tired that day, when I watch that video, my appetite comes back, I get excited and get up and cook.

P14: At night, especially, those videos can trigger my hunger before going to sleep... After that video is on, I get food for myself, too.

Most of the participants stated that they felt the need to eat even if they were full while watching mukbang videos. This situation carries the risk of being a trigger for obesity through unhealthy eating habits:

P8: I feel hungry, for example, I want to eat pizza even though I don't have any pizza on my mind. They eat sweets, for example, I feel the urge to eat sweets, they kind of force me to consume them.

4.1.2.2.1. Appearance Concerns

It was determined that almost all of the participants had a very high appetite independent of mukbang videos, but they are struggling to keep their appearance fit:

P6: I love to eat but unfortunately I can't eat it... it makes me gain weight... I would eat morning and evening if I could, but unfortunately, I can't eat whatever I want.

Some participants stated that they enjoyed watching foods that they cannot eat very much or frequently for fear of gaining weight in real life:

P1: Mega pizzas or mega burgers with more nutritional value, very high levels of carbohydrates... Interesting. I'm more interested in watching them eat this kind of extreme food. Because I'm both amazed and curious at the same time.

The fact that Mukbangers have a slim/fit appearance even though they eat very large portions in terms of both calories and quantity amazes the viewers:

P11: It whets my appetite and in fact, I constantly ask the question of why we gain weight when they are so thin... I wish I were Korean too, sometimes I want to eat a lot and have a lot of pleasure. I think it is genetic, I don't know.

4.1.2.3. Accompaniment

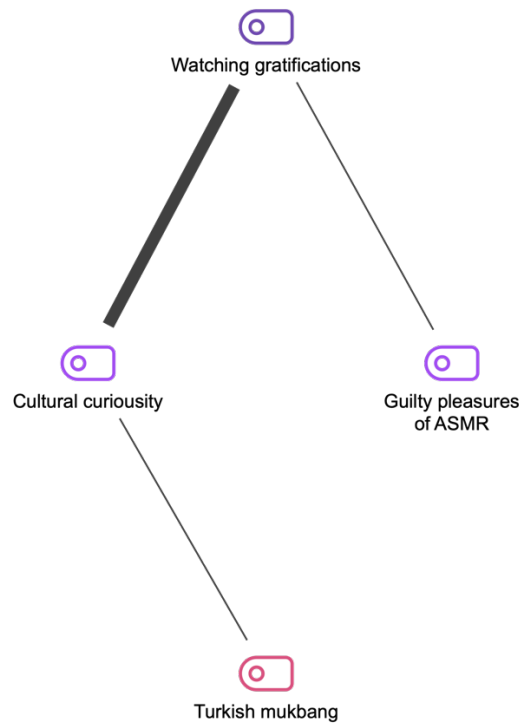
Unlike the general motivations for watching mukbang obtained in the study, three participants stated that they watched mukbang videos to provide an accompaniment while eating:

P11: Well, in the beginning, different food cultures caught my attention. Then I realized that I opened those videos while eating. I think I watched it just to avoid lonely eating.

P14: Since I live in a student house, it gives the impression that someone else is eating and chatting while I am eating. It brings such satisfaction, that's why it's so nice. That wasn't my first intention to watch it, but the next time I opened it willingly, I would open such videos when I was eating.

P14: I was in a large family, too. Since I grew up in a large family, meals were always crowded and conversations like this always took place during meals. I can say that because that sincerity makes me feel that environment a little more.

4.1.3. Watching Gratifications of Mukbang



4.1.3.1. Guilty Pleasures of ASMR

For many participants, eating sounds in mukbang videos bring a kind of spiritual satisfaction that they have difficulty defining due to the ASMR effect:

P11: Feeling of fullness. So, not only do I feel full in my stomach, but I also feel full spiritually. So, I don't know, I'm forming a strange connection.

When asked about the gratifications they obtain after watching these videos, it was observed that they had difficulty in defining their feelings and reasons, and moreover, they stated that they enjoyed watching the mukbangers' way of eating, even though it was against the way of eating that they were used to and could accept due to social life:

P4: Normally, I am a very sensitive person to lip smacking. But I really enjoy watching those videos. I feel like I'm eating it myself.

P6: Why do I watch them? They are actually very annoying. But on the other hand, I like it. Watching someone eat so much and so fast, the sounds of food and so on... It's very annoying, but I don't know, let me just say that I enjoy watching it.

Some of the participants stated that they preferred to watch mukbangers eating without talking, in connection with the ASMR effect and in order to better focus on watching the act of eating:

P2: Those who eat their food without talking... It disrupts my focus because it pulls my focus elsewhere. I'm not interested in him saying, "It's so delicious, it's so good," etc. I want to hear more of those sounds, the chewing sounds and crunches he makes while eating...

Some participants on the other hand stated that they were still disturbed by the sounds of eating and that they watched with the sound off to focus only on the act of eating:

P13: I watch with the sound off. Because I don't like that smack sound. I don't like the sound coming from the microphone. I just like the visual of it.

4.1.3.2. Cultural Curiosity

Different foods in mukbang videos push some of the participants to be curious about new and different tastes and to explore them if possible, which is another gratification obtained from watching mukbang content:

P2: Noodles; I didn't like them at all. But now I eat all kinds of noodle... Actually, seafood is also a matter of belief (Islam); let's say I prefer not to try. But I'm very curious about its taste.

P7: I don't really like to watch normal fast food or anything like that. But I prefer cultures that I don't know, that I've never seen or discovered before.

It was noted that the participants mostly watched mukbang videos containing Asian culture and especially Korean food. The birthplace of the mukbang movement is South Korea, and it is known that Koreans have become very professional in their mukbang videos, both visually and in terms of content. Moreover, it is reasonable to state that Asian cuisine is the most followed, as many dishes eaten in Asian cuisine seem interesting to the participants of Turkish culture, who are accustomed to the cuisine of countries such as USA and Europe from fast food culture or foreign restaurants that are widespread in Türkiye:

P11: Korea... Actually, I turned to Mukbang cooking videos by watching Korean TV series and my favorite actresses... There is another culture that I follow; I'm very curious about Indian food and also its incredible street food and culture. It's more like the dishes of eastern culture rather than western ones that are interesting to me, because there are more burger-type things like in the west. But like Pakistan, India, Egypt... I'm curious about those different cultures.

Some participants think that others also consume mukbang content to satisfy their curiosity about different dishes of different cultures, and about how a person can eat that much food:

P11: Their food culture and seafood are very different from ours. There are many different sea creatures that we actually don't know about. And they really attract my attention because they use very healthy steaming methods very often. I think others watch it because it is a different food, and their culture is different from ours.

P2: These videos were shot in Japan and China, and I think they encouraged our people to Noodle. If our people shoot mukbang videos that include Türkiye's local cuisine, maybe we can attract new people to our country and make them think that our food is very good. I think they can come to visit and see.

4.1.3.2.1. Turkish Mukbang

Almost all of the participants stated that mukbang videos were against Turkish culture and the etiquette in their own culture, that they did not contain interesting dishes, and for these reasons, they never watch Turkish mukbang content:

P11: Actually, I was curious and looked at it (Turkish mukbang videos), but it didn't interest me at all. Frankly, our people should improve themselves a little more in this regard, or maybe I am not interested in the dishes because they are dishes I know.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The increasing prevalence of use of digital platforms ensures that users are satisfied by simply watching and not actually doing some activities. For instance, children who play in playgrounds and whose play times are broadcast by their parents on YouTube channels are watched by their peers, or those who play computer games are watched by game lovers. Mukbang videos also provide some virtual satisfaction to their viewers, as in these examples. The increase in seeking virtual satisfaction by moving away from reality is an important issue that needs to be considered in terms of the evolution of digital life to individuals' real experiences.

Social media adds new and interesting trends to individuals' lives every day. While it was previously possible to witness the dishes of different countries in travel programs on television, with the mukbang trend that has become widespread on social media for the last few years, the dishes of different countries entered the lives of individuals in a completely different dimension. Mukbang videos, which emerged from the accompaniment need of young people in South Korea who move away from their families, over time turned into videos in which mukbangers eat very loudly and enthusiastically the food that they put in front of them, which are very high in both quantity and calories. These videos, also called as ASMR videos, provide their viewers an indescribable sense of satisfaction, and are watched with interest by many users in Türkiye, as in many parts of the world. Based on this reality, this study aimed to determine the motivations for watching mukbang videos and the satisfactions thought to be achieved with a sample of 14 college-aged young people living in Yalova.

Throughout the interviews, it is discovered that young people encounter with mukbang videos coincidentally at social media platforms, especially Instagram and YouTube. After their first encounter, participants who would like shorter but more diverse videos would go on watching them on Instagram, whereas those who would like more detailed longer videos for parasocial interaction and accompaniment with mukbangers would go on watching on YouTube. Although participants stated that they watched mukbang videos more than once every week, none of them follows a specific mukbanger's account, because the algorithm and the For You Pages of social media platforms already constantly recommend kinds of videos that have been watched before.

As for the motivations to watch mukbang videos, it is seen that first of all, the way that mukbangers eat is found interesting, intriguing, amazing and shocking for the participants. However, participants are also aware that mukbangers' way of eating is also against the rules of civil life, against table manners taught them by the society, and they do not actually like to watch others eating or listen

to their noisy eating sounds in real social life. Admitting that there is a primitive, an instinctual side of enjoying mukbang content, which is why most of the participants choose to watch mukbang videos when they are alone, showing that there is a guilty pleasure they experience while watching. This can also be interpreted as moving away from the rules of civilization during mukbang watching. Similarly, Anjani and her colleagues (2020) found as a result of their interviews that people mostly watch mukbang personally as a private activity because the videos go against conventional norms around mealtime such as exaggerated act of devouring food and the loud gustatory sounds. It was also interesting to find out that our participants are aware that mukbang trend is the product of a show business in social media and this is a trend away from Turkish culture, so it is just a media content that they use with the motivation to entertain and/or relax themselves.

As mentioned in previous titles, mukbang is a social media trend that appeared as a result of lonely living youth of South Korea who searched for accompaniment while eating. Relatedly, Kircaburun et al. (2021b, p. 274) found that watching mukbang fulfill social gratifications especially for lonely individuals via connecting mukbang creators and viewers. Anjani and her colleagues (2020) surveyed 104 viewers and interviewed 15 of them about their mukbang viewing habits and found that most viewers watch mukbang videos alone and during mealtime and they seek connectedness with others. Moreover, Stein and Yeo (2021, p. 962) found that South Koreans use media during meals for the feeling of being/socializing with other people more when compared to Germans as the members of a collectivist and interdependent culture compared to the individualistic Western culture. Stein and Yeo (2021, p. 966) conclude regarding their findings that mukbang videos are not simply contents consumed to eliminate boredom, but they are a way to feel being in connection with other people as they have their meals. However, unlike findings in the literature, for only a small portion of our participants accompaniment is a motivation to watch mukbang videos, although they belong to the collectivist Turkish culture.

As another gratification gained from mukbang watching, it is essential to mention the ASMR effect. Loy and Mohamad (2021) found that some people find listening to the sounds of eating (such as crunching and drinking) as very calming. Other studies (Choe, 2019; Gillespie, 2019; Woo, 2018) also found that watching mukbang satisfies viewers' food cravings and they enjoy the eating sounds the mukbanger makes, because these sounds provide an ASMR experience that brings happiness and relief. Moreover, Jenging and Mohamad (2022, p. 78) focus on the psychological dimensions of mukbang watching and point to the facts that the viewers may experience hunger by watching even if they just ate a few minutes ago, and it is enough to be stimulated by watching or thinking about the food. Moreover,

studies (Wang, 2020, p. 42-43) found that watching mukbangers improves appetite and encourages viewers to eat as much as a mukbanger. Because of social comparison or mimicry, people may consume more food when they are exposed to an individual consuming large high-calorie meals (Spence et al., 2019).

Relatedly, the most obvious gratification of watching mukbang videos for the participants in this study is the strange feeling of fullness, relief and satisfaction. Although they feel like full (as if they had eaten everything in the video content), they also feel hungry (even if they just ate their meal) and feel the need to eat something regardless of the time. This of course connotes a risk of obesity and unhealthy eating habits; however, it is discovered that most of the participants have an awareness about the need to keep their appearance fit. Some participants stated watching mukbangers who eat what they cannot eat regarding the fear of gaining weight, and finally they are amazed by the fit appearance of mukbangers who eat huge amounts of food. Moreover, some of the participants in our study stated that they would not think of shooting their own mukbang videos one day, because they would not want to gain weight by eating too much. Similarly, studies (Kircaburun et al., 2021d) found that people who love food but are hesitant to eat a lot because of gaining weight and being unhealthy satisfy themselves by watching mukbangers over-eat. Relatedly, Lim and Lee (2018) interpret mukbang videos which provide a gastronomical pleasure and substitutive satisfaction to their watchers as 'videos of liberation' from the psychological and physical pressure to maintain a slim body and a healthy diet.

Furthermore, the integration of social media into our lives day by day has allowed individuals to more easily exhibit their eating habits and cultures in their own society and has also become a common way of introducing different foods and food cultures to cultures in other societies (Öztürk and İspir, 2021, p. 11). For participants in our study, mukbang videos are also intriguing in terms of getting to know the cuisines of different cultures. Most of the participants stated that they preferred to watch Asian (especially South Korean) dishes, which are the starting location of the mukbang trend, and are quite different from the Turkish cuisine. This is the special reason why participants do not find watching Turkish mukbang interesting, because they state that they do not find seeing local food that they already know the tastes of interesting.

In conclusion, the results of our research show that social media introduces mukbang videos into people's lives. Watching these videos, which contain content that appeals to people's most basic need, the urge to eat, with the ASMR effect, has become a free time relaxation activity for the participants. Although it has the effect of increasing appetite and encouraging people to eat something every time

they watch, it was observed that the participants in this study were conscious of having a healthy physique/fit appearance. Therefore, it is possible to suggest that mukbang videos have the feature of replacing what our participants have a deep desire to do. It appears that participants use mukbang videos as a tool to avoid eating large amounts of or high-calorie foods for fear of gaining weight and to suppress or satisfy their inner urges. It is possible to define the satisfaction that the participants get from mukbang videos which they tend to watch with the motivation to get to know the foods of different cultures and to satisfy their amazement and curiosity about the way mukbangers eat, as increasing appetite, an ASMR satisfaction mixed with guilt from eating ways that violate the rules of civilized life, satisfying cultural curiosity and accompaniment during meals.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Social media has transformed the way individuals create, share, and consume content, giving rise to diverse trends and formats that reflect shifting cultural dynamics. Among these trends, Mukbang videos have emerged as a globally popular yet polarizing phenomenon. Originating in South Korea, Mukbang involves individuals recording themselves consuming large quantities of food while interacting with their audience. This unique video format combines elements of performance, community building, and cultural exchange, making it a compelling subject of academic inquiry. Mukbang's widespread appeal, coupled with its capacity to provoke discomfort, stems from its intersection with themes of digital consumption, food culture, social interaction, and body image.

This study focuses on the motivations and experiences of young Turkish viewers who regularly engage with Mukbang content. By exploring why these viewers are drawn to Mukbang and the gratifications they derive, this research seeks to uncover the socio-cultural and psychological factors underlying their engagement. The study adopts a qualitative methodology, leveraging purposive and snowball sampling to recruit 14 Turkish Mukbang viewers aged 18–30. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather in-depth insights into their viewing habits, emotional responses, and perceptions of the content. Data analysis was performed using MAXQDA software, enabling the identification of key themes and patterns.

The findings reveal that young Turkish viewers typically discover Mukbang videos through social media algorithms, particularly via the “For You” or “Discover” pages on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. Participants described their initial exposure as driven by curiosity, sparked by the unconventional nature of the content. This initial curiosity often transitions into habitual viewing, as Mukbang videos fulfill specific emotional and social needs.

One of the primary motivations identified in the study is the use of Mukbang videos as a source of companionship. Participants often watch these videos during meals, creating a sense of shared experience that mimics eating with friends or family. This aspect is particularly significant for viewers who experience loneliness or live in environments where communal dining is rare. Additionally, Mukbang content provides a form of escapism, with many participants citing the calming effects of the visual and auditory elements of the videos. The ASMR-like sounds of eating, coupled with the vibrant presentation of food, are perceived as soothing and stress-relieving, making Mukbang a popular choice for unwinding after a long day.

Cultural curiosity also plays a significant role in driving viewership. Mukbang videos often feature diverse cuisines and eating styles, offering viewers an opportunity to explore foods from different cultural contexts. For young Turkish viewers, this aspect is particularly appealing, as it allows them to learn about international food cultures without leaving their own homes. Participants expressed fascination with unfamiliar dishes and ingredients, as well as an appreciation for the storytelling that accompanies many Mukbang videos.

The study further highlights the dual gratifications—virtual and emotional—that viewers derive from Mukbang content. On a virtual level, Mukbang serves as a digital extension of communal dining, fostering a sense of connection with the content creator and, by extension, the broader Mukbang community. On an emotional level, participants reported feelings of comfort and relaxation while watching these videos. This duality underscores the unique appeal of Mukbang, which bridges the gap between physical and digital experiences in a way that resonates deeply with younger audiences.

This study makes several contributions to the literature on digital media and food studies. First, it sheds light on Mukbang as a cultural artifact that reflects the evolving relationship between food, community, and identity in the digital age. Second, it emphasizes the role of social media algorithms in shaping content consumption patterns, highlighting the ways in which digital platforms mediate users' experiences and interactions with content. Finally, the study provides insights into the psychological dimensions of Mukbang consumption, offering a nuanced understanding of why young viewers find this content enjoyable and meaningful.

Overall, Mukbang videos serve as a hybrid space where traditional notions of food and community are reimagined in the context of digital media. For young Turkish viewers, these videos offer a unique blend of entertainment, comfort, and cultural exploration, reflecting broader trends in digital consumption and social interaction. However, the study also raises questions about the potential risks associated with Mukbang viewership, suggesting a need for greater awareness and critical engagement with this content. Future research could build on these findings by exploring the intersection of Mukbang with issues such as disordered eating, cultural appropriation, and platform algorithms, offering a more comprehensive understanding of its impact on contemporary audiences.