

“Welcome Back To My Channel”

A study about communities and the self in relation to Mukbang videos on YouTube.

By Jade Holmes



(photos from the YouTube channel of Jade Holmes, The Mukbang Anthropologist)

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Introduction

“Hello and welcome to my first ever Mukbang video, [uhm] my name is Jade and I hope that you get your plate ready as well [be]cause you can join me while we are eating together” (My YouTube video, posted 16 February 2022).

On February 16th I recorded and uploaded my first Mukbang video on my YouTube channel The Mukbang Anthropologist. I am sitting alone in my room, behind the only clear white wall my house has. I intentionally chose a white clear wall as my background because I did not know how much of myself I wanted to show on YouTube, and I thought that a white background showed the least. Although once I set up my camera, which means placing my phone on a tripod on a random box, the frame looked too boring and I decided to place a big plant in the frame with me. I just bought the plant and I was still very proud of it, but after the second video, the plant left the frame. During every Mukbang video, I ended up completely changing my room to get it ready for filming. I had to move the coat rack that is in front of the white wall, I removed all plants from the table I was using, and I closed my windows because the fear that any neighbour could hear what I was doing was big. The fact that even my mother could hear me recording my first video, since we were both at home with Covid, felt already unpleasant. I made sure that my mother put her earphones in and listened to a Podcast in order to feel secure enough to record myself eating alone in my room while talking to a camera not knowing who was going to see the video. A weird phenomenon for someone who sees herself as an introvert, does not like her photo being taken and therefore rarely posts a photo of herself online, and never uploaded a video on YouTube before. Yet here I was, eating the roti¹ my brother made for my mother and me, since we could not go to the grocery store ourselves because of Covid. While recording the video of me eating the roti I instantly regretted my food choice. Yes, the story that my brother made me food may sound nice to the viewers, though I left the Covid part out of the story to avoid any Covid discussions in case my video got a lot of views and comments. However, roti turns you into a messy eater. While I was recording the video, the fluids of the dish dripped all over my hands turning my hands yellow while I shoved big bites of potato in my mouth. I did not feel like a pretty eater, and I certainly did not look like one either. At the same time, starting in this way broke the tension

¹ Roti, in this case based on the Surinamese kitchen, is a dish with potato and long beans eaten alongside a type of flatbread.

in a way of who I was going to be on YouTube, namely myself. Besides, after recording such a messy first video all the other videos felt like a walk in the park.

What is Mukbang?

Mukbang videos, also referred to as mokbang, meokbang, mökpang or eating broadcast (Kircaburun et al. 2020, 1193), is a phenomenon originating from South Korea which started approximately in 2008 (Donnar 2017, 122). The word Mukbang 먹방 is short for muknunbangsong 먹는방송, which is a combination of mukda 먹다 that translates to ‘to eat’ and bangsong 방송, meaning ‘broadcast’. Together it makes Mukbang translate to ‘a broadcast where people eat’ (Choe 2019, 173). In a Mukbang video, there is a person who is recording themselves while eating, and there are others who can watch that person eat via a livestream or a recorded video. While the Mukbang creator is eating, some talk about different topics that resemble conversations one could have when eating with a friend face-to-face (Rüdiger 2020, 145-146). Generally, Mukbang videos are characterised by the interaction between the Mukbang creator and the viewers, and the often large portions of food Mukbang creators eat (Schwegler-Castañer 2018, 783). In addition to that, a lot of Mukbang creators (can) earn money with their videos (Choe 2019, 173-174). The first Mukbang videos mostly aired on a South Korean online broadcast network called Afreeca TV (Hong and Park 2017; Donner 2017; Kircaburun et al. 2020; Choe 2019). As the phenomenon grew it expanded to different platforms as well, such as the online video platform YouTube where Mukbang videos were introduced in 2015. The expansion to YouTube made Mukbang videos visible to the whole world and not only to South Korea, which also made non-Korean creators able to use this video format (McCarthy 2017). Chapter one discusses Mukbang more thoroughly, including the multiple reasons why people watch Mukbang videos.

A shift in focus

The initial focus of my research was Mukbang videos on YouTube in relation to Mukbang viewers who experience loneliness, because Mukbang videos can create a sense of togetherness, as some viewers do not experience being alone as lonely when watching a Mukbang video (Kircaburun 2020, 1193). Reaching this population proved to be more difficult than I anticipated. I created a Mukbang channel to act as a gateway to the Mukbang community. By getting people to watch my videos, I could also ask them for help by letting me interview them. In reality, this went differently. Although I did use my platform to ask for

help by asking directly in my videos if people wanted to participate, it only led to one participant. As a result, my initial focus on loneliness and Mukbang videos on YouTube was not achievable. Reaching people who watch Mukbang videos or who make Mukbang videos and wanted to talk to me about Mukbang proved to be more difficult than expected. What was even harder was finding people who experienced feelings of loneliness, who watched Mukbang videos to help them with these feelings, and also wanted to talk to me about this. In my attempts to get into contact with my population, by making my own Mukbang videos, I started to notice something else. I was not only thinking about making Mukbang videos as a researcher, I was thinking as a Mukbang creator as well. I wondered about the importance of the food in my videos, did I want interesting foods in my videos or foods that were more true to myself? I thought about how much I wanted to show of myself, should I tell more personal stories or should I keep my personal life private? I noticed that over time these two got more intertwined in my fieldnotes and diary. From these reflections came the question: what distinguishes me as a researcher from me as a Mukbang creator? I began to perceive my own channel as a research object in and of itself. I did not only read about communities being created and I did not only see relationships between viewers and Mukbang creators existing, but I also experienced it myself. I felt the excitement of receiving a comment, I felt the worries of receiving a dislike (which luckily only happened once) and I felt the joy of creating Mukbang videos. I thought about the content I wanted to make, what types of food would work, how I wanted to portray myself, what I wore, how I ate, and to what extent I would show my personal space, my bedroom. To me asking such questions led to an interesting story to tell about Mukbang videos, acquired from creating the videos myself. A story best be told through autoethnography.

Autoethnography is a research method that combines three things, personal experience (“auto”), the ability to describe and explain (“graphy”), and a focus on cultures, experiences, stories, and practices (“ethno”) (Adams, Ellis, and Hollman Jones 2017, 1). Meaning, that autoethnography is both the method and the product (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011, 273). In my research, the product is the thesis you are currently reading, and the method is the process of creating my own YouTube channel for three months. My personal experience as a Mukbang creator is a recurring aspect throughout my thesis, allowing me to gain insight into the phenomenon of Mukbang on YouTube from a Mukbang creator’s perspective. A Mukbang creator is someone who films themselves eating. This could be done at home, in a car, or at a restaurant. It could be via a livestream or a pre-recorded video. It does not matter

on what platform a Mukbang creator uploads their video, it could be YouTube, it could be Instagram, it could be Twitch, or any other social media platform. It is not about the platform or the number of views, nor the amount of (dis)likes a creator receives (McCarthy 2017). This is also how it was originally seen in South Korea, where it is agreed upon that everyone can create Mukbang videos and can be seen as a Mukbang creator (Bruno and Chung 2017, 5). That is why I argue that everybody is free to use the term Mukbang and Mukbang creator, as long as the video consists of someone eating. Once I started uploading videos on my channel I used these terms as well. Not only in my channel name “The Mukbang Anthropologist”, but also in my video titles. I used titles such as “RAMEN MUKBANG [EATING SHOW]” or “Bakery Breakfast Mukbang | Eating Show”. I placed my videos in the category of Mukbang content, allowing viewers to quickly understand what kind of videos I make. Using the term Mukbang in the title of my videos also helped people who were searching for this type of content. The top three search terms that were used by people on YouTube that led to my videos were: “sushi mukbang”, “subway mukbang”, and “mukbang sushi” (Fieldnotes, 1 May, 2022). Therefore, making videos in this style of video format makes me a Mukbang creator, similar to people who upload vlogs² are called vloggers.

My experiences as a Mukbang creator will not only appear in vignettes, but the whole thesis provides different personal stories and experiences. In addition to the autoethnographic method, this thesis is assisted by academic data, and the non-autoethnographic data I collected during my fieldwork. I conducted fieldwork from February 7th till May 1st and to summarise the methods I used during my fieldwork: I have observed the online phenomenon of Mukbang on YouTube, Instagram, Reddit, and in Podcasts by watching Mukbang videos, reading comments and Reddit discussions, and by listening to Podcast episodes in which Mukbang creators were a guest. I also participated in the world of Mukbang by creating my own Mukbang channel, leaving comments, and by creating Reddit posts. I uploaded seventeen Mukbang videos on my YouTube channel which all combined received 1.127 views and nineteen comments³. I uploaded my first Mukbang video on February sixteenth and my last one on May first 2022. Lastly, I conducted interviews with three people who watched Mukbang videos via Zoom who are referred to as Shannon, Merle, and Tiana. In addition to that, I spoke to one person who watches Mukbang videos via Facebook chat, I call him Abeo. I also used video elicitation with six people who were not Mukbang watchers, showing them

² A vlog is a video blog.

³ Numbers based on 26 June, 2022.

two Mukbang videos of two different Mukbang creators and asking them questions about what they saw and about how they reacted to the videos. I will refer to two of them in my thesis using the name Danny and Jacquisha. Besides, I have used the autoethnographic approach to unpack how Mukbang videos on YouTube can be a community and how I have reflected on myself during my fieldwork as will be told in chapters two and three.

Based on the reality of my fieldwork and the change in methodology my research question has become the following: **how are communities and the self shaped through the online world of Mukbang videos on the social media platform YouTube?**

Two big conceptual frameworks in this research are community and the self. The community aspect of Mukbang was also in my original research plan. I found the loneliness aspect of Mukbang paradoxical to the community aspect of Mukbang. During my fieldwork I have experienced this side of the Mukbang world on my own. Although three months is a short amount of time to build a steady community on YouTube, I did engage in community-making processes through the comments I received and the interactions I had with some of my viewers. Allowing me to experience how the term imagined community fits the way the Mukbang communities are constructed in the online world. I delve into the community aspect and my experiences further in chapter two. Discussing the self is a result of the switch I have made in my research. The self will be discussed in relation to its intertwinement of the offline and online world. Although my research is digital, the offline world still impacts the self I am online. The self will be central in chapter three.

As Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) have said:

“Consequently, autoethnography is one of the approaches that acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist.”
(Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011, 274).

This quote allowed me to understand the shifting focus I was going through. My initial focus was not completely objective as well, no research will ever be. Yet, seeing my research as autoethnography helped me unpack my feelings, experiences, and reflections in a way my initial focus could not have done. What makes autoethnography an interesting research method is that it combines my experience with ethnography because I have observed, I have participated in, and I have studied the Mukbang culture. Autoethnography as a method allows me to take you into this world through my eyes and experiences. Not the experience of me as

a researcher, but the experience I had creating Mukbang videos myself. This does not mean that the experiences and opinions of others are not told. The openness of other Mukbang creators in their videos, the opinions of people whom I introduced to Mukbang content, and the experiences of people who have watched Mukbang videos for multiple years, all these different perspectives contribute to the story.

Digital anthropology

Mukbang videos need both the online world and the offline world to exist. As a viewer, what made a Mukbang video fun to watch was the flow between the offline world and the online world. Not only from the Mukbang creator who talked about their offline lives, but also in the comment section where viewers sometimes shared stories and chatted with each other. This flow between the offline world and the online world is also reflected in this thesis. My research can be seen as contributing to digital anthropology as it was set on the digital platform YouTube. Despite that, digital anthropology does not exist solely online. The notion behind digital anthropology is that the online and offline worlds can no longer be viewed as separate entities. Both the online and offline worlds are increasingly intertwining and influencing each other (Boellstorff 2021, 45). I argue that this view on Mukbang has been missing in the existing literature on the topic. A lot of the existing literature focuses on Mukbang as an online phenomenon, it focuses on observing the phenomenon instead of getting into the world themselves by creating Mukbang videos as well (Bruno and Chung 2017; Hong and Park 2017; Woo 2018; Choe 2019). However, my thesis shows how collecting the data does not stop once the laptop is closed but builds upon data both gathered in the online space and beyond.

Why YouTube?

One reason I wanted to focus on YouTube is that it allows my research to distinguish itself from other research that has been done on Mukbang videos. Mukbang videos outside of the South Korean context have not yet been studied a lot by anthropologists, while Mukbang videos on Afreeca TV have been studied before (Bruno and Chung 2017; Donnar 2017; Hong and Park 2017; Choe 2019). Mukbang content on Afreeca TV is mainly focused on South Korean content. YouTube made it possible for the Mukbang trend to grow beyond the South Korean audiences and creators. On YouTube, everybody with an internet connection can watch Mukbang videos and if you have a camera you can make some of your own. This change allowed Mukbang videos to transcend cultures, such as Korean culture, because of its existence on the internet and the internet being a melting pot of cultures. In chapter three we

will take a closer look at culture online. The missing focus on YouTube in previous research on Mukbang is a missed opportunity since YouTube has over two billion active users in more than a hundred countries over the world, and has more than 500 hours' worth of content posted to the platform every minute (YouTube n.d. a). Concentrating on Mukbang creators on YouTube there are numerous channels providing Mukbang content. Big Mukbang creators on YouTube based on their subscribers⁴ are for example the Ukrainian American Nikocado Avocado with over three million subscribers⁵, the South Korean American hyuneeEats with over 1.5 million subscribers⁶, and South Korea American Zach Choi with more than thirteen million subscribers⁷. Making YouTube an interesting platform to study as it is so central to modern internet usage.

My (YouTube) identity

Regarding my position on my YouTube Channel called The Mukbang Anthropologist, I decided to explicitly include anthropologists in the name of my channel to be transparent about the fact that I was creating Mukbang videos for research purposes. Besides my name I also discussed my intentions in my first video in the following way:

“My name is Jade. I am twenty-five and I live in Holland, where I also do a master degree in anthropology. Which is where the name of my channel The Mukbang Anthropologist came from. [me eating between sentences]. And as you could read in my description, I also use this channel for my master [uhm] because in your master you have to write a master thesis, and I am writing my master thesis about Mukbang videos.” (My YouTube video, posted 16 February 2022).

As mentioned in this quotation every video I posted had a disclaimer in the description⁸ that indicated that my YouTube channel was part of a research project from Utrecht University, that I valued the anonymity of my viewers and that I did not (plan to) make money off my channel. I will therefore not refer to my research participants by their actual name but by a pseudonym. However, the names of Mukbang creators that publicly post on YouTube are not

⁴ A YouTube subscriber is someone who has opted to "follow" a YouTube channel so they can receive notifications about new videos. Subscribing to a YouTube channel is free. Usually, the more subscribers a YouTube creator has, the more money they can ask for advertisements.

⁵ YouTube channel [Nikocado Avocado](#)

⁶ YouTube channel [HyuneeEats](#)

⁷ YouTube channel [Zach Choi ASMR](#)

⁸ The description is the text that appears beneath each YouTube video. These texts can assist viewers in finding the right video or help viewers to decide whether or not they want to watch the video. If a YouTube video contains any advertisement, it is usually also mentioned in the description.

anonymized as I also link their channel in the footnotes. This is something I feel comfortable with because their videos are open for the public.

Apart from communicating the intentions of my YouTube channel from the start, I also had to consider who I wanted to be on YouTube and in the Mukbang world. Before my research, I had never watched a Mukbang video by a Mukbang creator myself. I had only watched other YouTube creators who sometimes recorded a video using the Mukbang style of eating in front of the camera to record an extra YouTube video. This made me in a way blunt about how I wanted to portray myself on YouTube, but beforehand I already knew that I wanted to make natural Mukbang videos. A term I thought of on my own, which did not come from an existing definition. Based on my prior experience on the platform YouTube, outside of Mukbang content, I knew that there were content creators that exaggerated certain character traits in order to attract an audience, or edited their videos a lot before the video was posted. This is something that does not suit me, and why I came up with the term natural Mukbang. By this I mean to indicate that I recorded Mukbang videos that were simple, in set-up, editing, and food, and true to myself. I did not talk more loudly or enthusiastically than I normally would, nor did I overeat. I just tried to be me while I ate in front of the camera.

Before I started my channel I was aware of three things, I am a white twenty-five-year-old woman. It is important to be conscious of my skin colour because I believe that being a white person on YouTube has contributed to the pleasant experience I have had on YouTube. This does not mean that everyone who is not white is treated badly on the platform. However, I do think that having such a pleasant experience influences the way I approach this research, especially since I am using an autoethnographic method in which my experiences are central. In this case, it means that I have a positive view of YouTube and the Mukbang community, which may differ from creators who are not white. Although I have experienced the world of Mukbang on YouTube as divers, with creators from different backgrounds, being a white person on the internet is a privilege in itself because not everyone has the same access to this seemingly open space. In reality, a lot of people who do not have access are poor people of colour and as a result, the internet landscape was formed without them (Nakamura 2002, xii). One may imagine how that influenced the internet culture and the privilege of white people on the internet. Although I cannot do anything about the fact that I am white, I am aware of it.

As for my age, YouTube is not able to provide me with the analytics about what age groups have watched my YouTube videos the most. My initial age group was going to be young adults between the age of eighteen and thirty-four. I also focused on this age group when

conducting interviews and when I watched videos of other Mukbang creators because I made my shift in focus later on. That is why, during my fieldwork, I kept focusing on this age group. In all the interviews I held it became clear that age is an important factor for people who enjoy watching YouTube videos in general. My interviewees liked to watch YouTube videos of people of a similar age or who are in a similar stage of life. As Shannon, a twenty-five-years-old woman who frequently watches YouTube videos, said:

“Most people I watch videos from are between the age of twenty and thirty I would say. That is the main thing, people who are in a similar stage of life. [...] I like that the most.” (Shannon, interview, 24 March 2022).

Although I am using autoethnography as a method, which makes age less of a priority for my population, I believe that being in my twenties attracted people of this age to my channel because people watch YouTubers of similar ages or stages in life. Making my thesis a story about young adults, not only through my experiences but also through the experiences of the viewers, interview participants, and other Mukbang creators I have watched.

Lastly, I will reflect on being a woman. Food and gender as concepts can be easily discussed together as food is frequently used as a means of communication, connection, and differentiation between men and women (Counihan and Kaplan 1998, 4). Counihan and Kaplan exemplify this by showing how men dominate women through food in the dating scene. There are women who do not dare to eat in front of the men they date for fear of judgment, which is a valid concern as some men feel entitled to judge a woman by their eating behaviour and weight (Counihan and Kaplan 1998, 4). Although my research does not focus on gender, these power relations subconsciously still exist. I experienced the Mukbang world on YouTube as diverse with a lot of men and women creating Mukbang channels and videos, but my main concern of being a female Mukbang creator went along with me being, what in public discourse would be called, a thin woman. I did not want to contribute to the negative self-images of other women by eating large portions of food while remaining thin. Something that is unconsciously related to gender relations, as women are still expected to eat in a certain way and look a certain way (Donnar 2017, 125). Besides, eating large portions of food is something I also do not feel comfortable with from a health perspective. Even Mukbang creators themselves acknowledge the negative effects their eating behaviour has on their health (Bruno and Chung 2017, 11). On my channel, I have chosen carefully what I wanted to eat, one time this resulted in me eating a pizza, and another time I ate my oatmeal breakfast. The variation in foods I had on my channel allowed me to be comparable to who I

am when I am not filming a Mukbang video. I do not always eat pizza, nor do I always eat healthy meals. However, during my fieldwork I noticed that being a Mukbang creator influenced my eating behaviour on YouTube, something that will be discussed in chapter three about the self.

What to expect

In the first chapter, I will discuss the world of Mukbang. To analyse the concept of community and the concept of the self in relation to Mukbang videos and online space, the world of Mukbang needs to be understood. Therefore this chapter delves into Mukbang and Mukbang on YouTube. Starting with conceptualising the online space and how it has impacted the world of Mukbang.

Chapter two has the main focus on Mukbang and the community. I analyse the friction between a sense of community and a global platform. In addition to that, intimacy and commodification are placed next to each other to answer how the commodification of intimacy has impacted the world of Mukbang.

Chapter three discussed the self. This chapter especially shows reflective autoethnographic data, focussing on how I felt about being seen as a Mukbang creator and how I did not feel comfortable identifying as one. This chapter also looks at culture online and its intertwinement with the offline world. Chapter three is followed by the conclusion that discusses the research question.

Throughout this thesis, you will find hyperlinks in the footnotes that refer to the YouTube videos I am talking about or videos that I used a quotation from. This only applies to videos of other YouTube creators, because my YouTube videos are made private.

Chapter 1: The world of Mukbang

“Do you already know what you are going to eat in your next video?” my oldest sister asks (Fieldnotes, 20 March, 2022). It is March 20th and we are celebrating the birthday of my other sister who turns twenty-eight tomorrow. I am sitting in her living room on her large couch whilst she is in the kitchen preparing some snacks. My mother, brother, and oldest sister are sitting around me. To be fair, I am not sure what the answer to that question is. “I think you should try something typical Dutch,” my brother says. “I think it can be fun for people to see you eat something like pannenkoeken [pancakes] or poffertjes [dutch mini pancakes]” my brother adds (Fieldnotes, 2 March, 2022). I explain to them that I am still unsure what leads to views and comments on YouTube and what does not. I have uploaded nine videos so far, and they are not viewed as much as I had hoped. However, I recorded a video eating sushi and it looks like that one is picked up pretty well. I also see more views on the video where I eat a Subway⁹ sandwich. This has me thinking that well-known foods and well-known chains will lead me to more success on YouTube. Success does not only mean more views but mostly more potential interaction with viewers. In my head these two go hand in hand, more views will result in more people to maybe have interaction with. An important aspect as I am trying to research the Mukbang community. “I do not think people will search for Dutch foods on YouTube, so I do not think that eating pannenkoeken [pancakes] will work” I say to them (Fieldnotes, 20 March, 2022). They do not seem convinced and neither am I, because what exactly do people search for when they are looking for a Mukbang video on YouTube? Why do people watch Mukbang videos? Do they prefer me to eat junk food from well-known chains like McDonald’s? Compared to my other videos, the success of my Subway video would suggest that. At the same time, junk food itself is no guarantee because I expected my pizza Mukbang video to get more views than it did. “I was thinking maybe I wanted to go to Dunkin’ Donuts¹⁰ for the next one” I say to them (Fieldnotes, 20 March, 2022). They react with hesitation, but how could I follow their advice? Have they even watched a Mukbang video? My mother certainly has not, just like my oldest sister. The day after my sister’s birthday party I decided to film the Dunkin’ Donut video, but I could not completely let go of the opinion of my family. There was a chance that they were right and that pancakes will lead to success. I did not want to be stubborn, and I gave the pancakes a chance three days later. Both videos were not that successful, although the donut video did slightly better than the

⁹ Subway is an American fast-food chain that sells sandwiches.

¹⁰ Dunkin’ Donuts is an American chain company selling donuts.

pancake one. To this day I have not figured out what food works best in a Mukbang, but that may also come because people watch Mukbang videos for many different reasons.

Before we can delve into the process concerning community and the self, we have to expand our understanding of Mukbang in this chapter. First off, I will discuss what it means for Mukbang to exist in an online space. Afterward, I will explain several reasons why people watch Mukbang content in general. The next section will discuss Mukbang videos on YouTube, how they came to be and how the platform differs from the South Korean Afreeca TV. Lastly, I will share some of the different types of Mukbang content I came across during my research, with a more detailed explanation of ASMR content and extreme Mukbang videos.

Escaping through the online space

As Boellstorff (2008) explained in *Coming of Age in Second Life*, his book about the virtual world of the game *Second Life*, online research should not evoke the question if it is a good thing or not that the online world has emerged, or if the online world is moving toward the right direction. Studying the online world is not about these questions, because the existence of the online world is given (Boellstorff 2008, 5). This also applies to my research. In order to be able to study Mukbang videos, I will not question the online space in which Mukbang videos exist, I will see this as a given. That is the context from which we depart from and view this research.

One thing the online world has shown is that “For the first time, humanity has not one but many worlds in which to live.” (Castronova 2005, 70). This is something that is also happening through Mukbang videos, as some watch Mukbang videos to escape the offline world by watching videos in the online world. This does not only apply for the viewers, such as Amsterdam student Merle who watched Mukbang videos to escape the unpleasant living situation she was in (Merle, interview, 15 March 2022), or Shannon, who sometimes eats alone as her parents are off to work and thinks that it is nice to not feel like she is eating alone but to somehow feel like she is having a conversation with someone by watching Mukbang videos (Shannon, interview, 24 March 2022). Besides the viewer, this also applies to me from the perspective of the creator. As I wrote in my diary once:

“As a creator, I have noticed something about me. Moments I am eating alone feel like a waste of eating because I also could record a Mukbang video. Eating

alone feels like a moment to utilise, which also sounds logical because why would I not record a Mukbang video.” (Diary, 11 March 2022).

Looking back at this comment I wrote, I see how I sometimes used recording Mukbang videos as a way to be productive in the online world. Escaping unproductiveness in the offline world. However, continuing reading my diary I also saw, in myself, how creating Mukbang videos became a way to escape being alone in the offline world. In my diary I explain this in the following way:

“While I am recording a Mukbang video, I am not busy with the fact that I am eating alone. When I am recording Mukbang videos I am actually talking. Yes it is to myself, and yes sometimes I wonder what the hell I am going to talk about, but the act of talking makes it feel somewhat social to me” (Diary, 11 March 2022).

This fluid transition between the online world and the offline world reflects the current era in the way Castronova wrote about it. If I am not social in the offline world, as I am literally talking to myself in an empty room, I can be social in the online world I have created through my Mukbang channel. Although I am physically still alone, I am in my mind with the viewer. It does not matter to me that I do not know who they are, or that I am not even sure if there will be viewers at all. When I am recording I am envisioning that there will be people watching, and that is what makes recording a Mukbang video a social activity for me. Eventually, the core of this research is to show how the online world and offline world of Mukbang are related to each other. There are people living in the offline world, who only feel a sense of community online in their shared world of Mukbang. In the world of Mukbang online and offline alternate and complement each other which we will discuss further, without questioning the online space Mukbang lives in.

Why do people watch Mukbang videos?

There are multiple reasons why people watch Mukbang videos regardless of the platform they are viewed on. That is why these reasons are not bound to the platform YouTube, Afreeca TV, or any other platform that provides Mukbang content. Neither reason excludes the other. People may have different motives to watch a Mukbang video on a certain day, for a certain period or to follow a certain Mukbang creator. These reasons can all overlap and coexist.

Mukbang videos can be watched for social use. Looking at the origin of Mukbang videos in South Korea, Mukbang videos are mostly watched by a younger generation, most of whom

live alone and eat alone a lot of times (Hong and Park 2017, 117-118). Mukbang videos especially attract people that have to eat alone but do not want to. As explained in the introduction, Mukbang videos can create a sense of togetherness (Kircaburun 2020, 1193). In South Korea, there is a growing number of single-person houses which means that there are a lot of Koreans that eat alone. This is contradictory to the traditional Korean food culture, where food is meant as something that is shared at a big table with family. Mukbang videos are used in an attempt to fill this gap, especially among the Korean youth because watching Mukbang videos can give a viewer, who is eating alone, the feeling that they are sharing a meal with the Mukbang creator (Choe 2019, 174). This use of Mukbang videos does not only exist in South Korea. As twenty-five-year-old Mukbang watcher Merle concluded in our interview about watching Mukbang videos on YouTube:

“For me the moral of the story is indeed that it [watching Mukbang videos] was indeed correlated to Covid, the lockdowns, the online existence in that period of time, and indeed mostly from loneliness and the fact that Mukbangs just offered some kind of comfort in that. [...] I am glad I could watch Mukbang videos in that period of time. It [watching Mukbang videos] really reduced my loneliness.”

(Merle, interview, 15 March 2022).

That Merle talks about the COVID-19 pandemic is relevant because the COVID-19 pandemic especially clarified the need for humans to seek social contact, something that was scarce during the pandemic. This scarcity allowed feelings of loneliness to grow (Ozawa-de Silva and Parsons 2020). Making Mukbang grow a bigger audience during periods of lockdown as Mukbang filled a significant hole COVID-19 created, namely sharing a meal (Koman 2020).

Mukbang videos are also watched for entertainment, as a way to escape life, out of boredom, and out of hunger (Kircaburun et al. 2020, 1200-1201). On Facebook I chatted with Abeo, a father of a toddler who lives in Nigeria and who watches Mukbang videos out of hunger and to escape life in a way. As Abeo said in a chat with me: “Honestly, I only watch them [Mukbang videos] sometimes when I’m kinda down and can’t get food, I’ll watch a mukbang video just to console my empty stomach 🤔” (Facebook chat Abeo, 11 April 2022). Abeo explained that, since the COVID-19 pandemic, the living situations in Nigeria have been hard, especially getting a job is hard and no job means no income. In the case of Abeo, watching Mukbang videos has offered a way to escape his reality momentarily, to get entertainment, and to still create pleasant experiences with food (Fieldnotes, 11 April, 2022). This brings us

to another reason people watch Mukbang videos, namely for the experience. As embodied by the Abeo, by watching Mukbang videos some viewers feel that they experience the food eaten by the creator in a similar way (Kircaburun et al. 2020, 1200). The psychology behind this, according to Ardrini, Lubis, and Utami (2020), is that the combination of food presentation and food enjoyment stimulates the desire of the watcher to eat as well. Not only food enjoyment because the food looks great, as video triggers the visual sense, but the enjoyment also comes from the Mukbang creator eating it, the mouth movements they make, and the expressions of pleasure by the Mukbang creator (Ardrini, Lubis, and Utami 2020, 14). This is however an enjoyment online, which can be felt by someone offline, even when the viewer offline is not eating the food presented in the video. For some, this is a reason to watch a Mukbang video as the viewer seeks this experience online. The experience of food through Mukbang videos is a reason in itself for some to watch Mukbang videos. As Choe (2019) has observed, some viewers enjoy watching Mukbang creators eat foods they are craving or want to experience but cannot have (Choe 2019, 4). Take for example what Abeo from Nigeria said: "I like Korean/Chinese mukbang" (Facebook chat Abeo, 11 April 2022). Foods that are not as common in Nigeria, but can be experienced through Mukbang videos (Fieldnotes, 11 April, 2022). The internet (can) transcends national borders and cultures, allowing people to experience things they could not experience otherwise.

For some viewers, Mukbang videos also fulfil a sexual role, which often comes from a lack of intimacy in the offline world. A study done by Donnar (2017) showed that the connection the viewer wants to make with the Mukbang creator can be seen as an attempt to recreate a feeling of intimacy in an online setting (Donnar 2017, 125). Some viewers also have a physical attraction toward certain Mukbang creators. A lot of young female Mukbang creators who are (seen as) thin and attractive have an audience consisting mainly of overweight men (Donnar 2017, 122). This is related to the idealisation of thin women in, among other countries, South Korea (Kircaburun et al. 2020, 1199). Something I also reflected on in the introduction. On the other hand, Mukbang videos are also watched because watching women eat large portions of food can help with normalising a bigger appetite for women, giving women control over their bodies (Schwegler-Castañer 2018, 784). During my time on YouTube, I have not felt sexualized. However, I did have a conversation on the social media platform Reddit that made me reflect on the matter. The message I received was the following:

“Hi! I came across your mukbang videos and saw you are a researcher, but I like your style of video in that it's down to earth and not overproduced. Do you think I could pay for you to do a mukbang with a couple of changes that I enjoy seeing? Thankyou :)” (Reddit chat, 18 April 2022).

I replied to the message for research purposes:

“hello! first of all thank you :) Could you maybe explain a bit more what you mean by this? for example what changes? what kind of pay? ideally what would you want to see?” (Reddit chat, 19 April 2022).

To which the persons answered:

“Hey :) So as for 'changes' really I prefer the camera closer up, and chewing with your mouth open. I think that's one of the best sounds for ASMR¹¹. For pay it could be anything, I know you are doing this for an educational project but maybe you have a PayPal I could donate to, to at least cover the cost of any food? I liked everything else about your other videos so I think I would sum it up as 'more of the same please! (Plus those two things I suggested). I just really clicked with your videos for some reason when a lot of others don't really interest me, lol” (Reddit chat, 19 April 2022).

Although this person does not explicitly talk sexually, the message did feel to me as having a sexual intent. This also says something about me and what I see as sexual, but partly stems from my position as a woman. Journalist Sanghani (2014) wrote about this gender difference. She does not believe that people will offer to pay overweight male Mukbang creators money in the same way thin female creators are, because it is in fact sexual and not only about the company or food enjoyment for the person willing to pay (Sanghani 2014). What made the message sexual to me was the request for a closer shot and the request to chew with my mouth open. Although this person could view this differently, especially since this person mentions ASMR which is a very popular genre on YouTube and in Mukbang. ASMR is not necessarily sexual and will be further explained in the last part of this chapter discussing different genres of Mukbang content. What also made this request sexual for me was the offering of money. However, wanting to pay for Mukbang content is not necessarily sexual or gender-specific. Afreeca TV has a system of star-balloons that can be bought by viewers

¹¹ ASMR means Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response.

online with real money. The Mukbang creator receives the money from the star-balloon whenever a viewer sends them one (Bruno and Chung 2017, 4). These star-balloons are not by definition a sexual symbol. Bruno and Chung (2017) continue that viewers give these star-balloons voluntarily because the star-balloon allows the viewers to express their gratitude towards the creator. Gifting is also an important part of Korean culture and is a way to show that there is an intimate relationship between the viewer and the creator (Bruno and Chung 2017, 10). It is a way to appreciate the content a Mukbang creator creates, and a way to support a creator financially. Maybe that is how the person on Reddit saw his request as well, that person wanted the pleasure of my videos and as a token of appreciation there was a payment in return. Maybe he offered money because money has the same value online and offline. I wonder if it is just part of the Mukbang culture, in which such payments and requests are considered normal. I definitely reacted to this request through my offline norms and standards, where it is not normal to pay people for closely shot videos of them eating. Maybe I need to let that perspective go to become able to answer such messages. However, taking money from a stranger to make videos of me eating, which feels intimate to me, without knowing who the other person is does not feel right online and offline. It makes me feel like I, as a person, and my actions can be bought. Filming in the way the messenger wants me to does not match with the natural way of Mukbang videos I wanted to create. Doing it for a payment makes me feel like a commodity. This internal dialogue, and the reason that I am making Mukbang videos, for research purposes, made me not take up the offer.

Mukbang and YouTube

The YouTube video “YOUTUBERS REACT TO MUKBANG (Eating Shows)” posted on April second 2015 by the YouTube channel REACT, is seen as the first time Mukbang content was viewed by a larger audience on YouTube. The total number of views kept growing since then and is now nearly at seven million views¹². As the title suggests, this is a video in which YouTube creators from around the world react to South Korean Mukbang videos. In the video you see how various creators are intrigued by the concept of Mukbang that combines the best of both worlds, their passion for creating content with the enjoyment of eating. At the same time, there is some confusion by the creators about why people would watch such videos and how it is so successful in South Korea. Especially because of the simplicity of the Mukbang videos, it is just people who are eating. (YouTube video REACT,

¹² Numbers based on 1 July, 2022.

posted 2 April 2015¹³). The first YouTuber¹⁴ to make a Mukbang video is presumably Trisha Paytas, a girl from the United States that was already active on YouTube and came to the idea via the YouTubers REACT video. Paytas uploaded a video called “MUKBANG (Eating Show)”¹⁵ on 24 April 2015, and in this video she is saying the following:

“Anyways I thought it [Mukbang] was stupid, until I realized I was eating a whole case of cupcakes by myself and that was pathetic, but I have no one to eat my cupcakes with. So I am eating them with you all.” (YouTube video blndsundoll4mj, posted 24 April 2015¹⁶).

Paytas is showing that loneliness can also be a reason why Mukbang videos are recorded by Mukbang creators. Something I previously noticed as well in my diary referring to recording a Mukbang video as somewhat social.

It is important to take a closer look at the difference between YouTube and Afreeca TV, as it influences the Mukbang culture and interactions on YouTube. A big part of Afreeca TV is the livestreams the platform provides. Many Mukbang creators on Afreeca TV create livestreams up to three hours long (Bruno and Chung 2017, 2). While the Mukbang creator is eating, they can chat with the viewers in real-time, allowing interaction to happen on camera (Choe 2019, 3). Resulting in instant interaction between the viewers and creator. Unlike AfreecaTV, livestreaming does not seem to be as effective on YouTube. Even though YouTube also provides the option to livestream, livestreaming is not commonly used for Mukbang videos on YouTube. In a podcast episode North-American Mukbang creator hyuneeEats explains why she thinks livestreaming Mukbang videos do not work on YouTube:

“Because I think America is such a big country, everyone is like either working when I am trying to film during the day or they are sleeping in another time zone.[.] I did try doing it, but not a lot of people were watching it because they were doing something else.” (Behind the influence podcast, 13 November 2019).

HyuneeEats only talks about the United States, the fact that YouTube is a global platform makes it even more difficult to use livestreams for this reason as there are even more different time zones involved globally. Posting pre-recorded Mukbang videos creates interactions that differ from the livestreams of Afreeca TV because there is a delay. However, the delay does

¹³ [YOUTUBERS REACT TO MUKBANG \(Eating Shows\)](#)

¹⁴ A YouTuber is someone who makes and uploads videos on YouTube.

¹⁵ [MUKBANG \(Eating Show\)](#)

¹⁶ [MUKBANG \(Eating Show\)](#)

not prevent interaction from taking place on YouTube, the interaction between the creator and the viewer can still take place via the comment section of the video after the video is posted (Rüdiger 2020, 159). This is an important aspect, that will be discussed in chapter two, of creating an online community.

During my time on YouTube, I have seen many variations in Mukbang content. The one thing all these videos have in common is the eating of food. The way they do it is what sets apart one creator from another. There are Mukbang videos in which creators talk, and there are Mukbang videos where people just eat. There are Mukbang creators who talk about the food they are eating, and there are Mukbang creators who share more personal stories. There are Mukbang creators who eat at home, or others who drive to a drive-through place and eat in their cars. Some Mukbang creators cook. Some only eat take-out. Some Mukbangers show their whole face. Others zoom in on the mouth. There are Mukbang creators who record their videos alone, and there are Mukbang videos with multiple people (Fieldnotes, 7-8 February, 2022). There are all these small differences in the Mukbang world, but there are two types of Mukbang content I want to elaborate more on: ASMR and extreme Mukbang content.

I will not be focussing on ASMR in my research as ASMR is a subject in and of itself and is too big to study alongside Mukbang content in this relatively short study. However, by mentioning ASMR I want to acknowledge this big aspect of pleasure in the world of Mukbang. An aspect that is mentioned a few times throughout this thesis, and that is why I want to shortly touch upon the subject. ASMR stands for Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response. ASMR is a sensory experience often described, by people who experience it, as soothing. An ASMR video is mostly focused on audio, creating sensational sounds by sensory triggers such as whispering and tapping objects to create a sound, triggering a tingling experience from the back to the head (Barratt and Davis 2015, 1-2). When ASMR is used in Mukbang content the sounds are mostly provided by chewing the food, swallowing the food, and playing with the crunchiness of food (Rüdiger 2020, 150). Tiana, a twenty-five-year-old woman living in New York City I spoke to on Zoom about Mukbang, explained to me why she loves watching ASMR Mukbang videos: “I don’t know, I like the sounds and it’s kinda relaxing.” (Tiana, interview, 4 April 2022). However, the relaxing sensation ASMR content gives some people is not universal, and people who do not experience this often see ASMR as something unpleasant.

Another returning theme I have seen in Mukbang videos on YouTube is the extreme Mukbang videos. I went into this study expecting extreme Mukbang videos to be a small

niche among all other types of Mukbang content, but two weeks into my research I already noticed extreme Mukbang not to be as niche as I initially thought. There are different reasons why a Mukbang video can be seen as extreme. For example, in certain Mukbang videos living sea creatures are eaten by creators. I would personally deem this as extreme. However, most videos I came across that are considered extreme were mainly based on the amount of food some Mukbang creators eat (Fieldnotes, 13 February, 2022). Nikocado Avocado, as pictured below by one of Nikocado Avocado his thumbnails¹⁷, falls into the second category.



(Thumbnail of Nikocado Avocado's YouTube video, posted 6 December 2021¹⁸)

Extreme Mukbang videos have led to a lot of controversy in the Mukbang world. Questioning the promotion of bad eating habits by not only expecting unhealthy eating behaviour from the creators, but also normalising this for the viewer through creating such videos. During my interview with Danny, a thirty-three-years-old father of two who never watched a Mukbang video before our video elicitation interview, he alerted me that he worries about such extreme content: “Because then I am afraid, you know, that they [his kids] see this as standard and.. and they [his kids] no longer eat normally.” (Danny, interview, 25 March 2022). Mukbang creator Cheap Lazy Vegan also talks about the difficulty of this genre by mentioning views, something YouTube creators strive for as it is the revenue model behind their channel:

“In order to succeed [on YouTube] you have to be extreme nowadays right. So whoever is [the] most extreme, aka eats tons of food or does whatever extreme

¹⁷ A thumbnail is a picture you see before clicking on a YouTube video. They are mostly used to seduce the viewers towards watching the video or showing what the video is about.

¹⁸ Thumbnail from Nikocado Avocado: [EXTREME BLUE TAKIS FIRE NOODLES WITH HUNGRY FAT CHICK • Mukbang & Recipe](#)

thing on camera, is gonna get the most views.” (YouTube video Cheap Lazy Vegan, posted 20 December 2021¹⁹).

What makes extreme Mukbang videos controversial is the unhealthy eating habits extreme Mukbang videos portray. As an article in The Telegraph highlights, extreme Mukbang videos glorify binge eating which should not be glorified, because eating thousands of calories a day can lead to bad consequences for your health (Shipman 2019). In chapter three we will discuss the influence of extreme Mukbang videos on my experience as a Mukbang creator.

In this chapter I have established how Mukbang is related to the online and offline world, not only by seeing the online space as a given but also through the many reasons people watch Mukbang videos. All reasons are in a way linked to both the online and offline world, such as escaping loneliness in the offline world by seeking company in the online world. I also discussed YouTube, the platform I used to watch Mukbang videos. By explaining where Mukbang videos on YouTube come from, how they differ from Afreeca TV and what types of content I came across, I showed you the field of this research.

¹⁹ [Vegan Christmas Dinner MUKBANG \(Nut Roast, Mac & Cheese\) / Munching Mondays Ep.104](#)

Chapter 2: From viewers to people

When I received my first comment I was over the moon. I had just uploaded a video eating pizza. This was not only a tactical decision because I thought people would maybe search for a pizza Mukbang, but I was also actually eating pizza that night by myself so I thought why would I not record it? I did not want to waste this opportunity because pizza is a popular Mukbang genre on YouTube. After I had uploaded the video I was at home when the email notification popped on my phone saying: “New comment on ‘Pizza Mukbang + me talking..” (Fieldnotes, 15 March, 2022). The whole message was not shown on my phone, so I clicked as fast as I could on the notification to open the email. All I could think was: see a video eating pizza works, things will really get going from now on, I knew it. As I clicked on the email I saw the comment: “Your pizza looks amazing. Great video and +1 [subscriber] from me.” (Fieldnotes, 15 March, 2022).

The most exciting thing that could happen during my three months on YouTube was receiving comments. Without a doubt, I can say that comments exceed the importance of views because comments make the online world come to life. Comments gave purpose to my channel, not only from a research perspective but also as a Mukbang creator because it made me feel like a YouTuber. Making Mukbang videos sometimes felt very unnatural to me. I had to create an explicit moment for myself to eat and I had to create a social environment by talking to the camera, while I was in fact sitting alone in my room. It made eating, something I do without thought every day, something I really had to think about. Making something so familiar suddenly feel strange, all because there was a camera involved and an imagined viewer. However, whenever people commented on my videos I felt that I was not talking to myself because there were people who actually listened. This comment was the first time a viewer became a real person to me. Before my first comment, I only saw my viewers through the number of views YouTube provided, but now it is confirmed that actual people watch my videos. Maybe my assumption that my views were just my mother and brother watching my videos multiple times to get my views up was wrong. It was someone else, someone who I had never met, and who I will never meet. I immediately clicked on this person’s profile, because I wanted to see what kind of person they were. My expectation turned out to be correct. I received my first comment from someone who also created Mukbang videos, ASMR Mukbang videos. It felt like I was not only able to create my own community, but it was as if someone took my hand and guided me to the Mukbang community as well. I had seen it all happen before, small Mukbang creators supporting each other but also bigger

creators that made videos together or commented on each other's videos. I thought that this was the start of it all. It felt not only as the start to connecting to my viewers but also to the world of Mukbang outside of my own content.

This chapter will use Mukbang videos on YouTube to discuss online communities. A form of community that can exist through the notion of imagined community, arguing that people can feel connected without ever meeting. We discuss how the Mukbang community is constructed on YouTube. I begin with the importance of interaction, followed by words, food, and the financial component of YouTube and how this relates to the community-making of Mukbang. Lastly, the financial component is enhanced by discussing the commodification of intimacy in relation to the Mukbang community.

Imagined community

“Yes. I am going to do Mukbang hopefully forever. Maybe not as often, but I just wanna keep my Hyuneebees entertained until I die. So hopefully I can keep it going forever.” - hyuneeEats (Behind the Influence Podcast, posted 13 November 2019²⁰).

When I first heard Mukbang creator hyuneeEats make this comment about her viewers, collectively named Hyuneebees, it felt like a strong statement. However, after experiencing multiple interactions with viewers through receiving comments on my own channel, I was better able to relate to her. I understood the willingness to keep the viewers entertained, I wanted to create for my viewers as well as the weeks went on. The people I made videos for became more real, so my role as a Mukbang creator became more real as well. I wanted to connect to my viewers. I even missed filming Mukbang videos once I narrowed it down to filming once a week instead of two. During Easter weekend I wrote about wanting to connect while discussing if I should record an Easter video:

“Another factor is that it is Easter weekend and I am not doing anything with Easter this year. So by creating an Easter video I was not only celebrating my own Easter in that way, but also I felt like this could be something to connect over with the viewers since more countries celebrate Easter.” (Diary, 16 April 2022).

²⁰ [Behind the Influence Podcast](#)

This excerpt from my diary shows that creating Mukbang videos was no longer only about the data it would provide me. It was also about the people that watched my videos, especially the people that interacted with me. My YouTube channel became more personal.

To understand how I could feel connected to people I did not know, you have to understand the concept of online communities. A form of community that suits the online world of Mukbang. Online communities are groups or collectives that are internet-based, as a result of the growing possibility to interact with people online that have similar interests without being location-bounded (Wilson and Peterson 2002, 449). That interaction takes place through technical devices does not mean that the online world is outside of the offline world, they are connected to each other (Agre 1999, 1). The difference is that within online communities face-to-face interaction does not exist. One person who challenged the importance of face-to-face interactions for communities was Benedict Anderson (2006), by introducing us in 1983 to the term imagined communities. Anderson explains the term in the following way:

“It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.” (Anderson 2006, 3).

Anderson used the concept of imagined communities to explain the construction of nation-states, which differs from the online community this research focuses on. However, I argue that the concept of an imagined community is relevant for analysing Mukbang videos. The term especially fits when Wellman’s (2001) argument on closeness is taken into account, stating that physical closeness does not equal social closeness (Wellman 2001, 234). People can be close to each other without ever meeting each other, even when their relationship only exists in an online world. We see this in Mukbang due to the fact that Mukbang videos are available online, making Mukbang creators unable to determine how many people will watch them. Similar to the fact that the viewers do not know who watches the Mukbang video with them. Nevertheless, they do acknowledge each other’s existence through interaction (Bruno and Chung 2017, 3). This is because technology makes it possible, for people who are geographically apart, to overcome time and distance which still allows people to come together online and create an imagined community (Hitchcock Morimoto and Chin 2017, 174). This can happen consciously, but also unconsciously. Osler (2020) continues by arguing that most online communities exist out of people who have never met each other in real life, which does not affect people in their feelings of community and togetherness. People connect

online because they share the same interest, beliefs, or values, which is something that also occurs in the offline world (Osler 2020, 579). This also works the other way. People can lose their connection to a community once they do not share similar interests anymore. In the online world, this often leads to unfollowing someone from a certain platform. In the interview with Merle, the woman who watched Mukbang videos to cope with feelings of loneliness, this was exemplified by the following quote:

“That is also the reason why I sometimes unfollow people. Because at some point, indeed, if people's lives start to differ too much from me, I am going to unfollow them. That is not nice, but sometimes I just do not feel it [a connection] anymore you know.” (Merle, interview, 15 March 2022).

This can be seen as an advantage of online communities, you can connect to anyone at any moment, as easily as you can disconnect from them. By a simple unfollow from the safeness of your screen you can distance yourself from a person you once felt connected to. However, you can also create new connections and intimate relations online, with people you do connect with.

The intimacy of interaction

The anthropological study of Patricia Lange (2019) on YouTube shows that YouTube watchers do not see the platform as only a functional tool, “it represented an outlook of acceptance and interactivity through video sharing” (Lange 2019, 148). This is why YouTube can create online communities, but streaming platforms like Netflix cannot. Looking at YouTube, an important way a sense of community is formed is via the use of interaction through video and chat that allows the creator and the viewers to acknowledge each other’s existence. As explained in chapter one, although YouTube also provides the option for live videos, Mukbang videos on YouTube are mostly pre-recorded videos which causes a delay in interaction. However, the delay does not prevent interaction from taking place on YouTube, and can still take place via the comment section of the video after the video is posted (Rüdiger 2020, 159). Donnar (2017) argues that interaction and a feeling of intimacy help to create the online community (Donnar 2017, 125), which is something I also touched upon in my conversation with Merle. When I asked frequent Mukbang watcher Merle if she ever commented on YouTube videos, she explained that she does interact with YouTubers through comments especially by leaving more personal comments instead of commenting that she liked the video (Merle, interview, 15 March 2022), as illustrated by the following quote:

“And for example one other YouTuber I still frequently watch, is now pregnant. When I found out I said to her ‘oh I remember that you always wanted a family and that this is such a big dream of yours. I am super happy for you, congratulations.’ You know, that are the comments I sometimes make.” (Merle, interview, 15 March 2022).

Interaction is about acknowledging each other’s existence. That is why replying to comments increases the connection between viewer and watcher. My vignette showed how receiving a comment made me feel connected to my viewers. In the same interview I asked Merle about the viewer’s perspective:

Me: I think it is nice that you message people such kind things. Sometimes it seems easier for people to leave negative or hateful comments than to leave a nice comment like that. Which is such a great thing to share and also contributes to the connection you have with someone I believe.

Merle: Yeah exactly. Especially when you get a reaction back on YouTube or when they [creators] pin your comment²¹. I have had that quite often, they [creators] either liked my comment or they [creators] pinned it. Then it feels like this person truly reads this you know. That is the nice thing.” (Merle, interview, 15 March 2022).

How it feels to be at the receiving end of the interaction as a viewer is something I have not experienced during my fieldwork. However, interactions show that the bond strengthens for both the creator and viewer. Both feel seen, heard, and appreciated.

“Thank you my friend”

Another way how the community is constructed as seen on YouTube is through the usage of words. According to Irvine (1996) language has always been an important aspect of creating a sense of identification, belonging, and sharing. That is why it is argued that people who share a language share a feeling of community as well (Irvine 1996, 123). This is also the argument of Anderson (2006), who sees shared language as a key element of the imagined community. By speaking and writing in the same language you are already belonging to a similar group (Anderson 2006, 39-40). Words attempt to create in subtle ways a sense of togetherness in Mukbang videos. One way of doing this, according to Rüdiger (2020), is through the words

²¹ As a YouTube creator you can pin comments on your YouTube channel. As a result, these comments are the first comments you will see when you go to the comment section.

Mukbang creators use in their videos. For example, by not saying *I* am eating but *we* are eating. In such occasions, the pronoun *we* is used to incorporate the audience in the eating activity (Rüdiger 2020, 154). In my videos, I also purposely mentioned that *we* could eat together as well by saying something as: “Today *we* are eating breakfast together, so get your plate ready and come and join me.” (my YouTube video, posted 20 February 2022). I purposely did this as a way to create more of a shared experience. Not only for the viewer but for me as well. I wanted people to feel like we ate together because that also meant I was not eating alone. That is why the usage of *we* can be seen as an attempt to turn an offline individual experience, for viewers and creators, into an online shared experience. This is still an imagined shared experience, as I was never certain that I got to actually share my meal with someone because maybe no one was watching my video. Therefore, in actuality, saying *we* is a performative act offline in the hope to connect with viewers online who I do not know. Who do not necessarily exist.

Addressing viewers in a certain way is also an example of how Mukbang creators actively involve the viewer through words. Mukbang creators will often affectionately refer to their viewers, by calling them friends or referring to them as *you guys*. Some even give their viewers a personal loving collective name (Rüdiger 2020, 156). Out of the seventeen Mukbang videos I have uploaded, I start eleven of them by saying something along the lines of ‘hello *guys* welcome back to my channel’ (Fieldnotes, 1 May, 2022). I started using *guys* unconsciously, as it is a common informal term. Whenever someone calls a group I am in *guys*, I know it is not as the male gender but as a collective casual way to refer to us. By saying something like ‘guys’ the viewer became more real to me and they became more tangible and approachable in this way. As a result, the process of filming a Mukbang video became more intimate. This also worked the other way around. Whenever I received a comment in which somebody used an affectionate word towards me, it made me feel more connected to them as well. There was for example one returning viewer who left a comment on most of my videos. This alone made me already feel connected to that person because after a while I knew that if I posted a video that person would leave a comment. After a few videos, he left me the following comment:

“The pasta looks bomb not bad at all in fact I wouldn't mind trying it myself.

Anyway awesome job my friend 😊 👍 100” (My YouTube video, posted 5 April 2022).

I felt that I had established some type of relationship with this person, but that I was referred to as *my friend* confirmed to me that it was mutual. Reading the comment made me instantly happy, and is why I felt confident to reply: “Thank you my friend 😊” (My YouTube video, posted 5 April 2022). As I wrote the reply I genuinely felt some type of connection with this person. Even though I had no idea who this person was or what this person looked like. This brings us back to how Mukbang is an imagined community, although we do not know each other and we probably never will, in our minds we are connected.

Another way words are used is by asking questions. Not only from the viewer to the Mukbang creator but also from the Mukbang creator to the viewers. For example by asking their opinion on a certain topic, to which they can reply in the YouTube comment section (Rüdiger 2020, 155-156). I used this by asking multiple times what the viewer was eating. I thought that such a question could lead to more interaction, but also because it could enlarge the feeling of togetherness. I would say something like: “And I hope that you are eating your breakfast with me. And if so, please let me know what you are eating.” (My YouTube video, posted 27 February 2022). By asking the viewers this question I not only wanted to create a sense of togetherness for them, because by asking questions they get more involved, I also asked such questions to create more togetherness for me because the viewer would become more real to me when we interacted. As I wrote in my diary: “by talking to the viewers it feels more as if you are eating together” (Diary, 26 February 2022). I wanted to involve the viewer and I wanted to make them feel involved as well. Besides, I truly wondered what people were doing while watching my videos. By asking them such questions I had the chance to get to know them as well.

Eating together alone

Food is the main object used in Mukbang videos and is simultaneously the third way a community is constructed on YouTube. The act of eating together is seen as a basic human social activity, and with whom food is shared tells a lot about people’s relationships. Through the act of sharing a meal or drink social bonds are created that strengthen human relations (Beeman 2014, 32). Mukbang creators attempt to create relations with their viewers through food as well, especially for people who watch Mukbang videos for social use because the videos help them with their feelings of loneliness. People who cannot have the social bonding experience that eating together can give, because they are eating alone, can try to create this experience through Mukbang videos. As Merle, who used Mukbang videos to deal with loneliness, said in the interview as well: “With [watching] a Mukbang [video] I always had

the idea that I just sort of sat at a table with someone.” (Merle, interview, 15 March 2022). This comment is striking because it shows that Mukbang videos can give the perception of being with someone and sharing a meal, when in fact both the creator and the viewer are eating alone. It embodies the transition between the offline and online world. Mukbang offers a substitute for loneliness in the offline world, allowing a sense of community for individuals online who are actually eating alone (Choe 2019, 3). If your table is empty in the offline world, you can at least fill it with the idea of the company Mukbang creators can provide online. Company gathered from your imagined community.

The impact of money

YouTube also brings a financial component to how communities are constructed. It is not only possible to make money directly through the platform itself, but YouTube videos can also contain advertisements. Brands often look at the type of content someone produces and the number of viewers a Mukbang creator has. The more viewers a video has, the more exposure the advertisement gets. That is also why interaction is important for Mukbang creators. Interaction and collaboration with viewers lead to more viewers because interaction makes viewers feel connected to the creator (Waseem 2018, 48). Some would argue that creating a community can therefore be seen as an earning strategy, because Mukbang creators benefit from creating a strong community as it will help them earn money via their videos. However, this does not directly mean that it is every creator’s goal to make money, nor that the viewers are disadvantaged by this. Viewers sometimes even contribute to and encourage the revenue model which strengthens the bond between viewer and creator. Twenty-five-year-old Mukbang watcher Tiana from New York City exemplified this by saying the following about choosing a Mukbang video to watch:

“I also click on people that have little subscribers [be]cause I help them grow, [be]cause you know, like I said before. If they have more likes and subscribers they get more money, and they get people that want to promote them and help them. You know. So I like people that have [uhm] that’s like small YouTubers that just started.” (Tiana, interview, 4 April 2022).

Tiana directly links watching certain Mukbang videos to finding a way to support certain creators. She even uses the financial component of YouTube as a way to support the black community in a relatively easy way as Tiana starts to explain:

Tiana: [uhm] So I am like pro-black. So I am black. I watch people mostly that are the same ethnicity as me.

Me: Yeah. So you feel like, with that what you said, that you can support people by watching their stuff. Therefore watching black Mukbang creators makes you feel like you are supporting people that are like you.

Tiana: Yes. (Tiana, interview, 4 April 2022).

That is how the financial component YouTube videos have can still contribute to a sense of community through Mukbang videos. It is even possible to argue that maintaining a good relationship with the viewers becomes more important once the relationship makes the Mukbang creator money, because then the relationship with the viewer is an important aspect of the revenue model. Money can seem contradictory to feelings of community or intimacy, but it does not have to be as the following section will build upon.

Commodification of intimacy

When you want to make money directly from the platform YouTube you need at least a thousand subscribers and four thousand active watch hours produced in a year, meaning you will need to publicly post four thousand hours' worth of YouTube videos that are also in line with the community guidelines of YouTube (YouTube n.d. b). The earning model is ultimately in the commercials clips you may know from watching a YouTube video, often right at the beginning and end of a video, and sometimes even in between. Money being made from YouTube is a true form of commodification, the practice of putting a market value on commodities or services that were previously unavailable (Constable 2009, 50). Thus, the fact that YouTube allows users to make money demonstrates how the videos creators upload to the platform have become commodities. To which the number of views are crucial, because the payment a creator receives is contingent on the number of views. On the average a YouTube creator gets paid eighteen dollar cent per view (Mint 2022). Viewers who are gained by a creator through creating engaging content. Meaning, content that creates a sense of intimacy and togetherness. Which are important factors in the community-making process, but thus also results in more views. Eventually resulting in more money. This vicious cycle is how intimacy is commodified in Mukbang videos on YouTube. This does not mean that intimacy and togetherness is not sincerely felt. Mukbang creator Steven Sushi once said in a question and answer video: "I feel like YouTube has.. I don't know, just brought so many more connections and relationships which is kind of cool." (YouTube video Steven Sushi,

posted 10 May 2017²²). Showing that he feels the intimacy and togetherness beyond the revenue model of his videos. Constable (2009) continues on this example of Steven Sushi, by explaining that the internet has changed our outlook on intimacy, as we now no longer have to fear geographical distance to be intimate (Constable 2009, 53). Similar to how Anderson (2006) argued that community feelings can exist within physical distance. On YouTube, the creator is the one making money, but that does not mean they do not get motivated by the intimate relationship they might develop through their YouTube career to make videos as well. Rammseth Mukbang, a relatively small Mukbang creator, talked in his first question and answer video about what his favourite part of having a Mukbang channel is:

“And with time, with some people [viewers] you develop more of a banter, more of an exchange, and you have your own jokes, and you write like more comments and they reply and you reply back. And it’s great. That’s what it’s all about, apart from the food of course. But yeah, that’s a great feeling.” (YouTube video Rammseth Mukbang, posted 19 April 2022²³).

Similar to the fact that viewers are also aware of this and even enjoy the intimacy. As for this video of Rammseth Mukbang, a lot of people enjoy that he took the time to get more personal with the viewers by filming this question and answer video, as exemplified by the following comment:

“Loved getting to know you more Rammseth! This was a great video! Those croissants looked amazing! Thanks for answering my question! Keep it up friend! ❤️❤️” (Comment on Rammseth Mukbang channel, 19 April 2022).

It seems that money does not affect the intimacy that is felt on YouTube because there are still connections made and communities created. Which is striking as connections and communities strengthen commodification. This says a lot about the current times, being able to make a living offline out of creating content and connecting to people online because the viewers are escaping the offline world through the online one.

This chapter has shown how an online community, such as the Mukbang community on YouTube, is imagined. The connections made online transcend offline interactions, because they are not limited to space and time. I can watch Mukbang videos on YouTube from any

²² [VEGAN SPAGHETTI MUKBANG + Q&A](#)

²³ [Q&A! GET TO KNOW ME! STARBUCKS VANILLA FRAPPUCCINO, CHOCOLATINE CROISSANT CHOCOLATE PASTRY MUKBANG](#)

Mukbang creator all over the world, at whatever time I want as long as they upload one. Although this does prevent live interaction from taking place most of the time, there is still a bond being created. Through interaction, usage of words, and bonding over food. There is even reciprocity in economic value, specifically through the commodification of intimacy. Which, as shown, is not necessarily a bad thing. It can give the viewer the power to give back to the creator, and the creator the power to invest in the community and relationships they are building.

Chapter 3: The Mukbang Anthropologist

For the second time, I received a comment on a video today. I was as excited to receive the notification as I was the first time. I wondered if the same person commented again or if it was someone completely new. Both would be great because the same person would intensify our connection and a new person would mean creating a new bond with a viewer. What made me especially excited was the fact that at first glance the comment seemed very long, so long it did not fit in the email and I had to go to YouTube to see the full comment. However, this second comment I received on my ninth video, a sushi video, was different. At least to me:

“This was was definitely a delicious feast not bad at all I gotta try sushi when I get a chance never had it. Like your style already uncut and natural mukbangs are the best. Lol²⁴ only thing missing was a few good burps to seal the meal which u can do in a mukbang ya know its natural, in fact the louder the burps are the better let's u know the food is good 😊 🍴👍. Anyway awesome job on this can't wait for more 😊 👍 100”

Yes, I make natural and uncut Mukbang videos. This is something I deliberately do, this is who I want to be on YouTube. I do not see myself as a YouTube star or an entertainer that could create more staged videos or create videos with a staged personality. I am a researcher making Mukbang videos, and I want to experience the world of Mukbang for research purposes. This is also the reason why I make natural and uncut Mukbang videos. I feel that making them in this slow way fits my personality the best, and showing my personality was something I aimed for because of my initial research focus. By keeping my personality true to myself, I hoped that I could connect with viewers that would watch my videos because they wanted to eat with me. Viewers who potentially could become participants because of the connection we would establish. I was surprised that someone noticed that I used this style as well. It made me feel understood. However, the burp comment threw me off. Of course, I will not act as if I never burp, it is something natural the body needs to get rid of. Therefore I burp when I am home or alone since there are social norms, and burping is considered a violation of one in western society. The whole comment does make me wonder: What does burping say about who I am as a Mukbang creator? How does it impact how people see me? If keeping burps in my videos makes me come across as more natural, I like to keep them in but emphasising burps when one naturally happens feels unnatural to me. Besides, the comment

²⁴ LOL means Laugh Out Loud. An online expression to express that you are laughing.

implies the harder the burps the better the content, but does that mean better for me as a content creator or better for them as a watcher? If I just start doing things for the viewers, how authentic is my online identity then? On the other hand, what if I have viewers who see burping as a way to appreciate the food? A real possibility since people all around the world can see my videos, what if I seem rude to them if I do not burp? What does it even mean to be someone who burps, and what does it mean to not be one? One thing I am quite sure of is that before I started my Mukbang journey, I never expected to have to reflect on my burping behaviour.

This chapter discusses the self by discussing the online self, but also its relation to the offline self. Only, I start with a reflection on culture online, to discuss the difference between online culture and offline culture. At the same time, I question if offline culture can even be seen as something separate from the online culture. Followed by discussing the self, and how the self is influenced by others. Lastly, I discuss my identification with Mukbang concerning the Mukbang community and extreme Mukbang videos.

Culture in an online context

While I have been referring to the fact that the internet is a global space in which many different people and cultures come together throughout this thesis, I wonder if holding on to the idea of different cultures is not an offline worldview used in the online world. That is why I want to consider the following quote from Boellstorff:

“virtual worlds have unique characteristics and social significance that does not hinge on a direct relationship to the actual world.” (Boellstorff 2008, 238).

Is there even a difference in online cultures based on nationality, ethnicity, and cultural background? Or do these differences only exist offline? Are the only cultural differences that matter online, the different online cultures that exist? Meaning, that the Mukbang community differs from the gaming community on YouTube and that difference defines the culture of an online community. Therefore the Mukbang community is not about western norms and standards nor based on South-Korean culture. It is a culture on its own, a culture that appreciates burping as it is connected to the food experience of the creator and the viewer. Not because it is connected to offline cultural norms. Something that could arise because so many cultures come together online, that they eventually cancel each other out. Looking specifically at YouTube Burgess and Green (2018) explain that dismissing offline cultural differences and creating a platform with its own culture, based on a sense of community and

creativity, is the core business of YouTube (Burgess and Green 2018, 126). They continue with the following quote:

“YouTube remains a potential enabler and amplifier of cosmopolitan cultural citizenship – a space in which individuals can represent their identities and perspectives, engage with the self-representations of others, and encounter cultural differences” (Burgess and Green 2018, 129).

A quote that supports my argument. YouTube is such a large and global platform that it allows everyone with an internet connection to be part of it. By everyone being able to share everything, it has become a culture of its own. People are not limited to their own culture, and can even transcend it. However, I will not act as if different cultures and differences in culture are completely dismissed online. In the end, I am a Dutch person, and being Dutch influences my perspective. In my offline western world view, burping is not seen as appropriate. This not only affected me before I received my second comment, because of my cultural background I did not even consider burping in my videos as I also do not behave in such a way in the offline world, but it also affected me in the way I understood the comment. Beforehand I did not expect that anyone would actually want to hear burps in Mukbang videos. It did not cross my mind, because it is not considered normal behaviour for me. Even if I consciously want to leave my offline cultural background behind, as I step into the online world, it still defines me and how I see the world. Unintentionally or not.

Mazzarella (2004) has written about culture from the perspective of globalization, to which the online world is closely linked, stating that due to globalization the differences in culture have never been so clear, while at the same time authenticity is hard to find as cultures intertwine (Mazzarella 2004, 347). By watching Mukbang videos I can see different cultures and their eating behaviours, and I can see how they differ from mine. Being able to understand the difference also makes me able to imitate this behaviour, leading to the question of cultural appreciation or cultural appropriation. Are the ramen and the dumpling video I recorded considered an ode to the cultural background Mukbang videos have? Or did I appropriate Korean culture by taking Korean food, the Korean format of Mukbang video, and using the name Mukbang while being a non-Korean person? At the same time, as Mazzarella (2004) said, due to globalization cultures flow together. I have eaten ramen and dumplings before I started my YouTube channel because food has crossed land borders. Besides, I used these foods in a video because they were a convenient choice as they are cheap and easy to prepare. I did not think about the relation between the foods and the origin of Mukbang videos

when I decided to film these videos. I also talked with Abeo, the man from Nigeria I spoke to on Facebook chat, about this:

“I love mukbangs being done with Nigerian food. I think it’s the most recent and latest trend in the mukbang industry now. Millions of videos of a lot of people trying out the Nigerian food because of the hype and they get to love it very much and end up eating more than they thought they would” (Facebook chat Abeo, 11 April 2022).

Abeo sees the acceptance of his culture, or at least the food culture, as positive. People who are not from Nigeria can also share their appreciation for the Nigerian cuisine. However, striking about this comment is that he acknowledges Nigerian food as a trend and a hype in the Mukbang world, which raises the question: do these people actually appreciate Nigerian food, or do they appropriate the culture because it is only used as a trend? Yet, one does not exclude the other. Something can be a trend and cultural appreciation at once.

Culture online is a concept and research on its own, but I could not write my thesis without reflecting on it as my research taps into this framework. As Agre (1999) wrote:

“Gibson famously defined cyberspace as a space apart from the corporeal world a hallucination. But the Internet is not growing apart from the world, but to the contrary is increasingly embedded in it.” (Agre 1999, 1).

The online world is a big space, in which many people come together. Although online cultures are created, they are still a reaction to the offline world. Meaning that wanting to dismiss cultural differences can be seen as a counter-reaction to how cultural differences are dealt with in the offline world. Leading to people who want to unite online no matter where the other is from. However, culture can be fluid between the online world and the offline one. After I uploaded my second sushi video, which was my thirteenth video, I asked the person who left the burp comment where they were from after they commented again on my video. They said that they were from South Carolina in the United States (Fieldnotes, 31 March, 2022). Although I have never been there, and I have not studied how people in South Carolina think about burping, the United States is considered part of the western world. The burp comment is therefore not necessarily related to the norms this person follows in the offline world. Again, it could just be related to the online culture of Mukbang, to which burping may belong as part of food enjoyment. Perhaps the Mukbang culture is in fact influenced by South

Korean culture in the offline world, making burping part of it as it is normalised in South Korea. Maybe it is both, maybe it is none.

The self

Before I can reflect on myself I should ask, what does it even mean to be yourself? According to Edwardes (2019), typical of the anthropological approach to the self is how social it is. Interaction is needed to create a self. Therefore, the self is never separated from the group, whatever that group may be. The self is socially defined, formed by both the group's opinion of the individual and the individual's expression of the group (Edwardes 2019, 27). In the case of Mukbang, the group the identity is related to is the Mukbang community. The internet has become more and more a place of social interaction. This is somewhat contradicting, as we are more in need of the internet to socialise because we are spending a lot of time alone looking at a screen. This contradiction creates a need to retribalize (Turkle 1997, 178). A need to connect, a need to be part of a group or tribe as Turkle would say, because we need others to define ourselves since the self is social and therefore part of a group. Looking back at my fieldwork period, I can definitely see that the words of others impacted the way I saw myself or wanted to present myself. As the vignette showed, because someone commented about the burping I started reflecting on it. If such a comment was never made I would not have thought about it as reflectively as I did. This is consistent with Ewing's (1990) argument that the self is constantly renewed based on stimuli from the inside and outside. Yes, there is always an overarching self. There is always a part of yourself that is identifiable by others, but we do shift ourselves based on others (Ewing 1990, 258-259). This is also what Boellstorff sees happening in the virtual world of the game *Second Life*²⁵, people who play the game *Second Life* feel free to identify online differently from their offline selves. This can also be an important part of the online world for some, to be able to be a version of yourself that is different from the person you are in real life. Some players of the game may even feel that their online version of themselves is more real because their identity has different limitations than their offline identity. In the online world they can for example be more outgoing without feeling social anxiety or without being held back by their shy nature. This even leads to people feeling more confident about who they are online than offline, which can seep into the real world (Boellstorff 2008 119-121). Creating Mukbang videos made me understand the friction between the online self and the offline self. As mentioned in my first vignette, I am an

²⁵ *Second Life* is a 3D online game that reflects the offline world through the possibility to create a life in a virtual one.

introverted person but this does not mean I am always shy to talk. However, being the only person that can talk in a ten to sometimes twenty-five-minute video can be a lot, especially because there is a lack of interaction. I strongly felt that when recording a video I played the role of YouTuber and Mukbang creator, forcing myself to show more of my talkative side in the videos. A player of the video game *Second Life* said: “I think that online activity is roleplay in every sense, even those who aren’t roleplaying, because people just suppress certain aspects of their personalities and accentuate others.” (Boellstorff 2008, 119). A quote that reflected true on me whilst creating my videos. When uploading fifteen minutes of myself through a Mukbang video, I wanted to make sure these fifteen minutes I showed were the best version of me. I suppressed the introvert in me and I accentuated the nice, talkative, relaxed version of me. All characteristics that are part of my overarching self, only I adapted myself to the situation of creating a Mukbang video and to the people who will be watching them.

This is something we all do. We all use different versions of ourselves in different situations. Edwardes (2019) even distinguishes seven types of the self. All the seven selves are part of who you are or how you are seen by others, but there are four I want to discuss more thoroughly: the social self, the self-model, the cultural self, and the projected self. The social self is described by Edwardes (2019) as the initial self that we are conscious of. It is the self I am thought to be by others. However, that does not mean that others define you, but you take the view of others into perspective as well (Edwardes 2019, 164-166). Especially when the perspectives of others matter, in the case of my Mukbang channel for views and interaction, it becomes important how others see me. Of course, I could still be a Mukbang creator even if people would not watch my videos, but I believe that the goal of posting such a public video of yourself eating is to connect with others. If people do not like me or see me as a Mukbang creator they will not watch my videos or interact with me. Which would be a loss, as receiving comments and interacting with viewers helped me with understanding my role as Mukbang creator better. As I wrote in a previous vignette, the viewers became real once a comment was left. I became more real as a Mukbang creator, it felt as if my role was acknowledged because others acknowledged my existence through comments. It helped my self-model, which is the self I think I am (Edwardes 2019, 164). Although I struggled with my identification as a Mukbang creator, of which the negative identification is discussed in the next session, I also had moments where I did like making Mukbang videos and I even missed it as I did not record one. Creating Mukbang videos taught me more about myself. I can also be a person who creates Mukbang videos on YouTube that are appreciated by others. I can

use different worlds to highlight different sides of me, which fits the self-model that is like an amoeba, constantly changing its shape (Edwardes 2019, 167). The cultural self is the self I struggled the most with. This self is also influenced by others like the social self, but it is a representation of the ideal person in a specific culture, the best version of the person that they can be (Edwardes 2019, 175). During my three months of fieldwork the hardest part was finding my cultural self within the context of Mukbang culture. I see the world of Mukbang on YouTube as an online culture, but I could not figure out which standards and values this culture contained. That is why I did not know how to react to the burp comment. I did not know what was expected of me as a Mukbang creator, so I held onto the western norms I was raised by. This intertwining between the online world and the offline world made it even harder to understand what the ideal person was. Toon van Meijl (2008) wrote about how in the present world we are continually traveling through different cultural landscapes. Because of this, people understand that the self can also have aspects that do not fit the whole, as he states: “the pursuit of unity in the self is an illusion.” (van Meijl 2008, 182). I do not have to completely identify with myself as a Mukbang creator and the behaviour that goes with it. Therefore the friction I had with this role is not saying everything about who I am and what the Mukbang culture is, but is an interesting observation about my experience. Being aware of this friction probably also comes from the projected self, which is a combination of how I see myself internally and what people anticipate of me (Edwardes 2019, 178). Being aware of who I am made me also aware of who I am not, and something I feel like I am not is being a YouTuber. It does not suit me. Although I was in fact a Mukbang creator by creating my channel and uploading videos, being a YouTuber is not only about the literal act of uploading a video on the platform which makes you a Mukbang creator. To me, it is also about sharing enjoyment because it convinces people that I like creating Mukbang videos. People that I need to keep my channel alive, but mostly because I needed the data. That is why the one week I was not in the right mindset to record two Mukbang videos I did not. I wrote in my diary:

“This week I wanted to make two Mukbang videos. However, I just did not feel quite like it. I did record one Mukbang video, but I just could not put myself to recording another one. Maybe the introvert in me was just not having it.” (Diary, 26 February 2022).

I could have recorded two videos, where in one I would have really low energy, but that is not how I wanted to be seen. I also believed that that was something my viewers did not want to see as well. If you click on a Mukbang video you probably do not expect a low-energy

grumpy creator. Therefore I chose not to be one. Although it is also part of who I am offline, I felt like it was not part of me in the role of an online Mukbang creator. This may contradict the natural content I wanted to make, but not being in the right mood is not necessarily the natural me. We all have off days or off moments, but that does not mean that those moments are the key to our personality.

Even if I create a Mukbang video equivalent to how I see myself in the present and people enjoy it, this could still contradict my future self. Of course, you can always delete videos from YouTube or make them private, but often the pleasure of YouTube is in the possibility to watch footage of someone over the years. Due to this, a YouTube creator is not only concerned with their present self and if the video they created fits their self-image. YouTube creators are also self-aware of their future selves, who might be different from the person recording a video in the present (Wesch 2009, 24). This is something I recognize, as I was not only thinking about how I wanted to portray myself on YouTube in the moment, but I was also thinking about how these videos might affect me once the research was over. This is eventually the reason why I made my own Mukbang videos private. When my fieldwork was finished, I did not feel comfortable with having a Mukbang creator version of me so publicly on the internet. Yes, I was a Mukbang creator during those three months, but I am self-aware enough to know that creating Mukbang videos is not the career path for me. That's why I did not want to have a version of myself online that I do not completely support.

Being a Mukbang creator

Besides creating my own content and being a version of me based on the interaction (or lack of it) and imagined viewers I had on my own channel, I also was a Mukbang creator, like all the other Mukbang creators who posted Mukbang videos on YouTube. A part of my identity I struggled with during my time on YouTube. I wrote in my diary once:

“I see myself as a Mukbang creator differently than I do see myself as me. I find comfort in the role of researcher and that I am making and posting Mukbang videos as one. Instead of someone who is making Mukbang videos in general. Not that there is something wrong with Mukbang creators, I just do not feel like I am part of that group.” (Diary, 27 February 2022).

Although I was in fact part of the Mukbang community by creating Mukbang videos, I still did not feel like I was. Why could I not let myself be identified with this group? I think a big part of me wanting to distance myself from this group was because of how people from

outside the group saw Mukbang creators. In an attempt to talk to more people about Mukbang, I started doing video elicitation interviews with people who never watched a Mukbang video by Mukbang creators. During these interviews, I showed them two Mukbang videos and after we watched them I asked them questions. The people I interviewed were all people I knew in the offline world, and maybe because of that, they did not react mildly to the concept of Mukbang. The Dutch term *onsmakelijk* which translates to unappetizing is used in all six interviews multiple times, as illustrated by the following quote by Jacquisha, my twenty-seven-years-old friend who I introduced to the phenomenon of Mukbang:

“I thought it was an unappetizing person, the dish did not look tasty, he stuffed it in as if he hadn't eaten for three weeks, unappetizing teeth and the way of eating. Nothing else was said either, so you're very focused on him eating like this with his mouth open and making too much noise... No.” (Jacquisha, interview, 8 March 2022).

As the previous sections showed, the self is often based on others. This is why you may understand how such comments affected my identity as a Mukbang creator. I did not want people to view me as unappetizing as these participants viewed the Mukbang creators. This is also why I never shared my YouTube channel with any friends or family, and I disliked it when my family found my channel on their own. On one hand, I wanted to appeal to the Mukbang world, as this is where my research focus was. I wanted to get in contact with that world, so I wanted to behave like I was part of it. I saw food enjoyment as an important factor for creating good Mukbang videos, and table manners as less so. On the other hand, I was still me and I felt like my offline self did not align with the online self I was trying to portray. Every time I finished recording a Mukbang video and looked back at my video to see if everything was all right, I was always immediately disgusted by my eating behaviour. While filming the videos I did not mind, I was focused on the online world and the Mukbang community that was going to see the video and were going to appreciate the video. Only I noticed that once I was no longer recording, my empathy for the only world immediately decreased. I was not only physically in the offline world, but mentally as well and the way I ate did not fit the western offline world where people expect you to eat properly. While in the online world of Mukbang what is seen as proper behaviour is different. Mukbang videos in which cutlery is used are rare, because food enjoyment is an important value. A value that apparently goes together with eating with your hands on the online world of Mukbang.

However, the opinion of others is not the only reason that I did not fully identify with the Mukbang community and with being a Mukbang creator. It also comes from my understanding of their opinion. Before any video elicitation interview I did, I already watched multiple Mukbang videos myself. A lot of them were extreme Mukbang videos because extreme Mukbang videos are so present on YouTube. I did not like watching them, because I also found a lot of them unappetizing. That is partly the reason why I wanted to create as normal content as possible on my channel. Returning to the offline cultural background, there is a well-known Dutch expression that translates to: act normal then you are already crazy enough²⁶. Which probably unconsciously also played along with this choice. I am used to acting more modestly, that is why I have taken this with me online as well. In this way my videos did not only suit me offline, but they also suited who I wanted to be on YouTube. As mentioned in the introduction, my initial research focus was Mukbang videos and loneliness. Therefore, the videos I wanted to make were not only about the food but mostly about me, because I wanted to become someone people wanted to eat with. However, as my shift focused my persona also shifted on YouTube. Over time I became more tempted by the views extreme Mukbang had. I also wanted to have more views, because I felt that more views would lead to more data. That is why I allowed myself to experiment with different Mukbang content, as I recorded two sushi Mukbang videos, a donut Mukbang, and a Subway Mukbang. I even thought about recording a McDonald Mukbang myself, a common Mukbang video among the extreme content. What stopped me from going overboard with the extreme Mukbang content was me. I asked myself: do I really want to overlook who I am for the viewer? Yet I see this happening on YouTube. I saw Mukbang creators override personal boundaries because the self became subordinate to the public persona. Mukbang creator Steven Sushi explained in a video called “Goodbye to the Mukbang Community” how his online identity, as an extreme Mukbang creator, impacts his offline identity as well:

“Sometimes I think about like what I’m doing to my body every single day. Waking up to eat.. and it’s more than that. There is.. it messes with your mind. People think Mukbang don’t messes with your mind, but to me I’m realising it, it has kind of.. if you don’t have that balance and you let the food take over you, it will take over you.” (YouTube video Steven Sushi, posted 3 February 2020²⁷).

²⁶ The expression in Dutch: doe maar normaal dan doe je al gek genoeg.

²⁷[Goodbye to the Mukbang Community](#)

This brings us to another self Edwardes (2019) describes, the actual self. The actual self is who we physically are. We are not always aware of this self, but we also have a body that belongs to us (Edwardes 2019, 165). Although Steven Sushi speaks more about how his mind is influenced by the online world, it is also the behaviour he chases online that affects his body offline. After all, the mind can wander between worlds, but our body stays in the same place. As Turkle said: “When we step through the screen into virtual communities, we reconstruct our identities on the other side of the looking glass.” (Turkle 1997,177). We can mentally try to change or be someone else, but we cannot change our actual self in the same way.

Identity is a social construct, this is not different online than offline. Although the way we interact online is different due to the often lack of face-to-face communication, we still value the way others see us. How others see us online can be a challenge to understand, because people from all sorts of cultural backgrounds can respond to you. Sometimes leading to blurred lines of what is part of the culture online and what is influenced by someone’s culture offline. Similar to the self, you are not a completely different person just because you are behind a screen. However, being in a new environment with different interactions, values, and norms, can lead to a new understanding of who you are or who you want to be. This chapter showed how online and offline are inseparably intertwined concepts that teach us about ourselves and each other.

Conclusion

“so the actual world will not become irrelevant as it becomes possible to live parts of our lives online.” (Boellstorff 2008, 237).

The emergence of the social media phenomenon Mukbang has shown how our contemporary world is changing. The online world has evolved the way we connect, the way we form and maintain communities, how we escape our offline lives, and how we see ourselves including our flaws and our potential. As Boellstorff said, this does not mean that our offline life has lost its value, it means that we get to live another one as well. As long as we take it, as long as we adjust to it. Throughout this thesis, I have studied this online life, not by separating it from offline life but by looking at the entanglement of the online and offline world. It was the anthropological lens in combination with my autoethnographic research method that allowed me to study this in relation to community-making processes and the self. All in all this thesis aimed to answer the following research question: *how are communities and the self shaped through the online world of Mukbang videos on the social media platform YouTube?* To simply answer this question, community and the self are shaped in the online world of Mukbang on YouTube through the existence of the offline world. In chapter one this was shown through the many reasons why people watch Mukbang videos. People come to the online world, as they are limited by the offline one. You can escape boredom offline, by getting entertained online. You can (try to) stop feeling alone offline by joining a community online. Chapter two discussed how important interactions and words are for an online community, but this certainly also matters in the offline world. Only, I am selling the online world short if I pretend it is just an online version of the offline world. The online world is constant, once I am home alone I am still able to research others and communicate with them. Besides, the online world is global, it reaches and impacts more people than someone could do in the offline world. I argue in chapter three, that the global aspects impact community feelings online because there is not a shared cultural background. Everybody can come together online, and just like in the offline world, the connection is based on similar likings and interests. Creating cultures in which everybody can feel included. While at the same time everybody does come from a different offline culture, which may influence the way they react to or understand interactions, actions, and processes that are taking place online. Someone who burps online is maybe apricated in the online culture of Mukbang, but without this online cultural understanding you will react to this through the eyes of your offline world. Which probably will differ for a Dutch person than for someone from Japan. This also brings us to a

limitation of this research, it would have been valuable to talk to members of the Mukbang community, and discuss how they reflect on the difference in culture online and offline. A population I had trouble finding, even with my own Mukbang channel on YouTube. That the internet is so global also influences the self, as discussed in chapter three as well. The self is based on others because the self is a social construct. We are now in contact with way more people than we ever were, therefore the stimuli we receive and partly base our self on have extended and are never ending. I even question if you can be true to your self in this context because there are too many stimuli that exist. However, it is not about defining the difference between the online and offline world. It is about being able to understand that the two are intertwined in our current day and age. We can not fight it, we just have to make them coexist, and if we do we can live in both.

Regarding other research limitations, I would have wanted more time. If I knew that I wanted to do autoethnographic research from the start, I would probably have done things differently or at least more focused. During my fieldwork I was still uncertain at times about where my research was taking me, leaving me with fieldnotes on different aspects than I have used. Besides limitations, I also saw new opportunities arise during my fieldwork. I was very much intrigued by the phenomenon of extreme Mukbang content, which is a fascinating research object as well. My conversation with Tiana from New York made me especially reflect on future research ideas, as she mentioned that she also wanted to start a YouTube channel. It would be very interesting to discuss the self with someone who goes from viewer to creator, and how this change affected her self over time. Unfortunately, I did not have the time to act on this. Tiana herself was also not ready to participate in such a context, as she was still saving money to buy a camera to record her videos. That is why, I consider my research just the start of all that is possible in researching the phenomenon of Mukbang on YouTube, teaching us about the ever-growing online world.

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