Conforming and Resisting: Going Beyond the Male Gaze in Mukbang

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Abstract. The paper will present and analyze internet Mukbang, a video-recorded broadcast that portrays a "host" eating large amounts of food, as a feminist pop cultural artifact. First, the paper will demonstrate the importance of internet Mukbang by showing how it meets the definition of pop culture laid out by John Storey. Next, this paper will consider whether Mukbang is a liberating or a regressive form of entertainment, with reference to feminist terminology referenced by Andi Zeisler. The paper will be principally concerned with the idea of the "male gaze" and how it does or does not manifest Mukbang. Ever since the term was introduced by John Berger and later explored by Laura Mulvey, it has become an important focus of gender and film studies. The theory posits that women in film are presented through the eyes of hetrosexual men as passive objects of desire; thus the viewer is forced to look upon women as objects. Analyzing the YouTube channels of HunniBee and HyuneeEats, two representative female Mukbang broadcasters, the paper will conclude that Mukbang both conforms to and resists the male gaze and serves as a platform in which hosts might even cater to a "female gaze", prioritizing a sense of community and companionship.

Keywords: Mukbang, Male gaze, Feminism, Female gaze.

1. Introduction

How women are represented in the media is a matter of deep concern for our society because these depictions powerfully impact male and female audiences alike. Feminist media studies draw on a long tradition of feminist scholarship. Ground-breaking feminist texts including Simone De Beauvoir's book *The Second Sex* introduce the idea that society sees women as the "other" [1]. In her work, she highlights the impact of fiction such as fables and myths, and how they contribute to the ideas of womanhood. Betty Friedan was concerned with women's depictions in magazines because she understood the imagination projected on American housewives as the perfect mother. Her book *The Feminine Mystique* tries to unfold how first-wave feminism regressed and why women were falling back on more traditional roles in the household in post-war America [2]. In the past several decades, questions concerning women's representation in the media have entered the mainstream and have provoked a heated conversation between scholars. Susan Sontag and her impactful *Notes on 'Camp'* dissect the phenomenon of "camp" and how it connects to gender expression [3]; Arlie Hochschild who coined the term "emotional labor" links to female representation on reality TV [4]. Andi Zeisler's book, *Feminism and Pop Culture,* analyzes female representation in media, citing the work of earlier feminist scholars and gender theorists to demonstrate their relevance to today's cultural studies [5].

With the rise of the internet, new types of media and culture are consumed; there is more user-generated content that is widely distributed which differs from past generations. This phenomenon is particularly popular among young people. In the United States, "85 percent of 13 to 17 year-olds use YouTube", "72 percent use Instagram" and "69 percent" of the age group use Snapchat [6]. According to recent data, children between the ages of 4-18 usually spend 82 minutes per day on TikTok and 75 minutes per day on YouTube [7]. However, it is not only young children who consume this new type of internet media; adults of all ages are also increasingly turning to the internet and social media for entertainment. The content people enjoy on YouTube and other platforms are diverse; channels with millions of followers are devoted to makeup tutorials, celebrity gossip, video game live streaming, and much more. These forms of entertainment will be with us for the foreseeable future, so they are

worthy of cultural analysis. How are women depicted across the new media? And are the depictions conforming to patriarchal social norms or resisting?

In the past decade, Mukbang, also known as "eating broadcast", has been explosively popular as a form of media on the internet consumed by millions. In a Mukbang broadcast, a host or "BJ" (short for "Broadcast Jockey") sits and faces the camera and eats large portions of food. Each BJ brings a slightly different style of their broadcast, presenting different types of personalities and looks to the audience. Though Mukbang intersects with various dimensions of cultural analysis, this paper's main goal is to contextualize Mukbang as a feminist pop culture artifact and consider whether it is a liberating or a regressive form of entertainment. Examining the YouTube channels of two representative female BJs, this paper will situate Mukbang within Andi Zeisler's discussion of feminist pop culture, arguing that Mukbang both conforms to and resists the male gaze and conclude that it even may cater to a "female gaze" [5].

2. Why does Mukbang Matter?

2.1 Is Mukbang a Pop Culture Artifact?

At first glance, Mukbang may seem like an unusual and niche subculture. Some might ask why this subculture is worthy of analysis relative to more traditional forms of pop culture, such as television, radio, and film. After all, Mukbang is not part of the cultural conversation in the same way as other pop culture phenomena like HBO's Game of Thrones or Disney's Marvel franchise. In order to demonstrate the importance of Mukbang, and its worthiness in our consideration, the section below will demonstrate how Mukbang debatably meets all six definitions of popular culture in John Storey's *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*.

Storey writes that first, pop culture is "simply culture which is widely favored or well-liked by many people" [8]. The massive viewership of Mukbang speaks for itself as the most famous BJs have over 14 Million subscribers. Mukbang is a global phenomenon; its popularity began in South Korea in 2010 but its popularity expanded quickly to other countries. The Chinese term for "Mukbang", "Chibo", has been searched 28.4 billion times on Douyin, the Chinese TikTok [9]. Storey's second definition of popular culture concerns class and sophistication. He writes that popular culture is "culture that is left over after we have decided what is high culture" [8]. No one would argue that people filming themselves eating noodles would constitute high culture, a designation that is usually reserved for opera, literature, and other high-brow art forms. Debatably, Mukbang might be considered a new form of digital folk culture as it represents the thinking of the common people. Storey's next definition concerns the position of pop culture within capitalism; he states that popular culture is "hopelessly commercial culture" and is "produced for mass consumption" [8]. Mukbang is unmistakably commercial, often with the BJ explicitly trying and promoting new food products in their videos. Mukbang also conforms with Storey's fourth definition of popular culture: "culture which originates from 'the people'...for the people" [8]. Mukbang BJs are indeed ordinary people who create their content for an audience who finds them relatable and worth watching. The next definition that Storey points out in his book is that popular culture is "a culture which no longer recognizes the distinction between high and popular culture" [8]. User-generated broadcasts resist the generalization of "high" and "low" cultures [8]. In Mukbang's case, a BJ eating a product live is a form of postmodern "blurring of the distinction between 'authentic' and 'commercial' culture" [8].

The final definition presented by Storey and the most relevant definition to this paper is the Gramscian understanding of pop culture as a "site of struggle between the 'resistance' of subordinate groups in society and the forces of 'incorporation' operating in the interest of dominant groups in society" [8]. Ideas particularly relevant to this discussion will be Gramsci's hegemony theory; hegemonies that I will consider in relevance to Mukbang will be the dominance of men and the weight of the male gaze in a patriarchal society. It is this understanding that will be most relevant to this paper when exploring Mukbang as a feminist medium that is a site of struggle between different ideals of female behavior.

2.2 Is Mukbang Anti-Feminist?

The origin of feminism can be traced back to the time of the French Revolution with the writing of Mary Wollstonecraft, which argued for the political equality of men and women and that women are equal to men but are held back by societal norms [10]. But modern feminism discourse was reignited with the post-war writings of Simone De Beauvoir. In her book *The Second Sex*, she argues that women are seen as the "other" in society, that men are seen as fully human, and that women are defined as the second-class sex in society [1]. She also argues that because culture and fables have transformed women into "the symbol of life", normal women are robbed of individuality [1]. American author Betty Friedan was also interested in the representation of women in culture and media, arguing that stories written in popular magazines push women towards a "cult of domesticity" as modern housewives in her book *The Feminine Mystique* [2].

In the last several decades, feminist theorists have tried to understand the means by which women are held inferior in society; one of the core concepts most discussed by feminist academics is the concept of "gaze". The term gaze was first used by French philosophers of the 20th century. Jean-Paul Sartre argued that gazing and being gazed at creates a power dynamic; that the gazer is looking at the one being gazed at as an object [11]. John Berger, an English art critic, first used the term "the male gaze" in order to describe the way in which male artists objectified the presence of women in advertising and European painting [12]. In 1975, British feminist film critic Laura Mulvey developed the concept of the male gaze further by connecting it to cinema [13].

In Andi Zeisler's book *Pop and Circumstance: Why Pop Culture Matters*, Zeisler explains that the "male gaze" is the idea that we see "images in art or on-screen" in a manner that "a man might… even if we are women" [5]. She cites John Berger, who writes that "the surveyor of women in herself is male: the surveyed female…[and] turns herself into an object…[and] a sight" [12]. Zeisler also references Laura Mulvey, who suggests that in media, "pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female…[and] women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact" [13]. Mulvey explains that the cameras of Hollywood movies tend to linger on the bodies of alluring actresses such as Marilyn Monroe as a surrogate for the gaze of a male protagonist.

3. The Male Gaze in Mukbang

The proposed dominance of the "male gaze" in media seems especially relevant to Mukbang, a genre that brings together pleasure and self-exhibition. In order to explore Mukbang as a feminist popular culture artifact, this paper will analyze two representative female BJ channels: HunniBee ASMR and HyuneeEats [14] [15]. By exploring the contradictions and nuances within their channels, this paper will be able to ground the discussion of feminism in Mukbang in specific evidence.

3.1 Contradictions in the Mukbang Channel of YouTuber HunniBee

HunniBee, a popular female BJ who has 8 Million subscribers on YouTube, generally has heavy makeup during her Mukbangs and her outfits are more attention-grabbing and match the color of the food in that episode [14]. Her videos are labeled "ASMR" (an acronym for "autonomic sensory meridian response"), meaning that the sounds of her eating will feature prominently on the audio track of the video to enhance audience pleasure [14].

In HunniBee's video, she appears to cater to the "male gaze" by creating an erotic spectacle. In this video, HunniBee wears a revealing purple top and glossy purple makeup matching an array of purple sweets she ingests in the broadcast [14]. She strokes and displays the food in a fetishizing way and portrays a giggly, funny persona [14]. At first glance, her appearance and movements look hypersexualized, and the erotic nature of the presentation feels aesthetically similar to a pornographic video. In this manner, she seems to be explicitly performing for the male gaze, creating an image of herself as an alluring sexual "object" eager to show her "to-be-looked-at-ness" [5]. Eating purple candy while wearing purple clothes, she has fashioned herself in a way that implies she might also be

the "product" that is consumed. Some of the comments beneath her video show that viewers, especially male viewers, appreciate her videos for her "beauty" in a sexual way. One individual wrote: "she needs to do her Onlyfans page with the way she teases us" [16]. It is clear that in some cases Mukbang is consumed like other more explicit erotic content and that BJs might fashion themselves to appeal to the male gaze in that context.

However, a thorough review of HunniBee's YouTube comments paints a more complicated picture of the audience and what they profess to enjoy about her performance. Most people comment about "how relaxing it" is and how "it puts them to sleep" [14]; female viewers applaud her for her color coordination, and some even admire her for her big appetite and how her stomach can handle so much sugar. The overall nature of the comments seems to contradict the idea that her content is merely a product fashioned for the "male gaze". Certain aspects of Mukbang seem to subvert or resist the "male gaze". Within the Asian culture where Mukbang first originated, women are expected to eat small portions delicately. Eating norms in America are also influenced by sizeism; because the ideal woman is thin and fit, women are expected to eat the types of food and the portion sizes that would allow them to keep a smaller body. Under these societal norms, eating is less about the woman's pleasure and enjoyment, instead, it demonstrates conformity to the male gaze. Thus HunniBee eating such a large portion of sugar in her video can be interpreted as a subversion of traditional expectations. She performs her enjoyment of the food, nodding happily and closing her eyes. Her transgressive performance might be catering to what Zeisler suggests could be called a "female gaze" [5]. From this point of view, HunniBee is not creating a performance to spark male arousal, instead, she is creating a liberating spectacle. Following, her matching outfit, makeup, and color-coordinated candy constitute a "deliberate camp" which, using Susan Sontag's words, is a "passionate failure of the serious" [3]. For viewers who are bound to follow patriarchal customs with regard to food and manners (for instance, the pressure to order a salad on the first date), seeing HunniBee eat for her own frivolous pleasure can offer an escape from reality. HunniBee's channel shows that Mukbang is a playful genre that might amuse the male gaze but is ultimately not bound by rigid gender expectations.

3.2 The "Female Gaze" in the Mukbang Channel of YouTuber Hyunee

The notion that female BJs might not be conforming exclusively to the "male gaze" can be seen through the broadcasts of other female BJs who employ a wide range of appearances and styles. One BJ that has become popular within the last few years is Hyunee, the female BJ of the channel hyuneeEats which has 1.7 Million subscribers on YouTube [15]. Unlike HunniBee, who wears dramatic color-coordinated makeup, Hyunee portrays a more normal and approachable look [14][15]. She's open and relatable and discusses her daily life with the audience, which brings a sense of companionship. Unlike HunniBee's giggly funny persona, Hyunee has a more modest, charismatic persona. Hyunee's movements are less stylized and are not overtly erotic [15].

The way Hyunee interacts with the audience also serves as evidence that she is not conforming to the male gaze. She interacts with the audience as if she and the audience are friends, talking about her life that day or about the new trends she likes [15]. For example, at the beginning of one of her videos, she explains that she has just arrived home from a workout at the gym [15]. Again, different from HunniBee, the food that she eats is more commonly eaten in daily life. In one episode, she eats "nuclear fire noodles" (ie. Spicy ramen) topped with fried eggs [15]. Her videos' comments do not typically sexualize her. Instead of viewing her with the "male gaze", her viewers adopt what we might call a "female gaze". Her viewers identify with her, connecting to her lifestyle, some congratulating her on her pregnancy, and some relating to her stage in pregnancy. One commenter responded to her urge to eat spicy food, writing: "That's pretty much all I craved when I was pregnant" [17]. Hyunee's videos do not objectify her; instead, she has dominance over what she eats, what she wears, and how she portrays herself to the audience. Her choice of persona and comments from her viewers support the idea that she is not conforming to the male gaze.

While HunniBee's colorful style and Hyunee's approachable aesthetic are rich texts to study, there are other thousands of female BJs whose videos portray many personalities and mannerisms to the audience. BJs can choose from different portrayals of persona that would cultivate a specific audience. How they choose to attract an audience and the political implications of their performance, for instance, whether they subvert the male gaze or conform, is ultimately in the hands of each BJ.

4. What is being objectified in Mukbang? The BJ or the Food?

In feminist theory, the idea of the male gaze positions women's body as objects of desire. Analyzing Mukbang as a feminist or anti-feminist medium is complicated by the fact that within the screen, the host is not the only potential object of desire: there is also the food. In Mukbang, the food featured is typically popular and mouthwatering. In a typical Mukbang broadcast, around half of the screen is taken up with the food being eaten. For example, in Hyunee's "nuclear fire noodle with eggs" video from 2022, she sets up the camera and lays out the food so that the audience is able to view the whole meal that she is about to eat [15]. She spreads the ramen out on a flat surface in the middle of the camera so it dominates our view [15]. She lights the shot so that the ramen's bright red color contrasts with the glossy fried eggs laid evenly on top [15]. The entire presentation is meant to highlight the allure of the food. In some broadcasts, the viewer can only see the bottom half of the BJ's face, focusing their attention solely on the food. The host is not the only object of desire in this spectacle; even if there was the "male gaze" present here, it is certainly accompanied by some other sort of gaze.

However, because the food is being consumed by the host, it may not be appropriate to consider them fully separate objects of desire. Debatably, both the host and the food are part of the same spectacle. As discussed above, HunniBee consciously demonstrates this idea by coordinating her outfit and makeup with the color of the sweets being eaten in her videos [14]. By doing so, she puts herself within the spectacle and turns herself into an object of desire along with the sweets. But HunniBee's style and presentation are rare; and most female BJs in terms of showcasing themselves are more similar to Hyunee's style, presenting themselves as an approachable person. Certain BJs play the role of a comedian, some as a gamer, or some as the audience's close friend. Because they differentiate themselves with their personalities, they draw viewers not by positioning themselves as objects of desire, but as a person, the audience would want to know in reality. As detailed above, YouTube commenters respond to BJs that differentiate themselves with personality, in this case Hyunee, by showing interest in their personality and lives [17].

5. Conclusion

Given the ambiguities outlined in this paper, it is not reasonable to conclude that Mukbang as a medium is overly concerned with the presence of the male gaze. The many types of BJ, of all genders and presentations that are present in the industry, demonstrate that BJs have the choice of persona they portray to the audience. Since Mukbang is a very competitive and stylistically diverse industry, catering to the male gaze can be one of the many ways to achieve success. But as HunniBee's fans' comments reveal, what might at first seem like an erotic spectacle might be interpreted in different ways by different viewers [14].

Given that viewers are drawn to specific Mukbang BJs for their unique personality and presence, it might be productive not just to analyze Mukbang as a spectacle in which we try to analyze and interpret the meaning of the gaze, but as a ritual invoking community and companionship. The comments under many BJs' channels often reflect a sense of comradery and interpersonal connection. While this paper has been concerned with the broadcast itself, a revealing line of questioning is how, when, and why viewers watch Mukbang. In a journal article analyzing Mukbang's impact on public health, the author points out that one of the main factors why Mukbang has become such a large trend is because it is "an alternative way to satisfy the yearning for communal eating" and it pacifies

loneliness [18]. Many people watch Mukbang when they are eating or when they are craving food. These motivations for watching Mukbang may undercut the notion that Mukbang as a genre is ruled by the "male gaze".

Because this paper qualitatively assesses the broadcasts of two representative women BJs, a more quantitative research approach performed on a larger pool of female BJs could have aided this paper in exploring what makes certain BJs popular. For instance, future studies might explore the most popular broadcasts across the internet and conclude what sorts of broadcasts attract viewers and why.

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