

Mukbang influencer marketing and consumer engagement with food brands

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UNLV Journalism and Media Studies professors Linda Dam and Benjamin Burroughs during a mukbang. The pair, along with Anne Marie Basaran Borsai of University of Connecticut, published an article that examines how parasocial interaction with a mukbang social media influencer impacts advertising effectiveness and information credibility. Credit: Becca Schwartz/UNLV

Ever find yourself inexplicably sucked into (another!) video of social media influencer downing a massive feast of 100 different kinds of shrimp? You can't scroll past. And before you know it, you're craving crustaceans, making reservations at that new seafood restaurant, and searching for recipes.

We've got one word for you: mukbang.

And UNLV journalism and media studies professors Linda Dam and Benjamin Burroughs can explain why you're hooked on this particular type of video. Recently, the pair—along with Anne Marie Basaran Borsari of University of Connecticut—published their [research article](#) "(Over)Eating with our Eyes: An examination of Mukbang Influencer Marketing and Consumer Engagement with Food Brands" in the *Journal of Promotion Management*.

Mukbang is a video, typically found on YouTube and TikTok, in which a host chows down on a lot of [food](#) all while interacting with the audience. Popular mukbang influencers generally sprinkle in specific tactics aimed at developing parasocial interactions with their followers, according to Burroughs and Dam.

Parasocial relationships are non-reciprocal and typically developed with media personalities—the type of relationship where you think you really know someone even though you've never met them.

For example, the host, typically a paid influencer, will exaggerate the process of opening packages, loudly chew, and emphasize other sounds to create an ASMR experience. An "autonomous sensory meridian response" refers to the tingling or euphoric sensation brought on by specific stimuli—like fingernails tapping, crunching noises, or whispering.

They'll review the food they're eating in a one-way conversation with the audience.

About the Research

Dam and Burroughs conducted an [online survey](#) of 404 U.S. participants who are consistent mukbang video viewers. The researchers' survey tested for:

- Trustworthiness
- Information credibility
- Parasocial interaction
- Video attitudes
- Brand attitudes
- Behavioral intentions

Researchers asked respondents they trusted the influencers and whether the influencers provided believable information. They asked if the videos were dull or exciting and whether the brands featured in the videos were appealing or not. Participants were asked how likely they would eat similar food showcased in the video.

The study found that the higher the ratings of these indicators, the stronger the parasocial relationship, which helps an influencer's ability to sell a product and affects the brand's ability to become popular.

As a result of these parasocial relationships, the viewer feels connected to the influencer, has built a sort of intimacy with the influencer, will trust the influencer's recommendations, and will likely purchase and consume the product the influencer is selling.

What can society learn from the study?

The researcher's findings have practical implications for anyone who wants to be a social media food influencer and the brands who hire influencers. But more importantly, Burroughs says, it adds to the conversation about how society—including kids and adults—can become more media savvy.

"We want people to be informed and critical cultural consumers of this new form of content," Burroughs said. "I think it's an integral part of digital literacy so that people can understand the content they are consuming and understand why the person is creating the content, and who might be behind the production of that, and that there may be an economic interest or branded interest in why they're creating this content."

Dam said the study asks viewers to consider the psychological effects of mukbang and "to not normalize the amount people consume on there—that is part of the act of creating content" and not a behavior to emulate. "The study adds to the awareness of how so much social media consumption can potentially lead to really strong bonds with all those influencers could really impact your attitudes and behaviors."

As with other social media trends, it's not wrong to watch mukbang—it can be highly entertaining after all. But, Burroughs says, be aware that it is branded content and it's aimed at feeding your appetite. "This is part of the larger food branding advertising system that exists."

Burroughs and Dam said the study has takeaways for health and eating behavior experts, as well. Watching mukbang can result in overconsumption of unhealthy food.

In conclusion, Burroughs and Dam write in their study that "researchers have not only found that watching food-related social [media](#) posts can increase food consumption, but can [also] lead to negative health

behaviors." They point to previous research that shows "that Instagram use was associated with eating disorders, such as orthorexia nervosa, and obsession with healthy eating. Emerging research on mukbang revealed that mukbang viewing could lead to overconsumption."

More information: Linda Dam et al, (Over)Eating with Our Eyes: An Examination of Mukbang Influencer Marketing and Consumer Engagement with Food Brands, *Journal of Promotion Management* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/10496491.2023.2253244](https://doi.org/10.1080/10496491.2023.2253244)

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