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RESEARCH PAPER

The Impact of Watching Mukbang on Developing Risk of Eating Disorder Symptoms in Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the current research was to explore the relationship between watching Mukbang and developing the risk of eating disorder symptoms, and how personality traits play a moderating role in young adults The possible consequences of vicarious eating on dietary behavior and the role of personality factors between the variables have not been explored, which is why the current study focused on analyzing these relationships. A quantitative correlational survey was conducted on 101 participants aged 18 to 40. The scales used were the Mukbang Addiction Scale, Eating Attitude Test , and Big Five Personality Inventory. Results indicated a positive correlation between watching Mukbang and eating disorder symptoms; however, personality traits did not play a moderating role. This study helps clinical psychologists conceptualize cases and plan treatment with a new perspective. In future, sample from multiple cities of Paksitan could be inculcate to increase the generalizability of the result.

Keywords: Mukbang, Eating Disorder, Personality Trait

Introduction

Mukbang is the combination of two Korean words "meokneun" (eating) and "bangsong" (broadcast), has become a global trend where hosts eat large amounts of food while engaging with their audience (Evans, 2015). What began on South Korea's AfreecaTV quickly spread across the world, especially after gaining attraction on platforms like YouTube. In these videos, hosts are often seen consuming huge portions, eating extremely spicy dishes, and producing eating sounds—chewing, slurping, and crunching—that create a sensory-rich experience for viewers. Many of these sounds are associated with Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR), a soothing, wave-like sensation that typically starts on the scalp and moves down the neck and spine, triggered by soft audio-visual cues like gentle chewing or whispering (Poerio et al., 2018).

Although Mukbang may appear to be harmless entertainment—or even a comforting presence for those who dine alone—recent research suggests it could have deeper psychological effects. Studies indicate that regularly watching individuals consume large portions of food without visible health consequences can gradually alter viewers' perceptions of food, hunger, and body image (Bruno & Chung, 2017; Kern, 2014). While Mukbang might initially satisfy cravings vicariously, over time, this pattern can evolve into a maladaptive coping mechanism, potentially heightening emotional distress rather than alleviating it (Choe, 2019; Folkman & Lazarus, 1988).

Despite the increased exposure to Mukabng related content, its potential effect on psychological wellbeing and eating related attitude and behaviors are relatively underexplored within Pakistani context. The evidence based on current studies highlights a significant change in the dietary habits of young adults in Pakistan and overconsumption of processed food (Mahar, Warsi, & Shah, 2020). Moreover, studies shows that young adults

are more comparatvelyt vulnerable to developing eating disorder symptoms than other age group (Keski-Rahkonen & Mustelin, 2016; Udo & Grilo, 2018). These trends raise an essential question about how vicarious eating phenomenon like Mukbang might be influencing eating patterns among young adults.

Therefore, the present research aims to target the research gap by exploring the relationship between the intensity of watching Mukbang and the risk of developing eating disorder symptoms in young adults aged 18 to 40. Additionally, the moderating role of personality traits will be explored between the variables. The pattern of eating disorder symptoms such as binge eating, restrictive dieting, and an intense fear of weight gain, pose a significant risk to psychological and physical well-being (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The big 5 model of personality explains how five dimensions of personality (extraversion, neuroticism, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness) explains the role of individual differences in developing vulnerability to eating disorder disorders (McCrae & John, 1992).

The theoretical ground for current research was build upon the food-cue reactivity theory which states that repeated exposure to the conditioned cues related to the food have tendency to elicit the cephalic phase response (CPR) which leads towards the increase food craving and binge eating behavior (Jansen, 1998; Nederkoorn & Jansen, 2000). Additionally, Social learning theory explains how the individual learn behavior based on the pleasant and unpleasant consequences of an action perfomed by model (Bandura, 1977). The apparent joyful reaction of mukbanger can lead towards to the vicarious reinforcement for viewers which may lead towards maladaptive eating patterns. Lastly, the Predispositional Model emphasize that certain personalities traits are associated with the risk of unhealthy eating behaviors and symptoms of eating disorder(Levallius, 2018; Fassino et al., 2004).

Given the increase usage of digital media in Pakistan and research gap, there is a pressing need to better understand these dynamics by exploring how watching Mukbang is associated with the symptoms of eating disorder and how personality trait influences the strength of the relationship between predictor and criterion variable. The study will provide food for thought to other researcher in Pakistan and help clinical psychologist in conceptualizing the case of clients with eating disorder symptoms by giving them new dimension to view upon while building understanding about the case.

Literature Review

Mukbang is often seen as a harmless source of entertainment or comfort for viewers, however, growing research indicates the concerning impact of it on the eating behavior. According to Kircaburun et al. (2020), that the watching mukbangers with slim figure and no apparent health issue can promote binge eating. Similarly, Xu (2019) study shows that food displayed on the Mukbang channel can trigger the craving for the food shown on the screen, especially in population whose going through restrictive diet regime.

Several studies have suggested that Mukbang might lead to maladaptive eating habits, increased food consumption, and distorted views on body image and portion sizes (Bruno & Chung, 2017; Donnar, 2017; Hong & Park, 2018; Park, 2018; Shipman, 2019; Spence et al., 2019). Moreover, research by Choe (2019) and Woo (2018) shows that Mukbang fulfills the emotional need by providing the sense of companionship and source of emotional relief. However, reliance on mukbang as a coping mechanism could lead towards problem related with eating habits. Study conducted by Ling et al. (2022) shows that in China, frequent viewing of mukbang was linked to compulsive eating behaviors, late-night snacking and regular food delivery. Furthermore, a neurofeedback study by Jenging and Mohamad (2022) revealed that passive viewing influenced neural activity, which is associated with emotional eating and anxiety, indicating towards possible cognitive impact.

Research has shown that individuals concerned with weight or eating disorders are especially sensitive to food cues, often experiencing stronger urges to eat after exposure (Coelho et al., 2009; Cleoburry & Tapper, 2014; Sobik et al., 2005). The study by Meyer et al. (2015) and Reents and Pedersen (2021) indicates that even virtual cues are strongly related to increase food consumption and the reinforcement of binge tendencies. Furthermore, neuroimaging research shows that greater brain activation in response to food cues predicts lower success rates in weight loss programs (Murdaugh et al., 2012; Hermann et al., 2019). Additionally individuals with bulimia nervosa shows Strong emotional reactivity to food cues. (Schneppr et al., 2021).

In the context of Mukbang, viewers may model the behaviors of hosts who receive social recognition and pleasure from overeating (Vartanian et al., 2013). Research shows that the imitation of Mukbangers with attractive personalities can further increase the likelihood of imitation, impacting viewers' eating behaviors and self-image (Harrison, 2009; Erdogan, 1999; Atkin et al., 1984; Freiden, 1984).

Personality traits also play a critical role in shaping responses to food cues and media influence. The Predispositional Model suggests that certain traits—such as high neuroticism, impulsivity, and low conscientiousness—make individuals more vulnerable to disordered eating behaviors (Levallius, 2018; Fassino et al., 2004; Lilenfeld et al., 2006). Emotional eaters tend to have poor self-control and high impulsivity (Elfhag & Morey, 2008), while specific patterns emerge across different eating disorders: for instance, those with anorexia tend to show higher neuroticism and conscientiousness, while bulimics exhibit greater impulsivity (Fassino et al., 2002; Brown, Haedt-Matt, & Keel, 2011).

Recent studies also reveal cultural differences in how personality factors relate to eating behaviors. In recent study, Tang et al. (2021) found the strong correlation with addictive eating (AE) and personality traits like high impulsivity, increased extraversion and low agreeableness. Meanwhile, a study indicates that traditional and health-conscious diets were associated with higher openness, extraversion, and conscientiousness along with the lower level of neuroticism (Mõttus et al., 2012).

Taken together, the literature suggests that Mukbang can impact eating behaviors through a complex interplay of food-cue reactivity, social modeling, and individual personality traits. However, much of the existing research has focused on Western or East Asian populations, leaving a significant gap in understanding how these factors operate in the Pakistani context, where digital media consumption is rapidly growing alongside shifting dietary habits.

Material and Methods

In the current research quantitative correlational survey design was applied to explore the relationship between watching Mukbang content and the risk of developing eating disorder symptoms among young adults.

The sample consisted of 101 young adults between the ages of 18 and 40, recruited through convenience sampling from educational institutions and online platforms in Karachi, Pakistan. Participants were required to be regular users of social media and familiar with Mukbang content. Those participants who were fluent in English were included, as the questionnaire used in the current study was in English. Additionally, individual diagnosed with eating disorder were excluded to maintain the study's focus on general patterns rather than clinical populations.

The Mukbang Addiction Scale (Kircaburun et al., 2021) was used to measure the intensity of Muukbang watching. This scale includes several items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, assessing behaviors such as cravings, emotional reliance, and loss of control over

Mukbang consumption. In the present study, the internal consistency of the scale was acceptable (α = 0.66). Additionally, Eating Attitudes Test (EAT-26; Garner et al., 1982), a well-was used measure the risk of disordered eating behaviors and attitudes. The EAT-26 comprises 26 items scored on a 6-point scale, where higher scores reflect greater risk for eating pathology (α=0.88). The scale is divided into three subscales: Dieting scale (DS), Bulimia scale (BS) and Oral Control scale (OCS). Lastly, Personality traits were measured using the Big Five Inventory (McCrae & John, 1992), which captures five core dimensions of personality: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."

The approval was obtained from the ethics committee of the Institute of Professional Psychology. Participants were informed about the study's objectives, assured of confidentiality, and signed a written consent form before completing the survey.

Data was collected over a two-month period through a combination of physical distribution at universities and online circulation via Google Forms. The survey was structured in three parts, with participants first completing the Mukbang Addiction Scale, followed by the Eating Attitudes Test, and then the Big Five Inventory. The full survey took approximately 15 to 20 minutes to complete.

Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were informed that they could withdraw at any stage without any negative consequences. All data were anonymized to ensure participant confidentiality.

All statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 26). Pearson correlation analysis was used to examine the relationship between Mukbang viewing and eating disorder symptoms. To test the moderating effect of personality traits, moderation analysis was conducted using Hayes' PROCESS Macro (Model 1). Reliability analysis was performed to confirm the internal consistency of the scales, and descriptive statistics summarized demographic variables.

Results and Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate whether watching Mukbang videos was associated with the development of eating disorder symptoms and whether personality traits moderated this relationship among young adults. Consistent with previous research (Kircaburun et al., 2020; Xu, 2019), the findings indicated a positive correlation between Mukbang consumption and eating disorder symptoms. This suggests that frequent exposure to food-related media, especially content involving large quantities of food, may contribute to unhealthy eating attitudes and behaviors.

Descriptive statistics were first computed for the study variables. Participants' mean scores indicated a moderate level of Mukbang consumption and a range of eating disorder symptoms. (Table 1, Table 2). A Pearson correlation analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between watching Mukbang and eating disorder symptoms ($r = .413$, $p < .05$), suggesting that higher levels of Mukbang engagement were associated with increased symptoms of disordered eating. (Table 3). Moreover the linear regression analysis indicates that mukbang predicts the significant increase in the dieting behavior, binge eating and oral control behavior (Table 4, Table5, Table 6, Table 7)

Table 1
The Frequency and Percentages of Demographic Variables of Participants (N = 101)

Variables	f	%
Gender		
Male	12	11.9%

Female	89	88.1%
Education		
Intermediate	5	5.0%
Bachelors	83	82.2%
Masters	13	12.9%
Marital Status		
Single	95	94.1%
Married	1	1.0%
Engaged	5	5.0%
Socioeconomic Status		
Upper Class	4	4.0%
Middle-upper class	53	52.5%
Middle class	42	41.6%
Lower-middle class	2	2.0%
Occupation		
Full-time Student	82	81.2%
Part-time student	9	8.9%
Part-time professional	3	3.0%
Full-time professional	7	6.9%
Frequency of Watching Mukbang		
More than once in a day	6	5.9%
Once in a day	14	13.9%
More than once in a week	30	29.7%
Once in a Week	10	9.9%
More than once in a Month	10	9.9%
Once in a month	25	24.8%
Rarely in a year	6	5.9%

Table 2
The Descriptive Statistics and Univariate Distribution of Study Variables

Variables	N	a	M	SD	SK	K	Ranges	
							Potential	Actual
MAS	101	0.66	11.08	3.98	.695	.257	6-24	6-24
EAT-26	101	0.88	15.76	12.644	1.051	.792	0-78	0-60
DTS	101	0.86	8.56	8.237	1.151	1.082	0-39	0-38
BS	101	0.72	3.14	3.507	1.010	.294	0-18	0-14
OCS	101	0.62	4.06	3.776	.782	-.443	0-21	0-14
BFI	101	0.68	151.42	13.134	.654	1.465	44-220	100-178
EX	101	0.79	25.53	6.529	-.022	-.567	8-40	10-40
AG	101	0.70	34.39	5.301	-.585	-.341	9-45	21-44
CO	101	0.56	29.32	4.843	-.423	.167	9-45	15-38
NEU	101	0.79	26.26	6.294	-.252	-.448	8-40	10-38
OPC	101	0.53	35.92	4.564	-.076	.376	10-50	24-50

Note N = Sample size, M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation. MAS = Mukbang Addiction Scale, EAT-26 = Eating Attitude Test, DS = Dieting scale, BS = Bulimia Scale, OCS = Oral-Control Scale, BFI = Big Five Index, EX = Extraversion, AG = Agreeableness, CO = Conscientiousness, NEU = Neuroticism, OPC = Openness to Change

Table 3
The Correlation between the Intensity of Mukbang Watching, Eating Disorder Symptoms and Personality Traits (N = 101)

	MAS	EAT-26	DS	BS	OCS	EX	AG	CO	NEU	OPC
MAS	-	.413**	.358**	.409**	.22*	-.04	-.21*	-.027	.003	-.070
EAT-26		-	.91**	.79**	.63**	.06	-.09	-.06	.11	-.06
DS			-	.59**	.32**	.02	-.07	-.10	.14	-.07
BS				-	.44**	.08	-.19	-.07	.10	-.01
OCS					-	.09	.01	.07	-.03	-.03
BFI						-				

EX	.19	.31**	-.47**	.33**
AG	-	.27**	-.18	.21*
CO		-	-.33**	.21*
NEU			-	.02
OPC				-

Note * = (P>0.05), ** = (P>0.01), MAS = Mukbang Addiction Scale, EAT-26 = Eating Attitude Test, DS = Dieting scale, BS = Bulimia Scale, OCS = Oral-Control Scale, BFI = Big Five Index, EX = Extraversion, AG = Agreeableness, CO = Conscientiousness, NEU = Neuroticism, OPC = Openness to Change

Table 4
Simple Linear Regression Showing the Urge of Mukbang Watching as a Predictor of Risk of Developing Eating Disorder Symptoms (N = 101)

	EAT-26					95% CL	
	R	R^2	ΔR^2	β	P	LL	UL
MAS	.413	.170	.170	.413	0.00	.735	1.90

Note β = Standardized Beta, R^2 = R-Squared, R^2 = Change in R^2, P =significance (p<0.05), CI = Confidence Interval, LL = Lower Limit, UL = Upper Limit.

Table 5
Simple Linear Regression Showing Urge of Mukbang Watching as a Predictor of Dieting Behavior (N = 101)

	Dieting Scale					95% CL	
	R	R^2	ΔR^2	β	P	LL	UL
MAS	0.358	.12	.12	0.35	0.00	.354	1.13

Note β = Standardized Beta, R^2 = R-Squared, R^2 = Change in R^2, P =significance (p<0.05), CI = Confidence Interval, LL = Lower Limit, UL = Upper Limit.

Table 6
Simple Linear Regression Showing Urge of Mukbang Watching as a Predictor of Bulimia and Food Preoccupation (N = 101)

	Bulimia and Food Preoccupation Scale					95% CL	
	R	**R^2**	**ΔR^2**	**β**	**P**	**LL**	**UL**
MAS	.409	.167	.167	.409	0.00	.199	.522

Table 7
Simple Linear Regression Showing Urge of Mukbang Watching as a Predictor of Oral-Control Behavior (N = 101)

	Oral Control Scale					95% CL	
	R	**R^2**	**ΔR^2**	**β**	**P**	**LL**	**UL**
MAS	.221	.049	.049	.221	.027	.025	.405

To test the moderating role of personality traits, a moderation analysis was conducted using Hayes' PROCESS Macro (Model 1). The analysis showed that none of the Big Five personality traits significantly moderated the relationship between Mukbang consumption and eating disorder symptoms (p > .05 for all interaction terms).

Table 8
The Moderating role of Extraversion Trait between the Relationship of Urge to Watch Mukbang and Risk of Developing Eating Disorder Symptoms. (N = 101)

Predictor	**β**	**P**	**ΔR^2**	**F**
Constant	15.76	.00		
MAS	1.42	.00		
EX	.14	.42		
MAS*EX	-.007	.85	.0003	.0341

Note β = Standardized beta, ΔR2 = Adjusted R-square, P = Significance (P>0.05)

Table 9
The Moderating Role of Agreeableness Trait between the Relationship of Urge to Watch Mukbang and Risk of Developing Eating Disorder Symptoms. (N = 101)

Predictor	β	P	ΔR²	F
Constant	15.63	.000		
MAS	1.37	.000		
AG	.023	.919		
MAS*AG	-.0316	.5445	.003	.36

Table 10
The Moderating Role of Conscientiousness Trait between the Relationship of Urge to Watch Mukbang and Risk of Developing Eating Disorder Symptoms. (N = 101)

Predictor	β	P	ΔR²	F
Constant	15.72	.00		
MAS	1.37	.00		
CO	-.134	.575		
MAS*CO	-.037	.566	.0027	.33

Table 11
The Moderating Role of Neuroticism Trait between the Relationship of Urge to Watch Mukbang and Risk of Developing Eating Disorder Symptoms. (N = 101)

Predictor	B	p	ΔR²	F
Constant	15.75	.000		
MAS	1.40	.000		
NEU	.224	.232		
MAS*NEU	.0136	.762	.0008	.092

Table 12
The Moderating Role of Openness to Change trait between the Relationship of Urge to Watch Mukbang and Risk of Developing Eating Disorder Symptoms. (N = 101)

Predictor	β	p	ΔR²	F
Constant	15.73	.000		
MAS	1.42	.000		
OPC	-.11	.670		
MAS*OPC	-.034	.665	.0016	.188

The association found aligns with the Food-Cue Reactivity Theory, which posits that repeated exposure to food stimuli can trigger cravings and overeating behaviors (Jansen, 1998; Nederkoorn & Jansen, 2000). Watching Mukbang videos, rich in visual and auditory food cues, may stimulate emotional and physiological reactions that encourage maladaptive eating patterns.

These findings align with previous research suggesting that individuals who already struggle with body image concerns or disordered eating are more sensitive to food-related cues. Studies by Cleobury and Tapper (2014) found that people with bulimic symptoms or weight-related anxieties tend to have stronger emotional reactions when exposed to food stimuli. Similarly, another study by Boswell and Kober (2015) highlighted that exposure to visual cues increases the likelihood of overeating and eventually leads to weight gain. Their study further emphasized that visual triggers, like the ones found in Mukbang content, often have a stronger psychological impact than other sensory inputs like smell.

This provides broader insights into how the human brain responds to food-related stimulation. As Spence et al. (2016) pointed out in a study that repeatedly watching others consume rich and high calorie meals can activate neural pathways, increasing the likelihood of overeating. Although research on digital food content like Mukbang is still emerging, one helpful comparison comes from the work of Bőthe et al. (2019). The results of their study on excessive pornography use highlighted that frequent exposure was associated with increased sexual activity in real life. It further highlighted that repeated engagement with

stimulating content online may translate into behavioral patterns offline. Similarly, regularly watching Mukbang videos may lead to intense or more frequent eating episodes.

Interestingly, the influence of Mukbang is not one dimensional. While some of the viewers reported episodes of overeating or food preoccupation, others also described engaging in restrictive eating behaviors such as skipping meals or meticulously tracking calories after watching these videos. This might seem contradictory at first glance, but previous studies offer a plausible explanation. For instance, Choe (2019) and Hakimey and Yazdanifard (2015) found that individuals who are on a diet may watch food videos to experience vicarious satisfaction which means essentially satisfying cravings by watching others eat, and not consuming food themselves. Supporting this idea further, Tu and Fishbach (2017) conducted another experiment which showed participants were less likely to eat pizza or M&Ms after watching videos of people eating those foods, signifying that the act of watching, in some cases, can also reduce the actual consumption.

Nevertheless, personality traits did not moderate the relationship between eating disorder symptoms and Mukbang consumption. This finding suggests that a relatively stable link exists between Mukbang watching and disordered eating tendencies, regardless of the individual differences in personality dimensions such as conscientiousness or neuroticism. This result differs from earlier studies that have laid importance on the role of traits like emotional instability and impulsivity in eating pathology (Fassino et al., 2004; Morey, 2008). However, there is a possibility that the influence of media exposure, for instance Mukbang, may be powerful enough to affect eating behaviors broadly, simply overriding the moderating effects of personality differences.

One possible explanation can be that the immediate and sensory rich nature of Mukbang content may have the tendency to create a strong, universal reaction among its viewers, regardless of their baseline personality characteristics/traits. On the other hand, it could suggest that some other unmeasured variables, such as stress levels, emotional regulation skills, or existing body image concerns, might better explain the individual differences in vulnerability.

These findings contribute to the growing body of literature emphasizing the need to critically examine the psychological effects of digital food media. Given that digital consumption patterns are rising rapidly, especially among young adults in Pakistan, understanding the behavioral risks associated with new media forms like Mukbang is vital for informing prevention and intervention strategies in public health and clinical settings.

While the study offers important insights, it is not without limitations. The reliance on self-reported measures and a convenience sample limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research should consider longitudinal designs to better understand causal relationships and explore additional psychological moderators that could impact the association between Mukbang consumption and eating pathology.

Conclusion

The study explores the link between frequent mukbang viewing and the likelihood of developing eating disorder symptoms. It finds that watching mukbang increases the risk of binge eating, restrictive dieting, and other eating disorder behaviors. Mukbang videos also influence viewers' dietary preferences, meal choices, food consumption, and eating habits, often leading to overeating and disordered eating patterns. The study suggests that mukbang viewing may contribute to increased food cravings, further exacerbating eating disorders. Additionally, personality traits do not appear to significantly moderate the relationship between mukbang watching and eating disorder symptoms, as confounding variables need to be considered in future studies.

Recommendations

The study, being the first in Pakistan to explore the relationship between mukbang viewing and eating disorder symptoms, has several limitations. First, the small sample size for quantitative data collection limits the generalizability of the findings. Future studies should use a larger sample to improve this. Second, the cross-sectional design cannot establish cause-and-effect relationships, so a longitudinal study is recommended for future research to analyze causal connections between variables. Third, the study suggests analyzing the moderating role of personality factors, which was not adequately addressed, and considering the impact of extraneous variables. Additionally, the use of self-report measures introduces potential biases such as social desirability and memory recall issues, suggesting future studies employ more robust data collection methods. Fourth, the emotional and psychological experiences of participants while watching mukbang, which could mediate the relationship between variables, were not explored, so future research should investigate this aspect. Lastly, the non-random sampling and self-report survey method may introduce biases, and more reliable data collection techniques are recommended for future research.

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