

Editor's Note

## Communication Research in a Transcultural Era as Words like *Mukbang* Enter the English Dictionary

Soontae An

Professor, Communication  
and Media, Ewha Womans  
University

Corresponding to  
Soontae An

Professor, Communication  
and Media, Ewha Womans  
University, Seoul, 03760,  
Republic of Korea.  
Email: [soontae@ewha.ac.kr](mailto:soontae@ewha.ac.kr)

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest  
was reported by the authors.

### ABSTRACT

This editorial reflects on the dynamic media landscape and communication practices in a transcultural era. As the new Editor-in-Chief of *Asian Communication Research*, this piece introduces *mukbang*—a Korean-born, globally embraced phenomenon—as an example of how new forms of digital media content develop through transcultural flows while remaining embedded in locally situated cultural norms and interpretive frameworks. *Asian Communication Research* covers a wide and diverse range of topics, spanning from the implications of AI-generated content and platform algorithms to research on traditional media and enduring communication practices. In a transcultural era marked by rapid media convergence and cultural hybridity, the journal encourages scholarship that is both globally relevant and culturally grounded. It aims to foster insightful research that advances our understanding of communication in a world where cultural borders are increasingly fluid and media practices are constantly evolving.

### KEYWORDS

Mukbang, transcultural era, communication research, Korean wave, Hallyu

When I was a child, I often spent my school holidays at my grandmother's house in the countryside. I remember waking up in the morning, still groggy, and heading straight out to the yard. In one corner, my grandmother was feeding the cow in front of the trough. Like a daily ritual, I would crouch in a corner of the yard and quietly watched the cow munching on its breakfast. The cow slowly chewed with its nose buried in the feed trough, nodding its head. What appeared to be an ordinary moment—the sound of the chewing, the soft snorts from its nose, and my grandmother's gentle words to the cow—was more than enough to draw me in.

And so, at my grandmother's house, my childhood days would begin with the cow's eating show, *mukbang*. This was in the days before the Internet, long before *mukbang* made its way into the Oxford English

Dictionary. *Mukbang* is a portmanteau of the Korean words *muk-da* (to eat) and *bang-song* (broadcast), referring to a type of online content where individuals showcase themselves eating large quantities of food while interacting with viewers in real time or via recorded videos (Donnar, 2017).

Watching someone eat online fulfills more than just simple curiosity. It can be a source of shared joy, a form of vicarious satisfaction, or even a way to feel connected to others. Why do we watch *mukbang*, and why do we feel compelled to share those feelings and talk about them? What emotional and social needs does *mukbang* content satisfy? How do different cultures interpret or engage with *mukbang*? These are the research questions that I—along with many other scholars around the world—seek to explore.

As communication scholars, we are living through a transformative period marked by an ever-changing media landscape and evolving modes of communication. A childhood memory of mine—watching a cow’s eating show—has now become a subject of scholarly interest, with *mukbang* being studied by both Korean and international researchers. There are many other examples that reflect these transformative trends in media and communication, and it is precisely this dynamic terrain that *Asian Communication Research* seeks to showcase.

*Asian Communication Research* features cutting-edge scholarship in all areas of communication and media studies, welcoming submissions from diverse geographic and cultural contexts for a global readership. In an era marked by the rapid rise of AI-generated content, the growing influence of digital creators, and the increasing power of platform algorithms, new communication phenomena are emerging at an unprecedented pace. These developments are prompting scholars to rethink long-held assumptions and devise new theoretical frameworks that reflect the complexity of today’s media landscape. The journal encourages

work that not only critically engages with these transformative changes, but also contributes to shaping the future direction of media and communication studies. In doing so, *Asian Communication Research* aims to be a vibrant forum for intellectual exchange and innovation across national and disciplinary boundaries.

At the same time, shedding light on emerging phenomena does not mean overlooking traditional media research. *Asian Communication Research* remains firmly committed to scholarship that critically examines legacy media, enduring communication practices, and long-established theoretical frameworks. Revisiting historical forms of media and communication effects such as TV campaign publicity (Jin, Zhao, & An, 2006) is essential to understanding the foundations upon which contemporary transformations are built.

As the new Editor-in-Chief of *Asian Communication Research*, I am pleased to reaffirm the journal’s ongoing commitment to exploring the dynamic interplay among media, culture, and communication. As terms like *mukbang* enter the English language, they signify more than the diffusion of fleeting cultural trends—they reflect deeper cultural perceptions, values, and modes of connection. Research on *mukbang*, for instance, illustrates how everyday acts like eating are mediated, shared, and reinterpreted in digital spaces (Kang et al., 2020; Kircaburun et al., 2021; Lee & Wan, 2023), offering a lens through which we can understand broader shifts in identity, community, and communication—not only across Asia, but also within global media ecologies more broadly.

In this editorial, I seek to illustrate how the seemingly novel digital phenomenon of *mukbang* reflects enduring cultural values embedded in Korean society. While *mukbang* may appear to be a product of contemporary media and online entertainment, its appeal is deeply intertwined with traditional Korean notions of food and social connection (Ahn & Choi, 2016; Cho, 2020; Jang & Kim, 2016). By examining *mukbang* through this cultural lens, we can highlight how emerging

media practices are shaped by and continue to reflect longstanding social norms, emotional values, and culturally specific modes of human connection.

### ***Mukbang* in a Transcultural Era**

*Mukbang*—a combination of the Korean words for “eating” and “broadcast”—originated in South Korea around 2009 on video platforms such as AfreecaTV, where individuals streamed themselves consuming large quantities of food while interacting with viewers in real time. The trend quickly gained domestic popularity and expanded globally throughout the 2010s, fueled by the Korean Wave (*Hallyu*) and growing international interest in Korean food culture (Kim, 2018; Kircaburun et al., 2021). By the late 2010s, *mukbang* had become a global phenomenon, with creators emerging from countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, and Indonesia, among many others.

It is important to note that *mukbang* is deeply rooted in Korean food culture, where eating goes beyond mere sustenance to serve as an expression of care, a way to nurture social bonds, and a source of emotional comfort. In Korea, the act of sharing a meal carries significant emotional and social meaning—an ethos that helps explain the appeal of watching others eat in an engaging, communal setting (An et al., 2020; Ahn & Choi, 2016; Cho, 2020). As eating in Korean culture is often a form of communication and emotional connection, the idea of virtually inviting others to join one’s meal resonates deeply with viewers.

*Mukbang* allows viewers to experience a sense of togetherness, especially in moments of loneliness or disconnection (Kircaburun et al., 2021), mirroring how *bap* (rice or meal) functions as a medium for empathy, comfort, and social bonding in everyday Korean life. That is, in Korea, eating is not only a necessity but also a starting point for conversation and a medium for connection. It carries important social meaning. Phrases like

“Let’s grab a meal sometime” or “We should eat together soon” are often used as gestures to maintain or strengthen a social bond. They signify a willingness to share time and build rapport.

While meals carry cultural and emotional significance across many societies—including in the West, where inviting someone to a meal is a common gesture of hospitality—eating together holds even deeper symbolic meaning in Korea. In Western contexts, such invitations typically lead to a scheduled meal. In contrast, in Korea, saying “Let’s eat together sometime” may not necessarily indicate a concrete plan, but instead functions as a culturally embedded expression of goodwill, connection, or social intention. Although this cultural nuance can sometimes lead to confusion or disappointment for non-Koreans who interpret the invitation literally, it underscores why food-centered practices like *mukbang* are especially meaningful. They reflect not only individual behavior, but also a culturally grounded way of relating to others.

In a transcultural era—a time when cultural content easily crosses national and linguistic borders—*mukbang* has evolved from a Korean social media niche into a global digital phenomenon. However, it does not travel unchanged; instead, it adapts to local contexts, merges with different value systems, and often acquires new meanings (Anari & Eghtesadi, 2023; Xiao et al., 2024). This transcultural flow underscores not only the fluidity of cultural boundaries but also the agency of global audiences in reshaping and reinterpreting local content in a global context. As *mukbang* circulates globally, it is not merely consumed but embedded into new linguistic, social, and technological environments (Choe, 2019). These complex processes of adaptation and reinterpretation call for further scholarly attention to understand how culturally specific practices are transformed in global contexts, and what these transformations reveal about shifting modes of media consumption, identity construction, and cross-cultural communication.

## Have You Eaten?

The linguistic expressions we frequently use reveal much about our culture and consciousness. In Korea, one of the greetings often heard in casual conversation is “Have you eaten?” (“*Bap meogeosseo?*”)—something similar to “how are you” or “how’s it going” in Western context. This commonly used Korean expression is not simply a question about whether someone actually has had a meal. Rather, it serves as a way of checking in on someone’s overall well-being. Used among family, friends, and close colleagues, the phrase is a form of emotional connection—an indirect way of asking if the person is doing okay. In Korean culture, where *bap* (rice or meal) symbolizes survival and health (Na, 2014), this expression reflects genuine concern for the other person’s basic quality of life.

In many Western cultures, however, similar phrases such as “Did you have lunch?” are often understood more literally, focusing on whether the meal actually took place rather than serving as an emotional check-in. As a result, such questions in Western contexts tend to function more as casual conversation starters than expressions of care. This contrast underscores how everyday language reflects broader cultural orientations—relational and communal in the Korean case, and often more individual and informational in Western settings. It also highlights the unique role food plays in Korean communication—not just as nourishment, but as a medium of empathy and social connection.

Recently in Korea, a sitting president was arrested<sup>1</sup> and major news outlets—including Yonhap News Agency—provided real-time coverage of the investigation and detention under

the label of “breaking news.” One particularly striking detail appeared in large red letters at the bottom of the Yonhap News screen: “Yesterday: Jjajangmyeon, Doenjang-jjigae... Today: Pollack soup, Hangover soup” Jjajangmyeon (black bean noodles) and Doenjang-jjigae (soybean paste stew) are popular Korean dishes, and even the reporter’s briefing included the lunch and dinner menus, which were prominently displayed on screen.<sup>2</sup>

This serves as an example of how deeply meals (*bap*) are woven into the fabric of communication in Korean society. Isn’t it remarkable that even in the unprecedented event of a sitting president being arrested and detained, what he ate became part of the news? In fact, the more unusual point may be that such reports—like “Yesterday: Jjajangmyeon, Doenjang-jjigae...”—don’t strike most Koreans as particularly strange. Korean media often include meal details when high-profile figures are under investigation or in custody.

In other democratic countries, it would be rare for menus to make headlines during a national crisis involving a president’s arrest. Detailed reports of a leader’s meals would more commonly be associated with authoritarian regimes, where even the most trivial aspects of a leader’s daily life are used for propaganda under strict state control. Yet in Korea, the fact that such detailed food reporting appears in major news broadcasts reflects how central meals are to daily interactions and social connection—far beyond their role as mere sustenance.

## The Movie Memories of Murder

Another illustrative example of how meals—and the Korean word “*bap*”—carry deep symbolic

<sup>1</sup> In December 2024, President Yoon Suk-yeol declared martial law; however, the National Assembly passed a resolution to nullify the declaration and approved a motion to impeach him. The arrest occurred while the nation was still awaiting the Constitutional Court’s ruling on the impeachment. At the time of writing this essay, South Korea’s Constitutional Court has unanimously ruled in favor of the motion, resulting in his immediate removal from office.

<sup>2</sup> 방준혁 (2025). 윤대통령 구급 사흘째...조사 거부하고 두문불출. [YouTube 동영상]. 연합뉴스TV (YonhapnewsTV). Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iqTciyuRJRA>

meaning in Korean culture can be found in the film *Memories of Murder*, directed by Oscar-winning filmmaker Bong Joon-ho. The expression “Have you been eating well?” (“*Bap-eun meokgo daninya?*”) is a line spoken by Detective Park Doo-man, played by actor Song Kang-ho. He casually throws this question at a suspect, almost offhandedly. In the English subtitles, the line is translated as “Do you get up each morning too?” The English translation completely omits the word *bap* (rice or meal). This omission likely reflects the challenge of translating the emotional and cultural depth tied to the word *bap*, whose symbolic significance differs greatly between Korean and English-speaking cultures. Instead of directly translating the phrase, the English subtitles aim to convey Detective Park’s blunt and indifferent demeanor in a way that still resonates with the Korean sensibility.

In Korean society, where even a president’s prison meals become newsworthy, the question “Have you been eating well?” carries philosophical and poignant undertones. This thoughtful reinterpretation is characteristic of Darcy Paquet, the renowned translator of the movie *Parasite*, whose work is known for bridging cultural contexts with sensitivity and insight. His translation choices often illuminate emotional subtext in ways that resonate with global audiences while respecting the original Korean narrative.

The fact that this line was translated into English as “Do you get up each morning too?” highlights the cultural differences between Korean and English-speaking audiences. It emphasizes the act of waking up and breathing each day—basic human survival. In doing so, the translation poses a question and a form of mockery: how can someone who committed murder continue to live an ordinary life? This adaptation helps the message resonate more naturally within English-speaking cultures. The translator’s decision to omit the word *bap* reflects a thoughtful attempt to capture the Korean sentiment in a way that feels contextually appropriate and emotionally effective

in English.

Again, for Koreans, *bap* goes far beyond a simple meal. It is a powerful symbol of survival, human connection, and emotional bonding—and at the same time, it can represent a privilege that must be earned. The expression “You don’t deserve to eat” is often used as a harsh criticism of others or as a self-directed statement of shame. It reflects moral judgment and questions a person’s right to basic human dignity (Hong & Park, 2016). In English, survival is more commonly symbolized through metaphors like “breathing” or “waking up in the morning,” making those expressions more relatable and intuitive. For Koreans, however, *bap* is like the air we breathe—vital and taken for granted, yet something that may be withheld from those who fail to fulfill their moral or social responsibilities.

That said, scenes of people eating together are quite frequent in Korean dramas and films. While Western media also features conversations over meals, it is relatively rare for such scenes to serve as consistent narrative anchors. In contrast, it is almost unusual to find a Korean drama or film that *doesn’t* include a meal scene. These moments are not merely filler; they often mark turning points in relationships, reveal hidden emotions, or expose tensions beneath the surface. The act of sharing *bap* becomes a narrative device—one that advances the plot while deepening character development. Whether it’s a quiet breakfast between family members or a tense dinner among rivals, the shared table becomes a stage for emotional confrontation, reconciliation, or unspoken solidarity.

In this cultural context, it is perhaps no surprise that *mukbang* originated in Korea. *Mukbang* taps into deeply rooted values of togetherness, empathy, and emotional nourishment that extend far beyond physical hunger. The act of watching someone eat is not just entertainment but a form of surrogate companionship, shaped by a culture where *bap* represents life, health, and connection. It has also drawn attention for its potential impact

on viewers' health and eating behaviors (An & Lee, 2021), beyond its cultural significance.

Given *mukbang's* strong cultural grounding in Korean notions of care, connection, and the symbolic significance of *bap*, it can serve as a revealing example of how similar media practices are transformed across cultural boundaries. As the format is adopted in different regions, it may take on new meanings, fulfill distinct social functions, or reflect local values surrounding food, intimacy, and digital interaction. These dynamics invite further research across diverse national and cultural contexts into how food-related media practices are adapted, interpreted, and embedded within local framework.

### Communication Research in a Transcultural Era

As I begin my tenure as Editor-in-Chief of *Asian Communication Research*, I chose to use *mukbang* as an example that I hoped would illustrate both the scope and the direction of our journal in a transcultural era. This example was intended to reflect the journal's commitment to exploring communication practices that cross cultural and national boundaries, while remaining attentive to their local origins and meanings. Of particular relevance is the fact that *mukbang* also draws from traditional media formats such as television cooking shows and food documentaries. This connection underscores the importance of revisiting traditional media research within the context of evolving media ecologies. Other examples, such as direct-to-consumer advertising (i.e., Huh, DeLorme, Reid, & An, 2010)—which is permitted in the U.S. but restricted in most other parts of the world—illustrate traditional media research topics that are highly region-specific. *Asian Communication Research* is keen to showcase such distinctive media practices from around the globe.

As digital media platforms continue to evolve, this development has led to changes in the

ways individuals create, share, and interpret content across cultural contexts. We anticipate research that examines how algorithmic curation, livestreaming technologies, and platform affordances shape cultural expression and user engagement. Studies might explore how creators navigate global audiences while retaining cultural specificity, or how viewers interpret culturally unfamiliar content through their own lenses. The rise of virtual influencers, AI-generated content, and parasocial interaction in transnational settings also raises new questions about identity, authenticity, and connection. Moreover, cross-platform comparisons and longitudinal analyses can offer insights into how digital communication practices shift over time and across regions. These inquiries will contribute to a deeper understanding of communication in an increasingly interconnected and platform-mediated world.

I envision *Asian Communication Research* as a dynamic platform for disseminating research that is both theoretically rigorous and practically meaningful to a diverse and global readership. By curating a wide spectrum of scholarship that capture the evolving intersections of media, culture, and communication in Asia and beyond, our journal seeks to advance scholarly dialogue that transcends disciplinary and geographic boundaries. To that end, we warmly welcome the interest and contributions of scholars from around the world. It is through such diverse perspectives and active engagement that the journal can truly reflect the richness and complexity of communication in our transcultural era.

### REFERENCES

- Ahn, J., & Choi, Y. (2016). Characteristics of the viewing community in personal web-casting. *Korean Journal of Broadcasting and Telecommunication Studies*, 30(2), 5–53.
- An, S., & Lee, J. (2021). Effects of ad disclosure

- and motivation for watching mukbang on viewers' eating intent. *Korean Journal of Journalism and Communication*, 65(3), 39–79.
- An, S., Lim, Y., & Lee, H. (2020). A study of viewers' comments on online mukbang videos: A big data analysis of perceptions toward eating behavior. *Korean Journal of Journalism and Communication*, 64(2), 269–310.
- Anari, F. M., & Eghtesadi, S. (2023). The relationship between watching mukbang (eating show), eating behaviors, and anthropometric parameters in Iranian female students. *Journal of Research in Health Sciences*, 23(1), e00574. <https://doi.org/10.34172/jrhs.2023.109>
- Cho, E. (2020). A study on the trend and the cultural phenomenon of mukbang. *Journal of the Korea Contents Association*, 20(9), 68–85. <https://doi.org/10.5392/JKCA.2020.20.09.068>
- Choe, H. (2019). Eating together multimodally: Collaborative eating in mukbang, a Korean livestream of eating. *Language in Society*, 48(2), 171–208. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404518001355>
- Donnar, G. (2017). 'Food porn' or intimate sociality: Committed celebrity and cultural performances of overeating in meokbang. *Celebrity Studies*, 8(1), 122–127. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2016.1272857>
- Hong, S., & Park, S. (2016). Emergence of internet mukbang (foodcasting) and its hegemonic process in media culture. *Media & Society*, 24(1), 105–150.
- Huh, J., DeLorme, D. E., Reid, L. N., & An, S. (2010). Direct-to-consumer prescription drug advertising: history, regulation, and issues. *Minnesota Medicine* 93(3), 50–52.
- Jang, Y. J., & Kim, M. R. (2016). Need for interaction or pursuit of information and entertainment?: The relationship among viewing motivation, presence, parasocial interaction, and satisfaction of eating and cooking broadcasts. *Korean Journal of Broadcasting and Telecommunication Studies*, 30(4), 152–185.
- Jin, H. S., Zhao, X., & An, S. (2006). Examining effects of advertising campaign publicity in a field study. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 46(2), 171–182.
- Kang, E., Lee, J., Kim, K. H., & Yun, Y. H. (2020). The popularity of eating broadcast: Content analysis of “mukbang” YouTube videos, media coverage, and the health impact of “mukbang” on public. *Health Informatics Journal*, 26(3), 2237–2248. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1460458220901360>
- Kim, Y. (2018). Sell your loneliness: Mukbang culture and multisensorial capitalism in South Korea. In *Routledge handbook of cultural and creative industries in Asia* (pp. 225–238). Routledge.
- Kircaburun, K., Harris, A., Calado, F., & Griffiths, M. D. (2021). The psychology of mukbang watching: A scoping review of the academic and non-academic literature. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, 19, 1190–1213. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-019-00211-0>
- Lee, D., & Wan, C. (2023). The impact of mukbang live streaming commerce on consumers' overconsumption behavior. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 58(2-3), 198–221. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10949968231156104>
- Na, E. (2014). Context and pragmatic meaning of “Bob's Greeting Expressions in Korean”. *Korean Culture Research*, 63, 99–121.
- Xiao, Y., Zhong, T., Li, L., Wang, X., Tang, D., Song, P. G., ... & Xia, W. (2024). Psychological and physiological experiences of youth watching mukbang in China: A qualitative study. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 163, 107729. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2024.107729>