Watching Women Eat: A Critique of Magical Eating and Mukbang Videos

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Abstract

This project interrogates how Mukbang shows in online spaces both function to rebel while simultaneously reinscribe hegemonic thinness culture. Through the audience’s discourse and the way viewers discuss women eating in public spaces, audience members reinforce narratives of thinness culture even when that is not the intention. This occurs because of the dominant narrative that positions women eating in public as a taboo act. In this project I introduce the concept of magical eating to explain how audiences use these eating shows in an attempt to gain agentic capabilities over the constraints of thinness culture, but only further restrain and reinscribe these constructs. This research captures the current climate in how audiences interpret their own relationships with cultural eating and thinness culture ideologies.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Food culture in the U.S. is a pivotal part of U.S. American identity. Blogs, magazine publications, television networks, and even Fortune 500 companies are dedicated to how we talk, write, conceptualize, and film food. The food entertainment industry continues to grow with show after show on network television positioning either food or food consumption as the star. As social media continues to put agency in the hands of the public, it is no surprise that user-generated content has become dedicated to producing, discussing and consuming food. These narratives have quickly flooded and dominated digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and YouTube.

Nearly every kind of audience in every location has simple and easy access to consuming food entertainment as technologies continue to advance applications of media. How-to narratives and viral eating videos rapidly are becoming a staple in food culture on social media and streaming platforms with channels such as BuzzFeed’s Tasty and well-established vloggers bombarding their Instagram feeds with intimate and original food videos. The popularity of this new method of eating as entertainment is making headlines in our news media with top outlets such as the New York Times, Wall Street Journal and British Broadcasting Corporation (just to name a few) noting both the strangeness and proliferation of this new craze (Kwaak, 2014; Hu, 2015; Pequenino, 2016; McCarthy, 2017; Barmore 2019). Videos like Mukbang and Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response eating shows are trending at exponential rates, as more and more audiences
flock to view deviations from the traditional form of food entertainment, performances that offer a more intimate and focused portrayal of eating.

Media focused on food and food culture has been a long-established practice, and has grown more pronounced over the decades—gaining serious popularity in the early 2000s and onward (Pason, 2015). Pason notes, citing O’Neill (2003), there was a significant shift in the early 2000s with a boom in the production of food magazines and the transformation of food reporting becoming a more distinguished beat (2015). Once food blogging such as Yelp made its mark on the industry, there was another shift in how food reviewing was perceived and executed. Pason (2015) wrote:

The genre of food reviewing has become a shared language, taken up by professionals and the general public, and although might show thematic difference, all food reviews work to shape and influence our collective tastes, how we identify, and even position us politically (p. 50).

That is, the move from print to online publication, and the development of online spaces, allowed the public to participate rather than just consume food related content. This shift created a movement of more people being able to influence the cultural narrative that used to be relegated only for the distinguished few. This change is meaningful because of how significant food is to culture and its constitutive formation of cultural identities and power systems (Pason, 2015). Now the latest shift in digital media platforms has led to the general public (not just professionals) advancing beyond reviewing food also cooking and eating food for the purpose of entertainment and media content.
However, with such swiftness in popularity, I think it is just as urgent to interrogate the problematic impacts of this trend. I am particularly drawn to the new forms of media centered around women and food. Given the historicity of women’s bodies, eating behaviors, and media, I experienced a moral dissonance in my own fascination, dear I say obsession, with these videos.

After watching my first Mukbang video, or binge-eating show (see the Methods and Texts section for a more detailed definition), I was disturbed by my instinctual reaction — jealousy, followed by a throbbing sense of longing. Watching, specifically, the women in these videos eat with an unabashed freedom deeply triggered me in a way that almost seemed primal. My own relationship with food and treatment of my body has been a journey of self-loathing, harmfulness, and blame. In my past, I engaged in dangerous eating behaviors such as binging, purging, and restricting for a number of reasons: the primary one being to control the formation and appearance of my body. To this day, I struggle with reconciling my relationship with eating and food. I find myself trying to catch the fleeting comfort of how eating feels — desiring so badly to enjoy the magical powers of food. Systematically each bite leaves me grasping desperately at the euphoric feeling of my favorite meal before it is stolen away by the guilt and shame of an old and familiar narrative—my body is not allowed to indulge. Each bite bitterly dissolves into a painful swallow claiming consequence on my unruly body (Gay, 2017).

When investigating public reactions to Mukbang videos and other food videos, I noticed I am not the only one experiencing this type of reaction. The dissonance between Westernized normative standards of women’s bodies and eating culture juxtaposed with recent popularization (thanks to social media platforms) of representations of women...
eating freely and without obvious consequence causes the concept I call *magical eating*. That is, audiences of such media as Mukbang experience a fantasy of a consequence-free indulgence and liberated engagement with food through their consumption of eating entertainment. Thus, the audience is using the actors and the texts to fulfill their own fantasies of eating and embodiment.

This project adds to the conversation of how food entertainment in online spaces is further reinscribing hegemonic thinness culture, while also creating a space for people to grapple with their own struggles with the norms of this culture. In addition, the concept of magical eating complicates the way people experience these eating shows by removing agentic capabilities from the actor to reconcile these struggles.

Therefore, this research captures the current climate in how audiences interpret their own relationship with cultural eating ideology and thinness culture. A portion of this project is dedicated to looking closely at how audiences react to public displays of women eating. Through this work I find that there is a contradiction in these reactions with viewers reinforcing both current hegemonic norms in gendered eating habits, and rebellious fantasies of how to undermine these very constructs.

In addition, my work interrogates the power of thinness in U.S. culture. Discourse focused on embodiment cannot be separated from text depicting women eating. Women, corporeality, and eating seem to be constitutive in the perspective of many of the viewers. I demonstrate the prevailing dominance of thin culture, and how audiences consciously and unconsciously work to erase fat identity.

For this work I use a feminist cultural lens, which I explain and review the scholarship of in Chapter 2. By using this lens, I further the already established argument
that thinness culture is intersectional and constitutive of other power systems in U.S. culture, and, while other lenses focus on the individual forming dysfunctions with eating or relationships with their body, a feminist cultural lens accounts for and forces responsibility also on the dominate narratives and influence of culture.

More specifically, in Chapter 2, I review the historical constraints of thinness culture, the oppression these constraints put on women, and the impact these restrictions still have on today’s generations. Norms within this system including eating behaviors and the presentation of the body are used to structure a significant cultural understanding of femininity. Literature which underscores the power dynamics of thinness and the sigma of fat identity are also reviewed in the chapter to aid in the understanding of why audiences use these texts to fantasies about eating and thinness.

Then, in Chapter 3, I analyze the politics of eating by closely examining how audiences react to the Mukbang stars’ presentations of eating in relation to their gender. Through my examination of the formation of audience discourse and the Mukbang stars’ own candied discussions, I was able to determine themes that focused on common points of struggles with food and cultural eating norms presented in Western societies. I argue that though Mukbang shows rebel against gendered eating norms, they also work to reinscribe belief systems of thinness culture because of how audiences react to public displays of women eating. In this chapter, I demonstrate moments of the audiences supporting and encouraging the rebellious act of women eating in public spaces. However, also in this chapter I also point to ways audience reinscribes thinness culture. I do this by observing language which both emboldens and restrains eating behaviors. Through these
observations I formed themes focused on audience reactions to eating aesthetics, fantasies of indulgence, and desiring similar experiences with food.

Then in Chapter 4, I focus my work on how audiences are responding to Mukbang stars with ideal and nonconforming body types. This is useful in understanding the audiences’ fantasy of binge eating in relation to the presenting body featured in the fantasy. This work leads to a larger discussion of how thinness functions in U.S. culture and the Othering of fat bodies. The audience’s discourse encouraging Mukbang stars to engage in rebellious acts seen in Chapter 3 departs from the narrative in this chapter. The patterns I determined functioned to strongly reinscribe ideologies which privilege thinness and actually erasing fat identity (LeBesco & Braziel, 2001) all together.

Lastly, in Chapter 5 I connect my work from chapters 3 and 4 to explain the functionality of magical eating. I illustrate how the immediacy of this logic emerges from a need to undermine the historic constraints placed on women for decades dictating unattainable and oppressive eating norms and expectations of their bodies. These texts create a false sense of relief for audiences from these norms. However, in using this form of magical thinking, there also are ways that harmful ideologies continue to be reinscribed, defer any real introspective on one’s own damage from the repercussions of thinness culture, and abilities to transform eating and thinness culture all together.

Thus, this project captures the urgency of examining food entertainment especially on social media platforms. These platforms often depict a less filtered narrative of current perspectives and interpretations of culture, yet still have a similar reach in viewership and thus indoctrination. The few texts a choose to critique have millions of views and growing every second. It is imperative to continue to understand how the
public sees gender, food and corporeal politics because of the implicit power entwined in food and presentation of the gendered body.
Methods and Texts

For this project I analyzed binge eating shows on social media platforms. The methodology I used was rhetorical criticism of how the artifacts are discursively functioning and what overarching arguments are being made through these texts (Campbell & Burkholder, 1996). This process includes an interrogation of the descriptive and rhetorical moves of each text because each artifact persuades audiences and actors into different relationships to magical eating. This is conducted by analyzing the video content and audience comments for each video.

While conducting this analysis I observed patterns in the public discourse from which I drew conclusions to create each overarching theme and argument. The main arguments I made from my observations were how audiences interpreted and then reinscribed and rebelled against their current understanding of U.S. cultural eating norms, how audiences read the texts to interpret their own relationships with eating and thinness culture, and finally how the audience experienced the text to engage with magical eating logic. This was carried out by looking closely at the participation and roles of the actors, audience(s), structure(s), and material support of the texts (Campbell & Burkholder, 1996).

In my analysis, I considered the positionality and cultural location of all the actors to the best of my abilities. I watched multiple videos that I did not use for analysis in order to gain a stronger understanding of how they present themselves. By doing this I was able to retrieve more insights into who they are, what culture they are positioned in, and also a bit more of how audiences associate with these stars. Some of the information
I discovered was one of the actors is from Canada, one identifies with having a food addiction, and some of the stars are very open with audiences while others are reserved. By gaining a more contextual understanding of these stars I created a more holistic perspective of the texts (Campbell & Burkholder, 1996). Thus, I was able to cite relevant and dominant patterns that I observed forming and emerging from these narratives.

Additionally, because I was using audience comments as the bulk of how I was interpreting audience reactions, I needed to consider intentionality and intentionality. This was difficult because I did not have any information on who the audience was—I didn’t know how viewers identified themselves or their social location. This forced me to observe the functionality of the discourse as a larger narrative rather than how groups of people were reacting to the videos. For example, when looking at the discourse of one of the actors who presents with a nonconforming body, I saw a large trend of have audiences rejecting her actions because of her presentations, and some participating in this trend of reinforcing thin culture despite using encouraging language. My main goal was to understand how audiences were intentionally or unintentionally reinscribing narratives of thinness culture. Throughout this process I needed to be continuously aware of how I was interpreting the media and its discursive structure (Campbell & Burkholder, 1996).

By taking these details into account, my goal was to create sound arguments and links when taking into consideration factors that occurred situationally or how audiences were reading the videos in that moment and also how contextual factors shaped reactions. In other words, when drawing conclusions from audience comments I would weigh factors such as was a viewer referencing a past videos of an actor that impacted that
viewer’s interpretation of the current video, whether actors were from Western cultures or Eastern cultures, how the actors engaged with the audience—were they more open with their audiences or more reserved. This was an important step in attempting to capture how I saw audience discourse functioning, my claims in rhetoric working to reinscribe harmful narratives, and draw out my thematic conclusions from these texts.

**Artifacts**

I examined nine Mukbang stars and observed three to four different shows per star for this project. I was very selective in how I chose the Mukbang stars I wanted to observe for this project. The parameters for who I chose and why were several factors. I chose stars who all identified as women and were all around the same age. This was important because though there are many Mukbang stars who are men, I wanted this project to be focused on thinness culture and women. I wanted the stars to be all around the same age (in their early 20s or 30s) because age is another decisive construct for women in U.S. culture—thus I wanted to focus on gender and the constraints of eating and body narratives.

The second criteria were choosing stars who were established in the community, or at least have a large number of subscribers, and who had a YouTube channel that is mostly dedicated to Mukbang. This was important because I saw this contextually impacting how audiences watched these shows. The viewers who turned to these stars’ channels were ones who knew what Mukbang was (for the most part). This factor also allowed me access to a form of consistency the videos I watched of each star and a verity in the themes of videos. For example, some stars did 10,000 calorie eating Mukbangs, or eat foods that were particularly messy.
Lastly, I felt it was important to consider body presentation when selecting the
Mukbang stars I would observe for this project. I wanted to observe stars from both
Westerns culture and Eastern cultures—and particularly a star from Korea where
Mukbang originated. Looking at videos of stars with both thin and nonconforming bodies
was a very important step in the process. I first found Trisha Paytas who considers herself
fat, and much of her audience identifies her as fat. Paytas if a very famous in the YouTube
community launching her career uploading vlogs and music videos she would make—she
then started dabbling in Mukbangs and then main that the center theme of her channel—
she is self-proclaimed as the “Mukbang Queen.” However, Paytas is not extremely
overweight and has told her audience that she wears a clothing in U.S. size 12 this is
below average for U.S. American women (Chirstel & Dunn, 2016).

Then, I discovered Mukbang star Candy. She presents, what the scientific
community would label, as morbidly obese. I actually had never heard of Candy, and
YouTube algorithms never suggested to me her shows. I found her through one of
Paytas’ shows, where she was casually discussing which fat Mukbang stars she
watches—after noting most Mukbang stars are skinny. Candy became an important and
essential part of this study. As Paytas had noted, many famous Mukbang stars present as
thin-bodied, and it was important for me to observe videos with a woman whose body
defied not only cultural norms but also the norms of this particular community.

For the analysis of the Mukbang shows, I observed both the actors and content in
the shows, and I also used viewers’ comments to interpret how audiences were reacting
to these videos. It was by using these comments that I was able to connect patterns within
the discourse to create the themes cited above. My criteria for forming the patterns was to choose similar reactions that were occurring frequently from different viewers.

The artifacts used in this project are all texts positioned in popular culture that circulate on and in digital media platforms. All artifacts can be found on YouTube, which is easily accessible and shareable. These artifacts are centered in food as entertainment.
Mukbang

The Mukbang stars I critiqued in the project are all women whose ages range from 20-30 years old. These stars use YouTube to mediate, share and promote their shows. Below is a list of the Mukbang stars I observed for this project with contextual information on how they present and how many followers subscribe to their YouTube channels. I believe it is important to provide this basis of information to enable readers to infer a better understanding of what audiences are seeing when watching these shows. The names of the stars are the names they use on their YouTube station.

The Stars

· Trisha Paytas is a white, U.S. American woman and presents with a big body type. She typically switches from wearing no make-up or to an amount of heavy make-up. Currently she has 4 million subscribers to her YouTube channel.

· Veronica Wang is an Asian-Canadian woman who presents with a thin body type, and almost always wears make-up. She currently has 1.3 million subscribers.

· Dorothy is a Korean woman from South Korea who presents a slim body type. She always wears make-up, and she currently has 3 million subscribers.

· Lindsay Greene (her YouTube handle is Hunger Diaries) is a U.S. American woman who presents with a slim body type. She wears little to no make-up and currently has just under 50,000 subscribers.

· Candy (her YouTube handle is HungerFat Chick) is a U.S. American woman. She presents with a very fat body and wears little to no make-up. Candy currently has 142,000 subscribers.
About Mukbang

Originating in Korea, Mukbang videos began popping up on the internet around 2009 (Youm, 2016). The main idea behind these videos is simple: People film themselves eating large quantities of food, sometimes while telling stories or sharing day-to-day experiences. These shows quickly became a sensation in Korea, generating such popularity that in 2013 South Korean broadcasting networks started implementing the idea into reality television (Youm & Michaelmas, 2016). This phenomenon reached the U.S. around 2015 with live-streaming videos on platforms such as YouTube and a segment on the late TV personality Anthony Bourdain’s food and travel show, Parts Unknown (McCarthy, 2017; Youm & Michaelmas, 2016).

Though Mukbang stars are diverse in gender and race this project is interested in focusing on feminine-presenting Mukbang stars. Many of these stars follow hegemonic standards of beauty. These videos intrigued me because of the way women were approaching eating behaviors. I am fascinated by the blatant way both men and women are breaking eating norms by not only binging on an excessive amount of food, but also how this taboo behavior is put on display. Mukbang videos offer a rich text for the concept of magical eating because of the exoticism that these women embody because of their departure from normative ideologies of food, eating, and embodiment.

In this chapter I introduced my project and gave an explanation of why I see this work as important and urgent. That is, with the growing trend of food as entertainment and the boom of technology and creation of online spaces, it is vital to interrogate the formation of discourse in relation to ongoing narratives of gender eating habits and thinness culture, along with understanding how these narratives are functioning in these
spaces. In this chapter I also previewed what readers can expect to learn throughout this work, and I explained the methods I used, along with giving background information of the Mukbang, the videos I used, and the actors I observed. In the following chapter, I explain my theoretical approach, and the literature I reference in which I based and formed my arguments. This includes what using a feminist cultural lens means, why I think it was the best lens to use, and in-depth understanding of the underpinnings of thinness culture, and other theoretical frameworks I cite in my arguments.
Chapter 2

Theoretical Orientation

This chapter reviews the scholarship I use to form and confirm my arguments in my analysis throughout this project. The first section is dedicated to explaining what a feminist cultural lens means, and how I use this approach in my analysis. I cite established researchers and scholarship to aid in my explanation of why it is important to understand the historicity of gender, eating, and embodiment from the point-of-view that considers culture rather than just the individual. I then describe the theoretical frameworks of magical thinking, desire and fantasy to explain how I build my arguments for my concept of magical eating.

Feminist Cultural Lens

This research could easily take a variety of different approaches resulting in compelling findings. However, using a feminist approach enables me to interrogate these texts with a focus on the ways rhetorical discourse is recursively constraining and/or enabling gendered ideologies of the body and eating norms. Centering my argument around magical eating, I use this lens to obtain an understanding of how new formats of food and body narratives are either reinforcing or resisting historic and salient norms of female embodiment and eating behaviors.

Additionally, living and experiencing life in a Westernized female body, the move to critique these texts through a feminist cultural lens feels like the most significant approach. As Joycelyn Bailey (2015) explains through Susan Bordo’s work, the historicity of Othering femaleness and female bodies runs deep. Harkening back to an
Aristotelian understanding of the Self, the female body’s devaluation is centered in ideology by way of dualistic terms of femininity and the female body (Bailey, 2015). This inescapable binary continues to govern the ways of representing and constraining female embodiment.

Furthermore, enacted through media, national and global narratives of the female body further establish expectations and definitions of what is considered to be the ideal body. Though this is not a new phenomenon, the reach of this influence has greatly increased due to the advances in technology. In the preface of the 10th anniversary edition of Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body, Bordo (2003) underscores the enduring and dangerous impacts of gendered hegemonic standards on gendered bodies exacerbated by new forms of technology and media advancement, despite the more recent emergence of body positivity narratives.

In this preface Bordo (2003) offers an example that specifically points to the insidious and rapid effects Western media messaging has on the female body despite a short duration of exposure. In 1995, the island of Fiji received its first Western broadcasting service, and after just three years of consuming these programs the population experienced a shift in how women identified with their bodies. Prior to the introduction of Western media, the island had no documented cases of eating disorders, but rather, most Fiji women expressed feeling comfortable with their bodies at any size (Bordo, 2003).

However, in 1998, 11 percent of Fiji women who were surveyed reported using purging practices to lose weight, and 62 percent surveyed said they began dieting (Bordo, 2003). I outline this example to demonstrate the usefulness of conducting my research
with a feminist lens because of the need to track and trace how the evolution of media continues to constrain gendered bodies, as well as accentuate the evolution of how publics are consuming media.

Thus, using a feminist cultural lens is imperative for approaching a historic phenomenon that has found newer, faster methods of spreading. When examining eating and thinness cultures, it became apparent that in many ways their salience and formations are very much intertwined and constitutive of one another. Both culture’s rhetoric and ideologies that are deemed most dangerous for women are both indoctrinated through media and conceived in the medical and health communities (LeBesco & Braziel, 2001; Bordo, 2003; LeBesco, 2004; Gay, 2017).

There is a strong argument in feminist scholarship (Grosz, 1994; LeBesco & Braziel, 2001; Bordo, 2003) that corporeality and identity must be examined through an intersectional lens. It has long been established how thinness contributes to the architecture of whiteness and power (Counihan & Kaplan, 1998; Garb, Garb and Stunkard, 1975), so it only makes sense that scholarship views embodiment and thinness as constitutive of the intersectional power dynamics in relation to other identities.

Likewise, the health and scientific communities, though important and necessary in educating the public have also worked to reinscribe harmful ideologies of thinness both in relations to eating habits and concepts of what healthy looks like (i.e. thin) (LeBesco & Braziel, 2001; Bordo, 2003; Gay 2017). This is where a feminist cultural lens works to resolve and denounce antiquated and dangerous narratives, in order to portray a more holistic understanding of women’s perceptions of the body.
First, a feminist cultural lens scrutinizes the impact media has caused overtime on women’s relationships to food and eating behaviors. Bordo (2003) references back all the way to the Victorian era in her work. She notes that nineteenth century Victorian era ideologies were the first (documented) cultural influencer to impact gendered eating habits.

Food politics have dictated the flow of power for decades (Counihan, 1992; Goody 1982). In many cultures, still to this day, but certainly throughout history, food politics governed caste, gender, race, and class. This did and still functions through who has access to food, who farms food, who has access to nutritious food, and means to education on food and cooking food (Counihan, 1992; Adams 1990). Bordo (2003) connects the relationship of our current cultural norms, which regulate women’s appetite, to the initial Victorian practices of starvation and restrictive eating in large mass. The Victorian era also used mediated communication to indoctrinate women into ideologies of restrictive eating with messages equating femininity with controlled portions and the dangers of overindulgence (Bordo, 2003).

In addition, Bordo (2003) uses the work of Dijkstra (1986), to argue that this phenomenon to start controlling women’s eating habits was birthed out of the undercurrent to oppress the “new woman” which emerged during that time period (116). Bordo (2003) also links the popularization of these norms (women practicing controlled eating) to be driven by men’s fear of women’s sexuality. Historically women’s hunger has been connected to their sexuality, this can be seen in the metaphor of the man-eater and other interpretations which narrate women’s sexuality and power bore from her uncontrollable urge to devour men (Bordo, 2003).
Consequently, this has led to generations of harmful tropes of women eating (or not eating). Sadie Stein (2009), a Jezebel writer, explores modern takes on these tropes in sitcoms such as *Will and Grace* and *30 Rock*. Stein argues that characters Grace Adler and Liz Lemon both use food as comic relief during times of distress. These characters binge on fatty foods constantly yet remain skinny—and this facet is integral to the identity of these characters onscreen. Stein (2009) establishes a clear dominant pattern through critiques of advertisements that reinforces a deep fear that women should be constantly concerned with overindulgence and associating this act with shame.

Indeed, hiding transgressive acts of eating is something many feminist scholars have written about. I intensely relate to Geis’s (1998) portrayal of how many women present themselves eating in public—careful, dainty, neatly and never too much, in juxtaposed to their perceived shameful messy binges when drawn away from the spectacle of the world. Bordo (2003) underscores that this pattern of behavior is learned through messages of how women ought to eat, and how contrary to women, most bulimic men actually prefer to binge in public or with friends.

Similarly, Chis Shilling and Tanya Bunsell (2009) depict women and overeating as taboo behavior in their ethnographic research of female bodybuilders. In this study, the participant’s stigmatization is discursively created by friends, family and strangers in reaction to the dissonance resulting from observing the participant embody and engage in behaviors the defy traditional feminine activities. What I find particularly useful for this project is understanding the gendered discrimination that occurs for women around eating habits and food consumption. Through Shilling and Bunsell (2009) examples of negative
reactions and rejection the participants face, partly due to over-eating, this study assists in demonstrating that when women indulge in food, they are engaging in a rebellious act.

When women engage in transgressive eating habits they are engaging in acts of resistance. Bordo’s (2003) discussion of targeted advertisements for male diets also supports this idea. Despite dieting messages now targeting both women and men in the pursuit of all bodies needing to be “perfect” bodies, it is still evident that media representations of dieting reinforce the hegemonic belief that men should have insatiable appetites while women should not (Bordo, 2003). Rather, Bordo argues through her analysis of diet product advertisements either targeted to men or women, that despite both promoting dieting products the male advertisements encourage satisfying hunger, while the ads for women primarily encourage suppressing hunger.

In addition, Bordo argues that depictions of women eating in media are either rarely displayed (because this act is taboo) or are used as metaphors for sexuality. I see women displaying transgressional eating behaviors as resistant because it deviates from eating norms. Shilling and Bunsell (2009) note that female bodybuilders received criticism from inside and outside of their community because of the amount of food they consumed. One participant in this study said, “People are always really shocked when I tell them that I eat 3000 calories a day, they say stuff like ‘aren’t women only supposed to eat around 2000?’” (Shilling & Bunsell, 2009, p. 147).

Eating culture is intrinsically entwined with thinness culture. As I stated before U.S. cultures perception of the ideal body is deeply influenced by the scientific and health community. Bordo (2003) underscores the danger of negating culture as a major
contributor to eating disorders and shifting the responsibility solely on the individual.

Bordo (2003) writes:

> Most women in our culture, then, are ‘disordered’ when it comes to issues of self-worth, self-entitlement, self-nourishment, and comfort with their own bodies; eating disorders, far from ‘bizarre’ and anomalous, are utterly continuous with a dominant element of the experience of being [a woman] in this culture. (p. 57)

Here, Bordo argues that not only are most women experiencing some sort of disordered relationship to their body, but it is cultural ideologies that are major producers and contributors to how women form this relationship. However, much of culture takes its cue from the scientific and health communities. LeBesco and Braziel (2001) describe two points of contention that these communities had a hand in perpetuating. First is the construct of the fat body as the traumatized body, and second is the monetization of thinness.

Rhetoric that depicts the fat body as the traumatized body functions to reinforce thinness as happiness, and portrays the fat body as a symptom of something that is damaged (LeBesco & Braziel, 2001). This is part of the larger narrative that works to erase fat identity. LeBesco & Braziel (2001) note that many of the self-help books for losing weight—which argue that one must fix the trauma that is causing the weight gain—actually portray the fat literally eating away the healthy body.

This same notion is also depicted in how diet culture monetizes thinness. Despite how dangerous and harmful most of the diet fads, trends, medical procedures and supplements are for consumers, they promise to cut away, trim down and disappear the
fat body. In both of these instances the importance is placed on ridding the fat and replacing it with thin—again emphasizing that thin is healthy, thin is happy, thin is good.

Accordingly, this is the power of thin: not only is it positioned in the scientific and health communities as the status to obtain, but it is sold to the masses as how to achieve happiness. These narratives are what perpetuate the erasing of fat identity and what LeBesco (2004) describes by using Goffman as the spoiling of fat identity—by creating an association and understanding of an identity that is so abhorrent, so “uninhabitable,” so despised that “[it] work[s] to create the protests of fat people against their own bodies” (p. 3).

Gay’s (2017) work also portrays the ways in which women who inhabit “unruly bodies” experience ways that because of their body part of their identity is erased. She describes in her book the continuous contradiction she faces throughout her life, which is the ways thinness culture works make large bodies invisible, yet the ironic nature that large bodies claim space or are hyper-visible. She portrays this through a contradiction of (in)visibility where it is necessary for women to enact strategies in order to accommodate expectations constructed by dominant ideologies of women’s bodies. Gay adds to the conversation by explaining her internal struggle of strategically taking actions to be invisible in society which demands “unruly bodies” to be out-of-sight, and yet feels the inevitability of being hypervisible due to being in a body which goes against social norms.

Gay (2017) writes, “when you’re overweight, your body becomes a matter of public record in many respects. Your body is constantly and prominently on display” (p.120). This passage relates to the public discourse of obesity and the obesity crisis. Gay
demonstrates how narratives of obesity are not only salient in the public consciousness and internalized by women, but also are placed onto women by way of interpersonal conversations making visibility feel impossible to avoid. It is through these channels of communication that Gay explains feeling more out of control of her body as if she is only her body and not a person. It is important to think about the personal experience of visibility in this manner when understanding magical eating because of the role control plays in this concept, which I will explain further in this project.

Additionally, Gay discusses this feeling of hypervisibility juxtaposed to the need to be invisible. Gay (2017) paints a picture of having to constantly contort and manipulate her body to fit into spaces in order to accommodate the ideology which tells women that their bodies are not allowed to take up space. This dilemma pointedly demonstrates a physical enactment of invisibility. “I deny myself the right to space when I am in public, trying to fold in on myself, to make my body invisible even though it is, in fact, grandly visible” (Gay, 2017, p. 171).

To summarize, using a feminist culturalist approach enables me to explore the power dynamics occurring within the food entertainment through the texts at hand. Through media, power structures construct expectations of female embodiment and food behaviors. A feminist lens examines the ways this construction is constraining or enabling female bodies. Thus, I will be able to expose the ways that these texts are either contributing to or defying established restraints.

Turning from Magical Thinking to Magical Eating

Magical thinking is an important component to define when mapping the key role, it plays in how audiences engage with these texts, but also its functionality in thinness
culture and fantasies of non-consequential eating. In this section I will define magical thinking in order to connect this concept to the emergence of what I call magical eating.

Originating from psychology and anthropology, magical thinking is “the belief that one’s ideas, thoughts, actions, words, or use of symbols can influence the course of events in the material world” (Vandenberg, 2018; ph. 1). At first this concept was predominantly studied in situations of religion or superstition as a way of using magical forces in sense-making, however due to this, a neocolonial connotation of inferiority or naivety came to be attached to this concept (Vandenberg, 2018).

Instead, I draw upon the perspective used by James, Handelman, and Taylor (2011), which frames magical thinking as a useful coping tool in stressful situations where the notion of “magic works to restore the experience of interconnectedness in situations where this experience has been broken” (p. 633). That is, agency is gained by enacting a thought process through which to cope with an uncontrollable outside force by using a path of logic that would conjure a desired end. This is similar to the way Gunn and Cloud (2010) use magical voluntarism, which is to theorize the movement of agency. They explain how agency either moves from within the actor to enable a way of understanding phenomenon or moves from outside the actor to change conditions within a phenomenon.

Here, I turn to an example in the study by James et al. (2011) to demonstrate how magical thinking works in the sense of attempting to gain agency through a line of logic with the means to cope with uncontrollable experiences. James et al (2011) writes:

Celia’s mother, who had struggled with obesity all her life, eventually succumbed to cancer. Having anguished over her mother’s suffering, it is perfectly rational
for Celia to suspect that “breast cancer could be related to obesity” and as such be motivated to become “very regimented” in her own weight management. But Celia did not see a regimented diet as simply an action to lose weight in order to stay healthy. By practicing a regimented diet, Celia was attempting to gain agency over something she rationally knew she had no control over—her mother’s illness. For Celia, this was a way to feel in control in the face of events over which she had no power. (p. 639)

In this example the participant is using magical thinking in order to gain a sense of empowerment from within while attempting to gain agency over an outside phenomenon in relation to which she is rendered powerless. By using this method of logic, the participant is attempting to still arrive at a desired outcome, even though she is using faulty reasoning.

Gunn and Cloud (2010) explore a similar way of examining agency through a line of reasoning that is faulty—magical voluntarism. “We have been particularly prone to a philosophical belief in what we term ‘magical voluntarism,’ the notion that human agency is better understood as the ability to control a given phenomenon through the proper manipulation of thoughts and symbols (e.g., language)” (Gunn & Cloud, 2010, p. 51). For them, magical voluntarism describes a faulty agency that expects to control or enact a particular outcome simply by thinking or claiming it to be so.

Here, I want to turn to how magical thinking and magical eating connect. The role and popularity of food in the global entertainment industry is proving that audiences’ obsession with watching food preparation and consumption is only growing stronger. Kelly (2017) notes that U.S. Americans are cooking less but consuming food programing
more, creating a paradox around how consumers actually want to relate to their food. Western consumers of the food and entertainment industry are watching food being prepared and consumed not only out of practicality, but to consume an experience.

According to Kelly (2017), U.S. Americans do not just want to see food, but to “consume a vision of social life, embodied in how different cultural groups produce, consume, and relate to food” (p. 2). That is, audiences turn to food entertainment as a way to indulge in a voyeuristic experience of other cultures and people within those cultures.

Despite the multiplicity of why and how mediated food culture continues to emerge, I am concerned with how this phenomenon relates to fulfillment and fantasy between relationships of the audience and actor, specifically female audiences and actors. Though society as a whole is experiencing a recursively complicated relationship with food and consumption, I am particularly interested in examining how magical eating, under the guise of gendered constraints, functions with eating norms and feminine bodies.

As I stated, magical thinking is a line of logic that attempts to gain agency in order to control an outside phenomenon of which there is little possibility to control, and I argue that this is the same line of logic is inherent in magical eating. However, it is important to establish that the faulty logic which occurs in magical thinking is often seen as an outgrowth of the individual actor, which is not how I intend for the model of magical eating to function. Bordo (2003) makes a case for why magical thinking in eating disorder logic should not be placed on the actor, but rather the faulty logic is within the culture of dieting and societal expectations of women’s bodies. Bordo (2004) writes:

To turn to the bulimic’s “flawed reasoning” concerning the importance of slenderness in our culture: the absurdity of categorizing the belief that “I am
special if I am thin” and women’s embarrassment over being seen as “distorted” attitudes ought to be apparent. What reality do they distort? Our culture is one in which Oprah Winfrey, a dazzling role model for female success, has said that the most significant achievement of her life” was losing sixty-seven pounds on a liquid diet. (She gained it all back within a year.) … [A] culture which personal ads consistently list “slim,” “lean,” or “trim” as required of prospective dates. The anorectic thus appears, not as the victim of a unique and “bizarre” pathology, but as the bearer of very distressing tidings about our culture. (p. 60)

Using Bordo’s argument, I see magical eating as a strategy to satisfy fantasies of eating in order to undermine constraints placed on women around eating and embodiment. Though the logic of magical eating is still faulty in attempting to use these texts as a way to gain agency over a seemingly uncontrollable phenomenon, the responsibility for the faulty logic lies with the culture influencing how women can satisfy these fantasies, not within the women themselves.

Returning to Gay’s (2017) work, her need to negotiate (in)visibility was constructed by outside narratives of how unruly bodies must behave, which is similar to how I see magical eating functioning to satisfy fantasies—a strategy constructed by narratives of eating and embodiment. The constraints of thinness and restrictions of eating leads audiences to seek ways to negotiate their own experience of these norms, while also desiring ways to undermine them.

Thus, in this project, I use magical eating to look closely at how feminine bodies are consuming eating shows with female actors. How women are turning to these shows to rhetorically create a (false) sense of fulfillment—physically and figuratively. Magical
eating is used to trace how agency is obtained and where it is located in relation to the audience, and how the audience is orienting agency either onto the actor, the event, or the object.

**Desire and the Other**

Additionally, when mapping magical eating, I turn to bell hooks’ (1992) work, *Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance*. The Other, or the exotic, in this project is the representation produced by these Mukbang texts of a woman who can consume freely, abandoning rules placed on feminine bodies. This image is of a woman who differs from the gendered hegemonic rules of eating. To be clear, it is not the actors of the texts who are being Othered, rather the characters what the actors represent to the audience, which are ideal versions of women who can eat without consequence. This representation then becomes exotic for the audience because of the difference between the actor’s eating habits and audience’s own. Bordo (2003) writes of a similar phenomenon in advertisements centered around food or metaphors of food. The representations produced in these advertisements are of women who don’t care about eating, don’t desire to eat, or can eat without consequence (Bordo, 2003).

This image of a woman is so different from reality that she is seen as “foreign” (Bordo, 2003). In these types of representation of women’s relationships with food which resist against norms, they are enabling the audience's ability to vicariously walk the line with danger and exoticism, similar to how hooks explain Black bodies. She writes:

In the United States, where our senses are daily assaulted and bombarded to such an extent that an emotional numbness sets in, it may take being “on the edge” for
individuals to feel intensely. Hence the overall tendency in the culture is to see young black men as both dangerous and desirable. (p. 377)

This experience then situates the audience in a position of desiring the actors in the hopes of experiencing their fullness through an affective ecology of eating. Hooks (1992) explains:

*Encounters with Otherness are clearly marked as more exciting, more intense, and more threatening. The lure is the combination of pleasure and danger. In the cultural marketplace the Other is coded as having the capacity to be more alive, as holding the secret that will allow those who venture and dare to break with the cultural anhedonia (370)*

Here, hooks are depicting how bodies that do not conform with white normative standards are forced into a category of “exotic” because of the ways their bodies break those norms. Thus, just by being, their Otherness is posited as a location of excitement to be conquered.

When we turn to magical eating, we need to consider why this food media is so seductive for the audience and how it functions. I see hooks’ project of “eating the Other” as a useful tool in starting to unravel how the audience could share the experience collectively with the representation of the texts in this project—the audience could feel a sensation of fullness, satisfaction, and/or relief after watching the actor’s behavior and engagement with food in a resistant and free manner.

When considering magical eating, desire, and the Other, the spectacle of binge eating is a way to fulfill fantasies about uncontrolled eating behaviors while conforming to normative body images. This fantasy entails consuming an excess amount of food
without any consequences. This is a fantasy recirculated throughout popular culture. As Stein (2009) argued, television tropes which depict thin women overindulging without consequence allow the audience to indulge in a fantasy of magical eating. She (2009) wrote:

   It's especially depressing because these tend to be smart, sympathetic characters designed to appeal to women - in some way is this contradiction playing into our own fantasies? Because there's something deeply unhealthy about our liking for this trope, our buying into the dissonant fantasy (para. 4-5).

In this passage, Stein underscores the danger of what this trope represents for women, and the complicated nature of buying into a fantasy which further complicates an already harmful narrative.

**Fantasy and Orientation**

Taking a deeper look into what fantasy and desire are and what causes fantasy, Joshua Gunn’s work gives insight into this complex topic. To Gunn (2004), fantasy is motivated by desire that cannot be achieved by the “I” as it is held by the “Other.”

Fantasy is a coping mechanism that was created by a traumatic shock in the “Real,” which Gunn (2004) takes from Lacan. In Lucan’s theory, the order of the Real is anything that cannot be captured in the Symbolic or Imaginary—meaning that which is beyond language and simplicity. This trauma that creates the need for fantasy is called castration, which Mulvey (1989) explains as the retaliation used against women for not having a penis. Gunn (2004) complicates this view and disconnects it from direct relation to sex, arguing that the trauma of encountering the Real is the “pleasurable and yet traumatic moment when one submits to language in order to gain self-consciousness” (p.
9). This trauma occurs when self-identification occurs. Thus, fantasies are a coping mechanism in the subjects’ life-long struggle of striving for an impossible completeness.

These narratives can be internalized to explain why and what the Self desires in order to fulfill a fantasy, called “fundamental fantasies” (Gunn, 2004). Through these fantasies, an expression is manifest through the Other. That is, the Other is subjected by the Self as having the attributes of a fantasy, thus creating desire (Gunn, 2004). By projecting the fantasy onto the Other, this gives the Self (false) agency in order to achieve the (unachievable) fantasy (Gunn, 2004, p. 11).

In this project I use Dana Cloud’s (2010) development of Gunn (2004), Purdy (2003) and Žižek’s (1993) psychoanalysis of fantasy to form her interpretation of ‘traversing the fantasy.’ This is that actors use fantasies to keep masked the reality of the separation from one’s “unrealized hopes” in order to protect one’s self from entering into the “traumatic awareness that there is nothing behind it” unless they were to become aware and work through their fantasy (p. 4). This functions in my work in Chapter 6 when analyzing how magical eating works to keep audiences immobile in their own fantasies. That is because fantasies keep one in a masked reality, they are unable to reconcile their own struggles with social norms and unable to transform narratives which continue to reinscribe problematic ideologies.

My goal with using the theories and scholarships that I present in this chapter is to demonstrate what exactly can be problematic with these texts, and the baseline and structuring my arguments. There are several ways to interpret these Mukbang shows, however, for me, analyzing the complications of thinness culture in these videos deems the most compelling. My intention with this chapter is to help the reader understand not
only how I would be analyzing these texts, but also give an in-depth understanding of how dominant and prolific the narratives of thinness culture.
Chapter 3  

Eating  

*I love food but it is difficult to enjoy food.*  

*It is difficult to believe I am allowed to enjoy food.*  

*Mostly, food is a constant reminder of my body, my lack of willpower, my biggest flaws.*  

— Roxane Gay, Hunger

Dorothy greets the audience with excitement as if she is welcoming long-lost friends. Despite her charisma and enthusiasm, the mound of food positioned in front of her steals the scene. Her face floats behind the four oversized platters laying in front of her, and which only appear more outrageously large and cartoonish when placed next to her slender and small body. She explains the motivation behind today’s meal of Asian stir-fried squid blossoms soaked in a creamy and alarmingly orange sauce.

She not only had this meal at a local restaurant but loved it so much that she had to order take-out as well. Accompanying the squid, Dorothy explains, pointing her slim finger, is a larger-than-life pile mixed with thin and Chinese glass noodles (a thick, wide, and translucent noodle). She reveals that this meal would be just too heavy with rice. In addition, and to create her own spin to the dish, Dorothy is also using seaweed sheets, kimchi, and lettuce wraps for texture and taste. However, don’t forget that tasty beverage to wash this all down! Dorothy’s mouth smirks, as on cue, she pulls out a large mason jar filled to the brim with iced hibiscus tea from under her table. The audience is left to hear nothing but long gulps and ice clinking for several seconds before she plops down the glass and mysteriously pulls out a bowl of green chili peppers from the same location
(leaving the audience to wonder what else she is hiding under there). Ever so delicately, pieces of chopped peppers are sprinkled on top of the squid. Dorothy begins to mix the squid and noodles with her hands, turning everything bright orange and glistening.

Dorothy starts eating. She swirls a heaping portion of noodles and squid with her chopsticks and fits the entire bite into her mouth. Every chew and swallow are acutely audible and becomes the soundtrack of the show. It is apparent that these noises are an important element to Dorothy and her fans in creating an experience revolving around eating. The visuals are just as crucial as the sounds.

Soon, she begins to display the food before putting it into her mouth. With her next bite, Dorothy takes a large piece of squid secured between her chopsticks and dangles it up close and in front of the camera before cheerfully tossing the seafood in her mouth. In addition to these actions, her face reinforces that she is experiencing extreme pleasure. She consistently grabs and consumes oversized bites, some so large that her entire mouth and cheeks stretch and bulge in order to contain all the food—a feat she is known for.

Not only does Dorothy never stop chewing, slurping or crunching—creating a continuous loop of grabbing, stuffing and eating—but Dorothy never stops confirming and reassuring the audience that she takes pleasure in this activity. She affirms her satisfaction with wide smiles and gleaning eyes accompanying every bite, gasps and giddy expels of excitement through nods of her head, and putting down her chopsticks just long enough to give a thumbs up.
This chapter analyzes the politics of eating by closely examining the relationships between eating, food, gender, and identity. Through a critique of the discourse generated through audience comments and the Mukbang stars’ own personal discussions on these topics in their shows I was able to determine themes that focused on struggles with food and eating cultural norms presented in Western societies. The three themes I constructed were audience members reaction to the stars’ eating behaviors such as verbally policing and/or monitoring their eating habits, how the audience negotiated hunger and overindulgence, and how the audience discussed using these videos as a form of social connection.

**Contextualizing Mukbang and Eating**

There was some rich information revealed within the Mukbang stars’ discussed how they negotiate with cultural eating and body norms. Not all of the stars openly discuss their feelings and struggles with food and eating, but several of them do, talking about these topics candidly to their audiences.

Here, the strongest example is the discussions Trisha Paytas has with her audiences. In nearly every video I analyzed, Paytas disclosed her long-time battle with conforming to the concept of “healthy eating” or “healthy living.” Often, she contradicts her actions with qualifying statements before or during her Mukbang shows that disclose a dieting and fasting stint she is about to or currently engaging.

In her video, My 10k Calorie Lunch! EPIC CHEAT DAY MUKBANG, (which also implies dieting in the title), Paytas starts of the show by giving a warning. She explains,
So, warning, what you are about to see in this Mukbang is extra crazy, um I woke up this morning—it is two o’clock (p.m.), I haven’t eaten since about three o’clock (p.m.) the day before. So technically it is like 24 hours of fasting.” And within the same breath she then adds, “and I know that I say I am always on a diet, but not today, today is my—going all out—I ordered all my favorite foods … 

This statement demonstrates the qualifying many women do before eating an amount of food or type of food that transgresses acceptable or appropriate eating behaviors in U.S. American societies. Later in the chapter, I go into a deeper discussion of how eating and public displays of eating are still taboo for women. Paytas often sets-up her shows with an explanation that she is about to go on a diet and wants to “pig-out” before doing so. Other Mukbang stars that are not in the study, but who I have researched prior, seem to give a similar explanation, especially when eating a larger than average Mukbang (such as a 10k calorie challenge). Peggie Nation (who is known for eating very large meals and finishing all the food) often qualifies her actions by saying, “Now guys, I don’t normally eat like this,” or “I do not eat like this every day.”

In this same video Paytas discloses battles she has with audience members online or people in real life policing her eating habits. Paytas states, 

Yesterday was a day, I couldn’t get away from people telling me how disgusting I eat, as if I don’t know that I eat not the best. I don’t have a great diet,” she pauses and looks at the camera, “People talk to me as if I am a slow person when they talk about it.

This example involves two different points of struggle. It is clear that Paytas contends with external sources of judgement, but this example also points to the conflict she
grapples with due to her own internalized judgement that emerges from societal norms. I also believe this example demonstrates what Gay (2017) writes about in her work, which is when a woman transgresses from an acceptable body type and eating habits she becomes a public spectacle and is on display for society to openly judge. I will discuss similar issues in more depth in Chapter 3.

Other forms of discussion regarding eating and eating habits focus on how Mukbang stars react to audiences acting to police their behaviors. As described in the beginning of the chapter, eating sounds do enable the audience to become part of the experience, however this also leads to situations where the audience reinscribes oppressive patterns through their comments about the women. For example, Lindsay Greene or Hunger Diaries TV engages in discourse with her audience about one audience member who consistently tells her to “eat with your mouth closed” and to “stop smacking (when she chews).” Greene is able to read the comments instantly because she is live streaming the show. After reading these criticisms aloud, Greene seems to laugh them off and says, “Guys to be honest, I don’t know what smacking is—I’m just chewing …. I think it is hilarious, I don’t know how you feel, but I feel like people on YouTube just come to these channels to just complain about these things.” Though is seems Greene manages these policing behaviors in a positive manner (though we are only seeing her front stage behavior (Goffman, 1959) and do not know her true feelings about these types of interactions), some Mukbang stars seem to internalize these comments more than others.

When examining Veronica Wang’s rhetoric regarding criticism she receives for making “slurping sounds,” Wang appears more apologetic than Greene does for her
eating behavior. That fact that she does get criticized for slurping shocked me because the Chinese-Canadian seemed to be falling in line with traditional Mukbang practice, which is the louder the slurp the more pleased your audience (Boscamp, 2017). However, when slurping up a piece of flauta falling from her chin, she said, “there I go again, slurping things that shouldn’t be slurped.” She finishes the rest of the flauta, and justifies these noises, “It’s an addition, you guys who tell me to stop slurping, you seriously don’t understand—it is an addition.”

In the next section, I conduct a closer analysis of ways eating ideologies and norms emerge from the audiences’ reactions and interactions with these shows. This analysis captures a snapshot of how people are struggling with Western societal constraints and constructs about eating. This discourse reflects three major themes which build toward larger conversations on power and eating. These themes are: disciplining how one should eat (or the aesthetics of eating), monitoring one’s own agency with eating (or not eating), and finally manifesting a sense of social connection through watching people eat.

**Disciplining Eating Aesthetics**

Eating alone or together? Eating messy or neatly? Eating or not at all? This section reflects on some of the most basic and gendered eating behaviors grappled by women still to this day. When considering what looms beneath the surface of acceptable eating patterns per gender, it seems apparent that one can find themselves walking the tight ropes of power and food relationships. As Counihan (1992) using reminds us bluntly in her introduction of Food and Gender, Identity and Power, “food was, and continues to be, power in a most basic, tangible and inescapable form” (p.2). This section underscores
the ways audiences work to both encourage acts of transgression, but simultaneously reinscribes gendered eating norms.

Greene bites into an In-N-Out Animal Style, 3x3 (this is a three hamburger patties in one burger with special sauce). She pushes as much of the food into her mouth as she can in that first bite, and when she pulls the burger away, she reveals pink sauce smeared across her cheeks and lettuce spilling out of her mouth as she continues chewing. Laughing while trying to finish the bite, she licks the sauce off her cheeks, shoves the lettuce back into her mouth and swallows all the food. Without skipping a beat, she takes another bite, and then a third—all giant and just as “messy” as the first. Eventually, she stops for a moment (nearly half of the 3x3 consumed), and she says, “I am eating so fast I cannot breathe.”

Some Mukbang shows promote messy eating and use this behavior as the description *messy eating* to promote certain videos to entice audiences. The Mukbang stars in this study do not advertise their eating styles unless they feel it is necessary. Wang cited a “messy warning” for a Mukbang involving King crab legs dunked in cheese sauce—and yes it lived up to the expectations. Yet, despite these stars not intentionally labeling and promoting their shows as *messy eating* videos—they still remain as major foci of the audience. Also, eating messy is not the only behavior monitored by the audience: conduct such as eating too much, eating too much in one bite, and breathing too heavily, groaning with pleasure, and slurping are also points of contention in these shows. In the following subsection, “Eating Messy,” I analyze comments focused on reaction to the stars eating messy. This subsection is crucial in revealing how taboo women it is for to not eating politely or dainty. In U.S. culture how women eat is bound
by and to the construction of femininity. Thus, I want to demonstrate when women transgress this constraint, there is an instinctual reaction for audiences to negotiate this behavior.

**Eating Messy**

In this section, I begin with a comment that pointedly captures the contradiction occurring in these texts. This contradiction further confirms my argument in how Mukbang audiences both encourage transgressive eating but also reinscribe the ideologies that makes this behavior deplorable. MegaSmuf wrote about Wang’s eating style, “I keep seeing all these videos taking the p*ss because you take big bites which can be considered "sloppy." You're a mukbanger that takes big bites, so I dont get why people are getting so triggered by it.” With the booming trend of Mukbang, and women dominating the market, the dilemma of watching women eat sloppily becomes a major struggle or dissonance for audiences to reconcile.

Geis (1998) pointedly describes the dilemma of women and transgressional eating in the book *Eating Culture*, as she sets the scene of a man riding on the subway to work sloppily eating an Egg McMuffin letting crumbs drip down his chest and stomach—enjoying his meal in public without a care in the world. This, Geis (1998) further explains, is typically not the case for women:

Invariably, several [women] recount stories of “first dates” during which they scanned the menu for something that would be easy to eat inconspicuously, picking a salad or chicken breast for fear that devouring a plate of spaghetti would expose an overeager appetite and would risk stains and spills and messiness; only later, still hunger and safely away from the judging eye across the table, would
they open the refrigerator and stuff themselves with cold pizza, ice cream straight from the carton, anything deliciously gooey and sloppy (217)

In this quote, Geis is pointing to not only the fear for many women of eating in public due to judgement and being on display, but why this fear exists for women in the first place. I argue that the rules of how women should eat—daintily, controlled, with pose—are the foundation of why women’s acts of public eating are in fact rebellious acts.

Discourse which both enables and constrains gendered eating norms is dominant in the comments sections of the YouTube pages for these shows. I saw language in these comments which either disciplined or encouraged the eating behaviors of the women in this study. Yet, despite the intention of the language, both consistently reinforced the notion that it is still radical for women to publicly eat the way they do.

First, I want to demonstrate a correlation between the inherent disapproval with public displays of eating and these shows. The comments below directly reinforce Geis’ theory, that is the act of messy eating for women should be done in secret due to societal expectations and eating norms. One of Wang’s audience members, Dulce Quintero, wrote about Wang eating a traditional Mexican street food, “Yes girl, eat that elote like nobody watching.” This is framed to reference the popular saying, “dance like nobody is watching,” which implies to dance carefree and without worry of judgement, a woman must be free of observation. This notion mirrors the idea that yes, women are judged by the public or dinner partners when eating in a carefree manner or a messy fashion. So, though this comment is encouraging this behavior, it is also reinforcing and affirming the standard.
In these other examples, a pattern manifests, showing a clear goal from the audience to manage and police Wang’s resistant behavior—i.e. her messy eating. Monae Miller wrote, “Damm boo the food ain't runnin off ya plate is it ;” LPS Floofer TV commented, “Ok so, maybe not eat so like- messy and super quick? Otherwise I really like the sounds and it looks good. Just my opinion :));” and CakeH4X wrote, “girl the food isn't going anywhere, learn how to eat.” The most aggressive comment was made by DenimAndLeather, who wrote:

You quite LITERALLY stuff your face when your eat girl! You are a lady, take smaller bites and relax! Mukbangs are supposed to be enjoyable but the combination of you inhaling your food and the squeamish sounds of you slurping and chewing your food makes this quite cringey to watch. It is a shame because you are beautiful and have a sweet personality!! You just don’t have table etiquette lmao

As we can see, behavior that goes against the norms, such as eating sloppily and eating too fast is met with discipline, and the goal to reinscribe these gendered eating norms—women must eat lady-like or else it is offensive. Greene, whose eating style is, at times, more outside of normative behavior, also receives comments with the goal to discipline. Jasmine Hana wrote, “ur trying too hard to be messy why though;” marc hegler commented, “When you go out in public at a restaurant or bar or whatever and you're eating your entree do you chew your food the same way in public;” and vciouus wrote, “why you eating so nasty?”

These comments are strictly reinforcing gender eating norms. However, some of the comments Greene and Wang received reveal more of a contradiction from the
audience in terms of eating performances. For example, Kami Paige wrote about Greene, “I am so in love with the fact that she eats like a pig, BECAUSE GIRL SAME. Get messy queen!” While, Megan T, second this comment by writing below it, “You eat like a pig... I LOVE IT!! ❤️.” These two audience members are acknowledging that Greene is acting against expectations and either are relating to this behavior or admiring this behavior because of its inherent resistance of status quo, yet they are reinforcing these same standards simultaneously. Though they are supportive of the act of transgression by equating Greene to a pig (a metaphor for eating in a disgusting way), the audience members are also reinforcing the taboo nature of this behavior.

Likewise, some comments aim to directly address the disciplining rhetoric from the audience and reposition the argument to be more supportive toward the Mukbang stars. Madasyn Magee wrote in Wang’s defense, “I don’t get why everyone gets so mad about her shoving so much food in her mouth like that’s how she eats leave her be y’all food is good ,,” while Jennifer Medina wrote regarding Paytas’s behavior, “Idc [I don’t care] what anyone says about her eating. To me it’s satisfying to see someone be able to stuff themselves with so much food and be able to swallow it like nothing.” However, both of these comments still reinforce the idea that women eating like this is goes against normative behavior. By writing “this is just how she eats” or “I don’t care what anyone says” it implies that this one instances is OK but should be or is not a mainstream way of eating.

**Managing Other Eating Behaviors**

Next, I evaluate two observations in this section. First, I analyze how the audience reacts to food portions sizes and eating noises, and then I analyze how audiences react to
eating noises from Candy who presents with a nonconforming body. This section points to a broader picture of dissonance that occurs when women break eating norms, and women with nonconforming bodies break eating norms. I am able to depict through this analysis that audiences struggle with not just how women eat, but how much women eat, and collective reactions to women expressing pleasure when eating. This section points the power of the underpinning narrative of women being told to restrict food portions and adhere to prescribed feminized behaviors with eating norms. In addition, this section demonstrates the negotiations the audience faces with their own constrictions under these norms and observing them being broken by the actors, and actors with bodies that transgressive normative standards.

To begin, I point to a comment that I argue clearly demonstrates the uneasiness and at times outrage audience members experience when watching or listening to women engage in behavior which undermine what is deemed appropriate. Rita P wrote regarding Greene eating during her show. Rita commented:

I’ve never seen somebody eating this way. I like watching mukbangs and I don’t have a problem with eating sounds when they are appropriate. BUT to see a grown woman eating like a toddler makes me feel uncomfortable, sorry. No hate just honest review.

In this example it is unclear if it is just the eating noises or if it is also the messy eating that disturbs Rita. Either way, her explanation harkens to a desire to have Greene change her behavior to fit into the confined boundaries of what acceptable eating behaviors are for women. To Rita, Greene’s crossing of those boundaries makes her child-like—she is out-of-control and must be managed.
This idea of engaging with behaviors that cross boundaries with disdain can also be seen in comments around noise and pleasurable groans. The comments below are directed at Wang.

Sharlyn Zamora wrote, “Learn how to eat and stop chewing so loud. It’s so disturbing.” Another viewer, Paola Solis, commented, “Haven’t even started watching her eat yet but I swear to god she better not slurp her food.” These audience members demonstrate an anger toward this behavior, despite the fact that the eating sounds are supposed to be part of the experience in traditional Mukbang. In Korea Mukbang audiences actually digitally pay the actors to slurp loudly or eat loudly because the viewers find it pleasurable. Paola Solis is so upset by the noises that they are feeling anger when just anticipating Wang’s slurping. Again, I believe that these reactions come from the dissonance of watching women act in ways that undermine expectation.

In the next pattern I constructed, I analyze audience comments that are specifically regarding Candy or Hungry FatChick’s and the pleasurable moaning noises that she makes while eating. Here are three comments which demonstrate the language and tone used to police Candy’s reactions. The first comment is from, Lori Compton-Amegadze, who wrote:

I apologize if this is offensive, but your pleasurable moaning over food is unbearable to hear. Are you seriously this turned on over the flavor of the food or are you doing it for your audience?? I cannot handle it…it's like smacking or chewing with your mouth open…it is horrific! And please stop holding your eating utensil like a shovel…it's really poor manners! And the creep factor at the end when you blow kisses…10 out of 10! I'm out….
This, together with other comments that target Candy’s eating such as Lori Corpse who wrote, “I don’t watch your videos anymore cause I cannot stand the constant moaning...sounds so desperate;” and Zuzanna chylińska wrote, “She has orgasm during eating?”, signal two themes I noticed. First, the disturbance felt by the audience due to Candy’s expression of pleasure with eating, and second, their discomfort with these sounds eliciting a possible sexual feeling or experience. This discourse suggests that audiences are disturbed by women openly expressing pleasure with eating, especially women with bodies that do not fit the normative ideal. These comments also demonstrate resistance toward women’s sexuality, which Bordo (2003) also connects with eating as I discuss further in this chapter.

Next, I turn to examples that are concerned with food portion size and gender. Portion size and gendered eating is possibly the most salient constraint on gendered eating. The societal narratives in place on women in eating dictate that women must adhere to the rules of consuming daintily and having complete self-control (Bordo, 2003). Mukbangers purposefully eat large portions, typically eating a lot at once, and in a fast pace. This notion of undermining the rules around portion-control is a continued theme in my analysis.

Here, I focus on examining the discourse directed specifically toward portion control. Interestingly, the two Mukbang stars who received the most comments were Dorothy and Wang. Damilka Denise wrote regarding a show Dorothy published, “She not playin noooo games wit ha food ❤️;” syafiqah Aqilah commented, “i just wonder......how big is
your mouth? ;” Natalie Abramov wrote, “Huge bites and a fast eater, omg;” and Jenita yesu nesa mony, “Don't eat too much of food ....it is not good for health.”

Though these comments do not evoke a straightforward sense of disciplining or condemning, they do represent public shock and disbelief toward a woman is engaging in transgressive eating. These types of reactions reinforce the norm that when women eat large portions of food they are engaging in shocking behavior—which is typically and historically seen as a dangerous or negative action (Shilling & Bunsell, 2009).

Wang received comments regarding the amount of food she ate that were not overtly disciplining but demonstrated a sense of disbelief. Jennifer Medina wrote, “Idc [I don’t care] what anyone says about her eating. To me it’s satisfying to see someone be able to stuff themselves with so much food and be able to swallow it like nothing;” eleise Serna wrote, “Pay attention to the edditing!!! No way she is eating all that!! ;” Jimena Damn commented, “she can eat! My kinda girl subbed!;” Tammy Barton wrote, “I love that you don’t play with your food. And I also love that you can throw down!!! Get it girl!!! Mad respect;” and finally, Redon 17 commented, “****You got decent bites for a women xD.”

These comments paint an even more dramatic picture of people experiencing a type of dissonance in women eating large quantities of food. Eleise Serna accuses Wang of not actually eating all her food, which suggests the public is more willing to believe a woman is being deceptive about eating a large amount of food rather than actually eating it. This accusation points to how intrinsic eating norms are, and which cause people immersed in this culture an unwillingness to process the actions which could contradict their understanding of this ideology. The other comments continue to reinforce the notion
that women eating large portions of food is bewildering due to it undermining normative behaviors. Despite the positive comments, the audience still is reinscribing these constraints because audience members are reacting to the rarity and radicalness of the act.

Lastly, this section underlines the bias toward eating behaviors depending on body types. As Bordo (2003) has explained in her work, due to mainstream rhetoric and ideologies in the U.S. on health and healthy bodies, women who do not fit these constructs typically are disciplined and condemned for undermining both the body image and eating behaviors expected of women in society—making their actions even more demonized to the public. Bodies that fit body types correlated with ideal beauty standards are privileged, and though thin women are still scrutinized in these shows, I found evidence of audiences privileging thin bodies when it came to certain behaviors.

Below, these examples demonstrate disdain for how Candy breathes because audiences are correlating her heavy breathing with her body type, despite, in certain instances, Candy’s explanation of her labored breathing due to a chest cold. The following audience members made these comments on Candy’s breathing in her Popeye Chicken video, Lisa Filion wrote, “Disturbing to watch she has difficulty breathing really sad slowly killing herself,”; Caper Gal, wrote, “Your breathing is ridiculous, imagine how enlarged your heart is from working so hard,” and finally Susan Forget, wrote “Candy.. you better get checked out by a doctor.. you don't have a cold. Your heart is not able to pump blood to your lungs in order for you to breathe. The food you eat is killing you.. don\'t you know that. or do you not care.” These comments consist of shaming language and are all framed around a disdain of Candy’s actions. It seems the focus is on her breathing as a means of justification for the shaming language. However, when
compared with other Mukbang stars who have slim bodies, we see different reactions to
the same eating noises. In the above comments I see a correlation between how the
audience perceives body type and then how they frame their language.

For example, when watching Wang’s Mukbang show she carefully edits a section
of the video where she notes her own heavy breathing. She increased the speed so
audiences could still watch her eat, but not hear anything. She then puts a comment in the
video that explains why the edit was made, and asks her audience members how they feel
about heavy breathing. Though there were a few people who criticized the fact that she
would breathe heavily (like less than 10 out of nearly 3,000), most comments encouraged
or illustrated sympathy toward this behavior.

Overall, Wang’s audience reacting with encouragement to her editing her
breathing. For instance, Kashya Perez wrote, “Ur human I think heavy breathing is fine
girly ”; Chris Martinez commented, “Ur mukbang vids are awesome... don’t worry
bout heavy breathing n stuff ”; and game girl wrote, “I just want to say I hate the
fact that you feel like you have to worry about your nails or breathing heavy or the
sounds you make, just because people are rude and can't keep their mouth shut. I'm a
strong believer in if you don't have something nice to say don't say anything at all, and if
you don't like it don't watch. Girl just live your life do you be happy and your true ones
your real ones will be here rooting you on no matter your breathing noise your nails or
anything else WE LOVE YOU!!! ” As expressed above, the audiences’ reactions
depict support and encouragement for Wang to not feel self-conscious or concerned about
her “heavy breathing.” In fact many were frustrated that Wang had to even be concerned
about something that is so “human.”
Thus, when comparing the audiences’ reactions between Candy and Wang a pattern of bias is evident. There is an established need for the public to discipline or manage behaviors for women whose bodies defy normative standards, especially if the public can correlate those behaviors to the body: “People project assumed narratives onto [large] bod[ies] and are not at all interested in the truth of [those] bodies, whatever the truth might be” (Gay, 2017; p. 120). Gay so eloquently underscores the way people will openly humiliate large bodies and find justification for doing so because those bodies defy the ideal. Then, to contrast this situation, there is frustration when a woman who meets normative body standards breathes heavily and feels concerned about it. The audience is more willing to see the absurdity in culture that Wang feels embarrassed about breathing loudly in her video, but cannot show the same compassion for Candy’s breathing because of how her body presents. This shows the disdain collective the public has toward fat bodies because of the dominant way they are portrayed in culture. This subsection analyzed discourse which demonstrated how audiences struggle with eating behaviors that go against culture ideologies of how the prescribed way women should be eating. This section demonstrates the inherent struggle viewers have when witinessing acts that defy deep rooted beliefs, especially when those beliefs are challenged by a woman whose body also defies normative standards.

**Managing Hunger**

Thousands of people are turning to Mukbang shows to watch women eat, but how many are watching specifically to see them binge? This section examines how audience members discuss their own motivations of watching women binge eat, revealing a theme of wishful thinking around their own eating habits and desires of hunger and struggles
with starvation. Further in this chapter I will analyze these concepts more thoroughly using research that discusses binge eating and structures that constrain eating.

From this discourse I observed two central themes which focused on hunger. First, audience members disclose their desires for and/or experiences of hunger when watching these shows. And second, audiences disclose fantasies of eating and managing hunger. I argue that these shows are a platform where people can engage and negotiate with their own eating struggles because of the displays of radical eating. This analysis is important because it demonstrates and established strive audiences have with current eating norms and the desire to use these texts to fulfill fantasies.

The first pattern I observed in how audiences related to eating was demonstrated through simple acts of disclosing a feeling of hunger when watching these videos. Some comments include viewer, Disekiu Daily, who wrote regarding Dorothy’s Mukbang, “Why i feel so hungry when im watching your videos? ;”mnemosyne phynx, “When i’m hungry, i watched your videos;” and EliFoodie ASMR, “Now i am so hungry.” These commenters all demonstrate the audience desiring to engage in a shared or simultaneous experience of eating with the Mukbang star, along with using these videos to focus on eating and food.

Second, audiences also revealed a complex relationship with these shows in relation to their own eating habits. I noticed discourse that focused on eating disorders or serious struggles with eating in which audiences commented that these shows either aid in overcoming eating challenges or aided in starvation/dieting tactics. For instance, viewer Simon Wyatt’s comment on Dorothy’s mukbang, they wrote, “I genuinely have problems eating, I don't know why, but I just don't seem to ever get hungry and when I
eat I get full so quick but watching your videos genuinely motivates me to eat more!
Thank you for helping me out so much.” Similarly, a comment thread on Paytas’
mukbang also suggested these shows motivate audiences to eat, skinnygod wrote, “i think
I am defeating my eating disorder;” to which Mackenzie M replied, “yessss!! I am too
and it’s weird sometimes watching these videos helps, like it’s okay to eat what you want
and treat yourself ”; and Miranda Burks wrote, “Sometimes I eat a handful of cheetos
and 3 cookies and feel bad about myself, and then I watch these and don't feel bad
anymore lmao (laughing my ass off).” These comments all demonstrate how watching
radical eating helps the viewers to overcome their own battles with gendered constraints
on eating. However, there is also a more nuanced move I see occurring. As both
Mackenzie M and Miranda disclosed, watching these videos also enables the act of eating
without control or monitoring—defying a message historically targeted to women. As
Mackenzie M writes, “sometimes watching these videos helps, like it’s okay to eat what
you want and treat yourself,” underlining a self-acceptance of eating more freely because
of Paytas’ public display of binge eating.

Concurrently, I also saw how audience members negotiate their own desires to
both restrict and binge eat through watching these shows. I noticed multiple ways
audiences were discussing this dilemma. Rashellexo commented, “I watch these videos
because I know I physically can’t afford to eat like this because I gain weight too easily,”
Lissette Alveraz wrote regarding Paytas’ show, “Who else wishes that they can eat like
this without regretting it;” Marilyn’s Girl responded, “I feel hungry when I watch this but
I know that the guilt I would feel after isn’t worth it;” Suha A, wrote, “im on a diet.
..watching this is giving me some sort of satisfaction, like as tho i ate you knw (know);”
and Emo Trash wrote, “I just wish I could eat any food without feeling guilty (Eating disorders are fun).” In these comments there is an established struggle viewers are having with the constraints of eating and thinness culture that prohibits overindulges, which leads audience members to use these videos as a way to escape.

Similarly, I saw audience members revealing a conflict with wanting to eat like the Mukbang stars but not feeling able to due to their fears, struggles and disorders with eating. Viewers use these shows to experience the sensation of binge eating by watching the stars, or they use these videos to curb their desire to binge. These comments also are from Paytas’ shows Not Avocado wrote, “Yeah I’ve been eating 650 calories a day for the past ~2 weeks, and am planning on going down to 500. Whenever I get cravings, I just watch a few of these while chugging water and feel I 10x better;” and Danny Karim wrote, “Water fast day 6 out of 30. I watch this to keep me motivated, also I'm hungry af;” and Petra commented, “Me too lmao (laughing my ass off). I just drink plain water to fight hunger while watching this.” This type of discourse demonstrates a magical thinking mentality. These audience members are using Mukbang shows to fulfill desires of eating without actually eating themselves. Rishika Sharma, who commented on Paytas, wrote, “It’s weird but watching her eat just made me not want to eat. I was hungry before I started watching this video but now I’m full and I haven’t even eaten ;” Chelsea Baker, who wrote to another audience member on why they should watch these shows while dieting, stated, “or DO and let them get fat FOR you. Drink some cold water your growling stomach means it's applauding you;” and Hattie commented, “Yeah exactly, I’m doing a 10 day fast so Trisha eats for me in the meantime .” These examples demonstrate a shift in the rhetoric that suggests the audiences in negotiating their own
experience and identities and replacing them with the experience of the Mukbang star’s. The language moves from the audience’s reality to that of the actor—“let them get fat for you.” This type of logic is used to undermine, and yet reinforce the restraints placed on people because of thinness culture. The reasoning is that by watching the actors transgressively eat they too are engaging in this action but escaping the reality of gaining any weight. The viewer using the texts in this way creates a sense of escaping harm, yet unintentionally further tightens the bounds of thinness culture onto themselves. Such comments reinforce my argument that these spaces of radical eating behaviors present a platform for audiences to reconcile their own desires against the constraints of expectations and norms.

**Fulfillment and Social Connection**

This section looks closely at how audiences use these shows to connect with the Mukbang stars and eating. Much in the vain of wishful thinking, these comments revealed a longing to be with or be like the Mukbang stars. The specific themes that I observed demonstrate three outcomes. The first outcome was consistent with previous themes, which is a longing to emulate the Mukbang stars in breaking eating norms, the second depicts a desire to not eat alone or eat socially with the star, and the last outcome displayed a desire to feel the same sensations or experiences as the Mukbang stars.

First, there is a clear pattern of wishing to eat like the Mukbang stars. While some comments were simple statements such as what Kim Chichu wrote about Dorothy, “How do you eat so much I wish I could eat a lot but I just can't ơơ,” other audience members revealed more elaborate desires or fantasies to fulfill a shared or similar experience. This can be seen in Nadia Ilham’s comment, also regarding Dorothy’s show:
I really like to watch your vid [because] i can feel the mood.. i always love (even though i dont do it often) to eat late at night with the slow light from the lamp when everyone already went to sleep so that i can take my time to enjoy the exciteness of eating what u’ve cooked.. omg i hope u know what i mean.. the diff is u eat in front of camera.. but i eat in front of tv/pc watching movie or variety show or what not.. but the sad thing is i cannot do it oftenly [because] i will definitely gain weight unlike u.. .

Likewise, Francisca Gracia’s, comment depicts a similar reaction to Paytas’ Mukbang shows:

Yeooo is it just me or like when I start every video I’m hungry but the more I keep watching the more I feel like I’m there eating .. then again my stomach still trembling lmao ALSOO ..can we just talk bout how amazing Trisha’s genes must be because she stay eating w.e (whatever) she wants and drinking w.e (whatever) and I’ve never seen her break out .. mbfn (must be fucking nice) .. skin clear as the day Jesus got resurrected !!!! (Wait was it clear on that day?).

Both of these comments focus on a shared experience. Nadia is recreating how they image Dorothy feels when eating. This is seen in their making of similar meals, eating in front of an “audience” and how they wish they could binge eat often like Dorothy. With Francisca, they explain feeling as if they are there eating with Paytas, and have a desire to engage in eating without consequence—something Francisca fantasizes about Paytas’ experience. These comments reinforce my argument that audiences are using these videos to escape from restrictions placed on them through narratives of thinness culture.
Second, audience members fantasize about having a shared experience, watching these shows to fulfill a social connection while eating. For example, David Branch wrote about Paytas’ show, “I just wanna eat with Trisha. I love people that love food n know what's good;” while shibz _phan and kpop commented on Wang’s show, “I love eating while watching you, you have such an amazing personality and you make me feel less alone so it genuinely means a lot, you're amazing and I wish people would realise that xx ❤️;” Kyler Phelps commented, “Out of all mukbangers(?) you are my favorite. Like honestly I’d love to eat with you. Much love ❤️;” and finally Katie Geiger wrote about Paytas, “Watching this and eating food makes me feel like I’m eating with her.” As shown, all four of these comments point to a situation where through consuming these shows they are gaining a sense of belonging or social connection. Audience members are longing for more than just an outlet to express their identification with food and eating, but also a drive for a more meaningful way to relate with society—“watching this and eating food makes me feel like I’m eating with her.”

Discussion

This chapter is an examination of how audiences are reacting to public displays of women eating in transgressive ways. I argue that this data gives us deeper insight of the outcomes and consequences of this phenomenon, specifically when dealing with women as public spectacles, a reflection of how eating norms enable and constrain and the role they play in gendered eating expectations, gendered eating and sexuality, and ways audiences want to fulfill fantasies based in eating or social connection.

In each of these instances audiences are consistently reinforcing the status quo, either by intentionally or unintentionally affirming current social structures constitutive
of the relationships between power, gender, eating, and embodiment. Despite this reinforcement, the audience is also grappling with participating in the disruption of these constructs through the act of unbounded eating, as well as the gratification they experience in watching these shows.

First, I discuss how these Mukbang shows are both reinforcing and deconstructing salient eating politics, and the audience’s participation in this act. The control of who gets to eat and who doesn’t is well-established in demonstrations of how cultural power systems function through food. In many cultures throughout history caste, gender, race, and class are determined by who has access to food (Counihan, 1992; Goody 1982). In many cultures men eat first, eat the best and eat the most (Counihan, 1992; Adams 1990). In my analysis, audiences reinforced the ideology that women are supposed to restrict their food intake in order to conform to the construct of femininity.

Bordo (2003) cites that not really until the nineteenth-century Victorian era did records [in Western cultures] show women practicing starvation and restrictive eating behaviors in such masses. Also, during this time targeted messages, through pamphlets and conduct books were equating femininity with controlled portions and appetites—women were never to indulge. As I discuss in Chapter 2, Bordo (2003) argues that this phenomenon, referencing the work of Dijkstra (1986), was constitutive of the “cultural ideological counter-offensive” against the “new woman” (116). Along with oppressive constraints cultivated from the fears of the “new woman,” there is a strong link to a women’s hunger and to her sexuality (Bordo, 2003). The metaphor of the man-eater and other tropes, myths, and artistic interpretations depicts a woman’s sexuality and power bore from her hunger and would devour men—leading to a patriarchal campaign to
suspressing women’s agency (Bordo, 2003). This cultural ideology remains prevalent in current times, forming the current dominant eating norms.

So, when examining all the rhetorical moves occurring in these Mukbang shows and how audiences are reacting to them, I argue how the audience, whether or not they are in support of transgressive eating behaviors, still manage to reinforce eating restrictions through the way they talk about women eating. This shows a desire and conflict viewers feel bound to and restricted by, and this is why supportive messages still reinforce norms and a desire to experience social eating through the internet. That tension seems to bring out contradictory behavior that simultaneously wants to disrupt and support norms.

First, when looking at the Disciplining Aesthetics data, the trends were cultivations from audiences attempting to reconcile watching eating behaviors historically associated with men. Culture has told the narrative that “the mark of the manly is to eat spontaneously and expansively” (Bordo, 2003; p. 108). While women are portrayed in media with “tiny, bite-sized portions,” they are perpetually told to stay within “the bounds of appropriate feminine (eating) behavior” (Bordo, 2002; p. 129). These dominant narratives play a significant role in how the audience discursively interacts with these texts. The Mukbang stars are continuously told to clean-up their eating habits, not slurp too loud, not smack their lips—learn how to eat properly. All of this discourse aligns with hegemonic discourse working to “circumscribe and repress” women’s hunger (Bordo, 2003). In addition, the tone and varicosity of the disciplinary language seems to magnify for Candy, the Mukbang star who has a non-conforming body type. This pattern is also consistent with the public justification in shaming bodies that
are deemed unhealthy (Gay, 2017; Bordo 2003). “[The public] believe[s] they are medical experts, listing a litany of health problems associated with fatness as personal affronts. These tormentors bind themselves in righteousness when they point out the obvious—that our bodies are unruly, defiant, fat” (Gay, 2017; pp. 188-189). This type of rationalization behind the fat shaming is very much apparent in the comments on Candy’s show. The majority of comments for Mukbang stars with thin bodies were about eating appropriately, while Candy’s comments were focused on morality and health—as if to say it is OK to ridicule her because she is gluteus and killing herself. Western societies equate thinness with health and power, and though audiences want to engage with Candy’s public eating, they simultaneously want to condemn it.

Furthermore, audiences depict discomfort and even disdain for Candy’s pleasurable moans. As previously cited, historically women’s appetite is linked to sexuality. Bordo (2003) conducted extensive research on how the contradiction of sexualizing food in advertisements for both men and women, yet, dominantly portraying women as only being allowed to indulge a little. There is still the prohibition of true unabashed eating for women with evidence linked to media portrayals such as marketing predominately diets foods or bite-sized treats to women—Bordo (2003) paints the picture of two adds one for men, one for women—the man is diving into a sea of chocolate ice cream, the women into a bowl of WeightWatchers pasta.

Thus, I argue, audiences discomfort with Candy’s moans that could be read as sexual, is met with rejection for two reasons: one, women’s sexuality has historically been repressed; and two, Candy’s sexuality is coupled with binge eating and eating rich foods. Candy is indulging in multiple ways, and in many senses.
Next, I examine the two themes, *Managing Hunger* and *Fulfillment and Social Connection*. These two sections both function in similar ways to note how audiences use these texts for demonstrating wishful thinking. Additionally, these themes demonstrate the functionality of dominant norms in which women must restrictive their eating. This underscores why women publicly eating as transgressive behavior. Typically when women engage in indulgent eating, they do it alone and in private—this is true for women who have eating disorders and women who do not (Gay, 2017; Bordo, 2003; Geis, 1998). So, because women feel they need to indulge with food privately because they have been told they must restrict their eating and eating daintily and this is directly tied to the construction of femininity, Mukbang, on the surface, disrupts this belief system by displaying women in public places binge eating.

When comparing Mukbang shows to the dominant constructs of appropriate gendered eating behaviors—eating little, feeding others rather than themselves and equating minimal and controlled eating with femininity—it seems logical that audiences would turn to these texts to fulfill fantasies. As discussed in Chapter 2, magical thinking is commonly used with habitual eating logic (Bordo, 2003). The audience members whose discourse revolves around wishing they can eat like the Mukbang stars or watching the Mukbang star instead of eating are using this outlet to gain agency over an outside phenomena in which they feel they have no control over—"I wish I could eat like you and not gain weight” or “I am watching you eat like this and it makes me feel better about my issues with eating.” This theme arises again around eating and thinness in the next chapter.
When looking more closely at audiences who engage with Mukbang stars with the drive for more social connection, I argue this relates back to eating in secret or alone. As shown in the data many of the audience members pointed out feeling like they are eating with the stars, wanting to eat with the star or even mimicking what it would be like to be the star. I believe there is something powerful about watching women break the constructs—in particular—the construct of holding back eating indulgently and in secret.

Bordo (2003) conveys this so dynamically:

The representation and denial of hunger central to features of the construction of femininity and set up the compensatory binge as a virtual inevitability. Such restrictions on appetite, moreover, are not merely about food intake. Rather, the social control of female hunger operates as a practical “discipline” (to use Foucault’s terms) that trains female bodies in the knowledge of their limits and possibilities. Denying oneself food becomes the central micro-practice in the education of feminine self-restraint and containment of impulse … to project the appropriately attractive lack of appetite … really feel rewarded by a bite-sized candy, no matter how much the chocolate “wallop” it pacts. In private, shamefully and furtively, we binge (130).

Thus, these audience members are drawn to these shows because they are breaking every rule about eating expectations. The women in these studies are eating messily, eating larger-than-life portions that are all unhealthy rich foods, and they are allowing the whole world to see. I argue that both genders find a bit of liberation and relatability—but especially for the women audience members.
Conclusion

Watching women eat is political. Audiences are turning to these shows either unconsciously or consciously to watch women break the long-lived, historically-oppressive homogenized gender norms of how women should eat. In this chapter, I argue that the audience is reinforcing cultural gender eating constraints by the way they talk about women eating, despite if their intention is to encourage this action.

Indeed, audiences are reinforcing norms through disciplining language to manage the stars’ transgressive eating behaviors such as eating messy, being noisy, demonstrating pleasure and eating too much. Yet, many audiences do come to these shows because they enjoy seeing these actions, but still watch them as transgressive acts.

Additionally, the comments showed that thin bodies are more palatable to engage with transgressive eating behaviors than (as Bordo (2003) puts it) “fleshy, space-claiming bodies.” In particular, audiences demonstrated strong discomfort with Candy’s moans of pleasure—which harkens back to the historic narrative of suppressing women’s sexuality and the cultural link of women’s appetite and sexuality.

Next, I demonstrated how to audiences turn to these shows as a way to use magical thinking in order to reconcile their own struggles with food. As femininity continues to be equated with minimal eating, feeding others not yourself, and controlled portions, audiences seem to find a sense of relief in Mukbang shows as a way to cope and gain agency over realities that seem uncontrollable. However, the faulty line of reasoning, as Bordo (2003) points out is not in the audience, but in the expectations of gendered systems.
Lastly, I argued that audiences of these shows are finding meaningful connection to a show that on the surface may seem mindless. However, the audience discourse demonstrates viewers wanting to really connect and desiring a connection with these stars. I argue that one reason could because of the radical eating. Research shows how impacted and conditioned humans are by culture, and eating culture is no different. Bordo (2003) argues that disordered eating is predominately cultivated by culture. I see these audiences finding a sense of themselves in these acts of rebellion. No longer do we want to eat “in private, shamefully and furtively,” no longer do we want to feel the frustrations of “feeding others and never being fed [our]selves,” no longer do we want to feel that “our cravings are a dirty, shameful secret, to be indulged in only when no one is looking” (Bordo, 2003; pp. 129-131). Eating behavior constraints placed on women is very real and harmful, I see my analysis speaking to the impacts these restrictions have on people, and how much people are struggling to be unburdened from them. The next chapter demonstrates how eating behavior is also part of thinness culture, and the damage this culture has done to the public.
Chapter 4

Body

I have been living in this unruly body

for more than twenty years.

I have tried to make peace with this body.

I have tried to love or at least tolerate this body

in a world that displays nothing but contempt for it.

—Roxane Gay, Hunger

On YouTube and Instagram it is best practice for Mukbang stars to display an eye catching thumbnail (a still captured from their video) to accompany all new uploads. This is to entice new and currents fans to watch their latest content. Typically, these thumbnails are manufactured in a flashy, click-bate type fashion with popular fast-food logos contrasting a close-up shot of gooey cheese dripping down, juicy hamburgers positioned above unhinged jaws emulating the preparation for that “perfect” bite. In these thumbnails the food is prioritized over the body. Popular Mukbang star, Stephanie Soo (who is not featured in this research) often exaggerates this method by positioning all her food into the camera frame in larger-than-life piles, only allowing enough room for her head to poke into the frame. This effect creates a feeling that Stephanie is literally drowning in a sea of all the audience’s favorite foods.

However, Hungry FatChic (Candy) does not do this. Candy positions her body as the dominant feature in her thumbnails. Thumbnail after thumbnail depicts Candy eating Wendy’s, or Candy eating Mexican food, or Candy eating a family-size Stouffer’s
Lasagna. Whatever the meal of choice, she directs the audience’s attention to the corporal—her arms, hands, and mouth unapologetically taking up the space in the frame—with the food as a secondary feature. It seems for Candy that she is featuring her body as the star of her performance, rather than the food.

So, Candy highlights her body instead of the food in her YouTube thumbnails, so what? The reason I am taking time to discuss this decision is because Candy’s body is big—or as the scientific community would put it, morbidly obese. Her body is one that is fleshy and claims space (Bordo, 2003), and from the outside Candy seems to celebrate this. She exposes her skin, stretchmarks, and the soft folds of her body—which audiences are typically used to seeing covered up by bulks of dark clothing in any movie or TV show ever that features a fat character. Rather, Candy wears low-cut, spaghetti strapped tank-tops, and unapologetically reveals all of her that is often hidden. This boldness is coupled with binge eating—two taboos at once, scandalous. It is rare for audiences to have access to visuals of fat women eating that are not used as a comedic or sympathetic trope in a storyline—and even still I had to go digging to find Candy.

Audiences have a difficult time separating the food from the body, especially when the texts display women eating. One of the most popular questions for the thin-body Mukbang stars is, “How do you eat so much, but stay so thin?” For Candy this question is not posed; her body still is a major point of contention. This chapter analyzes the dominant discourse underpinning the corporeal in the Mukbang videos I’ve researched. Considering how connected fantasies of binge eating and remaining thin appear in Mukbang discourse (reviewed in Chapter 3) I found three themes of embodiment: what the secret is behind staying thin, Mukbang stars and eating disorders,
and the danger of encouraging binge eating. Before going into my analysis for this chapter I would like to contextualize how Mukbang stars talk about their own bodies in relation to thinness culture.

**Contextualizing Mukbang Stars and Thinness Culture**

Although much of the body-focused rhetoric is predominantly driven by the audience, the stars also talk about their bodies—either in response to the audience or organically in an open dialogue as part of their videos. Nearly all of this discourse is constructed around thinness—explaining their thinness, sustaining their thinness, or striving for thinness. The most typical way these conversations are manifested is the stars explaining how they maintain thinness. Hunger Dairies (Lindsay Greene) dedicated a portion of her Live-streaming “Popeye’s Review Mukbang” to describing how she stays thin. This was in response to an audience member who asked her, “how do you stay so skinny” during the live viewing. Greene began with a qualification, “I know this is something you all ask me a lot” as if she was slightly exhausted of having to justify her body and her eating habits. She gave a typical answer of “This is just how my body works.” This is a similar argument I have also heard from other Mukbang stars (such as Peggy Nation) which encompasses explanations to their audience including: I don’t eat like this for all my meals, I do work out, and genetics has a lot to do with it. However, for some of the stars discourse focused on the body moves in a more complex direction. Trisha Paytas, who refers to herself as overweight, “a bigger girl,” or fat— which much of her audience affirms—often discusses her newest diet or body goals in her videos. I would like to point out, that during the time of my research, Paytas said she wears a U.S. women's clothing size 12, which is actually smaller than the national
clothing size for U.S. women. According to a 2016 study (Chrstel & Dunn, 2016) the average sizes women wear ranges from 16-18.

Accordingly, Paytas frequently begins her Mukbang videos by saying she is about to go on a diet, or wants to go on a diet, or she is breaking her diet with a cheat-day. In her most recent Mukbang videos Paytas qualifies her eating by saying “I technically haven’t eaten for 24-hours,” or “I’ve fasted for 24-hours.” When looking closely at her dialogue it is clear that Paytas feels a considerable amount of societal pressure to be thin and engages in a cyclical dieting-followed-by-binging pattern. In her Mukbang, “My 10K Calorie Lunch! Epic Cheat Day,” Paytas reveals the pressure she feels to lose weight:

Really overweight people — which I am overweight— get a lot of hate more so on the internet then in real life, though people in real life get some too sometimes and lately I have been getting a lot more jabs at my weight. I know I have gained weight, I know I need to lose weight—I am saying that as I eat, we all know I have a food addiction, I really struggle with food and eating.

In many ways, Paytas’ confessional discourse mirrors the dialogues of thousands of women, women who may even watch her show. Her pattern—explaining or justifying her eating behaviors—is a popular practice of negotiation many (if not most) women engage in (Bordo, 2003) to not only justify their transgressive eating to friends or family, but also to themselves. This is magical thinking behavior—eating myths or superstitious thinking that women use to negotiate when breaking normative eating, such as binging on or snacking on “forbidden foods.” The faulty logic is that it’s OK to eat this cake if I go on a diet straight after or not eat dinner (Bordo, 2003).
However, as Bordo (2003) asks, is it this sort of logic that is faulty, or is the cultural structuring of thinness that is faulty? The importance of thinness in U.S. culture—which is accompanied by its own brand of problematic thinking, “I am special if I am thin” (Bordo, 2003, p. 59)—sets up women to use this type of negotiation in order to meet the required body type. This does not negate how seriously problematic this is on an individual level, however, when “[o]ur culture is one where Oprah Winfrey, a dazzling role model for female success, has said ‘that the most significant achievement of her life’ was losing sixty-seven pounds on a liquid diet (she gained it all back within a year)” (Bordo, 2003; p. 60). I argue that this way of thinking is a product of privileging thinness and thus an internalized fear of not being thin.

Furthermore, the fear of not being thin also is reflected in the way audiences react to the stars and the behavior in the videos—both for the conforming and nonconforming bodied stars. As introduced earlier, I saw patterns in the audience comments that reflect a desire of resolving the dissonance between both how the stars with ideal bodies engage in transgressive eating and yet remain thin, or how the starts with big bodies continue to engage in transgressive eating and not work toward becoming thin. In this chapter I argue how these texts function as an outlet for the audience’s fears about the body. Audiences negotiate their fears through rhetoric that affirms thin privilege, reinforces dominant narratives of how bodies and eating behaviors should correspond, and connects how Mukbangs are consumed to how the audience evaluates the stars.

Indeed, fear of being fat in U.S. culture makes perfect sense. These messages have been instilled in our understanding of the body—think of how the medical community discusses fat bodies, it is typically in terms of fear-based language that posits
obesity as a threat, danger, or cost. This is reinforced, of course, by the limited and problematic depictions of fat bodies and fat identity in media, paired with consumerist promises to minimize, cut out, and disappear fatness (LeBesco & Braziel, 2001).

Moreover, thinness is profoundly privileged in U.S. culture. As Counihan (1998) argues citing (Dyrenfoth, Wooley and Wooley, 1980), an ideology of success and intelligence is partly constructed using thinness as a marker. Thinness, as a determiner of wealth and social status, is also interconnected to whiteness. Counihan (1998) demonstrates a disparity in obesity rates connected to white privilege that still remains consistent today. Overall, people of Latinx and African American races are predominately more obese than people who are White—this remains consistent to studies conducted in 1975 (Counihan & Kaplan, 1998; Garb, Garb and Stunkard, 1975). This historical difference in obesity rates is part of the intense structures of racial inequality in the U.S. that not only impoverishes communities of color, but make it harder for them to access affordable and healthy food, and cause severe health problems related to intergenerational trauma. Thinness is part of the architecture of power in U.S. culture.

Also, it is important to point to the way bodies are constitutive of identity formation. LeBesco (2004) cites Grosz’s (1994) work on rethinking how identity and fat politics should be considered from a cultural and intersectional lens that moves beyond the scientific realm of discourse. This is similar to Bordo’s (2003) use of a feminist cultural lens to study eating disorders and body dysmorphia. Culture and the way culture functions must be considered when studying embodiment. Just as identity categories (sex, race, class) converge and are constitutive of each other, embodiment is also part of how people categorize themselves and each other in relation to cultural status structures
(LeBesco, 2004; Bordo, 2003). Thinness is part of the structuring and privileging of class, race, sex, and gender. It is dangerous to ignore how these categories are working in conjunction within larger power systems to constrain and enable society as a whole.

Although it is vital to understand the functionality of how thinness moves in power systems, I believe it is just as important to capture the consequences and impacts in a more personal way. Roxane Gay (2017) illuminates the feeling of being constrained by these power systems. In her memoir she describes her experience of finally achieving thinness after multiple attempts, enforced by her parents in grade school, to lose weight:

My parents tried to figure out why I was gaining so much weight. I had no answers I could share with them. They put me on a medical supervised liquid diet during the summer of my freshman year [of high school]. Every day, I drank 5 milkshakes that were chalky and disgusting. Of course, I lost weight—forty pounds, maybe more. My parents were pleased that I had gotten my body under control. I went back to school and my classmates admired my new body, offered me compliments, wanted to hang out with me. That was the first time I realized that weight loss, thinness really, was social currency. (66)

The pressure to be thin, especially for women, is the equivalent of going to a good college, getting your dream job, earning that big promotion at work. Recently, a major news outlet praised Paytas for losing 37-pounds—her weight loss was newsworthy (Heller, 2019)! This is no different than headlines going viral when Hollywood stars gain a significant (or even 5 pounds) amount of weight, lose the baby-bulge, and let’s not forget how the internet nearly exploded with the news of Kim Kardashian forming cellulite on the back of her thighs and buttocks. However, Gay also demonstrates that
reinforcement of thinness is not only prevalent in societal expectations, but also through interpersonal relationships—Gay became a good daughter and a popular student through loss of weight.

Likewise, fatness has a polarizing mode of representation, limiting discourse to either hyper-visibility or erasing all traces of space that would allow fatness to live. LeBesco (2004) argues that through language fatness needs to be transformed from a “spoiled, uninhabitable, invisible identity to a stronger subject position” (p. 3). The current ideology of fatness uses rhetoric that reinscribes oppressive ideologies—rhetoric “so powerful that even fat people abhor their own bodies (LeBesco, 2004; p. 3). This mode of discourse then effectively renders fatness, as a position and as a lived experience, invisible.

Additionally, Gay (2017) points out the situated contradiction which constructs fatness. She too, writes about the ways cultural norms function to erase her identity and rights to lived experiences. Gay explains:

My body is wildly undisciplined, and yet I deny myself nearly everything I desire. I deny myself the right to space when I am in public, trying to fold in on myself, to make my body more invisible even though it is, in fact, grandly visible (p. 145)

Here, Gay describes so pointedly the continuous battle of restricting herself, to withhold and take away the permission to simply exist. Yet, Gay also underscores the nonsensical norming of fatness where cultural narratives claim fat bodies as undisciplined, and are demand these bodies to take up space despite the fact that bodies do indeed take up space. Gay (2017) also describes the spectacle-like feeling when moving through everyday life, receiving unsolicited health advice from strangers, being gawked at by small children,
and receiving disgusted looks when eating in public. Ironically, even the spectacle of fatness is used to reinscribe thin idealism and erase fat identity.

Returning to LeBesco’s (2004) description of how U.S. culture positions fatness identity as “spoiled, uninhabitable, and invisible,” I would like to take a deeper examination of how precisely this functions through public discourse. This closer look with also help in understanding the phobic-culture of fatness.

First, I draw on Gay’s (2017) own perspective of living in an “unruly body.” Gay describes the harshness of public criticism:

Fat shaming is real, constant and rather pointed. There are a shocking number of people who believe they can simply torment fat people into weight loss and disciplining their bodies or disappearing their bodies from the public sphere. They believe they are medical experts, listing a litany of health problems associated with fatness as personal affronts. These tormentors bind themselves in righteousness when they point out the obvious—that our bodies are unruly, defiant and fat. (188-189)

In this passage Gay is critiquing the problematic discourse cultivated from how fatness is portrayed in the scientific and health community, along with the emergence of the commercialization or capitalistic gains of thin privilege (LeBesco & Braziel, 2001). By portraying fatness as something people ought to have control over or something people need to have control over—fat bodies are then perceived as “reckless, excess, prodigality, indulgence, lack of restraint, violation of order and space, transgression of boundary” (LeBesco & Braziel, 2001; p. 3).
Accordingly, fatness is depicted as a transgressive behavior leading that deserves judgment, which harkens to how Gay (2017) describes her experiences of being shamed from strangers, friends, and family. This is then exacerbated by consumerism. Exploiting people’s desperate desires to be thin, consumerism offers immediate and deadly ways to a quick fix (LeBesco & Braziel, 2001; Bordo, 2003). Yet, the marketing of these products (pills, surgeries, supplements, shakes, meal plans) further exacerbate the culture. Through these strategies, companies are targeting fat bodies with the promise to erase them despite the significant medical dangers, along with a common knowledge that typically any weight loss is gained back within a year— and thus creating a continuous, profitable and harmful cycle (LeBesco & Braziel, 2001).

Bordo (2003) offers insight into the ways women in particular are targeted through media contradictions that pray on unattainable desires of the body. Bordo introduces the unattainable women using hooks (1992) concept of eating the Other. The unattainable woman is effortlessly slim, but furthermore has a nonchalant and easy relationship with food. “[S]he has achieved a state beyond craving. Undominated by unsatisfied, internal needs, she eats not only freely but without deep desire and without apparent consequences” (p. 102). The representation depicted here is a trope created in media that is unattainable, but also contradicts reality. This representation is pushed at women among a plethora of other tropes telling women how to feel about food, yet this one in particular is harmful because women desperately desire to achieve this state because it means not feeling cravings therefore not being bound to the dysfunctional narratives of eating and thinness culture. This woman, unattainable and therefore impossible, presents a mystery. Many U.S. American women look at this figure and
wonder—what is her secret? The idea of the secret is a major theme in dieting culture—dieting food products, exercise commercials, etc.—promising to reveal mystical and effortless ways to be slim (Bordo, 2003). This connects to my concept of magical eating and why women also turn to Mukbang to fulfill fantasies of eating without any consequences. This same rhetoric also has lead the modern woman to be skeptical that there is any woman with an ideal body who truly has an easy and free relationship with food—“almost all of us who can afford to be eating well are dieting—and hungry—almost all of the time” (Bordo, 2003; p. 103). The narratives of thinness culture as complicated women’s relationships with food and their body so much that women rarely believe anyone has an effortless relationship with food anymore these days.

In the next section, I analyze the ways Mukbang audiences grapple with eating behaviors and embodiment. Evaluating the audience rhetoric, I demonstrate the negotiation of identity and ideologies when viewers are faced with transgressive eating coupled with thin bodies, and transgressive eating coupled with transgressive bodies. I establish how audiences reinscribe thin privilege through desire, skepticism, and fear-based discourse. Then I discuss the impacts, consequences and implications of how this rhetoric functions and reinforces current corporeal belief-systems.

It’s All About the Body Baby

As Gay (2017) so vividly captured in her passages discussed earlier in this chapter, through a sense of justification, driven by an inscribed and constitutive corporeal culture, the public feels motivated and a moral duty to evaluate the body when on display (even if display means walking through the mall). At times this evaluation leads to a desire of obtaining, or consuming others in hook’s (1992) sense, and other times this
motivation is driven by the need to discipline the defiant body. This section considers these avenues of discourse through a critique of audience reactions focused on the body.

**What is Your Secret?**

Dying to know the secret to thinness is one of the most popular themes in the texts I reviewed. All of the thin bodied stars were asked variations of this question. This most pointedly reinforces the crux of thinness-culture which is a shared belief in privileging the thin body. However, this section also underscores the implications and repercussions of this culture.

For most U.S. American’s there are rigid rules in place in order to accomplish and maintain the ideal body—and typically this excludes binge eating. Thus, much of the audience demonstrates an air of disbelief toward how the stars remain thin. In addition, due to the salient rules of maintaining thinness and thus “healthiness,” the audience also projects their judgements toward perceived rule-breaking and overindulgence because of the inherent disruption of this ideology. This suggests a logic that positions even perceived healthy bodies as unable to be absolved of the cultural rules of eating.

However, some stars endured more scrutiny than others. When analyzing audience comments for Dorothy’s videos, I observed that she received the least amount of skepticism toward her ability to engage in transgressive eating and maintaining thinness. Predominantly, the audience read Dorothy’s behavior as inspiring, yet were still baffled by her ability to override the laws of nature. This is demonstrated in such comments as Karla Small who wrote, “how do you stay so thin what’s your secret,” leigh dee diane lozano who commented,”why you're so thin and yet you eat too much ,” Gheraldine Ubaldo who wrote, “U eat so much doroth. But u not become chubby,”
soso koko wrote, “I want to understand why she is not fat,” and Debbie Huser commented, “All the noodles she eats are high in carbs. I don’t know how she doesn’t gain weight?”

Here, these audience members depict a desire to reconcile Dorothy’s ability to defy the unwritten rules of thinness, while also attempting to grapple with her capability to face no consequences (as seen from the audience’s point of view). These comments established a duality in the audience’s reading of the text, in which they are conflicted by her ability to accomplish a seemingly miraculous act, while also wanting in on it. This is particularly apparent in Karla Small’s posing of her question which wants to know Dorothy’s secret to eating and staying thin. The other comments are less overt, revealing a sense of wanting to know Dorothy’s secret, but still demonstrate a yearning to understand how this star can skate free of any consequence unlike everyone else. Debbie Huser’s comment signals one of the trendiest diet-culture taboos—carbs—the perceived enemy to all adults over 25. This observation situates a need to resolve Dorothy’s transgressive eating, but implies Dorothy is an exception to dieting logic—everyone avoids carbs, even the movie stars! This makes her special and her type of thinness unattainable.

However, Dorothy is not the only Mukbang star to receive this type of reaction. Audience members also posted similar questions in response to Lindsey Greene’s and Veronica Wang’s videos. Though there were fewer comments than what Dorothy received, Wang also was accused of having a secret. Altina Ajeti wrote, “Can anyone explain [to] me how she eats so much?? And why she does not get fat, this girl is
fabulous,” while Missy Nhicsy commented, “Hi! I was just wondering. How could you eat this much and stay sexy all at the same time? You're super pretty.”

These comments are very close to the discourse about Dorothy, however, the comments about Wang are even more aligned with rhetoric referenced in Bordo’s (2003) work on the representation of the unattainable woman—wishing to be her, having what she has, even consuming her (hooks, 1992). Greene’s comments, on the other hand, remain confined to a more accessible, yet still skeptical read of her body and eating behaviors. For instance, some 1 wrote, “what's your workout routine ?? & pls tell me this [is] all you eat in a day ;” and tyler tyler wrote, “Do u work out ?? How do u stay so fit ??,” Greene openly discusses in her videos the fact that she exercises regularly. She presents a very toned and defined body—which possibly influences the way her audience reconciles her transgressive eating. Although, some 1 did jokingly remark that despite this factor, her binge eating and staying fit still provokes disbelief.

Additionally, Dorothy received some criticism about her eating behaviors being unhealthy. Jenita yesu nesa mony wrote, “Don't eat too much of food ....it is not good for health.” However, most of her audience did not engage in judgmental criticism toward her binges. Some even came to her defense. Jenita yesu nesa mony commented in rebuttal to Kim Hyun Woo, stating, “Don't worry she knows what she is doing and she drink[s] hibiscus tea. Hibiscus tea is good for body and also for digestion. It can be enjoy both hot and cold and so i think she is ok.” Dorothy was even praised for eating all her food. R. Dew commented, “I love your videos. A lot of other mukbangers don't even swallow their food. They edit out them spitting out their food. You are genuine!” (There was controversy in the Mukbang world when some stars were accused of not eating any of
their food, rather using a “chew and spit” method, and editing this out of the final videos in order to appear as if they were consuming everything. Some fans were outraged and found this as a betrayal).

Unlike the other stars, Dorothy’s audience seems less concerned with eating behaviors, and less skeptical about her thinness. In the comments I reviewed, she was never accused of an eating disorder. The audience seemed more fixated on reconciling her body size to her portion sizes.

One reason Dorothy’s audience may be less judgmental of her eating habits in relation to her body may be because she is the only Mukbang star in this research who is not part of a Westernized culture—though Wang is also an Asian woman, she is Asian-Canadian, and currently lives in Canada. So, because Dorothy presents the most differently for some of the audience members watching her, this leaves less space for needing to speculate Dorothy’s norm-breaking, and more room for audiences to not questions her ability to eat without apparent consequence because she presents as different from women in Western cultures.

In this section, I examined a pattern of the audience’s desire to uncover the mystery of thinness when located in rule-breaking situations. The audience is unable to ignore the ways the stars contradict the dominant narratives of corpulence. These patterns also demonstrate how the audience engages in a constraining and enabling effect toward thin-culture. That is, through the audience yearns to rebel against the rules of thinness, they still wanting to conform to them—how can I eat like that, but remain thin?
**You must have an eating disorder**

In next pattern I identified is the how the audience used accusations of eating disorders to reconcile binge eating and thinness. This rhetoric also functioned as a way to make judgements of health, thinness and eating behaviors as understood in dominant narratives of corporeal culture. This type of discourse was mostly directed at Wang and Paytas—westernized women who seem to have a following that closely identifies with them.

Here, Wang received accusations of engaging in eating disordered behavior from viewer Abby Saito. Saito wrote, “She throws it up after tho, it’s a type of illness she has,” while a different viewer, Patricia Costuna, made a similar criticism by disclosing her own struggles with eating disordered behavior. She wrote:

> I'm a recovering binge eater and your eating reminds me of my binging episodes :( I hope you're not suffering from any [eating disorder] :( Anyway, from her cheeks and neck, I can say that she purges what she eats :(

Both of these comments are uniquely positioned. Rather than speculating whether or not Wang has an eating disorder, the audience members are stating that it must be fact that she does. This suggests that some viewers see their own behaviors reflected in Wang’s actions, identifying themselves as the same or similar to her, rather than finding in her body a desired magical way of escaping consequences. Though there is still a need to resolve how Wang remains thin, audiences instead reflect their own practices of conformity to societal expectations of embodiment.

However, though Paytas also faced accusations of an eating disorder her audience seemed less adapt to identify with her and readier to chastise her behavior. Audience
member, Izzy Boi wrote, “She has an eating disorder,” My journey to a better smile surmised a similar behavior, though showing some concern, writing, “She has an obvious binging eating disorder. I pray she's not purging. I just don't know how she's not bigger with the way she eats... she can kill some food!!!,” and finally abhx214 did not accuse her of an eating disorder but did implicate issues with eating, commenting, “And you wonder why you have struggles with your weight Trisha, this is a factor!” These comments demonstrate very little fantasizing of Paytas, which is contrary to the audiences discourse of Paytas in Chapter 3, and this rhetoric differs how viewers discussed Wang’s abilities to stay thin. In Chapter 3, audiences discussed using Paytas’ videos as a way to fantasize eating like her, and at times being like her (as in they wished they could eat like her), yet once the fantasy includes her body and not just binge eating, the rhetoric shifts to one of disciplining. That is because Paytas is not thin like Wang, audiences only want to use her videos to fulfill desires of eating, but also want to shame her because her body is nonconforming. This reaction is different from how audiences react to Wang, which is still accusing her of not being naturally thin because of her eating behaviors, but they show more compassion for her, rather than use shaming language.

Overall, this section demonstrated how health rhetoric plays a role in thinness and eating culture. Though Paytas is open about her on-going battle with food and eating, from my knowledge she has never said she has an eating disorder or bulimia. This is true of Wang, as well. Wang has neither disclosed having bulimia or any issues around eating disorders or food addiction. I surmise that audiences are projecting their own relationships with food and body culture onto the stars, while also reading these texts
through the dominant narrative, which says that overindulgence of food is unhealthy despite how thin the stars’ present.

**You should not be encouraged**

In this section, I focus on ways audiences spectacularize and attempt to discipline the defiant body (Gay, 2017). For the stars whose bodies fulfill the ideal of thinness, the audience’s rhetoric did not show attempts to shame their behaviors, but rather fantasize about them while attempting to reconcile norm breaking actions. In this section, I establish a pattern showing how the audience overtly attempts to discipline through means of shaming or exhibiting deep distress toward Paytas and Candy—the two stars in the study with non-conforming bodies. Although demonstrating concern for other stars such as Wang was also exhibited, the focus was not on her body, but rather her eating habits. The discourse clearly establishes a sense of moral duty that audiences should not be encouraging these stars’ eating habits because of how their bodies present.

Similarly to the way Paytas’ audiences assumed that she has an eating disorder, audiences also unsympathetically observed her body as a consequence of her transgressive eating habits. One audience member with the screen name Regina George responded to a comment regarding her eating habits. They said, “Septic Mack Phan umm she clearly does eat shit like this every day. She said it herself. Don’t be in denial. The girl is overweight and it doesn’t take a genius to see that.” Then viewer Laura Snipes made a jab referencing a video Paytas had made concerning her fears that her then-boyfriend thought she was too overweight, Snipe commented, “Btw, this is why your boyfriend doesn't think you're thin.” Viewer Keisha Sutherland made a comment targeting Paytas’ eating habits by scrutinized Paytas’ logic around breaking a fast with a
large meal, they wrote, “When you think fasting and then eating 10,000 calories is okay.”

While these comments do not aim at deterring the star from current behaviors, they do take on the point-of-view that her behavior should change due to the perceived ramifications—being overweight or your partner thinking you’re too fat to date. This reasoning aligns with popular ways of thinking, especially for women—eliciting the age-old philosophy grandmothers told mothers who then told daughters—watch what you eat, you’ll never attract a boy if you’re anything other than thin. This heteronormative slippage in logic teaches women that their bodies are objects that must be used to please men. This reasoning causes a disparity in power where women must place their value in expectations of they should present rather than in who they are. The comments also demonstrate the moralistic language that Gay (2017) and LeBesco and Braziel (2001) describe which is fat bodies are seen as inhabitable and gluttonous and it is the publics duty to disipline them into thinness.

In these next comments, audiences also moralistic language that aims to discipline Paytas into thinness. Audience member named, cairo ranjbar, wrote:

PEOPLE STOP ENCOURAGING HER. Body positivity shouldn't be telling someone who's killing herself that she's inspiring. You should be showing her that she will die if she doesn't stop, help her make changes before it's too late. I believe you should only be body positive if you're living a healthy lifestyle and taking care of your health. If you're doing that and you're still fat because of reasons you can't control or you just still don't like you're body even though you're perfectly healthy then body positivity is something you need. Fat people don't need body positivity they need a reality check and a health plan. If you're fine
with killing yourself then okay but stop complaining when the consequences bite you in the ass.

This viewer has a clear perspective on the definition of body-positivity and who is allowed to take part in the concept. I think it is important that Paytas’ viewers grapple and critically think about the potentially harmful impacts of Mukbang. However, taking a position of body-positive language can also be problematic and reinscribe thinness culture. This viewer’s quote harkens back to Gay’s (2017) discussion of how the public feels righteous in making claims and doulling out unwarrented advice to a person whose’s body is defiant. Although Paytas does discuss that food is a trigger for her, this does not automatically warrant moralistic responses from her audience. Also, the viewer seems to be confused by their own logic in who is allowed to use body-positive language and how it functions—“people who cannot control their body shapes need these affirmations, but not fat people.” This is a clear contradiction, studies show many fat people have little control over their body size due to issues such as health. Though the notion of controlling one’s body should not be a point of contention because people should be liberated from this constraint (LeBesco & Braziel, 2001; Bordo, 2003). Yet, it is not surprising that this audience member is struggling to grasp what body-positive is since the term’s meaning has historically been schizophrenic in this culture. Media platforms sometimes takes on the body-positivity approach in an attempt to undermine (and maybe undo) the damage of thinness narratives often implemented by these very platforms such as the 2004 Dove “Real Beauty” campaign. However, many feminist and embodiment scholars will argue that body-positivity rhetoric usually is working to reinscribe thinness. For the most part it is still unclear how helpful this concept is when
looking more closely at users’ intentionality. That is, when people say they are body-positive are they still seeing fat bodies as lesser than thin bodies, despite wanting to be inclusive?

Similarly, Candy’s videos received reactions focused on why she should change her behavior. Audiences demonstrated a conflict in feeling both concern for her health and contempt for her actions—though like in Chapter 3, there were some viewers who commented on enjoying her channel and watching her eat. Yet, I identified a pattern showing how audiences do not believe that Candy could be happy in a body that defies the normative ideal. Jackie Land wrote:

Please don't think I'm a troll. I'm not...But are you happy? You have a pretty face and I can tell you are kind hearted. I feel sad for you like I feel like you're crying on the inside or screaming on the inside. May you find peace.

Here, the implication is that being thin is being happy. That is, despite Candy presenting as a person who is satisfied with her life (in videos she often expresses how excited she is to eat, and her “about” page on her YouTube channel explains that she really enjoys eating on camera). The viewer assumes that Candy is depressed or “crying on the inside” because of how her body presents. Thus, to the viewer, if Candy stopped eating so much and she would be happy. This is a strong narrative in thinness culture—fatness is equated with unhappiness, If someone has a fat body then they must be depressed or have some type of underlying psychological issue (LeBesco & Braziel, 2001). It is not shocking that some of Candy’s viewers would make this type of assumption. Holly Joy makes a similar assumption in their comment, “I wish you could see the value of you and how beautiful and sweet you are and take care of yourself.” This too, reinforces the popular trope that
people with transgressive bodies are incapable of loving themselves or valuing themselves—this narrative is rooted in ideology that suggests the body is a reflection of a holistic sense of health including mental health.

While, these comments carry a tone of trying to spare Candy’s feelings, other comments make no attempts to hold back judgment, revealing contempt for her actions. These types of comments include SWIRLY4LIFE, who wrote, “STOP KILLING YOURSELF!!,” Momma Marijuana’s comment, “Mukbang and YouTube or money for that matter is not worth losing your life this is really sad to me,” Joe Rubino, who wrote, “Oh but hey, she’s drinking water.......that should offset the 12,650 calories in carbs she just consumed,” and finally Your Lord Kermit’s comment, “We should be encouraging her to eat less/better and to exercise more... not to stuff herself and tell her she’s sooo pretty while doing it.” Analogous to Candy’s comments regarding her eating (see in Chapter 3), viewers exhibit a bias toward her body as opposed to videos starring woman with ideal body types. The underlying message is that Candy’s engagement with binge eating is abhorrent because of how her body presents. This is apparent when viewers make contradictory comments such as I Am Legend, who wrote, “It should be illegal to eat this much so sad...,” and xxlady which commented, “So are we all going to ignore the fact that she had more than an average person’s daily calories for just one meal?” These messages are positioned in ways that make Candy’s actions wrong or even criminal instead of desirable despite her engaging in the exact same behavior as the thin-bodied stars. Also, the audience do not read her videos the same way as they do with the thin-bodied stars. That is, there is no dissonance or need to speculate her thinness—rather they see Candy as a cautionary tale of what happens when you indulge in food.
In this final section, I underscored the insidious and dominant narrative of thinness represented in the discourse surrounding the stars whose bodies defy the norm. Through observing the discourse from both Paytas and Candy’s audiences, I was able to demonstrate the ideology which reinscribes thinness and works to erase fat identities. By audiences reading Candy’s presentation as sick, depressed, and disgusting they are taking away Candy’s position as a legitimate way of existing as a human. This is observed in the contradictory ways audience identified the thin-bodied stars versus the stars with non-conforming bodies. Audiences reacted to Paytas and Candy’s videos with the motivation to discipline or reject these stars’ behaviors and actions despite having identical themes and content to the videos of the stars with ideal bodies.

**Discussion**

In this chapter I called attention to the formation of body-focused discourse in these videos, and explained its functionality. By linking patterns concentrated in current body norms, I argue that audiences use these texts to interpret and perform interactions governed by prevailing U.S. ideologies of thinness. The themes that I address in this chapter depict a contradictory attitude toward bodies, while also desiring to reinforce and rebel against the rules governing bodies.

In my observations of the secret of thinness, I showed how discourse was forming around a deep desire to uncover the thin bodied stars’ abilities to defy eating norms and yet remain free of any consequences (i.e. getting fat). This hyper-focused attention on maintaining a slender body underscores U.S. cultures’ obsession with thinness. Moreover, the audience’s fixation on sustaining a slim body was also matched with an interest in rule-breaking. The audience was equally as excited about transgressive eating
as they were with the stars’ ability to sustain ideal bodies. This reaction demonstrates a
unique phenomenon. That is, audiences instinctively reinforce ideologies of thinness,
while also finding themselves drawn to actions that undermine these belief-systems. They
are driven to conform by wishing to be the magical exception to the rules that they desire
to break along the way.

Thus, in my observed pattern of audiences wanting to uncover the secret of
thinness, the pattern both functions to establish the salience and insidious reinscribing of
thinness as power, but also ways audiences wish to undercut the oppressiveness of this
structure. Audiences are unable to reconcile how these women are so free of the rules
inherent in thinness culture—remaining thin while overindulging—yet desiring to
participate in the same acts only if they too can remain thin. This pattern demonstrates the
ways women are still bound by seemingly insignificant narratives that permeate all of
popular culture. This pattern shows the danger and damage these narratives still possess
and have carried out over the years.

In addition, this same logic was utilized in my second theme, which
demonstrates audiences’ attempts to resolve overindulgence with thinness through
accusations of stars’ disordered eating habits. Not only are the requirements of ideal
bodies salient in U.S. culture, so are the rules of how to achieve and maintain ideal
bodies—this is connected to gendered eating norms (Bordo, 2003). So when audiences
see women circumventing the homogenous understanding of eating and body culture
there is an immediate need to make sense of this phenomenon.

Furthermore, this pattern also suggests that audience members cannot believe that
women who binge eat and remain thin are healthy—even if they present with
stereotypically healthy bodies such as Wang and Greene. I assert that audiences have been indoctrinated with the ideology that women are not allowed to (over)indulge without facing consequences such as gaining weight or having an eating disorder. Other than those used for dramatic or comedic effect, the public has such little exposure to tropes of women eating (Stein, 2009).

Concurrently, both of these patterns propose ways the audience is interpreting the texts through their own understanding of thin culture and fears of fatness. As shown above some disclosed their own struggles with eating disorders and most disclosed a fear for the Western stars having an unhealthy relationship with eating. It seemed impossible for the audience to not read these texts without assuming a negative relationship between women and their eating habits. I see this as a reflection of the audience's own perception and relationships to their experiences with eating norms. That is thinness culture has complicated women’s relationships to eating because of body presentation expectations, and possibly audiences are using Mukbang to work out their own understandings or even experiences of the impacts of these constraints.

However, Dorothy became an exception to the audience’s accusation of an eating disorder. I assert that this departure from the pattern is due to her perceived exotismism. Bordo’s (2003) work on gendered advertisements offers a representation of the exotic woman, who in contrast to the dominant culture in the U.S., has an easy relationship with food and faces no consequences. This representation functions in a similar way with how audiences received Dorothy, they still desired to uncover her mystical relationship with food, but did not categorize and thus treat her the same as the other Westernized women.
Her relationship to eating was more believable and glorified than the other stars because she is seen as different from the other stars.

Finally, the last section I want to discuss is the audience’s reaction to the stars with nonconforming bodies. This was addressed in the last theme I presented, which underscored the ways fat identity is erased. It also captures the current climate of fat-phobia in U.S. culture.

First, the most apparent pattern I saw was the aggressive assertion that the audience should discipline or shame Candy and Paytas for their actions. As Gay (2017), LeBesco and Braziel (2001) write, society has framed fat bodies as criminal and subjects to be disciplined into thinness, which is a device that functions to erase fat identity. “[T]he tendency is to collapse the fat body within the traumatized body”, or in other words if you are fat there must be something deeply wrong with you (LeBesco & Braziel, 2001; p. 4).

Similarly, this narrative of the fat body is the traumatized body was frequently represented in the discourse targeted at both Candy and Payas. Much of the language assumed trauma, especially true for Candy. Comment after comment question Candy’s happiness. This ties back to how Gay’s (2017) family and peers deeply believed that once she was thin then she would be happy, and LeBesco’s (2004) concept of society viewing the fat body as “uninhabitable” (p. 2). It was too much for the audience to accept Candy’s transgressive eating and nonconforming body, leading to shaming language, encouragement to stop eating (or killing herself), and to start exercising.

Additionally, audiences expressed a double-standard on Candy’s channel. There were countless comments that criticized her for binge eating—which is the purpose of a
Mukbang show. Audiences read Candy’s actions as criminal because her body does presents as nonconforming. Popular tropes inscribe fat bodies as the result of “reckless excess, prodigality, indulgence, lack of restraint …” (LeBesco & Braziel, 2001; p. 3). Despite the thin-bodied stars engaging in the same practices, it doesn’t matter because of the “spoiled identity” fixed on Candy (LeBesco & Braziel, 2001)

I want to turn to how I first introduced Candy. I described her as a woman who presents as big-bodied and is confident in her body—I mean her handle is literally Hungery FatChick. She seems to love food and love her fleshy-space-claiming body—and won’t apologize for either. Unlike Paytas, Candy rarely talks about her body to the audience nor does she seem to really respond to comments about her weight or eating habits. Though her audiences reinscribes privileging thinness, Candy, on her own, does not.

**Conclusion**

In my observation for this chapter, I established evidence of the audience’s understanding of thinness culture and fear of fatness. The way the audience talked about the Mukbang’s stars and their relationship to food, and methods of staying thin, I argue reflects viewers’ own struggles with the constraints of thinness culture. I make this argument because of the way the audience discussed the stars’ bodies and eating habits the audience’s relation to their own desires to obtain thinness but also indulge.

This chapter also introduced the idea of magical thinking logic with diet culture and bell hook’s (1992) eating the Other with Bordo’s (2003) concept of eroticizing the representation of the women who eats without consequences. This was predominately useful in understanding how audiences reacted to Dorothy’s videos, and their need to
uncover her mystical relationship with food. Viewers did not attempt to resolve her thinness with accusations of an eating disorder, but rather accepted her ability to remain thin because she presents so differently from the Western culture.

Lastly, I discussed the way the audience discussed Candy and Paytas. I argued that this discourse worked to shame or discipline them into thinness. Disciplining rhetoric functions to erase identities which presented as anything other than thin. Through the audience’s language of shaming, disciplining, and essentializing, I established a pattern which positioned the audience either intentionally or unintentionally reinscribe hegemonic thinness and preserving a fat-phobic culture.

Thus, all three of these sections truly highlight the enduring and problematic ideology of thinness in U.S. culture. These patterns represent how the public reacts to bodies on display, and that feminist cultural research written at least 20 years ago still rings true. Thinness is still privileged, women are still internalizing how to reach and maintain such standards, and people are still instinctually disciplining those who break the rules. Though there is evidence of a longing to rebel against thinness culture, this desire is quickly erased by the overriding instinct to conform. It seems that the ideology of thin is deeper and more rooted than ever. This notion leaves me with feelings of despair because as I do this research, I see glimpses of change in representations of women who have defiant bodies. I see these glimpses in fat women playing lead roles who are written as happy and without some underlying psychological issue. However, moment of satisfaction is overshadowed with the fear that these instances are not occurring often and quickly enough to dismantle the prevailing and unrelenting power of thin.
Chapter 5
Magical Eating

Contextualizing My Own Experience with Thinness Culture

The first time, that I can recall, where I became really aware of my body was when I was in the third or fourth grade and a family friend told me my breasts were beginning to grow in. The second time I became aware of my body, or should I say ashamed of my body, was in the fifth grade on summer vacation and my crush told me I was a fat whale and I should lose weight. From then on, I never stopped feeling fat. It is funny how memories work; I distinctly recall feeling giant, obese, crawling in my skin, embarrassed of my waist and thighs—yet when I look back a photos of me from kindergarten through my senior year of high school—I was actually quite thin.

In my freshman year of college (the first time, the time I dropped out), I embarked on my long-term dysfunctional journey with food. Between the ages of 19 to 21 I successfully starved myself to the malnourished and slender frame I desperately desired. I remember feeling a sensation of achievement when I lay in bed at the end of the day and said “good job you didn’t eat today,” or refusing food from family members who pushed baked goods at me because they were worried about my weight.

Of course this success was short lived. I moved in with my then boyfriend at 22 and rapidly gained weight from binge drinking and binge eating. During these years, I felt, were my monster years—but even looking back at those photos I was probably just 15 pounds overweight. The continuous hatred for my body was exacerbated by innocent exhortations to lose weight from my then-boyfriend and suggestions from his brother that he should date “skinnier chicks.”
When eventually his drinking turned into sleeping with other women, landing in jail for a DUI, and verbally and physically abusing me, I finally gained the courage to leave him. I made serious attempts at living a healthier life. I rode my bike to work, joined a gym, and ate organic (mostly, anyway). I wanted to lose weight in a healthy way. And I did lose some weight. However, I couldn’t shake my urge to binge. I quickly found myself in a cycle of starvation followed by binging followed by attempts to eat healthy, before the cycle would repeat all over again. This led to very little weight-loss, but more importantly it led to an even deeper resentment toward my body—something I desperately needed to control but for which control was always out of reach.

My family has a weird relationship with food. My maternal side is mostly women, and I remember always comparing my body to that of my aunts and cousins. My grandmother instilled a neurotic need to be concerned with one’s weight; at 78 years old she is still dieting and by societal standards is still overweight. My childhood is over-ridden by my grandmother’s frequent conversations about her body. Every gathering was riddled with non-fat, low-calorie snacks. This model trickled down to some family members, but seemed to escape my mother. To me she always had an easy relationship with food and could always stay slender—this is something I always envied.

However, my father’s side was instilled with the immigrant mentality of eating until you literally are sick—this is a sign of happiness and success. I see my relationship with my father also affecting my association with food in other ways. My parents divorced when I was seven, and my father would disappear for months or even years at a time. But my distinct memories of him always involved food. He loved to cook; cooking was when he was at his happiest. My favorite times with him were when he was cooking
in the kitchen. He’d blast music and start belting out lyrics as he stirred pots filled with
sauces and sautéed pungent vegetables and salty meats. The kitchen would suddenly turn
in a magical place, safe again from the battlegrounds of screaming matches, flying beer
bottles, and acrobatic furniture just the night before. My father would often let me help
cook. I have a crystal-clear memory of him teaching me how to make a rue at 6 years old.
I felt such accomplishment as I turned the silky powder of the flour into a thick, brown
sauce—just the right texture.

As the years went on, and I saw my father less and less, I’d relish the times we
met at a restaurant—usually a greasy spoon type place—and we’d sit and eat and enjoy
each other until the next time—when I would be much older and he’d look at me sadly
knowing this wasn’t how things were supposed to be. It was in these years I learned what
wanting meant. I learned what the pain of longing felt like. I remember sitting by the
window for what felt like hours imagining my heartache was enough to will my father to
the door. I’d cry myself to sleep when I finally understood he was gone.

It is probably safe to say this has something to do with my need to binge—I turn
to food to fill the void. But as I discussed in chapters 2, 3, and 4 this is certainly not the
only factor. I also have memories of my grandmother feeding me one small bowl of
cereal for breakfast while my brother received heaping portions of French toast, eggs and
bacon. I remember learning what bulimia was from watching Tweety Goldberg in “All I
Wanna Do” and being excited about the idea of having an “easy” answer to binging. I
still can feel the sting of my aunt commenting to my father when I was 15 about my large
appetite, as if this was as dangerous as catching me smoking cigarettes (which I also did).
I’ll never forget comparing my body to every girlfriend who was thinner than me—
measuring the length of their seat belts to mine. I remember the shame of sharing clothes with my best friend in the sixth grade and seeing my pants hang loose and baggy around her waist and thighs—I screamed at her to take them off. I knew I was supposed to be skinnier, as thin as Britney Spears, Kiera Knightly, Kirsten Dunst (my thinsopration in the early 2000s). This unfortunately was also when low-rider jeans were in-vogue and created muffin-tops for anyone who wasn’t a size 0 to 2.

I hated myself every time I ate. I wanted so badly to not need food, to be immune to any craving, to live on water and air. But I also loved food. I loved the exactingness of preparing meals, all the sounds and smells, I loved the texture, the temperature, the way food worked to bring people together, satisfy my hunger. I didn’t actually start purging until my mid-twenties and it took me a while to get it down right. I found tips and tricks on online forums to make the process easier, less detectable, and not taste as disgusting. I found myself drawn to the high of the purge as much as the binge. A ritual began to take place. I’d shop for my favorite-purge friendly foods, and with each placement in the cart of macaroni and cheese, Ben and Jerry’s red velvet cheesecake ice cream, and four-packs of hot pockets I could feel my mouth water and a rush of adrenaline pulsate through me—this was going to be a great binge.

And it never was. Every binge is shrouded by the need to eat as much as you can as fast as you can—the food is not enjoyed much as it is devoured. When it comes time to purge, I faithfully take this time to degrade myself with the guilt-driven narrative of my selfishness for wasting food, my disgustingness for overindulging, and how pathetic this all is anyways—making myself throw up. Then I always finished each purge with the thought that if my baby cousin ever did this to herself I would be heartbroken. It is not
until the very end, when there is no more solid food to throw up and I watch everything being flushed away, when my stomach is completely empty and my body is tired and worn out that I feel a rush of pleasure, success, achievement.

I am a woman who has achieved many things denoting success in life, mostly with very little help. I graduated with my bachelor's degree, I’ve worked high-pressured jobs and did well, I was accepted into a Master’s program and a Doctorate program, I married a wonderful man who is the love of my life. Yet, being thin remains my deepest, most secret desire of them all. I too have been duped into believing that thinness is happiness.

So when I discovered Mukbang I immediately became captivated with not only the content of the shows, but also the potential functionality I observed within these texts. I was drawn to these texts as rebellious acts, reveling in the challenges to the norms of thinness; but as I continued to watch, I began to question my own intentionality in my interpretations. I wondered if I was using these texts to fulfill my own fantasies of enjoying food without enduring all the pain, guilt, and fear that comes with indulgence. I confronted my own latent desires to be these stars. This was my first recognition of magical eating. As I questioned my own approach to these videos, I thought, “I cannot be the only one doing this.” It became my goal to understand the complexity that these shows drew out of me, girding myself to seriously grapple with my own relationship with eating, food, and norms of thinness.

In this chapter, I explain the functionality and implications of my concept of magical eating. This concept is born out of the dissonance between Westernized normative standards of women’s bodies juxtaposed with an eating culture that represents
women eating freely and without obvious consequence. In magical eating, audiences of such media as Mukbang experience a consequence-free indulgence and liberated engagement with food through their consumption of eating entertainment. Thus, the audience is using the texts to fulfill their own fantasies of eating and embodiment—consuming texts rather than food to fulfill eating desires.

Through my work in chapters 3 and 4, I am able to make connections in this chapter to demonstrate how audiences engage in magical eating with these texts. Viewers exhibit this behavior because of the deep struggle with both eating and corporeality, displayed in both how they reacted to the stars, and in their own disclosure of their relationships with these structures. Audiences use Mukbang videos to try and reconcile their own dissonance between the desire to liberate themselves from norms and the instinctual need to conform. I argue that magical eating is a fantasy that audiences use to cover subjective contradictions in relation to eating and corporeal culture.

Turning back to James, Handelman, and Taylor’s (2011) research on magical thinking, which depicts women using faulty reasoning to gain agency over outside phenomenon of which they have no control—specifically dieting logic—it is important to remember the conundrum of magical thinking. That is, by using faulty logic, subjects are actually furthering themselves from gaining any agency—and potentially causing more harm to themselves.

A similar issue is evident in magical eating. Engaging in magical eating, which is fulfilling a desire about eating through watching others eat, brings out two points of contention. First, magical eating reinscribes problematic norms, such as thinness and gendered eating expectations. Second, the viewer is not actually gaining any agency in
their own struggles with these norms. This is why I argue that magical eating functions to cover contradictions in eating and corporeality norms that keep subjects oppressed.

When looking more closely at how magical eating reinforces harmful ideologies such as gendered eating norms and thinness culture, I also observe that engaging in magical eating requires Othering what these texts represent in order to fantasize about becoming these stars. As hooks (1992) explains, the dominant culture figuratively consumes black bodies through their desire to experience both their perceived danger and exoticisms positioned in their difference. That is, because the dominant culture others black bodies, those who are within the dominant culture want to conquer black bodies with the goal to have an experience. When black bodies are othered by the dominant culture a representation of exoticisms and danger is placed on them, and it is this very experience that the dominant culture wants to consume. I posit a similar argument using Bordo’s (2003) concept of the ideal woman. The ideal woman who can eat freely without consequence, or has a causal relationship with food, becomes eroticized by women who desire to become her because they are unable to achieve this themselves (Bordo, 2003).

Mukbang manufactures the ideal woman. The thin-bodied stars seem to remain unmarked despite their continuous engagement in the taboo of transgressive eating. Not only does this representation of the stars make them exotic to audiences, but they also embody a sense of danger in their difference—their free and easy attitude when going against normative expectations of gendered eating habits.

This is both the promise and danger of magical eating. Mukbang texts generate a representation of a woman who despite engaging in rebellious acts of transgressive eating, still continues to reinscribe harmful tropes of thinness. Magical eating only works
with thin-bodied stars because the functionality of the fantasy is to eat without consequence, or to overindulge without getting fat.

Returning to Cloud (2010), audiences are thus unable to traverse the fantasy and recognize their contradictions. Rather than working through what is foreclosed by their fantasies, it is crucial to remember that magical thinking only works to keep audiences stuck within their fantasies. Magical eating cloaks their contradictions, so audiences do not have to become aware of what is outside of this fantasy.

**Magical Eating**

Magical eating functions to fulfill fantasies of engaging in carefree indulgent eating while escaping any consequences. This is carried out through the action of watching thin-bodied women binge eat in online spaces. The clearest examples of this are the patterns I discussed in Chapter 3 where audience members disclosed watching Mukbangs and feeling a sensation of binge eating themselves. Watching people eat in ways that transgress social norms had the magical ability to make them feel full and satisfied.

For instance, viewer Rishika Sharma commented, “It’s weird but watching her eat just made me not want to eat. I was hungry before I started watching this video but now I’m full and I haven’t even eaten .” Sharma depicts a phenomenon of actually feeling full after watching one of Paytas’ videos. It also seemed popular to use the stars as a proxy for eating. Audience member Chelsea Baker wrote, “ … let them get fat FOR you. Drink some cold water your growling stomach means it's applauding you;” Hattie made a similar comment, “Yeah exactly, I’m doing a 10 day fast so Trisha eats for me in the meantime .” These examples embody the truest form of magical eating: viewers are
creating a type of reality where they are actually eating through the stars, or becoming the stars (consuming the stars) to fulfill their fantasies of eating. Other circumstances depict audiences using these texts to fulfill a desire of wishing they could eat like the stars—or eat like the stars and have their thin bodies. This is demonstrated in comments such as viewers like Rashellexo who wrote, “I watch these videos because I know I physically can’t afford to eat like this because I gain weight too easily,” Altina Ajeti who wrote, “Can anyone explain [to] me how she eats so much ?? And why she does not get fat, this girl is fabulous,” and Lissette Alveraz’s comment, “Who else wishes that they can eat like this without regretting it.” In this discourse viewers are not overtly using the videos to create a type of reality, but rather are fantasizing about having the same experience or relationship the stars have with eating.

Just like magical thinking, magical eating functions in faulty reasoning. For some of the viewers they are using this form of fantasizing to justify not eating. This is obviously a dangerous and harmful use of these texts. However, as Bordo (2003) notes, we cannot blame the faulty logic so much on the individual as the culture itself. Thinness is a structural component in the architecture of power systems in U.S. culture, especially for women. Despite the harm of idealizing thinness, narratives continue to circulate telling people that thinness equals happiness, success, and achievement. More pointedly, the construction of thinness places the value of women in their bodily presentation. By being told that their worth is in the temperance and control of their bodies, it forces women in a harmful cycle of consistently striving for something that is impermanent and fundamentally unattainable. Ultimately it is not the women, but this culture that needs to shift (Bordo, 2003).
When observing other ways magical eating is used in these texts, the fantasy lies in the desire to experience what it would be like to eat like the stars. This pattern demonstrates audience members who are using these videos to evade their own fears of eating because of the consequences they may face. Thus the danger in using magical eating is reinforcing internalized ideologies of thinness and relinquishing their own agency to transform their identities with eating and body politics.

Consequently, these patterns also depict my interpretation of Bordo’s (2003) ideal woman in concert with hooks (1992) Eating the Other. The audience is consuming what the texts represent which is something they desire to become or experience—the literal feeling of eating, the act of overindulging in food, eating freely and remaining thin. These audience members want to inhabit the representations the stars are depicting—women who can eat without any repercussions. To me this feels alarmingly scary and sad, as it not only functions as a way for thinness culture to thrive in unintentional ways, but it also paints a picture of how deeply people are struggling under the constraints of eating norms in this society.

Thus, magical eating presents with multiple facets of problematic dimensions. Audiences using magical eating to fulfil fantasies of eating are only furthering themselves from the opportunity to scrutinize their own struggles with hegemonic eating and body norms. They also are implicitly perpetuating these narratives onto themselves back out into the communities.

However, I also argue that magical eating works in a larger function than just for using these texts to fulfill fantasies of eating, but also as an outlet to express their interpretations of the very norms which bind them. Earlier I established how audiences
also used these texts to discipline the stars’ transgressive behaviors including messy eating, noisy eating, and stars who binge ate and had bodies that defied ideal types. These audiences were drawn to these fringe texts, yet found themselves needing to reinforce the hegemonic ideologies of eating and the body. Ultimately, what magical eating reveals is that even the socially defiant eating in Mukbang serves to reinforce norms of thinness.

Here, these patterns work to show the contradiction of the larger audience—the public. When women are transgressively eating on display, magical eating works to keep both perspectives static in their points of views. Both sides of the continuum—I want to eat like you, but you can’t eat like that, I want to look like you, but you must have an eating disorder—are all using these texts to reconcile their own struggles with the current social norms of eating and corporeality, yet because these contradictions are functioning though fantasies, viewers are unable to transform or resolve any of these issues.

In my final thoughts on magical eating, I turn to the work of Hanchey (2018) using Butler’s (2004) explanation of how fantasies reinforce harmful power structures, but simultaneously allows people to gain agency within them. This is an important way to approach the functionality of fantasies. That is, because fantasies work both to reinscribe harmful and oppressive narratives, they also perform as a sense of self-protection from seeing their own complicity in reinforcing harmful structures. However, this action also allows space for agency to be gained. Hanchey (2018) writes, [t]hrough fantasy, a subject can narrate her past experiences in a way that produces meaning, and thereby defend herself from recognizing her own structural inability to ever be coherent as a Self. (p. 147). Narratives of thinness culture continuously work to keep women in a place of constantly attempting to achieve a goal that is tempering and therefore unattainable
because women’s values are placed on a presentation of the body. The unattainable
design of this construct takes agency away from women causing a need to turn to
fantasies to gain back a sense of agency. The fantasy of magical eating further reinscribes
harmful belief systems onto the people using the fantasy and back into the dominant
narrative, but because there is not foreseeable future of dismantling of this structure,
magical eating is also the only way people can undermine and gain a sense of agency
within this system.
Chapter 6

Conclusion

It would be an understatement to say this project was hard to write. I saw so much of myself reflected in this research. It became critical, not just best practice, to use self-reflexivity in this work. This of course, was necessary in my interpretation of the audience’s comments, but also in how I wrote about the stars. I noticed this most pointedly in both of my opening sections for chapter 2 and 3, but this felt most urgent for Chapter 4. I knew I wanted to write about Candy, but I found myself emotionally invested in how I portrayed her. I was so afraid of reinscribing thinness, of using language that would further erase fat identity—that I was literally paralyzed in this process.

During the course of my work, I kept thinking about LeBesco’s (2004) research in “Revolting Bodies.” In her quest to transform through language the fat identity from one that is invisible to visible, she writes, “I am aware, however, that the process of gaining the upper hand, or redefining fat identity as palatable, will in turn produce its own subset of unthinkable, unlivable, and abject bodies” (LeBesco, 2004, p. 5). In this passage LeBesco is holding herself accountable for very real possibility of while working to dismantle unequal power structures, she could unintentionally reinscribe their power.

However, I also learned from this project that I cannot be stagnant out of fear. There needs to be room for messiness in order to get the work done. There were so many times that I found myself unsure of the language I used, my interpretations, the conclusions I drew. This does not absolve my need for critical scrutiny over my decisions
and my research, but I feel obligated to disclose my biggest point of struggle with this project.

Additionally, this project is incomplete, it is just the foundation to what I want to achieve with my work. That is because this research only functions as a means to expose problematic issues, rather than giving direction on how to transform those issues. Yet, it is always important to have a sturdy jumping off point.

Hence, I urge future projects to take this groundwork and develop research which moves toward transformation. The success of my work lays in pointing to the very real and very damaging underpinning evolving through food entertainment, especially for women. Yet, this project lacks a direction in how to transform the problematic issues I underscore.

For this I suggest and again turn to LeBesco’s (2004) insights as she makes an appeal to her readers using the work of Grosz (1995) and Butler (1997). It is not enough to demand a change of beauty standards that only works to keep the structure intact (Grosz, 1995). There needs to be a radicalization of what fat politics means, and “to force it into a demanding resignification,” (Butler, 1997, p. 5; LeBesco, 2004, p. 5). By doing this, there is more space to redefine the current valuation of the body into an inclusive valuation of all bodies. LeBesco (2004) surmises that this society is not yet capable of creating this type of change without reinscribing exclusion and abjection—I find this still to be true. Our society is not there, but I also am afraid we are simply running out of time. Just speaking in terms of the United States of America, as much as this country has pushed, fought for, and demanded change for equality, liberation of bodies, and inclusiveness in ideology, we have also seen violent and aggressive strides to undermine
and even erase this progress—working to create deep oceans of space between the people of this country and transformation in thought and spirit.

However, I see the promise in continuing to work. In this project, I urge readers to focus on the politics of bodies and food, or more specifically eating, and how these politics circulate in the ever-evolving and rapidly morphing world of online spaces. My concept of magical eating allows for a means to understand the effects of food entertainment, especially for women on social media platforms.

As stated in earlier chapters, the politics of women eating bears a historical lineage instilled over generations (Bordo, 2003; Dijkstra, 1986). More pointedly, the formation of these enduring constraints functions with the purpose to cut at women’s power. These structures are not arbitrary, nor ambivalent; they were born out of the fear of women becoming too independent, too radicalized, and thus were functioned to keep women docile (Foucault, 1995). Bordo’s (2003) research on the eating culture ideologies of the nineteenth century Victorian era explains that these ideologies were formed from men striving to move upward in socio-economic status, but were unable to because of the structuring of power during that time. So, in lieu of actually experience upward mobility, this group of men wanted their wives to have “fragile frames and lack of appetite” to mimic the aristocratic women. This presentation in body depicted a social liberation from the “laboring striving economic body,” and “ … possessing a wife [with an] ethereal body became a sort of fashion statement of his aristocratic tastes,” (Bordo, 2003, p. 117).

Accordingly, my research shows that not much has changed in how we perceive the power of thinness—a hegemonic standard that serves to keep both men and women, though historically women, oppressed. In my research I demonstrated the prevalence of
eating disorders and using Mukbangs shows to literally curb hunger. Audiences turned to the thin-bodied stars to imagine the sensation of eating, and more importantly the sensation of eating without gaining weight. This was done repetitively, and encouraged by viewers as a successful way to avoid cravings. Intertwined with thinness culture is the construct of gendered eating norms. These rules also have not progressed much throughout history. Chapter 3 demonstrates why these norms are so problematic. Though they may seem harmless, they actually function to reinscribe thinness culture for women. The expectations of women eating daintily, cautiously, and controlled is connected to women appearing daintily, fragile, and small—that being the standard for femininity.

How my concept of magical eating contributes to these conversations is by looking closely at the functionality of people’s fantasies of eating and embodiment, and the contradictions in their fantasies. In this work I established that there is strong attraction from audiences to watching women eat—and particularly, watching the binge eat. I believe that in part this is a rebellious act. However, when scrutinized, my research shows, the draw to these texts is really about people’s desires to escape their own internal contradictions over standards of eating and embodiment. However, magical eating is but a fantasy, not a way of traversing it.

Thus, using magical eating as a way to engage with food and desires of eating keeps people immobile. Although there is clear strife that people face when met with expectations of thinness in this culture, there is also a danger of using Mukbang shows to deal with it. Mukbang is escapist; it posits some women as exceptions that can be attained, a way out while maintaining the status quo. That is, people use these shows to
fulfill fantasies of eating without any consequences, perpetuating a situation where nothing has to change and harmful narratives of thinness can continue to be reinforced.

Additionally, my research also examined why magical eating works more easily with thin actors. That is because the audience’s fantasy is not only about overindulging with food but also about escaping the perceived consequences of eating. I believe that fat-phobia is instilled in this logic. Much of my research exposed the ways audiences demonstrated disdain for the nonconforming bodies in these texts.

Specifically, this can be seen in how Paytas and Candy were treated in comparison to the other stars. In both instances with eating norms and corporeality, my work demonstrated clear double-standards in how the thin-bodied stars were praised for their eating habits or their body presentation, while Candy, and at times Paytas, were disciplined or criticized. There were two cases that I see capturing my argument. The first is when Wang was told to not worry about her breathing during filming, and Candy was repetitively ridiculed for her breathing during her videos. The second is how audiences categorized Candy’s binge eating as basically criminal despite her YouTube channel being specifically for Mukbang, and then how none of the Mukbang stars are chastised for their binge eating. This accusation is undoubtedly only directly at Candy due to the presentation of her body.

Another alarming observation I made is the disparity in the language that is used toward the thin-bodied stars as opposed to the stars with larger bodies. I argue, in Chapter 4, that ideologies of thinness culture allow people to feel a deep sense of justification when erasing fatness through disciplining language. Most comments made toward Candy were targeted at how urgently she needs to change, or rather disappear, her body. There
was very little capacity for people to see past this type of defiance, and more pointedly bodily defiance caused outrage. On the other hand, other forms of rebellion, such as thin-body stars engaging in transgressive eating, excited audiences.

However, one point of contention I found myself struggling with were the dimensions of health in these texts. Though in this project I take a clear stance on the danger of using rhetoric which perpetuates tropes of thin-bodies equaling healthy bodies, and positions fat bodies as inherently both physically and mentally unhealthy, I still struggle with that idea that health issues should not be addressed at all. For instances, Paytas opening discusses her battle with food addiction. Is watching Paytas binge eat implicitly participating in her self-harm? Are audiences spectacularizing her pain? Or is this acceptable because Paytas is choosing to put herself on display, making this interaction empowering rather than exploitive?

This same dilemma could be position for Candy, though to my knowledge she had never disclosed having a harmful relationship with food. I am aware that making these assumptions because of her bodily size reinscribes harmful stereotypes of fat identity. Yet, I don’t feel comfortable ignoring the danger of abusing food.

For me, I think this spotlights one of the fundamental problems with our cultural understanding of “health.” It has been used against the public in order to commoditize thinness (LeBesco & Braziel, 2001), so we are unable to separate holistic health from the bodily size. In addition, because the language of fat identity has been structured to oppress, it feels impossible to have productive conversation about fat bodies without reinforcing oppressive ideologies. This issue then urges a need to rewrite the history of
fat bodies and “to force it into a demanding resignification,” (Butler, 1997; p. 5; LeBesco, 2004; p. 5)

I do not have a definitive stance on if I believe Mukbang videos are good or bad, if they are harmful, or if they are working to radicalize the trope of gendered eating norms. That is because on their own, I see them as ambivalent videos that depict women eating. It is of course our interpretations interwoven with all the historicity, all the politics, all the connotation of what it means to watch women eat that makes these videos problematic.

I still believe that Mukbang is radical in nature because women transgressively eating in public inherently is a radical act—and for this I support what Mukbang does for that narrative. Yet, while any form of media is open to numerous interpretations, that same form of media serves as a reflection of society’s pulse.

At the same token, it deeply troubles me that a video displaying a woman eating is something that I see as “radical.” Women eating should be banal. Women with defiant bodies who are also transgressively eating should not be treated as if they are engaging in criminal acts. And in a multitude of ways this narrative feels unmovable, something that will simply continue to be just the way things are.

For me, this project is not only about exposing the insidious and dangerous influence of hegemonic thinness culture in online spaces—though that is at the heart of this thesis. However, during the time of my research thirteen states moved to restrict anti-abortion laws with the purpose of having them challenged at the Supreme Court in the hopes of overturning Roe v. Wade (Merelli & Campoy, 2019). As of 2018 there were 201 reported and documented cases of sexual harassment exposed by the #MeToo movement
(Carlsen, Salam, Miller, Lu, Ngú, Patel & Wichter, 2018). To me this research points to the larger goal of aiding in the fight of women taking back their bodies. There is no more time to wait, be patient, or be polite. It is 2019 and our bodies are still perceived as something others may lay claim to. The dominant narrative of U.S. culture is that women’s bodies are objects that should continue to be governed by patriarchal ideologies. Furthermore, the dominant narrative in U.S. culture is that women should not be allowed to have control over their bodies. This is demonstrated in my citation above noting the recent steps by government to make abortion illegal, and this is demonstrated in thinness culture. The salient messages in thinness culture is that women’s bodies must adhere to strict expectations in order to maintain the patriarchal construct of femininity.

Finally, I hope this work finds young girls, teenagers, and women who avoid mirrors, go hungry all day, eat politely in public only to return home famished and secretly indulge in front of an open refrigerator (Geis, 1998), girls who hate their bodies, women who hate themselves after they slip—I hope this works finds them and lets them know the following: There is absolutely nothing wrong with you, and there is everything wrong with the culture that tells you that this is the secret to happiness.
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