

Open Access Brief Report

The Role of Perceived Feelings of Presence and Escapism in Problematic Mukbang Watching Among Emerging Adult Mukbang Watchers

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Citation: Kircaburun, K., Savcı, M., Emirtekin, E., & Griffiths, M. (2021). The role of perceived feelings of presence and escapism in problematic mukbang watching among emerging adult mukbang watchers. *Journal of Concurrent Disorders*.

Editor-in-Chief: Mona Neuroozifar

Received: 04/04/2021
Accepted: 05/10/2021
Published: 05/12/ 2021



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Abstract: A mukbang (“eating broadcast”) is a form of online video entertainment originating in South Korea, where the host eats a large amount of food while interacting with viewers. Recently, mukbang watching has been gaining popularity across the world. A number of studies have suggested that a minority of mukbang watchers may engage in the behavior excessively, problematically and/or addictively. However, there is still a dearth of studies examining the motivational and psychological correlates and health consequences (mental and physical) of problematic mukbang watching. The purpose of the present study was to investigate the relationship of presence and escapism with problematic mukbang watching. Path analysis indicated that social presence associated with problematic mukbang watching, while spatial presence was not.

Keywords: Mukbang; Escapism; Adult

Introduction

A mukbang (“eating broadcast”) is a form of online video entertainment originating in South Korea, where the host eats a large amount of food while interacting with viewers. Recently, mukbang watching has been gaining popularity across the world. A number of studies have suggested that a minority of mukbang watchers may engage in the behavior excessively, problematically and/or addictively (Kircaburun et al., 2020a, 2020b). Engaging in problematic mukbang watching can have serious adverse consequences including disordered eating, internet addiction, distortion of eating and table manners, and adolescent obesity (Kircaburun et al., 2020b, 2020c).

Previous studies have shown that using online activities for feeling more presence and escapism can lead to elevated problematic use of those online activities. For instance, spatial presence, social presence, and escapism have been found to be positively related to problematic *Instagram* use among adolescent *Instagram* users (Kircaburun & Griffiths, 2019). Mukbang watching can become a problematic online activity if watchers have a feeling of social and spatial presence and successfully escape from their unpleasant reality. They may obtain a sense of social presence while watching mukbang by interacting with the person who eats the food and other viewers. A sense of spatial (e.g., physical) presence can be obtained from watching mukbang by having the virtual pleasure (e.g., spatial presence) of eating. Consequently, these aforementioned experiences can associate with using mukbang watching as an escape from real life (see Kircaburun et al., 2020b for a review). The present pilot study was carried out to provide empirical evidence for these associations.

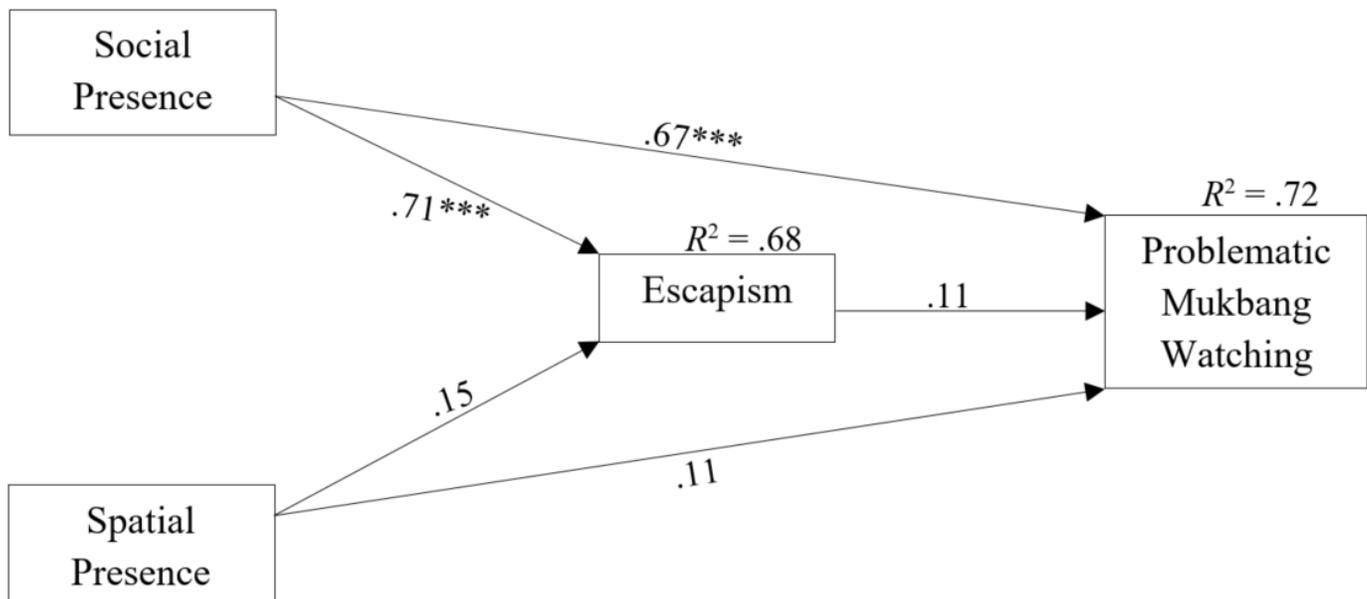
Methods

A total of 136 students from Yaşar University (62% females, $M_{age} = 21.81$ years [$SD = 2.66$], range = 19 to 42 years) who watched mukbangs in the past year participated in a cross-sectional study and completed an online survey anonymously and voluntarily. The measures included the: (i) Mukbang Addiction Scale (MAS; six items, scores ranging from 6 to 30 [Kircaburun et al., 2020a], Cronbach’s $\alpha = .91$), (ii) Escapism Scale (ES; four items, scores ranging from 4 to 28 [Kircaburun & Griffiths, 2019], Cronbach’s $\alpha = .94$), (iii) Social Presence Scale (SPS; five items, scores ranging from 5 to 35 [Kircaburun & Griffiths, 2019], Cronbach’s $\alpha = .94$), and (iv) Spatial Presence Experience Scale (SPES; four items, scores ranging from 4 to 28 [Kircaburun & Griffiths, 2019], Cronbach’s $\alpha = .93$). Problematic mukbang watching was the outcome variable, social presence and spatial presence were the independent variables, and escape was the mediator. All statistical analyses were carried out using SPSS 23 and AMOS 23. Path analysis was used to evaluate the relationships among study variables. Skewness and kurtosis values were evaluated to indicate normal distribution of the data. Tolerance and variation of inflation (VIF) values were evaluated to detect multicollinearity and autocorrelation.

Results

Skewness and kurtosis values (ranging between 1.51 and 3.07) indicated that the data were normally distributed and normality assumptions were not violated. Tolerance (ranging between .26 and .42) and VIF values (ranging between 2.36 and 3.84) indicated that, despite the high correlation among variables, there were no multicollinearity. Path analysis (using a saturated model) indicated social presence ($\beta = .67$, S.E. = .11, $p < .001$; 95% CI [.44, .85]) was positively (moderately) associated with problematic mukbang watching. However, spatial presence ($\beta = .11$, S.E. = .06, $p > .05$; 95% CI [-.02, .25]) and escapism ($\beta = .10$, S.E. = .11, $p > .05$; 95% CI [-.01, .38]) were not. The model tested explained 72% of the variance in problematic mukbang watching (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Final model of the significant path coefficients among variables.



For clarity the covariate between independent variables is not depicted in the figure. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Discussion

The present study found that social presence (but not spatial presence and escapism) was positively related to problematic mukbang watching. Social and eating gratifications have been previously reported as strong motivators for watching mukbang videos (Kircaburun et al., 2020b). However, the results of the present study suggest that obtaining a feeling of social presence by watching a mukbang was a stronger predictor of problematic mukbang watching than using mukbang videos as an escape from real life troubles or experiencing the feeling of virtual eating by

fantasizing about eating food while watching a mukbang. Even though the viewers do not know each other, they sense the presence of other viewers via the chat screen or feedback and likes (Bruno & Chung, 2017). These tools that enable social interaction for the viewers provide a sense of social presence while watching mukbangs on social media platforms. According to these findings, social presence should be taken into account when considering elevated problematic mukbang watching.

Spatial presence can also be obtained while watching mukbang because viewers can fantasize about eating the food that is being eaten in mukbang videos and satisfy their physical and sentimental hunger (Hong & Park, 2018). However, despite the moderate correlation of spatial presence with problematic mukbang watching in the correlation analysis, the present results indicated that mitigating loneliness by feeling higher presence of others while watching mukbang was a stronger predictor of problematic mukbang watching than vicarious eating. Finally, escapism was also one of the strong correlates of problematic mukbang watching but it was not significantly related to it in the model when included into the equation with other variables. This is consistent with the existing evidence that suggest that individuals watch mukbangs to obtain social and eating gratifications more than to avoid real life social and emotional problems. However, further investigation is needed to reach any conclusion, given that the successful attempts to escape from unpleasant reality is one of the main reasons that transforms recreational online activity use into problematic (i.e., addictive) online behavior (Savci & Griffiths, 2019).

Limitations

The main limitation of the study was the small sample size that comprised only university students. The present results should be tested and replicated using more diverse study groups and cohorts. Second, the sample consisted only those who watched a mukbang as little as once in the past year. Future studies should include participants who watch mukbang almost every day to have a more regular and frequent mukbang watching study group. Finally, future studies should adopt more in-depth methodologies (e.g., qualitative design) to obtain deeper insights concerning the relationships investigated here.

Conclusions

Despite its limitations, this study is one of very few existing empirical studies that has investigated problematic mukbang watching and its determinants. It appears that having a feeling of social presence is an important factor that promotes problematic mukbang watching. Social vulnerabilities that may be associated with more problematic watching of mukbang should be taken into account in order to understand this emerging problem behavior. Further empirical research is needed to investigate the motivational and psychological correlates and mental and physical health consequences of problematic mukbang watching.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval for the study was received from the research team's university's ethics committee, and complied with the Declaration of Helsinki (Approval number = 2019/7).

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

Availability of data and materials

Data will be made available upon reasonable request.

Funding source

None.

Authors' contributions

All authors significantly contributed to the preparation of this manuscript.

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