

The Review of Mokbang (Broadcast Eating) Phenomena and Its Relations with South Korean Culture and Society

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Abstract

This research paper focuses on how the South Korean culture and society plays a major role in not just in the personal lives of the Koreans but in the business sector too. By understanding the South Korean culture, it gives us an idea and understanding of why such a phenomena, like Mokbong (broadcast eating), has become such a popular trend in South Korea. This paper discusses and reviews the major characteristics of Korean culture, such as Kibun, Inhwa, influences of Confucianism and the power hierarchy, which influences the Korean businesses today (locally and internationally). Through these characteristics and the factors of the past and present day in Korean society and culture they had helped contribute to the success of Mokbong.

Keywords: Korean Culture, Business, Society, Mokbang, Factors of Success.

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Introduction

Makbong is the new current phenomena happening in South Korea whereby people pay other people to watch them eat online. This is not surprising since it is coming from South Korea. In fact, South Korea continues to become a global case study for economic

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development. Known as the “Miracle on the Han,” South Korea’s record-breaking development went from becoming one of the world’s poorest states to a global economic power with per capita GDP of \$30,000 (in purchasing power parity terms) (McKinsey, 2013). And behind all of this achievement comes from the unique and powerful influence of the South Korean culture. The South Korean culture plays a major role in not only the business world but in the personal lives as well (Lee, 2012). With its unique characteristics it helps aid in the understanding of why such business like Makbong has become increasingly popular within the South Korean society and furthermore, how Mokbang itself can influence the society where their culture heavily evolves around “success at any cost,” can influence them in a positive way.

Major characteristics of Korean culture for Business Practices in Korea

The characteristics of Korean culture includes: Kibun, Inhwa, influences of Confucianism and power hierarchy. Each with its own unique definition, they all play a major role in shaping the Korean business world. These characters are not usually the type of “features” used and practiced in the western world. Thus by knowing and understanding the difference of such characteristics will allow foreigners to have an idea about the Korean business background which would then help in partnering current or future businesses with the Koreans.

Kibun

The first key characteristic of South Korean business culture is Kibun. It is considered to be one of the major key characteristics of the Korean culture. This word has no literal English meaning to it. Kibun simply means emotion, mood or feeling of sense of balance and having good behavior and attitude which pretty much influences the way Korea runs their businesses (Chaney and Martin, 2011).

In South Korea, many people share the same viewpoint of trying to balance Kibun in both their personal life and business world. And it is not just about their Kibun but others aswell. To them, they believe that it is impolite to disturb other people's Kibun. The Korean culture is a type of culture where individuals cannot be selfish enough to think about themselves. They have to think about others. When doing something, they must respect or keep in mind of other people's feelings and opinions and often avoid saying "no" or bad news, to stop hurting other's Kibun. By doing so it creates a harmony. Thus Kibun is very important, especially in the business world (Southerton, 2008).

In the business word, the Koreans will always try their best to be friendly, polite and do things with only the best of intentions. However, the one thing that Koreans dislike is to criticize them in public (Southerton, 2008). For example, a manager's Kibun is damaged if his subordinates do not show him enough respect. A subordinate's Kibun however, is damaged if his or her manager criticizes his or her in public. And so because of this, Koreans would mostly show their different opinions through positive answers. Kibun is easily identified and understood between Koreans, for foreigners however it may be confusing and hard for them (Lee, 2012). Kibun is all about non-verbal, body languages and tone, which is called Nunchi. Nunchi can be translated to “eye measure”.

It simply means, the ability to know a person's Kibun through eye contact (Southerton, 2008).

Inhwa

Another key principle of South Korean business culture is *Inhwa*, which means harmony. As a collectivist society, harmony is an important component in encouraging and maintaining harmony in South Korea. *Inhwa* was influenced from Confucian beliefs, and it emphasizes a lot on harmony between people, especially unequals. Most often, Koreans like to deliver positive responses and try their best to avoid or hesitate to give direct refusals. They do not wish to hurt the well-balanced harmonious environment by giving negative answers or refusing others to cause face losing (Alston, 1989).

Inhwa can be seen mostly in unequal rank, status and power. In the business world, this term heavily involves the subordinates to be loyal to their superiors and in return, the superiors must take care of the well-being of the subordinates (Alston, 1989). In South Korea, the people believe that a person owes complete and total loyalty to parents, elders, organizational leaders, notably rulers etc. Hence, in the workplace, the workers also feel they owe the same loyalty to their employers and supervisors the same way as their parents and family elders. In the business world, Koreans express their respect and appreciation to their employers and supervisors, and normally avoid problems as much as they can whenever they have different judgments. By obeying the employers' and supervisors' orders, the workers are showing their loyalty and in return, their employers' and supervisors' are usually concerned about their workers' wellbeing. Neither party would want to do anything that could cause them to lose each other's face (Lee, 2012).

However, there is no such idea like *Inhwa* in other countries. For example in the United States, the people believe they have the full right and freedom to express their opinions and feelings to others, this including their employers and supervisors. To them, everyone is equal and have the freedom to share their opinions in the work place. And in return, the supervisors or managers do not take these opinions as a challenge or offence but they respect the employee's (subordinates) opinions (Lee, 2012).

Another feature of *Inhwa* is the responsibility to support others and make them happy. The later concept is consistent with *Kibun*, which means feelings. As mentioned earlier, Koreans do not like to hear bad news. They would wait until late afternoon to deliver the bad news so that the other individual's day will not be ruined (Alston, 1989). Thus by identifying and understanding the aspects of *Inhwa*, foreign countries such as the U.S. will want to avoid notifying bad news to Koreans or Korean companies until late afternoon. And if the Koreans do have to give out bad news, they do so indirectly; which is why foreign companies need to be able to carefully read/listen in order to get the hidden meanings (Lee, 2012).

Power Distance and Hierarchy in South Korea

South Korea is a country that follows high power distance and hierarchy. Usually, the eldest/senior starts activities such as greeting and eating and most often the lower status individuals would bow to the superiors /elders(Cho and Yoon, 2001; Lee, Brett and Park,

2012). Like other traditional societies, for example, those in higher positions are expected to seat in the center and always get their food arrived first. Youngers or juniors will show their respect by serving them. In South Korea, individuals do not call each other after their first name. This is not only found in business, home areas but also in school. In school the freshmen and sophomores show respect to their juniors and seniors by calling them brothers/sisters and obey their orders. And in return, the juniors and seniors would take care of the freshmen and sophomores (Lee, Brett and Park, 2012).

According to the Geert Hofstede Cultural Dimensions, when comparing United States to South Korea, South Korea has a higher Power Distance Index with a score of 64 (Chaney and Martin, 2011; Sama and Papamarcos, 2000). Based on this study, the South Korean society has a higher level of inequality. This explains why when many foreigners visit Korea the first time, they would often get surprised that most Koreans bow to others, especially elders, and that younger people would have to wait until the elders or the higher positioned people get their food first (Lee, Brett and Park, 2012).

In the business world, besides the way of name addressing, negotiations with Koreans also indicate power distance. For example, senior Korean officials will not feel comfortable whenever a junior member of an American negotiating team will try to make deals with them; no matter how much of an expert he or she is. Koreans are very sensitive when it comes to status and titles (Alston 1989). Thus if Americans wish to make deals with senior Koreans, they must be aware of the higher power distance and show respect by sending the right officials to make deals (Chen, 2004).

Korean Confucianism and Collectivism

Confucianism had influenced both the personal lives and business world in South Korea to a high extent. Kung Fu-Tzu, or also known as Confucius, lived in China around 500 BC. He was a teacher who taught his students a system of order when China went through a difficult time (Kim, 2009; Smyth, Wang and Hwee, 2000). He came up with five moral disciplines in order to oversee the five human relationships: (1) There should be justice and righteousness between dominant and subject; (2) There should be proper father-son relationship (3) Separation of function between husband and wife; (4) The younger should give priority to the elder; and (5) Faith and trust should control over relationships between friends (Kim, 2009; Smyth, Wang and Hwee, 2000). In short, the five disciplines display or represent the five relationships between ruler and subject, parents and children, husband and wife, brothers and sisters, and friend and friend. Confucianism emphasized the importance of responsibility, loyalty, honor, family loving, respect for age and seniority, and sincerity (Cho and Yoon, 2001; Von Gilnow, Huo & Lowe, 1999).

Confucianism influences the South Korean society in many different ways in terms of status, relationships with others, social contacts, etc. For example, Korean status is controlled and determined by age, gender, wealth, profession, education, family background, and political system. Social links determine success. Family and backgrounds are important as they determine how people are treated in the hierarchical society (Chaney and Martin, 2011). South Koreans are very friendly, and their culture has a strong importance on group bonds. An individual is expected to reflect the values and

benefits for the entire group/community in which he/she belongs to (Lee, Brett and Park, 2012).

As a collectivist society, the Korean society and many other Asian countries, compels people to harmoniously as a “family”. Consistent with the idea of Kibun, people are not encouraged to embarrass or humiliate others or causing others to lose face in public. People are also expected to not disturb other people’s Kibun by considering the “family” as a whole. To put it simply, South Koreans are normally more group-oriented and collectivist (Lee, 2012).

What is Mokbang? (Gastronomic Voyeurism)

In increasingly virtual South Korea, the latest and newest trend is watching someone eat online. This is called “mok-bang” in Korean, which means “eating broadcasts”. Hosts would broadcast themselves live while eating incredibly huge servings of food while chatting and socializing away with their viewers (Cha, 2014).

Some of the famous “mokbang stars” are The Diva and Chef King Biryong. Even though all they do is eat, however they attract different types of people for similar but somewhat different reasons.

Mokbang Artist: The Diva

The queen of this particular phenomenon is a pretty 33-year-old woman named Park Seo Yeon, also known as The Diva. Every evening around 8P.M, thousands of viewers tune in to watch The Diva eat large portions of food for hours (4 to 6). She can finish four large pizzas or 3kg of beef in one sitting easily. After she finishes eating, she would spend another 2 to 3 hours just chatting away with her fans through live stream chat rooms. Her fans would show their appreciation by sending her virtual money that can be cashed in later. For Park, online eating is not just a hobby but it is her source of income. She can simply make up to \$9300 a month from her live broadcast alone (Cha, 2014).

Confessions of Park: “My fans tell me that they really love watching me eat because I do so with so much gusto and make everything look so delicious. A lot of my viewers are on diets and they say they live vicariously through me, or they are hospital patients who only have access to hospital food so they also watch my broadcasts to see me eat. Loneliness is another crucial factor. The show is addictive as you can communicate with thousands of people at home. One of the best comments I ever received from a viewer who said that she had gotten over her anorexia by watching me eat. That really meant a lot to me.”

Some of the Park's biggest fans are women. She cooks about one third of the food she eats, and the rest are all delivered. She received a lot of sponsorships from many restaurants but she only features the food she likes and wants to share (Cha, 2014).

Afreeca TV, which is the public social networking site that hosts her channel, allows user to buy and send virtual “star balloons”, which can be monetized after the site takes a 30-40% charge. The payments done by viewers are purely voluntary since all channels

can be watched for free. However the service is limited to South Korea, although the company does plan on expanding to other countries (Cha, 2014).

Mokbang Artist: Chef King Biryong

Every night at 10 P.M., thousands of Koreans tune in to watch Choi Ji-hwan, also known as Chef King Boryong, eating on streaming video. The 24 years old Choi, offers cooking lessons and then for his main online act, he would eat in a wild, funny way to show how much he enjoys a good meal (Kwaak, 2014).

For his show, Choi is normally dressed in army training outfits and battle fatigues. He decorated his kitchen counter with toy semiautomatic rifles. He shows off his trademark camouflage hat with earflaps pointed up as he goes around the kitchen explaining how to make certain meals that is being served in South Korean mess halls. And because his show displayed an army theme, his viewers are able to connect with him in an emotional way and bring back nostalgic memories because many South Korean men have to serve the country's two-year service requirement. Doing this live broadcast, Choi feels an emotional bond with his viewers. According to one dieter, she told him she felt a bubble of excitement watching him eat; another viewer, living alone, said he likes eating with Choi (Kwaak, 2014).

Why is Mokbang So Popular?

Increase in single households leads to Loneliness

The current day independent soul is often recognized as a “singleton,” a one-person householder who either voluntarily or involuntarily chooses to stop living in the comforts or discomforts of family life. These singletons include senior citizens without their spouses, lonely divorcees in their 40s or 50s, and young job hunters living alone (Hunny, Sung-Woo, 2013).

This trend is commonly seen in the United States whereby 27% of households have a single occupant. In Sweden, more than 2 million people are solo occupants. And in Japan over 30% are single occupants (Hunny, Sung-Woo, 2013).

According to Lee Sang Lim of the Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs, Korea has a record of 23.89% of its people living under a one-person residence. 23.8% of men and 18.9% of women at the ages of 20s will stay single until 45 if the current trends still continue (Hunny, Sung-Woo, 2013).

“If the marriage rate of 2010 persists, one in four or five men and one in five or six women who are now in their 20s are expected to stay single,” said Lee.

A July study conducted by Lee Eun Mi of the Samsung Economic Research Institute further showed that “the growth rate of the number of Korean one-person households is the fastest on the planet,” while by in the year 2035, more than 7 million households in Korea will be one-person homes (Hunny, Sung-Woo, 2013).

Fundamental social changes that shook traditional Korean Confucian values have also added to the rise in solo dwellers. For example, marriage is losing its “value” and status as a required and crucial custom among Koreans, especially to women. In 2010, 39.4% of Seoul women believed they didn’t have to get married while 41.8% believed divorce is no longer a negative thing in the Korean society. In the same year, 34% of Koreans over the age of 15 responded that they were either uninterested in marriage or were against it according to the national survey managed by Statistics Korea (Hunny, Sung-Woo, 2013).

As a result fewer marriages mean fewer babies, which thus contribute to an extremely low birth rate. Currently, Korea’s fertility rate stands at 1.3, although is a slight improvement from 2005 where it stood at 1.076 it is still considered low. A declining birth rate would stress pension funds, which means younger generations “have” to pay taxes, and not just that there will be a shortage in manpower in both private and public sector, and even the military (Hunny, Sung-Woo, 2013).

Due to the high percentage of one person households, loneliness arises. By watching someone eat online is one of the way to deal with single-person’s loneliness in South Korea. They do not want to eat alone. They want to ease that sense of “alienation”. While they are watching these shows, they feel “emotionally” connected (Park, 2014).

Stress

According to a new study conducted by McKinsey, South Koreans are extremely stressed. Most of them are from the middle class. And over half of the families spend more than they earn. One of the major reasons why this happens is because of expensive home loans and private education. Parents would race to make sure their children will have better or the best opportunities for their future (Rovnick, 2013).

South Korea has the highest suicide rate amongst all OECD nations. Its divorce rate has also soared, and the fertility rate has fallen to the lowest. All of these symptoms are caused by stress (McKinsey, 2013).

Depression and suicide is said to have come from parents’ obsessions with money and social position, which harms the mental health of young people who do not score respected jobs. Declining of fertility occurs because of high costs of living and children’s education. Internet addiction is also a common escape from these stresses but at the same thing it causes its own problems such as malnutrition since gamers often forget to eat and it also causes social isolation (Rovnick, 2013).

By watching someone eat can efficiently help the Koreans relieve stress from their whole fast-paced and hyper-competitive life style. Korean society has been said that it is a culture of “success at any cost,” and because of this it places huge pressure to many Koreans. Students, for example, are stressed from demanding school life and young Koreans are pressured from hectic work life. By watching someone eat, it can be argued that Koreans are experiencing a vicarious pleasure (Park, 2014).

Cooking and the Belief that Food and Medicine Are the same

Deep within the root of Korean cooking is the idea that food has medicinal properties. Koreans know there are medicinal properties in a range and mixture of foods and drinks such as fruits, seasonings and spices, mineral water and liquors. This strong belief has both positive and negative effects due to the natural powers of yin and yang, and the five elements of wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. This belief had long been introduced and spread even before Confucianism took place (Chon, 2002).

Humans are products of nature. It is important that individuals take in as much and rely on the blessings of nature as they can. Positive and negative is understood by the workings of the five elements. Within this belief, health is achieved by consuming natural green-, red-, yellow-, white-, and black-colored, which are represented by the 5 elements, ingredients in equal amounts in the diet. The expression of these beliefs in cooking can still be seen in the modern Korean lifestyle (Chon, 2002).

A common dish in where all 5 elements can be represented is the pipinpapu or mixed rice. It is often served at yakiniku restaurants, where it is called korutounpan, which consists of meat, fish, and vegetables cooked and served on top of rice. In short, healthy cooking means that with each meal all gifts of nature must be included. Another popular dish in Korea is called kujorupan. It is known as a royal dish of the Choson Dynasty in which 9 separate ingredients are presented (Chon, 2002).

Compared to the Japanese style of cooking, the Korean style cooking uses a lot more vegetables, and the dishes are prepared in a much larger quantity. By using vegetables, it helps meet the traditional requirements of including ingredients of the five elemental colors. A type of dressing or sauce, known as namuru, is made up of sesame oil. Using sesame oil for dressings and sauces has its roots in the pre-Confucian era of Buddhist influence. Initially eating meat was strictly forbidden by Buddhist teachings, thus the reason why sesame oil was widely used was to make up for the nutrients missing in their strict vegetarian diet. Sesame oil is very common ingredient in most Korean dishes today. It is thought that the use of sesame oil has been carried forward from the days of Buddhist influence. Sesame oil is an essential and important ingredient in the creation of Korea's delicious and healthy cooking (Chon, 2002).

Most often, it is normal to see housewives saying "Oh! This dish is so good for you," or "This dish is good for your eyes and bones,". Such comments are not based on the belief of positive and negative influences of the five natural elements, but rather, they are based on knowledge that has been known and passed down from generations to generations. As a conclusion, the belief in the powers of yin and yang, and wood, fire, earth, metal, and water has become a simple way of life that runs in the Korean's daily lives. (Chon, 2002).

Advanced Technology and Fast Speed Internet

South Korea is considered to be one of the most connected and wired countries and it also has the most penetrated broadband markets in the world. By the year 2010, more than 81 percent of Korean citizens are able to connect and access the Internet (International Telecommunication Union, 2009). Furthermore more than 16 million people had subscribed to broadband service (Korea Internet and Security Agency, 2010).

Following heavy investment in broadband groundwork after the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s, South Korea now permits its citizens with a national network that carries data at an average speed of 17 Mbps, which is considered to be one of the highest in the world (Allen, 2010). The South Korean capital Seoul has been named “the bandwidth capital of the world”, due to its fast yet inexpensive broadband service (Hertz, 2010). Other than Seoul, major cities in South Korea also provide wireless broadband through Wibro and High-Speed Downlink Packet Access technologies. Thus as a result of this wide coverage, over three-quarters of South Koreans use the Internet more than once per day (National Internet Development Agency of Korea, 2008).

Due to the hyper-fast internet speed, it makes it possible for viewers in Korea to interact with the Mokbang shows. These shows are streamed live, so in a way this is not one-way, but rather mutual. It is said that Mokbang hosts and viewers are “emotionally” connected to each other. Thus this explains why the hosts tell stories while they are eating and cooking. Viewers can also share their stories as well. This kind of emotional connection might also be the reason why there is a high number of smartphone users in the country. It is said that Korea is considered to have one of the highest smartphone users with a penetration rate of over 70% in 2014 (Park, 2014).

Discussion

Every now and then we would hear something crazy or unique happening in South Korea. This happens due to the rewards of the society and culture of Korea. It is not surprising when something like the business Mokbong came out of the blue. By going into depth and understanding the real concept and characteristics of the South Korean culture, it gives a clear and an easier understanding of how such things can happen and why it happens.

The characteristics of Korean culture in business are Kibun, Inhwa, power distance and hierarchy, and Confucianism. Kibun simply means emotion, mood or feeling of sense of balance and having good behaviour and attitude that very much influences the way Korea runs their businesses and their personal lives (Chaney and Martin, 2011). This can be seen in Mokbong. The way the hosts and viewers connect, they have some sort of an emotional connection where they tell each other stories or talk about how good and delicious the food is. Since Koreans think that cooking and eating is like a medicine for them, this gave the people the mindset or concept that just by eating or looking at other people eat can help relieve your stress, pain or illness. Inhwa means harmony. Living together in harmony as one society is very important. In fact, everyone is encouraged to maintain such harmonious lifestyle; even if it means ignoring the negative things such as bad news, bad comments to one another etc. As for Mokbong, there will always be positive vibes going around. Everyone will enjoy talking to one another and eating together. Positive comments such as how delicious the food is, or how healthy it is to eat this type of food or how funny the host is or how pretty the host is, will be flying around the chat room. Confucianism has a big impact on South Korea. For example, the way people live, the way they eat, what they eat, how to get along with friends, family and someone older or powerful than them, are just some of the few examples where Confucianism play a major role in the South Korean society.

Mokbong is popular due to four main reasons: increase in one person household, stress, the belief that food and medicine are the same and lastly advanced technology. The increase in one person household leads to people to experience loneliness. According to Professor Sun-Hee Park of Ewha University's Division of Media Studies, she believes that for Koreans, eating is a very social and communal activity; which is why even the Korean word "family" means "those who eat together". Hence, Mokbong helps those lonely individuals to ease their discomfort by chatting away and eating and having a good time. Stress is another factor that makes Mokbong so popular. Due to the hectic lives of Koreans, eating is a way for them to help deal with stress. Also, the belief that food is medicine is also implied here. Korean food includes a lot of healthy ingredients. Unlike other Asian countries, Koreans consume a lot of vegetable. The reason is because of Confucianism. By representing the 5 elements (earth, water, fire, wood and metal) in a dish, health is achieved and since vegetables come in varies of different colors, Koreans consume more vegetables. Lastly, advanced technology and high speed internet access allows everyone to be connected with everyone. Since Mokbong shows are live, people can watch the shows without difficulty thanks to the fast internet.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, we must not take anyone's culture for granted. It is not something to be neglected or ignored. It is something very precious which people hold very close to. Unlike countries like The United States, South Korea strongly runs their personal and business lives based on their culture. From the way they eat, to the way they interact with one another etc., are all deeply rooted within the Korean culture. Culture and society explains why certain people behave the way they are and further explains why. In this case, Mokbong became popular due to the South Korean culture today. Even though some of the characteristics have changed from before and now, however, the Korean culture is still strongly rooted within the society and it still controls everyone's daily activities and lives.

Mokbong is not just about business. It is something much more than that. It focuses on how much the Korean culture has a big impact on Koreans today. As mentioned earlier, the South Korean culture and society has evolved in such a way due to today's changes. Such examples include marriage where before Koreans would pay a lot of attention towards unmarried women and would look down upon those who are divorced. Now, however, the Koreans don't pay much attention to marriage. In fact, they are not in a hurry at all to the point that the country's fertility rate had gone considerably low; below average.

Mokbang has helped improved the lives of some Koreans positively. Because of the high percentage of people living individually, they would usually eat alone. Koreans hate eating alone. To them, they believe that eating is a way of connecting and bringing back people and memories together. Thus, the idea of Mokbang came about. Everyday thousands of lonely individuals would watch Mokbang hosts eat while chatting with them. This brings happiness and pleasure to them. In fact, this is actually a great method to also help those with eating disorders such as anorexia. By watching the famous The Diva consuming a lot of food, anorexic individuals feel they can feel beautiful and enjoy good food at the same time.

This research on Korean culture and business such as Mokbang can help aid a lot in further research related to South Korea. Since Mokbang is still a new topic, more and better research can be conducted in order to help solve some of the crisis and problems in South Korea. The more we understand about a country's culture and society (past, present, and future), the more we know how to progress and solve problems and future problems. Up until now, Mokbang can be seen as a positive point. But what happens when everyone eats too much? Or what happens when everyone is on the internet 24/7? Will Mokbang bring new problems to the Korean Society? And can the same popularity of Mokbnag in South Korea be just as popular in other parts of the world? Or is Mokbang really just a Korean "thing"? These are few questions which future researchers might want to focus on.

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