The Making of Microcelebrity: AfreecaTV and the Younger Generation in Neoliberal South Korea

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Abstract

This article follows a recent thread of work on microcelebrity on social media and examines live streaming broadcasting jockeys (BJs) on AfreecaTV and their self-branding strategies in the South Korean context. As the nature of media platform influences self-branding tactics of microcelebrity, this article focuses on analyzing the text of popular live streaming and the chats among the viewers and BJs. Using the framework of authenticity, I argue that popular microcelebrities of AfreecaTV present a self-branding tactic of staged personae that are often exaggerated and aggressive rather than presenting self as intimate and ordinary figures who interact immediately with their fans. Staged personae are presented in conjunction with the viewer as the aggressive interaction in the chat rooms between the BJ and the audience strengthens exaggeration and aggressiveness. In the context of neoliberal self-care, I also argue that the making of microcelebrity on AfreecaTV is distinctly shaped by the larger generational culture of jingyŏ. The focus on unproductive work, idleness, and momentary entertainment among BJs and the viewer represents their rejection to neoliberal self-care, which has long been a key tool of personal success and prosperity in the context of neoliberal Korea.

Keywords
microcelebrity, live streaming, South Korea, neoliberalism, AfreecaTV

Live streaming platforms such as Twitch.tv, Facebook Live, and Periscope have become as popular as smartphones, making it easier for people to film anything and post it online. In the South Korean (hereafter Korean) context, AfreecaTV has been one of the most popular platforms for the live streaming of playing games, cooking, eating, and putting on make-up since 2006 (I. Kim, 2012; S.-j. Park, 2017). AfreecaTV, short for Any FREE broadCAsting, initially started as a service to retransmit TV channels but became popular as a peer-to-peer video streaming platform. The viewer can watch an individual broadcasting jockey’s (BJ) channel on one’s mobile phone or computer and interact with the BJ in the live chat. The average number of visitors in 2009 was 0.5 million, which increased to 3.5 million in 2014 and 8 million in 2015 (S. Lee, 2015; S. Park, 2014). In terms of content creators, there were 350,000 BJs streaming on the platform in 2014 (S. Park, 2014).

The majority of AfreecaTV’s audience is the younger generation—from teenagers to 20+ years. News articles repeatedly report that AfreecaTV and YouTube are the top two video platforms that such young Koreans search and visit the most (Hwang, 2016; D. Lee, 2017; S.-j. Park, 2017). Out of the teenage population, almost 30% watch live streaming videos (Korea Press Foundation, 2016). They often dive into live streaming platforms to find a new type of fun—to relieve stress, relax, or escape from their responsibilities and daily lives (D. Park, 2017).

With such popularity, BJs enjoy an elevated social status presented through the measures of fame and money similar to that of a media celebrity. The term microcelebrity explains how popular users present their everyday lives online (Senft, 2013). Recent discussions of microcelebrity (García-Rapp & Roca-Cuberes, 2017; Jerslev, 2016; Marwick, 2015a, 2015b) specifically focus on various social media platforms and how each platform affects different self-branding strategies. In the Korean context, Donnar (2017) examines microcelebrity in a specific genre of mŏkpang (eating show). Bruno and Chung (2017) similarly focus on mŏkpang BJs and how they present authenticity, emphasizing the economies of AfreecaTV and YouTube. Although self-presentation skills...
are an effort to distinguish oneself from others, they are also influenced by the media platform’s structure and culture, as well as the users’ culture and their desires. There is no scholarship that examines the self-presentation practices of microcelebrities and how their interactions with viewers influence BJs’ self-branding in the Korean context. Thus, the purpose of this article is to study how and why BJs and viewers of AfreecaTV construct the characters of BJs in certain ways. In addition, I take into account Korea’s neoliberal economy and culture, the unique culture of young Koreans, and the economic sponsorship structure of AfreecaTV to explore the relationship between BJs and viewers and the larger youth culture in neoliberal Korea.

In doing so, this article uses the framework of authenticity in relation to the changing meanings of neoliberal self-care—from a necessary tool of self-improvement for individual success to an unavailing effort with no guarantee of favorable outcomes. I examine how AfreecaTV BJs achieve and maintain their fame and money and balance acts with viewers in strengthening the brand. Although authenticity remains an important element of BJs’ self-presentation, the meanings of authenticity differ from microcelebrities on other social media platforms. In their attempts to present consistent characters while balancing the multiple facets of personae, I contend that many BJs create and play distinctly staged characters that do not follow positive aspirations, unlike those of Instagram, Facebook, or YouTube in the North American context. These personae change over time with their audience’s demand and reaction through what I call the play culture of antagonism. I argue that microcelebrities’ self-branding skills are a good representation of younger Koreans’ generational culture as distinct characteristics that explain their distrust toward neoliberal self-care in the Korean context.

**Self-Branding Through Authenticity**

Coined by Senft (2008), the idea of microcelebrity refers to the presentation and branding of self online (Jerslev, 2016; Marwick, 2013a, 2013b, 2015a, 2015b; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Senft, 2008, 2013). Social media encourages users to share and allow constant access to their daily lives, with success being defined by metrics including the number of followers, viewers, or likes. Microcelebrity creates a constant stream of attention and competition for the biggest audience, which ultimately leads to an elevated status among users (Senft, 2013).

There are a number of strategies which microcelebrities on social media implement to seek attention and achieve their celebrity status. Although in different terms, scholars such as Marwick (2015a, 2015b), Jerslev (2016), and García-Rapp and Roca-Cuberes (2017) contend that immediacy, intimacy, and ordinariness are important qualities of authenticity, one of microcelebrities’ most important self-presentation strategies. Immediacy means being constantly available and allowing the audience access (Jerslev, 2016). Intimacy can be discussed in terms of disclosing private information and staying connected with the audience (García-Rapp & Roca-Cuberes, 2017; Jerslev, 2016). Together, an instant interaction with fans is important in achieving microcelebrity’s fame and popularity (Marwick, 2013b). In the case of AfreecaTV, this interaction between fans and BJs lets some viewers construct a community in which they share and fulfill emotional needs (K. Choi, 2015; Jang & Kim, 2016). For instance, mŏkpang would lessen the feeling of loneliness or heighten vicarious pleasure for the viewer (K. Choi, 2015). The BJ makes an effort to connect with the viewers via live interaction, from which the viewers grow fond of the BJ and become fans. Some microcelebrities disclose their private information to further build a sense of intimacy. Presenting oneself to be an ordinary, everyday person also allows microcelebrities to establish trust by being honest with viewers (García-Rapp & Roca-Cuberes, 2017). As such, online performance of celebrity relies on constant access and presence, as well as the treatment of followers (Marwick, 2013b).

However, authenticity in this context means, through the elements of ordinariness and intimacy, portraying oneself as a real person, not a staged character. But to be authentic does not necessarily rely on whether one presents one’s real life. Rather it means maintaining a consistent character, carefully controlled and played by the user. How microcelebrity presents a persona is known as creating an “edited self” (Marwick, 2013b). The term persona in the context of social media describes how celebrities present their public identities through strategic enactment that a network of connected people can influence (Marshall, Moore, & Barbour, 2015). Only a snippet of a microcelebrity’s life and personality—often shown in a positive light—make it onto his or her social media. The ideology that stands behind this selective exposure of self and creation of persona is distinctly neoliberal and capitalistic—finding self-fulfillment while succeeding economically via presenting a self-motivated, positive, and knowledgeable individual on social media. In this sense, self-presentation is business; one has to develop and maintain an edited self with an entrepreneur’s mind-set (Marwick, 2013b). As one markets a sellable image, self-presentation often follows one’s aspirations in life such as high economic, cultural, and social capital, which directly relate to their status (Marwick, 2015a). Becoming role models for their viewers, some microcelebrities perform positive social interactions with the viewer and reveal enough personal information to stay authentic while being carefully edited (Marwick, 2013b). This interaction with fans is important to microcelebrities in creating their images.

Conversely, there are microcelebrities who become famous due to their excessive or bizarre behaviors or comments. Donnar (2017) examines how women mŏkpang BJs become microcelebrities by subverting gender ideology. They display their bodies as something inappropriate rather than ideal by eating a lot, which is not lady-like. The large
amount of food that they consume is more like watching a circus performance than learning everyday tips. Microcelebrities who become famous through presenting an eccentric, excessive, and aggressive character make up a large number of cases on AfreecaTV.

**Internet Culture of the Youth: Yingyŏ and Monster of Capitalism**

According to Marwick (2015a, 2015b), microcelebrity’s different practices depend on two factors: social and cultural contexts from which microcelebrity operates and media platforms’ different characteristics. For AfreecaTV, the distinct Internet subcultures of young Koreans affect microcelebrities’ self-branding practices. The idea of yingyŏ is an important facet of Korean youth’s Internet culture. The governmental promotion of and financial support for the IT industry from the 1990s led to high reliance on the Net, stronger intimacy, and emotional support from online communities than that of offline and a very large subculture of satire toward the mainstream culture (H. Lee, 2010). The idea of yingyŏ—which started out as a form of online play culture—began to permeate youth culture. The dictionary meaning of yingyŏ is surplus (“yingyŏ,” 2018). But its vernacular use refers to a person who has nothing to do or no desire to do anything. Often, the word is used as a means of self-ridicule. It represents a social misfit who might be passionate about something that others disdain or is not interested in living an economically, socially, and culturally meaningful life. As the use of the word became more playful, the notion of yingyŏ describes any activities that do not carry productive outcomes or meanings but nonetheless have entertainment value for killing time, procrastination, or genuine enjoyment. The battle of French fries, which became an online phenomenon between Japanese and Korean teenagers in 2013, is a great example of yingyŏ activity (Y. Kim, 2013). When a Japanese fast-food chain put up a discount for French fries, teenagers uploaded a video stacking French fries on a table and eating them. Korean teenagers soon challenged the Japanese to do it more excessively. People questioned the practicality of this exchange and commented that it was unnecessary, but they nonetheless showed much interest.

This yingyŏ culture aligns with the characteristics of the NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) generation (Hong & Park, 2016). This generation is in their mid- to late 20s and are not members of educational institutions or workplaces—people deemed as productive workers of the future or the present (Hong & Park, 2016). Their unfortunate status stems from economic and social difficulties—the declining number and instability of full-time jobs in a mature neoliberal economy, accompanied by low birth rate, decreased marriage rates, and less upward mobility. In May 2018, Statistics Korea announced that the youth unemployment rate has reached a record high of 10.5% (Kwon, 2018). Similarly, the marriage rate, as May 2018, is a record low with 25,000 such cases, a decline of 7.1% since 2017, and the birth rate is 278,900—a decline of 7.9% since 2017 (Han, 2018). As Korean society does not always provide productive opportunities for its younger generation, a subculture such as yingyŏ comes up to the surface as neoliberal reality. The alternate online world allows the younger generation to actually avoid the self-defeating narrative of neoliberalism (Hong & Park, 2016). Popular cartoons such as the Lee Malmvön series represent the younger generation’s heavily codified humor in a scribbling drawing style and an unprofessional tone, which are characteristics of yingyŏ culture (S.-h. Kim, 2011).

Another major Internet-specific subculture in the context of AfreecaTV is the idea of the monster of capitalism (S. Kim, 2017). It is a self-deprecating joke that the users—both BJs and the viewer alike—use to describe themselves. The term monster is a playful joke that refers to users maintaining relationships with each other through slanderous curse words and acts as insiders (S. Kim, 2017). The term is also useful in explaining the economy of AfreecaTV. According to its website, AfreecaTV distinguishes its BJs into three levels: Partner as the highest level, Best as the next highest, and General as the lowest. The higher the level, the more perks from AfreecaTV, such as better opportunities for advertisements and sponsors and better income for the BJs. During live streaming, the viewer can send a BJ pyŏlp’ungsŏn (star balloons) of which one purchases from the website and gives to a BJ as a gift. This digital currency of AfreecaTV costs about US$0.10 each to purchase for the viewer and is cashable for the BJ when accumulated for more than 1,000, each exchanged for US$0.06 to 0.08 (S. Lee, 2018). This means that the platform takes 20%–40% of what viewers give to BJs. Pyŏlp’ungsŏn is a powerful tool that not only functions as the majority of income for BJs but also as AfreecaTV’s revenue. In 2017, Partner BJs made between US$15,000 and US$30,000 from pyŏlp’ungsŏn alone in a month (J. Kim, 2017). In 2017, AfreecaTV’s sales revenue in the third quarter was US$2.2 million, while the sales of pyŏlp’ungsŏn alone during the same period accounted for US$2.1 million (S. Lee, 2018).

This economic importance of pyŏlp’ungsŏn precisely explains the meaning of monster of capitalism. Sooljin Kim (2017), in her study of the interaction between BJs and AfreecaTV’s viewers, explains that the logic of pyŏlp’ungsŏn is seen as an exchange of action between the BJ and the viewer—a BJ would perform a cute reaction if the viewer gave pyŏlp’ungsŏn requests it. Sometimes a BJ engages in excessive and unnecessary actions such as scribbling on his or her own face with a permanent pen or eating 20 raw eggs and a 100 dumplings in a limited amount of time to induce more pyŏlp’ungsŏns from the viewer. The fans scrutinize these eccentric actions and criticize BJs for doing almost everything for money, thus labeling them as monsters of capitalism (S. Kim, 2017). Similarly, viewers fall in the same category as they request that BJs do anything if they provide money.
Both *yingyŏ* culture and monster of capitalism seem to contradict productive activities of neoliberal self-care. The locus of neoliberalism is how market principles extend to all areas of life, especially subjectivity (Elias, Gill, Scharff, & Orbach, 2017). In this culture, life becomes an enterprise bounded by one’s ambition and personal responsibility, forced by market principles (Rose, 1992). Self-care in this context is fulfilling this expectation to become the best self—to learn the best practices of self (Foucault, 1988). Self-care is a process of individualization that requires individuals to make choices toward success or be penalized harshly for personal failure, whether it is rooted in lack of luck, resources, or will (McGuigan, 2014). In a capitalistic state, a status of job and personal economy could mean success in life that the process of self-care brings while other aspirations can include becoming a cosmopolitan individual or moving upward in socioeconomic status with better cultural and social capital. In the Korean context, neoliberal self-care has been a successful way of life since the late 1990s after an economic crisis that led people to focus on preparing themselves to compete with others. This mainly includes an effort to receive the best education, study abroad to acquire foreign language proficiency, and other skills that makes one competitive in a globalized and cosmopolitan neoliberal economy (Y.-k. Cho, 2014). The recent rise of *yingyŏ* culture and the notion of monster of capitalism allude to the younger generation’s changing reality and their feelings toward the idea of neoliberal self-care.

Within these distinct characteristics of the platform and economic and cultural contexts, I examine the ways in which popular BJs use authenticity as a self-branding tactic in the making of their personae to become and/or maintain status as microcelebrities. The interaction between BJs and viewers is also important as it shapes the making of BJs’ characters. In addition, the analysis focuses on how the youth culture of *yingyŏ* and the idea of monster of capitalism influence BJs’ personae and the play culture of BJs and viewers and vice versa. I also probe the ways in which the self-branding of microcelebrities and relevant communication with viewers and BJs interact with the larger neoliberal culture and value of self-care in the Korean context.

In doing so, I have watched nine popular BJs across various genres from March 2017 to January 2018. According to AfreecaTV’s website, the themes of live streaming follow: talk/cam, *mŏkpang*, sports, game, and education. Talk/cam means a BJ talking about anything from their private lives to cultural events and current news. Many BJs in this category are referred as girl or boy cam, as many rely on their looks to draw the viewer in. Sports refer to debriefing and making commentaries on sports games. In the game category, the BJ plays a game with exciting impersonations, detailed explanations, taking requests from the viewer, and role-playing the characters. Educational content offers language lessons, lectures on real estate, investment, or the stock market. As of January 2018, AfreecaTV displays popular BJs’ ranking on its website. This ranking changes every week based on the average number of viewers in a week, the number of viewers who have clicked to become fans of particular BJ, the number of clicks of the UP button (similar to the like button of Facebook), and the number of clicks on the previous videos of BJs that show a snippet of previous live streaming sessions. The nine BJs selected were consistently present on this weekly chart for weeks or months during my observation. The BJs are Chŏlkuhyŏng20 (game, talk/cam), Mbro (*mŏkpang*), Shuki (talk/cam, *mŏkpang*, game), Pŏmp’ŭrik’a (*mŏkpang*, game, talk/cam), Kkottoechi (*mŏkpang*), God. Tŏkhŏng (talk/cam, game), Oechilhye (talk/cam, game), Seya (talk/cam), and Kamsŏt’ŭ (talk, game, and Pŏmp’ŭrik’a are the top two BJs with more than 145,000 fans. Each BJ’s income varies but most Partner BJs earn close to US$900,000 (J. Kim, 2017). Partner BJ Seya’s annual income from AfreecaTV was close to US$891,000 in 2014 (H. Kim, 2016). Most BJs broadcast live four to seven nights a week from 2 to 4 hr. Initially, I selected the nine BJs from the top 10% after purposefully locating their YouTube accounts with recordings of live streaming. This is due to the fast nature of live chat comments, which are hard to capture due to their speed. The frequency of uploads on YouTube is once a day on average as a BJ uploads the whole live streaming session or shorter edited snippets from live streaming from the day before. On average, I have observed about 22 hr of live streaming from each BJ, which is about a total of 200 hr of viewing time. I re-watched each recorded version on YouTube a few times to analyze live chat comments and the BJ’s verbal, vocal, and visual qualities, which became the text of my analysis below. In identifying the themes within the texts of BJs and viewers, I have utilized the semiotics approach of Dyer (1979) where he used studying the image, talk, and behaviors of celebrities as texts that point to their identities. The categories that I have deployed are character’s speech acts, behaviors and gestures, appearance, and reactions to other’s speech and behaviors (Dyer, 1979). In the context of AfreecaTV, BJs’ speech and behaviors are inseparable from live chat comments as the BJ constantly communicates with them. As BJs’ personae are a result of this collective discourse, I take into consideration the viewers’ comments as speech acts that influence BJs’ characters in addition to Dyer’s categories. After identifying relevant themes in relation to the culture of *yingyŏ*, monster of capitalism, and self-care, I have drawn on examples below that represent BJs’ personae and the nature of AfreecaTV’s play culture.

**Staged Personae in the Pursuit of Fun**

To contextualize the self-branding strategies of BJs, a brief discussion of AfreecaTV’s viewers is needed. Scholars such
as Ahn and Choi (2016) contend that BJs can create a feeling of inclusion that engages their viewers and draws them to heavily consume their live streaming as a community. These active fans comprise a large number of viewers. But there is lack of research on another type of viewers who gather as an incoherent mass and consume live streaming in a lighter manner. S.-h. Kim (2011), examining young consumers of webtoons in Korea, contends that youth Internet culture projects various codes of fun segmented according to Koreans’ subculture, socioeconomic status, and tastes. With a variety of content provided to them, many young Koreans enjoy gathering with others who have the same tastes yet do not always show signs of heavy consumption such as showing enthusiasm toward the work or the webtoonist for a prolonged time (S.-h. Kim, 2011). Similarly, some viewers who identify themselves as teenagers on AfreecaTV that I have observed do not necessarily engage in intimate conversations with each other and often not with the BJ either. Viewers click in and out of channels that offer similar content and show low loyalty. In doing so, the viewer often lets others and the BJ in a particular broadcast know what and how other broadcasters are doing. During Oechilhye’s live streaming, for instance, a viewer who disclosed his age as 17 years said, “I’m clicking in and out of Chŏlkuhyŏng20 and Oechilhye at the moment. If one gets boring, I’ll check out the other. By the way, I came to tell you (Oechilhye) that Chŏlkuhyŏng20 is better at playing the game Overwatch.” To capture these fluid viewers, BJs compete against each other. In developing, maintaining, and evolving their personae, BJs actively adapt to the varying types of viewership and immediacy of live broadcasting and interaction that allows for exaggerated content.

Because the viewer demands something new, fresh, and worth watching for the sake of entertainment, many BJs perform staged fun. Staged fun not only means that the BJ has put forethought and preparation into what they are saying or doing but also has a distinct characteristic of exaggeration, sometimes to absurd or bizarre extents. The vernacular language of chuchak (fabrication in Korean) explains the idea of staged fun well. In the context of AfreecaTV, the viewer refers to any unnatural response, reaction, or outlandish situation that BJs create as chuchak. For example, Chŏlkuhyŏng20, one of the most famous BJs on AfreecaTV, receiving the grand prize in AfreecaTV BJ Awards in 2016, is known to pick a fight with his wife who is another famous BJ—Oechilhye. On camera, they would hit and scream at each other, or throw things when one of them is not happy. The situation varies—sometimes it is about an unfavorable attitude toward one another or one of them hanging out and saying inappropriately sexual comments about another woman or man. Many times, they walk the fine line between staged fun and domestic violence. Live chats reflect that viewers enjoy watching the fight: “This couple is so funny and attractive,” and “They’ll divorce soon. This is addictive.” What Chŏlkuhyŏng20 offers in his chuchak is not the type of intimacy where a microcelebrity discloses personal information to connect with the viewer. Rather, he offers his viewers the opportunity to satisfy their sense of voyeurism by peeking into the private life of a married couple.

On one hand, the viewer seems to enjoy that the fight is based on a married couple’s real relationship. On the other hand, the viewers acknowledge that the fight is not serious and half-staged for the viewer. This is why the viewer who is critical of the situation— commenting with ridicule, negative criticism, and blame—gets into an argument with other viewers in the chat room. When the situation becomes outrageous, the viewer would call it fabricated and tell them to stop: “Stop with chuchak. This is no fun,” or “Why do you do this? You guys are parents. You should be ashamed of yourselves.” The viewer who advocates this content acknowledges that it is only staged performance and should not be taken seriously: “This is a show from beginning to the end, why do you guys take it so seriously?” and “It’s all fabrication, just chill.” This support from the audience as well as how such controversy attracts a larger audience seems to motivate Chŏlkuhyŏng20 to continue this type of staged fun. In this case, the idea of authenticity does not include the burden of portraying the inner person, being honest or trustworthy, or showing everyday life. As the viewer acknowledges that his edited self is presenting chuchak, what one feels intimate toward is how the BJ stages and performs chuchak. Rather than connecting to the BJ as a person, the viewer connects to consistent exaggerated behaviors of the character as a form of entertainment. While these actions accumulate and make up the staged persona, the agency of microcelebrity is not as visible or important in this context because the BJ does not explicitly engage with the viewer through a seemingly authentic personality.

In the case of BJ Seya who maintains a sensible character with chuchak, agency shifts back to the BJ, but not entirely. One of BJ Seya’s series is called We Got Married, where he pairs with a woman BJ and dates on-camera. The prototype of this content is the popular reality television show “We Got Married” (MBC, 2008–2017) where two celebrities pair up to show what life would be like had they been married. Seya’s viewers understand that the dating scenario could happen with a script, including planned quarrels and brawls. In this 10-part series, Seya and his partner created different scenarios of dating—visiting each other’s homes for the first time, chatting in coffee shops, drinking late night at a pub, and traveling together. Because they are constantly looking at the camera and monitoring the chat room, the scenes look rather awkward, but his fans enjoy temporal immediacy and connectedness. The chat room becomes a playground for the viewer to discuss and predict what Seya will do to his partner next and guessing to what extent these BJs planned out their actions on camera—whether or not they are performing chuchak. Because the viewer thinks that they know Seya well (based on his disclosure of personal information in the past), the viewer can make this inference. At times, the
viewer seems to play a game allowed by the platform’s immediacy. The idea of intimacy stems from the viewer’s ability to request Seya to move forward with courtship, as if the BJ is an avatar. The viewer follows the storyline, asks the BJ to complete tasks, and expects entertainment and surprise along the way. Although this is characterized as chuchak with exaggerated fun, Seya does not push the boundaries of appropriate behavior, unlike Chŏlkuhŭyŏng who often hits or show other signs of violence. Because intimacy is grounded in his ability to connect with the viewer, Seya’s tactic of self-presentation is similar to microcelebrities on other social media platforms. However, he balances this self-presentation with more exaggerated and fabricated situations and behaviors. His authenticity does not rely on ordinary life or an honest presentation of self, as his staged situations are apparent.

Staged fun as a strategy of microcelebrity is indeed influenced by the platform itself, since AfreecaTV’s purpose is to deliver entertaining content rather than presenting everyday life. This is why presenting an authentic, true self is not the main tactic of self-branding. Although there are microcelebrities on YouTube with similarly exaggerated or explicit content, it is not a strategy widely adapted by creators and accepted by the viewers across the platform. Such strategy does not quite resonate with other examples of microcelebrity as many focus on positive self-image or their socioeconomic and cultural aspirations. Rather, BJs focus on the moment of entertainment that slowly establishes their brands through balancing exaggeration and immediate, intimate staged personae.

Play Culture of Antagonism

BJs’ self-branding strategies are closely intertwined with the viewer, whereas platforms such as Instagram—which relies on active upload of the user and the convenience of access—allow microcelebrities to focus on presenting their images. As noted briefly above, how the viewer orders BJs around influences not only the nature of how BJs respond and shape their content but also the BJs’ personae in the long run. Pŏmp’ŭrik’a engages his audience by playing an interactive roulette game while he eats. In this game, the viewer gets to order the BJ around if the number that everyone has agreed upon comes up when Pŏmp’ŭrik’a throws a dart into a spinning wheel. The ways the viewer plays this game are either favorable or not toward the BJ. For instance, viewer A would order Pŏmp’ŭrik’a to laugh out loud for every bite, while viewer B will cancel that order so that Pŏmp’ŭrik’a would not suffer long. The viewer, not the BJ, leads this—spectators co-labor with the BJ to create an enjoyable experience. If watching was a passive activity in the age of television and playing on screen was an active activity in the age of video games, then the boundary is malleable on AfreecaTV. The viewers vicariously play by watching what the BJ does and actually participate in the live play. Here, the degree of engagement cultivates a sense of intimacy. As one gets more involved in interacting not only with the BJ but also with other viewers, watching the content becomes a game that demands a strong presence of viewers. Thus, it is not solely a strategy of the BJ’s self-presentation; rather, the role shifts to the viewer. This co-labor helps strengthen Pŏmp’ŭrik’a’s persona, as it allows him to express his bluff character, which is what he is known for. In a regional dialect, which accentuates his swear words, he curses strongly at his viewers and argues that he is capable of much more than he seems. He has many fans that enjoy this type of immediate interaction and exaggerated reaction, although Pŏmp’ŭrik’a receives much criticism from detractors for his behaviors and speech on camera.

The interaction between the BJ and the viewer is ambivalent as the BJ sustains a balance between favorable comments and more aggressive ones. Some fans might cheer and participate nicely while pointing out if anyone in the room is crossing the boundary of inappropriateness. As noted in the example of Chŏlkuhŭyŏng, the viewer enacts behavioral and self-presentation guidelines for the BJ. To a certain extent, the viewer makes an effort to create an enjoyable environment for everyone. Others engage in more aggressive and even hateful comments, which are common contradictions of the viewer. This is similar to the description of anti-fans by Gray (2003) and Senft (2008). In the case of cam girls, Senft (2008) notes that some viewers thought of them as attention seeking and unnatural and were critical of their behaviors.

However, aggressiveness shown by the viewer of AfreecaTV is different from that of anti-fans who dislike the content and often consider it as pointless, futile, morally wrong, and/or esthetically worthless. I call such aggressive interaction the play culture of antagonism. As a distinct self-branding tactic of AfreecaTV’s microcelebrity, this interplay between the BJ and the audience—and among the audience itself—builds the BJ’s unique persona. The viewer comes to accept and appreciate the BJ’s style of streaming. In the case of Pŏmp’ŭrik’a, the viewer starts to exchange curse words with the BJ and other viewers, which elevates the overall tone and builds excitement for the game. In his broadcast on 10 September 2017, the viewer started with easy requests such as laughing loudly for every bite, mixing and eating different foods, and making a funny face for every bite. Then followed aggressive requests—to slap his face for every two bites of food or to prank call a restaurant for an excessive order of food. The rowdier the requests became, the more the viewers seemed excited. When some fans canceled out some of the requests, many viewers started to exchange curse words and fight with each other for “ruining the fun.” This process in itself is a form of play culture for the viewer, as it repeatedly happens and characterizes Pŏmp’ŭrik’a’s content. The viewer expects an antagonistic interplay through
to watch someone eat for 1–3 hr every day has no precedent. special skills, knowledge, or expertise—they eat, and often a ers seeking pure entertainment of the moment. hours of unproductive social activity of chatting with strang- talk/cam. These offer no helpful knowledge to improve the presented through popular themes of mŏkpang, game, and mŏkpang is mostly rep- The idea of intimacy stems from a culture shared by a group of men. The play culture of antagonism resembles a communication style of a close circle of friends. The anonymous viewers and the BJ share this moment during live streaming. In this sense, the idea of intimacy stems from a culture shared by a group of people in the same demographic as well as taste in entertain- ment. Both BJs use their rowdy and funny personalities to build friend-like personae, balancing their actions with over- the-top chuchak and exaggeration. In harmony, these actions make up consistent staged personae which the fans acknowl- edge and these microcelebrities become famous for.

The Culture of Yingyŏ as Resistance

The idea of yingyŏ culture is the basis of this antagonistic play culture. On AfreecaTV, the idea of yingyŏ is mostly rep- presented through popular themes of mŏkpang, game, and talk/cam. These offer no helpful knowledge to improve the self-value required by neoliberalism; rather, they offer long hours of unproductive social activity of chatting with strang- ers seeking pure entertainment of the moment. Mŏkpang is a representative example as BJs do not necessarily possess special skills, knowledge, or expertise—they eat, and often a lot. Although media cover eating contests around the world, to watch someone eat for 1–3 hr every day has no precedent. Mŏkpang BJs show raw and instinctual behaviors. In itself, to watch and enjoy mŏkpang is to indulge in the culture of yingyŏ.

Yingyŏ culture in the context of AfreecaTV doubts the value of neoliberal self-care. The spirit of yingyŏ is carefree, alone, and carries little to no responsibilities, but neoliberal self-care calls for individual responsibilities in improving skills for self. BJs use yingyŏ practices as a self-presentation tactic to achieve some of the end goals of becoming a suc- cessful individual while rejecting the process of improving self-value. The process of neoliberal self-care is to invest time, effort, and money to become a better self. This achieves success in neoliberal Korea, which include capitalistic goals of money and fame but, more importantly, an elevated socio- economic status accompanied by a fitting lifestyle with rel- evant social and cultural capital, and global cosmopolitan identity. In the case of mŏkpang, BJs skip the hard part—the work of productive and skillful self—and achieve only a part of capitalistic success, money, and fame.

Mŏkpang BJ Kkottoechi’s case is exemplary. She focuses on the present and eats and even becomes an object to be stared at for the purpose of entertainment. Every time I have observed, her viewers explicitly commented or insulted Kkottoechi’s appearance and the amount of food she con- sumed even when the moderators of chat rooms warned viewers not to mention them. BJ Kkottoechi disregards or endures any negative comments about her weight and pro- ceeds with immediate interaction, which relates to how much money she makes in one sitting. According to Kkottoechi in her 31 October 2017 broadcast: “I’m happy with the way I live now so don’t say anything about how I look or how much I eat. If you don’t want to watch me then you don’t have to.” The chats responding to this comment said, “You mean you like the way that you make money by doing nothing but eating. It’s easy money.” The viewer focuses on the monetary aspect and at times ridicules how this yingyŏ activity leads to such monetary value. Her yingyŏ activity— unproductive and mindless eating—has turned her free time into a capitalistic, income-generating, and productive moment that earns fame, money, and career as microcelebrity, which are some of the qualities of a successful individ- ual in neoliberal Korea.

Succeeding as a microcelebrity in this context disregards the existing system of neoliberal self-care. A hard-working individual winning and succeeding in competitions to achieve a better socioeconomic status and what follows no longer applies for BJs and viewers. By rejecting the process of self- care, younger Koreans have generated a self-ridiculing narra- tive that reflects their reality. They expose uselessness of the process of self-care. With no guarantee of success in the neo- liberal sense such as securing a lifetime job, moving upward in the socioeconomic ladder, and gaining an elevated cultural status with global cosmopolitan identity, neoliberal self-care’s value diminishes for the younger generation. Leading a pro- ductive life for the sake of a better tomorrow no longer applies. If in the past quality education and striving for the best guaranteed a well-paying job that ultimately led to owning a house in the Seoul metropolitan area or starting a family,
engaging in the so-called productive activities became meaningless as these fail to actualize their hopes. In a similar vein, watching BJs performing on AfreecaTV is not a productive activity from the narrative of self-care. It doesn’t fit into valued forms of labor to strive for or connect to power, capital, and sociocultural status in neoliberal Korea. For both BJs and the viewer, hours of broadcasting and watching mindless entertainment do not translate into investment or improvement of skills that will prepare for a better future. Money, however, it is accumulated, has become a marker of self-branding and motivation for microcelebrity. Unproductive behaviors, as long as they entertain the viewer, can lead to economic success, which is unheard of in the context of neoliberalism in Korea. BJs’ staged fun and exaggerated personas, thus, are in turn mocking the practice of neoliberal self-care, which no longer brings capitalistic rewards.

These cultures of AfreecaTV are threats to the existing order as the younger generation no longer values the idea of neoliberal self-care to succeed as a citizen. The possibility of yingyô, becoming a prime means of capitalist aspiration is difficult to understand for the older generation who have succeeded through and push neoliberal self-care to their children. Aggressive or antagonistic personae and play culture becoming a key to success are unfathomable to older generations. However, the playful idleness and aggression combined with capitalistic aspiration have aroused to substitute neoliberal self-care and its aspirations.

**Microcelebrities: Leaders of Exposing and Rejecting the Culture of Neoliberal Self-Care**

AfreecaTV’s characteristics as a social media platform—live streaming, chats, and its economy—within the cultural context of the younger generation shape BJs’ self-branding tactics as microcelebrities. They perform staged personae, often with exaggeration on expressive and explicit content. The idea of authenticity through staged personae is unique, as it is a careful mix of the feeling of immediacy and connectedness, edited self, and staged performance. By testing the boundary of what is fun and excessive within the play culture of antagonism, BJs develop dynamic characters with consistent behaviors that characterize their personae. Rather than focusing on positive self-image that resonates with their everyday lives, or showing off their socioeconomic and cultural aspirations, many BJs focus on providing fun that would not last once the viewer is out of the chat room.

Influenced by yingyô culture, the focus on the moment and short-lived entertainment also taps into the generational affect of younger Koreans who reject the idea of neoliberal self-care and expose how it has failed them. After AfreecaTV became popular, many articles were written on the issues of AfreecaTV—such as its explicit and violent content, the youth’s infatuation with materialism, and BJs’ unconventional ways of money making. Although many characterize these issues as Korean youth’s fad culture, yingyô culture on AfreecaTV has expanded to an implicit form of resistance to—or a temporary substitute for—neoliberal self-care, which Korea has been so keenly relying on for its success as a nation. As the promise of a rosy future winds down, the younger generation offers a sarcastic twist on neoliberal self-care with a new form of play culture.

Overall, AfreecaTV’s culture of microcelebrity shows a unique modality of neoliberalism in a developed nation and its waning economy. In the Anglophone context, the analyses of microcelebrity focus on how they draw attention and achieve fame and money through an intimate, authentic character that allows for positive immediate interaction and taps into followers’ desires. However, AfreecaTV’s BJs represent a new modality, emphasizing unproductive practices that result in valuable capitalistic outcomes. Combined with Korea’s specific social, economic, and cultural contexts, microcelebrities lead a play culture that turns them into leaders of subversion of the existing order, although without their acknowledgment. Through exposure and popularity, microcelebrity has the power to inspire a scattered generation who simply chase after momentary fun or has no outlet to share their lack of interest on the value of self-care. The brand of microcelebrity as an exaggerated, excessive figure expands younger Koreans’ subculture to a major phenomenon and exposes the experienced failure of the late neoliberal state for the younger generation. Microcelebrity’s popularity exposes the youth’s yearning and search for a more sensible practice that can yield more progress than the existing practice of neoliberal self-care.

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