

Commentary

# Monsters Created by Capitalism: An Anthropological Study of Internet Broadcasting Website AfreecaTV by Kim Soojin

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The media industry estimates that people all over the world, combined, watch videos for over one billion hours daily. Social media development and improvements in data compression technology have contributed to the rapid growth and success of video streaming. In 2005, YouTube was launched, and the platform has changed how the world of videos works—user-generated content (UGC) has emerged due to new media and technology affordance. UGC is also known as the “Me-media” platform, offering new tools for “Generation Me” to shape individuals’ different experiences and definitions in the mediated and real worlds. At the forefront, live streaming technology offers individuals and brands a direct approach to engage followers in real time. As a result, live streaming video platforms have mushroomed during the past few years and stirred discussions about their consequences. This study offers a good starting point for scholars and students interested in South Korean media to ponder the case of AfreecaTV.

AfreecaTV started as a service to retransmit television channels, and it provided a platform for its users to post content and comments on various discussion boards in addition to viewing a variety of channels (live video

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game broadcasts, taxi driver monitoring, artist performances) and personal video blogs of ordinary people, politicians, and professional actors. The platform has stirred criticism in South Korea because of copyright violations and inappropriate content (e.g., sexual subject matter or abasement of disabled individuals).

The phenomenon merits scholarly attention to address the following questions: What does this new media platform (AfreecaTV) mean for Koreans? What is its relationship with the capitalist economy when it is referred to as a “monster created by capitalism?” When the media characterizes AfreecaTV users as “lonely and suppressed individuals,” do the actual viewers agree with this stereotype? Who are the producers? What is the nature of the relationship between the content producers (broadcasters) and the consumers? Do they conform to the cultural norms of Korean society? If yes, how?

The author conducted participant observation on the platform for six months to reconcile the different definitions. Results showed that some theoretical concepts in anthropology, such as “gift economy” and “reciprocity,” provided valuable insights into online interactions. It is intriguing that the platform schemes are designed in accordance with communal principles, such as honor and recognition, to promote interactions. Participation on AfreecaTV is motivated by users gaining a sense of freedom and equality, despite the platform being controversial and stigmatized. Consumers seem to use the space to evade or avoid stresses in the real world. The online communities on AfreecaTV seem to mirror real-world problems that South Korean society should address.

These paradoxical situations showed potential for further anthropological inquiries in order to understand the motivations and behaviors of the users. In general, past studies on social live streaming services (SLSSs) tend to employ theories in media psychology and social support, and they use surveys to study the motivations of the broadcasters and audiences (Bründl, Matt, and Hess 2017; Hilvert-Bruce, Neill, Sjöblom, and Hamari 2018; Zimmer, Scheibe, and Stock 2018). An effective online ethnographic method is necessary for future researchers to understand the breadth and depth of user experiences. Besides online participation observation as users, interviews with the users and participation observation of their offline behaviors should also be included in the ethnography. More comparative studies of the content, strategies of platform influencers, and their interaction with other users in different countries will also be useful for

policy makers who need to establish regulations.

## References

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