

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

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(Abstract) This article aims to conduct an exploratory study of the concurrent dualities that operate on various levels in real-time internet broadcasts and accompanying typed comments from participants. AfreecaTV is a real-time internet broadcasting website with an unrivaled share of and scale in the Korean market. The site is often criticized by politicians and in public discourse as a hotbed of socio-pathological problems, a phenomenon linked to the fact that online activity remains a blind spot within the system. This study, by contrast, approaches AfreecaTV as a society existing in cyberspace. It is an attempt to grasp the internal logic of the relationships between AfreecaTV broadcasting jockeys and viewers, who describe themselves as “monsters” and make a habit of “problematic” speech and behavior. From a local perspective, the world of “monsters” operates according to highly social principles. This is shown by starballoons, the virtual currency given by viewers to BJs, and by the arguments that take place on the site. Here, we find a combination of trading relationships and gift-based relationships, reputation and speaking rights coupled to accumulated starballoons, and anti-authoritarian tendencies that keep these in check.

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1. Introduction

1) The Issue

We live in at least two worlds at once. The many arguments dividing the offline and online worlds equate the former with tangible reality and the latter with the virtual, focusing on the “strange and unfamiliar” behavior that occurs in the virtual world. Activity on the website AfreecaTV, the scene of this study, is based on real-time internet broadcast-chat and gifting “starballoons,” a virtual currency given by viewers to BJs (“broadcasting jockeys”). On this site, BJs are given starballoons with a cash value of several million or even tens of millions of won, almost on a daily basis. In sectors of conventional society, such as the political realm and the media, such behavior is often branded abnormal and a moral problem, rooted in distorted human desire (Kim Dohyeong 2014; Hwa Gangyun 2015; Cha Sangeun 2015; YTN 2016; An Jinyong 2016; Bong Seongchang 2016).

I, too, first heard about AfreecaTV through articles criticizing the behavior that takes place on the site. Because I believe that anthropology starts by making the strange familiar, and vice versa, I tried thinking about these media articles from a different angle. If all the behavior occurring on AfreecaTV is categorized as abnormal, surely that would make the hundreds of thousands of people perpetrating it—who were bound to include some of my family, friends and neighbors—“abnormal!” In which case, before rushing to make dichotomous judgments about the real and the virtual or the normal and the abnormal, shouldn’t we first take a look at who the people active on AfreecaTV are and why they squander so much money on this site? It was this curiosity that first drove me, in the summer of 2016, into the world of AfreecaTV.

“Monsters created by capitalism” became an important root of this study. It is a phrase commonly used by AfreecaTV’s participants or “locals,” as I shall call them. It is often used in reference to the BJs, who will do anything to receive starballoons. On the site, “monster” is a label that connotes both pride and ridicule regarding such behavior. This has several notable implications. First, it reminds us that economic factors are the key context for the behavior of AfreecaTV users, particularly BJs. This raises the question of how “capitalism,” cited as the creator of the “monsters,” functions within the site. Second, it is worth asking why the site’s members so readily describe themselves as monsters. What kind of socio-political

order, other than “capitalism,” must there be on AfreecaTV that allows active assertion and recognition of the existence of “monsters”? I therefore intend to explore the internal principles that govern activity on AfreecaTV.

2) *AfreecaTV – “Visual Radio”*

According to its official website,¹ the name AfreecaTV is derived from the phrase “anybody can freely broadcast TV.” The site claims to be a medium that allows anyone with an internet connection and a PC or mobile device to make live broadcasts from anywhere, at any time, without the need for special equipment or a budget. The site, which marked its 10th anniversary in 2016, has accompanied South Korean society through many of its changes, from live broadcasts of the anti-U.S. beef protests to the more recent “*meokbang*”² syndrome (Yi Jeonggi 2009; Kim Hyejin 2015). As befitting its frontrunner position in the Korean internet broadcast world, the channel enjoys unrivaled status in its industry. It posted total operating profits of 62.8 billion won in 2015,³ while another survey found that it hosted an average of some 5,000 live broadcasts every day and was growing rapidly year on year, with 8.03 million users at the time of the survey (Yi Seonmi 2015: 3, 9). The same study placed the monthly average number of AfreecaTV BJs in the first quarter of 2015 at 300,000 (*ibid.*: 9). Though it is uncertain, of course, whether all these BJs were continuously active, the fact that so

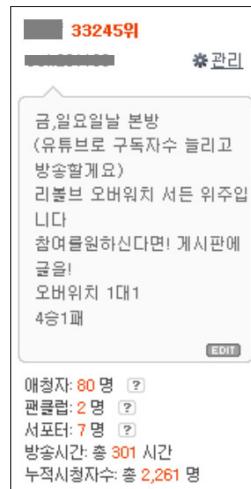


Figure 1. AfreecaTV BJ Station homepage (Accessed: October 21, 2016). This BJ is ranked 5th in popularity. Total broadcast time was 301 hours over three months, indicating that over 10,000 people follow the BJ's activities.

¹ See AfreecaTV's corporate website (<http://corp.afreecatv.com>; accessed October 21 2016). This is different from the AfreecaTV broadcast website (<http://www.afreecatv.com>), on which this study focuses.

² (Translator's note) A popular South Korean internet broadcast genre in which the BJ films herself or himself eating large amounts of food.

³ See the Financial Data section of AfreecaTV's corporate website (<http://corp.afreecatv.com/ir/financial.html>).

many people had even dabbled in BJing is meaningful in itself. Since the “starballoon” system was introduced in 2011, a string of media reports have claimed that famous BJs earn tens of millions of won each month, and broadcast jockeying has emerged as a popular occupation. Interest from various companies in the market potential of BJs has helped the multi-channel network industry to grow too.

On the homepage of the AfreecaTV website, broadcasts are categorized into 17 genres.⁴ These are the same as those on the list of “broadcast themes” that BJs choose each time they make a broadcast. The 17 genres can be grouped into three types: “video games,” “visual radio” and “sports.” The site publishes BJ rankings according to these three groups;⁵ and many BJs and viewers use them when describing the identity of their broadcasts. “I’m a game BJ,” “I was a game BJ but these days I do visual radio,” and “I only watch sports,” for example, are common types of self-description. But there are no regulations or divisions forcing BJs to work in any single genre, and the visual radio category encompasses almost all the 17 genres.⁶

This study focuses on the arena of these visual radio broadcasts. From July to December 2016, I frequented AfreecaTV by the usual method of joining the site with a user nickname. My main area of study was the broadcast *bang* (“room”) in which the words and actions of the BJ and the conversation of viewer comments are immediately accessible. I also met them on the forums of the BJ channels, where they manifested themselves in large numbers, and on the internet broadcast section of popular website DC Inside.⁷ Now and again, when I missed a live broadcast or needed to

⁴ Games, mobile games, talk/cam, *meokbang*, beauty/fashion, music, sports, K-pop, terrestrial/cable, animation, education, entrepreneurship, current affairs/on-the-scene, stocks/finance, lifestyle/info, Shopfreeca, and age restricted.

⁵ BJs are ranked according to the following categories: All, new BJs, mobile, games, visual radio, and sports. Among these, the games, visual radio and sports categories relate to the content and genre of BJs’ broadcasts. BJ rankings are updated every week and are calculated according to a set formula based on “UPs” (number of recommendations), highest viewer numbers, fan club growth and sticker index.

⁶ No visual radio style activity appeared under the “cable channels” or “animation” categories, in which BJs simply broadcast external copyright-free/copyright-permitted material.

⁷ The “forums” on BJ channels are like personal blogs within the AfreecaTV website. DC Inside Internet Broadcast Gallery is one of several forums on the website DC Inside (<http://www.dcinside.com>), in which users comment on internet broadcasts. The forum is known as *inbanggael*, an abbreviation of its Korean name. In this study, I refer to its participants as *inbanggaelers*.

watch it again, I accessed the recording of it on the BJ's YouTube channel.

Before I began this study, I had never watched AfreecaTV. Knowing nothing, I started off by choosing and wandering among random broadcasts, regardless of the genre or how well known the BJ was. I ended up focusing on visual radio for two reasons. First, as mentioned above, it encompasses almost all broadcast genres. For example, while there are plenty of visual radio BJs who don't broadcast sports content, there are hardly any sports BJs whose broadcasts don't include "visual radio" content. Whichever BJ's broadcast you watch, you're bound to encounter visual radio by chance or necessity.

In the video game and sports types, the main content, such as a certain video game or sports match, is relatively clear. In the visual radio type, by contrast, the main content is unclear. So visual radio depends totally on interaction between BJ and viewers in real-time. This is what gives rise to the tendency for BJs in visual radio to work hard to captivate viewers with their words and actions in order to make a profit. It is probably no coincidence that, during the period when I was studying AfreecaTV without choosing specific genres or BJs, the two BJs criticized in media articles for "problematic" words and actions were both active in the visual radio genre (Yi Byeongchae 2016; Hankyoreh 2016). Most other broadcasts that had previously incurred public criticism were visual radio too.

3) Cyberspace and Reciprocity

The reason quotation marks must be used here for the expression "monsters created by capitalism" and the words "monster" and "capitalism" used in isolation is not just that they are the words of AfreecaTV users but also that they must be understood within the context of AfreecaTV. I am treating AfreecaTV as a society comprising BJs and viewers, active principally in the arena of live broadcast.

At a time when opinions diverge on the question of whether internet experiences are virtual, real, or virtual reality, some may question whether it is logically justifiable to describe cyberspace as a society. Bringing "the virtual" into reality is a familiar approach in traditional anthropological research (see Hallowell 1955; Bateson 1998; Turner 2014; Schieffelin 1985). Yet it is only in internet-related anthropological studies that the tendency to treat cyberspace as a medium for offline behavior or to posit it as a mirror reflecting intensive projections of "real" social problems has

become so pronounced (Wilson and Peterson 2002). No anthropological studies of AfreecaTV exist either in South Korea or abroad, but the few analyses of the site conducted by researchers in other disciplines show the same tendencies (Yi Jeonggi 2009; Kim Hyejin 2015; Jeong Hyeonsu 2015; Kim Beomjun 2016; Bak Juyeon and Oksuk Ban 2016; Jeong Mingi 2016). These studies fail to consider the internal logic of behavior in cyberspace or merely provide one-sided interpretations. By contrast, Yi Gilho's (2012) anthropological study goes beyond existing approaches by asserting that cyberspace is solid reality and that the "anonymous" entities rendered visible in the form of nicknames are real agents. Analyzing the Korean website DC Inside in terms of the logic of gifts and warfare, Yi (2014: 4-5) claims that actions in cyberspace that appear, at first glance, to be "anti-social or unsocial" are thoroughly "social." In this study, I intend to further such insights by discussing the internal logic at work in AfreecaTV cyberspace in terms of reciprocity.

The concept of reciprocity has received ongoing interest in anthropology since its introduction a century ago by Marcel Mauss. In his early work (Mauss 1979), reciprocity was something that considered mutual cyclical relationships and coexistence among heterogeneous forms. But, by *Essai sur le don* (2002), it had gained concrete form within the specific conceptual framework of the gift economy. Therefore, reciprocity has sometimes been reinterpreted according to exchange-based arguments along the lines of "if something is given, something must be received." Sahlins is another scholar arguing in this vein. In *Stone Age Economics*, he criticizes mainstream neoclassical economics while making it his ultimate aim to explore the possibility of an anthropological theory of exchange value (Sahlins 2014). Sahlins reinterpreted *hau*, which Mauss introduced as a Maori word for the spiritual force of a giver that became attached to the object he had given, as a product or profit of the given item. His creative analysis, which classified reciprocity according to the immediacy and equivalence of the exchange, has become widely known, and Sahlins's argument has achieved the status of a classic in economic anthropology (Wilk and Cliggett 2010: 272).

This assessment of Sahlins is valid and yet somehow inadequate, especially when the focus is on reciprocity. Exchange is reciprocal, but the basic idea about reciprocity that Mauss expressed and Sahlins intended to develop has socio-political implications that cannot be reduced to economic exchange. So there are clear limits to attempts to regard reciprocity and

exchange as equivalent and assert the significance of “holistic” analyses limited to the exchange of objects. I consider that the significance of the argument started by Mauss and continued by Sahlins lies in its emphasis of “the social” before “the political” and “the economic”: “Reciprocity is a ‘between’ relation” (Sahlins 2014: 246).

I intend to focus especially on the “introduction of the third party” in exchange that Sahlins worked hard to elucidate. For, firstly, on AfreecaTV, a third party (viewers) participates at the point where the realm of gifts, through the medium of starballoons, can be distinguished from the realm of non-gifts and the realm of products, so that “one man’s [the starballoon giver/BJ’s] gift should not be another man’s [the BJ/starballoon giver’s] capital” (Sahlins 2014: 231). What appears to be “economic” exchange can only be explained through a “socio-political” discourse that engages with issues of honor and prestige. Moreover, a three-way relationship may suppress or exclude the normal termination or establishment of a two-way relationship.⁸ Discussions of reciprocity involving a third party explain how constant coexistence between heterogeneous aspects⁹ is possible in AfreecaTV society.

Exchanging starballoons, BJs and viewers (re)produce a continuous relationship of mutual support. At the same time, however, they exhibit behavior that is far from amiable, constantly attacking each other and fighting. This is clearly hard to explain using only the framework of “reciprocity” discussed above. In reference to Clastres (2005), we could view this duality in AfreecaTV as exchange and war existing on the same level. Of course, in positing the precedence of the social, Clastres belongs in the intellectual lineage of Mauss. But, digging further into the issue of political power, he points out the “special” relationship between the realms of exchange and power, the negative relationship whereby a group places power outside its own structure (Clastres 2005: 54-57). In so doing, Clastres branches off into a school of thought that counterposes war to communal solidarity. To him, the mutual and independent exchange of

⁸ Here, by “establishment of a two-way relationship,” I mean relationships of exchange that can be unilaterally terminated and power relationships with a fixed command-and-obey structure.

⁹ I will discuss this specifically in Sections 2-3 of this study. A rough list of concurrent dualities is as follows: capitalism and gift economies, the dishonor and honor of monsters, reciprocal exchange and conflict, friendly and hostile relationships, the state and the anti-state.

women, goods and language is merely one aspect explaining the structure of American Indian society. For war is not something that breaks out during temporary failures of reciprocal exchange but a principle maintaining the social group, just like exchange. It is this duality that allowed Clastres to define primitive societies as societies “without power” that “resisted the state.”

In short, this study is a discourse on various dualities that function as the communal structure of AfreecaTV. Starting with a discussion of the reciprocal principle of starballoon gifts (Section 2), it continues by addressing the content of conflict that is not just “reciprocal” (Section 3). My aim is to analyze and identify the communal principles at work on the site, where capitalism and “capitalism,” monsters and “monsters,” and friendliness and hostility overlap as BJs and viewers interact.

2. Starballoon Presentation and “Monsters”

1) Money and Gifts

BJ: “Wooowwwwwwww!!!! 109¹⁰ starballoons from XX. [Barks like a dog.] Wuff wuff, wuff wuff wuff!!”

Viewers: “Oooohhh” “Damn!” “Here we go!” [The starballoons have started flowing.] “Wow!” “OMG!” “Go XX!”

BJ: [Putting on exciting music] “XX, what can I do for you? ...”

This scene shows the buzz generated as starballoons are exchanged. The commodity at the heart of the celebration, the starballoons are AfreecaTV’s currency, considered to be worth 100 won each in real terms. They are used only as gifts from viewers to BJs, making them a key source of monetary income. To those unfamiliar with AfreecaTV – even to its members, in fact – seeing several hundred thousand or a million won’s worth of starballoons showered on a BJ in just a few minutes is not just surprising: There is something wondrous about it. The BJ quoted above, for example, earned

¹⁰ The Korean pronunciation of the number 109 is *baekgu*. One homonym of this word means “a white puppy.”

10,900 won each time he was given 109 balloons!¹¹ Yet this kind of crazy scene plays out almost daily on AfreecaTV.

In such circumstances, the desire for money is what prompts many people to become BJs. One BJ, who worked as a night club waiter before “changing jobs,” said that he had started broadcasting “not because [his] monthly income of about 10 million won as a waiter was decreasing” but because he had seen how another BJ he knew made more in a short space of time. Motives like this can be found in the words of the majority of BJs. They sometimes admit that they are “balloon whores,” compelled by huge “balloon power” to go to any trouble for the sake of starballoons. Viewers often become fascinated by the question of how many starballoons a certain BJ “collected” in a certain time. So far, it may appear that AfreecaTV is deeply permeated by the logic of capitalism.

At the same time, it must be noted that the giving of starballoons takes the form of “gifts” and “patronage.” I define giving starballoons as a gift ritual constituting a money game. It follows that the task now is to find out why starballoons, as a virtual currency with the characteristics and functions of money in a capitalist market, become gifts. In connection with this is the principle whereby the game is established despite the participation of a profit-seeking BJ.

The following example, perhaps both simplest and clearest, is a description of starballoons from the AfreecaTV website (Appendix 1; bold text is in the original, underlining is the author’s):

<Starballoons>

Give starballoons to BJs who make original and entertaining broadcasts. BJs who receive lots of starballoons become the shining stars of AfreecaTV.

- Starballoons are valid for five years from the date of purchase.
- Starballoon gifts cannot be cancelled.

Source: AfreecaTV official website (Bold in the original and underlines by

¹¹ This is the figure before calculation of the cut taken by AfreecaTV. Starballoons bought on the AfreecaTV website cost 100 won each because a commission is added, but BJs are generally considered to receive 100 won per starballoon. When a BJ converts starballoons into cash, he receives 60 or 70% of the money, according to his rank as determined by AfreecaTV. The company takes the remaining 40 or 30%.

the author).

Viewers' conversion of their own money into starballoons is described as "purchasing." In other words, starballoons are bought and sold within the relationship between viewers and the company. But this study focuses on the relationship between BJs and viewers, the "participants/locals." When it comes to the movement of starballoons between these participants, the term "gift" appears. In actual talk among participants, too, words or attitudes suggesting that viewers "pay" starballoons to BJs, or "buy" the services of BJs using starballoons, are shunned; the habitual expression is that starballoons are "gifted," given as "support" or a "treat." Even though starballoons are only given publicly during live broadcasts, BJs emphasize that they are "gifts from viewers" and avoid talk of converting them into money. Is this the case in the actual process of starballoon exchange too?

To start with the conclusion: yes. It is not sufficient to regard starballoons as money characterized by fixed calculation of (exchange) value based on profit and utility, as generally required by the market logic of capitalism. Starballoon exchanges that bring monetary profit to one party in the transaction (the BJ) must be considered more broadly, in the context of a symbolic struggle that expresses and realigns social relationships in conjunction with issues of honor and prestige. If we recall earlier anthropological research that reveals currency, in primitive and capitalist societies alike, to be something moral, political and religious that symbolically constitutes social order, we should have no problem understanding starballoons as a total social fact (see Mauss 2002; Zelizer 1979; Appadurai 1986, 2012; Graeber 2012; Hart & Ortiz 2014).

The threefold system of obligation in gifting – to give, to receive, and to return the gift (Mauss 2002) – rules the circular process whereby viewers give starballoons and BJs receive them and offer a "reaction." The most essential and fundamental way for a BJ to react after receiving starballoons is to mention the giver's nickname and thank them. After that, the BJ may take further action such as grading the number of starballoons with certain hand movements or dance moves performed to background music, dancing or singing for the giver, writing the giver's nickname on the screen, enacting the message that appears on the starballoon image in the comment window,¹² or undertaking a mission suggested by the giver. Sometimes, a

¹² See Appendix 2. Examples of images and phrases that appear in the comment window

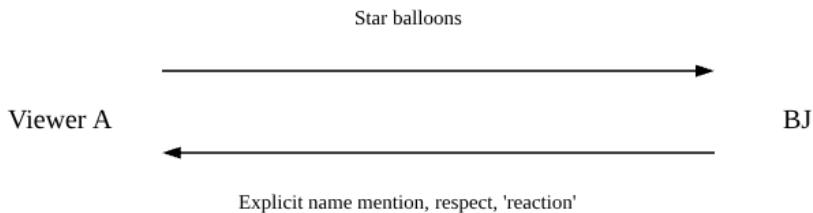


Figure 2. Starballoon exchange in a two-way relationship.

BJ may repay the giver with a gift of an AfreecaTV “item” such as “Quick View.”¹³ Reciprocity, as the viewer gives the balloons and the BJ receives them, takes a specific form, whereby the BJ makes explicit acknowledgment of the gift (see Figure 2).

But a diagram like this fails to capture the phenomenon accurately; it offers no more than a highly fragmentary explanation of why the viewer was motivated to give starballoons in the first place and why the BJ made sure to carry out their duty to repay the favor. Also present are the other viewers who did not give the starballoons. In other words, a third party is involved in the exchange. The introduction of a third party is the key point at which gift exchange becomes different from the buying and selling or bartering of goods. From the perspective of a struggle for recognition, the beginning of a gift exchange means that the giver “is asking whether the other party is a person with honor and waiting for an answer” (Kim Hyeongyeong 2015: 172). This means that animosity and competition are always lurking in the equation. The third party “is necessary precisely to show a turnover: the gift has had issue; the recipient has used it to advantage” (Sahlins 2014: 231). In other words, as a witness, the third party becomes a basis for the emergence and continuance of issues of socio-political status and honor, unlike in a two-way relationship, which can be ended unilaterally. This presence contributes a degree of tension to the relationship. With these points in mind, let us now look at the specific

include *baekgu* ("white puppy;" 109), *ppo-ppo-ppo* ("kiss-kiss-kiss;" 333), *Bita500* ("Vita500" [Translator's note: A popular South Korean vitamin drink]; 500) and *gu-gu-gu* ("coo-coo-coo" (pigeon noise); 999).

¹³ Quick View is an AfreecaTV “item” that brings various benefits including direct entry into broadcast streams without having to watch ads, and a multi-view function for watching several streams at once. The cheapest Quick View product available on the website is a 30-day option, priced at 3,900 won.

process of giving starballoons, involving the giver, the receiver and the third party.

On a live broadcast page, individual viewers converse not with other viewers but with the BJ. BJs cannot respond to every comment because of the speed at which they appear and pass by. From a starballoon giver's point of view, balloons are a means of focusing attention on herself and acquiring status and a voice, albeit temporarily, in an asymmetrical structure of communication comprising one BJ and multiple viewers. Along with the starballoon image that appears in the comment window, she stands out as a prominent nickname among the large mass of other viewers, becoming recast as an active participant. When the BJ calls the giver by name, her status is momentarily formalized. This is because the BJ, when responding with comments such as "Thank you, XX, for the N starballoons," also asks what kind of reaction the giver expects. In general, the more starballoons given, the more the giver is likely to be mentioned by name by both the BJ and by other viewers and to enjoy heightened status. See Figure 3.

Recently, a trend has emerged among BJs for using the so-called "electronic woman" utility, which makes the voices of givers even more powerful. The electronic woman automatically names and thanks the giver in a mechanical voice and reads out the first comment he writes in the chat



Figure 3. Increased visibility and a status boost for a starballoon donor in a comment window.

window after giving the balloons. Participants in the broadcast are forced to listen as the mechanical voice reads the giver's comment aloud, burying the BJ's words as it does so. Of course, using the electronic woman does not mean that the BJ's own reaction has disappeared.

If, however, a viewer who gives a large number of starballoons abuses her status, she promptly receives a barrage of criticism. This generally happens if the donation interrupts the flow of the broadcast or spoils the fun. In one broadcast, for example, a Die-hard Fan¹⁴ of the BJ named "HingXX" (name altered) interrupted the flow by sending a string of starballoon donations and tried obstinately to grab the BJ's attention. Despite sending balloons to the value of a million won, HingXX got a frosty response from other viewers, drawing insults such as "Doggy Hing," "Hing-gro"¹⁵ and "attention seeker." By contrast, when another viewer, who had made a "generous" gift of starballoons worth more than 100,000 won in one go, told the BJ, who was tired after giving a series of reactions, "That's enough [reactions]," her generosity drew still stronger praise from the BJ and other viewers.

BJs must fulfill their duty to receive starballoons and respond. If a BJ overlooks some starballoons by accident, viewers will help her to fulfill her duty by typing comments like "XX gave you N" [starballoons], "XX got ignored," "N got ignored," "look at those N," until she notices. The viewer who gave the balloons is addressed in honorific form by the BJ. The more she receives, the more the BJ must show a "sincere" reaction. This sincerity is often measured in terms of effort-intensive, inflammatory or sensational actions. If viewers find the BJ's reaction unsatisfactory, they send a flood of criticism, with comments such as "rip-off,"¹⁶ "soulless" and, to the starballoon giver, "stop giving." But if, as in the example above, the starballoon giver

¹⁴ On AfreecaTV, fans are ranked according to how many starballoons they give a BJ. Die-hard Fans in each BJ *bang* are the 20 highest-ranking fans in terms of starballoon donations. Bang, meaning "room" in Korean, is used in local AfreecaTV parlance to denote the live broadcast field in which the BJ's performance and real-time comment window interact.

¹⁵ A combination of the nickname of the starballoon donor, "HingXX" and the English word "aggro" (as an abbreviation of aggravation or aggression). In this context, it carries the negative connotation of being a nuisance or disruptive person. In other cases, however, aggro is used in a positive way, to describe actions that make the broadcast more interesting or focus viewers' attention.

¹⁶ A term used by viewers when they consider the BJ's reaction inadequate in relation to the size of the donation.

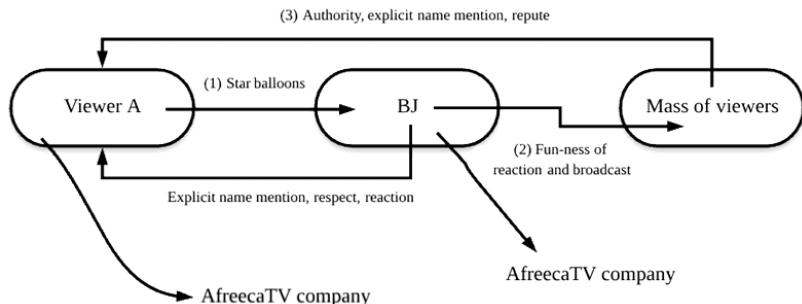


Figure 4. Diagram of starballoon gift involving a third party: The relationship between AfreecaTV as a company, where starballoons are converted, and participants is located outside the gift realm.

behaves in an excessively overbearing way, no one takes issue when the BJ treats her contemptuously or ignores her.

At this point, we might ask how monetary equivalence is established between starballoons, with their undisputed conversion value, and the BJs' reactions. The key to the answer lies with the third-party witnesses, the mass of other viewers. According to the aforementioned explanation on the AfreecaTV website, starballoons equate, in terms of exchange value, to "original and entertaining broadcasts." When it comes to the words of the BJ who receives the balloons, her "original" and/or "entertaining" reactions appear to be aimed at the giver. But, in fact, this gift in the form of a reaction is given to the mass of viewers. In reference to Sahlins's interpretation (2014: 231), whereby the *hau* of a given item is its product, the mass of viewers plays a role of judging and proving whether this "product" at least reaches a certain level as demanded by the principle of equivalence. In short, the involvement of a third party makes sure that the BJ's reaction is "worth the price" and provides a foundation for weaving in the status and reputation of the giver, which are enhanced through the gift. Moreover, given that the mass of viewers are potential givers, the duty of the BJ is not limited to a specific reaction at the time but extends into entertaining broadcasting, diligence, and improved presenting skills.

According to AfreecaTV regulations, starballoons, once given, cannot be cancelled; but sometimes a giver asks a BJ for a "refund" or a BJ returns to the giver the sum of money that he received by converting the starballoons. In most cases, this happens when the giver feels in some way betrayed by the BJ or when the BJ wants to be rid of the giver. Giving back

the exact equivalent value of the gift is effectively a declaration that the relationship is over.

Coupled in this way with personal value, the logic of starballoon gifts makes it possible to interpret the BJ's earning of money as a "money game." This is especially true from the perspective of viewers, who not only cannot make economic profit from their gifts but face actual economic losses. The ritual of giving starballoons operates according to the rules of a game and creates entertainment value for the broadcast, regardless of the different motives for participation on the part of the BJ and particular viewers. If, during a live broadcast, there are signs of a succession of starballoon donations at an appropriate time, regardless of the BJ's intentions, the BJ and viewers unanimously begin spurring the donors on. For example, the BJ may turn exciting background music on and up the tempo of the broadcast, while the viewers build up the momentum with comments such as "heave-", "ho", "heave", "ho," as in a rowing race, or "here we go," "and they're off!" and "more! more!" If the BJ's reaction is a dance, viewers may type ") (()) (()) (()" in the comment window in time to the beat, representing shaking buttocks. Here, the keyboard symbols form a kind of aesthetic and dynamic flow in the comment window. All of these things start and stop spontaneously, on the spur of the moment.

Sometimes, participants give names to these games. "Baekdusan," a name that metaphorically implies climbing to the top of Mt. Baekdu, is when a viewer gives increasing numbers of starballoons according to a sequence such as "10, 20, 30..." or "11, 22, 33...", ending with "a proper blast." This game is generally led by the "big players," Die-hard Fans on each channel that account for a high proportion of starballoon gifts. Other viewers exalt the giver's status, helping to build up the mood. If the BJ fails to do her duty at such times – by not cranking up the fun level – the game falls apart, accompanied by critical text comments from viewers such as "Let's stop giving" and "rip-off." Meanwhile, if the BJ declines gifts, saying "stop giving," viewers sometimes tease her with comments like "just go for a cigarette break" or "this is our party." Giver, receiver and witnesses all have a lot of fun as they compete for status in the game. Next, let us examine the dual meaning of "monster" as manifested in the meta-framework of the game.¹⁷

¹⁷ For more details about this question, see Bateson (1998). According to Bateson (1998: 288), the statement "This is play" implies self-contradiction, i.e. "These actions in

2) The Creation of “Monsters”

We drew the conclusion that a gift economy was operating in AfreecaTV's strain of "capitalism." The "capitalism" mentioned by locals partly implies a reference to market capitalism, but, for the sake of accuracy, it must be understood in terms of its exclusive use according to the logic of AfreecaTV society. "Monsters created by capitalism" can therefore be translated into "monsters created by gift exchange." What, then, are these "monsters" like? What are the implications of being called a "monster" when it comes to the reciprocal giving game we have seen above?

Participants in AfreecaTV generally call a BJ an "MCC"¹⁸ when she reacts dramatically or produces novel broadcasting content that is "truly attention seeking." Examples can include the BJ graffitiing her own face with a permanent pen, or "attracting" starballoons by betting that she can eat 20 raw eggs and 100 dumplings in a set amount of time. The use of "MCC" is similar to the logic used in establishment sectors like the media when condemning AfreecaTV, in that it accompanies odd behavior aimed at earning more starballoons; BJs and viewers are all too aware of this too. Yet, as in our earlier discussion of "capitalism," the kind of "monster" talked about by locals does not directly connote the indecent, twisted, and problematic character associated with the usual use of the word.

BJ: "Be the best at whatever you do. If everyone else wipes their ass with paper, you have to be willing to use your hand."

Viewers: "OK, after you," "wipe my ass," "what have you ever done?"

BJ: "What have you ever done? ... Fuck you, you obviously haven't watched my broadcasts. I've been pouring soy sauce (for 100 starballoons) for the past 8 years. I'm the guy who started out pouring milk over my face for 1,000 won (10 balloons)! Would you do that for 1,000 won? But I lost my early spirit and started pouring soy sauce for 100 balloons."

Viewers: "Soy sauce pride," "You're the best," "Apparently, he's the president of AfreecaTV," "Mr. Soy sauce," "o ✕ [the Korean initials for "인정," meaning "acknowledgment"], "Go go milk" ... "Hilarious to hear a dick who just sits

which we now engage do not denote what those actions for which they stand would denote."

¹⁸ "Monster created by capitalism." (Translator's note: The Korean abbreviation used is *janatgoe*, short for *jabonjuui-ga naheun goemul* ("monster(s) created by capitalism").)

at home with his computer in pursuit of starballoons talk like he has so much life experience lol.”

BJ (Reading the last comment, above): “You’re right that all I do is beg for balloons. Afreeca has a free commenting culture. You have the right to make comments. Everything you said is true. What’s more ridiculous than earning money by sitting at your computer? But I try so hard to be the best here that I’ve got vocal cord nodules twice ...”

Viewers: “True,” “ㅇㅈ,” “yeah from smoking” (re vocal cord problems), “ㅈㅍㅇ” (the initials of the BJ’s alias plus “up”), “good point,” “let’s go along with what he says,” “what a try-hard” ...

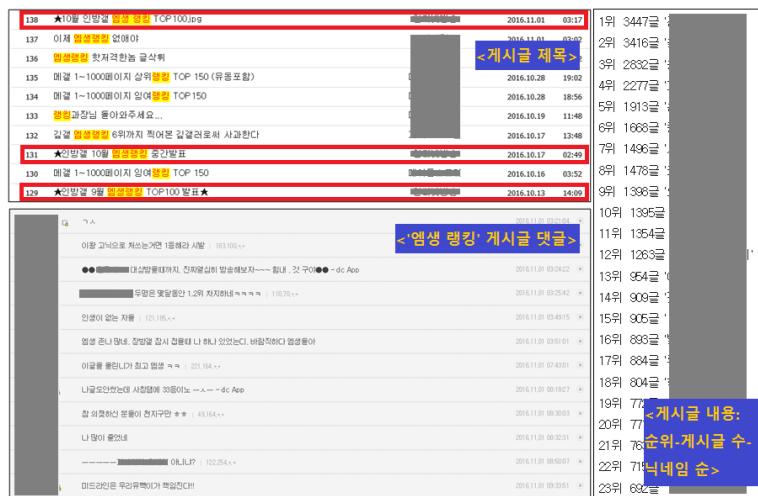
In the conversation above, we see terms tinged with mockery for the BJ and his soy sauce and milk-pouring reactions, such as “soy sauce pride” and “balloon beggar.” Yet, as we see, we cannot take the mockery merely as criticism, as it would appear from an “external” perspective. Above all, this BJ is recognized among locals as the bona fide “president of AfreecaTV.” If even he is sometimes called an “MCC,” or “MCSB,”¹⁹ both by himself and others, the meaning of this “monstrous” behavior must also incorporate approval and praise.

In short, the phrase “monster created by capitalism” can be seen as an exclusive local usage in AfreecaTV which yet includes the conventional meanings of its constituent words. The term “monster” does not refer to intrinsic personal qualities of “monstrousness.” Rather, it must be understood as the specific name for a condition born of the social relationships within AfreecaTV. In the starballoon giving game, in other words, “monster” is a mocking term or an expression of acknowledgment used when a BJ faithfully provides entertainment in exchange for her gift; and it is also used actively in self-description.

In our discussion, the term “MCC” has been applied only to BJs. This was partly because it is actually used mostly in reference to BJs. But I now intend to consider the implications of the word in a broader perspective. We have mentioned both BJs and viewers as AfreecaTV participants, so should we not also examine what “MCC” reveals on the side of viewers?

Instead of “monster,” the term “emsaeng” is used to describe a certain

¹⁹ (Translator’s note) “Monster created by starballoons.” The Korean abbreviation used is *byeollatgoe*, short for *byeolpungseon-i naheun goemul*.

Figure 5. The *Emsaeng* rankings for October 2016.

type of viewer. This is derived from the slang term “*emchang*²⁰ *insaeng*.²¹ On DC Inside, another forum that gives visibility to its viewers, the label carries the disparaging connotation of the original terms and is commonly used to mean “I’m now sitting here using DC Inside.”²² Of course, not all AfreecaTV participants and inbanggaelers²³ are labeled *emsaelng*. The term is normally used 1) to belittle an inbanggaeler as a means of aggressively rebutting her comment; 2) when a user is posting comments so eagerly that it looks as if “her life depends on it”; or 3) when a BJ is being given starballoons worth a large amount of money.

What is interesting is that in cases (2) and (3), this label is used on DC Inside for nicknames with high recognition. When we remember that nicknames on DC Inside are linked to character and that more “crazy-

20 “*Emchang*” (a fused abbreviation of “*eomma*” (“mom”) and “*changnyeo*” (“prostitute”)) is slang meaning “If I’m lying, my mom’s a whore.”

21 (Translator’s note) Someone who lives the life of an emchang. The meaning of the term is close to that of “loser.”

22 For example, in the context of saying, “My life is pathetic: I don’t have a good education and I can’t get a job” or “I’ve never had a boyfriend/girlfriend,” *emsaelng* contains the self-deprecating message “Therefore/despite this I’m sitting here now commenting on DC Inside.”

23 See footnote 9. Most comments on Inbanggael are about AfreecaTV broadcasts. Inbanggaelers addressed in this study are also AfreecaTV viewers.

power” brings a better reputation (Yi Gilho 2012: 60–61), we discover issues of status and authority entwined with the term *emsaeng*. Direct evidence of this is the “*emsaeng ranking*”²⁴ posted monthly on the site in accordance with overall comment prolificity.

The *emsaeng* who make it into the rankings are viewers devoted to digging into the broadcasts, pasts and private lives of BJs, and offering their own analyses and predictions (Figure 5). To borrow Yi Gilho’s analysis of commenting activity on DC Inside as governed by gift logic, these viewers are faithful participants in the giving game, busily providing and chewing up “material.”²⁵ A lot of what they write is publicly regarded as credible. This is partly because of their originality and insightfulness, but it is also because many of them are veteran viewers with long viewing histories, “big players,” or Die-hard Fans. The presence and status of those active on both DC Inside and AfreecaTV with the same nickname intersect the two platforms. Strangely, we discover shiny starballoons precisely at the point where “monster” meets the system of meaning in which the terms “big player,” “Die-hard Fan,” “*emsaeng*” and “crazy-power” circulate. From the BJ’s perspective, an *emsaeng* is both a nuisance who generates gossip about her and a symbiotic partner to be thankful for.

3. The Conflicting Structure of “Beloved Enemies”

1) *Speech and Authority*

AfreecaTV broadcasts are based on a one-to-many communication structure that forms rapidly and in real-time. Here, speech amounts to a competitive declaration aimed at making one’s existence known. On the speech platform that is AfreecaTV, combat basically takes the form of verbal conflict rather than violence or bloodshed. In this section, I intend to focus on issues of authority and power relating to speech between BJs and viewers. The central question now is whether power lies with the BJ, the viewers, or both. A three-way structure, with the BJ as “pretender,” Die-hard Fans and “big players” as “the figures with the money,” and other

²⁴ This is also the creation of *inbanggaelers*.

²⁵ According to Yi Gilho’s glossary of DC Inside terms, “material” (*tteokbap*) means “any subject that can focus the attention of *inbanggaelers*” (Yi Gilho 2012: 399).

viewers as “third-party witnesses,” will become apparent in connection with this issue too. Once again, inaccurate first impressions of AfreecaTV provide a pretext for telling this story.

When we see the BJ monopolizing the screen and the microphone and the viewers longing for the BJ to engage with their comments, it appears that some kind of solid hierarchy exists between them. Indeed, in the broadcasts I first encountered at random, the rule I picked up was that “friendliness (*chinmok*) is forbidden.”²⁶ Friendly interaction or chatter among viewers that “distracted attention from the BJ and obstructed the broadcast” was taboo.²⁷ Above, we saw how balloon giving, too, was an arena of competition and combat in which viewers and BJs vied for the right to speak. At the beginning of this study it appeared, from the perspective of an outsider, that the vertical differentiation between BJs and viewers, and among viewers themselves, related to inequality of opportunity to speak.

Yet, during actual broadcasts, we encounter a situation where we cannot be sure whether the central role is played by the BJ or the viewers. The viewers are not passive users, merely viewing the broadcast. Through the comment window, where comments flow in real-time, accompanying the BJ in the video window, AfreecaTV viewers are speakers and participants, actively producing and constituting part of the broadcast.²⁸ Even with the medium of starballoons, viewers have the power to quash the BJ’s right to speak or her will at any time through their comments, their words. The ever-changing tension between BJ and viewers can also be glimpsed in their speech, which can flip from respect to contempt in an instant. The following example shows bickering between a BJ, who wants to take the day off after broadcasting late into the small hours, and his viewers:

BJ: “Guys, listen up. To be honest, I’ve been going all out for the last five days ... And I put out a lot of great content yesterday, so would you mind if I took a few breaks today [the next broadcast]? They’re doing a [scheduled] inspection [of the AfreecaTV server] anyway ...”

²⁶ As discussed below, “anti-friendliness” functions as a rule that permeates AfreecaTV as a whole. This is also characteristic of DC Inside, which shares participants with AfreecaTV and, in many areas, a similar culture. For a more detailed discussion, see Yi Gilho (2012).

²⁷ (Editor’s note) The quotations in this sentence appear to be from AfreecaTV, though no precise information is provided in the Korean-language original.

²⁸ Despite this, I refer to them in this study as “viewers” or “fans” in accordance with AfreecaTV terminology and convention.

Viewers: "No, that's not ok." "Rest in peace forever." "No, it's not ok." "Keep your promise" (to broadcast every day).

BJ: "Fuck, I can't say anything to you lot! Fine, I won't take the day off! You make me sick. Can't you even talk nicely? You're pissing me off again. 'Rest in peace,' die' ... what the fuck?! Fine, I'll do the broadcast!"

Viewers: "Loooolllllll!" (repeatedly)

BJ: "At this rate, for fuck's sake, you'll shit all over me if you don't find Survival [the name of a later episode planned by the BJ] fun enough. Fuck!"

Viewers: "Loooollllll," "We'll always be here for you."

Strictly speaking, the viewers in the above situation have no right or authority to sit the BJ in front of a camera again if he decides not to broadcast. Despite this, their long, two-way argument shows clearly how the BJ's power is practically nonexistent and "a function operating in a void" (Clastres 2005: 39). In many respects, in fact, watching the BJ is reminiscent of the American Indian chief that Clastres described. To borrow Clastres's analysis (2005: 41-42), the BJ's talking skill on AfreecaTV is a condition and a means of political authority, and his endless speech can be described as not just a privilege but a duty and a yoke of sorts. Can we not, then, try to apply Clastres's early question about chieftaincy without authority—"What is this power that is deprived of its own exercise?" (2005: 38)—to the relationship between AfreecaTV participants?

Three questions follow. 1) Is the authority in the BJ's speech located outside the BJ (as with an Indian chief)? 2) What does differentiation within the viewer group imply when it comes to speaking? 3) Where Clastres declared that if power is a Western concept premised on the state, inequality, and coercive command-and-obey relationships, then primitive societies lacked power, could it also be said that AfreecaTV is, ultimately, a "society without power"?

Regarding the first question, we have seen indications in examples above that the answer will be "yes." For more depth, let's look at the BJ's specific strategies regarding the right to speak during a broadcast. As a means of controlling the broadcasting platform, the BJ holds cheat keys that viewers can neither know about nor access. She has the power, for example, to make a broadcast password-protected, to restrict access to viewers aged 19 and above, to make a blacklist of individuals to be forcibly

expelled or barred from commenting, to restrict commenting privileges to fans only, or to freeze and unfreeze the comments window.²⁹ Sometimes viewers who are appointed “managers” by the BJ perform this role on her behalf, in accord with her guidelines. Control strategies that do not rely on the actual mechanisms of the platform include taking advantage of the asymmetrical communication structure to read only the comments she wants to read, while “naturally” avoiding other comments. At the same time, BJs also use a “smokescreen” method of cleverly diverting the viewers’ attention: They make use of viewer comments in their broadcast but avoid getting caught up in them. In other words, BJs draw viewers’ attention and exploit their comments so as to direct the topic and mood. From the BJ’s perspective, this is effectively “rule number one” when it comes to presenting a broadcast.

In situations where comments cannot be ignored or controlled using the smokescreen tactic, BJs sometimes claim “ownership” or “sovereignty” over their channel or broadcast. If content they do not want to address keeps coming up in the comments window, they will assert that the broadcast is their own “exclusive territory,” saying things such as “This is my *bang*/channel,” “If you’re going to say stuff like that, you can leave,” “Don’t watch my broadcasts,” or “Go and do that somewhere else, not in my *bang*.” Yet the BJ’s words cannot be words of power or commands. Only once the BJ does give in to the harassment and talk about the topic mentioned in the comment, or once the viewers have had a good laugh at her for getting so wound up, do comments such as “That’s enough” appear in the window, and a new topic emerges. If the BJ does not align herself

²⁹ - Password setting: This makes a live broadcast accessible only by entering a password. In reality, it is very rare for a BJ to apply password protection vis-à-vis all viewers, except during temporary checks while preparing a broadcast.
- Age limiting: A BJ can designate a broadcast “adults (aged 19 and above) only” if she drinks alcohol or smokes during it, or uses strong language or behavior. When this happens, viewers below the age of 19 are automatically ejected from the broadcast.
- Blacklisting: Blocking designated viewers completely from viewing future broadcasts by the BJ.
- Expulsion: Expelled viewers are no longer able to watch the rest of a live broadcast. Unlike blacklisting, this is a temporary measure that allows them to take part again in the BJs next broadcast.
- Fan-only commenting: This allows only viewers who have become fans by donating at least one starballoon to the BJ to comment.
- Freezing/unfreezing comments: When the comment window is frozen, only the BJ and managers can comment. This is reversed by unfreezing.

with the general sentiment, her words end up isolated and echoing in a void.

Gossip, or “people power,” is viewers’ greatest strength. Even in issues other than speech, the BJ must keep an eye on this trend, given that her broadcasting depends on popularity and viewers’ support. Yet, for individual viewers, it is hard to find a voice except by acquiring status through giving starballoons. Not only does the rapid flow of the comments window mean that any comment easily becomes buried, but it also means the viewer must be mentioned by the BJ during a broadcast or she will go unheard. Viewers must collectivize their voices. The most basic strategy is the “wallpapering” technique, where one viewer, or several viewers, who have seen a particular comment, keep uploading it repeatedly. Smokescreening, whereby viewers obscure the BJ’s argument, is based on wallpapering. Of course, this does not always work to the disadvantage of the BJ. Above, I mentioned an example where commentary in unison by viewers served to enhance the mood of the starballoon giving game.

From the BJ’s perspective, problems arise when such tactics go against her will or words. No matter how much a BJ claims autonomy, the situation cannot be resolved as long as wallpapering continues (Figure 6). Sometimes, a BJ will forcibly impose sanctions (such as blacklisting or expulsion) on a few specific viewers in order to make an example of them. These are effective methods, but they carry a strong risk of turning people hostile, so BJs are reluctant to use them. In sum, the BJ’s words reveal the externality of her power. The group demands acceptance of the fact the BJ cannot exercise more power than anyone else.

One strategy for individual viewers to gain a bigger voice by themselves is by raising their fan rankings. Here we find the answer to the second question, about differentiation among speakers. Those who have been appointed managers by the BJ or who have raised their fan ranking by giving lots of starballoons show up differently in the comment window. When the broadcast is viewed on a mobile platform, the color of their commenting font is different; when viewed on a PC monitor, an icon indicating their rank appears next to their username. The BJ has a duty to manage her fans properly, and failure to accord appropriate treatment to Die-hard Fans and other “VIP” donors risks her livelihood. Whether because their comments are more visible or because they have to treat them well, BJs tend to mention the comments of managers or high-ranking fans more often during broadcasts. So far, it appears that the right of viewers to

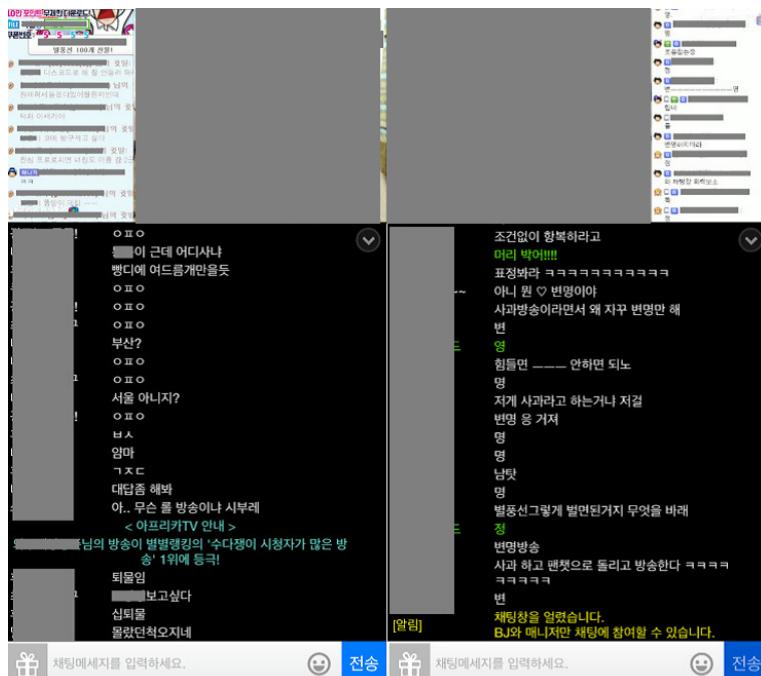


Figure 6. Comment windows being “wallpapered.”

- Left: The comment window of a BJ during a broadcast is being wallpapered with letters praising another BJ (“○ㅍ○”), distracting viewers’ attention.
- Right: A BJ apologizing during a broadcast to viewers demanding explanations about a scandal. The comment window is being wallpapered with words like “lifetime,” “ban,” and “excuses.” When the BJ was so overwhelmed that she could no longer continue the broadcast, somebody—either the BJ, a manager or the channel operator—froze the window (see yellow text).³⁰ That provoked even greater indignation.

speak differs in proportion to the scale of their donations, like some kind of social class system.

But in the dynamics between participants, we must never overlook the third party that is the mass of other viewers. Let’s remember how donors giving huge numbers of starballoons can still be condemned as soon as they act in an “overbearing” fashion or openly reveal that they want attention. A viewer with a wad of cash may use it to gain recognition of her

³⁰ (Translator’s note) The yellow text reads: “Notice: [Unspecified subject] has frozen the comments window. Only the BJ and managers can make comments.”

dignity or authority, but this does not guarantee that she will be able to exercise more power than other participants. The more a BJ shows bias toward a minority of viewers by mentioning their comments only, and the more “big player” viewers show off their closeness to the BJ in the comment window, the more they come under strong criticism for “ass licking.” Locals claim that “real fans don’t talk,” and acts of hospitality “obstruct the broadcast and block new [viewers/fans] from coming in.” This kind of behavior does, indeed, lay a foundation for creating a kind of hierarchy of influence; and it is rejected as a threat to the reproduction of the group.

In short, this society does not allow vertical differentiation to settle into inequality of power, be it in the relationship between the BJ and viewers or within the viewer group. The BJ is the pivotal presence in the broadcast, and starballoons are a “fast-track” for viewers to obtain active recognition of their presence; but in the specific comings and goings of speech, power is rejected by the society. Continuing competition for status among participants, shown in how they belittle and verbally attack each other, serves to regenerate the independent freedom and equality of the society.

2) Friendliness-hostility

AfreecaTV: a place where participants constantly threaten and try to control each other. This place, where no “overbearing behavior” is tolerated, sometimes seems to represent rampant abuse of freedom. To those unfamiliar with it, the site’s extreme violence, with its participants ripping each other apart, is more than a little disturbing. So far, I have looked into how relationships that look “hostile” from the outside operate simultaneously with the reciprocal principle of gifts (Section 2) and how “anti-authoritarian” politics is integrated into this kind of society (Section 3, Subsection 1); but I have still not been able to solve the problem of how the society is able to survive its endemic eruptions of violence. Or, to put it another way: Why does “hostility” among participants arise, and why does it not end these relationships? Could their arguments be a means of friendliness in this society?

First, let’s see what the people of AfreecaTV think about the endless squabbling:

- Inbanggael comment title: What I acknowledge about BJ □□

- Comment: “I don’t watch women’s broadcasts³¹ at all, and I’ve never watched █’s broadcasts for long, as I can barely stand them for five minutes. But there’s one thing I’ll admit. She’s one of a small handful of BJs who can deal with dickhead AfreecaTV viewers. TBH I hate a lot of things about AfreecaTV commenting culture. You say anything and it gets smokescreened, there’s endless bickering and backstabbing, and they make fuck-loads of demands and never shut the fuck up complaining. ... Mostly the BJ gets stuck in the middle trying to keep it all together and then the broadcast is over. Sometimes even W and Y, not to mention other BJs, get properly mad with the comments and fight with the viewers. Even H, who was a great image maker, ended up destroyed by aggro from commenters. They say BJs make their living from aggro but what use is it if you can’t rise above the sea of douchebag viewers after days and days of it?”

- Replies: “You’re not wrong. AfreecaTV’s own breed of dickhead viewers have a fucked-up culture;” “Yeah you’re right, nice comment. I’m just a regular viewer too, but it’s true that we’re the problem;” “There’s nothing BJs can do. They’re lucky just to stay sane;” “Yeah, just surviving with aggro levels like that takes some skill;” “To be honest, BJs are nowhere neeeaaaarrrrrr as bad as viewers lol – at least they don’t abuse everyone all the time.”

Viewers belittle themselves as a “dickheads” and are all too aware that their specific ways of talking create a “fucked-up/despicable culture;” but they see “overcoming” violence as a measure for gauging a participant’s ability and status. By contrast, those who rush to arbitrate what is right and wrong or to complain are seen as “fucking killjoys” and branded “*seonbi*.³² In the context of AfreecaTV, a *seonbi* is generally the polar opposite of a “monster” and “should be rejected.” The following example, which offers a compressed glimpse of viewers’ sarcastic attitude of towards *seonbi*, is the creation of an inbanggaeler who received much support from other participants (Figure 7).

We discussed above how fun, in the system of reciprocal exchange, was the *hau* of the gift. In view of this, it becomes highly significant that those who act like *seonbi* are compared to “repressors.” Here, an individual who cannot or does not provide fun is failing to do her duty. Sometimes, such individuals are disparaged as newbies rather than *seonbi*, meaning that, like

³¹ (Translator’s note) The Korean term used here is *yeokam*, a term used for visual radio broadcasts made by women.

³² (Translator’s note) Meaning “classical scholar” in the pre-modern Korean mold, the word *seonbi* can be used to conjure the image of a humorless figure with no sense of fun.

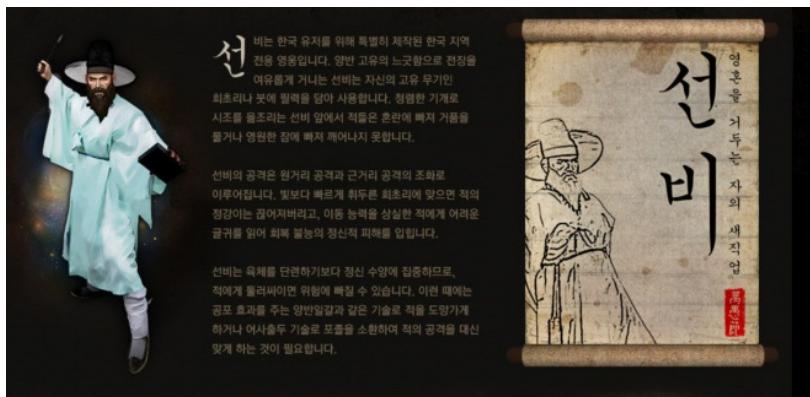


Figure 7. An image spread by one viewer: “*Seonbi*: the new profession for repressing the spirit” (of AfreecaTV).

Here, the user writes, “If you’re going to say ‘Don’t do that,’ ‘that’s wrong,’ ‘that’s rude,’ ‘that’s against the rules,’ during a broadcast, just go and watch EBS³³ or a documentary. Even on EBS documentaries, you see lions ripping out the throats of deer and blood spurting everywhere.”

a new kid in school, they don’t know the rules or culture of the group. When these examples are taken together, the fierce fighting and words are symbolic actions that show and acknowledge that the participants involved have made the transition from outsider to insider. The fun that accompanies violence is thus clearly an important element to locals, but their fighting cannot be explained solely by the logic of reciprocal exchange. Let’s now examine another aspect of their arguments, remembering our earlier discussion of how, in AfreecaTV society, the realm of power is located simultaneously and in multiple layers outside the realm of exchange.

A pronounced pattern can be seen, in which a series of combats flare up and disappear in an instant. One clear example of this is a “riot,” in which violence is intensified collectively. A riot is triggered when a BJ says something that angers the viewers. The viewers wallpaper the comment window with single words and syllables such as “ri”-“ot,” “lifetime”-“ban”³⁴ and “fuck”-“off,” ignoring and thwarting the words and intentions of the BJ. BJs deal with this by returning the viewers’ anger, stressing their sincerity

³³ (Translator’s note) EBS (Korea Educational Broadcasting System) is a South Korean educational public broadcaster.

³⁴ A punishment imposed by AfreecaTV on BJs for causing scandals.

by promising “only to tell the facts” or appealing to viewers’ emotions by bursting into tears. At the same time, BJs believe that, to some extent, they can worm their way out of circumstances that would otherwise prove controversial as long as they are fun. So they sometimes claim that they “made up” the whole anger-inducing episode for entertainment or try to create a smokescreen by making another promise that diverts their viewers’ attention.

No matter how much fun material a broadcast contains, if the viewers remain unconvinced, they may refute the BJ’s claims, claiming she has tried to deceive them with “fabricationism,” or remaining angry and mocking her for “turning on the waterworks” or “telling a sob story.” But if the BJ’s response is accompanied by fun, and the mood is somehow an accepting one, the comment window soon fills with a wave of “o ✕” (“acknowledged”) comments. At the end of this ritual process of expressing, compromising and wiping away violence is hospitality from locals to the object of the violence—who, given that he is a member of AfreecaTV too, also embodies the “friendliness-hostility principle.”

4. Conclusion

This study began with bemusement at the dramatic actions of people on AfreecaTV. The kind of content in the website’s broadcasts and comment windows that has incurred public criticism is clearly of a level that can neither be permitted nor transmitted in conventional broadcast media such as television. Yet, upon closer inspection, it soon becomes clear that conventional explanations for such “monstrous” behavior, such as attributing it to money or claiming that it offers a portrait of lonely, repressed individuals in modern society, are inadequate. Focusing on the fact that AfreecaTV broadcasts take place in the space of the internet, a relative blind spot in terms of the system, this study has attempted to analyze the internal logic of interactions between BJs and viewers in cyberspace. In fact, the world of “monsters” is not incomprehensible to us but operates according to highly communal principles.

A series of questions as to why AfreecaTV’s participants act the way they do, and how they could possibly act that way, is answered, according to local logic, by a twisted narrative whereby “X is both X and not X.” It was shown in Section 2 that “capitalism” is both capitalism and not capitalism.

Rather than contravening capitalist principles, starballoons accumulate in a non-capitalist realm that functions through the involvement of a third party. On AfreecaTV, the “monster” is a liminal figure that creates “capitalism,” a realm that marks the boundary between capitalism and non-capitalism and is not part of either. We have seen in detail how, although “monster” connotes self-deprecation, it is associated with issues of honor and recognition, not stigma. We have discovered that, in the continuous conflict that accompanies starballoons, the relationship between BJ and viewers follows a logic of friendliness-hostility: they are friends, yet not friends (Section 3). In these arguments, the effects of giving starballoon gifts do not accumulate but are repeatedly overturned. Moreover, participants’ abusive and insult-filled broadcasts and comments, another “monstrous” feature of AfreecaTV, enabled the survival of freedom and equality in the society. They were connected to principles of group reproduction in AfreecaTV broadcasts. In sum, I posit that concurrent dualities on multiple levels are a socio-structural principle by which the local AfreecaTV society operates.

Several previous studies have posited that AfreecaTV is part of cyberspace, but examination of the media-esque aspects inherent in internet broadcasting has the potential to be further developed in future research. Although this study has concentrated only on the relationship between BJs and viewers, focusing on the starballoons and words they exchange, future studies may be expanded to include the relations with “the outside,” which affects the site. I believe this will lead to richer and more accurate exploration of ways to coexist with the realms of “the non-” and “the anti-,” which must always be taken into account by society and the state.

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[Appendix 1] “Giving” starballoons (Source: AfreecaTV website)

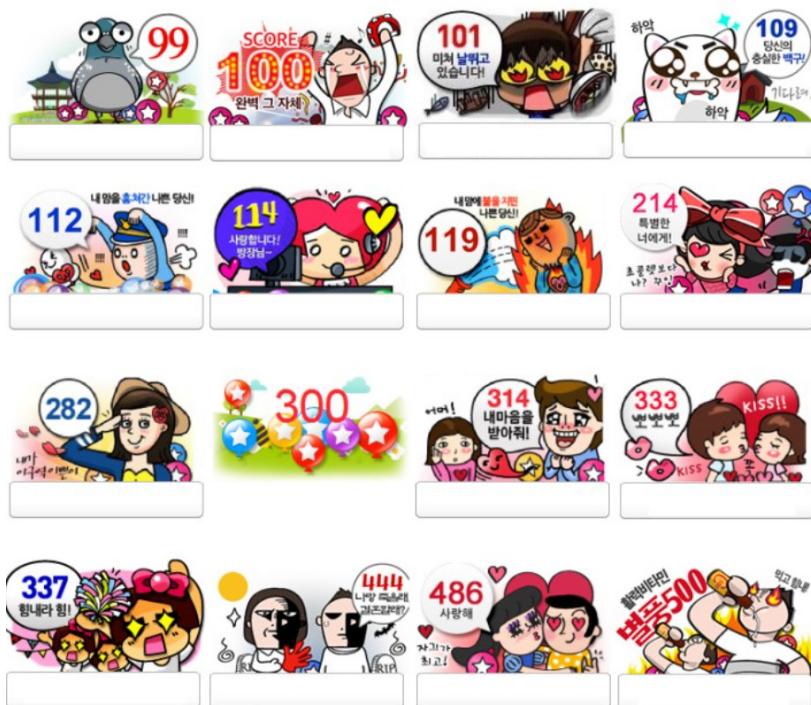
▣ 별풍선

참신하고 재미있는 방송을 진행하는 BJ에게 별풍선을 선물하세요. 별풍선을 많이 선물 받은 BJ는 아프리카TV의 빛나는 스타가 됩니다.



[Appendix 2]

Examples of starballoon images that appear in comment windows (Source: <http://dalin2.blog.me/220718695511>)



99 [<i>gu-gu</i> , the sound of a pigeon cooing]	Score 100 Perfect itself!	101 You're on fire!	109 Your loyal puppy! Wait!
112 [Korea's emergency police number] You're so naughty! You stole my heart!	114 [The telephone number of KT Corporation (formerly Korean Telecom)] I love you, BJ!	119 [Korea's emergency fire number] You're so naughty! You set my heart on fire!	214 [= February 14 = Valentine's Day] To someone special! You love me more than chocolate? Oooh!
282 The hottest girl in town	300	314 [= March 14 = White Day] I love you!	333 Kiss kiss kiss
337 [A popular clapping rhythm used in applause] Go go go!	444 [the Sino-Korean numeral four, <i>sa</i> , homonymous with a Sino-Korean word for death]	486 [a number synonymous in Korea with <i>saranghae</i> , meaning "I love you"] I love you. You're the best!	500 Vitamin Power 500 Star Balloons Drink this for a boost!

Kim Soojin received her master's degree in anthropology from Seoul National University. In 2017, she published an article, “아프리카TV가 낳은 괴물들: 인터넷방송의 동시적 이중성에 관한 연구” [The monsters born in AfreecaTV: A research study of concurrent dualities in internet live-streaming] (『비교문화연구』 [Cross-cultural studies]), which she further developed into her master's thesis, “위반하는 사회: 실시간 인터넷방송 아프리카TV에서 나타나는 사회문화의 역동” [Violating society: The dynamics of social differentiation in AfreecaTV]. She approaches cyberspace as an existent social place and analyzes the emergence of a system and the boundaries for those living there. Currently, she is expanding her research into the area of cybernetics as a working principle for activities not limited to the Internet space.