

Dehradun-based Akshanshu Aswal, 26, is a mukbang video creator, who used his filmmaking experience in the lockdown to get creative without having to step out



# TAKE A BIG BITE

Mukbang videos of people eating massive high-caloric meals, which found popularity in South Korea in 2009, have become a global phenomenon. Indian creators and consumers, along with food psychologists and bloggers discuss the impulses behind such consumption

SUCHETA CHAKRABORTY

FORTY-two-year-old Ghatkopar resident Ulhas Kamathe, better known as the Chicken Leg Piece guy, started making lipsyncing videos on TikTok until a spontaneous food video went viral internationally. Not a follower of international mukbang videos, Kamathe poured his own unique style into his content—with his signature act of holding a leg of chicken, saying the words “chicken leg piece” out loud and then promptly gorging on it—and found them drawing millions to his channel. A staunch non-vegetarian, Kamathe shares that he has always preferred variety in his meals and has had a predilection for spicy food. But when not promoting a restaurant, does he cook the variety of items that feature in his videos? “I can’t cook at all. I can only eat!” laughs Kamathe, admitting that his wife Archana has catered to his gastro-

nomic demands for years given his general reluctance to order restaurant dishes. Expectedly, plump legs of chicken are a favourite, followed by chicken biriyani and dried Bombay duck or sukha bombil. Dehradun-based creator Akshanshu Aswal, 26, however, unlike Kamathe, has followed TV shows like James Cunningham’s Eat St. about North American street food and Adam Richman’s highly indulgent Man v. Food for years, eager to start his own YouTube channel on travelling and food. As a cinematographer who worked in Mumbai for two years prior to his video creator stint, a love of filmmaking further helped bring these varied interests together. With travel restricted in early 2020, he decided to give mukbang videos a try, admitting to having little prior knowledge of them. This kind of food content can be roughly divided into two types, explains Aswal. While mukbang vide-

os typically have hosts consuming food while interacting with their audience, there are ASMR (Autonomous sensory meridian response) videos which accentuate sounds of eating like a crunch or a slurp, which apparently audiences find soothing. Moreover, the original target audience for these videos which first surfaced in South Korea over a decade ago were people living solitary lives, like students pursuing academics away from their homes. “They were for people who were living, eating and preparing their food alone,” says Aswal. Apart from an easy interactive style and a practice of featuring

ULHAS KAMATHE’S FOLLOWERS  
6.9M TikTok  
1.2M Instagram  
1M YouTube



Mumbai resident Ulhas Kamathe says he has always been a fan of spicy food and in fact, adds extra chillies to his plate if his meal doesn’t have the required heat. PIC/SAYYED SAMEER ABEDI

Japanese and American cuisines food while interacting with their audience, there are ASMR (Autonomous sensory meridian response) videos which accentuate sounds of eating like a crunch or a slurp, which apparently audiences find soothing. Moreover, the original target audience for these videos which first surfaced in South Korea over a decade ago were people living solitary lives, like students pursuing academics away from their homes. “They were for people who were living, eating and preparing their food alone,” says Aswal. Apart from an easy interactive style and a practice of featuring

Tube channel has around 4,13,000 subscribers, however, knows that there’s something more that does the trick. “I imagine myself as my audience. I would love to watch someone eat things that I can’t eat, and that’s why I upload my videos at night [when people are generally eating their meals],” he says. For 19-year-old Gia Badami who follows international creators like Eloise Head and Nic Kaufmann on Instagram, the sight of scrumptious junk food like ramen, burgers and pizzas induces hunger. “When I see so much of good food on screen and then look down to see dal chawal on my plate, it somehow makes the latter less boring,” sharing that the videos have both an entertaining and a deliciously soothing quality. It is this addictive nature of the videos, associated with a steady surge of dopamine release, that may prove harmful, warns nutritionist and food psychologist Diksha Wadhvani. For the creator, routinely engaging in excessive meals, causes harm to hormones like leptin and ghrelin that regulate satiety. “No one is making mukbang videos on salads or soups, or with dal chawal. The food involved is usually something that is high on calories and addictive,” notes Wadhvani. “We are actually disrespecting those hormones and our body’s mechanism by stuffing ourselves with so much food.” Moreover, the euphoria-giving hormone dopamine, she explains, is released as a response to pleasure and reward through sex, drugs, food and alcohol. But if indulged, it can result in addictive behaviour. “If a piece of chocolate releases a

Continued on page 21

Continued from page 20

certain amount of dopamine, leaving an individual to experience a certain degree of pleasure, and he continues eating it, over time, even 20 bars of chocolate will not be sufficient to give him the same pleasure, so he will want to go back and eat it over and over again,” she explains. “I’m not saying every creator out there is physically or mentally unfit, but if they continue to do it to be able to create content that is demanded of them, it will cause harm.” Moreover, even for the consumer of such content, there is a significant quantity of dopamine release,

she says, especially with ASMR or mukbang videos, since they induce repetitive behaviour. “No one watches just one mukbang video: it’s on loop and it gives you the anticipation of how good the food must be and resultantly the pleasure hormone is released in the body.” She also points out how the sounds of eating specifically contribute to this feeling of pleasure. “If there was no sound, or only background music, it would not have had that kind of impact or create the sort of pleasure for the person watching it. When you’re watching someone



eat, you want to do the same. Without sound, that won’t happen as it is an incomplete process for the brain to comprehend.” For food writer Kalyan Karmakar, what accounts for the popularity of mukbang videos is their comic element. He highlights how comedy and sports are the two genres that do especially well on Indian

social media, and how these feed into a certain propensity for the slapstick and ribald which traditionally Indian comedy has encompassed. There is also the fact of the pandemic and increased isolation with people eating lonely meals that may have contributed to their popularity. As Aswal notes, his interactive videos have made people feel as if he is sitting across from them sharing a meal. Revenge eating, admits Karmakar, with people going out to eat routinely or ordering in because they have spent 18 or 19 months in some degree of isolation

during the lockdowns, is another side to these online meals of excess. Just like the increased popularity of travel content online, deprivation both of food and the social pleasures associated with it have led to people seeking this kind of vicarious pleasure. Moreover, in spite of the clamour around healthy eating, Karmakar points to research indicating that in India food preferences have largely leaned towards indulgence and taste. “It is only the urban, upper middle class segment, a minuscule portion, that concerns itself with provenance in terms of what is going into their bodies.”

sucheta.c@mid-day.com

## The dark side of affirmations

While positive self-talk is helping many sail through a difficult day, it’s having the reverse effect on some, especially those who are too traumatised to believe that all will be well



Experts believe positive self-talk won’t help if your actions don’t align with your words. An instance of this is saying, “I am thin” to the mirror, and then binging later. REPRESENTATION PIC

AASTHA ATRAY BANAN

IT was my therapist who made sense of it. She said, “Aahana, do you go around saying, I am a girl, I am a girl, every day?” I said, “No!” Yes, because it’s a fact and you believe it,” she replied. She told me that affirmations need to be rooted in reality, and have to be believable, or they can harm us negatively,” shares Aahana Mulla, author and emotional guide. Mulla recently went in for therapy, because the “self-talk or affirmations” that she repeated to herself every day, were getting toxic. “After a point, it felt like I needed to repeatedly say these things to myself to feel better. And that was putting [a lot of] pressure on me, which in turn was adding to my negative feelings.” Eventually, to get herself out of the spiral, she started going “downstream”. “I started to let go, and made it light and easy. If the af-

firmations came easy, great, or else fine. I also recommend that instead of affirmations, try replacement statements—if you have a bad thought, replant it with a good one. Move your body. Journal. There are many more ways to rid negativity beyond affirmations.” Daily affirmations are a hashtag that many follow on social media. This writer, too, shares affirmations with her Instagram family every morning. Affirmations are, simply put, “an affirmative thought” that are to be set in the present tense, as if they could change and mould your reality. “I am enough”, “I have all that I desire”, “I have the love of the one I want”, “I am appreciated at work”—are just a few examples. French psychologist and pharmacist Emile Coue is considered to be the father of affirmations. In the early 20th century, Coue noticed

that when he told his patients how effective a potion was as he gave it to them, the results were much better than if he said nothing. He felt that ideas which occupy our mind exclusively become reality, asking his patients to repeat the words, “Every day, in every way, I am getting better and better” to themselves. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn’t—he also discovered that his methods didn’t work if his patients made an independent judgement about their affirmation. Basically, they really needed to believe what they were saying for it to come true.

In the past few decades, several people have propagated affirmative thoughts. Bestselling author Louisa Hay, who wrote the self-help book You Can Heal Your Life (1984) discussed how the causes of disease included stress and unhealthy thought patterns. To affect positive change in the body, Hay felt that we need to change the way we think. There is also Rhonda Byrne’s The Secret (2006), which was based on the belief of the law of attraction—that good thoughts attract good outcomes and change a person’s life directly. The recent glut of affirmative literature has led to counter chatter about how it can actually end up making a person feel worse, especially when things don’t work out. Canadian researcher Dr Joanne Wood at the University of Waterloo and her colleagues at the University of New Brunswick, who published their research in the Journal of Psychological Science, said that “repeating positive self-statements may benefit certain people, such as individuals with high self-esteem, but backfire for the very people who need them the most”. They noticed that when positive self-statements strongly conflict with self-perception, there is not just resistance, but a reinforcing of self-perception. People who view themselves as unlovable, for example, find that saying that they are

You can’t replace the noise in your head with more noise. Wounded people need to heal and you need practical hardcore exercise for it. I started working out after my breakup. Anything that doesn’t address the shadow aspects of healing, doesn’t bode well. Atika Chohan, screenwriter



You can’t look at yourself in the mirror and say, ‘I am thin’, and then binge eat. The affirmation becomes negative as your actions aren’t aligned with it. It’s not the affirmation that is to blame, it’s your belief system. Chetna Chakravathy, positive action coach

Chetna Chakravathy, positive action coach

lovable strengthens their own negative view rather than reversing it. Screenwriter Atika Chohan, who wrote the Deepika Padukone-starrer Chhapaak (2020), has shared on Instagram how she finds affirmations to be unscientific. “Things like Reiki and tapping still could be affecting our neurological system,” she says. For her, structured practices like yoga have worked better instead. “You can’t replace the noise in your head with more noise. Wounded people need to

heal and you need practical hardcore exercise for it. I started working out after my breakup. Anything that doesn’t address the shadow aspects of healing, doesn’t bode well.” For actor Rytasha Rathore, who also shares her affirmations on social media, the key to maintaining balance is to not get dependent on the affirmation. “You have to work through the dark place, before saying, ‘I am okay’. Affirmations help me avoid the worst case scenario. But I prefer saying ‘setting an intention’ for my behaviour. It helps me make better decisions.” Integrative mental health expert and clinical psychologist Seema Hingoranny says that many therapists use affirmations as resources, but they won’t work if the patient has a fragmented mind. “They have to first process their grief, or else the affirmations won’t work. If they do, and they fail, then it becomes another thing that they are not good at. I always tell people don’t do it, just because your friends are doing it. Do it, because you believe it, and feel better after it. But some are too traumatised to believe a good thing, so they need to work on that first. They should give journalling or exercising a try.” But Chetna Chakravathy, positive action coach, feels that the trick is to know that it’s not a “one-affirmation-fits-all” kind of scenario. Chatterjee, who goes by the handle @positivityangel on Instagram, says that affirmations need to be customised and should be followed with action. “You can’t look at yourself in the mirror and say, ‘I am thin’, and then binge eat. The affirmation becomes negative as your actions aren’t aligned with it. Then you are causing unnecessary pressure on yourself. It’s not the affirmation that is to blame, it’s your belief system. Work through your fears and use affirmations in a realistic way. In the end, positivity equals acceptance.”

aastha.banan@mid-day.com