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Crafted Relaxation and Reciprocal Rhythms

Unveiling ASMR Culture with Applied Cultural Analysis

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Abstract

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This thesis explores the fascinating world of ASMR culture, aiming to expand academic understanding of this burgeoning online subculture. Employing applied cultural analysis, the study delves into ASMR phenomenon, synthesising existing literature to define ASMR culture boldly. Through qualitative methods such as netnography, online interviews, and autoethnography, data was collected from ASMRtists and ASMR audiences to understand the cultivation of ASMR culture. Two key research questions were addressed: what motivates individuals to seek ASMR relaxation, and what bonds exist within the ASMR community. Drawing from phenomenological theories and affect theory, the thesis reveals that ASMR relaxation is driven by intentionality, intimacy, and affordance, shaping a unique experience for ASMR audiences. Furthermore, through an analysis of gift exchange practices of ASMR community, the study elucidates the complex dynamics between different groups, highlighting the significance of emotional, reputational, and economic factors. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of ASMR culture, shedding light on its potential as a tool for relaxation and community-building. By bridging the gap in research on ASMR relaxation, the study offers insights into the role of intentionality, intimacy, and affordance in shaping ASMR experiences. Moreover, it challenges stigmatisation of ASMR, emphasising the need for contextual interpretation and caution against over-reliance on digital intimacy. The exploration of gift exchange dynamics enriches understanding of ASMR community formation, paving the way for a sustainable ASMR community. Innovatively, the study incorporates a first-person perspective, enriching the research landscape with insights from ASMRtists. By adopting diverse approaches, the thesis offers a comprehensive analysis of ASMR culture, inspiring future researchers to explore this intriguing phenomenon further.

Keywords: ASMR culture; Applied cultural analysis; Phenomenology; Gift exchange; Netnography

Abstract in Swedish

Utformad avslappning och ömsesidiga rytmer: Att avslöja ASMR-kulturen med tillämpad kulturell analys

Yizhen Wang

Denna avhandling utforskar den fascinerande världen av ASMR-kultur med målet att utöka den akademiska förståelsen för denna växande online-subkultur. Genom att tillämpa kulturell analys dyker studien in i ASMR-fenomenen genom att syntetisera befintlig litteratur för att djärvt definiera ASMR-kulturen. Genom kvalitativa metoder såsom netnografi, online-intervjuer och autoetnografi samlades data in från ASMR-konstnärer och ASMR-publik för att förstå odlingen av ASMR-kultur. Två centrala forskningsfrågor behandlades: vad som motiverar individer att söka ASMR-avslappning och vilka band som existerar inom ASMR-gemenskapen. Med utgångspunkt i fenomenologiska teorier och affektteori avslöjar avhandlingen att ASMR-avslappning drivs av intention, intimitet och tillgänglighet, vilket formar en unik upplevelse för ASMR-publiken. Vidare, genom en analys av gåvautbytespraxis inom ASMR-gemenskapen, belyser studien de komplexa dynamikerna mellan olika grupper och betonar betydelsen av emotionella, ryktmässiga och ekonomiska faktorer. Resultaten bidrar till en djupare förståelse för ASMR-kulturen och belyser dess potential som verktyg för avslappning och gemenskapsbyggande. Genom att överbrygga klyftan i forskningen om ASMR-avslappning erbjuder studien insikter om intentionens, intimitetens och tillgänglighetens roll för att forma ASMR-upplevelser. Dessutom utmanar den stigmatiseringen av ASMR och betonar behovet av kontextuell tolkning och försiktighet mot överdriven tilltro till digital intimitet. Utforskningen av gåvautbytesdynamik berikar förståelsen för ASMR-gemenskapsbildning och banar väg för en hållbar ASMR-gemenskap. Innovativt inkluderar studien ett förstapersonsperspektiv och berikar forskningslandskapet med insikter från ASMR-konstnärer. Genom att anta olika tillvägagångssätt erbjuder avhandlingen en omfattande analys av ASMR-kulturen och inspirerar framtida forskare att utforska detta intrikata fenomen ytterligare.

Nyckelord: ASMR-kultur; Tillämpad kulturell analys; Fenomenologi; Gåvautbyte; Netnografi

Abstract in Chinese

精雕细琢的放松与互惠节奏：透过应用文化分析揭示ASMR文化

王艺臻

本论文探讨了ASMR文化的迷人世界，旨在拓展对这一新兴网络亚文化的学术理解。采用应用文化分析，本研究深入探讨了ASMR现象，并综合已有文献大胆定义ASMR文化。通过多种定性方法，如网络民族志、半结构化在线访谈和自传民族志等，从ASMR创作者和ASMR观众两个视角收集数据，以了解ASMR文化的培育过程。本研究解决了两个关键研究问题：是什么促使个人寻求ASMR放松，以及ASMR社区内存在着怎样的纽带。借鉴现象学理论和情感理论，本论文揭示了ASMR放松的动力源于意图性、亲密性和可供性，这三重动力共同塑造了ASMR观众独特的体验。此外，通过对ASMR社区中的礼物交换实践进行分析，本研究阐明了不同群体之间复杂动态，揭示了ASMR社区中互惠关系背后的情感、声誉和经济因素影响。本研究结果有助于帮助人们更深入地理解ASMR文化，揭示其作为放松和社区建设工具的潜力。为了弥合ASMR文化研究中的缺失，本研究提供了关于意图性、亲密性和适应性在塑造ASMR体验中的作用的见解。此外，本论文批判了ASMR文化的污名化现象，并强调了对数字亲密关系过度依赖的谨慎和对ASMR视频存在背景的解释的必要性。对礼物交换实践的探索丰富了对ASMR社区形成的理解，为构建可持续的ASMR社区铺平了道路。本论文创新性的融入了第一人称的视角，通过ASMR创作者的见解丰富了研究领域。通过采用多种方法，本论文提供了对ASMR文化的全面分析，启发了未来研究者进一步探索这一有趣现象。

关键词：ASMR文化；应用文化分析；现象学；礼物交换；网络民族志

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The world has undergone unprecedented changes since 2020, bearing witness to history both on a personal level and as a global community. May we all remain healthy, happy, and grateful for each tranquil day that comes our way.

Ad Utrumque. May we continue to approach life with readiness and courage, embracing whatever challenges may lie ahead.

Yizhen Wang

Sichuan, China. 2024-04-27

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1 Introduction

Listen, my heart, to the whispers of the world with which it makes love to you.

—Rabindranath Tagore, *Stray Birds*, 1916

I experienced a strange feeling all the time. Ever since I was little, it has appeared again and again. On my scalp, on my back, and in my head. It was not annoying or unpleasant, on the contrary, it relaxed me. It was a fleeting firework that appeared in my changeless life, and I have long been accustomed to it. Time and time again, I ignored this wonderful tingling sensation in the minutiae of my quotidian routine. It was not until I was twenty-four years old that I officially hit the ground running with it.

While navigating the unfamiliar terrain of studying abroad in Sweden, I found myself grappling with insomnia. It was during this time that I stumbled upon ASMR videos online, initially met with skepticism. On a routinely sleepless night, I picked up my mobile phone again and then typed the word “*Zhu Mian* (助眠)”, which means “sleep aid”, on a Chinese video website Bilibili. I was eager to find a solution to my insomnia from the omnipotent online world. Luckily, many videos with the keyword “*Zhu Mian* (助眠)” have emerged from the Internet. It seemed that I was not the only one who was deeply affected by insomnia and prayed for help from the online world. I felt a little comfort at that moment. I clicked into a video called *Biting Pencils to Help You Sleep* because I felt strange and curious about the title. I was surprised to find that a female performer was biting a pencil to make some strange sounds and movements in the video. Her action lasted for a whole 20 minutes. In addition to the word “inexplicable”,

[FrivolousFox]狐狸姐手势催眠 咬铅笔声音助眠~~

71.3万 1808 2019-09-17 10:09:05



Figure 1. Screenshot of ASMR Bilibili channel homepage. Retrieved from https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1uJ411w7YL/?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click&vd_source=85f5b7670618923a07d8575743640bd2. (Date of retrieval: February 20, 2020)

I could not find a more suitable word to describe my feelings at that moment. What’s even more confusing to me is that this inexplicable video actually gained hundreds of views, and many people in the comment area expressed how relaxed and helpful this video was for them. It was exactly at that moment that I

encountered ASMR. My scalp somehow had a strange sense of numbness, and my eardrum could feel the vibration that was brought by the biting. I felt relaxed and comfortable through this video, and I had a good sleep that night. I was soon captivated by the mesmerising effect of these seemingly weird actions.

These personal encounters served as catalysts for my exploration of ASMR's multifaceted essence. Although I did not encounter the term "ASMR" until adulthood, the profound relaxation induced by auditory, tactile, and visual stimuli resonated deeply within me. Fueled by the vibrant ASMR community online and my own visceral experiences, I embarked on a quest to unravel the essence of ASMR.

1.1 The History of ASMR

The concept of ASMR, an abbreviation for Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response, was coined in 2010 by healthcare manager Jennifer Allen according to American physiologist Craig Richard's research. This pivotal moment marked the formal recognition of a sensation that had long been experienced but not explicitly defined. ASMR encapsulate the physical and psychological effects. It is mostly triggered by various external stimuli, including auditory, visual, and tactile stimuli. These stimuli, though primarily external, may manifest differently for each individual, eliciting sensations ranging from tingling along the spine to relaxation of the entire body. Richard's research highlighted the subjective nature of ASMR, noting that while not universally experienced, it resonates deeply with individuals across diverse demographics, transcending boundaries of age, gender, and cultural background (Richard, 2018, p. 12).

Although the term ASMR gained prominence in 2010, the exploration of this sensory phenomenon predates its formal identification. Richard traced the earliest discussions surrounding ASMR to a forum thread titled "Weird Sensation Feels Good" on SteadyHealth.com in 2007. Here, a user identified as okaywhatever51838 intricately described personal encounters with this sensation, recounting experiences from childhood to adolescence.

i get this sensation sometimes. theres no real trigger for it. it just happenes randomly. its been happening since i was a kid and i'm 21 now. some examples of what it seems has caused it to happen before are as a child while watching a puppet show and when i was being read a story to. as a teenager when a classmate did me a favor and when a friend drew on the palm of my hand with markers. sometimes it happens for no reason at all that i can tell, though. i'll just be sitting or whatever doing whatever and it happens. its like in my head and all over my body. if i get an itch when i'm

experiencing the sensation i won't scratch it cause the itch helps intensify it. i also like to trace my fingers along my skin because it feels good when experiencing the sensation. sometimes my eyes will water. when the sensation is over i will sometimes feel nauseous, but not that bad. just a slight hint of nausea. what is it?? i'm not complaining cause i love it, but i'm just wondering what it might be... help (okaywhatever51838, posted on steayhealth.com, 2007).

This post was like a stone thrown into the lake, causing ripples in the online world. Many people who have experienced the same sensation have appeared and replied “Me too!”, and gladly said that they have finally found someone who has the same experience. This thread has gained hundreds of replies over the years. This discussion also laid the foundation for further ASMR research. Learned from Richard’s book, some early discussion participants in this forum thread established the first ASMR discussion sites on Facebook, a community-focused ASMR blog, and the first ASMR research site, which laid a good foundation of network data for later ASMR research (Richard, 2018, p. 15).

In 2009, a pivotal moment in the evolution of ASMR occurred with the emergence of the first ASMR video on YouTube. Titled “Whisper 1-hello”, this brief yet impactful video featured a female performer with a British accent delivering soothing whispers to the audience. Despite its simplicity, the video garnered significant attention and served as a precursor to the expansive ASMR content landscape that would follow.

The proliferation of ASMR-related content on the Internet has propelled ASMR into the cultural zeitgeist, sparking widespread interest and discussion. From documentary series exploring the phenomenon’s intricacies to museum exhibitions showcasing ASMR as an art form, cultural institutions have embraced ASMR as a subject of study and contemplation. For example, the Swedish national public television broadcaster SVT produced a series of documentaries based on the theme of “*Sanningen om ASMR*” (truth about ASMR) in 2019. In 2020, the Swedish museum ArkDes cooperated with Bon Magazine to invite Swedish poets and writers to read their works in ASMR form and made an exhibition. In 2021, the famous HBO TV series *The White Lotus* also featured doing ASMR scenes.

Furthermore, ASMR’s commercial potential has not gone unnoticed, with brands leveraging its immersive qualities in advertising campaigns to engage consumers in unique and memorable ways. Many companies, such as IKEA, Reese, Safeguard, SK-II, etc., used ASMR as a powerful marketing tool to promote their products, and these ASMR ads have also attracted a lot of attention. As ASMR continues to evolve, its impact extends far beyond its origins,

permeating various aspects of contemporary culture and society. From its humble beginnings as a whispered confession on an online forum to its current status as a global cultural phenomenon, ASMR's journey is a testament to the power of human connection and sensory experience.

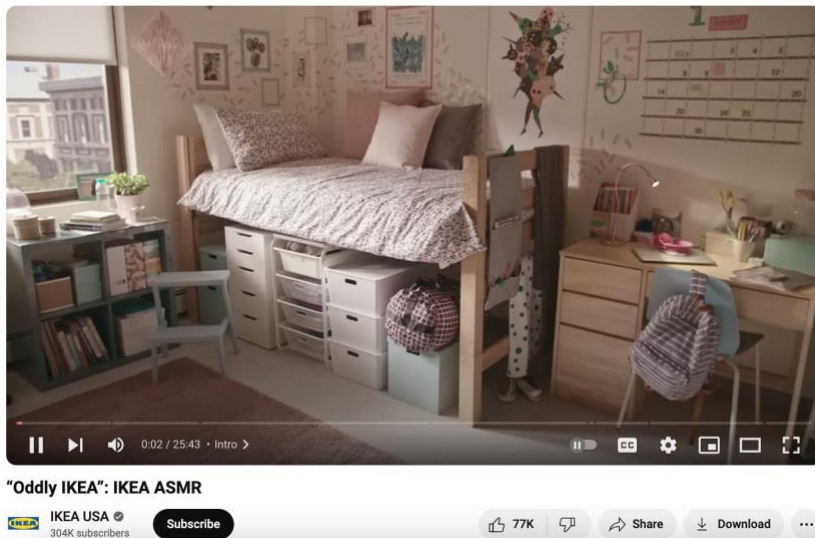


Figure 2. Screenshot of IKEA USA YouTube channel homepage. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uLFaj3Z_tWw&t=1293s. (Date of retrieval: April 17, 2024).

1.2 The Working Mechanism of ASMR

When Jennifer Allen coined the term Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response in 2010, her primary aim was to provide a clear, objective expression for this sensory experience. She intended to foster open dialogue and enhance awareness of the ASMR phenomenon among those unfamiliar with it. At the time, she believed that adopting a term with a somewhat “clinical” connotation was the most suitable choice (Allen, 2016). Through Allen’s endeavours, this unique sensation finally found a name that was widely discussed and disseminated. However, as discussions and research on ASMR have progressed, it becomes apparent that the nomenclature of ASMR, while providing a foundation for discussion, remains somewhat ambiguous and lacks scientific precision. For instance, it primarily focuses on describing the sensory effects following stimulation, without specifying the motives, senses involved, body parts affected, media materials used, or specific stimuli. This forms the basis of our analysis in this section.

So the tingles. It usually starts in the back of your head. It grows and comes in waves. If it's really good it can spread all down your back and chest and into your thighs. It is calming and relaxing and comfortable and very pleasant. It feels safe and welcoming and while you want it to continue forever you also want to go straight to

sleep. I definitely watch for the tingles. If I don't get any tingles from a video I find a different video. If I get lots of tingles from one I will watch it over and over. I mostly only do it when I'm going to sleep though. So for me it has become habit because I've been doing it for several years. (jibberish13, Posted on Subreddit ASMR, 2020)

The description above, drawn from a 2020 subreddit discussion, encapsulated a typical ASMR experience. It effectively highlighted specific details and characteristics of the ASMR phenomenon. For instance, tingles, the hallmark psychosensory experience of ASMR, served as the primary objective for many ASMR enthusiasts. Additionally, jibberish13 provided insights into the extent and frequency of ASMR experiences, along with a rich array of adjectives like “calming”, “relaxing”, and “comfortable”, which underscored the positive nature of the ASMR experience. The mention of “videos” suggested that jibberish13 was stimulated by the media content of ASMR videos. The statement “I mostly only do it when I'm going to sleep though” offered insight into the timing of ASMR experiences, typically sought before bedtime. This succinct response offered an accurate portrayal of the mechanics of the ASMR experience, indicating that the goal of watching ASMR videos is to induce tingles for relaxation and improved sleep quality.

Interestingly, within the same subreddit discussion, the second most upvoted response came from an ASMR enthusiast who did not experience tingles from ASMR videos but still chose to watch them for relaxation purposes.

I sadly don't believe I feel the tingles. Only time it happened was when my hair is played with. But I do watch the videos for relaxing purposes. Helps me zone out and fall asleep. (lemonails, Posted on Subreddit ASMR, 2020)

From lemonails's response, it becomes evident that although lemonails did not experience the characteristic ASMR tingles, lemonails still derived practical benefits from watching ASMR videos, namely relaxation and improved sleep. These responses reflect the frequent association of ASMR with relaxation and sleep aid.

Considering the above responses from both ASMR-experienced and non-experienced people, I boldly conclude that watching ASMR videos is not just a preference of ASMR experiencers. ASMR audiences consist of two types of people: ASMR experiencers and non-experiencers. Motivations for watching ASMR videos stem from three main aspects: seeking the unique psychosensory experience of tingles, aiding sleep, and relaxation. Motivations for watching ASMR videos stem from three main aspects: seeking the unique psychosensory experience of tingles, aiding sleep, and relaxation. Of these, relaxation emerges as the most common

motivation, applicable to both experiencers and non-experiencers alike. Dr. Richard concurs, stating that while brain tingles may be a prevalent aspect of ASMR, the primary enjoyment derived from ASMR lies in relaxation (2018, p. 13).

Over the years, various ASMR researchers have confirmed the significance of relaxation-seeking as a primary motivation for ASMR listeners through different experiments. British psychologists Barratt and Davis surveyed 475 self-identified ASMR experiencers via an online questionnaire, with 98% of participants agreeing or strongly agreeing that seeking relaxation was their primary reason for engaging with ASMR content (2015, p. 5). In psychological research conducted by British psychologists Poerio et al., participants were asked to watch ASMR and non-ASMR videos while physiological sensors recorded their heart rate and skin conductance levels. Results indicated reduced heart rates and increased skin conductance levels in ASMR experiencers, accompanied by positive affect (calmness and excitement) (2018, p. 13). Similarly, Japanese scholars Sakurai et al. used Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) to measure brain function during exposure to ASMR auditory stimuli, concluding that ASMR stimuli induce relaxation, even without eliciting tingling sensations (2021, p. 7). These studies collectively affirm that relaxation-seeking is a core motivation for ASMR audiences.

In the pursuit of relaxation, ASMR audiences turn to ASMR content, which is conveniently accessible on various online platforms. ASMR audiences seek relaxation through ASMR videos or audio recordings, anytime and anywhere, thereby contributing to the growth of the ASMR market. Content creators, affectionately referred to as ASMRtists, cater to audiences' preferences by crafting ASMR content across different categories, employing various triggers. According to Richard's estimate, "In 2022, there may be about 500,000 ASMR channels, 500,000 ASMRtists, and 25 million ASMR videos on YouTube" (Richard, 2022). Although these figures are only rough estimates, the giant potential of the ASMR consumer market can still be seen. At the same time, it is worth noting that these estimated figures are only for one online video platform, YouTube, and if considering the number of ASMR videos and participants on other video and audio platforms like TikTok, MissEvan, Bilibili, etc., the figures are even more astonishingly huge.

Each day, myriad freshly crafted ASMR videos and audio recordings proliferate across prominent online platforms, while the creation and enhancement of ASMR products undergo continuous refinement. Content creators, affectionately referred to as ASMRtists, cater to audiences' preferences by crafting ASMR content across different categories, employing

various triggers. According to Richard, ASMR triggers encompass a range of stimuli, including auditory, tactile, visual, and scenario triggers, all enveloped in a gentle, calming, and enjoyable presentation (2018, p. 13). Although triggers can be further subdivided based on different criteria such as whispering, roleplay, tapping, and eating, etc., auditory triggers remain the most integral and indispensable element. A study by British psychologists Barratt et al. also highlighted the potency of auditory triggers in eliciting ASMR responses (2017, p. 10).

It is important to note that individuals may respond differently to the same ASMR trigger. For instance, “mouth sounds” may induce relaxation in some individuals while evoking aversion in others (Barratt et al., 2017, p. 2). The idiosyncratic nature of ASMR experiences underscores its personalised and subjective nature. This variability and complexity contribute to the diverse range of ASMR products, fostering a thriving ASMR culture and community.

The term “ASMR” has transcended its original meaning, evolving into an audiovisual phenomenon shaped by technology and media. ASMR content creators continue to produce a myriad of videos and audio recordings, catering to the diverse preferences of ASMR enthusiasts. With the proliferation of ASMR content on online platforms, ASMR culture has gained mainstream recognition and acceptance. ASMR’s integration into mainstream consumer markets has further propelled its cultural significance, symbolising a dynamic interplay between human creativity, technology, and society.

1.3 Define ASMR Culture

In the realm of ASMR research, the focus has predominantly gravitated towards the experiential aspect and the ASMR community. While these avenues of inquiry are undeniably integral to understanding ASMR culture, the precise delineation of ASMR as a distinct cultural phenomenon has often been elusive. Many socio-cultural researchers have tangentially discussed ASMR culture in their studies, analyzing the phenomenon through various socio-cultural theoretical frameworks. However, a definitive definition of ASMR culture has remained elusive. Hence, in this discourse, I propose a bold definition of ASMR culture, aiming to provide clarity for cultural researchers and the wider public.

To define ASMR culture, we must first grasp the concept of culture itself. Throughout the history of anthropology, the definition of culture has undergone numerous iterations. American anthropologists Clyde Kluckhohn and Alfred Kroeber once documented as many as 161 different definitions of culture, highlighting its complexity and variability (2015, p. 3).

Understanding culture as an ever-evolving and dynamic construct shaped by societal development and diverse socio-economic and political contexts is paramount. Drawing from the insights of Victorian anthropologist E.B. Tylor and esteemed American cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz, Norwegian anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen defines culture as “those abilities, notions, and forms of behavior persons have acquired as members of society” (2015, p. 4). This definition serves as the cornerstone for elucidating ASMR culture in this discourse.

British media researcher Rob Gallagher also offered fragments of the definition of ASMR culture. According to Gallagher, ASMR culture constitutes a burgeoning subculture of the Internet, originating from online health forums and currently centred on platforms like YouTube. ASMR culture strives to legitimize this seemingly enigmatic physiological phenomenon while avoiding its stigmatization. It embodies a convergence of human creativity and intentionality with non-human actors and techno-organic circuits. ASMR video culture epitomizes a shift in perceiving media not merely as expressive works but as mood regulators and tools. This culture sheds light on pivotal issues in digital culture, including the nexus between humans and networks, the formation of personal identity, and the emergence of new cultural forms prioritising feeling over meaning. ASMR culture is underpinned by networked neoliberalism, gendered and racialized forms of affective labour and caregiving, and algorithmic systems facilitating the valorisation of bodily experiences (Gallagher, 2018, p. 1-14). While Gallagher’s definition offers valuable insights, it primarily reflects a Western perspective. The discourse surrounding ASMR culture occurs within varied contexts, and with the proliferation of short video platforms such as TikTok, ASMR culture extends beyond YouTube.

Drawing upon the aforementioned insights and my fieldwork knowledge of ASMR culture, I propose the following definition of ASMR culture: ASMR, or Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response, denotes a positive psychosensory experience induced by external stimuli, eliciting sensations of tingling, relaxation, and pleasure within the body. This phenomenon transcends socio-cultural boundaries. With the advent of the Internet and new media, individuals have increasingly explored and shared this phenomenon, sparking discussions in online forums and the creation of videos and audio productions for online dissemination. Through this process of sharing and dissemination, the abilities, notions, and behavioural patterns associated with the ASMR phenomenon are assimilated and perpetuated by participants, thereby fostering the

emergence of ASMR community and culture. ASMR culture burgeons within the framework of Web 2.0, characterised by user-generated content and contributions (O'Reilly, 2009, p. 22 & p. 24). It fundamentally embodies grassroots culture, stemming from the expression of personal sentiments and collective consciousness. However, ASMR culture is multifaceted, with diverse perspectives and issues arising within its digital landscape. There is a tendency within ASMR culture to instrumentalise the phenomenon, emphasising its utilitarian value. To comprehend ASMR culture fully, one must delve into the temporal and spatial contexts in which it thrives, considering personal and communal experiences, and examining it through human, platform, and technological lenses. Only through this multifaceted approach can we gain a comprehensive understanding of ASMR culture. With this foundational understanding of ASMR culture established, the subsequent analysis will delve deeper into this cultural phenomenon from a cultural analyst's perspective.

1.4 The Aim of the Thesis

My selection of ASMR as the focal point of my thesis stems from two primary motivations. Firstly, a personal intrigue sparked by my own encounters with ASMR prompted my research interest. Having experienced ASMR since childhood, I remained oblivious to this distinct psychosensory phenomenon until the proliferation of ASMR videos on the Internet. Recognising the rarity of ASMR experiences and the prevailing controversy surrounding the topic, I perceive it as my dual duty – both as an ASMR experiencer and as a cultural analyst – to elucidate the essence of this phenomenon for the uninitiated. I aspire to delve beyond the well-documented pursuit of relaxation. Secondly, while delving into ASMR-related literature, I observed that much of the existing academic research merely skims the surface, primarily focusing on explaining the physiological mechanisms and responses associated with ASMR. There appears to be a noticeable gap in social-cultural studies, particularly concerning ASMR relaxation and ASMR community. Drawing from my experience as both an ASMR experiencer and a content creator across multiple platforms, I aim to bridge this gap. As such, in this thesis, I adopt the lens of a cultural analyst to address the following two pivotal questions about the ASMR cultural phenomenon:

1. What is behind ASMR relaxation? What motivates individuals to seek a relaxing ASMR experience?
2. What kind of bond exists between ASMR audiences and ASMRtists? How to deconstruct

and interpret the ASMR community from the perspective of applied cultural analysis?

Clarifying these questions posed a significant challenge. Given that ASMR culture resides predominantly in the digital realm, researching the ASMR community presented unique obstacles. Unlike traditional fieldwork, I lacked a fixed physical site for direct face-to-face interaction with research subjects. Consequently, my fieldwork, including interviews, was conducted virtually. While this approach afforded convenience, particularly during the pandemic, it also engendered a palpable disconnect with the ASMR community, particularly concerning research on ASMR content creators. Regrettably, I encountered difficulties in securing interviews with ASMR content creators, posing a substantial setback to my research and compromising the comprehensiveness of my study.

In an endeavour to address the dearth of research material on the ASMR community, I made a considered decision to assume the role of an ASMR content creator. However, this decision required meticulous deliberation and time to materialise. Consequently, my fieldwork extended over a considerable duration, spanning from February 2020 to April 2022, during which I continually immersed myself in diverse identities within the ASMR landscape. The primary phases of my fieldwork centred on two distinct periods: from February 2020 to April 2020, where I primarily engaged as an ASMR experiencer and researcher, and from May 2021 to April 2022, during which I transitioned into the role of an ASMR content creator, meticulously observing and analysing the nuances within the ASMR community. In subsequent chapters, I will present my research findings alongside my observations and reflections, aspiring that they contribute meaningfully towards addressing the aforementioned research questions.

1.5 Thesis Structure

This thesis will be structured into seven chapters. The introductory chapter, as presented in this section, provides the background of ASMR. The second chapter will focus on presenting previous academic research findings on the ASMR phenomenon across various disciplines. In the third chapter, I will outline the methodology employed in conducting my ASMR fieldwork. Chapter four will delve into the theoretical frameworks underpinning my ASMR research, with a primary emphasis on phenomenology. Chapter five will address the first research question concerning the ASMR experience. Here, I will present and analyse the collected materials. In chapter six, the second research question, pertaining to the ASMR community, will be explored, with data and analysis presented accordingly. Finally, in the concluding chapter, I

will summarise the key points discussed in the thesis, offer my insights, and propose potential future research directions for ASMR culture.

2 Previous Research on ASMR

In recent years, academia has begun to take notice of the emerging phenomenon of ASMR culture and has endeavoured to explain both the mechanism of the ASMR experience and ASMR community from various perspectives. A plethora of academic research on ASMR has continued to grow and evolve, providing a robust background and academic foundation for my research. The literature review below will primarily focus on these two aspects.

2.1 Previous Research on ASMR Experience

In the introduction section, I highlighted some of the current research on ASMR within psychology and neuroscience, all of which affirm the existence of ASMR and its ability to induce positive psychosensory experiences. This section will delve into researchers' explanations for the formation and mechanisms of ASMR experiences.

As a nascent field of research, scholars have endeavoured to explain the ASMR phenomenon by drawing connections between past experiences and existing phenomena. American psychologists Campo et al. were among the first to link the psycho-physical responses of ASMR and frisson, proposing that mindfulness plays a key role in ASMR experience, leading to increased happiness (2016, p. 5). Canadian biopsychologists Fredborg et al. conducted a comparative study on personality traits and ASMR, finding associations between ASMR and specific personality traits. They claimed that ASMR experiencer demonstrated significantly higher scores on Openness-to-Experience and Neuroticism, and significantly lower levels of Conscientiousness, Extraversion, and Agreeableness (2017, p. 1). American Neuroscientists McGeoch et al. explored the relationship between ASMR and misophonia, suggesting "synesthetic cross-activation between the primary auditory cortex and the anatomically adjacent insula may help explain these two puzzling conditions" (2020, p. 1). They argued that in ASMR, cross-activation of the affective tactile map leads to an increase in subjective well-being, whereas in misophonia the effect of cross-activation is to decrease emotional well-being.

In addition to comparative studies, researchers have attempted to deconstruct ASMR in terms of the experience itself. Social psychologists Smith et al. asserted that ASMR triggers are reliable, implying that listeners consistently respond to certain stimuli (2016, p. 3). British

psychologists Poerio et al. suggested that ASMR is a reliable physiological experience with potential therapeutic benefits (2018, p. 1). Musicologist Harper argued that mundane sounds in ASMR videos create intimacy, connecting audiences and performers (2019, p. 2). Sociologists Smith et al. emphasized the multifaceted nature of the ASMR experience, asserting that beyond the technical aspects like audio and visual components, understanding ASMR necessitates a consideration of affect. They argued that ASMR occupies a distinctive space within the realm of affect and emotion literature, blurring the boundaries between affect, feeling, and emotions (2019, p. 42-p. 43). Dr. Andersen further contended that in the realm of ASMR, affect and emotion are inseparable, intertwined with intentionality, memory, and nostalgia (2014, p. 3).

These studies offered valuable insights into ASMR experiences and culture, providing a framework for interpreting ASMR culture from a broader perspective in my research. In this thesis, I adopt a holistic approach, recognizing the interconnectedness of affect, emotion, and feeling in the ASMR experience. Consequently, I will employ these terms interchangeably to capture the rich complexity of ASMR phenomena. I will explore the roots of ASMR relaxation through a phenomenological lens, emphasizing intentionality, intimacy, and affordance. My applied cultural analysis will fill a gap regarding the underlying causes of ASMR relaxation within the current literature.

2.2 Previous Research on ASMR Community

The advent of network technology has reshaped the concept of community, extending social interaction beyond physical spaces to the virtual realm. Renowned critic Howard Rheingold noted in *Virtual Community* that virtual communities serve as aids, comforts, and sources of inspiration (1993, p. 23). Seeking support and solace motivates individuals to engage in online communities, especially for subcultures seeking resonance in the online sphere. The emergence of the ASMR community exemplifies this trend, representing a unique form of affective collaboration (Smith et al., 2019, p. 44).

Sound researcher Hudelson posited performance as a central element in the ASMR community, suggesting that both ASMR creators and enthusiasts engage in performative acts within their respective roles. ASMR audiences perceive ASMR as a remedy for insomnia and illness, leading creators to adopt therapeutic personas, such as dentists or therapists, in their videos. This performative aspect extends beyond ASMR videos to encompass various facets of the ASMR community, including gender performance, interaction, intimacy, and closeness

(Hudelson, 2012). At the core of ASMR performance lies the symbolism and simplification of mundane experiences, with creators ritualizing and stylizing everyday scenarios to elicit tingling sensations in their audience. Psychologists Smith et al. also underscored the significance of affect in shaping everyday relational dynamics within the ASMR context, highlighting ASMR's role in reproducing and amplifying affect (2019, p. 43).

In addition to performance, Dr. Jessica Maddox offered an economic perspective on ASMR, framing the ASMR YouTube community and creator-viewer relationships as transactional exchanges—relaxation offered in exchange for clicks, likes, views, and other metrics in the attention economy (2020). This reciprocal relationship forms the foundation for the sustenance and growth of the ASMR community, with creators investing more effort into content creation in response to audience engagement. Similarly, the audiences' support for creators reinforces this cycle, ensuring the continuous flow of ASMR content.

Distant intimacy emerges as a key theme in existing ASMR community research, reflecting the unique nature of online communication mediated by technology. Dr. Anderson observed that whispering in the ASMR community fosters intimacy without physical presence, leveraging video platforms' affordances for distant yet immersive participation. This digital mediation, coupled with real-life experience replication and extensive video sharing within the ASMR community, facilitates the community's formation and sustenance (2014, p. 7-8). Psychologists Smith et al. further asserted that the Internet plays a pivotal role in defining ASMR as an intentional affective experience constructed through sound, emphasizing digitally-mediated intimacy as a core component of ASMR culture (2019, p. 41).

While current research offered valuable insights into ASMR community dynamics, gaps remain, particularly in understanding the transfer practices within ASMR community, and in considering cultural contexts beyond the Western perspective. To address these gaps, this thesis adopts an applied cultural analysis approach to conduct netnography in both Western and Chinese contexts, aiming to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of ASMR culture.

3 Materials and Methods

Conducting fieldwork is a multifaceted and unpredictable endeavour. While I had some initial assumptions about my research questions and directions, my focus and interests often shifted

as new phenomena emerged in the field. Given that ASMR represents the emergence of new cultural forms that prioritise feeling over meaning (Gallagher, 2018, p. 2), exploring the cultural meanings behind it presented considerable challenges. In this context, employing appropriate fieldwork methods to gather research materials was crucial. Recognising that there are numerous approaches to conducting fieldwork and providing a definitive methodology is impossible, I positioned myself as the primary “scientific instrument”, investing a significant part of my own personality in the research process (Eriksen, 2015, p. 34). While the methods I adopted may not have been perfect, they were the most suitable for me and my research objectives.

In the process of gathering research materials, I primarily utilised three approaches to explore ASMR culture from two different perspectives: those of others and myself. When collecting materials from other ASMR culture participants, I employed netnography and online interviews to elicit their experiences and feelings about the phenomenon across various channels and platforms. Additionally, I employed autoethnography to articulate my own experiences as both an ASMR audience and an ASMR video creator. By occupying these dual roles within the community, I shed light on the hidden encounters and invisible functioning mechanisms within the ASMR community. I believe that this multi-sited and multi-perspective approach contributes to a more comprehensive and immersive understanding of ASMR culture.

3.1 Design, Participants and Materials

Here, I reiterate the research questions driving this thesis: to conduct a cultural analysis unraveling ASMR culture from the perspectives of ASMR experience and ASMR community, thereby fostering a better understanding of ASMR culture among both insiders and outsiders. With this aim, this thesis principally adopts a qualitative study research methodology. I designed two distinct programmes to investigate ASMR culture and collect relevant data. Ethnography serves as the primary methodological approach, allowing me to collect qualitative data on ASMR culture across different settings through netnography, online interviews, and autoethnography. This qualitative research approach enables a deep exploration of the ASMR experience and community, facilitating insightful cultural analysis from diverse perspectives.

Although I have been an ASMR audience for almost five years and have gained some insights into the phenomenon, I only began systematic ASMR fieldwork in February 2020. Over three months, from February to April 2020, I conducted multi-sited netnography across three digital

platforms: the Facebook group ASMR community, the subreddit ASMR column, and various YouTube ASMR channels. Concurrently, I recruited four ASMR audiences from the Facebook group *ASMR Community* and conducted one-hour online interviews with each participant. All interviews were conducted via Messenger through text messaging, with participants' electronic consent obtained for the study. Notably, I did not impose additional screening criteria, such as age, gender, or occupation, for participants; membership in the Facebook group was the sole requirement for participation. Therefore, for research on the ASMR experience, my data primarily comprises interviews and netnography, supplemented by personal reflections.

For research on the ASMR community, netnography served as the initial research strategy. However, as my understanding of this community deepened through fieldwork, I recognised that the roles of observer and audience alone were insufficient for gaining a profound understanding of ASMR content creators. Thus, I embarked on a bold experiment to augment my previous netnography within the ASMR community by becoming an ASMR video creator. Given my location in mainland China, my experiment was restricted to Chinese social media platforms, such as Red, Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok), Kuaishou, Xigua, Bilibili, and the audio-sharing platform MissEvan. From May 2021 to April 2022, I published 35 ASMR videos across these platforms, accruing more than 500 followers in the process. Red, in particular, yielded the highest number of followers, with a notable increase from 0 to 271. While different video-sharing platforms have distinct structures, regulations, and dynamics, they all serve as social media platforms for sharing and communication. Additionally, I draw on my netnography and personal reflections on the Western ASMR community to offer a more comprehensive interpretation of ASMR culture.

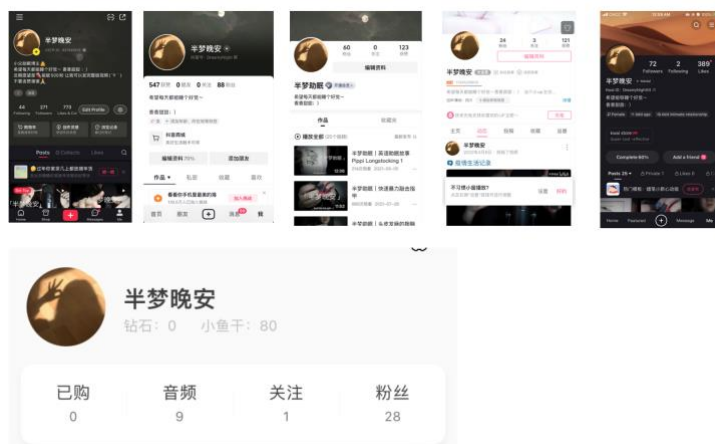


Figure 3. Screenshot of my six video platforms. (Date of retrieval: February 18, 2024).

From ASMR experience to ASMR community, and from Western ASMR social media to Chinese ASMR social media, I aim to conduct a thorough cultural analysis of ASMR culture using various research methods. Subsequent sections will provide detailed discussions of the research methods employed, along with an exploration of their respective strengths and limitations.

3.2 Multi-sited Netnography

As we know, ASMR is a digital culture, making netnography the most suitable research method for studying this phenomenon. According to cultural researcher Kozinets, netnography involves online participant observation using computer-mediated communications as a data source, aiming to achieve an ethnographic understanding and representation of a cultural or communal phenomenon (2010, p. 60). Therefore, netnography serves as a tailored research method for participant observation of phenomena and cultures occurring on the Internet.

From February to April 2020 and May 2021 to April 2022, I conducted netnography within the Facebook group *ASMR community*, the ASMR subreddit, ASMR videos on YouTube channels, and Chinese social media platforms including Red, Douyin, Kuaishou, Xigua, Bilibili, and MissEvan. My primary focus was on ASMR audience's descriptions of their ASMR experiences and their perspectives on the ASMR phenomenon. These platforms provided ample opportunities to observe and study the ASMR phenomenon and community across a broad digital landscape, facilitating the collection of extensive information within a short timeframe. In my subsequent data presentation and analysis, empirical data will be organised by theme rather than platform.

Netnography is evidently tailored to the needs of ASMR research. As a network subculture, the history and development of ASMR are readily traceable online. The Internet serves as a real-time updated archive, offering convenience for up-to-date research. Moreover, netnography allows access to diverse discussions participated in by many individuals, providing a material basis and multi-dimensional perspective for comprehensive investigation of network cultures or phenomena (Davies, 2008, p. 153). Constantly searching ASMR keywords across multiple websites enables me to obtain relevant information and follow development trends, facilitating the delineation of clear research contexts. Additionally, the majority of information obtained through netnography appears in typed messages, eliminating the need for transcription and saving time and effort (Davies, 2008, p. 154).

Netnography also enables ethnographers to understand people's genuine thoughts, lending validity to research data. According to Kozinets, netnography offers a subtle and in-depth method of observation, allowing analysis of Internet discourse that combines naturalism and unobtrusiveness (2010, p. 56). Unlike traditional interviews, netnography allows researchers to uncover hidden insights by observing people's behaviour, minimising researcher influence to avoid disrupting the research process (Davies, 2008, p. 157). Moreover, multi-sited netnography provides opportunities to understand cultures and communities from various perspectives, enhancing understanding of different thinking patterns and behaviours within the ASMR community across multiple platforms.

Despite its advantages, netnography also has limitations. As noted by Hine, virtual ethnography tends to be one-sided, making it challenging to achieve a holistic description of informants, locations, or cultures (2000, p. 65). Additionally, the data collected through netnography primarily consists of typed messages, limiting researchers' ability to interpret non-verbal cues such as facial expressions or body language. This reliance on typed messages also places a high demand on researchers' personal abilities to search, investigate, identify, and analyse research objects.

Despite these limitations, netnography remains a preferable option for studying digital culture. With sufficient netnography conducted on the research object, I am confident in obtaining ample data to ensure the validity of ASMR research.

3.3 Semi-structured Online Interview

As mentioned earlier, while netnography is the preferred research method for studying cyberculture, its scope is limited as a participant-observation method. One of its major drawbacks is the lack of direct interaction with the research subjects, hindering the exploration of topics according to the researcher's interests. To obtain first-hand data, I opted to engage directly with the ASMR community through ethnographic interviews, which proved invaluable in capturing personal experiences and perspectives on ASMR culture.

Given that ASMR is a niche topic not commonly discussed offline, conducting interviews in traditional settings proved challenging. However, online ASMR groups provided a platform to connect with potential interviewees. According to Dr. Charlotte Aull Davies, establishing one-on-one social connections and deep conversations is achievable through various social media outlets in the virtual world (2008, p. 153). Through direct private messages on the internet, I

recruited four participants and conducted individual interviews, offering valuable insights into their ASMR experiences and opinions, significantly enhancing my research.

The interviews were predominantly semi-structured. As described by Davis, a semi-structured interview is informal yet purposeful, with topics predetermined by the interviewer. While maintaining a formal arrangement, there are no rigid requirements for questions and answers, allowing flexibility to adapt to the interviewee's responses (2008, p. 105-p. 106). This approach aimed to afford interviewees the freedom to share their ASMR experiences without constraints, fostering deeper insights and potentially inspiring new perspectives (Davies, 2008, p. 109).

To ensure the comfort of the interviewees, I provided options for the interview format at the outset, including text, video, or audio via Facebook Messenger. Unanimously, all four interviewees opted for text-based interviews. This decision resulted in data collection primarily comprising typed messages, significantly reducing the transcription workload while maximising the accuracy of received information.

While interviews facilitated direct and rapid insights into ASMR experiences and community dynamics, this method has its limitations. Similar to netnography, the absence of facial expressions and body language in distant text interviews may result in information gaps. Though interviewees may utilise emojis to convey emotions, the potential for deception remains, posing a threat to interview validity. Furthermore, the limited number of interviewees, with three being female, may inadvertently skew or undermine the egalitarian nature of the research interview (Davies, 2008, p. 111). To mitigate these shortcomings and provide a comprehensive understanding of ASMR culture, I sought to complement online interviews with netnography and other research methods.

3.4 Autoethnography

In addition to netnography and online interviews, I incorporated autoethnography as my third research method. While the former methods are outward-focused, autoethnography delves into inward exploration. While netnography and online interviews shed light on the diverse perspectives of ASMR audiences, they fall short in exploring the intricacies within the ASMR community itself. As a researcher, I find myself drawn to uncovering the underlying truths beyond mere discourse, prompting me to utilise my own experiences as a conduit for research.

Inspired by ethnographer Ehn's assertion that cultural analyses inherently involve researchers

using themselves as tools and sources of information (2011, p. 54), I embarked on a bold experiment to deepen my understanding of the dynamics between ASMRtists, ASMR audiences, and the community. By assuming the role of an ASMRtist, I sought to engage with the platform and audience firsthand, enriching my insight into the ASMR community. Therefore, the autoethnography in this research constitutes a retrospective analysis and introspection based on my experimental immersion. Furthermore, as an existing ASMR audience, autoethnography enables me to provide a more nuanced depiction of the ASMR experience, serving to validate the experiences of other ASMR audiences.

As defined by researcher Adams et al., autoethnography utilises personal experience to elucidate cultural phenomena, beliefs, and practices (2017). Autoethnographers recognise that personal experiences are shaped by political and cultural norms, engaging in rigorous self-reflection—referred to as reflexivity—to discern the intersections between the self and societal contexts. Consequently, autoethnography offers a means to bridge gaps in existing research, leveraging personal experiences to elucidate aspects of ASMRtist and Chinese ASMR research that traditional methods may overlook. By immersing in inward exploration, researchers can glean insights without disrupting external subjects, facilitating a deeper understanding of the research process and enabling more comprehensive analyses.

However, autoethnography demands researchers maintain objectivity and rationality throughout inward analysis and exploration. Sensitivity to one's emotions and situational awareness are imperative, with researchers reminded that the ultimate aim is to present findings relevant to external audiences while remaining focused on the research's overarching goals.

3.5 Ethical Consideration

Diverging from traditional ethnographic studies, exploring network culture, especially through netnography, reveals that much of the data is publicly accessible. Thus, in researching and analysing network culture, it becomes crucial to navigate the boundary between information disclosure and privacy. While posted data is openly available to all internet users, it is essential to remain sensitive to online data's privacy implications (Davies, 2008, p. 167-p. 168). Even though respondents may openly post data in unobstructed online spaces, it may still be perceived as highly private by them. Consequently, obtaining consent from relevant stakeholders before referencing their data is paramount. In my research, I have diligently informed participants of my research purpose and secured their consent to quote their

conversations, while also taking measures to safeguard their privacy by withholding key information.

However, it is imperative to acknowledge that despite best efforts, complete privacy for informants cannot be guaranteed in the particular and open environment of the internet. Moreover, quoting network data poses several challenges. Firstly, locating contact information for respondents can be challenging, especially when some users' accounts are inactive. Secondly, due to the openness of online data, even anonymous references may inadvertently reveal the data's source (Davies, 2008, p. 169). It is essential to recognise that this inability to ensure complete anonymity is a characteristic of the internet environment rather than a flaw in the research process. Consequently, these challenges persist in current research, with no immediate solutions. Despite these inherent limitations of netnography, my data collection and citation processes adhere to the ethnographic research ethical framework.

4 Theoretical Framework

ASMR, as a contemporary phenomenon, has often been analysed through the lens of rational natural science, quantifying it into measurable metrics. While this approach has provided some insights into ASMR, it has also reduced the rich experiential dimension of ASMR into mere physiological or cognitive indicators, such as heart rate and blood pressure, which fail to capture its transcendental nature. As a cultural analyst, I aim to interpret ASMR culture through the lens of phenomenology, a philosophical approach that seeks to understand the essence of phenomena beyond appearances and presuppositions. Phenomenology, with its focus on the essence of things, offers a suitable framework for dissecting the ASMR phenomenon and revealing its true essence. Through phenomenological analysis, I hope to provide deeper insights into the ASMR experience, addressing the limitations of previous research that have failed to capture its true essence. I will also incorporate affordance theory to examine the development of the ASMR experience, considering three dimensions: social, technical, and emotional. Furthermore, in examining the ASMR community, I have observed that reciprocity plays a central role in shaping and sustaining its power structure. By deconstructing the dynamics of reciprocity within the community, I aim to shed light on the underlying mechanisms that govern interactions and relationships within the ASMR community.

4.1 Phenomenology of ASMR

The ASMR experience is multifaceted, encompassing physical, mental, and affective dimensions, often imbued with a sense of elusive beauty. While psychologists and neuroscientists have explored ASMR from the perspective of natural science, their hypotheses and experiments, while contributing to public understanding, have not delved deeper into the essence of the ASMR experience. Instead of navigating convoluted paths dictated by presuppositions, I advocate for a direct and intuitive exploration of the essence of ASMR. Phenomenology offers the ideal approach for this, prioritising a presupposition-less examination of phenomena to uncover their true essence. In this dissertation, I aim to utilise phenomenology's concrete and intuitive nature to guide myself and readers back to the essence of ASMR, facilitating a deeper understanding of this intriguing phenomenon.

4.1.1 Phenomenological Reduction

Phenomenology is not merely a set of philosophical propositions; rather, it is a methodological approach aimed at uncovering the essence of things. Introduced by the renowned German philosopher Edmund Husserl in the early 20th century, phenomenology sought to depart from the murky presuppositions of previous metaphysical and scientific inquiries, instead advocating for a return to the phenomena themselves with unbridled intellectual freedom (1983, p. XIX). In Husserl's vision, phenomenology aims to elucidate essences rather than factual matters, focusing on the transcendental realm beyond empirical observations (1983, p. XX). Shaun Gallagher, an American philosopher, characterised Husserl's phenomenology as a method for describing how things appear in conscious experience (2012, p. 8). Thus, phenomenology serves as a research method for intuitively describing transcendently reduced phenomena.

To achieve a phenomenological understanding of phenomena, one must undergo a process of reduction. Gallagher identified three primary methods of phenomenological reduction within Husserl's philosophy. Firstly, bracketing involves setting aside all presuppositions to isolate the phenomenon to its most primitive experience, where essence and phenomenon converge (Gallagher, 2012, p. 47). Secondly, eidetic reduction entails systematically altering the properties of a phenomenon to uncover its essential nature amidst varying manifestations (Husserl, 1983, p. 222; Gallagher, 2012, p. 49). Despite its limitations, eidetic reduction can be supplemented by empirical variations to address its shortcomings (Gallagher, 2012, p. 50). Finally, transcendence reduction transcends the limitations of subjective consciousness by acknowledging intersubjectivity, recognising the communal nature of perception and

understanding (Husserl, 1983, p. 108). Through the theoretical framework of phenomenology, we can gain a more direct understanding of the study focuses on human consciousness and ASMR experiences.

4.1.2 Lived Experience

Husserl's phenomenological reduction method offered valuable insights into understanding phenomena within the life world. It stripes away presuppositions for a direct encounter with essence amidst complexities. However, Husserl's focus on subjective experience may overlook objective existence.

French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty recognised this limitation within Husserl's framework and sought to address it in his seminal work *Phenomenology of Perception*. Merleau-Ponty advocated for grounding phenomenological inquiry in the embodied experience of existence. He asserted that individuals perceive the world through the lens of their own bodies, with perceptions serving as the focal point for interpreting and deconstructing objective realities. According to Merleau-Ponty, perception entails a dynamic interaction between the body and external phenomena, wherein each perception represents a profound communion between self and the world (2005, p. 373). Thus, Merleau-Ponty elevated human perception to a foundational aspect of all cognitive activities, asserting that without perception, theoretical frameworks and value systems would lose their validity. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty elucidated how past experiences inform present actions, and present perceptions anticipate future behaviours (2005, p. 161). He underscored the inseparable connection between the body, space, and time, positing that every perceptual experience encompasses the entirety of temporal and spatial dimensions. Consequently, individuals inhabit space and time, and their existence is contingent upon historical and social contexts.

Similarly, German philosopher Martin Heidegger regarded phenomenology as a means of revealing the inherent meaning of existence underscoring the existential significance inherent in phenomenological inquiry (2010, p. 125). In *Being and Time*, Heidegger introduced the concept of *Dasein*, which is "being-in-the-world" (2010, p. 138). Heidegger posited that engagement with the world constitutes the essence of Being, enabling the self to manifest within its surroundings. He adopted a holistic perspective, emphasising the interconnectedness of beings within the shared world. Heidegger highlighted the interwoven nature of human experiences, where past events resonate in the present, shaping individual perceptions and

collective realities (2010, p. 309). He described the phenomenology of *Dasein* as inherently hermeneutic, revealing concealed truths embedded within everyday phenomena (Heidegger, 2010, p. 127). Heidegger's analysis of *Dasein* through the lens of temporality served as a foundational theoretical perspective in *Being and Time*. He asserted that the essence of *Dasein* finds its significance in temporality, positing that all inquiries into being are rooted in temporal phenomena (2010, p. 92). According to Heidegger, time is the essential framework through which Being's existence is comprehended. He divided temporality into three interconnected dimensions - past, present, and future - viewing them as inseparable aspects of Being's ontology (2010, p. 93). Heidegger identified the past as the repository of tradition, the present as the locus of action, and the future as the realm of potentiality.

In synthesising the phenomenological insights of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty with Heidegger's ontological framework, I aim to interpret the ASMR experience by contextualising it within diverse temporal and spatial dimensions. These interpretive endeavours will be further expounded upon in the subsequent chapters.

4.1.3 Intentionality and Orientation

Another crucial concept in phenomenology is intentionality, central to Husserl's understanding of consciousness. Husserl defined intentionality as the inherent quality of mental processes to be conscious of something, indicating that consciousness is always directed towards an object external to itself (1983, p. 200). This implies a constant association between consciousness and the external world. Husserl's delineation of intentionality highlights the structural relationship between the conscious act and its object, employing the ancient Greek concepts of *Noesis* and *Noema* to elucidate this structure. According to philosopher Robert Sokolowski, *Noema* represents the transcendent attitude towards the objective correlates of intentionality – the concrete objects in the external world (2000, p. 62-63). *Noema* bestows intentionality upon consciousness, preventing it from falling into an egocentric trap, while *Noesis* encompasses intention-rich conscious acts such as perception, imagination, and memory. This directional view of intentionality clarifies that in phenomenological perception, conscious activity is not self-contained but directly engages with external objects through intentional activities. Consciousness exists only in its directedness towards objects of consciousness. By examining intentionality as the relationship between consciousness and object, we can effectively describe phenomena intended by consciousness.

Cultural researcher Sara Ahmed used the Husserlian concept of intentionality to illustrate the kinetic energy of orientation contained in affect. In Ahmed's work *Happy Objects*, she conceptualised affect as "sticky", suggesting that it fosters enduring connections between ideas, values, and objects (2010, p. 29). She contended that being affected by something involves intentionality, habitual social norms and shared values, which is manifested in how our bodies turn towards or away from objects (2010, p. 31 & p. 35). This orientation shapes our immediate surroundings and influences our preferences over time. Objects associated with positive experiences tend to become preferred, while those linked to negative experiences are avoided. This process establishes boundaries and reinforces our orientation towards objects, shaping our perception and experience. Ahmed's analytical approach, influenced by Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger, underscored the dynamic and contextual nature of our interactions with objects.

Both the concepts of intentionality and orientation entail a form of directedness, highlighting the dynamic interplay between individuals and their surrounding environment, thereby emphasising the intentional aspect of human experience. I will utilise these concepts in my analysis of the ASMR experience.

4.2 Affordance

When examining affective orientation and practices, particularly within the ASMR context in cyberculture, consideration of affordances becomes essential. Media scholar Hector Postigo distinguished two forms of affordance: technological and social (2014, p. 4 & p. 5). Technological affordance pertains to the functionalities enabled by technology, such as YouTube facilitating the upload and sharing of ASMR videos. Social affordance, on the other hand, encompasses changes in social structures and practices resulting from technological advancements. For instance, YouTube's emergence has influenced ASMR audience perceptions and community dynamics, even prompting regulatory responses to controversies surrounding ASMR content.

Moreover, in the realm of affective experiences like ASMR, a third aspect—emotional affordance—becomes pertinent. German cultural researcher Christoph Bareither introduced this concept by merging emotional practice theory with affordance theory. Emotional affordances refer to the capacity of media technology, materiality, and architecture to prompt, enable, or restrict specific emotional experiences (2019, p. 15 & p. 16). Modern technology offers diverse avenues for conveying emotional experiences through various mediums like

images, sounds, and texts, often resulting in heterogeneous emotional responses.

These affordances are intertwined with embodied knowledge and situated practices, subtly influencing our selection and experience of ASMR. I will delve into these concepts further to analyse the ASMR experience in subsequent chapters.

4.3 The Power of Gifts

Within the ASMR community, various dynamics shape and transform its landscape. Among these dynamics, sharing and reciprocity emerge as significant forces in shaping relationships within the ASMR community. They hold not only economic importance but also rich cultural connotations. In studying ASMR community relations, I draw on the gift theory of French anthropologist Marcel Mauss, the reciprocity theory of American sociologist Alvin W. Gouldner, and the sharing theory of German anthropologist Thomas Widlok as theoretical frameworks to conduct an applied cultural analysis and interpretation of ASMR group relations.

4.3.1 Must-return Gifts

French anthropologist Marcel Mauss's seminal work, *The Gift*, published in 1925, offered a comprehensive examination of gift exchange as a social phenomenon across material, moral, and religious dimensions. Mauss's exploration of gift-giving practices across various civilisations, including the Samoan, Maori, Tahitian, Tongan, and Mangareva, illustrates the widespread nature of gift exchange. He introduced the concept of "the system of total services", highlighting its significance in establishing social relationships and networks (Mauss, 2002, p. 6 & p. 7). Mauss posited that gift exchange is not merely an individual obligation but extends to broader mutual obligations, encompassing economic, cultural, religious, social, and legal aspects. All acts of gift exchange serve the purpose of establishing and reinforcing social norms and networks.

Mauss's theoretical framework is instrumental in understanding gift exchange behaviours prevalent in the ASMR community, where the value of exchanges may not always be apparent. I will utilise Mauss's theory to analyse gift exchange behaviours within the ASMR community in subsequent chapters.

4.3.2 The Norm of Reciprocity

American sociologist Alvin W. Gouldner, building upon Mauss's work, explored the concept of reciprocity in functional theory. In his seminal article *The Norm of Reciprocity: a Preliminary Statement*, Gouldner identified three models of reciprocity and emphasised the importance of balance between rights and obligations in relationships (1960, p. 161). He proposed that reciprocity entails mutual rights and obligations, often traversing timelines. Gouldner delineated two forms of equivalence in reciprocity: heteromorphic reciprocity, where gifts may differ in form but have equal value, and homeomorphic reciprocity, which requires similarity or identity in form or content (1960, p. 172).

In contrast to Mauss's qualitative approach, Gouldner's emphasis on quantitative analysis provides a valuable theoretical tool for examining reciprocity in the ASMR community. I will delve into Gouldner's norms of reciprocity to analyse reciprocity within the ASMR community in detail in subsequent chapters.

4.3.3 Sharing

While Mauss's gift theory focused on the tripartite obligation of giving, receiving, and returning gifts, the concept of sharing in the ASMR community presents a scenario where explicit reciprocity may be lacking. German anthropologist Thomas Widlok's sharing theory provided an alternative framework to understand such interactions. In *Anthropology and the Economy of Sharing*, Widlok defines sharing as "enabling others to access what is valued" and offers six arguments about sharing theory (2017, p. 1). Notably, sharing involves uneven, unbalanced and singular transfers and does not necessarily require the ideology of generosity or affection (2017, p. 6 & p. 129 & p. 147).

Widlok's sharing theory offers insights into transfer practices within the ASMR community that defy explanations based solely on gift and reciprocity theories. I will apply Widlok's theory to elucidate interactive behaviours in the ASMR community in subsequent analyses of transfer practice behaviours.

5 The Cultural Analysis of the ASMR Relaxation

"Never regret anything you have done with a sincere affection; nothing is lost that is born of the heart."

— Basil Rathbone

The instrumentalization of ASMR emerged as a central concern throughout my fieldwork on the ASMR experience, shaping my observations, reflections, and discussions. While initially focusing on personal ASMR experiences, I soon realized that simply describing these experiences fell short of unveiling their underlying mechanisms. In the digital era, ASMR experiences predominantly occur through the consumption of ASMR videos on platforms like YouTube, thus making video-watching an integral aspect of the ASMR experience. This chapter delves into my cultural analysis of ASMR relaxation, centred on ASMR audiences engaging with these videos as tools for relaxation.

ASMR audiences perceive ASMR videos as facilitators of relaxation, actively seeking out and deriving relaxation triggers from them. This deliberate and functional process underscores the instrumentalization of ASMR videos, showcasing the existentialist and pragmatic influences behind ASMR relaxation. Moreover, this instrumentalization has propelled the commodification and commercialization of ASMR. Through my analysis, I identified intentionality, intimacy, and affordance as pivotal factors in facilitating the relaxing experiences and aesthetic enjoyment derived from ASMR videos, thus furthering their instrumentalization and commodification. In the subsequent sections of this chapter, I will explore the instrumental nature of ASMR through three dimensions: intentional diversion, constructed digital intimacy, and affordable emotional practices.

5.1 Intentional Diversion

5.1.1 Intentional Audience

The subjective intention of the ASMR audience stands as a pivotal aspect of the ASMR experience. As noted by the American phenomenologist Robert Sokolowski, every act of consciousness we perform, every experience we have, is intentional (2000, p. 8). Experiencing ASMR relaxation entails a deliberate retreat into subjectivity. Reflecting on my personal ASMR journey, I recall stumbling upon ASMR videos seemingly by chance while seeking relief from insomnia. However, upon closer examination, I realized that this encounter was predestined. In my pursuit of relaxation amidst sleepless nights, I specifically sought out ASMR videos within the vast expanse of the internet. Since then, these videos have become my go-to remedy for insomnia and stress, providing the soothing experience I sought. Affectionately known as “ASMR tingles”, these videos have evolved into my personal panacea for sleeplessness, stress, and depression. My repeated engagement with ASMR videos during moments of emotional turmoil serves as a form of self-emotion management. As anthropologist

Monique Scheer outlined in her theory of emotional practices, seeking external support, such as consuming media products, becomes a viable strategy when dissatisfied with one's emotional state (2012, p. 209 & p. 210).

Likewise, this intentional orientation towards ASMR videos and culture manifested in the experiences of my informants. Motivated by a keen curiosity and a pressing objective, I joined the largest and most inclusive ASMR Facebook group *ASMR community*, in February 2020. This platform served as one of the primary arenas for my fieldwork, where I engaged participants in direct discussions about ASMR experiences and perspectives. It is noteworthy that this Facebook group has since transitioned into a closed community. Comprising individuals with a vested interest in ASMR culture, the ASMR community encompasses ASMR audiences, content creators, and scholars like myself dedicated to the study of ASMR.

Hey my lovely ASMR folks. Hope you all are doing well and staying healthy at this tough time. I really really need your support and help now. I am a master student and right now I am doing a research about ASMR. I am trying to explain ASMR in a more reasonable way, so I would like to talk to you about your experience and opinions on ASMR. Any help would be highly appreciated! If you want to talk, just hit me up. Cheers! (My first post in the Facebook group ASMMR Community, 2020)

To swiftly establish communication with members of the ASMR community and identify willing informants for discussions on ASMR topics, I opted to directly post my queries within the Facebook group. This approach yielded some responses, facilitating initial engagement with potential participants.

I define it as a brain massage. (CG commented on my post, 2020)

It feels like my brain is getting candy. Very calming and puts me in a happy headspace. (MF commented on my post, 2020)

The responses from CG and MF are particularly illustrative. They both employed analogies to articulate their ASMR encounters. It is noteworthy that whether likening ASMR to a brain massage or enjoying candy, both descriptions denote a sense of relaxation and pleasure for them. However, given that ASMR is a somewhat nebulous sensation, those who do not experience tingles may struggle to empathize with the ASMR phenomenon. ASMR outsiders often grapple with whether the tingling sensation is discomfoting or comfoting. In this context, CG and MF adeptly utilised the terms “brain massage” and “getting candy” to convey the sensation. These analogies, rooted in familiar experiences like massage and enjoying sweets, enable ASMR outsiders to grasp and appreciate the soothing and pleasurable nature of

the ASMR experience. As Heidegger observed in *Being and Time*, “Discourse expressing itself is communication. Its tendency of being aims at bringing the hearer to participate in disclosed being toward what is talked about in discourse” (2010, p. 162). Communication serves to guide listeners towards the subject at hand. Through such analogies, both ASMR outsiders and insiders attain a shared understanding of ASMR. Consequently, the affective experience of ASMR can be conveyed between individuals through communication, fostering a shared perception of ASMR.

In considering CG and MF, their subtle analogies vividly illustrate how ASMR has become synonymous with relaxation and pleasure for these individuals. Even in our discussions within the Facebook group, they expressed a distinct pleasure towards ASMR, embodying a specific emotional practice observed in social exchange (Scheer, 2012, p. 214). Although they may not be actively engaging with ASMR videos in the present moment, the mere thought or mention of ASMR instantly evokes associations with relaxation. ASMR has become intertwined with the concept of relaxation, transcending its physical manifestation. Despite describing their ASMR experiences using similar terms, their eloquent analogies imbue ASMR with captivating imagery, portraying it as a source of happiness and contentment. Consequently, ASMR ceases to be just a sensory experience; it transforms into an embodiment of joy and tranquility, shaping the identity of ASMR audiences. As Sarah Ahmed put it in her *Happy Objects*, “We turn toward objects at the very point of ‘making’” (2010, p. 29). When an object provides pleasure or relaxation, it naturally becomes our preferred choice. ASMR audiences perceive ASMR works as reliable sources of relaxation, fostering a deep bond with these creations. Through further communication with my informants, they acknowledged this intentional orientation towards ASMR works.

So, I originally found ASMR on YouTube. I regularly listen to relaxing music while I work as well as guided meditations. Maybe about 3 years ago I had stumbled onto ASMR videos through searching for relaxing content. It is almost like a meditation. I can get a lot of anxiety before sleep. When I focus on the ASMR sounds it helps to make my brain quiet down. Instead of getting caught up in worrying I have something to focus on until I drift off. For me, ASMR helps me get rid of any anxiety or even muscle tension I have in my body, as well as focus. (Interview with Axel, 2020)

I reached out to Axel, a member of the *ASMR Community* on Facebook, via Messenger, where he served as one of the moderators. Upon sending him an interview request, he promptly agreed. Like my own journey of discovering ASMR videos, Axel’s exploration of ASMR content was driven by a quest for relaxation on the internet. Guided by YouTube’s algorithm

and recommender system, he stumbled upon ASMR. According to Axel, ASMR videos have proven invaluable, not only in inducing relaxation but also in alleviating his insomnia, anxiety, and muscle tension. This assertion regarding the effectiveness of ASMR in combating insomnia and stress was a recurring theme in my research.

it's not about tingles for me. A lot of people in the community don't get tingles. I have had major sleeping problems my whole life and asmr is the only thing that has really helped. I've tried half a dozen sleep prescriptions and only one worked, but it had bad side effects. So I found asmr before it was asmr and have been listening almost every night since. (CL commented on my post, 2020)

In the Facebook group *ASMR Community*, various participants often raise questions, and I occasionally engage in these discussions. CL was one individual I encountered in a discussion thread. I vividly recall the initial question posed in that discussion, which revolved around whether ASMR audiences experience tingles every time they watch ASMR videos. CL responded that he had never experienced ASMR tingles while watching ASMR videos. Intrigued by his response, I queried why he continued watching despite not experiencing tingles. His reply reiterated a point I previously highlighted in the section on the working mechanisms of ASMR culture – namely, that compared to seeking tingles, attaining relaxation and sleep aids serves as a more universal motive for ASMR audiences to consume ASMR content. Based on the self-reports of ASMR audiences, I can corroborate that ASMR content indeed alleviates stress, anxiety, and insomnia. For individuals like CL, ASMR represents a safer and more dependable alternative to sleep aids, devoid of pharmaceutical side effects.

I'm not a creator but I suffer from extreme anxiety and depression, loneliness....and I just recently discovered ASMR, by accident. Since his video was the one I stumbled upon, ASMR Eduardo is my go-to. He's almost like a security blanket. Many a times his videos, his voice has lullaby'd me into peace (which has alluded me for years) and often into a quiet sleep. Therapy hasn't helped me as much as he has. (Interview with Lucy, 2020)

During my interview with Lucy, she openly expressed that ASMR had been more beneficial to her than therapy. Lucy, whom I contacted via direct private messages, stood out to me due to her active involvement in recommending ASMR Eduardo (now A.E.), a male ASMRtist's YouTube channel, to other members of the Facebook group. Upon requesting an interview, Lucy graciously accepted. Throughout our interaction, Lucy demonstrated a high level of emotional transparency and honesty. She disclosed that she had been grappling with depression and anxiety for an extended period. Lucy attributed feelings of safety and security to ASMR Eduardo's content, which facilitated a sense of peace and relaxation, aiding her in falling

asleep. Additionally, she frequently cited the therapeutic impact of the ASMR creator's work. Notably, Lucy was the sole informant who expressed a distinct preference for a specific ASMR creator.

From the narratives of the three informants mentioned above, it is evident that they share common experiences in turning to ASMR. Firstly, all three informants grappled with varying degrees of sleep or mental distress, prompting them to seek assistance from external sources. Secondly, they actively searched the internet for help and stumbled upon useful content. Thirdly, they serendipitously discovered ASMR videos while seeking relaxation, sleep aids, or related content online, as indicated by their exposure to ASMR-related recommendations. Fourthly, they found solace in ASMR videos, using them for relaxation or sleep aids, thus becoming staunch advocates of ASMR. To illustrate, consider clutching onto a sturdy piece of driftwood while drowning: in that moment, its significance transcends its materiality, embodying hope for survival. Similarly, in moments of helplessness, insomnia, and despair, these individuals eagerly sought solace in the vast online realm, yearning for the relaxation and sleep aid they desperately needed. ASMR emerged as a beacon of hope, offering the promise of relaxation. Consequently, they embraced ASMR wholeheartedly as a last resort to attain the long-awaited relief they sought. As a result of these experiences, my informants associated ASMR with positive mental comforts such as relaxation and sleep aids. They consciously elevated relaxation to an object of pursuit, transforming ASMR into the embodiment of relaxation. As Husserl once articulated, "If an incentive mental process is actional, that is, effected in the manner of the cogito, then in that process the subject is "directing" himself to the intentional Object" (1983, p. 75). ASMR audiences, in their quest for relaxation, continually gravitate towards ASMR, viewing it as the ultimate relaxation object. Thus, relaxation itself becomes phenomenologically intentional. ASMR audiences imbue ASMR works with relaxation values, influencing their behavioural choices and shaping their living spaces and identities. In contrast to non-ASMR audiences, ASMR enthusiasts exhibit a self-defined preference for ASMR works, integrating them into their daily lives for continued enjoyment. This deliberate engagement distinguishes ASMR audiences from others, forging their unique ASMR identity, all in pursuit of ASMR-induced relaxation. In this light, ASMR works serve as the proverbial driftwood for ASMR audiences, guiding them towards the attainment of their long-awaited relaxation.

5.1.2 Intentional ASMR Works

The ASMR work itself serves as a tool infused with human intention. Within the subreddit ASMR community profile, a passage describes the community as follows.

This subreddit was created to share videos that elicit this sensation (either intentionally or unintentionally), as well as discuss and try to understand this fascinating physical reaction. (r/asmr, 2021)

From this passage, it is evident that the subreddit community categorizes ASMR videos into two distinct types: intentional and unintentional. Intentional ASMR involves creators deliberately selecting and enhancing trigger words, sounds, gestures, or visual elements to evoke the ASMR experience for viewers. The majority of ASMR videos circulating online fall into this intentional category. Conversely, unintentional ASMR videos are those not created with the explicit aim of triggering ASMR, yet contain incidental elements capable of inducing the sensation for viewers. A notable example is Bob Ross's painting tutorial videos. Originally intended to teach painting techniques, these videos unintentionally stimulate ASMR experiences in viewers due to Ros's soothing voice and the gentle sounds of his painting tools. Consequently, his work has become a source of ASMR enlightenment for many within the community, garnering widespread appreciation. While this classification of ASMR videos based on the creators' initial intent has been embraced by some community members and researchers for taxonomy purposes, I find it to be a somewhat ambiguous distinction. What is labelled as "unintentional" ASMR may not be entirely devoid of purpose upon closer examination of its creation. All videos serve some purpose, whether educational, entertaining, or otherwise. To deliver high-quality content, creators must adhere to strict standards for sound and visual elements, ensuring a harmonious presentation to the audience. Thus, videos inherently embody creative intentions. Moreover, ASMR triggers originate from a multitude of sources, with Dr. Richard listing up to 101 different triggers (2018, p. 140-p. 144). The diversity of ASMR triggers surpasses imagination, and their aesthetics vary widely. Different individuals may perceive sounds and images with varying degrees of sensitivity, resulting in diverse experiences. For instance, while some may find pleasure in listening to eating sounds, others may find them intolerable. Therefore, in so-called unintentional ASMR videos, as long as they contain essential sound, visual, and other elements inherent to any video, they possess the potential to evoke ASMR experiences intentionally or unintentionally.

Furthermore, according to the British media researcher Rob Gallagher's perspective, initially, only unintentional ASMR videos were present on the Internet. These unintentional ASMR

videos underwent a redefinition within the ASMR community, with creators extracting triggering elements from them to serve as a blueprint for their ASMR video creations. Through this process, the original intent behind these unintentional ASMR videos gradually faded into obscurity, while the accidental triggering elements emerged prominently, assuming new significance within the ASMR context. These triggers continue to be amplified by ASMR creators, giving rise to intentional ASMR videos one after another, thus shaping a cohesive “tingly aesthetic” (Gallagher, 2016, p. 4). Hence, it can be asserted that within the realm of ASMR, all unintentional ASMR videos serve as the foundation for intentional ASMR videos. Whether it is ASMR creators or audiences, their utilisation of unintentional ASMR is inherently imbued with ASMR intentions. This intentional use of ASMR videos further reinforces the instrumentalisation of ASMR videos. As Sara Ahmed stated, “We are moved by things. And in being moved, we make things” (2010, p. 29). Through the transformation of original unintentional ASMR videos into intentional ones, ASMR audiences actively cultivate their own ASMR aesthetic orientation, while ASMR creators generate these material variations of video intentionality.

5.1.3 Intentional Technology

Technology plays a pivotal role in shaping ASMR culture, imbued with intentionality. As Heidegger articulated in his book *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, “The essence of technology is by no means anything technological” (1977, p. 4). Technology is inherently non-neutral; it serves human purposes. Throughout my interviews, my informants frequently used words such as “found”, “discovered”, “stumbled onto”, and “stumbled upon”. In their narratives, their encounters with ASMR videos were marked by serendipity and romanticism. Similarly, reflecting on my own experience, my introduction to ASMR seemed quite accidental. Although in 2019, the keyword I entered was “助眠 (sleep aid)” rather than ASMR, these two terms are closely linked on the Chinese Internet. This strong correlation has led “助眠 (sleep aid)” to become synonymous with ASMR in the Chinese online sphere. When I searched “助眠 (sleep aid)” on Baidu, China’s largest search engine, the top results were predominantly ASMR videos. Similarly, on Bilibili, the primary video platform for Chinese youth, the search yielded almost exclusively ASMR content. This pattern also extends to Douyin (Chinese TikTok) and other Chinese online video platforms. Hence, I have concluded that within China’s current online culture, sleep aid videos equate to ASMR videos.

To validate my hypothesis, I conducted a search using the keyword “放松 (relaxation)”, another frequently associated term with ASMR. The results demonstrated a more diverse array of content compared to the keyword “助眠 (sleep aid)”. Notably, content related to exercise and meditation also surfaced. This further corroborates my assertion that the term “助眠 (sleep aid)” has become deeply intertwined with ASMR within the Chinese online landscape. Therefore, when I searched the term “助眠 (sleep aid)” on the Chinese Internet in 2019, my encounter with ASMR videos was inherently intentional, guided by predetermined associations. Similar keyword associations and algorithmic recommendations are observed on some Western social media platforms. For instance, when I searched for “relaxing” on YouTube or TikTok, I received numerous ASMR content recommendations. These online encounters underscore the influence of recommendation algorithms in guiding users’ interactions with ASMR content.

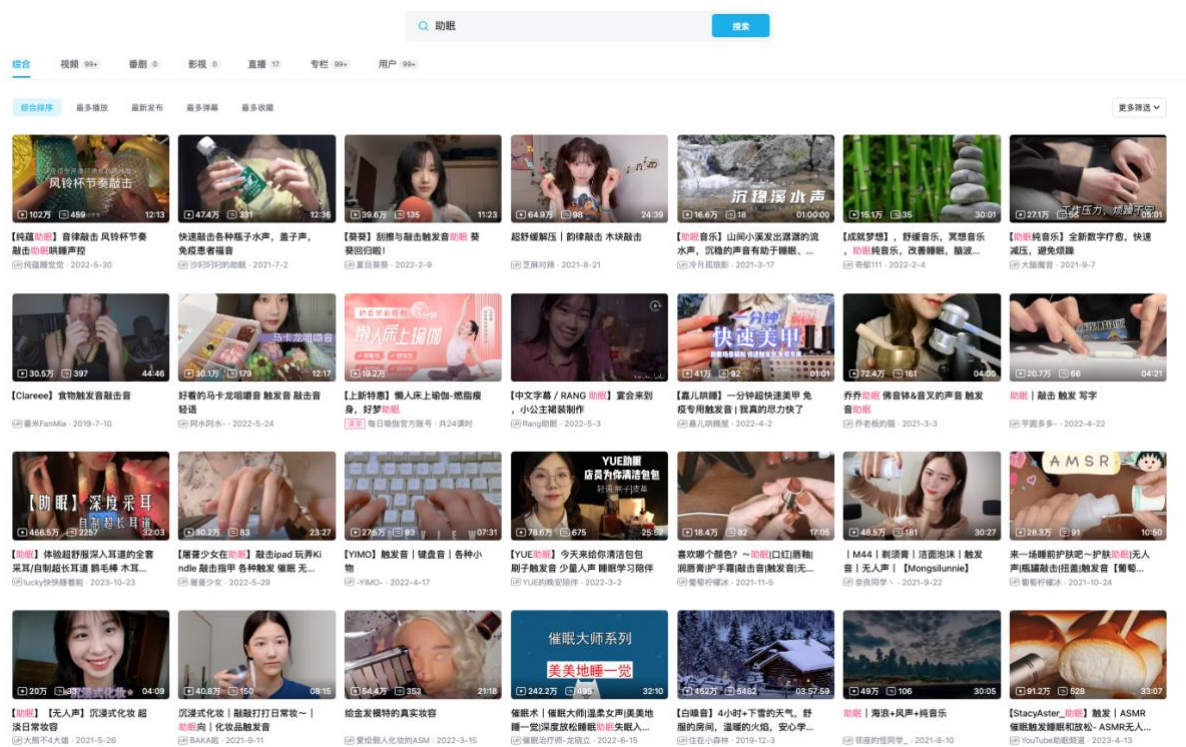


Figure 4. Screenshot of Bilibili Homepage with “助眠 (Zhu Mian)” as Keywords. Retrieved from https://search.bilibili.com/all?keyword=%E5%8A%A9%E7%9C%A0&from_source=webtop_search&spm_id_from=333.1007&search_source=5. (Date of retrieval: April 18, 2024).



Figure 5. Screenshot of Baidu Search Page with “助眠 (Zhu Mian)” as Keywords. Retrieved from <https://www.baidu.com>. (Date of retrieval: April 18, 2024)

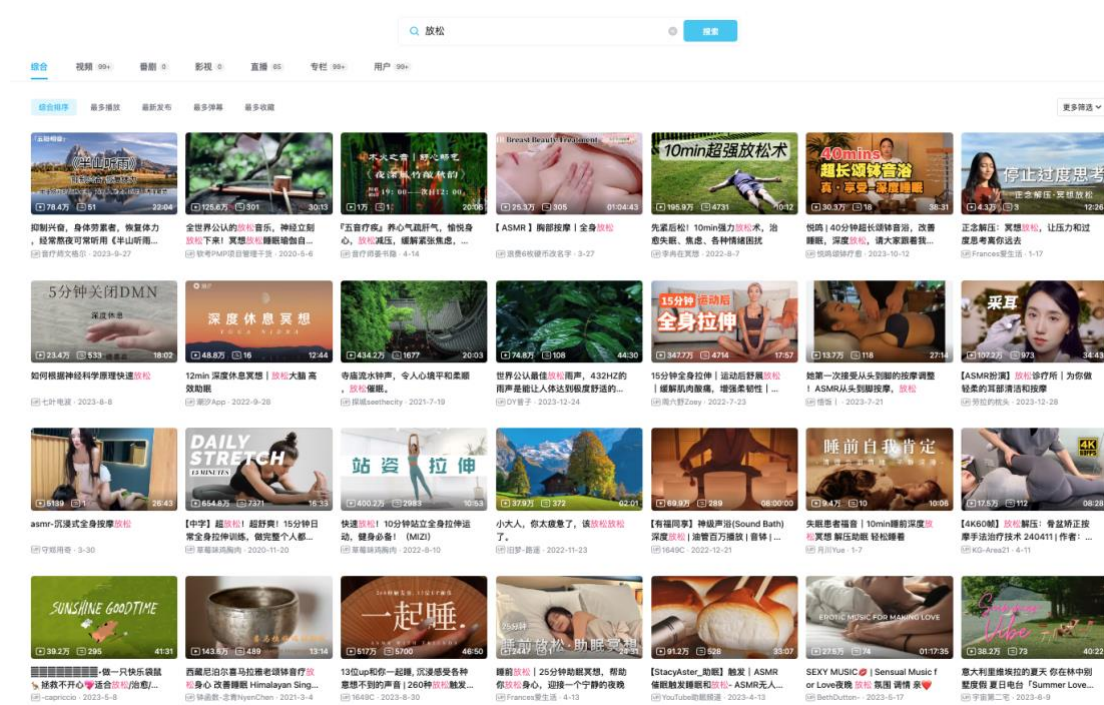


Figure 6. Screenshot of Bilibili Homepage with “放松 (Fang Song)” as Keywords. Retrieved from https://search.bilibili.com/all?keyword=%E6%94%BE%E6%9D%BE&from_source=webtop_search&spm_id_from=333.1007&search_source=5. (Date of retrieval: April 18, 2024).

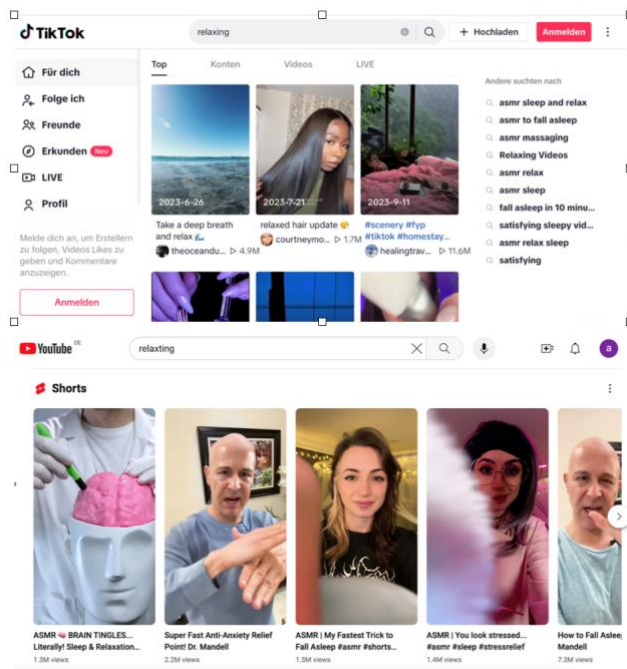


Figure 7. Screenshot of TikTok and YouTube Homepage with “relaxing” as Keywords. (Date of retrieval February 10, 2024).

Internet algorithms are inherently fraught with intentionality. According to the American cultural anthropologist Nick Seaver, “algorithms are not autonomous technical objects, but complex sociotechnical systems” (2018, p. 378). On one hand, algorithms are shaped by the individuals operating within the algorithmic system, namely, the engineers. On the other hand, algorithms are influenced by the users interacting with the algorithmic system from outside, i.e., the users. Throughout the process of Internet search and algorithmic recommendation, the search terms inputted by ASMR audiences during the pre-ASMR era supplied algorithmic engineers with abundant search data, including terms such as “relaxing”, “sleeping sounds”, “whispering sounds”, and “soft sounds” among others. Drawing from this data, algorithm engineers gather and refine it based on user practices, weaving it into a web closely aligned with user preferences. The result is the presentation of recommended ASMR content strongly correlated with user search keywords and consistent with their consumption preferences. “Machine learning systems changed in response to user activity, and engineers accommodated user proclivities in their code” (Seaver, 2017, p. 4). Algorithms evolve in response to extensive user interactions. This dynamic interaction between users, algorithm engineers, and algorithmic systems is evident in the escalating trend of ASMR-related searches on Google since 2010. This growing interest in ASMR topics enhances the likelihood of encountering ASMR content when users search for related subjects such as relaxation or sleep aids.

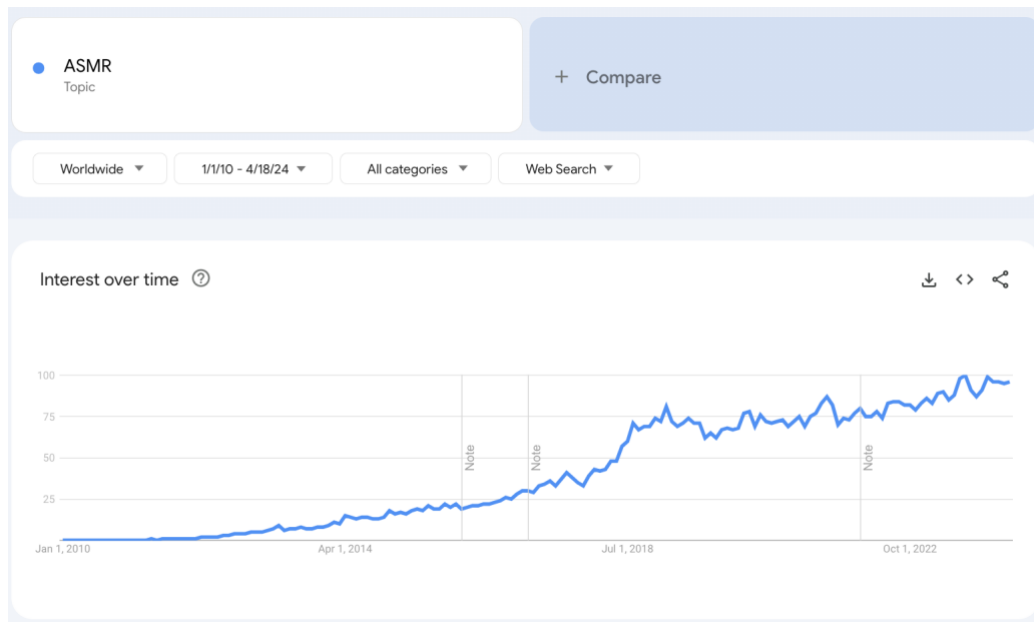


Figure 8. Screenshot of Google Trends with “ASMR” as Keywords. Retrieved from <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=2010-01-01%202024-04-18&q=%2Fm%2F0ngt1v6&hl=en>. (Date of retrieval April 18, 2024).

Additionally, the internet’s recommendation mechanisms are influenced not solely by consumer markets but also by macro factors like national policies. As outlined in the literature review chapter, although the majority of individuals in the ASMR community do not classify ASMR works as pornography, there remains a lingering association with sexual themes in discussions about ASMR. In June 2018, amidst the Chinese government’s anti-pornography campaign, videos tagged with obvious ASMR labels were indiscriminately banned on major video platforms in China, leading to the removal of numerous ASMR videos. Subsequently, the control over ASMR videos on Chinese online platforms has persisted for nearly five years. Between 2018 and 2022, searching for the keyword “ASMR” on Bilibili yielded no direct ASMR content. Instead, users could only access ASMR videos by using more ambiguous terms such as “助眠 (sleep aid)” or “解压 (stress relief)”, perpetuating the association of these keywords with ASMR content and further conditioning recommendation algorithms. When I searched for video content on Bilibili using the keyword “助眠 (sleep aid)” in 2019, the search results primarily consisted of ASMR content. This convoluted process reflects a deliberate interplay of human intentions and artificial targeting. This case underscores that the regulation of ASMR videos by higher-level social authorities cannot suppress genuine social demands but instead reinforces ASMR audiences’ stickiness to ASMR videos and broadens the scope and influence of ASMR culture. In response, the ASMR community on the Chinese internet has shifted away from using a singular “ASMR” label to mark and promote ASMR videos, opting

instead for broader, more relatable everyday language to counteract this coercive emotional regulation. Ultimately, this social perception of ASMR videos as positive entities has facilitated the relaxation of platform controls. Presently, searching for “ASMR” on Bilibili yields a plethora of recommended ASMR videos. While there is no technology that operates independently of human control and intentions, and we invariably navigate within the realm of human intentions, it is authentic social desires and emotional practices that dictate what remains within a community and what is excluded. Therefore, only affective practices that fulfil genuine social expectations will exhibit enduring resilience.



Figure 9. Screenshot of Bilibili Homepage with “ASMR” as Keywords. (Date of retrieval: November 16, 2022).

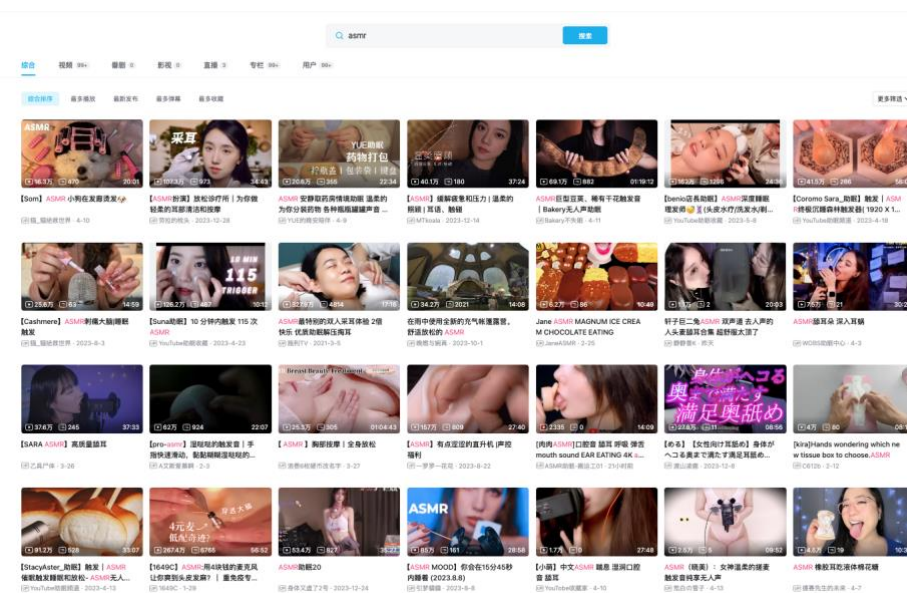


Figure 10. Screenshot of Bilibili Homepage with “ASMR” as Keywords. Retrieved from https://search.bilibili.com/all?keyword=asmr&from_source=webtop_search&spm_id_from=333.1007&search_source=5. (Date of retrieval: April 18, 2024).

5.2 Constructed Digital Intimacy

The ASMR experience offers immediate benefits to its audiences, foremost among them being the ability to distract attention. This distraction enables ASMR audiences to momentarily

disengage from stressors and immerse themselves in the ASMR scene, fostering a sense of relaxation. Beyond the tingling sensation, which has always been a central aspect of ASMR, the crux of the experience lies in the intimacy it engenders, captivating ASMR audiences. It is within the realm of intimacy that audiences relinquish their defenses and pressures, allowing themselves to be enveloped in the soothing ambiance of ASMR without anxiety. In previous discussions on ASMR, I underscored the significance of digital intimacy in shaping the ASMR experience in the literature review chapter. Scholars widely concur that constructing digital intimacy involves three key dimensions: the ASMR audiences, the ASMRtists, and the technology (Anderson, 2014; Smith et al., 2019; Harper, 2019; Zappavigna, 2020). It is the successful cultivation of intimacy within the ASMR experience that fosters ASMR audiences' perception of ASMR videos as a dependable tool for relaxation. In this section, I will delve into an applied cultural analysis of how intimacy is shaped within ASMR experiences.

5.2.1 Intimated ASMR Practices

According to a recent report by the German online data gathering and visualization platform Statista (2023), online users worldwide spend an average of seventeen hours watching online videos weekly. In simpler terms, this equates to around two and a half hours per day spent watching online content. While this might seem insignificant when compared to the total twenty-four hours in a day, when considering the typical division of an Internet user's day into eight hours of work, eight hours of sleep, and eight hours of other activities such as eating, it becomes apparent that one-third of the discretionary time is devoted to watching online videos. As Bausinger aptly noted, "The media are an integral part of the way the everyday is conducted" (1984, p. 349). Consequently, everyday life has inherently absorbed media influences. Within this framework, the practice of watching ASMR videos has become deeply ingrained in the routines of ASMR audiences, shaping how they allocate their time and express their emotions.

Watching an ASMR video is an intimate experience. Unlike attending a movie screening where one can enjoy images and music alongside hundreds of other viewers, experiencing ASMR through videos is typically a solitary journey that does not necessitate the presence or participation of others. This privacy aspect inherently renders the ASMR experience a personal indulgence exclusive to each individual audience.

My ASMR routine usually commences at night, just before I prepare to sleep. Despite feeling

fatigued after a day's work, lingering worries and distractions often impede my ability to quickly drift off. Thus, I seize this moment of leisure to clear my mind. Naturally, I do not desire the presence or involvement of others to impede my quest for relaxation and sleep. Ultimately, relaxation and sleep are solitary pursuits. During such moments, novels or TV series, which fill my mind with information, fail to provide the undistracted rest I seek. As the plot unfolds, my thoughts become more active, hindering sleep. For a long time, music served as my background noise for sleep. However, ASMR replaced music as my preferred sleep aid, proving to be more effective. Unlike music's diverse rhythms, ASMR exerts a direct influence on my ears with simple yet effective triggers, gently guiding me into a tranquil space shared solely between myself and the ASMRtist. I feel the ASMRtist subtly enhance one calming trigger after another, lulling me into a deep sleep with their familiar and comforting routine. Through this process, ASMR videos have become an essential part of my nightly routine, providing a personal sanctuary that belongs solely to me.

The act of watching ASMR videos leans towards an introspective practice within the ASMR community. ASMR audiences typically refrain from sharing this practice as a communicative social activity among groups with differing values. During my interviews, my informants exhibited a propensity for privacy and discretion concerning ASMR topics. In my semi-structured interviews, I posed the question to my informants: "Would you discuss watching ASMR videos with your offline friends?" The responses I received indicated that they generally avoid broaching ASMR-related subjects with their offline friends.

I'm fairly secretive about my interest and creation about asmr outside of the community, because of the lack of understanding. It's really difficult to explain to someone who doesn't get it. (Interview with Axel, 2020)

I don't think anyone I know in real life knows what it is. Some wouldn't understand. Maybe one person gets it. But that's it. I never even thought of that. I'm not sure how they would react to it. I think if I was to show friends who need to relax or have anxiety issue might understand more. Not so much as worries but I just don't think many people I know would be into it. "Why do you need that? Just see a therapist. Take your meds." They wouldn't understand why I find it so comforting and helpful. (Interview with Lucy, 2020)

My informants Axel and Lucy both adopted a rather cautious approach towards openly discussing ASMR topics offline. This caution arises from the fact that ASMR, as an online subculture, lacks recognition in mainstream society. I can relate to this cognitive gap. When I decided to focus my thesis on ASMR, I discussed this decision with my friends, but the response was largely negative. This lack of understanding led to frustration and significantly

dampened my enthusiasm for discussing ASMR in public, as it would entail repeated explanations. Faced with this disconnect, ASMR audiences like us often choose to conceal this aspect of our identity and consciously avoid discussing ASMR-related topics to sidestep potential difficulties and blend in more seamlessly with the crowd. This practice also dictates that watching ASMR videos remains a private activity. It fosters a sense of exclusivity within the community, nurtured in this unseen setting.

The spatial intimacy of the ASMR experience extends beyond the physical confines of the offline world. While a dedicated physical space exclusive to the individual ASMR audience can indeed enhance the ASMR experience, the advancement of technology has significantly facilitated the creation of boundless intimacy within ASMR experiences. Technologies such as mobile phones, headphones, and networks have vastly expanded the realms in which ASMR experiences occur, empowering ASMR listeners to autonomously decide when and under what circumstances they engage with ASMR content, thus exerting control over their embodied affective ASMR experience (Smith et al., 2019, p. 46). For instance, based on my interview data, most of my informants mentioned using ASMR to calm their restlessness before bedtime. However, during one interview, my informant Axel also described how he incorporated ASMR into his work routine:

For me, ASMR helps me get rid of any anxiety or even muscle tension I have in my body, as well as focus. I listen ASMR pretty often while I work because it helps me stay focused and work in a calm mindset rather than be tense and worried about deadlines or anything like that. (Interview with Axel, 2020)

Axel mentioned that he often listens to ASMR to help him maintain focus and calmness at work. This utilization of ASMR in the workplace underscores the role of technology. With the aid of the Internet, mobile devices, and headphones, Axel can effectively shield himself from the distractions of his offline environment, using ASMR as background noise to immerse himself in his mental tasks. Once again, the instrumental value of ASMR in daily life is demonstrated. Regardless of the setting, the use of ASMR has become a daily ritual for my informants. Whenever they seek refuge from the chaos of the offline world, they instinctively reach for their headphones, select their preferred ASMR content, and surrender to the pure relaxation that ASMR offers. During my interviews, my informants revealed that their history of watching ASMR videos ranged from nearly three years to eight years. Despite reporting that they no longer experience the so-called ASMR tingles in most cases, they continue to indulge in ASMR videos, finding solace and tranquility in the moments they provide. This illustrates

what Ahmed refers to as the “sticky attributes” of ASMR – its enduring appeal as a relaxation aid among ASMR audiences (Ahmed, 2010, p. 35). ASMR videos have been established as effective tools for relaxation through emotional engagement within the ASMR community, prompting audiences to repeatedly revisit these comforting resources in pursuit of relaxation. Through this ongoing revisitation, the social connection between ASMR audiences and ASMR content strengthens, fostering a sense of intimacy and belonging within the ASMR community.

5.2.2 Mediated Intimacy

ASMR draws its vital sustenance from the routines of everyday life, which are also the raw material of media production (Bareither, 2019, p. 10). Within ASMR videos, crucial sound elements often originate from the most ordinary and commonplace objects encountered in daily life (Smith et al., 2019, p. 42; Harper, 2019, p. 1). These objects could be as simple as a comb or a pair of scissors, and the sounds produced by their interactions form the backdrop of daily existence. “ASMR highlights the way mundane sounds serve as a mechanism for affective experiences” (Smith et al., 2019, p. 41). Although these ambient noises might seem inconspicuous, they play a significant role in shaping our sense of space and our perception of the world around us. Such commonplace sounds constitute a crucial component of our affective encounters, existing almost as a Merleau-Ponty-esque pre-consciousness in bodily habits, silently guiding us along established life trajectories without conscious thought. These everyday sounds encapsulate a wealth of social experiences spanning from the past to the present. Familiarity with these sounds is so ingrained that we no longer need to consciously engage with them. ASMR videos capture these mundane sounds and life scenes, recreating familiar environments as experienced through the medium of ASMR. ASMR employs sound as a trigger for memory, intertwining past and present modes of existence (Smith et al., 2019, p. 45). As I highlighted at the outset of this thesis, my initial attraction to the ASMR domain was sparked by a pencil-biting video crafted by ASMRtist FrivolousFox, resonating deeply with my own past experiences. Through this video, I found myself able to empathize and experience the tingles evoked by this ASMR-triggering scenario. In my interviews, both Axel and Clara also discussed the phenomenon of revisiting past life experiences through present ASMR-triggered sensations.

A lot of people get it from haircuts or their mom’s brushing their hair. Which is why there are a lot of videos like those as well. I think many of us experienced these feelings from a young age, and whatever triggered us then, is likely to trigger us now. (Interview with Axel, 2020)

To me asmr is more like i said a parent soothing a child. In my childhood my mom would caress my hair, sing songs softly until I fell asleep. Maybe it's why asmr makes me fall asleep right away hahaha (Interview with Clara, 2020)

For Axel and Clara, one of the most significant aspects of ASMR videos triggering their affective experiences was the videos' capacity to transport the past into the present. ASMR content creators, through role-playing scenarios, reconstructed everyday scenes in their videos that were commonplace and reflective of the audience's upbringing, yet often overlooked intentionally. This brought an unexpected sense of familiarity and everydayness to the ASMR audience, stirring their pre-consciousness. By resurrecting the sounds of bygone days, the cultural and sonic contexts in which these sounds originated imbued them with significance (Kelman, 2010, p. 230). Scenes like getting a haircut, combing hair, or parents soothing a child were all experiences Axel and Clara had encountered during their upbringing. Listening to the familiar everyday sounds of the past in ASMR role-playing videos evoked fond memories for them. These experiential historical ASMR role-plays reconstructed a sense of normality from their past experiences, providing them with a feeling of peace and stability conducive to falling into a sound sleep. When ASMR audiences undergo ASMR experiences, there exists a compelling force that intertwines their present with their past, merging their own experiences with those of others. This force is intricately linked with the origins of their perceptions and their factual nature (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p. 47).

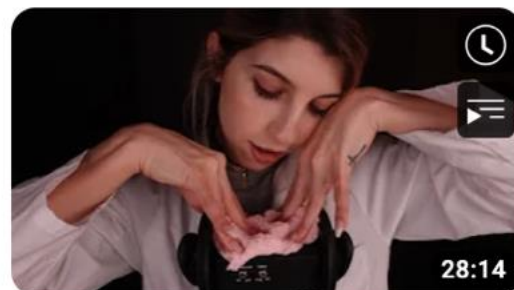
In addition to the sense of everydayness, another crucial element in constructing the intimacy of the ASMR experience is the sense of copresence. According to Australian linguist Michele Zappavigna, ASMRtists primarily employ four types of performances using linguistic, visual, and aural resources to shape and evoke the ambient audience's sense of digital intimacy and copresence. The first type of performance involves the ASMRtist using a soft or whispered voice for role-playing. Soft voices serve dual purposes: enhancing the sensory experience of the ASMR audience and establishing an intimate relationship with them. Whispers or soft conversations typically occur within close social distances of intimate relationships, and ASMR whispers mimic such interactions, creating a sense of "whispering to you" (Zappavigna, 2020, p. 6 & p. 7). The second performance style entails the ASMRtist selecting appropriate visual, aural, and linguistic elements to construct a credible or creative interactive context based on everyday life. The aim is to foster a sense of "Dasein", where the audience feels they are sharing the same space at that moment (Zappavigna, 2020, p. 9). For instance, in my informant Lucy's ASMR experience, her favourite part involved casual interactions where ASMRtist

Eduardo portrayed her boyfriend, sharing sweet words typical of romantic partners. In the third performance type, the ASMRtist engages with the camera lens, aiming to draw the ASMR audience into an immersive experience. This involves actions directed towards the foreground of the visual frame, particularly evident in personal attention videos, such as beauty or relaxation videos (Zappavigna, 2020, p. 14). For example, the ASMRtist might bring an object close to the camera lens, intending to evoke a sense of copresence between themselves and the audience. In the fourth performance mode, the ASMRtist interacts with the recording tools, treating them as extensions of the ASMR audience's body. For instance, they might use a binaural microphone and interact with it as if it were the ears of the ASMR audience, through touching or whispering (Zappavigna, 2020, p. 14). Zappavigna's framework offers a comprehensive perspective on the main performative modes used by ASMR creators to construct intimacy. Despite the apparent differences in these modes, they all share a common core: the shaping of copresence relies heavily on the cultivation of relationships. Regardless of the performance mode adopted, ASMRtists engage in an intimate relationship with their audience.



Boyfriend Roleplay - Camping Date
Ft. First Kiss, Sensual Tension,...

2.5K views • 1 year ago



ASMR | Massaging your BRAIN 🧠👉
(*Very* Scientific RP)

46K views • 14 hours ago

Figure 11. Screenshot of A.E. YouTube Homepage and FrivolousFox ASMR YouTube Homepage. (Date of retrieval: March 18, 2024).

ASMR role-playing videos epitomize intersubjective relations: the ASMRtist adopts the perspective of the ASMR audience and enacts simulated interactions believed to meet the audience's needs through ASMR performance (Zappavigna, 2020, p. 21). This performance represents a transcendence of the self. Utilizing various visual, auditory, and linguistic elements, the ASMRtist offers the ambient ASMR audience the opportunity to inhabit an exclusive perspective. It is this opportunity that enables the ASMR audience to experience sensory enjoyment and ambient intimacy (Zappavigna, 2020, p. 21). ASMR role-playing videos place significant demands on the personal qualities of the ASMRtist. They must not

only immerse themselves convincingly in shaping characters and relationships but also transcend their own perspectives to consider the needs of the ASMR audience. Only when the ASMRtist fulfils both roles can an ASMR role-playing video maximize the intimacy desired by ASMR listeners. Through role-playing, ASMR video creators can directly convey care and undivided attention to their ASMR audience through words or performances. It is through the professionalism of the ASMRtist that the ASMR audience can sense care, support, and affection, thus alleviating negative thoughts.

During our interview, Lucy was candid about how the care and support she received from her favourite ASMRtist helped alleviate her “extreme anxiety and depression, loneliness”. Eduardo, Lucy’s preferred ASMRtist, primarily produced intimate role-playing ASMR content portraying scenarios of a boyfriend or husband. It was evident that Lucy was a devoted fan of this genre of role-playing ASMR within an intimate context, as she even admitted during the interview that she had purchased customized role-playing videos from Eduardo.

He’s been extremely kind to me. Especially since I’ve had to let him in on some of my fantasies for my personalized videos. No judgement. And he’s very professional about getting them out in a timely manner. He’s also very awesome to all his supporters. He takes care of all of us. (Interview with Lucy, 2020)

I explored some of ASMRtist Eduardo’s role-playing videos on YouTube. In creating his content, his performance closely adhered to the model defined by Zappavigna. Eduardo utilised linguistic, visual, and auditory elements to depict a male companion who embodies traditional masculinity while also being handsome, tender, and caring. Throughout the video, he consistently assumed the role of a male partner, engaging intimately with the viewer by sharing interesting anecdotes and offering virtual massages while expressing thoughtful concern and



Figure 12. Screenshot of A.E. showing care. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXs7qFwWZm4&t=785s>. (Date of retrieval: March 18, 2024).

affection. As a heterosexual female ASMR audience, it is difficult not to be captivated by his reassuring phrases like “I truly appreciate you”, “You are such a treasure”, and “I am gonna cherish you forever, honey”. The characterisation by the ASMRtist is, in essence, a

reflection of the inner needs of the ASMR audience. They yearn for someone who can provide comfort during moments of negativity. This emotional need may be challenging to fulfil in the offline world due to various reasons, but an ASMRtist and their videos can fulfil it, regardless of time or place.

This might sound weird, but his videos make me feel safe and comforted, even the sexier ones. And having suffered with extreme dreadful anxiety since 1995, I finally found something (it happened to be Eduardo & his videos) that actually eased my mind. I've had real moments of peace girl the first time in 25 years. Moments where I'm not dreading anything. And because of that, I feel a loyalty to him. People may just say its ASMR and they're just videos but for someone like me, who has gotten relief from half a lifetime of dread and anxiety, it's so much more than that. It's therapy. Its art. (Interview with Lucy, 2020)

As Lucy disclosed, she struggled with severe anxiety for twenty-five years, finding the support she received in the offline world insufficient to alleviate her distress. However, the affordances of ASMR videos provided Lucy with care and assistance from her trusted ASMRtist, unrestricted by time or space. This enabled her to feel secure and comforted, facilitating her emergence from emotional turmoil and enabling restful sleep during insomnia episodes. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty delineates two realms within which the body exists: the physical world, where the objective body resides, and the phenomenal world, where the phenomenal body is situated (2005, p. 120 & p. 121). In the ASMR experience, it is the phenomenal world that is apprehended and inhabited by ASMR audiences. Leveraging technology, ASMR audiences utilise their eyes and ears as instruments for seeing and hearing. They employ the body both as a conduit and a potential source of familiar behaviours, situating themselves within environments containing the ASMRtists' manupulanda. Their presence in this milieu is nebulous, untethered to any specific time or space (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p. 120). Although physically separated, ASMR audiences and ASMRtists can still forge a connection through the digital reality crafted by ASMR videos. Within this phenomenal realm, ASMR audiences inhabit a shared virtual space created by the ASMRtists, perceiving not only their own bodily experiences through visual and auditory stimuli but also sensing the presence of the ASMRtists. Through tangible ASMR relaxation and tingling sensations, as well as through scripted interactions, ASMR audiences perceive the ASMRtists' presence. This realisation of presence and interaction in a shared virtual domain engenders a sense of coexistence between the ASMRtists and the ASMR audiences.

5.2.3 The ASMR of the Spectacle

In 1967, the renowned French philosopher Guy Debord posited in his book *The Society of the Spectacle* that “In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation” (2014, p. 2). Debord contended that our world is characterized by a vast visuality, where individuals lead a life constructed by the spectacle, supported by images. The term “spectacle”, as used by Debord, encapsulates a comprehensive social phenomenon wherein lived experiences are supplanted by a representation—a distinct pseudo-world that can only be observed. It comprises fragmented images culled from diverse facets of life and rearranged into a mosaic of simulated reality. This worldview conflates human social existence with representation, fostering a superficial perception of commodities and images while negating genuine social interaction. Undeniably, with the evolution of media and technological progress, the manifestations and underlying mechanisms of the spectacle have undergone significant enrichment. Particularly since the advent of digital media, our everyday existence has become thoroughly permeated by the spectacle. Online videos have emerged as a conduit for the public to convey the emotional nuances of daily life. Concurrently, they exert a profound influence on people’s offline experiences, profoundly shaping the fundamental constructs of selfhood and society.

In my preceding sections, I conducted an applied cultural analysis of the ASMR experience, focusing on how intimacy is cultivated. However, concurrently, I harbour profound concerns regarding ASMR culture as an online subculture. This apprehension largely stems from the concept of distant intimacy inherent in ASMR. As previously discussed, ASMR intimacy represents an unconventional form of closeness, with mediated intimacy playing a pivotal role in crafting ASMR relaxation. ASMRtists often opt to foster a sense of remote intimacy with their audience by cultivating an atmosphere of everydayness and copresence. The construction of everydayness, in reality, comprises a highly symbolic and fragmented representation of daily life experiences. ASMRtists extrapolate tangible life occurrences into a partially perceived reality, abstracting sound and visual elements from this partial reality, and recontextualising them within the online ASMR milieu. Consequently, ASMR audiences perceive a semblance of reality in the videos crafted by ASMRtists, imbuing the ASMR spectacle with authenticity and fostering a sense of everydayness. This pursuit of “reality” within the online ASMR realm effectively estranges individuals from their offline world, with ASMR itself emerging as a byproduct of this estrangement. Nevertheless, ASMR also holds a tangible existence within the realm of ASMR audiences. Thus, between the online and offline domains, the ASMR online

sphere and real-life experiences engender a reciprocal estrangement, constituting the essence and framework within which ASMR audiences operate. As articulated by Debord in his seminal work, “The images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream in which the unity of that life can no longer be recovered. Fragmented views of reality regroup themselves into a new unity as a separate pseudo-world that can only be looked at. The specialization of images of the world evolves into a world of autonomised images where even the deceivers are deceived. The spectacle is a concrete inversion of life, an autonomous movement of the nonliving” (Debord, 2014, p. 2). Here, Debord astutely observes the erosion of life’s unity as detached images coalesce to form a new pseudo-reality, relegated to objects of mere observation. The authentic world is reduced to simplistic images, which, in turn, assume a semblance of reality, ensnaring the ASMR audience in a meticulously crafted illusion.

The construction of a sense of copresence in the ASMR experience is inherently illusory. Despite ASMR’s extensive use of sounds, visuals, and technologies to foster a feeling of copresence between ASMRtists and their audience, this sensation remains predominantly one-sided. While message boards for ASMRtists’ channels on online video platforms and major ASMR internet communities offer spaces for dialogue between creators and viewers, it is crucial to recognise that not every message or post receives acknowledgement or response. The ASMR spectacle inherently discourages dialogue, representing more of a unilateral, invisible exertion of control over the audience. ASMR videos predominantly reflect a one-way flow of communication, leaving viewers with limited avenues for expressing opinions, resistance, or criticism directly to the ASMRtist. Even if viewers attempt to voice dissatisfaction through actions like disliking a video or sending direct messages, the efficacy of such gestures remains questionable, particularly in the context of videos driven by commercial interests. Platforms like YouTube often only display the number of likes, obscuring the extent of dissatisfaction



Figure 13. Screenshot of YouTube Channel Homepage. (Date of retrieval: March 18, 2024).

expressed by viewers. As Debord astutely observed, “Imprisoned in a flattened universe bounded by the screen of the spectacle, behind which his own life has been exiled, the spectator’s consciousness no longer knows anyone but the fictitious interlocutors who subject him to a one-way monologue about their commodities and the politics of their commodities. The spectacle as a whole is his ‘mirror sign’, presenting illusory escapes from a universal autism” (2014, p. 116). In the context of ASMR, viewers can only perceive the fictional interlocutor represented by the ASMRtist, who perpetuates a facade of dialogue through their videos, relegating the audience to a role of silent obedience.

The absence of actual copresence transforms the ASMR spectacle into a vehicle for one-sided invisible control and subjugation, a phenomenon that is alarmingly politicised. Within the ASMR spectacle, ASMRtists orchestrate performances that pervade the lives of ASMR audiences, who assume a passive role, silently and entrancingly observing the ASMRtists' displays. Through captivating performances, ASMRtists captivate and hypnotise ASMR audiences, diverting them from their innate critical and creative faculties and ensnaring them in adherence to the ASMRtists' ideologies. A particular incident from my own experience with ASMR viewing remains vivid in my memory. Amidst the political turmoil in Hong Kong in 2020, an ASMRtist whom I admire uploaded a video on her YouTube ASMR channel. Throughout the video, she repeatedly whispered the phrase "Free Hong Kong". Without any semblance of rationale or context, it was a crude and simplistic dissemination of her personal political stance. At that moment, her ASMR channel and video became tools for political indoctrination and manipulation of ASMR audiences. Some unsuspecting viewers mindlessly acquiesced, becoming slaves to the ASMRtist's political beliefs. While I acknowledge everyone's right to express their political views, as an influential ASMRtist with over a million subscribers, her decision to assert a contentious stance in such a manner left me, a member of her silent majority of ASMR audiences, disillusioned. I sought relaxation and entertainment from her ASMR videos, only to be subjected to her personal political agenda. This incident served to alienate me from her overtly biased political stance, leaving me fatigued by the subtle thought control and ideological influence. It underscores the reality that the ASMR spectacle operates as an ideological force with genuine hypnotic and manipulative capabilities. ASMRtists wield control over the creation and dissemination of the ASMR spectacle to shape the social consciousness of ASMR audiences.

While it is undeniable that the ASMR audience experiences a sense of care from ASMRtists through the facilitation of technology and media, it's also true that digital technologies have significantly eroded the ASMR audience's capacity for self-reflection and self-determination. In reality, the ASMR audience is often treated as a standardized object by digital technology, with their freedom to shape their personal identity limited by platform rules and recommendation systems. It is crucial to recognize that technology is never neutral; rather, it is wielded by humans to exert control over digital intimacy within the ASMR spectacle. When we engage with ASMR videos and immerse ourselves in ASMR culture, we must maintain a sense of critical awareness and self-reflection. We cannot afford to overlook the significance of our offline existence in favour of a fabricated sense of everydayness, copresence, and distant

intimacy. It is essential to remain vigilant to the underlying ideological influences masked by the allure of entertainment and relaxation. Only then can we avoid succumbing to the control of external forces, whether they be other individuals or technology itself.

5.3 Affordable Emotional Practices

Whether one's intention is to establish an ASMR routine or to cultivate the intimacy of immersive ASMR enjoyment, the realization of these intentions largely hinges on the affordances of media technology. The affordances of media technologies directly influence the instrumental use of ASMR videos.

5.3.1 Technological Affordance

The integration of technology within the ASMR experience significantly contributes to the cultivation of a sense of everydayness and copresence. ASMR experiences entail the utilization of technology to reconstruct and convey specific affects by ASMRtists, ASMR audiences, and online platforms.



Figure 14. My Blue Yeti Microphone and Sony Camera. (Yizhen Wang, 2024)

For ASMRtists, at least one camera and one microphone are indispensable tools in shaping intimacy. These devices act as extensions of bodily boundaries, expanding the vision and hearing of the ASMR audience. ASMRtists utilize microphones to capture and amplify the trivial, mundane, and fleeting sounds of everyday life. These microphones then convert these subtle sounds into electrical signals, broadcasting them to ASMR audiences scattered across the globe. At this point, the microphone symbolically embodies the ears of the ASMR audience, attentively listening to the sounds created by the ASMRtist. Similarly, the ASMRtist interacts and performs with the ASMR audience by symbolically representing the camera as the body or a part of the body of the ASMR audience, thereby conveying a sense of copresence and personal attention to the ASMR audience on the other side of the screen. Both of these tools significantly expand the reach of the ASMRtist's presence, altering the dynamic range of their movements and creating an expressive space. Within the space afforded by these tools, the ASMRtist transforms the microphone and camera into extensions of the ASMR audience's body, swiftly drawing them into the ASMRtist's performative realm, fostering the illusion of copresence with the ASMR audience.

ASMRtists also meticulously upload ASMR videos to various online video platforms, which have transformed into digital arenas where these videos are generated, stored, and disseminated. Thanks to the technological capabilities of online video platforms, ASMR audiences can indulge in, share, and revisit these videos. Moreover, the technological

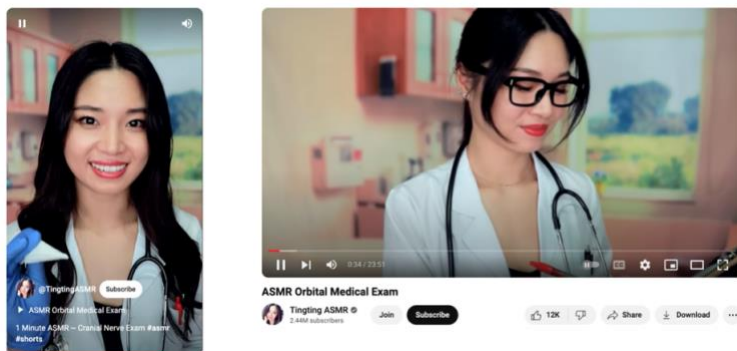


Figure 15. Screenshot of Tingting ASMR on YouTube and YouTube Shorts. (Date of retrieval: March 24, 2024).

framework of online platforms forms the foundation for the “stickiness” of ASMR culture, deepening the influence of ASMRtists. Furthermore, the technological affordance of online platforms influences the production of ASMR videos. For instance, while ASMRtists can only upload short videos up to 60 seconds on YouTube Shorts, they can post longer videos up to 12 hours on YouTube. This discrepancy directly impacts the editing style and content of ASMR videos shared on different platforms. For instance, renowned ASMRtist Tingting opted to upload a 1-minute ASMR video on YouTube Shorts and a full 24-minute ASMR video on YouTube, each tailored to the respective platform’s specifications. Consequently, the editing style of the videos varied accordingly. This deliberate differentiation in video content aims to cater to the diverse needs of ASMR audiences across different platforms. Such a strategy maximizes the potential for triggering affective experiences among ASMR audiences and enhances their stickiness to ASMR videos.

In the absence of physical copresence, ASMR audiences can unwind and enjoy the ASMR videos provided by ASMRtists without the need to navigate social interactions or consider external factors. This lack of physical presence associated with ASMR may even deepen the affective experience (Smith et al., 2019, p. 45). ASMR audiences can freely indulge in the intimacy and copresence offered by ASMR videos without hesitation. In addition to the recommendation system of video platforms, ASMR audiences can directly search for ASMR videos online and select the ASMRtists that most appeal to them. Control is an integral aspect of the intentional affective experience of ASMR (Smith et al., 2019, p. 46), and the technological capabilities of the platform assist ASMR audiences in maintaining control. With the aid of technological capabilities, ASMR audiences can engage in emotion regulation by

determining when, where, and what to watch in ASMR videos, thereby controlling the specific context of their own ASMR affective experience. Furthermore, owing to the technological capabilities of online platforms, ASMR audiences can express their preferences for specific ASMR videos through various digital interactions such as saving, liking, disliking, sharing, downloading, reporting, commenting, and so forth. These digital behaviours of ASMR audiences are recorded and digitised by the platforms, serving as the basis for evaluating the value of specific ASMR videos. These digital interactions furnish metrics (e.g., number of views, likes, favourites, etc.) that enable platforms to quantify the popularity of an ASMR video. Generally, the greater the number of video views and likes, the higher the quality of the ASMR video and the more likely it is to elicit an ASMR response in the audience. Driven by the affective economics represented by these metrics, the feedback from ASMR audiences assists platforms in refining their personalised recommendation systems, thereby enabling them to more accurately suggest ASMR videos to individual users, thereby enhancing users' ASMR experience.

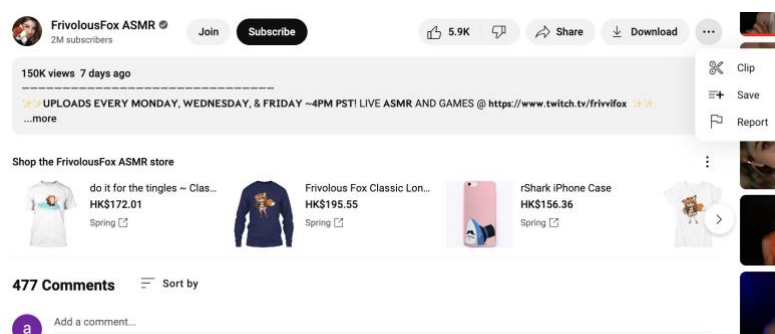


Figure 16. Screenshot of open message board on FrivolousFox ASMR YouTube channel homepage. (Date of retrieval: March 24, 2024).

In addition to the deliberate shaping of the recommendation algorithm, the open message board of online video platforms enables direct and convenient communication within the ASMR community. ASMR audiences can utilise the message board to express their

opinions about ASMR videos and ASMRtists to others in the ASMR community. Shielded by online identities, ASMR audiences can freely converse in cyberspace with like-minded individuals without reservation or misunderstanding. Simultaneously, the ease of online communication transcends the physical barriers of the offline world, fostering internal communication within the ASMR community and the development and affirmation of ASMR identities. The open message board serves as a platform for ASMRtists to gain immediate and tangible insight into the reception of their ASMR videos, aiding them in improving and refining their video production to create content that resonates more deeply with ASMR audiences. Likewise, it allows outsiders to directly observe the perspectives of the ASMR community on ASMR videos, effectively reducing discrimination and prejudice stemming from lack of

understanding. The support of technology has also enhanced the overall ASMR audience experience.

5.3.2 Social Affordance

ASMR videos not only facilitate ASMR audiences' access to ASMR affective experiences but also broaden their options for health management.

I have had major sleeping problems my whole life and asmr is the only thing that has really helped. I've tried half a dozen sleep prescriptions and only one worked, but it had bad side effects. So I found asmr before it was asmr and have been listening almost every night since. (CL commented on my post, 2020)

Many a times his videos, his voice has lullaby'd me into peace (which has alluded me for years) and often into a quiet sleep. Therapy hasn't helped me as much as he has. (Interview with LM, 2020)

As mentioned by both my informants CL and LM, before the emergence of ASMR videos, individuals experiencing difficulty falling asleep or restlessness were often advised to resort to sleep prescriptions or therapies. However, these treatments sometimes proved ineffective, and the consumption of pharmaceuticals could lead to adverse side effects. The advent of ASMR videos has introduced them to a relatively harmless method for relaxation or sleep induction. As this awareness spreads, the ASMR industry and culture are expected to flourish.

Moreover, the emergence of ASMR videos has expanded people's conception of intimacy. ASMR represents a deeply technologized, mediated form of intimacy (Harper, 2019, p. 2). People's understanding of intimacy is no longer limited to traditional close relationships; rather, the affordances of technology have enabled the ASMR community to establish unconventional and distant forms of intimacy. ASMR audiences and creators mutually support and rely on each other within this virtual space. A sense of copresence and collective identity is fostered within this imagined community. Even in the absence of the tingling sensation associated with ASMR, community members remain drawn to these videos, which serve as relics of past intimate and joyful experiences, akin to memories of caring and intimacy in the offline world. The ASMR community is evolving within the parameters of YouTube's participatory features, facilitating an immersive, interactive, and intimate experience despite the physical distance (Andersen, 2014, p. 14).

The emergence of ASMR videos has not only reshaped people's perspectives on relaxation, sleep aids, and intimacy, but it has also sparked new ideas for marketing and branding. Currently, there are two prevalent approaches to using ASMR in marketing. The first involves producing commercials in the ASMR style. For instance, the "Oddly IKEA: IKEA ASMR" commercial, as mentioned in the introduction chapter, is a prime example. It promotes IKEA products by showcasing furniture and decorations in an ideal IKEA student dormitory, all in an ASMR manner. These ASMR commercials are typically aired on TV and online platforms. The second method involves collaborating with influential ASMRtists to incorporate product advertisements into their ASMR videos, which are exclusively featured on the influencers' personal channels on online video platforms. ASMRtists usually allocate a specific segment of their videos to promote products in an ASMR style, and they also include purchase links for the featured products in the video's introduction section or comment area. Consequently, these

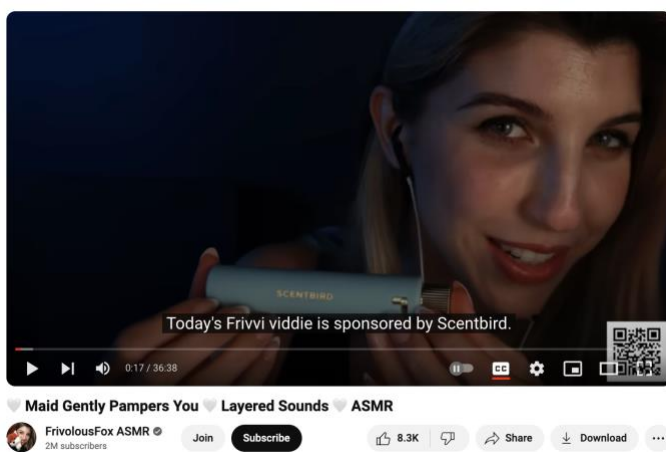


Figure 17. Screenshot of FrivolousFox ASMR YouTube channel. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u6XtRHJqhWk&t=656s>. (Date of retrieval: April 1, 2024).

platforms provide the necessary technologies to seamlessly integrate the ASMR advertising concept. "The market system is a strong driver in YouTube's affordance structure" (Postigo, 2014, p. 6). To maximize profitability, both platforms and content creators, along with capital stakeholders, collaborate to devise and implement key technological affordance to reap benefits.

5.3.3 Emotional Affordance

In addition to technological and social affordances, we must also consider emotional affordance due to the emotional factors in the ASMR experience. Emotional affordance encompasses two main aspects. Firstly, it involves the affective practice of individuals to reconstruct and convey specific emotions through the use of particular technologies. However, this emotional expression and practice are constrained by technology and the specific situation. On the other hand, emotional affordance entails people's perception of the emotional potential assumed by specific technologies, architecture, and materiality (Bareither, 2019, p. 15 & p. 16).

The defining characteristic of ASMR lies in its ability to foster intimacy, explicitly conveying

care, comfort, and relaxation to its audience through videos. ASMRtists diligently endeavour to achieve this goal. They may express care directly to the ASMR audience in a variety of ways within their videos, using language, visual cues, and facial expressions. Alternatively, they may evoke a sense of everyday familiarity and recreate copresence through sounds, triggering memories of past intimate experiences for the ASMR audience. Texts or emojis may also be employed by ASMRtists to convey care and affection. ASMRtists harness all available technological affordances to deliver an immersive, interactive, and intimate experience to their audience within the parameters of online video platforms. For instance, on the prominent YouTube channel of ASMRtist FrivolousFox, emojis denoting smiles and love are used in video introductions to convey warmth and friendliness. Simultaneously, direct phrases such as “Don’t worry! I am right here” reassure her audience of her immediate presence and readiness to offer support and assistance. Through the combination of technological affordance and the dedication of ASMRtists, feelings of relaxation and comfort are effectively transmitted to ASMR audiences, fostering a sense of distant yet intimate connection.

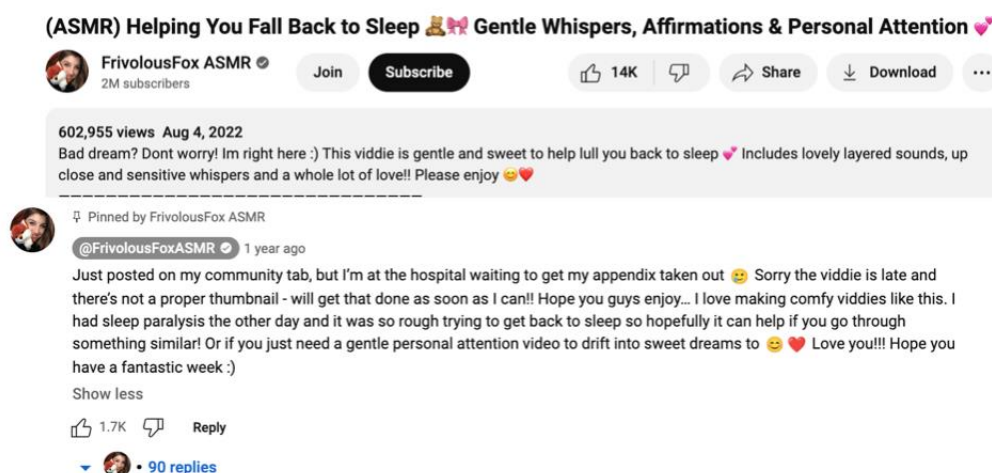


Figure 18. Screenshot of FrivolousFox ASMR YouTube channel. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BvXKWZMYnxc&t=5s>. (Date of retrieval: April 1, 2024).

The interpretation of ASMR is subject to conditions. As discussed in the literature review, the ongoing debate regarding the eroticisation of ASMR persists within academia and even among the general public. Despite many ASMR enthusiasts justifying its utility for relaxation and sleep assistance, and advocating for the promotion of ASMR culture with a more positive and scientifically grounded approach, there remains a faction that perceives ASMR as a conduit for unconventional pornography.

During my interviews, I queried my informants about their perspectives on the notion that

ASMR is regarded as pornographic by certain critics. Without fail, all of my informants vehemently rejected this notion.

I think it's a little silly haha but understand why people would take it there. Some of the triggers really border on being sexualized. At it's root, in my opinion it's not a sexual thing at all, and it's a peaceful relaxation thing. (Interview with Axel, 2020)

ASMR i can get that people thing that. Its to bad because to my there is nothing sexual about it But I can see How people find the soft spoken videos and the wisphering sensual. And there are some ASMRtists out there giving off a sexy vibe for views for sure. (Interview with Maria, 2020)

Both Axel and Maria contended that ASMR is not inherently pornographic. However, due to the sexualisation of certain triggers in ASMR, such as whispering and mouth sounds, and the interpretation of these triggers by some audiences as having erotic connotations, ASMR has become shrouded in a cloud of eroticisation and stigma. Indeed, it is not uncommon for individuals to experience arousal through sounds or visuals. Sound researcher Eduardo Abrantes, in his study *Interpenetration of Vibrating Thresholds*, highlighted the longstanding association of hearing with intimacy, with the ear being regarded as both a site and symbol of erotic interpenetration within the body (Abrantes, 2019, p. 74). Abrantes illustrated this concept using the example of phone sex to underscore the potential erotic analogy between the ear and sound, which possess a natural compatibility in terms of reception and emission. He argued that sound, as an unsettling presence in everyday life, disrupts the boundaries between things through its power of transmission and stimulates intimacy. Due to its mixed nature, sound also activates the imagination in eroticized ways. As individuals experience sound, they continually transition their private experiences from the private to the public sphere in unfathomable and unpredictable ways (Abrantes, 2019, p. 78). In ASMR videos, the ASMR experience evokes a tingling sensation in the audience's body, facilitated by the stereo technology of headphones. This sensation is a distinct manifestation of the intensely private acoustic environment in which it occurs. In this context, the site of libidinal transfer is the ear, where distant sounds penetrate through the headphones, eliciting a bodily sensory response (Abrantes, 2019, p. 81). From this, it becomes evident that there is a rationale for some ASMR audiences to associate ASMR with eroticism, particularly in terms of sound, as sound conveys complex information and our interpretation of it is influenced by different contexts. What may sound normal to some audiences may be perceived as pornographic by others.

The emotions elicited by ASMR are intricate and diverse, defying easy classification as purely benign or erotic. Unlike national anthems, which serve as patriotic musical compositions

evoking sentiments of love and pride for one's country, the relaxation induced by ASMR sounds can be perceived as either a serene form of meditation devoid of erotic undertones, or as a relaxation tinged with erotic implications. The interpretation of ASMR extends beyond the sounds themselves; it also encompasses how ASMR audiences perceive and interpret them. While perusing the Facebook group *ASMR Community*, I stumbled upon a post by a female YouTuber that captured my attention.

I want to serve this as a warning if you notice your traffic ratios going up to 98% male audience you could be in danger of just being deleted off YT. My content was not sexual - I am a genuine underwater dancer, it's beautiful stuff but my channel got deleted last year. And this year the spikes in male audience ratios started happening again and I found out why...My content was being ripped and uploaded as free click bait for adult fetished pawn pornography sites...I am distraught and just want to let you know, if you see those ratios creeping up towards a male dominant audience... do a search! Your content is being sexualized somewhere. (Jane posted on ASMR community, 2021, September.)

The female YouTuber, Jane, brought attention to an alarming incident where her underwater ASMR content was appropriated and uploaded onto a pornographic website, leading to an influx of male viewers on her YouTube channel. This surge in traffic and the disproportionate gender ratio flagged her channel as potentially containing explicit content, prompting its removal by the YouTube platform. For Jane, a video content creator, this was a devastating setback to her vlogging career, rendering her efforts futile. What exacerbates Jane's sense of injustice is her belief that the ASMR videos she uploaded did not harbour any sexual undertones. As the creator, she asserts that her original intent did not involve any form of innuendo. However, differing interpretations and opinions among her viewers complicate matters. Setting aside the debate on whether Jane's ASMR videos contained sexual innuendo, this incident underscores the subjectivity inherent in the ASMR experience, with viewers often perceiving the same content differently. Moreover, it underscores the inherent ambiguity and uncertainty in the ASMR creator-viewer dynamic, where creations exist within a grey area of interpretation. Consequently, ASMRtists' works are susceptible to various potential threats and uncertainties.

During my interview, my informant Clara provided her perspective on ASMR's perceived bias towards pornography from a gendered standpoint.

I think people link tingles with orgasms and like, nah, that's not it at all people don't consider massages to be sexual (unless, you know, you go to a specific place for that), so why do they consider asmr to be sexual? I also think that it is linked to how women

are perceived. Often, men (and people, but more frequently men) will think anything a woman does is to be seductive. So if you think like that and you see a woman doing close up on her mouths, her hands caressing objects, people will think DAMN SHE'S TRYING TO SEDUCE (Interview with Clara, 2020)

Clara staunchly believed that viewers' gender bias has led to discrimination against female ASMRtists. Even if a female ASMRtist simply performs conventional ASMR-triggering actions in a typical setting, some viewers will still associate it with sexuality. The interpretation of ASMR depends more on the individual interpreting it than on the ASMR itself. The issue of gender in ASMR is not new. Critics have highlighted a clear gender bias in ASMR. ASMR performances often take place in intimate settings such as homes or bedrooms to create caring and intimate experiences for the audience. As qualities like intimacy and caring are typically associated with femininity, combining femininity with intimate spaces can lead to ASMR being interpreted as sexual or erotic (Andersen, 2014, p. 10; Smith et al., 2019, p. 46). This gender-based critique is undoubtedly biased and outdated. Even though more women than men are currently involved in ASMR creation, we cannot ignore the existence of male ASMRtists. Associating intimate and caring traits exclusively with femininity is a misunderstanding of human personality; masculinity can also be nurturing and affectionate. Particularly in the context of building intimate relationships, men often display their gentle side. In ASMR performances, male ASMRtists frequently use tender gestures to express care and affection towards their audience. As Lucy, one of my informants, experienced in a supportive role-play video by male ASMRtist Eduardo, the warmth, care, and affection she felt immersed her in the experience.

Hence, I do not find it reasonable to associate femininity and intimacy with the ASMR experience solely from a gender perspective. ASMR itself does not inherently possess gendered qualities. Furthermore, I believe that the emotional aspect of ASMR extends beyond the content itself. To interpret the emotional message of ASMR, we must consider the platforms hosting ASMR content and the contexts in which ASMR audiences engage with it. In reality, ASMR is not limited to relaxation, sleep aid, and marketing; it is also used in pornography. If you search for ASMR on Pornhub, the world's largest pornographic website, you will find a plethora of pornographic videos presented in the ASMR format. Therefore, I argue that we should not assess ASMR based on gender or self-perception to determine whether it should be labelled as pornography. Instead, the emotional affordance of the platform should be a reasonable criterion for determining whether an ASMR video carries pornographic connotations. After all, a platform's stylistic positioning of its content is more explicit and

standardized than an individual's interpretation of ASMR content.

During my fieldwork, I observed that some ASMRtists distribute different styles of ASMR videos across various platforms. They post non-sexual ASMR content on non-pornographic video sites and sexual ASMR content on pornographic platforms. ASMRtists demonstrate a clear understanding of which platforms are suitable for specific types of content, albeit with subtle differences. For instance, Jane, who uploaded underwater ASMR videos on YouTube, expressed frustration when her YouTube content was misconstrued as pornographic. She mentioned that she had uploaded both pornographic and non-pornographic content on different video platforms.

So, underwater content is staying on Patreon. Not OnlyFans that's my sexual outlet. Here is underwater and swimming stuff only...For sexualized content, OnlyFans. (Jane posted on ASMR community, 2021)

Jane's explanation also highlights her consideration of the platform's ecosystem and the audience's needs when posting videos on different platforms. Her actions reflect an underlying common understanding of social awareness and platform-specific rules regarding video content. For instance, pornographic content found on platforms like Pornhub or OnlyFans would never be permissible on YouTube. YouTube's platform regulations and censorship mechanisms help ensure, to some extent, that ASMR videos on the platform remain non-pornographic. In Jane's case, the erotic content she shares on OnlyFans is distinct from what she posts on YouTube. Her YouTube content is self-censored and identified as non-pornographic, aligning with the platform's positioning and broadcasting standards.

This categorization of ASMR videos as either non-pornographic or pornographic brings to mind the work of the renowned British anthropologist Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger*. Douglas posited that discussions of purity are essentially discussions of order, suggesting that dirtiness is not an absolute concept but rather the result of things being in places where they do not belong. When something is deemed incompatible with its environment, it is considered disorderly. The only way to restore normalcy is to re-establish order by returning things to their rightful places (Douglas, 2001, p. 2). Similarly, I believe Douglas's framework can help elucidate the controversy surrounding ASMR videos. It appears that the emotional landscape of ASMR is remarkably flexible and multifaceted. ASMR serves as both a therapeutic and a potentially sexual practice, and its applications may extend to various emotional contexts in the future. Nevertheless, the ultimate effect of ASMR on the audience is relaxation. To

determine whether an ASMR video can be classified as pornographic, it is essential to consider the platform on which the video is hosted. If the platform resembles Pornhub, which primarily features pornographic content, ASMR content uploaded there could reasonably be deemed pornographic. Conversely, if the platform is non-pornographic, such as YouTube, the ASMR content on that platform would likely be regarded as non-pornographic. Therefore, our assessment of ASMR's emotional affordance is heavily influenced by the emotional affordance of the platform itself.

In 2020, researchers Starr et al. from the National University of Singapore conducted a study on several Chinese ASMR videos through acoustic and content analyses. They unequivocally asserted that, at least within the Chinese context, ASMR and sexual ASMR are distinct genres, and ASMR is not evolving into a medium for clandestine dissemination of sexual content (2020, p. 494). Pornographic material has long been stigmatized in mainstream social discourse and by the Chinese government, relegated to the clandestine corners of China's internet, largely hidden from public view. "The Chinese authorities have exerted a great deal of effort aimed at limiting the general population's exposure to pornographic content on the Internet" (McLelland, 2015, p. 123). In my observation, owing to the stringent control exerted by the Chinese government and legal restrictions on pornographic content on Chinese social media, the ASMR-related videos available on mainstream Chinese video platforms are exclusively clean ASMR videos devoid of any pornographic implications. This underscores the need to consider the emotional affordance of ASMR videos within a broader context, encompassing platform regulations, governmental oversight, and social norms.

As Merleau-Ponty elucidated in his treatise on the cube, the cube's essence, as an identity, cannot be perceptually apprehended except through the multiplicity of its sides, aspects, and contours. These perceptual manifestations inevitably result in perceptual disjunctions, and to truly perceive the essence of the cube itself, one must forsake its diverse manifestations and directly engage with the core of its identity (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p. 40 & p. 173 & 235 & p. 350). A similar approach should be adopted towards ASMR. Setting aside the various online platforms and socio-cultural contexts in which ASMR videos are situated, ASMR itself, as a form of emotional practice, encompasses a myriad of potentials for application and emotional affordance. To perceive ASMR in a transcendent manner, one must disregard the superficial scenes and forms of its utilization, whether they are pornographic or non-pornographic, and instead focus directly on the relaxation induced by the ASMR experience. The sole consistent

emotional affordance of ASMR is the relaxation it bestows upon the ASMR audience. As noted by my informant Lucy, she finds solace in enjoying the ASMR creations of ASMRtist Eduardo as long as the end result is that she feels relaxed, regardless of whether she feels “aroused or soothed”.

Eduardo is extremely hot. But it's his voice that gets me everytime. Whether it's being aroused or soothed, my anxiety drops immediately. (Interview with Lucy, 2020)

The ASMR experience commences with intention and revolves around the cultivation of intimacy, ultimately facilitated through affordance. As an exceptionally versatile affective encounter, ASMR draws upon various media forms to establish and sustain long-distance intimacy, leveraging the richness, synchronicity, and mobility inherent in these mediums. Technological, social, and emotional affordances render the ASMR triggers capable of eliciting emotional responses visible and readily accessible. ASMR serves not only to alleviate the stress of its audiences and induce relaxation but also enhances consumer experiences in advertising campaigns. This chapter primarily frames the ASMR experience through a phenomenological lens, while the subsequent chapter will delve into an analysis of the ASMR community from the perspective of gift exchange.

6 The Cultural Analysis of ASMR Community

“Hast thou a friend whom thou trustest well,

from whom thou cravest good?

Share thy mind with him, gifts exchange with him,

fare to find him oft.”

—*The Elder or Poetic Edda, Translated by Olive Bay, 1908, Stanza 44*

In this chapter, my focus will be on the transfer practices within the ASMR community, rather than on the platforms that host this community. I classify interpersonal relationships within the ASMR community into three primary types based on their interactions and social dynamics: the relationship between ASMRtists and ASMR audiences, the relationship among ASMRtists themselves, and the relationship among ASMR audiences. Although these relationships run parallel to each other, they are closely interlinked and mutually influential, collectively shaping the overall fabric of the ASMR community. Among participants in the ASMR community,

transfer practices play a pivotal role in constructing and maintaining this interconnected network. In the ensuing discussion, I will employ Mauss's gift theory, Gouldner's reciprocity theory, and Widlok's sharing theory as the theoretical framework. Drawing from the empirical data I have gathered in my dual roles as both an ASMRtist and an ASMR audience, I will analyse the interactions and social structures within the ASMR community to develop a comprehensive understanding of its dynamics. Through a cultural analysis of the empirical cases I have compiled, I aim to address a series of inquiries: What kind of bond exists between ASMR audiences and ASMRtists? How to deconstruct and interpret the ASMR community from the perspective of applied cultural analysis? It is my aspiration that through this applied cultural analysis, I can provide insights into these questions and offer a deeper comprehension of the ASMR community.

6.1 Transfer Practices between ASMRtists and ASMR Audiences

The transfer practices between ASMRtists and ASMR audiences represent the most prominent and intricate dynamics in shaping the ASMR community. These interactions encompass a range of practices including sharing, reciprocal gift exchange, and even commodity transactions. ASMRtists invest considerable effort in creating and presenting their ASMR works to audiences. However, whether they receive reciprocal gifts in return is often fraught with imbalance and uncertainty. The content created by ASMRtists may either go unnoticed or be embraced by the ASMR audience, adding a layer of complexity to these interactions. Economic and fame considerations often play significant roles as motivators for ASMRtists to continue offering their ASMR creations. In this section, I will undertake an applied cultural analysis of the transfer practices between ASMRtists and ASMR audiences, with a particular focus on the themes of economy and fame.

6.1.1 Economic Capital as Gift

The relationship between ASMRtists and ASMR audiences is fostered through the proactive sharing of content by ASMRtists. Seeking self-realization, ASMRtists take the initiative to upload intricate ASMR creations onto internet video platforms. These works are presented on the platform like gifts awaiting selection by guests. However, it is important to note that not every piece of work will necessarily be chosen. My interaction with the ASMR audience also stemmed from my decision as an ASMRtist to share my creations online.

“Hello, hello, hello. Welcome to my channel; let's fall into a deep sleep together tonight!” Clad



in a black shirt against a black background, with a black microphone, I wave my hands in a constant gesture to convey friendliness to the camera. This serves as the fixed opening of my ASMR videos.

Figure 19. I perform ASMR reading. (Yizhen Wang, 2021)

To gain a deeper insight into the dynamics of the ASMR community from various perspectives, I made a bold decision at the end of May 2021. I resolved to become an ASMRtist, aiming to immerse myself in the ASMR community as a video creator and gather first-hand research data. Despite watching ASMR videos for nearly two years by then, I was entirely unfamiliar with the process of producing one. I turned to online ASMR production tutorials and procured essential equipment, including a high-quality Blue Yeti microphone, a camera stand, and ASMR sound-making materials such as fake nails and slime. Drawing from my observations and years of experience as an ASMR audience, I incorporated fixed personal elements into my video content that I found appealing. These included tingling sound elements, standardized openings, black attire, and dimmed camera lighting. For privacy reasons and to prevent any personal social connections from interfering with this digital experiment, I chose not to reveal my face in the ASMR videos I produced. As early as 2014, Dr. Anderson suggested that the body and face in ASMR videos are “fragmented and abstract”, prioritizing the voice over visual components (2014, p. 6). To validate this concept and due to personal preferences, I decided to reveal only parts of my body in the ASMR videos. Once all preparations were complete, I fully committed to this bold experiment. Initially, I shared my ASMR works on five Chinese video platforms and one Chinese audio platform. These platforms, namely Bilibili, Xigua, Douyin, Red, Kuaishou, and MissEvan, are all popular in China and play crucial roles in shaping the ASMR community. While each platform has slightly different positioning, they collectively contribute to the community’s growth. I opted for Chinese platforms for my ASMR experiment due to my cultural background and familiarity with them, coupled with my residency in China at the time. Additionally, due to network restrictions, accessing Western websites like TikTok and YouTube was less convenient and stable. Thus, selecting Chinese Internet platforms was

the most viable option for studying ASMRtist-audience interactions at the time.

From the end of May 2021 to April 2022, I published a total of thirty-five ASMR works. Initially, for the first two weeks of the experiment, I simultaneously uploaded ASMR content across all six online platforms without differentiation. However, after two weeks, I opted to focus on only five video platforms due to my limited energy and variations in feedback across each platform. In the comments section, I frequently encountered remarks such as, *Why is such a good video not popular?* Yes, why not popular? This was a question that plagued me since embarking on my journey as an ASMRtist and initiating this experiment. Two weeks into launching my channel, my meticulously crafted ASMR creations failed to garner the anticipated feedback. The discouraging metrics of views, likes, comments, and subscriptions on my ASMR videos led me to question the viability of this experiment and whether I would gather meaningful data.



Figure 20. My early dismal video data on Red. (Yizhen Wang, 2021)

I felt doubly frustrated in this situation. While my original intention as a researcher was simply to gather more empirical data and gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics within the ASMR community, with traffic not being my primary goal, the disappointing video data traffic still weighed heavily on my identity as an ASMRtist. It signified not only a potential failure of my experiment but also implied that my output as an ASMRtist was unappreciated work that garnered little attention. This disheartening start taught me my first lesson after stepping into the role of an ASMRtist: that sharing as an ASMRtist does not always result in acceptance and feedback from ASMR audiences. As German anthropologist Thomas Widlok once pointed out, sharing often entails a one-way, unbalanced transfer with no discernible return (2017, p. 6). My sharing initially stemmed from my research into transfer

practices within the ASMR community, driven partly by my personal need for experimental data. However, the ASMR videos I shared did not originate from a demand from ASMR audiences for the content I produced. This disparity in demand made it challenging for my sharing to be reciprocated. I realized that creating and sharing ASMR videos solely for individualistic utilitarian purposes was no longer viable. This self-realization-driven transfer

practice would likely result in the experiment becoming a solitary endeavour. Furthermore, transfer practices within the ASMR community do not occur directly but rather through Internet video platforms. ASMRtists' works are not shared directly with ASMR audiences. Instead, these works are first uploaded to video platforms, which then act as unbalanced sharing sites, distributing the content to ASMR audiences based on recommendation and search algorithms. This sharing model leads to dispersion within the ASMR community, making it challenging to receive reciprocal responses. The success of sharing depends on the actions of both those who request and those who respond, rather than solely on the sharer (Widlok, 2017, p. 170). Only when ASMR audiences accept the ASMRtist's sharing and respond to it can the sharing be deemed effective and successful.

I began actively contemplating how I could enhance my traffic and elicit more responses. After careful consideration, I identified three main reasons for the dismal traffic of my videos at that time. Firstly, I had not been an ASMRtist for long enough. Starting as an unknown in this field, devoid of innate fame and popularity, made it particularly challenging at the outset. Secondly, I lacked marketing resources to garner sufficient exposure in the Internet recommendation system, making it arduous to showcase my videos to ASMR audiences. Lastly, my video



Figure 21. My first popular ASMR ear-cleaning video. (Yizhen Wang, 2021)

content failed to captivate the audience. The absence of my face made it exceedingly difficult to establish a connection between myself and my ASMR audience. It was a challenge for them to feel attached to my ASMR work solely from my fragmented and

abstract body and face. Considering that the first two reasons were constrained by inflexible factors and material conditions beyond my immediate control, I resolved to optimize my video content to attract more attention. While maintaining the premise of keeping my face out of the camera frame, I began exploring relaxation and ASMR-related terms on major video websites and delved into the most-viewed videos. I observed that ASMR videos themed around bodycare garnered significant views on the Chinese Internet. Inspired by this observation, I created my first ear-cleaning video. In this video, I simulated the procedure of ear cleaning in everyday life using two cotton swabs and interacted with my microphone as if it were the ears

of the audience. Additionally, I employed binaural editing techniques in post-production to enhance the realism and vividness of the sound. This video ultimately garnered over 4,500 views and directly earned me 130 followers.

Through this case, I came to realize that ASMR video production is not entirely driven by the ASMRtist's intentionality. Within the power framework of the ASMR community, the ASMR audience sometimes holds sway. During the initial two weeks of the experiment, my ASMR video production was solely based on my personal interests and preferences. However, upon uploading my videos to public platforms, they ceased to be solely my private creations. I desired for my ASMR work to be discovered and consumed by the audience, signifying that its value needed to resonate with them. If my work went unnoticed, it would merely amount to a frustrating share. As Swedish researchers Magnus Bergquist and Jan Ljungberg once articulated, "An application or some information does not really become a gift until someone finds it and makes use of it" (2001, p. 313). Only when my ASMR work was found and consumed by ASMR audiences did it truly become a gift, thereby establishing a power relationship grounded in the exchange of gifts between myself and these audiences who had received and watched my ASMR videos. As Mauss has already posited, gift exchanges are given and reciprocated obligatorily (Mauss, 2002). As an ASMRtist seeking attention and experimental data, I needed to actively foster the formation of a gift-exchange relationship between myself and my ASMR audiences. Only within this exchange could I obtain what I desired in return. I had to consider the preferences and needs of ASMR audiences as pivotal indicators for my creations, as only content meeting their needs would be viewed. Driven by my intense desire for recognition, the ASMR audiences emerged as the superior entities within the gift power relationship between us.

The exchange value of ASMR videos is entirely contingent on the ASMR audiences, and this value fluctuates case by case. Within the online community, "the value of the gifts is dependent on the amount of attention the giver gets from the receivers that choose to make use of the gift" (Bergquist & Ljungberg, 2001, p. 314). The greater attention my ASMR videos garner, the more valuable they become to the ASMR audiences. For a given ASMR video on the video platforms, some ASMR audiences may not be interested and thus do not even click on it. For these ASMR audiences, the video does not represent a gift, and consequently, no corresponding gift relationship forms with the ASMRtist who produced it. Conversely, for the ASMR audiences who do click and watch, their engagement signifies acceptance of the ASMR video

as a gift, thus establishing a gift relationship with the ASMRtist. In researcher Jessica Maddox’s analysis, she proposed that ASMR culture can be examined from an economic perspective, terming the ASMR works “transactional tingles” (Maddox, 2020). Indeed, viewed through the lens of a gift economy, ASMRtists provide ASMR audiences with the relaxation and tingles they seek. If ASMR audiences enjoy and are willing to support these experiences, they contribute valuable data to the video—such as views, likes, subscriptions, and other market-recognized metrics. The significant returns from ASMR audiences are also captured by the platforms, enhancing exposure for the video and potentially reaching more users. Some ASMR audiences may even reciprocate by financially supporting the ASMRtist. In essence, for these online ASMR videos, traffic and revenue determine the exchange value. Presently, most video platforms operate on a traffic-dependent mechanism. If a video performs well in terms of data within a specific period post-release, the platform’s recommendation system grants it greater exposure. This allows the ASMRtist to garner more attention, leading to potential financial gains or reputational benefits.



Figure 22. On Xigua video platform, some of my ASMR audiences clicked the highly recommended button helping me to get more traffic. (Yizhen Wang, 2021)



Figure 23. My video received an income of 4.31 CNY on Xigua. (Yizhen Wang, 2021)

2021-10-06 01:30:44	0.2	给视频 BV1464y1b7Zf 打赏
2021-10-01 21:34:45	0.2	给视频 BV1464y1b7Zf 打赏

Figure 24. On Bilibili, I received digital tips from some of my ASMR audiences. (Yizhen Wang, 2021)



Figure 25. On red, my videos received views, likes, collects, comments, and some followers. These are the recipients of my gifts who return traffic to me. (Yizhen Wang, 2021)

In addition to ASMRtists seeking attention from ASMR audiences, there are instances where ASMR audiences also seek acknowledgement from ASMRtists through direct financial contributions. For instance, ASMR enthusiasts actively seek to commission private customised ASMR videos directly from their favourite ASMRtists. My informant Lucy mentioned in an interview that she commissioned five customised videos from her preferred ASMRtist. Personally, I have also received private messages from two subscribers on my Bilibili channel requesting personalised videos. Although I did not ultimately agree to these requests, our interactions ceased there. In customised videos, the ASMR audience typically requests the ASMRtist to address them by name and engage in role-play tailored to their identity, creating a sense of copresence. This allows the ASMR audience to enjoy the ASMRtist's attention in a more immersive and exclusive manner. Moreover, in customised videos, ASMR audiences may specify additional requirements such as the ASMRtist's attire and performance style. If the ASMRtist agrees to these terms, a bespoke ASMR video is created to fulfil the specific needs of the audience. Through such transactional economic practices, ASMR audiences perceive themselves as having a significant influence on the creation of ASMR videos

(Maddox, 2020).

The exchange of gifts between ASMRtists and ASMR audiences constitutes a form of heteromorphic reciprocity. As defined by American sociologist Gouldner, “heteromorphic reciprocity, equivalence may mean that the things exchanged may be concretely different but should be equal in value, as defined by the actors in the situation” (1960, p. 172). As illustrated by the examples provided earlier, the gifts exchanged between ASMRtists and ASMR audiences differ materially. ASMRtists offer their labour-intensive creative ASMR videos, which imply potential relaxation for the audience. Consequently, when ASMR audiences accept these videos as gifts, they provide double returns to the ASMRtist. The first return is explicit and immediate: traffic and direct financial support resulting from the attention and recognition of ASMR audiences. The second return is implicit and deferred, arising from the traffic generated by ASMR audiences. This may include fame, labour, or financial benefits from potential commercial opportunities. However, despite these apparent differences, these exchanges must adhere to the principle of equivalence in value. The value of the gift is determined by ASMR audiences as consumers. It is this characteristic of “non-uniform market pricing” that allows ASMR videos to circulate within the ASMR community as gifts rather than commodities traded on the open market.

Undeniably, the transactional economic aspect is a significant driver compelling most ASMRtists to consistently create and share ASMR videos, viewing ASMR as a business tool for profit. However, this economic perspective only accounts for utilitarian behaviours within the ASMR community, leaving non-utilitarian behaviours largely unexplained. At a deeper level, I contend that gift theory may offer a more apt explanation for understanding the interactions between ASMRtists and ASMR audiences in the ASMR community. The construction of the ASMR community is not solely governed by the principles of attention economy; it is also shaped by notions of sharing and reciprocity. Influenced by sharing and reciprocity theory, social dynamics within the ASMR community revolve around practices of sharing, gift exchanges, and even commodity exchanges. While ASMRtists may be driven in part by motives such as seeking traffic and monetary gain, non-utilitarian gift exchanges also play a crucial role in shaping the broader ASMR culture. This reciprocity can stem from a desire for status or emotional connection. In the subsequent sections, I will delve into an in-depth analysis of transfer practices and relationships within the ASMR community from the vantage point of gift theory.

6.1.2 Social Capital as Gift

Despite the phenomenon of certain ASMRtists leveraging ASMR as a significant means of generating income, my interviews revealed that my informants are not particularly averse to this utilitarian aspect. During the interviews, I brought up the commercialization of ASMR. In contrast to the prevalent criticism of capitalism, all my informants exhibited a high degree of acceptance and tolerance towards ASMR commercials, considering themselves as direct consumers of ASMR.

I can't really blame people for trying to make money by doing something they love (hopefully they truly love making ASMR) but If That is all they talk (whisper!) about it can get a bit boring (Interview with Maria, 2020)

I think it's ok actually. It's become a mainstream thing, and to be honest, If it had stumbled upon it via a commercial, it wouldn't have changed the fact that I had experienced that as a child. So I think a lot of people are becoming aware of it. (Interview with Axel, 2020)

Businesses are already using it to sell big products. So it's out there. And we would all love to say, "this is my thing, let's keep it a secret" but think of the ASMRtists who could possibly start making more money. If you support something or someone and believe in what they're doing, we should want them to be able to make a living off their craft. (Interview with Lucy, 2020)

All three informants expressed their understanding of ASMR creation for profit-seeking purposes. Maria argued that ASMRtists are beyond reproach as long as they create appropriate ASMR works, even if their intentions are impure. Axel mentioned that regardless of the purpose of ASMR creation, he still enjoys the ASMR relaxation experience and believes that the essence of ASMR remains unchanged regardless of the ASMRtist's motive. As long as the ASMR commercial can provide a positive sensory experience to the audience, then this commercialised ASMR video is no different from any other ASMR video. Lucy, on the other hand, suggested that ASMR videos are a form of ASMRtists' craftsmanship, in which case she believed that "*it is totally reasonable for ASMRtists to make a living off their craft!*" She regarded money and support as a proper positive return for the ASMR gift provided by the ASMRtist. All the responses indicate that high-quality ASMR videos are the primary focus of ASMR audiences, and the return gift as well as the motives behind the gifting are not the primary concern of ASMR audiences.

Additionally, Lucy touched on the topic of support for ASMRtists. She believed that if ASMR audiences support an ASMRtist, then they should show practical support for the ASMRtist

financially, not just emotionally. This discourse of love and support shifts the focus in this gift exchange from the gift to a discourse centred on the relationship between the two parties in the exchange. The essence of this discourse is that we should exchange gifts to maintain a relationship, while the gifts themselves are not the centre of this exchange. I wholeheartedly agree with the idea that the relationship is the focus in gift exchanges. According to the anthropologist James Carrier, “A gift does not identify either the object or service itself, or the forms and ceremonies of giving and getting. Instead, what makes a gift is the relationship within which the transaction occurs” (1991, p. 122). As I mentioned earlier, the interaction between the ASMRtist and the ASMR audience begins when the ASMRtist shares a valuable ASMR work online, and when the ASMR audience accepts and reciprocates a counter-gift, the gift-exchange relationship between the ASMRtist and the ASMR audience is formally established. According to Bradford et al., sharing within a community helps build, enrich, and sustain relationships through gift rituals (2012, p. 43). The relationship of gift exchange is not a one-time event. The specificity of digital gifts leads to the fact that digital gifts such as ASMR videos can be continuously produced and circulated in the online public space. This sustainability leads to the reaffirmation of the obligation between the giver and receiver in the gift relationship, and this obligation further strengthens the gift relationship. On the other hand, unlike mass-produced commodities circulating in the free market, each ASMR video contains strong personal attributes of the ASMRtist. These personal attributes do not disappear with exchange and circulation. These personal attributes also remind the recipient of the giver’s identity and their relationship when they see the inalienable gift, which is the obligation to give, receive, and repay gifts in appropriate ways (Carrier, 1991, p. 126).

Acquiring the support of ASMR audiences and establishing a virtuous circle of relationships with ASMR listeners is, in fact, the social capital that ASMRtists aspire to harvest in ASMR production. According to Dr. Romele and Dr. Severo’s study in 2016, they argued that “gifting on the Internet does not have much to do with goods exchange, but rather with mutual recognition” (2016, p. 2). Similarly, in Prof. Lampel and Prof. Bhalla’s study in 2007, they claimed that the motivation of content creators to contribute online is “strongly associated with building online identity and online status seeking” (2007, p. 444). Admittedly, in addition to the pursuit of economic capital, social capital is also something that ASMRtists want to accumulate in the gift exchange. The sociologist Stefanie Duguay stated that “individuals who desire to create a following on social media are often compelled to accumulate social and economic capital” (2019, p. 3). As in the case I mentioned in the previous section, during the

gift exchange practice, the ASMRtist tends to create ASMR videos based on the ASMR audience's orientation to attract more followers. At this stage, the ASMR audience is the real master of the gift exchange. Therefore, in the Facebook group *ASMR Community*, we often see some ASMRtists sending out posts sincerely seeking advice on improving their video content.

Channel critique request: what am I doing wrong? I was really inspired with how bravely Jordan Webb took critique from everyone, and how intelligent and informative this community's discussions are. This seems like a safe place to request feedback. Why am I stalling? What can I improve? (PP posted in *ASMR Community*, 2020)

At this stage, the ASMRtist is subject to the ASMR audiences, both in terms of video content and the maintenance of the relationship. The ASMRtist aims to make their gift a "high value" offering to the ASMR audiences, expecting to receive a corresponding "high value" counter-gift in return. Once the ASMRtist's gift is recognized as high value by the ASMR audiences, and the ASMRtist can consistently produce high-value ASMR videos for the ASMR audiences, then the ASMRtist will be able to accumulate more attention and reputation. As the number of followers grows, the ASMRtist will become a celebrity and gain a certain amount of social influence in the ASMR community.

It is noteworthy that to date, the influence of ASMRtist celebrities remains largely confined to the ASMR community. Despite some renowned ASMRtists boasting over one million subscribers on social media, their primary fanbase resides within the ASMR community, with minimal impact on the mainstream on a broader scale. The influence of ASMRtist celebrities can be described as primarily at a micro level. Communication scholar Alice Marwick characterised the status of microcelebrity as being famous within a niche group of individuals (2015, p. 334). Microcelebrity status is forged by an ASMRtist's accumulated reputation through their ASMR productions and sustained by their ongoing efforts. In Duguay's examination of the microcelebrity labour of everyday queer women, she delineated three modes of labour to cultivate a following, including intimate affective labour, developmental aesthetic labour, and aspiring relational labour (2019, p. 1). Duguay argued that cultural producers employ these forms of practical labour to share and manage personal public discourse, shape personal public image, and foster connections with other celebrities to bolster personal visibility (2019, p. 2). While Duguay's study focused on the online queer women community, my fieldwork data confirms that her notions regarding microcelebrity labour are applicable to ASMR communities.

In the process of ASMRtists establishing microcelebrity status, intimate affective labour, developmental aesthetic labour, and aspiring relational labour all play significant roles in personal image building and branding. Here, my focus is more on the participation and interaction of ASMRtists and ASMR audiences in these three practices. According to Duguay's definition, intimate affective labour mainly involves microcelebrities sharing their private lives in subcultural communities to foster intimacy with their audiences and attract more followers through this intimate connection (2019, p. 5). Developmental aesthetic labour pertains to the careful curation of posts by microcelebrities and the use of special techniques to garner more traffic and attention (2019, p. 5). Aspiring relational labour involves microcelebrities employing collaborative strategies to increase their impact and attract more attention (2019, p. 5). My fieldwork revealed that ASMRtists utilise all three types of labour to garner attention and establish influence.

As I discussed in the chapter on ASMR experience, intimacy plays a crucial role in eliciting ASMR responses, and ASMRtists employ significant amounts of intimate affective labour in their ASMR productions. They recreate various familiar visual and auditory elements in their videos to foster trust and intimacy, such as whispers, hair brushing, and everyday life scenes. Moreover, ASMR videos themselves require relatively high-quality standards, especially concerning audio quality. This necessitates ASMRtists to invest considerable developmental aesthetic labour during both the production and post-editing stages of the video. Based on my personal experience, creating a high-quality ASMR video demands not only spending ample time on recording and filming but also acquiring proficiency in post-processing software for audio and video editing. Upon beginning my journey in making ASMR videos, I had to familiarise myself with software like Adobe Premiere and Adobe Audition to refine both the video and audio aspects. While the actual filming might take less than an hour in many cases, the post-production phase for video and audio often required two to three hours, resulting in a final product that could be as short as fifteen minutes. Hence, ASMR video production entails substantial developmental aesthetic labour. It is important to note that both intimate affective labour and developmental aesthetic labour are undertaken by ASMRtists, with their ultimate service targets being ASMR audiences. In essence, these efforts culminate in ASMR videos, which constitute the gift bestowed upon ASMR audiences by ASMRtists.

As noted by French sociologist Jean Lojkin, in a gift society, gift relations are oriented towards mobilising and directing labour (1989, p.155 & p. 156). In the exchange of gifts within the

ASMR community, ASMRtists receive fame, attention, additional labour, and benefits from ASMR audiences in return. A phenomenon observed in the ASMR community is when some ASMR audiences inquire about recommendations for high-quality ASMR videos. At such times, there are always enthusiastic ASMR audiences who voluntarily promote their beloved ASMRtists to the questioners. This behaviour constitutes free marketing labour that ASMR audiences undertake for the ASMRtists they support. Lucy exemplifies such a devoted fan who actively promotes her favourite ASMRtist within the ASMR community. During my netnography, I observed Lucy recommending her preferred ASMRtist multiple times in response to posts by other ASMR audiences seeking high-quality ASMR videos. This type of voluntary promotional labour represents the counter-gift that Lucy, as an ASMR audience, offers to the ASMRtist she supports to enhance their popularity. In addition to engaging in unpaid promotional activities, Lucy also contributes to the ASMRtist's business by purchasing personalised ASMR videos from them.

In addition to employing promotional labour and financial support as counter-gifts for ASMRtists, ASMR audiences also step forward to defend the reputation of the ASMRtists they support when they come under attack. They offer direct support and advocacy as a gift in such situations. I happened to encounter a controversy between an anti-fan and a fan regarding the quality of my ASMR videos.

A (to me): So loud! It woke me up! This does not help me sleep!

Me (to A): You can turn down the volume of your mobile phone

A (to me): It's already very low

F (to A): You have a problem with your mobile phone, my iPad volume to the maximum is not noisy. You don't know how to adjust the volume yourself, what a pain in the arse!

A (to F): Tsk, tsk, tsk, there's something wrong with your phone!

F (to A): Yes, it's okay that there's something wrong with my phone, but it's wrong for you to make such nonsense because of your own reasons

F (to A): Tsk, tsk, tsk! You think you're so cool? What grade are you in?

Me (to F): Don't be angry, listen to your favourite voice and relax~

A (to F): I'm speechless.

F (to A): If you don't like it, you don't have to watch it, did others criticize something about you? You accuse people indiscriminately.

F (to me): I'm sorry, I shouldn't have argued with those anti-fans under your video. I'm sorry for ruining your mood.

F is a long-time fan of mine who has been following my account and consistently liking my content, whereas A is merely a passerby who stumbled upon my video. When A criticized the quality of my ASMR video, F came to my defense and refuted A's claims. This act of support

from F was incredibly touching. I believe this incident also exemplifies the reinforcement of microcelebrity through fan (and anti-fan) interactions. This example underscores the fact that there are limitations to the exchange of gifts within a subcultural group. Although my ASMR videos are freely available on online platforms as gifts, not every ASMR audience provides uniform feedback. Some viewers offer positive feedback on my videos and choose to follow my account, establishing a sustainable relationship with me. The accumulation of such positive feedback contributes to the growth of my microcelebrity. Conversely, other viewers may provide negative feedback on my ASMR videos, leading to the end of our interaction.

The exchange of gifts serves as a means of relationship maintenance. In a gift society, the reciprocation of a gift is obligatory, and if a gift is not reciprocated, the relationship may dissolve. For ASMRtists, particularly, preserving their microcelebrity status and nurturing a virtuous gifting relationship with ASMR audiences demands significant relational labour. Unlike the collaborative relational labour defined by Duguay, which emphasizes cooperation among ASMRtists, relational labour involves the efforts exerted by ASMRtists to attract and retain the attention of ASMR audiences. Nancy Baym, an American communication scholar, identified relational labour in her research on artists' work, defining it as "the regular and ongoing communication with audiences over time to build social relationships that foster paid work" (2015, p. 16). In a case from my own experience, the significance of relational labour for sustaining gift relationships among creators in the cultural industry becomes apparent. As previously mentioned, I initially distributed my ASMR videos across six different platforms but later discontinued the audio-only platform, MissEvan, and focused exclusively on video platforms. It was during this transition that I noticed a fan whom I had interacted with on MissEvan began following my channel on Bilibili across platforms, becoming my fourth fan on Bilibili. This fan engaged with me positively on Bilibili, frequently commenting on and liking my ASMR videos. Initially, I responded to his comments and expressed appreciation, thus maintaining our relationship. However, as I ceased responding to his comments and interacting with him, he only provided likes on my new videos. Eventually, he unfollowed my Bilibili channel after feeling ignored by my lack of response. This experience taught me that gift exchange entails a form of equivalent exchange and is inherently relational. The value of the exchanged gifts must be perceived as equal by both parties involved, without room for favouritism or leniency. If one party demonstrates conspicuous absenteeism or breaches the unwritten contract, the relationship will likely dissolve. "On social media, creators are expected to reciprocate attention that they receive from viewers and commenters by responding

personally. Social media experts often wax rhapsodic about engaging in reciprocity-or mutual exchange of things-to maintain strong relationships and enjoy success” (Lange, 2019, p. 107). Thus, the existence of microcelebrity hinges on the continuous positive support and reciprocity from ASMR audiences towards ASMRtists. Failure by ASMRtists to reciprocate attention and invest in maintaining relationships with ASMR audiences may result in the fragile microcelebrity of ASMRtists fading away.

Certainly, there are various ways to further interpret the relationship between ASMRtists and ASMR audiences, but here I am primarily considering both sides within the framework of gift exchange. As mentioned earlier, ASMRtists employ various forms of labour to nurture their relationship with ASMR audiences, and one specific type of labour is aspiring relational labour. This form of labour necessitates collaboration among microcelebrities, even though its ultimate aim is to capture the attention of ASMR audiences. Such direct gift exchange is confined to homeomorphic gift exchanges within the same group in the ASMR community. I will delve into this type of gift exchange in the following section.

6.2 Transfer Practices among ASMRtists: Collaborative ASMRtists

When compared to the transfer practices between ASMRtists and ASMR audiences, the gift exchange among ASMRtists is more straightforward. It embodies a homeomorphic reciprocity, conducted in a cooperative and mutually beneficial manner, with the exchanged gifts being largely similar. In the Facebook group *ASMR Community*, it is common to come across posts from ASMRtists seeking collaboration.

Hey guys all right? Let’s do a collective action? I am starting now, and as you all know, it’s very difficult to get subscribers at the beginning of our project. Shall we help each other? I’ll leave my channel here, who subscribe. I write back!! (AA posted on ASMR Community, 2020)

Hey guys. Just wanted to pop by and share an idea for a COLLABORATION!! I was thinking about each of us can do a specific trigger and make it happen? What say? Anyone interested? Btw my channel name is “*****” in YouTube. (KFA posted on ASMR Community, 2020)

There are two main types of collaboration among ASMRtists. One is “sub for sub”, where ASMRtists subscribe to each other’s channels, thereby contributing to each other’s follower counts. The gift exchanged and received by ASMRtists in this scenario is an individual subscription. This collaboration strategy is commonly employed by ASMRtists with a small number of fans. Through such reciprocal exchanges, ASMRtists can quickly accumulate a

certain number of followers at a low cost. On some video sites, reaching a certain number of followers is a prerequisite for unlocking specific features. For instance, on Red, one can only upload a video longer than five minutes if their follower count exceeds 500. Since the highest number of followers I acquired on Red was only 275, I was unable to upload the full version of the ASMR video I made until the end of my experiment. Additionally, when the number of fans reaches a certain threshold, ASMRtists may have the opportunity to collaborate with brands, thereby reaping economic benefits. However, there are certain risks associated with “sub for sub”. Firstly, there is a possibility that one subscribes to someone but they do not reciprocate the subscription. Secondly, such an approach may violate platform regulations. For example, YouTube does not endorse such practices and may penalize them upon detection, as they can lead to misleading metrics and false impressions. Another form of collaboration between ASMRtists is the joint creation of ASMR videos. In this gift exchange practice, both parties involved contribute their labour, with the ultimate reward being attention and traffic from ASMR audiences. By collaborating with other ASMRtists, individuals can garner more attention and attract a wider audience. They can leverage each other’s audience bases to draw in new viewers. Collaborative videos enable ASMRtists to extend their personal brands and content to a broader audience, thereby enhancing their exposure and attention. Moreover, collaborative creations foster diversity in content. The interaction and collaboration among different ASMRtists can spark new ideas, resulting in more engaging content for ASMR audiences.



Figure 22. Screenshot of YouTube Homepage with “ASMR Collaboration” as Keywords. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=asmr+collaboration. (Date of retrieval: April 18, 2024).

Collaboration between ASMRtists exemplifies what Duguay defines as “aspiring relational labour” (2019, p. 5), wherein ASMRtists employ collaborative strategies to garner more traffic

and attention. This mutually beneficial gift relationship can be established and maintained because both parties share common goals and interests, namely, gaining more traffic and attention and expanding their visibility. In most cases, this type of gift exchange practice is essentially a one-time occurrence and is not sustainable. However, when the output of ASMRtists' collaboration garners widespread attention within this niche circle, they may initiate further collaborations. These subsequent collaborations between ASMRtists are motivated by the attention of ASMR audiences, and it is only the attention and traffic from ASMR audiences that sustains and stabilises the gift exchange between ASMRtists.

6.3 Transfer Practices among ASMR Audiences: Gifting-while-sharing

Transfer practices among ASMR audiences also involve sharing and homeomorphic reciprocity, but unlike the exchange of labour between ASMRtists, the gifts ASMR audiences exchange are more of their emotions. In the ASMR community, ASMR audiences not only share their favourite ASMR videos, but they also share their emotions and moods. This community resembles more of a support network, where individuals seek recommendations for ASMR videos, resonance for ASMR experiences, and a sense of belongingness within a community. In the ASMR community, sharing among ASMR audiences is a means for them to engage in the community, satisfy their exchange partners, integrate into the exchange, and construct their own membership identity (Giesler & Pohlmann, 2003, p. 13 & p. 14). I observed that my informant Lucy would often share videos of her favourite ASMRtist in the Facebook group *ASMR Community*.

One of my favourites to help with sleeps. It's like sleepy time tea, only better. (Links) #ASMR**** (Lucy, 2020)

Although Lucy's behaviour can be viewed partly as a means of promoting her favourite ASMRtist's videos, there is no doubt that her action also reflects a desire to capture the attention of fellow ASMR audiences to initiate dialogue and share her sentiments with others. The practice of sharing emotions is widespread in the ASMR community. Unlike the materialistic intent behind video sharing among ASMRtists, the purpose of sharing among ASMR audiences appears to be more spiritually inclined. ASMR audiences aspire for the act of exchanging gifts to foster interaction and discourse within the ASMR community, thereby reinforcing their sense of belonging and membership in the ASMR community while fulfilling their emotional needs. As highlighted by scholar Bradford et al., "Membership in these communities and the relationships that develop are nurtured through traditions of sharing,

motivation, recognition, and rituals, namely gifting” (2012, p. 32).

During my fieldwork, to gain a first-hand understanding of the significance of the ASMR community to its participants, I directly posed the question “What does the ASMR community mean to you?” to the Facebook group ASMR Community. Fortunately, I received several responses, all of which consistently conveyed that the ASMR community provided them with a private space to share and delve into their niche interests, enabling them to connect with like-minded individuals and find a sense of belonging on the Internet.

Finding out that I’m not the only one with this itching desire to go into a vegetative state every night lol. (Replied by DT on my post, 2020)

I have meant some the best people through ASMR and I love this community so much because of how loving the people are. (Replied by AR on my post, 2020)

As discussed in preceding chapters, the prevailing public perception of ASMR remains somewhat constrained, and the societal stigma surrounding ASMR culture renders it challenging for enthusiasts to openly engage in discussions about ASMR in public settings. Given this prevailing social gap in understanding ASMR, the act of sharing within the ASMR community assumes heightened significance for its members. Central to this sharing and mutual support is the practice of gifting. Through the exchange and dissemination of gifts, ASMR enthusiasts collectively cultivate a distinct realm of ASMR discourse. This realm serves as an information cocoon—a sanctuary wherein they delve into various ASMR-related topics, exchanging and sharing insights, resources, and emotions. Within this ongoing social exchange, they provide mutual support, foster a sense of belonging, establish unique social circles, and solidify their identities as ASMR enthusiasts. During my conversation with Axel, he underscored the profound influence of the ASMR community on his life.

I thought it (ASMR) was just a bodily thing and never knew how to explain it. When I found out what ASMR was it was like an answer to a question I had my whole life. And that there was an entire community of people that experience that as well and even try to trigger it. It was really powerful for me. (Interview with Axel, 2020)

Axel’s remarks vividly illustrate how the active sharing within the ASMR community has led him to realize that there are numerous kindred spirits worldwide who share his sentiments. Moreover, he recognizes that these allies are actively advancing the systematic exploration of the underlying mechanisms of the ASMR experience. Such insights are profoundly impactful for newcomers entering the ASMR community. It is through the sharing of these experiences and emotions as gifts within the community that a continuous circulation of supportive

interactions is fostered, providing members with a profound sense of belonging. As noted by scholars Bradford et al., “Through sharing, individuals create bonds of belonging in the making of a pseudo-extended family with ties of a common goal in lieu of blood” (2012, p. 39). During my netnography, I observed numerous participants expressing gratitude for the supportive environment fostered by the ASMR community.

The people in the ASMR community seem to really care about helping people who suffer from depression and anxiety. I just wish there were more people like those in the ASMR community which is hard to find. Listening to ASMR is bringing back my wiccan belief which I thought I have left a few years back. But my life is really a total tragedy. I hate being deaf and wearing a cochlear implant and hearing aid, it just opens up so much for me to get picked on. I never asked for a life like this. ASMR is beautiful to me, especially its lullabies. :((CB posted on ASMR community, 2019)

CB sincerely expressed the remarkable changes that ASMR and the ASMR community have brought to his life. His authenticity and strong sense of self are palpable in his narrative of his identity background, along with his evident desire to share experiences and forge connections within the community. In their research on online communities, Bradford et al. categorized online gifting into three types: monadic gifting, dyadic gifting, and systemic gifting. They argue that monadic gifts focus on the self as both giver and recipient, closely tied to self-concept, while dyadic and systemic gifting occur within communities through shared experiences, comments on others' experiences, expressions of appreciation for posted comments, and social support (2012, p. 40-42). For CB, his shared experiences function as both a monadic gift, affirming his sense of self-identity and belonging within the ASMR community, and also as dyadic or systemic gifts. These shared experiences not only reinforce his own sense of belonging but also foster a sense of community among ASMR audiences who resonate with his experiences. Sharing is inherently a collective act that fosters connection and unity (Belk, 2010, p. 717). In this community, there are numerous individuals like CB who share their perspectives on ASMR and the ASMR community daily, seeking resonance with others. These shared experiences are created, consumed, and reproduced, allowing ASMR audiences to develop an evolving sense of self and cultivate relationships with others. Thus, a sense of belonging and self-identity is nurtured within this online community.

The driving force behind the gift exchange among ASMR audiences is self-identification and recognition within the community. Through participating in the sharing ritual, participants establish a sense of membership and belonging, thus forming their social circle. The act of gifting in the ASMR community also reflects self-awareness and the development of

relationships within the community, contributing to the construction of self-identity and social bonds within this online community. Whether it is the exchange of attention among ASMRtists or the sharing of emotions among ASMR audiences, this form of homeomorphic reciprocity is prevalent in the ASMR community, fostering a tight-knit community with a strong sense of belonging. The ASMR online community serves as a refuge for enthusiasts of this subculture to explore their extended selves beyond the offline world. Here, they exchange various ASMR gifts to cultivate their online relationships and identities. The existence of the ASMR community provides a space for individuals with niche interests to freely express themselves, fostering an environment where their once-isolated interests can flourish and grow without judgment.

7 Conclusion, Applicability and Future Research

7.1 Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis aims to delve into ASMR culture, expanding academic knowledge of this emerging online subculture. Employing applied cultural analysis, I provided a comprehensive overview and introduction of the ASMR phenomenon, synthesising previous literature to define ASMR culture. I delineated two main research directions: ASMR experience and ASMR community. Through rich qualitative methods including multi-sited netnography, semi-structured online interviews, and autoethnography, I explored ASMR culture from both ASMRtists' and ASMR audiences' perspectives. Central to my study were two fundamental questions:

1. What motivates individuals to seek a relaxing ASMR experience, and what lies behind ASMR relaxation?
2. What kind of bond exists between ASMR audiences and ASMRtists? How to deconstruct and interpret the ASMR community from the perspective of applied cultural analysis?

From a phenomenological standpoint, I analysed ASMR experience as an affective relaxation journey, elucidating the roles of intentionality, intimacy, and affordance. I revealed that the pursuit of ASMR relaxation stems from intentional immersion, facilitated by the construction of intimacy and shaped by technological, social, and emotional affordances. Additionally, drawing upon gift theory, reciprocity theory, and sharing theory, I deconstructed the ASMR community's dynamics, focusing on transfer practices within ASMR community. I found that

gift exchange relations in the ASMR community are underpinned by economic, reputational, and emotional needs, shaping intricate interactions.

My investigation into the ASMR phenomenon underscored the significance of relaxation within this cultural domain. ASMR audiences prioritize the soothing experience over mere physical sensations, with relaxation crafted through intentionality, intimacy, and affordance. The pursuit of ASMR relaxation is intentional, whether it be the deliberate focus of the audience's mindset, the intentional creations of ASMRtists, or the guided direction facilitated by technology and platforms. The quest for ASMR relaxation hinges on the construction of intimacy, cultivated by ASMRtists to immerse audiences in a narrative of everydayness and copresence. This pursuit is also shaped by technological, social, and emotional affordances.

Furthermore, my examination of transfer practices within the ASMR community revealed parallel practices of sharing, reciprocity, and commercial transactions. Notably, interactions between ASMRtists and audiences are the most significant and complex, characterized by various forms of exchange. ASMRtists invest considerable effort in creating works that offer relaxation to audiences, yet the reciprocity of this exchange is often uncertain. Economic and reputational factors drive ASMRtists to share their creations, while audiences seek emotional connection and community support within their own subgroup.

My research contributes to a deeper understanding of ASMR culture and its implications. By bridging gaps in research on ASMR relaxation, I illuminated how intentionality, intimacy, and affordance shape the ASMR experience. Moreover, I challenged the stigmatization of ASMR, emphasizing contextual interpretation over generalization. Additionally, I cautioned against over-reliance on digital intimacy, urging audiences to balance online engagement with offline experiences. Through an exploration of gift exchange dynamics, I contributed to the groundwork for a sustainable ASMR community. By employing innovative methodologies, such as self-experimentation, I offered unique perspectives that enriched our comprehension of ASMR culture. Ultimately, I hope my research inspires future scholars to explore ASMR from diverse angles, fostering a deeper understanding of this intriguing phenomenon.

7.2 Applicability of Findings

The implications of my research extend to various facets of ASMR experiences and community development. Primarily, it is imperative for ASMRtists to acknowledge that relaxation serves as the primary motivation for ASMR audiences, surpassing mere tingling sensations. This

awareness should inform the production process of ASMR content, prompting creators to prioritize the cultivation of a serene ambiance through language, tools, performance, and technology, rather than solely focusing on eliciting tingles. Furthermore, ASMRtists should recognize that successful video creation and dissemination hinge upon catering to the preferences of ASMR audiences. Such alignment facilitates the attainment of desired financial and reputational outcomes. Maintaining microcelebrity status necessitates not only fostering positive audience interactions and managing personal brand image but also actively pursuing collaborations with fellow ASMRtists to bolster popularity and attract greater attention.

For ASMR audiences, a deeper comprehension of ASMR culture enables a more discerning appraisal of their instrumental use of ASMR content and their relationship with ASMRtists. ASMR videos, serving as efficacious relaxation tools, offer respite from anxiety and stress sans the adverse effects associated with pharmaceutical interventions. However, it is imperative to acknowledge that ASMR videos wield potent intentionality, warranting caution in their consumption. My findings empower ASMR audiences to engage with ASMR content judiciously, fostering vigilant self-awareness to mitigate the risk of excessive addiction and reliance on virtual relationships and remote comforts.

As for online platforms hosting ASMR content, clarifying their stance and diligently reviewing posted ASMR content can mitigate unnecessary risks and controversies. Misaligned ASMR content not only misrepresents ASMR culture but also undermines the emotional affordance of the platform, resulting in a diminished content ecosystem and jeopardizing profitability. Thus, online platforms should align their positioning and exercise discernment in curating suitable ASMR content.

7.3 Implications for Further Research

In this thesis, I have endeavoured to conduct a relatively comprehensive applied cultural analysis of the ASMR cultural phenomenon. However, certain aspects of ASMR phenomena remain unexplored. Regrettably, due to objective technical constraints, my ASMRtist experiments were only conducted on Chinese Internet platforms and not on Western social media.

Concerning future research directions within ASMR culture, I propose the following avenues:

1. Exploration of private customized ASMR videos. As discussed in this thesis, the

phenomenon of ASMR audiences commissioning ASMRtists to create exclusive ASMR content exists within the ASMR community. Yet, systematic research on this phenomenon is lacking. What are the precise motivations underlying the emergence of private customized ASMR videos? What are the benefits and potential pitfalls associated with this phenomenon? How should we interpret and understand this phenomenon through the lens of applied cultural analysis?

2. Investigation of masculinity in ASMR culture. While ASMR culture is often perceived as highly feminized by scholars and members of the community, the role of masculinity remains underexplored in current research. Despite the presence of numerous male ASMRtists, the industry continues to be predominantly associated with femininity. How should we perceive and interpret the role of masculinity in shaping ASMR culture? How does the presence of masculinity intersect with the highly feminized landscape of ASMR culture, particularly through the framework of applied cultural analysis?
3. Comparative analysis of ASMR culture across different cultural contexts. While I conducted a cross-platform and cross-cultural analysis of ASMR cultural phenomena using Chinese and Western social media platforms, further comparative research across diverse cultural backgrounds is warranted. If resources permit, future studies could explore ASMR culture in varied cultural contexts, enriching our understanding through a comparative lens.

As an emerging phenomenon, comprehending ASMR culture holds significant implications for the exploration of future emotional support mechanisms and digital comfort-seeking behaviours. Addressing the pressing issue of alleviating loneliness, anxiety, and stress in our increasingly insular, atomized, and uncertain society requires innovative approaches. ASMR serves as a potential tool for individuals seeking relaxation and solace, thus presenting immense research value. In investigating ASMR culture, I advocate for the utilization of applied cultural analysis as a valuable research tool. Such an approach enables us to gain insights into the perspectives of ASMRtists and audiences, bridging gaps between technological, communal, and scholarly standpoints. Ultimately, it offers theoretical and practical guidance for further research within the realm of ASMR culture.

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Appendix

List of Fieldwork Websites

Red.

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