

The Headphone

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CASE

Maria (GentleWhispering) gazes intently into the camera and sways softly from side to side, her hands fluttering gently, her expression is warm, relaxed and calm. She has long blonde hair and a slight Russian accent. She is whispering to you and explaining the premise of the video - **Crinkle Crinkle lil shirt...** - ASMR/binaural/hair brushing/whisper (GentleWhispering, 2014):

Good evening, as you can tell by the title this video is going to be dedicated to crinkle shirts; and I have three of them... I would love it if you would tell me which one you like the best...And I will be gently brushing your hair – I will try to whisper mostly so you can hear the sounds of the shirts better...I am going to include the soothing sounds of crinkling.

The first shirt is, as Maria explains to you a “very crinkly shirt”, and appears to be a pink waterproof outdoors jacket; she explains that the loud crinkles of the shirt mean that her movements must be “extra slow for you”. The crinkly shirt sound helps recreate the sensation of sound all around the viewer as it is highlighted by Maria’s movements. The dimensionality of sound created by the crinkling shirt, should, as Maria hypothesises, add something ‘extra’ to the experience. She stops talking and turns her back to the camera moving gently to create crinkling sounds with the jacket. Excusing herself she grabs a hairbrush that she describes as “very dear to her heart” and commences slowly brushing your hair. She disappears from the screen, and all you can hear are the sounds of the shirt and the hairbrush moving through your hair from ‘behind’ you along with some inaudible whispering that carries an air of calm and reassurance (GentleWhispering 2014).

I think that getting your hair brushed is one of the most intimate and pleasant feelings a person can feel. And I think that has to do with the feeling of us being vulnerable and someone taking care of us; calming us down, touching our hair... I think for a lot of people the feeling of hair being brushed is as close as they can get to tingles

[no talking, sounds of shirt crinkling, hair brushing and gentle breathing; Maria is mostly out of frame]

...it is definitely one of the most pleasant feelings and every time it makes you feel so relaxed.

The soundscape is carefully arranged. The first shirt is the loudest with its stiff fabric generating deep crinkling sounds at the slightest movement. Maria describes the second shirt as more subtle, but still very capable of producing pleasant crinkling sounds. The subtle crinkling sound of this second shirt allows Maria to introduce additional elements into the soundscape; specifically hair brushing. Maria is something of an amateur ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response) theorist, and many of her videos propose potential explanations about the nature and significance of ASMR. As Maria brushes your hair, she theorises about why the sound of hair brushing might be so soothing; she explains that the sound of hair brushing serves as a memory trigger, it is “going back into the childhood time [sic]...with someone who cares about you...”; Maria connects the feeling of ASMR produced by the shirt and the hair brushing to a broader sense of child-like enjoyment with the world, and connecting with nature, “smiling into the sun, hugging a tree, climbing a tree” (GentleWhispering 2014).

Crinkle Crinkle lil shirt... (2014) was the first ASMR video that I (Naomi) ever listened to. At the time, I am procrastinating grading papers and drifting around the internet. I find myself reading an article about ASMR that emphasises the strangeness of it, the whispering, the waving hands. I am curious, and I am bored, searching for what Paasonen (2015) calls an ‘affective jolt’. I fish around for my headphones and put them in, pressing play. I start with the volume turned right down, trying to avoid any ‘nails on a chalkboard’ response, but I don’t find the sounds misophonic, I find myself straining to hear the small sounds, pushing my earbuds further into my ears. So I turn the volume up, and a warm, relaxing sensation washes over me. The headphones allow me to forget that I am in an open plan office and direct my attention inwards. The headphones narrow my perception and I do not experience the sounds as coming from outside in, but rather they feel like they are being dredged up from pleasant corners of my memory. My thoughts, tense, jittery and restless almost immediately relax. It feels like the headphones are a way of injecting a blissed zen feeling straight to my brain. It is strange, it is intriguing and it feels good.

Is a crinkly shirt a good thing? Usually, the answer would be no. A shirt that crinkles is likely to be made of stiff, low quality fabric. Insofar as a button-down shirt has a sound, it might be best

described as an inaudible rustle. One of the many tensions in ASMR is that it forces us to reorient ourselves to objects, instead of valuing objects for how they look or feel; they are valued for how they sound. In ASMR content, the parts of an object that are usually discarded, including the plastic packaging, are often carefully kept (for example, the plastic comb that is still in its plastic packaging in *Crinkle Crinkle lil shirt...*(2014)). In this way, objects become separated from their capacity to be used for their original purpose. You cannot use a comb in its original packaging for combing your hair, but it can make satisfying crinkly noises when it is gently pressed. As such, objects move from their direct relationship to an intended use, to objects whose primary purpose is to produce sound.

In a sense, ASMR makes instruments of the unexpected. It does not matter that the comb is still in its packaging: ASMR sound production allows it to become a new object *combinpackage*, whose purpose is to make gentle, plastic-crinkle noises as part of a pleasurable soundscape. Likewise, the cheap, crinkly shirt, probably profoundly unpleasurable to wear, finds new life and utility in sound.

Using things in a manner that they were not originally intended for often makes people uncomfortable. Why is she fondling that comb, they might wonder, why is it still in its package? The tension exists because the uninitiated (to ASMR) do not recognise the new object *combinpackage*, whose only job is to produce sound. The use of mundane, everyday objects to create ASMR demonstrates that these objects can, “generate and transmit affects themselves” (Ash 2015, 85). Headphones play a central role in producing and approaching these new objects.

Previous scholarship implies that headphones act as a bubble, distancing the urban citizen from their surroundings by drowning out the sound of the city with other noises (usually music) and turning public spaces into private auditory experiences (Bull 2012). Bull (2012) highlights the power of headphones, and by extension of the iPod, to transform and transcend the geography of space. However, the way headphones are used to experience ASMR is substantively different. Rather than blocking out or transmitting sonic geographies, the brushing, tapping, crinkling, scratching and typing sounds typical of ASMR content allows the listener to experience the unremarkable sounds of daily life as immersive. Headphones help ASMR listeners to focus on particular experiences of sound. Without headphones it is difficult for the viewer to ‘get’ ASMR. Think about everyday sonic experiences without headphones: for example, unless someone is rustling a packet of crisps behind you in a movie theatre you are unlikely to pay much attention to the sound of crinkling plastic. As overwhelming as the noise of the crisps packet can be, it is accompanied by a host of other noises in the theatre, including the sounds of your body, the creak of patrons shifting in their seats and the

movie itself. ASMR via headphones allows the listener to encounter all these sounds intimately, individually and pleurably. In ASMR videos, sounds move from their immediate and mundane domestic context, which allows them to be highlighted, elevated and experienced as immediately and consciously pleasurable.

The kind of listening that ASMR videos enable is akin to Pauline Oliveros' (2005) concept of 'deep listening'. Deep listening, as described by Oliveros (2005), is mindful attention to the layered dimensions of sound, present in the soundscapes that surround us. Oliveros makes a careful distinction between listening and hearing; listening is intentional, and hearing is incidental. Oliveros proposes that the practice of listening turns the ordinary sounds of life into an aesthetic experience. ASMR is similarly focused on the transformation of ordinary sounds into affective triggers. However, the labour of listening that Oliveros describes is removed. ASMR videos do not require careful listening, to focus on one sound amongst others, because this work is done for the listener by the ASMR artist. In ASMR videos sounds are usually presented one by one to allow for maximum enjoyment. Although deep listening is not required, close listening is, and headphones serve as a way to facilitate this.

The sound levels in ASMR videos are usually very low. In order to fully experience the dimensions of the soundscape, the listener usually must listen with the sound turned up on both the YouTube video and the listening device itself. The use of headphones assists in the practice of close listening by heightening the noise and blocking out other sounds, increasing the chances of an immersive experience. The sounds are, quite literally, brought closer through the use of headphones.

ASMR as a sound culture is perhaps uniquely dependent on a range of technologies for its existence. The first recorded discussion of ASMR on the internet occurred on a health-focused forum, under the title "Weird Sensation Feels Good". We have redacted the reference details to preserve the privacy of participants. This thread is the first attempt to name and label ASMR as a discreet experience:

i get this sensation sometimes. Theres [sic] no real trigger for it. it just happenes [sic] randomly. its been happening since i was a kid and i'm 21 now... 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...what is it?? i'm not complaining cause i love it, but i'm just wondering what it might be... help.

Another user replies:

I think I know what you may be talking about...Since I was a child I got this strange sensation in my head. It happens to me, I discovered, when certain people talk, especially when they talk slowly, or when people move slowly, or when even sometimes someone is driving slowly... I love the feeling...It is like this tingling in my scalp. The only way I can describe [sic] it is like a silvery sparkle through my head and brain... almost like a sort of head orgasm, but there is nothing sexual about it... Is this the same feeling you were describing?

Other posters continue to contribute their own experiences of this 'weird sensation' elaborating on the embodied sensation of it, and possible triggers. In this instance, the internet has facilitated the discussion and recognition of ASMR as an experience and afforded space for a community to emerge around it; however, it is not yet a distinct sound culture in and of itself. At this stage, ASMR is a rather ephemeral and fleeting experience that participants in this discussion are trying to pin down and identify.

While the ASMR community only exists online, many of those who experience ASMR report tingling sensations in day-to-day life going back decades. Some of the common triggers for the tingling sensation include the ambient sounds of the library, the painting demonstrations of Bob Ross, and pleasant customer service interactions. ASMR content is designed to capture these 'real-life' experiences through role-playing, where ASMR artists perform ritualised and stylised interactions as doctors, flight attendants, beauty therapists, librarians or receptionists. In these role-play videos, ASMR artists focus on recreating the sensation of personal attention with a stylised overemphasis on the associated sounds. The point is less the role play itself, but rather the soundscape that the role play facilitates. For example, a role play set in a library would feature book and paper sounds heavily. These role played interactions are central to some of the tensions of ASMR.

CAUSE

ASMR is ripe for mockery, ASMR performers (or artists as they are called within the community) whisper up close the camera, tapping and caressing mundane objects like hairbrushes, books and plastic product packaging. The result is a cascade of 'small sounds'; the type that surround us every day, but to which we pay little or no attention. This listening/feeling experience may be euphoric or

repulsive. In one early article explaining ASMR, a writer describes the sensation induced by ASMR as a “horrible feeling...I wanted to rip off my skin and bathe in alcohol”, and suggests that ASMR videos are all fetish videos (Shrayber 2014, np). Of course, this is not the intended or desired reaction; for those who experience ASMR the result is supposed to be a state of skin-tingling relaxed euphoria.

For the most part, it is safe to assume that most of your academic colleagues have not watched ASMR. So when you tell your thoughtful colleagues that you are writing a paper on ASMR, they might probe as to why you are doing this, being concerned for the integrity of the work. They may say, “What is there to gain about studying people tapping stuff, or watching someone brush someone else’s hair?” Or, “What is the ‘so what’? If some people get tingles from watching these strange videos and some don’t? Why is a video of someone waving their hands over the camera something that should concern social scientists?” If you are getting dangerously close to proposing a project on ASMR your colleagues might remind you that any work done to isolate and observe a phenomenon that is ‘weird’ needs to be intriguing as well as informative of a social phenomenon.

Rather than studying ASMR and its community of viewers as a type of sound culture, studies of ASMR, thus far, are dominated by positivist approaches that work to define responses to ASMR as a type of neurological condition (Smith et al. 2016; Barratt and Davis, 2015). This means that much of the previous research and commentary on ASMR tends to view the drive to watch ASMR as in-born, and the ‘tingles’ individuals get from watching it, as deep-seated or inherited; these assumptions focus on ASMR as a biomedical trait.

Another essentialist view that runs through discussions on ASMR is it that it is sexual and especially so for women. Even though ASMR artists have done careful boundary work to assert that what they do is not arousing, but relaxing (Smith and Snider 2019), there is no shortage of articles and video blogs linking ASMR to porn and creepiness. Take, for example, a video from Russell Brand’s YouTube channel, titled, *Is ASMR Just Female Porn? Russell Brand The Trews (E298)?* (2015). Brand’s comments are brash (and dated); however, his ‘observations’ demonstrate how commentators in the past have perceived ASMR as sexual and intended primarily for a female audience.

Some scholars have suggested that despite the ASMR community’s understanding of ASMR as non-sexual, ASMR can be interpreted as a “radical mode of sexuality” (Waldron 2017, np). The issues Waldron raises when arguing that ASMR is a sexual(ised) experience point to some key issues regarding sex, pleasure and intimacy that deserve further examination. We do not dispute that ASMR

is both intimate and pleasurable, which makes it easy to read as sexual. This tendency to label ASMR as sexual speaks to a broader conflation of intimacy and pleasure with sex.

Although intimacy, pleasure and sex are doubtlessly intertwined, they are not necessarily co-occurring. We can experience pleasure and intimacy without it necessarily being sexual in nature. As Waldron (2017) identifies, there is a specific sub-section of ASMR that is intentionally sexual in nature and NSFW (not safe for work). The challenge for academics working with phenomena like ASMR is to hold the tensions inherent within it, and in doing so, to disentangle concepts (such as intimacy and sex) that often get stuck together. We also need to remain attentive to the cultures and norms within the communities themselves. For instance, the ASMR community specifically and repeatedly works to distance itself from sexualised interpretations of this practice. For example, according to Andersen (2015) the ASMR community first adopted the name Society of Sensationalists; however, the name quickly changed to the acronym ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response). This acronym, using terms that are suggestive of the weight of scientific investigation, was deliberately selected to avoid sexualised interpretations of ASMR.

ASMR is not a site without tension. In order to maintain the ASMR community, viewers and the creators of ASMR content engage in constant boundary work or boundary policing; a practice that has long been noted (e.g. Erikson 1996) as central to the maintenance of communities, both on and offline. In online spaces boundary policing, or boundary work can take a variety of forms. In this case, ASMR is created and maintained as a distinct affective experience through definitional work advanced by ASMR creators and reinforced by viewers. Pile (2010) outlines how emotions are constructed through language, discourse and representational practices. This also applies to the ASMR community who use discourse and representation to solidify the social meaning and experience of ASMR. Naming ASMR defines it as an affective object, but also functions as a way to create and reinforce boundaries within the ASMR community. ASMR is undoubtedly an intimate experience, but the intimacy expressed in ASMR is more spatial than relational. The sounds of ASMR whispering, soft speaking, crinkling, tapping and so forth are the sounds of proximity.

Part of what makes Brand's (2015) ASMR commentary off-putting is that ASMR artists are pushed into a 'sexual' space if they carefully construct their videos to be intimate – with props, role-play, silent face-to-face interactions, prolonged eye contact or no eye contact, as well as layers of sound. A 'sexual' label is further reinforced by the focus on whispering in some analyses of ASMR. For example, Andersen's analysis of ASMR focuses primarily on whispering, arguing that ASMR creates a "suggestion of physical proximity and intimacy" (2015, 684). Whispering is also culturally associated

with romantic intimacy, for example, the phrase ‘whispering sweet nothings’ ties whispering to seductive and romantic behaviour. Indeed, ASMR is a risky site of inquiry as it continually bumps up against cultural understanding of intimacy, sensuality, pleasure and sex.

Obert (2016) argues that interpersonal intimacy is dependent on four key feeling-states: curiosity, vulnerability, empathy and the recognition of irreducibility. Whispering in ASMR videos may evoke some of these feelings-states. The result is that these sonic collages are suggestive of intimacy, and not intimate in and of themselves, being made distant through asynchronicity and mediated through digital technologies and space. Intimacy is increasingly implicated in digital spaces (Cockyane, Leszynski and Zook 2017). ASMR is a further example of how intimacy, mediated through digital technologies, is implicated in the “entanglement and indivisibility of proximate and distance spaces” (Pain and Staeheli 2014, 36), and made possible through an assemblage of technologies including headphones. Additionally, although whispering is an important trope within the ASMR genre, it exists alongside other noises such as tapping, crinkling and rustling. A singular focus on whispering as central to ASMR reduces a complex and multi-faceted sound culture to a single aspect.

ASMR artists work hard to produce a certain affective atmosphere for their viewers, and it is up to us, as researchers to explore its social importance as a sound culture. ASMR artists frequently emphasise that the ASMR experience is not intended for sexual pleasure, focusing instead on its possibilities for relaxation, stress and anxiety management (Andersen 2015, 692). As one ASMR artist, Olivia Kissper (2014), explains, viewing ASMR videos “triggers the relaxation response, so when you experience your tingles they feel super relaxed, they help you with your stress, anxiety, depression or falling asleep.” These explanations additionally reinforce the definitional work of the ASMR communities: for boundaries to be effective they must be maintained, and in this instance, reiterated.

The ‘tingling’ physiological response that comprises ASMR and the intimate, personal nature of the videos often means that ASMR is interpreted as being sexual or erotic. This does not foreclose investigation into the sexualised subculture within the ASMR community, but it also does not mean that we can neglect the careful definitional and boundary-making work in which the community repeatedly and pointedly engages. To ignore this work would be to ignore the collective and social aspects of nascent sound cultures like ASMR.

APPROACH

From an anthropological perspective, it is important to understand sound cultures like ASMR from the point of view of those who experience and participate in them. Therefore, in this section of the chapter we include several useful tips from the sampling approach that we used in our study (Smith and Snider 2019). We will also explain the process of analysis of ASMR content that we used in our article, which included a grounded theory approach to the ASMR artist's and viewer's comments.

There is an emphasis in current research about the 'performance' of ASMR, but less research that actually considers ASMR as a 'sound culture', with all the social aspects that it provides, including media representation, communities on Reddit, YouTube comments sections, and comment amalgamation channels such as SootheTube, and Unintentional ASMR, both of which collect and redistribute a variety of ASMR videos - deliberate and unintentional (Gallagher 2016). Although there has been some content analysis on the comments by viewers of ASMR videos, the current research is mainly focused on studying the relationship between ASMR and 'tingles' and sound, and what a 'typical' ASMR video employs, for example: "a quiet, private scene, with a relaxed, friendly and intimate actor (ASMR artists)" (Kovacevich and Huron 2018, 1). Yet, if we are to consider a study of ASMR through the methods employed by anthropology, we need to move beyond reading the work of ASMR artists as creating aesthetic paradigms (Andersen 2015), or naming and physiological responses to sound (Smith et al. 2016; Barratt and Davis 2015), to reading and understanding the community/culture of ASMR sounds.

In our previous research (Smith and Snider 2019) we began to outline an approach to the study of ASMR by explaining how ASMR artists intentionally construct and strategically heighten affective experiences, and how the ASMR community defines these affective experiences. We did this by using a grounded theory approach informed by an ethical approach to sampling, to note themes in video content (Smith and Snider 2019). However, sampling ASMR materials can be difficult as many ASMR artists post new content everyday. For those who are in the process of creating a study on ASMR, you know it is time consuming and potentially not feasible to watch all the videos of certain tags. For example, one search in Google videos of 'whispering' and 'ASMR' that came up with over 2,500,000 hits July, 2019.

In our study we narrowed our focus on how various popular ASMR artists, as well as community members of viewers of ASMR, discuss and envision what ASMR is. We did this because we think that ASMR provides an interesting space to study the social aspects of sound and the cultures that form around them. Moreover, as sociologists, we were more interested in understanding the ASMR as a

community, rather than a neurological phenomenon. We are also interested in using socially driven framework to theorise about how ASMR might 'work' as a phenomenon.

To study the community and culture of ASMR, which is centred on sound, ASMR content must be carefully selected. Depending what social aspect of sound you are investigating, we suggest that you choose videos that are created by ASMR artists who regularly post their own content. We also suggest that your search criteria includes the work from ASMR artists who post videos that are directly connected to the intention of what you are studying. For example, when selecting research content for our study on ASMR and digitally-mediated intimacy, we viewed and included commentary from ASMR community members who intended to educate those outside the community (Smith and Snider 2019, 2). We selected this type of content because how ASMR community members define their boundaries, and how they understanding and explained the sensation of ASMR, were both large components of our research focus.

When examining ASMR communities from an anthropological perspective it is important use appropriate research methods as well as an ethical approach to understand the point of view of those who create ASMR content, and those who participate in viewing ASMR content. Since there is an ethical risk that comes with selecting content from ASMR forums, steps need to be place to limit the exposure of members commenting on ASMR videos. We suggest that you limit exposure by de-identifying data of any unique markers that might identify participants offline. We also encourage you to remove online handles, but include the name of the forum that the comments came from; for an example, please see Smith and Snider (2019).

An anthropological study of sound not only includes a study of community and culture, but also a history of both listening and feeling (Feld and Brenneis 2004). Therefore, this part of the chapter where we offer an example of a more embodied approach to studying of ASMR as sound culture; in doing so, we implore you get out your phone or computer and experience ASMR. We will do this too.

After scrolling through her recommended videos I, Anne-Marie, select a video of a young ASMR artist who is clicking and touching the video screen, while saying, "touching, touching, touching your face" (Chynaunique 2019). While this interaction could be perceived as 'weird', the 667,000 views this video has received in the two months since posting suggests there is something more to this video. To describe the room Chynaunique (2019) is in, one could say it dark and not much else; but if you follow her channel Chynaunique has many videos sitting on the ground of a bedroom, in the beam of late-

afternoon glare. These videos in the sun are especially calming; there is something about the way the light often hits the room that Chynaunique is in, a soft, mid-afternoon light that usually makes me (Anne-Marie) fall asleep if I am reading a book in a quiet corner, or viewing ASMR with headphones. Moreover, the speed of Chynaunique's voice and the way that she manipulates everyday found objects, such as a lip-gloss container, is about the speed of turning a page in a book. The speed in which everyday objects are slowly and carefully tapped or scratched demonstrates how the pace of speech and movements plays an important role in building ASMR content. In comments left below Chynaunique's videos there is a community of viewers engaging with each other about the video, and expressing appreciation and preference for specific types of video content. A close analysis of such comments provides a way to study online communities of sound as well as a history of listening and feeling.

After watching a few videos have you noticed that ASMR artists sometimes wear headphones during video creation? At academic conferences and within academic journals, anthropologists of sound used to rely on recordings to share their research with others, and because of the quality of playback equipment there were issues with promoting the anthropology of sound. As ethnographer Steve Feld noted in an interview with Brenneis (2004, 470):

..think of journals, anthropology or ethnomusicology; very few of them include sound or the option to connect to a website to hear the sounds that are part of an argument or interpretation in an essay. As for books, there are virtually no anthropological books with CDs, and the CDs packaged in most ethnomusicological books I know are of an utterly miserable audio quality.

ASMR videos, and the use of headphones to experience them, have shifted the experience of analysing our research as well as sharing our research and promoting an anthropology of sound. Without headphones the sound quality would be compromised; with headphones academics, artists, listeners and readers are able to experience the same sound.

ASMR artists will recommend that you use headphones too; so put them on. Do you sense anything different with them on? What is it that you feel? Do you sense anything different with headphones on? Watch more videos. After doing so, did you notice that the more you tapped into what looked interesting, watching video after video, and did you notice you started to choose certain types of videos? Do you have a sense of, *why these videos*? Do you feel a kinship or loyalty to a certain ASMR artists or sound?

To investigate these questions, we suggest you include and reflect on the transcriptions of ASMR

artists using a grounded theory approach to analysing ASMR community. In doing so, one can begin to establish themes around why groups of people are convening around specific types of ASMR content. An embodied approach to your own feelings as to why you are repelled or drawn to certain ASMR content can assist in the process of analysing. As you approach topics of ASMR, we suggest again, that your research should focus on how ASMR is defined by the communities that produce and view it, and this may include you. Regardless, all sampling of ASMR content and analysis of ASMR content should be guided by an ethical approach.

PAST

ASMR research is still a field in its infancy, but there are emerging and identifiable trends in previous scholarly work. There are two general approaches to ASMR research: biomedical and social/cultural. The first is rooted firmly in biomedical and positivist assumptions, and its goal is to find the 'cause' of ASMR, whether that is found in the neural functioning of the brain (Smith et al. 2019) or in the personality characteristics of those who experience it (Roberts, Beath and Boag 2019). There is some nascent academic research that attempts to find a potential biological mechanism for ASMR as well as additional research which has linked synesthesia to the ASMR experience (Smith et al. 2016; Barratt and Davis 2015). Yet the descriptions of triggers and tingles occupy a slightly different frame of reference, resisting full translation into biomedical discourse. For example, research by Roberts et al. (2019), despite its biomedical focus, concludes by highlighting the importance of ASMR's individualised and context-specific nature.

Research conducted from a biomedical perspective also tends to discuss ASMR as something that has tangible and measurable practical benefits, including improving one's mood and reducing chronic pain (Roberts et al. 2019). The key therapeutic claims of ASMR are as follows: that it is a sleep aid, general relaxant and beneficial for anxiety and stress reduction. These claims are often supported by ASMR viewers who state that engaging with ASMR sounds or videos helps them sleep and feel relaxed. As previously mentioned, these interpretations stand in direct contrast to sexual or erotic interpretations of ASMR.

It is not surprising that a substantial focus for ASMR research focuses on the potential for an identifiable and empirically based 'condition' that is causally linked to 'tingles' (Smith et al. 2016; Barratt and Davis 2015). This type of research includes scanning participants in an MRI while they watch ASMR videos, in order to locate the neural location and effects of ASMR (Smith et al. 2019). Researchers who have used this approach demonstrate that individuals who experience ASMR, when shown ASMR videos, have a higher level of activity in the right cingulate gyrus, right

paracentral lobule and bilateral thalamus compared to control participants (Smith et al. 2019). Indeed, mapping physiological responses to viewing ASMR a common theme amongst biomedically informed research. For example, Poerio et al. (2018) measured autonomic nervous system responses while participants watched ASMR videos that they enjoyed. This activity corresponded with an increase in skin conductance response and a decrease heart rate in participants who experience ASMR. Poerio et al.'s (2018) findings are consistent with the ASMR community's self-described 'tingling' or 'chills' response. Typically an increased skin conductance response is associated with physiological arousal and thus, an elevated heart rate (Boucsein 1992). The co-occurrence of a decreased heart and increase in skin conductance response may explain the 'tingling' physiological response that is triggered by ASMR. Importantly, it also distinguishes ASMR from musically induced frisson, which corresponds with an increased heart rate and 'chills' (Smith et al. 2019).

While the conditions and neural underpinnings of ASMR are interesting, they may also be a misunderstanding of how ASMR is experienced. This is particularly apt when examining the construction and representation of gender in ASMR videos. ASMR videos largely reproduce gendered notions of care. Many ASMR artists are women, and their videos are constructed around helping, soothing or reassuring scenarios. One individual from Barratt and Davis' study, "described her tingling sensation as changeable depending on the gender of the voice in the ASMR video she was currently watching" and noted, "that a female voice would cause the tingles to extend more strongly down one leg, whereas a male voice would increase the sensation in the other leg" (2015, 11). Furthermore, "Several individuals responded similarly, specifying that 'different triggers hit different parts [of the body]" (Barratt and Davis 2015, 11). These responses imply that ASMR is not 'purely' biomedical, but rather that it is tied to our social understandings of the world. The gendered responses to ASMR suggest, as with many aspects of social life, that gender plays an important role in how individuals interpret and respond to ASMR 'triggers'. Biomedical approaches therefore cannot account for the social context in which an ASMR 'experience' is located.

ASMR explicitly seeks to create intimate, caring, comforting and nurturing experiences for their viewers, qualities typically associated with femininity and womanhood. It is no surprise then that ASMR viewers may sense a change in their physiological response to ASMR content when a man embodies these qualities.

Social and culture examinations of ASMR tend to focus on ASMR videos as a central site of analysis. For example, Waldron (2017) considers ASMR as a type of performance. Treating ASMR

videos as texts instead of as part of a community allows researchers to consider them, as Waldron (2017) does, as a sexual practice. On the other hand, Gallagher approaches ASMR as part of “new aesthetic paradigms” (2016, 2), and takes a particular interest in how videos circulate. He argues that ASMR itself is possible partly due to the systems and affordances of Web 2.0, specifically the shift from a text-based to a multi-modal web that includes social networks, blogs, content aggregators, webcams and easy to use video editing software. He emphasises that understanding the digital and technical architectures that afford ASMR are just as important as understanding the videos themselves. Similarly, Andersen (2015) emphasises the technical and social aspects of ASMR videos. However, while Andersen (2015) references the ASMR community, limited research has examined the community itself, instead often treating it as an adjacent issue, rather than an important part of the commercial and cultural mainstreaming of ASMR.

ASMR videos are a distinctive aesthetic genre, both sonically and visually. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, ASMR highlights the mundane and sometimes unappealing sounds of daily life. Gallagher (2016) argues that a central part of ASMR as an aesthetic culture is how ASMR artists amplify what might otherwise be flaws or incidental features of recording, such as unintelligible or accented speech. As a sound culture, ASMR has emerged out of the noise of daily life, and the (informational) noise of digital spaces to become a unique sound culture.

At present research that focuses on the social or cultural aspects of ASMR is limited. However, the social field of research is a promising and compelling avenue for further study. Why ASMR and why now? The potential answers to this question may illuminate important aspects of contemporary life. Manon (2018, 228) argues, following Lacanian theory, that ASMR can be understood as part of “broader digital-millennial trends in its repudiations of the lack of lack itself.” That is, ASMR is a response not to absence, but too much presence, and too much noise. Manon suggests that this is apparent when we consider the background for ASMR triggers which are designed to be as subtle and unobtrusive as possible. This backdrop allows low-amplitude, or what we call ‘mundane’ sounds, to “rise to the surface” (Manon 2018, 230) through a combination of binaural microphones and the viewer’s use of headphones. Although, in suggesting that the sounds of ASMR simply emerge, Manon (2018) erases the labour that goes into creating ASMR. This absence points our attention to future questions and approaches, why do ASMR artists labour? Do they merely seek to profit, or is there a sense of mutuality and connection in what would otherwise be a parasocial relationship? The tension between these social aspects of ASMR point to future avenues of research.

FUTURE

ASMR is at a transition point, moving from a niche internet subculture, to a more mainstreamed one. During the 2019 Superbowl Michelob ULTRA Pure Gold, aired an ASMR Ad titled, *The Pure Experience*. Video flashes through a lush tropical landscape with a loud (but not unpleasant) buzzing noise that suddenly cuts to silence. Zoe Kravtitz sits on a polished wooden platform surrounded by lush Hawaiian landscape. She is wearing headphones as she whispers into the microphones, “Let’s all experience something together.” She slides a full and unopened, beer bottle covered in condensation across the wooden desk, picks it up and begins tapping on the glass slowly, and uses the bottle and the desk to create an ASMR soundscape.

By tapping into the affective power of ASMR, Michelob creates a bridge for their audience to establish a relationship with their product. Michelob beer is not the only, nor the first company, to jump aboard the ASMR train. Dove Chocolate, Sony, Toyota, Pepsi, Ritz and Ikea are also tapping into the power of ASMR. The co-opting of sound by corporations looking to sell products highlights how research into sound cultures like ASMR is necessary if we hope to understand how comfort, intimacy and privacy are both experienced and socially constructed through sound.

ASMR also has implications beyond the sensory and affective responses of the individual. As part of writing this chapter, we (happily) revisited the ASMR community as a site of research. We found a complex web of interconnected ASMR artists who appear in each other’s videos (for example, WhispersRed’s video *Personal ASMR Sound Treatment feat. GentleWhispering*, 2017), and participate in gift exchanges that are then recorded and shared (see for example:

GentleWhispering’s ASMR 🎁 *Secret Santa Unboxing* 🎁 *Crinkles* 🎁 *Tapping* 🎁 *Chewing*, 2017). The reciprocal gift giving suggests that ASMR artists are a community in and of themselves, separate, but connected to their audience.

Indeed, audience connection is a key ASMR trope as ASMR artists address the viewer directly. The perceived relationship between creator and viewer is as the core of the ASMR experience. However, the mainstreaming and commercialisation of ASMR means that creators are under constant pressure to create new and more sophisticated ASMR videos. In WhispersRed’s video, *ASMR Trigger Favourites Whisper Tapping, Crinkles, Jewellery* (2019), Emma explains that,

ASMRtists can feel the pressure to produce more high-tech, more complicated, more professional, snazzy videos. And I find myself on purpose making something simple...of

course I like to make snazzy ones too, but not all the time 'cause I don't want that to define what ASMR is; 'cause it's not. [pause] ASMR is more just about this [she touches her hand to her heart] to yours [she reaches toward the camera where your heart would be], and simple sounds.

This quote highlights the ways in which the ASMR community is growing and developing from its organic and accidental roots into a more professionalised area, where ASMR artists partner with and endorse brands. The influx of ASMR artists creates additional pressure for ASMR videos and soundscapes to stand out in a crowded field through regular uploads and more professional videos. In a comment below her video *(((Need a hug))) ASMR* (2016), an impromptu, lo-fi video GentleWhispering (Maria), says,

Please forgive me for not making any exciting and inventive content lately, it is my fault for not working harder. I hear you, I know I need to do better and I will. Thank you for continuously giving me a chance, I appreciate it more than you know.

Future research could tease out this tension between professionalised ASMR, audience, authenticity and creativity. To what extent is ASMR dependent on creators enjoying their own soundscapes and creative practice, does the pressure of constant innovation and production imperil this?

ASMR artists are expert at creating a sense of intimacy and connection with their audience as part of the ASMR soundscape. It is difficult to tell at this point, the extent to which the relationship between those who consume ASMR, and those who create it is mutual and reciprocal. The most striking example of audience and creator reciprocity is in the low-fi video created and uploaded by GentleWhispering a few days after the 2016 US presidential election titled *(((Need a hug))) ASMR*, Maria begins by apologising for her irregular uploads, "Hello my friend, I'm sorry I've been away, I'm fighting a little bit of a stubborn that would not seem to go away, so my voice is not the best."

Voice is an important aspect of many ASMR artists' personas and self-presentation, the sense that Maria is pulling back the curtain of perfection to 'hang out' with the viewer, gives the video an air of authenticity. She explains,

But, I thought it is an emergency time, I felt like I needed to hang out with you, just be here by your side for a second. I know it's been quite a challenging time...we will take care of you, hopefully relax you enough so that you can have nice and sweet dreams.

Maria then goes on to present a variety of household objects that produce pleasant and soothing sounds for the viewer. Each object is presented with a short explanation of why she likes the sounds, which she offers to the viewer as a gift to soothe their anxieties. The sounds of the objects are interspersed with whispered reassurance, and emphasise the relationship between her and the viewer:

I'm here and we're together, we go through things together, we help each other out...no matter what we've got each other, we love each other, we need each other, we look out for each other.

The final object Maria produced is a studded leather bag. In introducing it she invokes the common community of interest that has formed around ASMR. Maria is not simply producing random objects and seeing what works, she chose sounds that are personal and pleasurable to her in the hope that the viewer might also enjoy them. She holds up the bag to the camera and taps on the studs, squishing the leather and explains:

I kept thinking, 'oh my gosh, I know my friends on YouTube would want to listen to it all day too'. [pause to let the listener enjoy the bag sounds] See, it feels better already right?

Can the ethic of care that pervades ASMR videos be sustained in a growing and commercialised sound cultures, and is the authenticity of ASMR dependent on its pseudo-amateur status? The relationship between ASMR creators and viewers is close and loaded with yet unexplored expectations. For Maria, the viewer is ever-present in the way a loved one might be:

I always think of you. I'm always thinking of you. I always think, how are they doing, what are they doing, I wonder how they feeling; and it's important to me, and I want you to know that you matter, and that your opinions and your voice matter too. No matter what happens in life, we've got each other, and that's what matters. Everything will be ok. Everything will be great. Yes. (GentleWhispering 2016)

As ASMR is a sensory response, it also is an emotional one, this is because it plays on feelings of intimacy and comfort and highlights the importance of sound as part of our geographies of care, intimacy and affection. Further, ASMR suggests that technologies like headphones have an important role in the ways that new media and digitisation can expand the senses, and the capacities of the biological body. Does the experience of ASMR render us, briefly, cyborgs; plugged into technological assemblages, our hearing enhanced and heightened by headphones, the

mundane background noises of every day life made instrumental and aesthetic? Listening to an ASMR video, via our headphones, we certainly feel both more human and more than human.

As ASMR becomes co-opted by corporations, does it unsettle the fundamental pull of ASMR, despite the intimate and direct-to-camera style of address? We think that ASMR is a sonic phenomenon at its core, one that is closely tied to the mundane sounds that shape our domestic intimacies. Future research could more deeply explore this, asking whether ASMR viewers develop attachments to particular sounds, or particular ASMR artists. The audio *quality* of sound is yet another avenue that remains unexplored. ASMR videos are increasingly becoming high tech affairs with excellent production values. Moreover, the sounds that induce ASMR are not made to be 'nice'; they are incidental and accidental, the fact that they produce an embodied affective response is what makes ASMR so unusual and intriguing as a sound culture. This raises a related question for future research: by producing sounds through high-quality recording equipment are they being stripped of their affective power? ASMR is a low-fi phenomenon, first noted in the painting demonstrations of Bob Ross and the accidental encounters of daily life. Can ASMR be overproduced in the same manner as a musical recording? Is there a relationship between the quality of the sound recorded and the likelihood of ASMR being triggered?

ASMR also raises interesting speculative questions for future research around the social construction of intimacy. Does ASMR provide a basic primer for Artificial Intelligence to learn about how sound, connection and intimacy are intertwined for humans? Future research will help unpack many of the questions above, and broaden our understandings of intimate, domestic and private sound cultures.

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CV

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