

The Effect of Affect

An Ethnographic Exploration of the Commodification and Sexualization of Affect Through the Lens of the ASMR Community



Master Thesis

Submitted on August 15, 2021 to the Department of Cultural Anthropology as part of the Master's programme Cultural Anthropology: Sustainable Citizenship

Student: Hannah Koster

Student number: 6916376

Supervisor: Kyra Lenting

Word count: 21.927



Utrecht University

The Effect of Affect

An Ethnographic Exploration of the Commodification and Sexualization of Affect Through the Lens of the ASMR Community

This thesis is enjoyed best with earphones and an open mind.

Foreword & Acknowledgments

In the early 2010s, I was still in high school. The stress of my exam year got the best of my quality of sleep; thus, I often spend my nights browsing on the Internet. YouTube was the platform I spent most of the time on. One night I was scrolling through my recommended videos until an unknown word got my attention: ASMR. My curiosity told me to click on the video. That decision took me on an eight-year-long deep-dive into the world of ASMR-induced ‘brain-gasms’.

Watching an ASMR video before I go to sleep has been part of my daily routine ever since I discovered it. When I do not have access to a video, for example, if I do not have WiFi or my phone battery died, I have a hard time falling asleep. ASMR is a moment in my day where I can turn off my thoughts, release the stress of a busy day and relax. The tingling sensation accompanied by the distractive sounds and movements takes me to a place of pure calmness and bliss, a state of mind I find difficult to reach by myself.

For years, I knew nobody in my environment who also enjoyed ASMR and, frankly, had such a co-dependency on the phenomenon as much as I did. I always wondered why not more people listened to it since the tingles are similar to a brain massage to me. And practically everybody enjoys a massage, right? I repeatedly recommended ASMR to others in my personal circle, but no one seemed to have the same experience as I did. When I had to pick a subject for my thesis, I saw my chance to finally explore ASMR and speak to like-minded people about their lived experiences with these brain massages.

The thesis you are about to read is the result of three months of ethnographic fieldwork, in which I explored the ASMR community I know so personally through an anthropological lens. In this period, I pushed out of my comfort zone as a viewer and put myself on display by creating and publishing ASMR videos under the YouTube channel name *AnthroSMR*. I talked to people from all walks of life about their lived experience of ASMR and embodied the phenomenon more than I could have possibly imagined. To all those who were willing to speak to me about this weird but wonderful topic, I want to say: thank you.

Thank you to the viewers for answering a storm of questions. I am so thankful for their openness, honesty, and transparency about topics that might not always be easy to speak about. Thank you to the creators who wanted to assist me in my struggles to become a creator myself. Their support, truthfulness, and kindness helped me become a better ASMRtist and a better researcher. Thank you to those who hate ASMR but still were willing to participate and endure the whispers and tappings. The insightfulness and bluntness of their perspective balanced out my fieldwork and allowed me to look beyond my own bubble.

Lastly, I want to thank: Yara for helping me with all the creative hurdles I had to take to realize my participant observation process and for always being such a supportive friend. Boas for always believing in me, even when I did not. My parents, family, and friends for supporting me throughout this crazy journey. And finally, my supervisor Kyra, for guiding me through the writing process and helping me realize that everything will fall into its place eventually.

Table of Content

| | |
|--|-----------|
| <i>Prologue</i> | <i>1</i> |
| Introducing the ASMR Community | 3 |
| The field | 7 |
| The approach | 8 |
| The ethics | 11 |
| The structure | 12 |
| <i>Interlude: Beginning AnthroSMR</i> | <i>14</i> |
| Chapter 1: The Double-Edged Sword of YouTube | 16 |
| How binary code becomes communal | 16 |
| Perfect host or policing leech? | 18 |
| Chapter 2: Triggering Affect | 22 |
| ‘ASMR is what I embody, but at the same time share with someone’ | 22 |
| A force between culture and biology | 24 |
| ‘It’s also not pleasant when a masseur makes a sexual innuendo’ | 26 |
| <i>Interlude: Embodying AnthroSMR</i> | <i>30</i> |
| Chapter 3: Sexualized Whispers | 32 |
| Reframing intimacy | 32 |
| ‘Basically, the microphone is used as a metaphor for a penis’ | 34 |
| ‘Sex sells’ | 36 |
| Chapter 4: The Affect of Capitalism | 40 |
| From a gift to a commodity | 40 |
| ‘He has spent a great deal of money on me’ | 41 |
| ‘Follow the money...’ | 45 |
| Conclusion | 50 |
| Bibliography | 53 |

Prologue

Dot, dot, (gently poke the back with your index finger)
Line, line, (gently draw lines on the back with your finger)
Spiders crawling up your spine (use all fingers to be a “spider” across the back)
Crack an egg (pretend to crack an egg above the head)
Let it run (use all fingers to “let the egg run” across the face)
Cool breeze (blow softly alongside the ear)
Big squeeze (give a gentle squeeze)
Now you got the shiveries! (gently tickle everywhere)¹

You might know this children’s rhyme from your childhood, whether you were the one telling it or the recipient of it. You sit on a chair while your friend or relative stands behind you. They tell you to close your eyes. The person recites the rhyme to you, accompanied by specific touches, sounds, and movements such as tapping fingers along the back to mimic spiders. The sound of a cracking egg as if they actually cracked one above your head. The feeling of a breeze produced by someone blowing in your ear. While the person who performs the rhyme barely touches you, you can feel it on your skin, on your head, in your ears. The story is not the same without the sensory acts, such as the sound of the cracking egg or the feeling of a breeze. However, the sensory acts are also not the same without the story (Andersen 2015). In other words, the shivers (or shiveries in the rhyme) are what you get from the combination of the storytelling and sensory actions performed in this children’s rhyme. My friend Simon describes this rhyme to me as his first experience with ASMR. He argued that the shivers you get from this rhyme are somewhat similar to the tingles you get from ASMR. Simon explained that the combination of concentrating on the dots and other sensory activity, a healthy dose of imagination and anticipation of the story, and the emotional investment of both parties creates the experience.² Essentially, the experience of ASMR is made up out of those same components.

I have recorded this rhyme for you, the reader of this thesis, hoping that this will trigger a childhood memory for you. Because while the chance that you have experience with ASMR is slim, the possibility that you have had an experience with the shiveries is a more realistic bet. This thesis exists mainly out of the written word, but, as anthropologist Tim Ingold (2000) argues, sensory experience reaches further than any verbal categories. Our lived experiences are shaped by all the senses, from what we hear and see, to what we feel and smell. This is especially accurate for the experience of ASMR. I can try my hardest to explain what ASMR is, how it makes people feel, what it does to people and what its social and cultural repercussions are. Yet, that will only give you a glimpse of its deeper essence. Ingold makes the point that all our senses

¹ See [Now You Got The Shiveries \[Prologue\]](#)

² Simon, Interview, 05-03-2021

are interconnected, meaning that “looking, listening, touching [...] are not separate activities, they are just different facets of the same activity: that of the whole organism in its environment” (2000, 261).

You understand the shiveries because you have embodied the entire sensory experience at some point in your life. The memory of this experience triggers all senses you used in that activity. As you have read so far, ASMR is a quintessential sensory experience triggered by remembrance, imagination, and intentionality (Andersen 2015). Therefore, this thesis would be incomplete without other materials than words. Throughout the thesis, I have incorporated eight audio and/or video fragments in the footnotes to complement the words you will read. The material varies from video to audio and was either created by myself or other ASMRtists.³ You can access the material by clicking on the link. I advise you to have a pair of ear-or headphones ready to experience this accordingly. To simulate an experience in which you can understand ASMR similarly to myself and many others, I hope you can approach the accompanying audio and video materials with an open and curious mind.

³ Term used for ASMR creators. Combination of ‘ASMR’ and ‘artist’.

Introducing the ASMR Community

Let me tell you about a collective of people on the Internet that whisper sweet nothings to one another via videos they make in their bedrooms. These people record themselves while tapping on random objects, smack their lips, and tell the camera that everything is going to be okay with the intent to induce a feeling that people describe as ‘head orgasms’ or, as I call them, brain-gasms (Page 2017, 1). At the other end of the video, the viewer gets off from this pleasurable head sensation. But not in the way you might think. The viewer becomes so relaxed from this feeling that they fall asleep with their phone in hand and headphones on while the person in the video continues to whisper calming words in an ultra-sensitive microphone.

This collective of people call themselves the *ASMR community*. The community consists of the viewer and the creator (hereinafter called the ASMRtist). In 2010, Jennifer Allen termed this sensation *ASMR* (Keilis 2019). ASMR stands for ‘autonomous sensory meridian response’, which both scholars and non-scholars utilize as a pseudo-scientific term for the physiological reaction in the form of a tingly feeling on the head, neck, and back from external sensory triggers such as whispering, tapping, roleplaying of caregiving professions, and personal attention (combined definition by Andersen 2015; Barratt and Davis 2015; Poerio et al. 2018). The fact that not everyone is able to experience this tingly sensation leaves people puzzled about how ASMR exactly works. In this thesis, I define people who do not experience the tingles as outsiders of the ASMR community. Insiders of the community experience relief of stress, insomnia, anxiety, and depression when consuming ASMR content, while outsiders get annoyed, angry, or stressed from all the triggers (Waldron 2017). The phenomenon highly differs in character and intensity per individual, which makes the experience subjectively constructed. According to Smith and Snider (2019), there is an interplay between affective and sensory elements in the videos. ASMRtists deliberately record themselves up-close and personal while producing certain pleasant, sensory triggers, which mimic an intimately affective feeling for the viewer. Several scholars connect ASMR with affect theory (Andersen 2015; Poerio et al. 2018; Smith and Snider 2019). Anthropological literature differentiates affect from other human expressions such as emotion and feeling, describing it as the relations between individuals rather than an individual experience (Richard and Rudnyckij 2009). In that respect, ASMR is a shared experience, and thus in this thesis, I suggest that it is relevant for anthropologists to examine affect as a framework to explore subjective and intersubjective conditions such as ASMR. Poerio et al. (2018, 14) argue that ASMR enables a "complex emotional blend consisting of activating and deactivating positive affect" for people who experience the tingles. This thesis is based on the notion that positive affects intertwine with sensory triggers in ASMR videos to harvest a subjectively affective experience.

Peculiar about the response is that ASMR is triggered mainly through the auditory and visual system rather than the tactile senses. This is predominantly caused by the inherent digitality of the spaces in which the community acts. Physical touch is simply not possible. The

community is mainly active on the social media platform YouTube. On YouTube, the community has had the opportunity to grow into a mainstream phenomenon with millions of views (Andersen 2015). Because of the continuous mediation of digital technologies, ASMR can be considered a "technologically-mediated experience shaped by digital spaces and its affordances" (Smith and Snider 2019, 41). As a technologically-mediated affective experience, ASMR encourages a reshaping of how we identify intimacy between individuals. ASMR is a form of intimacy in a public, communal setting without bodies touching or face-to-face interaction. In other words, the whisper community demonstrates the notion that feelings of community and togetherness "are based less on material and embodied proximity than on a collective sense of identity - a feeling that one belongs and is committed to a particular group" (Lysloff 2003, 256).

A need for this type of digital intimacy might have its roots in contemporary neoliberal exploitations of care. Fest (2019) declares that the catapulted popularity of ASMR might be related to two global developments: the 2007-2008 financial crisis and the multiplication of technology in our daily lives. Economic precarity and political instability from the financial crisis increased insecurity and inequality across the globe. Simultaneously, the role of technology has irrevocably emerged in our daily lives. Our attention via technological devices became the new capital. In the context of 2021, I would additionally add the ongoing pandemic as a catalyst for rising viewer counts on ASMR videos. Chinese ASMRtist Tingting shared in *Vox* that she observed "about a 5 to 10 percent jump in viewership" since the coronavirus hit globally, as people search for stress and anxiety relief from the uncertainty of the pandemic (Ward 2020, 1). Considering the neoliberal turn of the past decades as the fuel of these developments, and a global neglect of social investment programs, ASMR portrays a self-fulfilling social service (Harvey 2005). People are unable to get proper social assistance to deal with these contemporary developments. As a result, they turn to ASMR videos to implement "a mode of self-care".⁴ ASMR has become an easily accessible, free tool for therapeutic purposes, one that equips people to combat mental issues such as anxiety, insomnia, stress, and depression (Waldron 2017). Within this context, ASMR can be understood as a coping mechanism against the digitized, late-capitalist condition we are finding ourselves in (Bjelic 2016).

Those who do not experience the tingles are not convinced of ASMR as the antidote for our contemporary struggles. Outsiders perceive ASMR as peculiar, annoying or "some sort of weird sexual fetish".⁵ Due to the intimate and affective nature of the videos, ASMR frequently gets interpreted as a sexual experience. *The New York Times* wrote that "the genre seems doomed to appear sexual - a suspect jumble of tingles and pleasure and subservient women you watch alone at your computer" (Keilis 2019, 1). The description of ASMR as a 'head orgasm' does not help this judgment. Questioning whether ASMR is sexual or not has riddled the community from the get-go, which most of the members firmly reject. Because it is undeniable that ASMR is affective, intimate, and even sensual, I argue that a broader definition of intimacy is required to understand ASMR in its whole essence (Andersen 2015). Heteronormative notions

⁴ Interview, Sarah, 12-03-2021

⁵ Interview, Resley, 07-04-2021

of intimacy consists out of two-bodied, private settings in close proximity, in which sexual encounter is inherent. This framework does not seem to fit ASMR as a non-standard, technology-mediated, multiple-bodied, public form of intimacy that does not intend to give sexual orgasms (Berlant and Warner 1998).

On the other hand, while the ASMR-viewing participants I spoke to indicated that ASMR is not sexual to them in a heteronormative manner, they did argue that they have seen more and more creators use nudity and sexualizing elements in their videos.⁶ The ASMR community finds itself in a trend of sexualization on the Internet, in which there is a contemporary hyperfocus on expressions of sexuality, increased emergence of new modes of sexual experience, and other manifestations of sexual nature that seem to have the upper hand in late modernity (Attwood 2006). In other words, the tingles themselves are not sexual. Instead, the ASMR culture is sexualized, both by insiders and outsiders. As an ASMR viewer myself, I also observed a gradual increase in sexual content in the community. I am not the only one: due to the rise in sexually tinted ASMR, China banned all ASMR videos in 2018 (Starr, Wang, and Go 2020). This increase in sexualized ASMR conflicts with the denial that ASMR is sexual. When I asked participants why this shift has been happening, many of them mentioned something along the lines of ‘sex sells’.⁷

That affective services sell is not a new phenomenon. Affect, intimacy, and sex have been commodified through modes of sex work and domestic labor (Constable 2009). Through economic models that commodify affective experience, ASMR is made into a product. Richard and Rudnyckyj (2009, 58) conceptualize ‘economies of affect’ as ‘the connection between economic transformations and affective transactions’ and argue that affect lies in the center of late-capitalist processes. The ASMR community finds itself in an economy of affect, as YouTube, corporations, and ASMRtists have been profiting from ASMR videos’ popularity, turning these affective intimacies into commodities. YouTube provides the Partner Program for creators, allowing ASMRtists to get paid per view on a video. ASMRtists also have been able to seek compensation for their services through sponsorships with corporations and paid subscription platforms outside YouTube. For the most part, this financial compensation relies on the number of views an ASMRtist accumulates. Thus, to make a living off of ASMR, one needs to attract as many viewers as possible. In a conversation with Simon, he stated:

‘I bet that surely everyone who creates a video dressed like that has in the back of their mind: you know, I do this with intent because I could have also worn a normal blouse and everything, but then I would have fewer views and less money and fewer subscribers, followers and all that.’⁸

⁶ Fieldnotes, Conventional diary, 03-04-2021

⁷ Fieldnotes, Video diary, 14-04-2021

⁸ Quote from interview, Simon, 23-04-2021

Since affect is valuable without capitalist intrusions, intangibles such as affect need to be separated from its life world to become a capitalist commodification, which Tsing (2015) terms alienation. If ASMR is not sexual, then introducing sexualizing elements into the videos requires both the ASMRtist and the viewer to be alienated from their subjective understanding of ASMR. In this context, the ability to employ and perform sexualizing behaviors in ASMR becomes both a source of alienation for affective laborers and consumers and a resource exploited for financial benefits.

While the ASMR community might conceptualize its identity as 1) supplier of affective labor and 2) a non-sexualized form of affect, the community's simultaneous contribution to capitalist monetization processes leading to commodification and the incarnation of sexuality to do so contests these conceptions. Juxtaposing these notions raises several questions. For example, how viewers and makers construct, transform, and contest affect through the ASMR community and how sexuality and capitalism interact with those enactments. The combination of these questions leads me to the following research question:

How does the ASMR community contribute to the commodification and sexualization of affect on the social media platform YouTube?

This thesis explores the lived experience of Dutch members of the ASMR community on the social media platform YouTube in particular. Furthermore, these contradictions encouraged me to include the standpoint of those who are not part of the ASMR community and how their perspective influences both the construction, transformation, and contestation of the ASMR community. The outsider's perspective serves as a reflexive mirror for me as a researcher who is part of the ASMR community, permitting me to rethink how ASMR interplays with affect, commodification, and sexualization. Exploring both the inside and outside of the ASMR community enables this thesis to analyze the trajectories that affect runs through and how sexuality and capitalism interact with one another in those affective trajectories. In this thesis, I illustrate the subjectivity of affect and how internal and external forces of sexualization and commodification, on the one hand, contradict the idea of affect that the ASMR community envisions as its essence. On the other hand, these forces simultaneously construct and transform the notion of affect in the context of ASMR. I answer the research question via a triangulation of methods and perspectives on which I elaborate on in the following paragraphs.

The field

Since approximately 2008, the ASMR community predominantly exists through interactions via the online video-sharing platform YouTube (Andersen 2015). YouTube is the central field setting of this ethnography; however, the community is also present on other social media platforms such as Instagram, Reddit, and TikTok. It is not easy to estimate how big the community is on YouTube. According to *The New York Times*, in 2019, around 500 ASMR videos were uploaded

per day on YouTube (Keilis 2019). Throughout the years, ASMRtists have accumulated millions of subscribers and views via YouTube. How the ASMR genre has accumulated these high numbers of views are easily accounted for: I have watched some of my favorite ASMR videos each night for months on end. As of July 2021, South Korean ASMRtist Jane ASMR has the most extensive following with 14 million subscribers and 4,797,203,462 views in total.⁹ All over the globe, people watch and create ASMR videos, making it a global online community. The community stretches out over various languages, religions, nationalities, races, gender, and sexualities and has numerous sub-categories such as mukbang,¹⁰ diverse kinds of roleplays, no-speaking, and more.

Even though the demographics of the ASMR community are multi-diverse, some generalizations can be stated. For one, the larger part of ASMRtists is female. Andersen (2015) argues that the job of the ASMRtist is gendered as female because women often perform intimate roles of care. Nevertheless, ASMR is performed by all genders on the spectrum. Secondly, according to data retrieved from my own ASMR channel (see Figure 1), most viewers are female and under 35 years old. My channel hardly represents the entire community since this data is solely based on 7,000 unique viewers. However, this data does provide an idea about the community's demographics and the context of my field setting. Therefore, I will proceed to describe the field by the hand of my channel *AnthroSMR*.¹¹ As of July 2021, *AnthroSMR* has 565 subscribers, 29,000 views, and a watch time of 1,800 hours in total. The most popular video has almost 5,000 views. Most videos are Dutch spoken; thus, the channel is part of the Dutch-speaking ASMR community. The reason to focus primarily, yet not exclusively, on the Dutch-speaking ASMR community is three-fold. First of all, I made most ASMR videos in Dutch. This attracted a Dutch-speaking audience primarily. Therefore, most of my interactions were in Dutch. Second, the ASMR community is a global collective, with millions of viewers and thousands of creators. Therefore, focusing on a specific geographic part of the community helped demarcate the population into a sample group of participants. Finally, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic limited international traveling during my fieldwork. In order to have the possibility to do offline fieldwork, it was more efficient to focus on the Dutch community since I am a resident of the Netherlands.

⁹ See <https://www.youtube.com/c/JaneASMR>, numbers as of July 2021.

¹⁰ Mukbangs are videos where the maker eats in front of the camera. Mukbang ASMR is a popular sub-genre of ASMR (Starr, Wang, and Go 2020).

¹¹ See https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC1_szY418Fz2LzQJFo3_Jwg

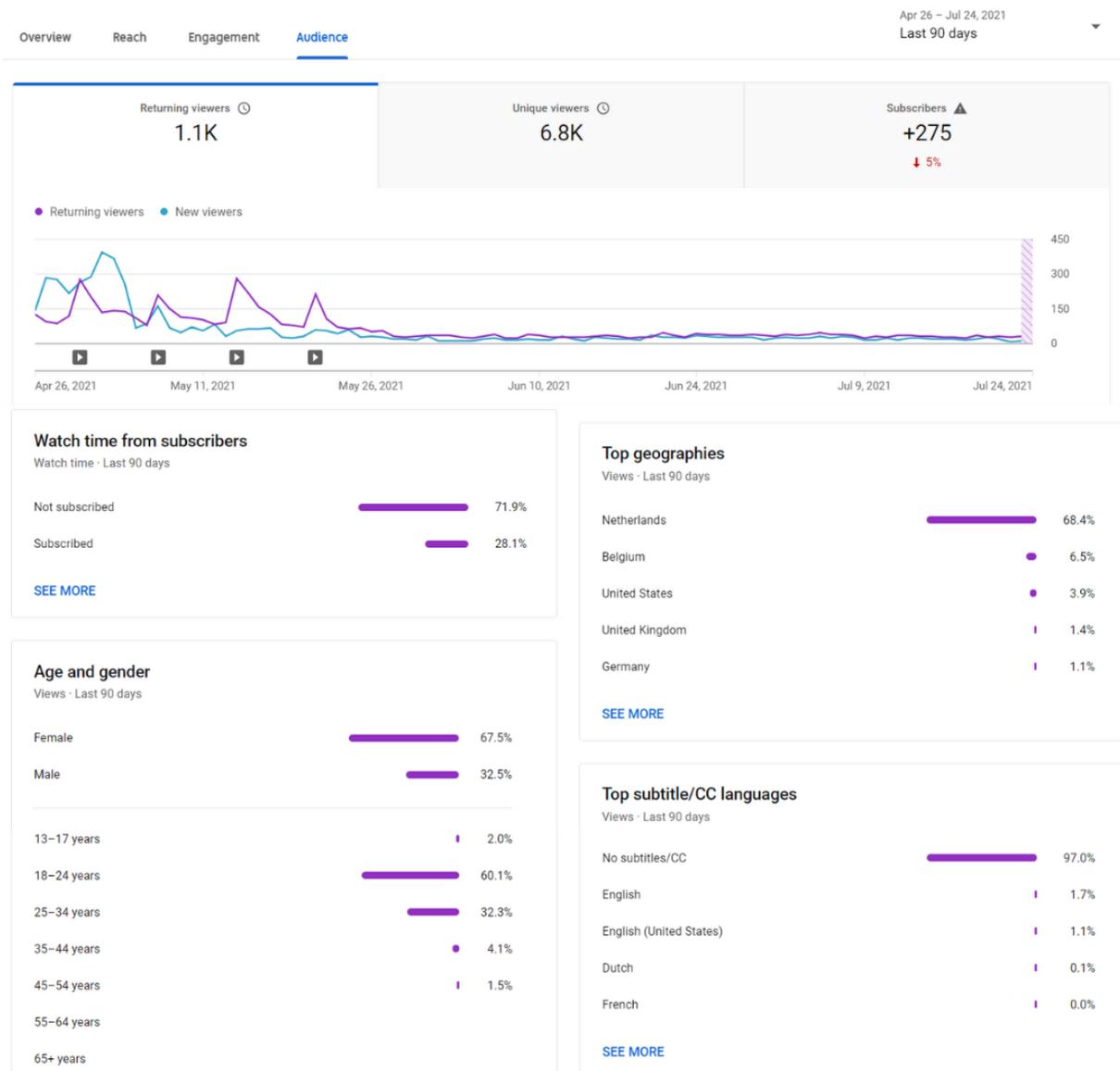


Figure 1. Channel analytics from the YouTube channel *AnthroSMR* in the time period April 26-July 26 in 2021. Retrieved via YouTube Studio through log-in, accessed on July 26, 2021.

The approach

ASMR is embodied by all the senses across multiple forms of media. Through triangulation of multidisciplinary data methods, I have aimed to incorporate not only verbal and written expressions but all expressions of the human senses. The fieldwork has been conducted between February 1 and May 10, 2021. Central to this thesis research is the method of participant observation. DeWalt and DeWalt (2011) define participant observation as partaking in activities, routines, interactions, rituals, and events that a group undertakes daily to learn about the specific

aspects of their social and cultural life. As the principal undertaking, I have established my own ASMR YouTube channel: *AnthroSMR*. Activities included filming ASMR videos, editing videos, and uploading them on the channel. Next to that, I responded to comments from viewers and commented on other ASMR videos daily. I also watched ASMR videos via this channel every day. Running *AnthroSMR* was the primary participant observation of my fieldwork. The site represented the embodiment of the ASMR community, as it allowed me to put myself in the central space of interaction within the communal spaces of ASMR.

Ethnographic fieldwork is seldomly tight down to one geographic, social or cultural setting (Hine 2015). Therefore, I did not limit myself to YouTube, and I followed participants' movements between and within online and, occasionally, offline settings (Dyke 2013). I have created an Instagram account, coined *digitalanthropologist*, to post content about ASMR and interact with potential participants and viewers.¹² Since YouTube does not have a feature that enables one to send private messages, my Instagram became a place where viewers could speak to me privately. I have also reached out to potential participants via Instagram's direct message feature due to privacy. Finally, I have created a Reddit account, called *digital_anthro*, to interact with the ASMR community on the subreddit *r/asmr*.¹³¹⁴ Rather than being merely a 'lurker' on the Internet, participating by both watching and creating ASMR videos, and interacting with others in various spaces has enabled me to engage in activities across all roles within the community (Hine 2015).

In retrospect, I got access to most of the ASMR community through the YouTube channel I started. While my channel was a nonhuman actor in my fieldwork, the channel acted as what ethnographers call a gatekeeper (O'Reilly 2012). Managing an ASMR channel and actively creating and uploading videos gave me legitimacy as both a community insider and a serious ASMR researcher. One of the ASMRtists I spoke to, named Ally, even told me that because I embodied what we were discussing made it easier to talk to me since she knew I would understand.¹⁵ Gaining more subscribers also made me more visible as a creator. The algorithm of YouTube would recommend my videos more often once I hit about 100 subscribers. My research benefited from this since more people started to interact with me. Eventually, people started to reach out to me to participate in my research instead of the other way around. Bonini and Gandini (2019) call this a form of "platform gatekeeping", where the algorithm and moderators have the power over the visibility and accessibility of someone's presence on a platform. Once YouTube's algorithm started to push the visibility of my videos, the participant observation became more meaningful through the increased interactions surrounding my channel.

Amid participant observation, I have jotted down fieldnotes in a conventional fieldnote diary. These were continuous descriptive notes I made about everyday activities, but also methodological and analytical notes (Bernard 2005). I have consciously kept all my notes in one document to have structure and easy access to all fieldnotes. Next to jotted notes, I have also established a video fieldnote diary during my fieldwork. After each field day, I would sit down in front of the camera to reflect on the day. Filming my reflections helped me express descriptive

¹² See www.instagram.com/digitalanthropologist

¹³ See www.reddit.com/user/digital_anthro

¹⁴ See www.reddit.com/r/asmr

¹⁵ Interview, Ally, 09-04-2021

observations verbally and non-verbally, which suited such a multisensory experience as ASMR. Through this method, I have used an interplay between two ethnographic approaches termed multisensory and multimedia ethnography (Pink 2015). ASMR is experienced with all the senses; thus, limiting my approach solely to the written word would restrict a comprehensive and embodied understanding of the phenomenon.

Since I have employed my own senses and embodiment, I have chosen to also conduct an autoethnography in conjunction with multisensory and multimedia methods. According to Hine (2015, 84-85), “whether or not self-consciously autoethnographic, ethnographic research that is carried out in and of and through mediated communications is always to some extent ‘insider research’”. Thus, I have embraced the fact that I am considered an insider in my field setting and utilized an autoethnographic approach. Separately from my conventional and video fieldnotes, I have kept an autoethnographic diary to reflect on my own experiences, feelings, thoughts, sensibilities, and understandings (Bernard 2005). Diary entries were in writing, video, and audio recording. Autoethnography is utilized to gain “reflexive accounts of personal experience” to better understand cultural phenomena (O’Reilly 2012, 130). The purpose of this diary was to separate my own subjective embodiment of ASMR from my objective observations of the community.

O’Reilly (2012, 98) argues that anthropologists who conduct “insider ethnographies” might be “too familiar to achieve the required curiosity” to notice unconscious behaviors within the community. Therefore, I have interviewed four non-viewers to reflect on my own biases and get an outsiders’ understanding of the community without insider interference. Next to that, as I stated before, outsiders have influenced how ASMR culture has been sexualized and commodified since the Internet, and thus ASMR is a public phenomenon. Approaching the analysis of the community with what Santoro (2014) calls a ‘multiple perspectives framework’ has allowed me to understand the phenomenon in a complex, multidimensional and rich manner.

Ultimately, I conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with 11 participants: two ASMRtists, five viewers, and four non-viewers. Three participants, I have found via a convenience sample. The remaining participants were found by consulting my existing contacts to gain further contacts, which is called snowball sampling (O’Reilly 2012). I have reached out to the ASMRtists directly since I could quickly identify an ASMRtist compared to viewers and non-viewers. The male-female ratio was five-six, which was a conscious decision since I wanted to avoid a gendered bias. Important to note here is that both ASMRtists I have interviewed were female. While my fieldwork was not focused on the role of ASMR in the gendered affective labor market, the fact that ASMR is gendered is crucial for the context of my sample. All interviewees were based in the Netherlands, although one participant did not have Dutch nationality. The age of the interviewees ranged from 21 to 35 years. Most interviews were executed via video call, but I have conducted interviews in an offline setting on some occasions.

In some of those interviews, I also have incorporated video-elicitation. Video-elicitation is derived from a more canonical ethnographic method, photo-elicitation. Rather than analyzing and interpreting ASMR video material myself, I have used my participants to discuss the material's content and express how they feel when watching the videos (O’Reilly 2012). Video-elicitation initiated a moment of immediate self-reflection with the participants, but also for myself as both research and avid viewer of the material. Next to that, incorporating ASMR

into an interview elevated the experience into both a multisensory and multimedia approach. I have also used video-elicitation with written, structured online interviews that I have conducted with eight people who reached out to me after finding my YouTube channel.¹⁶ While written, structured interviews are not usually conducted within ethnographic research, Markham (2005, 255) argues that “giving a voice to participants meant selecting the medium based on what was most appropriate for the participants, not the researcher”. This online form of interviewing had a low threshold for viewers who wanted to remain fully anonymous, even to the researcher. I have created a questionnaire in Qualtrics, which included 15 ASMR videos and 30 open-ended questions. The questions covered the main concepts. All eight participants were viewers of Dutch nationality. The male-female ratio with this method was less balanced; only one viewer was male.

The ethics

Since my fieldwork took place in a familiar setting to me, you can consider this ethnography an “insider ethnography” (O’Reilly 2012, 98). The ASMR community has been a prominent part of my personal life for over eight years, and I still watch ASMR videos almost every day. The consciousness that I am an insider includes the necessity of being reflexive about the place from which I observe the subject (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011). Therefore, it is essential to reflect on my position as an ASMR viewer to understand my positionality in this research. Additionally, my position as a white, middle-class Dutch female in her twenties needs to be considered. Even though I am committed to painting the picture as objectively as possible, I was reflexive about the fact that all researchers are biased (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011). Precisely because of my insider role, I wanted to incorporate alternative standpoints from outsiders in this thesis to reduce the inevitable bias of my own perspective. By comparing both similarities and deviations in experiences of myself and other participants, I was able to draw ethically and analytically solid conclusions (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011).

Doing participant observation via the Internet calls for a reflexive plan of action in terms of anonymity. On the one hand, using “cyberstealth” as an invisibility cloak can be helpful to avoid adapted behavior of participants in the presence of a researcher (Ebo 1998, 3). Besides that, a common argument in favor of covert ethnography on the Internet is that none of the participants reveal their actual identity, as they can hide behind digital aliases (O’Reilly 2012). In some cases, I did not actively reveal my identity as a researcher. When reading archived threads on Reddit, I have refrained from contacting users since the interactions were not active anymore.¹⁷ On the other hand, O’Reilly (2012) points out that online identities can be just as meaningful and authentic as real-life identities. Therefore, I went out of my way to announce my role as researcher in every active digital interaction, both in public and private spaces. On my YouTube channel and under every video I have uploaded, I have put a disclaimer that any

¹⁶ See www.survey.uu.nl/jfe/form/SV_eRkACXsTsypgWAm

¹⁷ When a thread on Reddit is archived, users cannot post new comments anymore.

interactions with my channel could be used for my Master's thesis. Additionally, I have refrained from using my personal social media accounts to contact participants. To contact possible participants, I have created an Instagram and Reddit profile which included a short biography that introduced myself and my intentions as a researcher. I have anonymized all participants throughout my thesis to protect their identity and the data they have shared with me.

This entire research was executed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic affected my fieldwork to some extent. During the planning stages of the fieldwork, I carefully considered the possible influence of the pandemic. In truth, it is challenging to strategize ethnographic research when you cannot foresee how the world will look like in a month or even a few weeks. In the end, the ongoing restrictions in the Netherlands have halted me from doing extensive offline fieldwork. When I did execute an occasional interview or video-elicitation offline, it involved ethical considerations on whether the setting was safe for both participants and myself. Reflecting on my decision-making, I have mixed feelings. On the one hand, I wished I had the opportunity to have done more offline fieldwork. On the other hand, the situation in the Netherlands was fluctuating throughout my fieldwork from safe to unsafe constantly. Ethnographic research is inherently unpredictable, and planning fieldwork needs to be flexible in its research design in any circumstance (O'Reilly 2012). With that notion in mind, this thesis has been executed exactly as it should have been.

The structure

The first interlude, "Beginning AnthroSMR", describes the start of my fieldwork and struggles I experienced, based upon vignettes I wrote about participant observations surrounding my ASMR channel.

Chapter 1, "The Double-Edged Sword of YouTube", introduces the central field site of my research: YouTube. YouTube has been the perfect host for the ASMR community to grow their collective, yet it also has become a policing force that exploits the community's dependency on the platform (Strangelove 2010). The argument that the relationship between the ASMR community and YouTube became a toxic relationship ridden by simultaneous monetization and demonetization and pushing and censoring of ASMR content is explored.

Chapter 2, "Triggering Affect", positions ASMR in a multidisciplinary framework of affect, with a specific focus on anthropological literature. Affect is situated between the blurry boundaries of culture and biology, similarly to ASMR (Sedgwick 2003). The question of whether ASMR included affects that are culturally taught or biologically predisposed is explored. I discuss how ASMR as a physiological response runs through pre-existing biological trajectories but should ultimately be understood in its socio-cultural context to fully grasp how affect is constructed (Gallagher 2019). In this socio-cultural context, the ASMR community strives to be taken seriously as a therapeutic tool, yet this approach might be a strategy to derive from sexualized conceptions of the phenomenon.

The second chapter is followed by a second interlude, “Embodying AnthroSMR”, and continues from the previous interlude. The interlude elaborates on how I tackled struggles in the field and what I did to elevate my participant observation.

Chapter 3, “Sexualizing Whispers”, elaborates on sexualizing readings of ASMR and how the community and outsiders construct the interplay between sexuality and ASMR. Intimacy needs a conceptual reexamination to fit ASMR since the affective experience is not a heteronormative expression of intimate relations. Conflicting perspectives on ASMR from insiders and outsiders are juxtaposed to understand when ASMR is sexualized and when not. Followed, the narrative that sex is incorporated in ASMR because “sex sells” is explored.

Chapter 4, “The Affect of Capitalism”, focuses on how the ASMR community negotiates the price tag of ASMR and how sex plays a part in the product of ASMR. An anthropological framework of commodification is utilized to follow how ASMR is formed from a gift to a commodity. I discuss how the ASMR community uses sexualization as both a source of alienation for affective laborers and consumers and a resource exploited for financial benefits.

Finally, the conclusion summarizes the main findings, answers the research question, and discusses the societal and academic relevance of the thesis.

Interlude: Beginning AnthroSMR

On February 13, 2021, I created my first ASMR video after about eight years of being solely a viewer. Methodologically, I felt compelled to approach ASMR through the role of the creator: the ASMRtist. Inspired by McGranahan (2019), who both tweeted and interacted with tweeting Trump supporters through her Twitter account, I did participant observation via my own YouTube channel. Similar to face-to-face fieldwork, digital spaces are “inhabited, given form and meaning, and brought to life by humans” (McGranahan 2019, 3169). During my time in the field, YouTube transformed from just another social media platform into a digital space filled with human lived experience through numerous comments, likes, and messages.

On that day in the middle of February, I asked my friend Yara to help me with making my first ASMR video. I had the idea to do a hair play video. This is a sub-genre of ASMR, where sounds and movements surrounding hair are central to the video. One of my favorite ASMR triggers is hair play, so I figured that I could easily recreate what I had seen before. I positioned Yara in front of the camera so she was only in the frame and I could hide behind her. During the production of this video, I quickly realized that viewing ASMR is nothing compared to creating ASMR. I underestimated the process of making those types of videos. It seemed easier when I was solely a spectator. Now, I needed to pay attention to the sounds I made, Yara made, my neighbors made, the birds in my garden made. Also, is the camera focused? Is the lighting flattering? Wait, is this a weird angle? Why does the microphone not work? I knew what kind of ASMR videos I preferred, yet how to make them myself was a mystery.

I purchased a Blue Yeti microphone (the one featured on the cover page of this thesis) to approach the job of an ASMRtist in full professionalism. I never worked with microphones or other audio equipment; thus, producing pleasant, ASMR-like sounds instead of harsh, annoying noise was another challenge. At first, most sounds were too soft. But on occasion, I would ever so gently tick against the microphone, which would produce the loudest noises. The Blue Yeti microphone is extremely sensitive. You are required to deeply listen to every sound you make, analyze it, think ahead before you make it, and be gentle all the time. After taking what felt like years to film the video, it took me a while to master editing such an audio-centered video as well. I made an effort to learn how to use Premiere Pro, an editing program that most professional editors use. I had some experience editing simple video material, but I wanted to create the best videos possible. Creating balanced, toned-down, and, above all, pleasing sounds is a challenge. Continuing to edit that material into a video that radiates relaxation and serenity is not just a task; it is a form of art.

At first, being the artist instead of the viewer caused a disconnection from ASMR for me. Learning to make ASMR was frustrating at times: why is this so hard while I have observed ASMR videos for years? I started to despise it. Where ASMR was once the cure when I was stressed, now, ASMR was the cause of my anxieties. This felt paradoxical. Embodying this

alternative role in the ASMR community made me feel like an imposter as well. Was I good enough to help other people relax? Why would people feel affected by my videos?

On February 15, I created a brand-new channel on YouTube. For the name of my channel, I took inspiration from Tom Boellstorff's ethnography on Second Life (2008). He named his home in Second Life *Ethnographià*, which led me to name my YouTube channel *AnthroSMR* (a portmanteau combining anthropology and ASMR). When I finally uploaded the first video, I expected something great to happen.¹⁸ I knew which words to put in my title, which tags to include in the description, and how to make an appealing thumbnail.¹⁹ Surely, people who are interested in ASMR videos would find them, right? But nothing happened. After a week, I received a meager 20 views on the video. What was I doing wrong? Was the quality not good enough? I used a professional camera borrowed from my friend, so that should not be the case, right? I also spent good money on a Blue Yeti microphone, the most popular ASMR microphone. Were my whispers not soothing enough? Did I not tap the way other ASMRtists tap? How do real ASMRtists do this?

¹⁸ See [▶ ASMR Playing With Hair I Hair Play, Hair Brushing and Tapping I Trying ASMR For The First Time](#)

¹⁹ A thumbnail is the photo one sees from a YouTube video prior to clicking on it.

The Double-Edged Sword of YouTube

ASMR is deeply intertwined with the Internet, in particular with YouTube. Describing YouTube merely as a social media platform to watch videos fails to comprehend its complexity. YouTube is a massive global, ever-changing, interpersonal, and social entity. Most viewers I talked to spent several hours a day on YouTube, engaging with online video as an interactive and sociable substitute for television (Strangelove 2010). By day, viewers watch anything from vlogs to gaming content. At night they tune into ASMR videos.²⁰ The participatory nature of YouTube creates a sense of community among its users, but Lange (2019) argues that there is a simultaneous decline in sociality because of YouTube's monetization and demonetization policies, failing algorithms, hate-fueled comments, and, as a result, digital migration to other platforms. Spending endless hours on YouTube, watching ASMR videos, and reading comments during my fieldwork revealed a paradoxical relationship between YouTube and the ASMR community. ASMRtist Esther shined a light on YouTube's control over which videos get pushed to the audience, which videos get monetized, and which creators grow in subscribers. "I don't want to pay attention to it, but you kind of have to to get by", Esther told me.²¹ Based on Strangelove's (2010) notion that YouTube is both landlord and police, this chapter explores how YouTube enables the existence of the ASMR community. That dependency on YouTube for survival has brought the community popularity, but also tensions that constantly transform the ASMR culture.

How binary code becomes communal

YouTube means different things to different people. My mom only uses YouTube to watch music videos ever so often. The app is not even installed on her phone; she accesses the platform via her browser. On the other side of the spectrum, I use the YouTube app daily. I watch vlogs, documentaries, sometimes even television shows, and, of course, ASMR videos via the app. Strangelove (2010) illustrates YouTube as more than just an archive of amateur videos; it has become a complex social, interpersonal place that reflects present-day cultural politics and thus is filled with cooperation and conflict. This has made YouTube a contested space where users have become influential in interpreting and representing events. Understanding the socio-historical context of YouTube is essential to understand ASMR as a digital community and cultural phenomenon since the ASMR community has flourished in the midst of that context.

YouTube was founded in 2005 to eliminate technological barriers for people who wanted to share home videos online without any knowledge of technology (Burgess and Green 2018). In 2006, Google bought YouTube and developed the platform into its present-day formation (Lange

²⁰ Multiple interviews, March/April

²¹ Interview, Esther, 12-03-2021

2019). Soon, YouTube became more than merely a digital space where people could dump homemade video content. The platform developed a comprehensible interface that effortlessly assists users in uploading, publishing, and viewing videos, has various options regarding video quantity or quality, and allows connecting with your friends (Burgess and Green 2018). YouTube's accessibility becomes evident in Esther's rite of passage from ASMR viewer to creator. She told me that she was watching an ASMR video one day and thought: "I can do this too".²² Right then and there, she filmed her first video with her phone and uploaded it to YouTube within the hour. Esther started her channel six years ago and has almost reached 6,000 subscribers. Making an account on YouTube is free, but you are not obligated to sign up if you solely want to watch videos. If you want to use all other features such as uploading, commenting, subscribing, and liking/disliking, you have to create a YouTube account. Lange (2019) defines YouTube participants as people who post videos or comments, thus who have a YouTube account. Those participatory activities are what shapes the sense of community for YouTube users (Strangelove 2010). Before I started my fieldwork, I barely liked videos or subscribed to ASMR channels. Once I became a participant-observer in the field, I consciously participated with the videos through leaving comments, liking the video, and subscribing to channels I enjoyed. I wrote in my autoethnographic diary: "I never realized that I could feel even more part of it than I already did. You are only in it once you interact with it".²³ In this thesis, ASMR viewers and creators are YouTube participants in accordance with Lange's definition.

It might be hard for you to imagine a community that solely exists on the Internet. Both the YouTube and the ASMR community have no offline materiality, except for your computer screen or telephone. During my fieldwork, I have met only a handful of people face-to-face who can be considered as part of the ASMR community. The rest of the participants I met and spoke to online. A mutual interest in ASMR and interpersonal interaction on YouTube has helped me build rapport with strangers that defied technologically-mediated boundaries. Anthropologists Wilson and Peterson (2002) debunk the idea that we can conceptualize community on dichotomies of offline/online, virtual/real, and individual/collective. After all, communities are not essentially defined by face-to-face interactions but rather "by the style in which they are imagined" (Anderson 1983, 6). Ally, another ASMRtist, told me that she felt as if she was part of a community through messaging with other ASMRtists, including Esther:

"With Esther, I have contact via Whatsapp too, so last week we messaged about custom videos so we can ask questions to one another. I don't know; you do the same job and you don't really have co-workers, you know, so [...] But you quickly come into contact with one another and that is really nice, and because of that, I have a feeling that we are a community together."²⁴

²² Interview, Esther, 12-03-2021

²³ Fieldnotes, Autoethnographic diary, 27-02-2021

²⁴ Quote from interview, Ally, 09-04-2021

Ally understood that communities such as her own do not need to have materiality or embodied proximity to transfer a sense of community and belonging. Instead, a shared sense of identity creates feelings of commitment and belonging to your community (Lysloff 2003). Through that collectiveness, Ally's channel has accumulated 11,000 subscribers in almost ten years. In the context of the ASMR community, the collective sense of identity, belonging, and commitment created in interactions between community members is vital for an affective experience such as ASMR. Individuals within the ASMR community are not solely striving to find affective intimacies; their quest is also fueled "by their desire to share it through online media" (Andersen 2015, 687). In other words, affect simultaneously manifests via ASMR triggers and interactions with like-minded viewers and creators through the infrastructures of YouTube. Therefore, YouTube is the perfect host for the ASMR community to thrive.

For the ASMR community to keep on flourishing, they depend entirely on YouTube's infrastructure. Important to note is that YouTube is many things - a medium, platform, community, and a sociocultural space - but what we should not overlook is the fact that YouTube is not a non-profit organization. Instead, Strangelove (2010, 106) argues that the communities that exist on YouTube heavily "depend on the goodwill of the YouTube corporation". The ASMR community has had the opportunity to grow, as "millions of views on YouTube carry the weight of legitimacy more than pseudo-scientific claims. The community practically owes its existence to YouTube" (Andersen 2015, 687). The figurative ownership that YouTube has over the ASMR community breeds the toxic relationship between both parties. In other words, YouTube enables the ASMR community's existence, but that dependency on YouTube's services simultaneously creates tension among communities. This tension is fueled by YouTube's acts of monetization, censorship, account cancellations, and advertisement, among other policing actions. Strangelove (2010) describes the role of YouTube as both the landlord and village cop: it acts as both the host and policing force for the communities that it facilitates. I add to Strangelove's notion that YouTube exploits its control over communities such as the ASMR community. The next part of this chapter explores the repercussions of the ASMR community's dependency on YouTube.

Perfect host or policing leech?

When I first met Esther via Zoom in March, the relationship with YouTube in conjunction with the ASMR community came into conversation. She has been an ASMRtist for about six years, thus has a fair deal of experience with the platform. When I asked Esther if she paid attention to whether her videos get into the algorithm, she rapidly replied, "oh, no idea". She then corrected herself: "no, that's not entirely true" and sighed, "okay, maybe I secretly pay a lot of attention to it".²⁵ Esther continued to explain some tricks she used to boost her video into people's recommendation pages. From capitalizing letters and putting the word 'ASMR' as the first word of her title to using English terms to reach a larger audience and consistently posting between

²⁵ Interview, Esther, 12-03-2021

18:00 and 22:00,²⁶ she explained that there are many ways to try to cheat YouTube's clever algorithm:

“When you start to make money off of YouTube, you will think more about that. I notice that with myself sometimes. I try not to focus on it because I don't see this as a job. I see it as a hobby where I can earn something, just like you can make bracelets and sell them. But secretly, you start to think about it, and I notice that with myself because the nasty thing about the YouTube creator app is that you can see all the numbers. Even with an arrow, like, oh, this is how much your videos are watched in minutes normally, these are your views.”²⁷

Strangelove (2010, 106) argues that many users attempt to “‘game the system’ by taking advantage of YouTube’s technical design to attract more visitors”. The technical design Strangelove refers to is YouTube’s algorithm, designed to automatically clean any pornographic, violent, or racist videos or comments. As Esther explained, this algorithm can also work in the creator’s favor. The algorithm pushes popular content, recommends videos on the recommendation page, and suggests video titles in the search engine, all based on what you previously watched or created (Lange 2019). Seaver (2017, 1) suggests that anthropologists who investigate algorithms, or digital spaces that use them, approach algorithms as “‘unstable objects that are enacted through the varied practices that people use to engage with them’”. Thus, the algorithm of YouTube is a nonhuman actor that helps to construct and contest the cultural patterns of meaning surrounding online communities such as the ASMR community (Seaver 2017).

I have illustrated previously why YouTube’s infrastructure is such a suitable landlord and its algorithm the figurative handyman. The other side of the sword that I want to elaborate on is YouTube’s algorithm as a village cop. The algorithm protects creators from inappropriate comments but also polices creators when it comes to uploading inappropriate videos. In that respect, Nardi (2009, 79) suggests that “‘digital rules provide a special kind of resource with which good design can be preserved and protected through encapsulation in the black box. In this sense, rules may be nurtured by providing a safe haven for cultural objects of integrity and excellence’”. In the context of the ASMR community, that kind of protection and preservation is necessary to keep members safe. In the three months I managed my ASMR channel, I have received numerous sexualizing slurs and fetishizing requests.²⁸ Ally, who has been an ASMRtist for almost ten years, also shared this experience with me: “‘it really ruins [ASMR] a little bit sometimes’”.²⁹ As I have established in the introduction, ASMR is often mistaken for sexual due to its intimate nature. I discuss the sexualization of ASMR more in-depth in chapter three. However, it is essential to mention in the context of the repercussions of YouTube’s automated

²⁶ ASMRtists often post at night because ASMR is mostly viewed before bed.

²⁷ Quote from interview, Esther, 12-03-2021

²⁸ Fieldnote, Autoethnographic diary, 30-03-2021

²⁹ Interview, Ally, 09-04-2021

policing on the lived experience of ASMRtists. While the algorithm protects them from harassment, it also censors and demonetizes ASMR videos that are not intended to be inappropriately sexual. In contrast, some ASMRtists also intentionally incorporate sexual elements in their videos. Starr, Wang, and Go (2020) term this sub-genre ‘S-ASMR’. Differentiating between ASMR and S-ASMR seems unchallenging, but there is no clear definition of ASMR compared to S-ASMR and where the boundaries of sexual and non-sexual are in ASMR content.

The blurry boundaries between sex and innocence are where YouTube detects a problem. This leaves YouTube on a cross-road. There is no space for sexual content on YouTube. Simultaneously, the ASMR community is a moneymaker for the platform. The other side of the coin, which I add to Strangelove’s concept of the ‘village cop’ (2010), is that the power to police (and monitor, judge, and execute) can be abused to exploit online communities. Burgess and Green (2008) observe that YouTube needs to implement such a harsh, automated form of censorship to make the community suitable for the general public and, perhaps more importantly, advertisers. Companies can advertise before, after, and in-between videos on YouTube. Creators can partly profit from video monetization via the Partner Program that YouTube introduced in 2007. Once you reach 1,000 subscribers and 4,000 watch hours with your YouTube channel, you can sign up for the Partner Program and get paid per view on videos (Lange 2019).³⁰ Unsurprisingly, YouTube and the companies that advertise profit mostly from the monetization of videos, but the Partner Program does facilitate the desire of ASMRtists to seek compensation for their services. Payment varies from 10 cents up to 30 cents per view.³¹ Given that ASMR videos can accumulate tens of thousands to millions of views, there is a possibility to make a significant amount of money from ASMR. The revenue model behind YouTube encourages creators to get as many views as possible. As Esther mentioned, she does not perceive YouTube as her employer. At the same time, she does want to enhance her videos’ performance in the algorithm to make some extra pocket money. Other ASMRtists depend entirely on their ASMR channel for their income, which is jeopardized when ASMR videos are unfairly demonetized and censored by YouTube.

In 2018, the banning of ASMR videos reached a boiling point. YouTube, but also other (online) companies such as PayPal, purposely targeted ASMR videos as inappropriate. They globally misidentified thousands of ASMR videos as sexual and thus unsuitable for their brand (Blue 2018). As a result, they demonetized a large amount of ASMR videos and froze PayPal accounts of ASMRtists. ASMRtists use PayPal accounts for donations of subscribers, on which a significant amount of their paycheck next to YouTube depends on. The increasing demonetization and censorship of ASMR videos are met with frustration and anger in the ASMR community. Especially by the ASMRtists who depend on monetized videos to make a living, ongoing demonetization has severe consequences on their lives. Ally, who plans to make ASMR

³⁰ See <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/72851>

³¹ Interview, Esther, 12-03-2021

her full-time job in the future, expressed worry about the constantly changing climate of YouTube:

“I love the freedom of working whenever I want, you know, I make up the rules. [...] But YouTube does change a lot with its legislation, and that’s strange, I guess, since it feels free, but at the same time, what’s the word? It’s uncertain, precarious to be dependent on how YouTube develops into the future. So I guess it feels as if I come up with [the rules], but [YouTube] more so [does].”³²

Ally emphasized the changeability of YouTube. Part of YouTube’s complexity is rooted in the ever-changing policies that it acts upon. ASMRtists cannot anticipate what the platform will do next to make their jobs more difficult. Viewers do not know if ASMR will even be available on YouTube in the future. China, for instance, has already banned both S-ASMR and conventional ASMR from YouTube (Starr, Wang, and Go 2020). The complicated paradox of YouTube as both perfect host and policing exploiter is the central setting of this thesis.

The ASMR community, in particular, falls victim to YouTube’s acts of policing since ASMR’s intimate nature can seem sexual. This is precisely the type of content that YouTube wants to censor (Starr, Wang, and Go 2020). YouTube strives to be a corporation that polices (and monitors, judges, and executes) videos in its digital space to establish itself as a perfect opportunity for advertisers (Strangelove 2010). The increasing popularity of the ASMR community is indisputable, which evidently presents itself as an opportunity to gain profits for YouTube (Premack 2018). This paradoxical relationship keeps the ASMR community on its toes, as ASMRtists remain uncertain whether their content will be monetized or censored. YouTube also acts as the perfect landlord for the ASMR community, which makes this paradoxical relationship two-fold. The platform facilitates an infrastructure that is inherently suitable for the desire of the ASMR community to share videos, interact with one another and induce an affective experience through the mediation of technology (Andersen 2015). This chapter’s exploration of the relationship between YouTube and the ASMR community has set the context of this thesis. In the next chapter, I extend how the ASMR community is able to construct and contest ASMR as a technologically-mediated affective experience on YouTube (Smith and Snider 2019).

³² Quote from interview, Ally, 09-04-2021

Triggering Affect

In contemporary times, affective experience seems hard to get by. People have migrated to the Internet to seek shelter from long, stress-inducing days in an attempt to make up the deficit of care, intimacy, and affection. In somewhat similar wording, viewers indicated that they need ASMR daily ‘to set [their] worries aside and be able to relax’.³³ The fact that it is possible to shape affective experience through technologically-mediated trajectories deserves a closer exploration in this thesis. This chapter continues on the previous chapter by illustrating how digital spaces such as YouTube can facilitate affect. Since the nineties, anthropologists and other social scholars have revisited affect theory as a revamped conceptual frame in which the forces behind intimacy, feeling, emotion, and sentiment in the public domain are both recognized and analytically accommodated (Seigworth and Gregg 2010). In the context of ASMR as an unquestionably affective experience, it is valuable and effective to explore ASMR in this framework.

‘ASMR is what I embody, but at the same time share with someone’

In the middle of a strict COVID-19 lockdown at the beginning of March, I conducted my first interview with Simon. Simon consented to do our interview face-to-face since the regulations allowed one visitor a day, and we committed to a one-and-a-half meter distance. I had been acquainted with Simon for a few years before the interview. Because we hung out in the same circles, I found out that he watched ASMR. He did not exactly tell me himself. I found out about a year before the first interview because I saw the name of a well-known ASMRtist in his YouTube history while putting on a music video one night. While he was hesitant at first to participate in my research (‘I only want to do it if I stay completely anonymous’), I convinced him with the promise of anonymity and a few Leffe Blond specialty beers.³⁴ As we cracked open our first beer, I asked Simon why he was in doubt when I initially asked him to participate. Simon sighed and responded that it felt extremely personal to speak to me about something so intimate: ‘ASMR is what I embody, but at the same time share with someone I don’t even know. That’s weird to explain to someone, even you. I don’t even fully understand, you know, why a creator I never met makes me feel those tingles’.³⁵ Later in our conversation, we explore this connection that is so hard to understand as affect. A handful of social and natural sciences scholars have argued that ASMR is an affective experience (see Andersen 2015; Barratt and Davis 2015; Poerio et al. 2018; Smith and Snider 2019). The concept of affect has various meanings across many disciplines in the social sciences and is notoriously hard to pinpoint.

³³ Written interview, Aria, 13-04-2021

³⁴ Personal communication, Simon, 14-01-2021

³⁵ Interview, Simon, 05-03-2021

According to Seighworth and Gregg (2010), affect is continuously underway and constantly in the process of becoming rather than being. Seighworth and Gregg base their notion on Brian Massumi (2002), a lead author on affect theory. Massumi stresses that approaches to conceptualizing affect should not strive for a stable and static notion but rather aim to illustrate affect as movements.

This philosophy on affect relates to how Simon explains affect in our second encounter. According to him, affect takes on multiple shapes in various contexts, ranging from romantic relationships and family bonding to a warm conversation with a stranger and, of course, the mediated connection with an ASMRtist.³⁶ In other words, affect will never reach a static definition because it constantly stays in movement through different moments of someone's social life. While Simon stressed the individual embodiment of affects resulting from ASMR, perhaps the shared aspect between individuals is even more essential for the experience. In past literature, anthropologists have treated emotion and affect as synonyms. In their article *Economies of Affect*, Richard and Rudnyckyj (2009, 57) argue that affect and emotion should segregate, since affect "refers to relations practiced between individuals, in contrast to emotion, which still bears the specter of psychological individualism". In other words, implementing emotion as an analytical tool cannot help anthropologists uncover social relations and subjective experiences between people. Human subjectivity entails "the ensemble of modes of perception, affect, thought, desire, fear, and so forth that animate acting subjects", but also the socio-cultural constructions that form, manage and express subjective experience (Ortner 2005, 31). Subjective experience relates to the inner state but also the socio-cultural environment of subjects, and affect is what binds social relations together. Therefore, affective experiences such as ASMR are not static but transmitted, shared, and circulated between and outside of the viewers and creators their subjectivities.

While I agree that emotions and affect should be seen as two different forms of human expression, this does not mark earlier anthropological literature on emotion irrelevant in constructing current conceptualizations of affect. In addition, it should not be ignored that there is a simultaneous interplay between emotions and affect, next to their separate manifestations. In their article, *The Anthropology of Emotions*, Lutz and White (1986) describe emotions as multifaceted, rather than one-dimensional, and situate feelings, emotions and affect as means to overcome conceptual dualisms in social science, such as the mind-body. According to Leys (2011), treating affect and emotion as dualisms also separates the mind and body, which ignores the complexity of subjective experience. Evidently, ASMR is a prime example of how the mind-body dualism is bridged. A mixture of emotion, feeling, and affect enters the mind, which generates a bodily response. That interplay shows in Simon's words: the embodiment of emotions is an individual affair, but this is impossible without the affective experience facilitated by the relation between viewer and creator. Understanding emotions, feelings, and affect as interconnected expressions that defy the mind-body dualism helps us to imagine the inducement

³⁶ Interview, Simon, 23-04-2021

of ASMR with a viewer as a subjective experience through the affective triggers performed by a creator.

Since this thesis looks at ASMR with an anthropological lens, I have chosen to explore ASMR as an affective experience that exists through relations practiced between individuals (Richard and Rudnycky 2009). While I have stressed acknowledging the interconnectedness between individual emotions and feelings accompanied by affect, the rest of this thesis focuses on how affect is separately manifested through ASMR.

A force between culture and biology

On a rainy morning in May, I met up with Sarah via video call. I met Sarah by accident at the beginning of my fieldwork, unaware that she experienced the tingles as well. After chatting for a while, the topic of my thesis came up, and she immediately expressed interest in participating. She was lying on the ground with a group of people during a Shaman session when she first experienced the tingles. Sounds of singing bowls and other spiritual objects tingled her senses, accumulating an explosive feeling on the crown of her head. Sarah wondered if everyone felt this silvery tingling or if it was unique to her. Years later, when she was scrolling through YouTube one night, she found out what she experienced before was called ASMR. Circling back to that rainy morning, I had prepared several videos to watch together with her. I told Sarah to get comfortable since watching ASMR videos is supposed to be a relaxing and informal experience. During the videos, we sat in silence, cross-legged, and sometimes with our eyes closed. Videos passed, and we listened to the sound of whispers and tapping fingers, and the rain ticking on my skylight window and watching the movements together without much interaction except the occasional smile or chuckle. Sometimes we were interrupted by her toddler storming into the room, which momentarily took us out of the relaxed ambiance and into the real world. “My son also enjoys [ASMR], you know”, Sarah remarked after she had gently guided him out of the room.³⁷ I remember her previously telling me that her son loves his mother’s voice the most and once said that he wished that there were only women because their voices are the most relaxing and beautiful.³⁸ This narrative exposes the number one question in ASMR discourse, namely, whether ASMR is culturally taught or biologically inherited (Gallagher 2019). According to Sarah, both she and her son experience ASMR, but she also mentioned that she had played ASMR for him since he was a baby. Additionally, Sarah experiencing the tingles from the sounds of singing bowls took place later in life, and the context of a Shaman session could have been more cultural or spiritual. Sedgwick (2003) suggests that affective experiences appear to be more complex than the nature/nurture dualism, as the force that constructs affect is situated on the vague boundary between biology and culture.

On the one hand, the ASMR University, established by Craig Richard, hypothesizes that ASMR is triggered through already existing biological trajectories of interpersonal bonding and

³⁷ Interview, Sarah, 04-05-2021

³⁸ Interview, Sarah, 12-03-2021

associated behaviors (Richard 2014). In other words, the affect resulting from ASMR travels through the same biological pathways as the affect one receives from a parent, romantic partner, friend, or family member. Concerning Sarah and her son, this could mean that her son simply prefers her voice because it represents protection and safety, something we biologically crave (Gallagher 2019). Most narratives of viewers include the presence of tingles in their childhood. Freyja, a viewer I met through Instagram, illustrated how ASMR might simulate a form of social grooming:

“My mom used to do that, like touch my hair and also draw on my back [...] yeah, with her finger, and that was always really tingly. Like, I didn’t know back in the days that that’s what it means, but it felt really good. And also like she would rub my ears.”³⁹

Freyja, who grew up in a Scandinavian country but has lived in the Netherlands since 2014, argued that her preference for ASMR videos that display ear-rubbing and hair play triggers comes from this sentimental memory of her childhood. In their two-fold study juxtaposing physiological and neurobiological response to affective response in ASMR viewers, Poerio et al. (2018, 14) suggest that ASMR could be similar to social grooming, “which facilitates well-being and interpersonal bonding (e.g., through reduction in heart rate and release of endorphins)”. Being taken care of by someone who protects you induces hormones such as endorphins that everyone has naturally, enabling those positive affects that make us relaxed, soothed, and happy. In a similar vein, Simon related his preference for female, soft voices to his childhood. His mother would perform the *dot dot line line* rhyme to him, on which the prologue of this thesis is inspired, which gave him a tingly sensation on his scalp and neck.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, pinning the affective qualities of ASMR solely on biological predisposition does not explain why people like Freyja, Sarah, and Simon are able to experience ASMR, but others cannot. Additionally, this theory ignores social and cultural intervention through subjective experience, memory, and intentionality, which plays a significant role in shaping affect (Leys 2011; Andersen 2015).

Gallagher (2019) stresses that the tendency to favor evolutionary biological factors over sociocultural components completely ignores the context ASMR finds itself in. Rooted in subjective experience, memory, nostalgia, and sentiment, affect is formed through social and cultural aspects that cannot be ascribed to biology. Expectations of care and intimacy are shaped through socially constructed gender roles and culturally established domestic spheres (Andersen 2015). Sarah believed different people provide different affects, which she illustrated by the hand of a video of a male⁴¹ and a video of a female⁴² ASMRtist that we watched together:

“They embody different archetypes [of care]: the confident mother, you know, who is touching me very lovingly, well she is not really touching me but as a matter of speaking.

³⁹ Quote from interview, Freyja, 17-03-2021

⁴⁰ Interview, Simon, 05-03-2021

⁴¹ See  (ASMR) Delicious Hand Movements (No Talking) Obviously

⁴² See   Slow Hand Movements  and Blissful Whispers  ASMR

Sort of, just like a mother, kindly touching her child. [...] And the boy that is more like you are getting to know someone, and he is in love with [the person he is talking to]. But it is still exciting, you know, so more as if he is a caring boyfriend.”⁴³

Many videos display domestic, gendered roles in caring, affective situations: a caring boyfriend, a loving mother, but also a kind doctor, a masseur, or a ‘luizenmoeder’.⁴⁴ These forms of intimacy and care all carry meaning and symbolism that dominate our affective experiences (Ortner 2005). Since my particular scope explored the Dutch ASMR community, the subjectivities of the viewers and creators I spoke to were dominated by meanings, sentiments, and nostalgia of Dutch origin. “I do not enjoy English ASMR, because if I want to relax, well English is not my native language, so I am not used to listening to it”, Ally explained, implying that the Dutch language gives her more tingles than languages that she is not familiar with.⁴⁵ Other triggers, such as showing particular cultural staple products, roleplays of certain local shops, and other cultural, spiritual, religious, or social forms of affect are utilized in videos as trends within sub-genres of ASMR. I played into one of those trends when I created an ASMR video displaying my tea collection, a concept performed by many other Dutch ASMRtists.⁴⁶ Owning various tea bags is quintessentially Dutch; therefore, this video concept is typical of Dutch cultural meaning. On another note, the ASMR community transcends geographic borders in many respects. The ASMR community is also positioned in global Internet culture. Some cultural aspects in ASMR culture have been constructed out of ‘viral’ digital trends. This has nothing to do with a geographic, cultural difference but signifies Internet culture.

Circling back to Sarah’s first experience, she felt tingles during a Shaman session later in her life. She described it as a “sound healing experience where [she] was laying on the ground with a bunch of people, and someone was making sounds with all kinds of ordinary objects. Looking back, it was very ASMR”.⁴⁷ The spiritual magic of the moment, according to Sarah, triggered the physiological response. As an anthropologist, I cannot conclude whether Sarah was born with the ability to experience tingles or that the ambiance of the moment awakened it. I can say that sensory elements can trigger an affective response shaped by social and cultural aspects. In the end, I suggest, in a similar vein as Andersen (2015), that understanding ASMR as purely a physiological sensation rooted in biological capacities apart from nostalgic experiences of intimacy and underlying impressions of care is as limiting as assuming that affect exists without the interconnectedness with emotion and feeling.

⁴³ Quote from interview, Sarah, 04-05-2021

⁴⁴ Dutch term for a parental figure who checks children for lice at school.

⁴⁵ Interview, Ally, 09-04-2021

⁴⁶ See [YouTube video: Nederlandse ASMR I Koffie en Thee Hoekje I Tapping, Fluisteren, Sorteren, en Meer Thee-ngles](#)

⁴⁷ Interview, Sarah, 12-03-2021

“It’s also not pleasant when a masseur makes a sexual innuendo”

Ultimately, sociocultural context is just as crucial in the creation of affective experience as biological markers. Nevertheless, the ASMR community goes out of its way to present itself “in ‘bio-social terms”, associating itself with health, medicine, and well-being to negotiate legitimacy from the rest of the world (Gallagher 2019, 269). Smith and Snider (2019) argue that the ASMR community wants to find medicinal legitimacy in an attempt to distract from sexual readings of the phenomenon. The sexualization of ASMR dominates the conversation more than the benefits on well-being, which frustrates the community. These contesting narratives continue to negotiate the meaning and purpose of affective components in ASMR content.

In the past decade, the ASMR community wanted to present itself as the ultimate self-serving therapeutic tool to combat mental issues such as anxiety, insomnia, stress, and depression. With a global deficit in sufficient social investment programming resulting from neoliberal processes, the community is eager to promote ASMR as a cure against our late-capitalist condition (Bjelic 2016). The first point on the agenda was to obtain a certain scientific legitimacy. Stan, a medical student who has been viewing ASMR for the past three years, shared that he understands that urge for the community to be taken seriously as a medicinal instrument. From his point of view, ASMR could play a more prominent role in the future of well-being but is not assessed to its full potential because people find it weird and perceive it as a fetish.⁴⁸ ASMRtist Esther acknowledged that ASMR could help anxieties, stress, and loneliness, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic: “[T]he lowering of one’s heartbeat [when watching an ASMR video] the moment someone listens, and I think it can assist someone who battles depression for example”.⁴⁹ In a similar vein, Poerio et al. (2018) suggest both physiological as well as psychological benefits of consuming ASMR. However, Esther also wondered what happens to people when the video stops. She argued that the ASMR videos are soothing in the moment of watching, but only until the video has reached its ending. “I do not think we are there yet in terms of [ASMR] solving actual problems”, Esther debated.⁵⁰ The goal of most ASMRtists is not to assist individuals, she continued, juxtaposing watching an ASMR video with a therapy session or a personal trainer. Instead, the goal is to relax as many viewers as possible, which might not be as effective as one-on-one consultations in an offline context. In that sense, forcing ASMR into a similar category as therapy, medical assistance, or psychological help might do more damage than good. Affective triggers cannot cure or replace adequate professional help.

According to Smith and Snider (2019), the focus on the science behind ASMR as a therapeutic tool is a trick to distract from the sexual narrative. Despite attempts to attach pseudo-clinical terms to the phenomenon, the community cannot shake the prejudice that ASMR is more similar to porn than therapy. Not only do outsiders mistake the intimate and interpersonal

⁴⁸ Informal conversation, Stan, 06-04-2021

⁴⁹ Interview, Esther, 12-03-2021

⁵⁰ Interview, Esther, 12-03-2021

nature of ASMR for sexual, but also narratives within the community cannot explain their lived experience without drawing parallels with pornographic content (Gallagher 2019). Sarah told me that when she first discovered ASMR videos, she watched them almost every day. This daily habit changed once she noticed the rise of a more sexual narrative in the videos. According to her, the experience of ASMR is undeniably filled with sensuality and intimacy, yet Sarah also acknowledged and understood sexual interpretations of the experience. She explained, “I don’t see it as a sexual thing. I do see it as a sort of sensual experience. Sometimes similar to going to the sauna or the spa, getting taken care of, getting a massage. That kind of sensual stuff where your senses get stimulated”.⁵¹ There is a hazy boundary between sensuality and sexuality. As argued prior, affect has everything to do with “the senses and sensibilities and their relationship to the mind and to the body, aspects that are inseparable”; thus, it is impossible to disconnect the senses, affect, and sexuality because they all are correlated (Skoggard and Waterston 2015, 112). For most viewers and creators, ASMR simply does not produce that kind of arousal similar to porn (Poerio et al. 2018). Nevertheless, the videos at face value seem comparable to pornography: intimate, interpersonal, and sensual. Sarah felt disheartened that ASMR has parallels with pornographic content:

“[Sexual elements in ASMR] gave me conflicting feelings because, well, I am anonymous anyways, but I do watch porn, and that is something else. And then when I watch ASMR, and they add that sexuality, I feel awkward because I watch this more for that motherly feeling, you know. It’s also not pleasant when a masseur makes a sexual innuendo.”⁵²

Sarah expressed discomfort with sexualizing something perceived as innocent, nurturing, and motherly to her. Modes of sexualization in ASMR culture might be the problem that awakens contestation in the community. Attwood (2006) discusses contemporary culture as inherently preoccupied with sexualizations of values, identities, and practices, generating new forms of sexualities and breaking down previously dominant rules, meanings, and categories of how sex should be interpreted. In sexualized culture, to affect someone and be affected is continuously sexualized because of affection, intimacy, and emotion interplay with a hyperfocus on sexual discourse. Simon understood these overarching processes that affect ASMR culture but seemed mournful that something as “purely relaxing” as ASMR got dragged into these narratives:

“It went too much to the [sexualizing], all that nudity and that kind of stuff. I got a bit disgusted by it. At first, I really liked the videos [of a particular ASMRtist], but now I feel almost encumbered because of the underlying tone of sexual commentary that is

⁵¹ Interview, Sarah, 04-05-2021

⁵² Quote from interview, Sarah, 12-03-2021

made. And then I have something like, for me, that is not necessary, because it is not the reason I listen.”⁵³

When I asked Simon why he thinks ASMR videos are being both sexualized and sexualizing, he argued that he thinks it generated more views on videos. Sarah also thought that sexualizing affective experience intrigues people through someone roleplaying a sexy boy or girlfriend or licking a microphone. Simon admitted: “Sure, okay, when a girl looks nice in the thumbnail, yes, I click. But once the video starts playing, I close my eyes and focus on the sounds, not the video”.⁵⁴ In this respect, sexuality seems to play a role in the initial attraction to ASMR content but is separate from the affects that are transmitted through the triggers.

There is no denying that ASMR is driven by the power of affect: one affects or is affected through the performed triggers. Using a conceptualization of affect to understand ASMR means analyzing the phenomenon as relations practiced between people, where (inter)subjective experience based on memory, nostalgia, and intentionality is central (Richard and Rudnycky 2009; Andersen 2015). How affect is generated between individuals is hard to pinpoint. It is constructed from a biological desire to affect and be affected, but it also is learned through sociocultural influences how we construct affects between one another. Because we influence constructions of affect through the trajectories of social and cultural behaviorisms, we also have the opportunity to transform and contest how affects are shaped. The ASMR community strives to be perceived in a medicinal, therapeutic manner, yet millions of views have carried the legitimacy of the phenomenon more than any scientific claims yet to be made. Precisely in those outstanding numbers of views resides the issue of sexualizing ASMR, both from outsiders and insiders in the community. These contradictory narratives are further elaborated on in the following chapter.

⁵³ Quote from Interview, Simon, 05-03-2021

⁵⁴ Interview, Simon, 23-04-2021

Interlude: Embodying AnthroSMR

A month passed, and there was very little growth in my channel. By that time, I had finally come into contact with other ASMRtists via Instagram. I asked for feedback, hoping that they had enlightening insights that would help me further. After all, I wanted to use data from this experience. And at this point, there was practically no data to be collected. I met up with Ally and Esther via Zoom, and they were keen to share their knowledge to help my channel to the next phase. Through their teachings and by observing and practicing, I became better at the tasks that came with being an ASMRtist. Through their expertise and experience, I became some sort of apprentice, learning a skill (and learning about a skill) through experts by doing what they were doing. Although this thesis is hardly an apprenticeship-based ethnography, apprenticeship is almost always part of fieldwork in different intensities (Downey, Dalidowicz, and Mason 2015). Letting myself be guided by ASMRtists who had experience creating videos encouraged me to tweak my original plan of action. Two points of advice were key: (1) making the videos in Dutch instead of English, and (2) showing my face on camera instead of hiding out of frame. Switching to Dutch was an easy alteration, as I am a native Dutch speaker. The second piece of advice was harder to follow up on.

There were multiple reasons why I felt discouraged to give up a piece of my privacy and anonymity. For one, I felt that putting myself on display in YouTube videos would discredit my role as a researcher. Making YouTube videos did not feel scholarly to me. Where I first thought of myself as an imposter when I posed as an ASMRtist, later on in my fieldwork I felt like an imposter as an anthropologist. The need to legitimize myself as an ASMRtist and researcher at the same time did not go hand-in-hand in my mind; thus, I struggled to be both. Additionally, uploading videos of myself seemed the culmination of vulnerability to me. I questioned if I wanted to give that much of my private self to this research. The final push I needed to make this step came from ASMRtist Esther. She told me the following: “once you reveal your face, you will see that your viewing numbers will probably sky-rocket”.⁵⁵ Looking back, I needed to be vulnerable to get vulnerability back in return from the people who were watching because the first video with myself on display catapulted an enormous growth in my subscribers count. Rethinking vulnerability not as a precarious condition but as ‘the condition of being affected’ allowed my viewers to interact with me and be willing to subscribe (Butler 2016, 6). If I wanted to study affect properly, it required me to set my personal insecurities aside and be vulnerable. Thus, I sat down to film a video in Dutch and with myself as the center of the video.⁵⁶

Where I had 13 subscribers after one month of fieldwork, in May my subscriber count reached the baffling number of 458. People started interacting with my videos, liking them, and messaging me via Instagram. Interactions with subscribers varied from heart-warming messages such as ‘thank you for making me sleep’ and ‘your whispers are the best’ to less than pleasant

⁵⁵ Interview, Esther, 12-03-2021

⁵⁶ See [Nederlandse ASMR I Schoenen Collectie I Lo-Fi Tingles I Tapping and Scratching Leather Boots](#)

comments. I received comments containing sexual slurs, requests for fetishizing triggers, and once even an accusation of abusing my research to make money from my videos. These comments were what I was afraid of: it felt like an exploitation of my vulnerability. I intended to create ASMR to affect others, relax and soothe them, and hopefully put them to sleep, but these intimate affects were confused for sexualizing means to gain from the videos financially. Nevertheless, at the same time, these interactions precisely demonstrate the essence of my thesis. The following two chapters highlight the interplay between sexualization and commodification in the context of ASMR.

Sexualized Whispers

As Sarah implied, when one goes to a masseur, you do not expect sexual gratification, nor is it the intention to be sexually aroused. Drawing a parallel with these forms of care, relaxation, and non-sexual intimacy demonstrates how viewers and creators perceive the affective characteristics of ASMR in a non-sexual way. Despite those narratives, ASMR is intimate, sensual, and interpersonal, which are inherent components of sexual intimacy as well. The ASMR community widely contests the presumption that ASMR is sexually loaded, yet those who do not experience ASMR or can relax from the videos are not convinced (Andersen 2015). Additionally, an increasing sub-group of ASMR has been introducing intentionally erotic elements in ASMR. This development creates both tension and division between expressions of erotic and non-erotic ASMR. The third chapter continues to explore ASMR as an affective experience for both viewer and creator but also aims to extend on the contested comprehension that ASMR transfers forms of affective intimacies that are sexually gratifying and arousing (Poerio et al. 2015). The sexualization of ASMR culture seems to be deeply rooted in the “contemporary preoccupation with sexual values, practices, and identities” and “the emergence of new forms of sexual experience”, among other manifestations that indicate that sex is the main talking point of our era (Attwood 2006, 78-79). Built upon conversations with both in and outsiders of the ASMR community, this chapter portrays the conflicting perspectives on the nature of ASMR’s affective characteristics.

Reframing intimacy

According to Poerio et al. (2015), the notion that ASMR is sexual stems from the intimate and interpersonal character of the videos. Sarah stressed that this makes sense since ASMR is intimate, and sexuality is intimate. “I don’t see ASMR as something sexual. I do see it as something sensual”, she told me the second time we met up.⁵⁷ Similarly, Starr, Wang and Go (2020) argue that there should be a distinction between sexual and sensual ASMR, with most conventional ASMR falling into the latter category. Sensuality is easily confused with sexuality, as I argued earlier. Sensuality triggers all senses in a pleasurable way comparable to sexual triggers. In this respect, Sarah also pointed out that ASMR could be more than just sensual for people who want more out of the experience if only sexuality would be less of a taboo to people. In this conversation, we discussed the relationship between sex and ASMR and how it could be interesting to incorporate ASMR in sex work. Sarah said: “Imagine if you go to a sex worker, in a world where that is normalized, and you would say: hey, hi, I would like some ASMR too”.⁵⁸ In other words, Sarah suggested that we might be better off if we considered less static

⁵⁷ Interview, Sarah, 04-05-2021

⁵⁸ Interview, Sarah, 12-03-2021

boundaries between the sexual and non-sexual/sensual components of affective intimacies. In a similar vein, Constable (2009, 53) advocates for anthropology to “move beyond the frames and assumptions of heteronormativity that are inherent in much research on transnational intimacies”. In the following section of this chapter, I explore an alternative lens on intimacies to examine ASMR.

Initially, my analysis of ASMR was positioned in a heteronormative, privatized, two-bodied framework of intimacies. My personal experience with ASMR was inherently non-sexual, but I never assumed that others would experience it as sexually arousing. I embarrassingly have to admit that before my first interview with Simon, I was prejudiced that he might find it sexual, as he identifies as a hetero, cis male.⁵⁹ My judgment about his lived experience was entirely wrong. Simon stressed on multiple occasions that the sexual tone of some ASMR videos is not the reason he listens or watches ASMR.⁶⁰ This moment of reflexivity, combined with other conversations throughout my fieldwork, encouraged reevaluating the analytical framework on intimacy and sexuality in conjunction with new, technologically-mediated forms of affect such as ASMR.

According to Andersen (2015), the ASMR community reestablishes the boundaries that heteronormative culture has defined for intimacy. ASMR is a technology-mediated, distant, multiple-bodied, public form of intimacy. Contradicting, heteronormative intimacy is illustrated as private, in close proximity, often sexual, and between two people (Berlant and Warner 1998). While ASMR does not fit this description of intimacy, that does not indicate that ASMR is not a manifestation of intimacy. Considering the experience of intimacy solely within the narrow boundaries of heteronormative ideas of intimacy “limits both with whom one can be intimate and how a person can experience pleasure” (Andersen 2015, 691). In other words, a broader definition of intimacy is necessary to analyze ASMR inclusively. From an anthropological point of view, Constable (2009, 50) defines intimate relations between people as “social relationships that are - or give the impression of being - physically and/or emotionally close, personal, sexually intimate, private, caring, or loving”, which allows more space for subjective interpretation than any normative descriptions. It also considers the rise of technologically-mediated intimacies and how performed affects between people can mimic intimacies across time and distance. Cyber intimacies such as ASMR are particularly postmodern because they disrupt heteronormative traditions of sex and sensuality. Additionally, the mediation from technology shifts intimacies from the private to the public, joining body and machine for everyone to see (Attwood 2006). Andersen (2015) argues that because of the mediated connection, ASMR is a distant intimacy that transports intimate experience without the need for body-to-body contact. Andersen combined the term non-standard intimacy, from the work of Berlant and Warner (1998), with distant intimacy. Non-standard intimacies are every form of intimacy that does not fall into the category of heteronormative intimacy. Combined,

⁵⁹ Fieldnotes, conventional diary, 05-03-2021

⁶⁰ Interviews, Simon, 05-03-2021/23-04-2021

conceptualizing ASMR as a non-standard, distant, technology-mediated form of intimacy that mimics affects across time and space is suitable to analyze the phenomenon in this thesis.

Sexual contact is not inherent in non-standard intimacy. As made clear, the tingles that one feels while watching ASMR are not sexual, at least according to the ASMR community. However, this does not mean that the media form itself can not be sexual, or rather, sexualized. Esther formulated my point accurately by saying that “all that whispering and soft speaking and personal attention is so related to something similar to sexual tension, but giving into that stigma [by making S-ASMR] would only help it to be recognized as such”.⁶¹ Therefore, I suggest understanding ASMR’s intimacy in the context of sexualization and sexualized culture instead of conceptualizing the physiological tingles or ‘head orgasms’ as the sexual component of ASMR culture.

“Basically, the microphone is used as a metaphor for a penis”

At the end of March, I invited Resley and Jana over to my place. It was warm for the time of the year, so we settled in my garden. I was acquainted with both Resley and Jana, and ever since I mentioned my research was about ASMR, they voiced an intense hatred of the phenomenon to me. Especially Resley, who has never been shy to speak his mind, had some alternate perspectives on the matter that I wanted to include in this ethnography to portray a holistic picture of the subject. I decided that to provoke an immediate and genuine reaction from them, I would use video-elicitation. The first video, an ASMR video by Maria from Gentle Whispering ASMR,⁶² immediately initiated direct responses from Resley: “You cannot deny that this is sexual, right?”, he shrieked while pointing at his telephone screen.⁶³ Fest (2019) argues through an analysis of multiple ASMR videos that Maria portrays Freud’s perfect “Madonna-Whore” binary in her videos. She utilizes a simultaneously erotic and innocent mode of intimacy. In this scenario, Resley only saw the ‘whore’ in Maria, while I only have eyes for the ‘Madonna’ that she represents. When Resley called out his opinion on Maria’s video, I suddenly realized that we are outside, and my neighbors cannot see that we are not watching sexual content. Or are we?

Resley, Jana, and other participants who are not fond of ASMR that I spoke to have implied that ASMR represents sexual, almost pornographic content to them when they see it online.⁶⁴ They are not able to embody the tingles as a non-sexual sensation; thus, from an outsiders’ perspective, ASMR shows the same characteristics that sexual intimacies have: close to the camera, slow and sensual movements, whispering, and often a female in the lead (Andersen 2015). Resley pointed out what made the videos sexual to him. For example, the usage of a microphone and how the ASMRtist handled the presence of a microphone:

⁶¹ Interview, Esther, 12-03-2021

⁶² See  What is ASMR?

⁶³ Interview, Resley and Jana, 31-03-2021

⁶⁴ Fieldnotes, Video diary, 05-04-2021

“Basically, the microphone is used as a metaphor for a penis. She caresses it with her hands or with a brush. At least, that’s what I think she is trying to imply. [...] The whispering next to [the microphone] makes it really sexual.”⁶⁵

Aside from the apparent similarity in shape between microphone and penis, the whispering next to the microphone is what takes the intimate video into unfamiliar territory for Resley. Li (2011) describes whispering as a powerful sonic tool in domestic spheres. Whispers are produced in close proximity and predominantly are performed on intimate occasions in the private domain, such as between lovers or family. Through ASMR, whispers are taken into the public. The sound of a whisper bridges the distance between viewer and creator in a public manner (Andersen 2015). This shift can feel uncanny for those who do not yield the tingly benefits of public whispering, resulting in an erotic reading of the whisper. When I asked Simon and Sarah what they thought about Resley’s statement, they both looked at me in shock. “Maybe, if you do not get tingles, you think, what the hell is she doing with that microphone? But I can’t imagine thinking that it is a penis”, Simon chuckled.⁶⁶ The difference in responses between the viewers and non-viewers indicates an alternative perspective on the intimacies of ASMR.

Ally could not understand the metaphor that Resley sees, but she was aware of traditional ASMR triggers that are even on the sexual side to her. “Earlicking and other things, I get that it gives intense sounds in terms of ASMR, but it is also often expressed in a certain sexual way sometimes”, Ally explained, indicating that sounds made with the mouth can have sexual meaning.⁶⁷ Because sexual representations, products, and services have become more visible and accessible, and digital technologies can support those developments, sexual expression is more easily constructed and identified (Attwood 2006). As I poured another glass of chilled water for Jana and Resley to cool down from the heat, they started to watch one of the final videos. This video included the earlicking that Ally mentioned, which is notoriously a sexualized trigger in ASMR.⁶⁸

Jana:

“Ugh, ieh, oh no I cannot watch this. This is simply porn to me.”

Hannah:

“I have to say, this video is quite extreme. It was even deleted by YouTube when it was initially uploaded, this is a re-upload I think [by someone else].”

⁶⁵ Quote from interview, Resley and Jana, 31-03-2021

⁶⁶ Interview, Simon, 23-04-2021

⁶⁷ Interview, Ally, 09-04-2021

⁶⁸ See  [ASMR Ear Eating Ear Licking Sucking !!!](#) GwenGwiz

Resley:

“I must say. More than half of what we have seen does the same, in different variations and intensities: appeal to the male fantasy. That’s it. I cannot make anything else from that.”

Hannah:

“Can you elaborate on that? Because most of my viewers, for example, are female.”

Resley:

“That females also enjoy it. I guess they get something else from it. But the videos, and the monetization process behind it, is focused on [the male fantasy].”⁶⁹

Resley’s response demonstrated the heteronormative perspective he and Jana have on intimacies. In this regard, females are being sexualized and objectified as if their expressions of sensuality are in service of heterosexual relations, even in ASMR. Attwood (2006, 83) argues that in popular culture, sexual expressions of females are glossed over as “sexy encounters”, yet these meanings are merely disguising actual issues in gender inequality and sexism. Contesting Resley’s point of view, Sarah pointed out: “Okay, men want sex. But hello! Women also want sex! It’s just that ASMR is not the place to look for [sex]”.⁷⁰ Perhaps Resley’s perspective comes from the heteronormative models of intimacy in which women direct care toward men, but there also might be a viewer’s bias involved. Juxtaposing the standing points of ASMR viewers and non-viewers exposes alternative perspectives on what sexuality and intimacy entail in ASMR. The notion of non-standard intimacy caters to the viewer’s perspective, but does it to the non-viewer as well? Teresa, a non-viewer of ASMR I met on Instagram, illustrated the issue concisely during our coffee date:

“[M]aybe it’s a viewer bias on both sides. The one who doesn’t experience it sexualizes it to give it meaning, otherwise it makes no sense. And those who do experience it do not sexualize it, and thus do not necessarily understand the sexual tint. Yet it is also understandable that it is seen as sexual, because it is just intimate. Everything is sex these days.”⁷¹

“Sex sells”

Without fail, every person I have talked to stated that they were not surprised by the increased sexualization of ASMR in the past years. “Without an explanation, someone starts to softly whisper in your ear. Yes, that can be regarded as sexual. Especially if you are not familiar [with

⁶⁹ Interaction in interview, Resley and Jana, 31-03-2021

⁷⁰ Interview, Sarah, 12-03-2021

⁷¹ Quote from interview, Teresa, 05-04-2021

ASMR]”, said Kendra.⁷² Kendra reached out to me via Instagram after finding my YouTube channel and wanted to contribute to my research. She insisted that ASMR is being sexualized by outsiders but also implied that the ASMR community might also sexualize itself because “it is good for views, apparently it works”.⁷³ According to *Business Insider*, the ASMR community has accumulated millions of views, and businesses, YouTube, and ASMRtists are profiting from the popularity of ASMR content (Premack 2018). For one, the Internet has proven to be the ultimate marketplace for non-standard intimacies such as ASMR, since “the rules of the Internet are often sex and with that comes money. Whether that is in gaming or in ASMR, sex sells”, as Resley pointed out.⁷⁴ Next to that, the 21st century caters to changes in the construction of sexuality and intimacy. There has been a “shift from relational to a recreational model of sexual behaviour, a reconfiguration of erotic life in which the pursuit of sexual intimacy is not hindered but facilitated by its location in the marketplace” (Bernstein 2001, 397).

The dynamics between capitalism and sexuality in the ASMR community have raised many questions. As I have explored in the first chapter, YouTube strives to gain financially from the videos uploaded on the platform. Via the Partner Program, YouTube pays creators per view on videos. With views on ASMR videos rising through the roof, this revenue model is attractive for ASMRtists. Freyja has been watching ASMR for eight years and slowly observed a shift in the community from behind her phone:

“I think it kind of went from like people just making sounds in front of their camera like eight years ago or even more. [...] it was just a different kind of vibe back in the days. It was not so popular. [...] Yeah, so I think the sexualization comes with like when it gets more popular as well. So when more people find it, there will always be some kind of sexual element in it. Because more people see the opportunities I guess to, you know, make money because sex makes money. I think those videos have a lot of viewers.”⁷⁵

ASMRtists and viewers I spoke to argued that they had seen S-ASMR or ASMR with provoking, sexualizing elements gain views that run into the millions. While that does not mean that conventional ASMR is not watched often, Esther implied that these videos attract a large audience from within and outside the community.⁷⁶ With a larger pool of consumers, it is easier for ASMR to become a product. As a commodity, ASMR can become a profitable source of income for creators, and including sexual elements seems to boost these numbers even higher.

⁷² Written interview, Kendra, 22-04-2021

⁷³ Written interview, Kendra, 22-04-2021

⁷⁴ Interview, Resley, 07-04-2021

⁷⁵ Quote from interview, Freyja, 17-03-2021

⁷⁶ Interview, Esther, 12-03-2021

The contradictory interplay between ASMR, affect, and sexuality is two-folded. On the one hand, ASMR is being sexualized through dominant, heteronormative interpretations of intimacies, in which ASMR is oversimplified as a sexual occurrence. The ASMRtists I spoke to stressed that they do not want to be sexualized, nor do the viewers I met watch for sexual gratification. Blandly stating that ASMR is sexual, such as Waldron (2017), ignores the lived experience of community members. Alternatively, I have suggested continuing the analysis within a framework that includes ASMR's unconventional form of intimacy. Rethinking ASMR as what Berlant and Warner (1998) term a non-standard form of intimacy, embracing both sexual and non-sexual performances, sheds an alternative, more inclusive light on the affectiveness of the experience, allowing more space for various narratives within and outside the community.

At the same time, ASMR culture is positioned in the sexualizing climate of postmodernity, where everything can be interpreted in a sexualizing manner (Attwood 2006). The ASMR community continues to contest the notion that ASMR has even a grain of sexuality in its essence but simultaneously seems to utilize that misconception of ASMR to attract a larger audience and accumulate financial compensation. The revenue model of YouTube is built upon a simple ideology: more views equates to more money. As I mentioned before, the millions of views carry the legitimacy of the phenomenon more than scientific acknowledgment and therapeutic labels (Andersen 2015). If sex sells, then displaying sexuality in ASMR videos can attract views that boost the numbers of the ASMR community. These narratives reveal a vital dynamic in the negotiation of the monetary worth of ASMR. Exploring the figurative price the community pays to get paid is the central focus of the final chapter.

“As postmodern subjects, we are addressed as the consumers of our own sexual experiences; like browsers in a shopping mall we expect to be easily aroused and instantly gratified, and if we see what we like, we have it and worry about paying for it later.” (Attwood 2006, 88)

The Affect of Capitalism

Since the launch of YouTube's Partner Program in 2007, creators have been able to put a price tag on their videos: each view equates to a paycheck from the platform (Lange 2019). With this equation in mind, it must come to no one's surprise that the millions of views the ASMR community accumulates resulted in a transformation in the economics of digitally-mediated, affective labor. Brain Massumi (1995, 106) concludes in *The Autonomy of Affect* that the "ability of affect to produce an economic effect more swiftly and surely than economics itself means that affect is itself a real condition, an intrinsic variable of the late-capitalist system, as infrastructural as the factory". Affect is a driving force in economic shifts, but in this chapter, I also explore the possibilities to commodify affective experience into a product itself. Once you become aware of the power of affect, "it is easy to get caught up in the numbers".⁷⁷ Especially the knowledge that sexualizing elements can contribute to growing views creates slippery boundaries for ASMRtists. This chapter illustrates how the ASMR community negotiates the price tag of ASMR and how sex plays a part in the product of ASMR.

From a gift to a commodity

Before delving into narratives regarding ASMR as a commodity, I briefly examine an appropriate anthropological framework of commodification. The commodification of intimate relations, such as ASMR, "can be treated, understood, or thought of as if they have entered the market: are bought or sold; packaged and advertised; fetishized, commercialized, or objectified [...] echoing a global capitalist flow of goods" (Constable 2009, 50). According to Tsing (2013), the anthropological distinction between gift and commodity represents the process of making a capitalist commodity possible through the removal of non-capitalist social relations. In this binary, the gift stays connected to the maker, while a commodity is disengaged from where it came from. Rephrased, things need to be detached from those who create them outside capitalism to become exchangeable objects. In order to remove the social relations from possible capitalist assets, Tsing (2015) argues a disentanglement needs to occur between the object of exchange and their life-worlds, which she terms 'alienation'. This mode of alienation is not definite or all-consuming:

"Despite the power of capitalism, all capitalist commodities wander in and out of capitalist commodity status. This is because the discipline of labor and natural resources, which builds alienation and privatization into the commodity, is never fully successful. Capitalism always requires non-capitalist social relations to accomplish its goals." (Tsing 2013, 37)

⁷⁷ Interview, Esther, 12-03-2021

In the end, the creation of capitalist commodities depends on the floating absence or presence of alienation, which represents the contrast between gift and commodity. That said, affect in itself is a form of non-capitalist social relations, one that has value without the intervention of capitalist processes (Tsing 2015). As I mentioned before, the essence of affect is inherently challenging to pinpoint; thus, you can imagine how hard it is to objectify a concept that is so subjective. Nevertheless, capitalists have been able to increasingly commodify interpersonal relations for the past decades by alienating those who affect and are affected (Constable 2009).

The commodification of ASMR is overlooked by many since most people perceive digital experience to be positioned in a gift economy. Terranova (2000, 36) stresses we should regard the digital economy as “an important area of experimentation with value and free cultural/affective labor” but acknowledge that the digital economy’s gift element is driven by the reproduction of labor in the context of late capitalism. In other words, despite the idea that the Internet is based in a gift economy, it cannot fully separate itself from late capitalism as a whole. In the context of ASMR, before the community became mainstream, the value of free labor was taxed not to gain financial rewards but to exchange pleasure and relaxation (Terranova 2000). However, as audiences expand, tasks become more time-consuming, and videos professionalize, it gets more difficult for ASMRtists not to alienate their users by monetizing previously free affective labor (Jaramillo 2018).

Paradoxically, the rise of ASMR content was supposedly a solution to anxieties, stress, and depression fueled by capitalist processes (Fest 2019). Viewers I spoke with click on ASMR videos to escape daily struggles, not increase them. But affect does not only belong to the subjectivities of human relations; it also plays a crucial role within the transformation of economic processes (Richard and Rudnycky (2009). In other words, affect drives economic change as much as social relations. Richard and Rudnycky (2009, 63) note that in economies of affect, the affective exchange is “by no means inherently alienating”, as showcasing affect is simultaneously perceived as “an antidote to estrangement” rather than the aspect that alienates between people. The reason affect is depicted as the solution, rather than the problem, illuminates its status as a gift, both at the beginning and end of the exchange. Affective exchange loses that formation somewhere in the middle when alienation and privatization are introduced and settled into the commodity through brief advertisements, a donation link, or the promotion of a paid subscription on another platform that does allow explicit sexual content (Tsing 2013). In those moments, the viewer becomes estranged as “[advertising and sponsoring] detracts a bit from what they say in the videos”, but not long enough for them to click away from the affective and sensory pleasures that ASMR videos offer.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Written interview, Ariane, 12-04-2021

“He has spent a great deal of money on me”

Many community members showed concern about the increased appropriation of ASMR as a vehicle of consumer capitalism, where corporations utilize the subjective sensory preferences of the consumer in their marketing practices (Howes 2005). On the one hand, viewers acknowledge ASMRtists should get paid for their services. “Those people also need to make money off of the time they put into creating their videos. They deserve the money!”⁷⁹ As ASMR gets a larger audience and demand for higher production value and quality videos increases, Jaramillo (2018) argues it is unpreventable for ASMRtists not to desire financial compensation. Viewers seem to understand that ASMRtists cannot afford to invest in quality and quantity regarding their videos without making a living. On the other hand, important to note here is that viewers solely accept advertisement and sponsor deals in exchange for an appropriate, ASMR-style form of commercialization. Ellenoor, a viewer of my own channel, told me that she is okay with ASMRtists using their ASMR videos as tools to seek financial compensation as long as it does not conflict with the quality of the videos. “ASMR is free and if ASMRtists can get by or can earn something through sponsor deals I encourage that. Viewing those videos [with advertising] still gives really pleasant sounds. As long as it does not get in the way of [the sounds], I don’t mind advertisement”, Ellenoor stressed, implying that ASMRtists need to incorporate appropriate ASMR-like triggers into their monetization strategies to keep their audience satisfied.⁸⁰

ASMRtists and their viewers constantly (re)negotiate the terms of their exchanges, also when it comes to monetization in conjunction with ASMR. Ally and I had been chatting for a solid hour when she asked: “I’m noticing that my concentration is slipping away, do you mind if I smoke a cigarette?”⁸¹ She then reached for something past what I could see on the screen, presumingly to find her hit of nicotine. I looked at the time. It was past six P.M on a Friday, far later than I thought it would be. I hoped she did not mind that it was so late, and said: “yes, of course you can smoke”, hoping I could talk to her a bit longer. Before her request, I had just asked Ally which viewers she felt most connected with. She told me that she used to feel an obligation to respond to every viewer that left a comment or sent her a direct message via Instagram. But since her subscriber count has grown to over 11,000 people, Ally does not feel that same responsibility:

“The thing is, I cannot have conversations with everybody. And to be honest, which sounds dickish, but I don’t really feel like it either. You see, they know me very well, but I don’t know them. It is really a one-sided contact.”⁸²

⁷⁹ Written interview, Felicia, 10-04-2021

⁸⁰ Interview, Ellenoor, 07-05-2021

⁸¹ Interview, Ally, 09-04-2021

⁸² Quote from interview, Ally, 09-04-2021

I assured her that her statement does not sound that dickish to me; after all, she is doing her viewers a favor. This one-sided contact portrays the nature of the relationship between viewer and creator as one of gift exchange. In this interaction, the value of affect resides outside the commodity market. Rather than property of the viewer, the creator merely gives video content without losing a fundamental connection to the affect they give (Jaramillo 2018). Additionally, Ally does not expect anything in return from her subscribers. Her stance changes when the basis of the contact between her and the viewer shifts. Ally told me that she has closer contact with a few viewers who are frequent buyers of her custom video service. During my fieldwork, I noticed that offering personalized trigger videos as a product is a common form of monetization in the ASMR community, especially (but not exclusively) among Dutch-language creators.⁸³ A viewer can ask a creator for a custom video with preferred triggers in exchange for a standardized financial compensation. Since viewers can watch content on YouTube free of charge, buying a custom video from an ASMRtist is a popular way to support an ASMRtist financially.⁸⁴ The past year, Ally got numerous orders from the same person for custom videos. At one point, he bought her personalized trigger videos as frequently as once every two weeks. This person is not the only one who orders personalized video, but he is by far her most popular customer. “He has spent a great deal of money on me, but that is why I don’t mind keeping contact via email”, Ally explained to me.⁸⁵ She specifically told me that this is an exception for her:

“Normally I would not sustain contact with someone, but well, he pays 50 euros for a video [...] It is part of my income, you know, but because he also has been asking for videos for over a year, I feel more of a connection toward him.”⁸⁶

In this scenario, the gifted communications between Ally and her buyer are merely tools to keep the relationship alive. It is a business relationship where social relations without the interference of capitalism strengthen commodities. The supply chain of the ASMR video becomes an interesting road to follow. A closer look lays bare the trajectories that affective experience as both gift and commodity runs through. It starts as a gift from the creator to the public. Everyone can access Ally’s public ASMR content, which she posts on her public channel. The labor that ASMRtists do in this stage of the chain has many gift-like qualities. Like Esther said, “I see it as a hobby”; she makes videos because she likes to help people through ASMR.⁸⁷ There is no workplace alienation here, as Tsing (2013) calls it, so how does the gift become a commodity?

ASMRtists offer a piece of themselves once they start to sell the ASMR video as a product, instead of presenting it as a gift to the public. “The custom videos are great because they

⁸³ Fieldnotes, Video diary, 15-04-2021

⁸⁴ Interview, Esther, 12-03-2021

⁸⁵ Interview, Ally, 09-04-2021

⁸⁶ Quote from interview, Ally, 09-04-2021

⁸⁷ Interview, Esther, 12-03-2021

tune into a specific trigger for that individual person”, Esther explained.⁸⁸ This makes a personalized video constrained to a specific trigger the buyer has paid for. The ASMRtist has to give up free expression and creativity to fulfill the expectations of the customer. Tsing (2013) stresses that in order to alienate, the object needs to be translated into something private. A custom video, but also paywalls and subscription-based videos, take ASMR out of its original public sphere into the private. At the same time, the creator hands in a piece of privacy during this process. A part of the ASMRtists’ private self becomes estranged through the customer’s expectations, which results in the commodification of affect (Hochschild 1983). Ally mentioned that she does try to protect her personal boundaries, but that is not always easy:

“I don’t do often in videos like, ‘everything is going to be okay’ and ‘I am happy you are here’. I talk as if it is public, I talk to all my viewers and not one specific person. Because otherwise it feels too personal. But in custom videos, when someone pays so much and requests so often, I do it. Only that person gets the link [of the video]. [...] That is just for him, because I think he is lonely.”⁸⁹

The option to buy a private, personalized video of your favorite ASMRtists opens the door for content inappropriate for the general public. As discussed in the first chapter, YouTube polices pornographic or sexualizing content or comments through their algorithm. This algorithm is far from perfectly effective in removing any sexual material; creators carefully situate themselves in the grey area between pornographic and innocence (Strangelove 2010). Nonetheless, for inappropriate or explicitly sexual content, ASMRtists have utilized other digital spaces, such as Patreon and OnlyFans.⁹⁰ In an anthropological analysis of *Second Life*, Nardi (2009) discusses that the online virtual world solved the rise of inappropriate content by making users pay for private spaces to access this type of interaction. This policy kept pornographic content inaccessible for the general public and allowed a price tag on the content. Similarly, the ASMR community uses, for example, Patreon and OnlyFans to guide viewers to private spaces containing exclusive and/or erotic content protected from the public eye by a paywall. Simon argued that viewers who like an ASMRtist gladly pay to become more personal with the creator, which mainly stems from adoration rather than a desire for sexual gratification.⁹² In that respect, the Internet has made it possible for individuals to commodify new forms of intimacy without public observation (Constable 2009).

Both Ally and Esther have been transparent about their views on incorporating sexual elements in custom ASMR videos: sexual content is where they draw the line. That does not mean that they have not received any requests or have not observed an increasing trend in this. In

⁸⁸ Interview, Esther, 12-03-2021

⁸⁹ Quote from interview, Ally, 09-04-2021

⁹⁰ Patreon and OnlyFans are membership platforms that facilitate tools for creators to manage their content within subscription services. While both platforms do not solely accommodate sex work, they are commonly associated with pornographic content.

⁹¹ Fieldnotes, Video diary, 12-04-2021

⁹² Interview, Simon, 12-03-2021

fact, they argue that they think it ruins ASMR, but “those videos [do] have a lot of views because of it and those people make a lot of money”.⁹³ Nevertheless, there is an awareness that their body is objectified both in fragmentations and as a whole. Historically, according to Sharp (2000), the female body, in particular, has been subjected to commodification because it is reduced to reproductive quality and prized as erotic and exploitable. Ally told me that she had requests to do custom videos in which she had to show her breasts for an increasing amount of money than she usually asked. She politely declined:

“If I wear a shirt or something and you see a bit of cleavage, then that is my own choice and it is not with the intent like: oh look at me, you know, click on my videos, so I do not think about [it having to do with getting more views]. But it can occur [that I wear a shirt with cleavage] in a video and that someone thinks something else about that decision.”⁹⁴

In that respect, ASMRtists do not just alienate themselves by giving a piece of their private self, but they are also estranged and objectified by their audience as if they are sexual commodities for sale at the right price (Attwood 2006).

“Follow the money...”

Concluding this chapter, I demonstrate how the sexualization of ASMR interplays with the commodification of ASMR by the hand of an altercation I had with a viewer of my ASMR videos. It was seven in the morning when I arrived at my part-time job as a security guard. I grabbed a cup of machine-produced cappuccino, walked into the poorly lit security office, and turned on my laptop. I immediately went to the YouTube studio page of my channel and started to check my comments. On this particular morning, I saw that someone had left an unusually long comment:

“Very lame if you delete comments in which I showed with links last week how much asmr youtubers earn with these videos. So we can conclude that this research is fake... Because this asmr is made by the makers for money... Nothing wrong with that. But if you claim to do an investigation... Follow the money... Nothing anthropological about it! Follow the money.”⁹⁵

It took me a minute to process the comment. I almost spit out my coffee out of shock. At this point, I had become accustomed to the occasional spam comments, fetish-focused requests, and sexualizing slurs that were left underneath my videos. Usually, as I discussed prior, YouTube’s algorithm deletes comments left on my channel that have the intent to be hateful, sexist, racist, or

⁹³ Interview, Esther, 12-03-2021

⁹⁴ Quote from interview, Ally, 09-04-2021

⁹⁵ Comment on *AnthroSMR*, Innox GTX, 29-04-2021

fetishizing.⁹⁶ However, the comment by Innox GTX (hereinafter Innox) did not use any inappropriate language. I also did not delete any previous comments by this user, contrary to what Innox implied. Reflecting on this altercation, this comment attacked my ethics as a researcher, which felt more personal than calling me a “fucking hot bitch” or other slanderous statements. That is why I decided to engage with the viewer.⁹⁷ Unexpectedly, the discussion that followed from this comment helped in the shaping of my thesis argument. Our conversation continued as follows:

Innox:

“I think that as soon as you mention amounts on earnings, YouTube filters out for viewers to ASMR.”

AnthroSMR:

“I then wonder, why would YouTube do that?”

Innox:

“I don’t have any answers.. I think a lot of listeners of ASMR are shocked when they realize that the ASMR makers make so much money with it. Even though everyone can know this if you see how many views there are. You can assume that every million views earns 2,000 euros anyway. And if you personally make additional advertising in the video, this goes to 4,000 euros per million views.”

AnthroSMR:

“And how do you feel that so much is being earned from the videos you watch as a viewer?”⁹⁸

The answer I received from Innox came in a lengthy comment, which since its initial posting has been deleted by YouTube. Assumingly, the comment was deleted because it included the words ‘sex’ and ‘sexual’ in it. The comment implied that while Innox wants to support ASMRtists, they have an issue with making someone rich. This is the reason why the viewer prefers smaller ASMR channels with fewer views. According to Innox, the problem of monetization within the ASMR community lies in the appropriation of sexuality in ASMR videos. The occurrence of OnlyFans specifically was a catalyst of the increasing commodification of ASMR. Viewers are lured to alternative platforms, away from the public, to get exclusive and explicit content in exchange for more money. Innox stressed that even though platforms such as OnlyFans contain some non-sexual content, the introduction of alternative platforms that offer the possibility to

⁹⁶ Fieldnotes, Conventional diary, 12-04-2021

⁹⁷ Comment on *AnthroSMR*, Gekke Geert, 11-04-2021

⁹⁸ Interaction on *AnthroSMR*, Innox GTX, 29-04-2021

monetize ASMR into the ASMR community has been the superlative of commodifying ASMR through using sexual elements to lure viewers into buying content.⁹⁹

Simon argued along a somewhat similar line that ASMRtists know that their “adoring subscribers” will follow them to alternative platforms to see their content.¹⁰⁰ Partly because they get explicit content, partly because they want to support their favorite ASMRtists and get personal with them. Important to note is that explicit sex is not always intertwined with the commodification of ASMR. Fest (2019) points out that ASMRtists also commodify through videos that carefully unwrap, unbox or consume products. In those videos, they utilize ASMR triggers to “duplicate and intensify consumption’s happy affects, monetizing new items that have technically been “consumed” already” (Fest 2019, 6). Nevertheless, even in those videos, commodities are merely extensions of the ASMRtists’ bodies. They tap on the commodities with their fingers and pretend to use them on the viewer’s face. For instance, Esther and Ally frequently collaborated with a certain fashion brand. In exchange for free clothes and a sponsorship, Ally told me she would display the clothing on her body in ASMR-style. These forms of commodification are not consciously sexual, nor does Ally intend to use her body to attract viewers. “I show my clothes, and yes, you see a bit of body [...] It is not made with that intention [to be sexualized]”, Ally explained, referring to past sexualizing comments about her body underneath her videos.¹⁰¹

Regardless of whether the intent is to be sexual, the usage of the body to commodify ASMR or products used in ASMR videos yields conflicting feelings for Innox and other viewers and creators. They want to support (other) ASMRtists; Innox thinks that they provide a valuable service, but they do not want to make them rich. Therefore, Innox expressed the deliberate choice to watch ASMRtists with lesser views, presumingly because they do not make much money from YouTube’s revenue model. This demonstrates an urge to solely consume from ASMRtists that have “pure intentions to make someone relax”, feeling estranged from creators who want to profit off of ASMR and use sexuality to do so.¹⁰²

My conversation with Innox portrays the discourse regarding sexualization and commodification that the ASMR community contributes to. The therapeutic purpose of ASMR can be seen as the antidote against the struggles of our late-capitalist condition, or at least this is a narrative that the ASMR community eagerly wants to spread. Within the community, this narrative is the lived experience of many: the videos have helped millions release stress, soothing anxiety, and finding much-desired sleep and rest. Richard and Rudnyckyj (2009, 63) rightfully note that affect itself is not alienating. However, when affective experience estranges those who make it, any intimacy

⁹⁹ Fieldnotes, Conventional diary, 29-04-2021

¹⁰⁰ Interview, Simon, 05-03-2021

¹⁰¹ Interview, Ally, 09-04-2021

¹⁰² Interview, Ellenoor, 07-05-2021

can be objectified and commodified. Alienation only proceeds once the affect is ripped out of the context of subjective lived experience regarding ASMR and put into an economic frame (Tsing 2015). ASMR is a non-standard intimacy because it is performed in the public sphere, yet building privatization into ASMR through custom videos and alternative platforms such as OnlyFans makes it a private matter again. In that respect, Innox seemingly feels estranged from ASMR when the ASMRtists take their work to private settings to profit off their viewers financially.

‘Regardless of whether culture is broadly aware of ASMR’s existence, it is certainly on the rise, and for those who partake, it is a definitive marker of twenty-first century living’ (Manon 2018, 243-244)

Conclusion

The emergence of ASMR has opened up relevant discourse within digital culture: the formation of communities in online settings, the changing components of (affective) labor in late capitalism, sexualized readings of affective expression, and the commodification of affect, the body, and experience through digital infrastructures are all integral issues of the present day that cannot be ignored (Gallagher 2019). This thesis explored a variety of these issues through the lens of the ASMR community. The purpose of this thesis was not merely to explore ASMR as a physiological and individual sensation but rather to offer an anthropological lens on the ASMR community as a cultural and shared phenomenon. Rendering ASMR as merely physical and/or psychological condition falls short on presenting the sociocultural context of the phenomenon, which is deeply rooted in gendered forms of affective labor and care, and the valuation of affect, bodily capacities, and the accompanied lived experiences (Gallagher 2019).

This thesis aimed to answer the question: *How does the ASMR community contribute to the commodification and sexualization of affect on the social media platform YouTube?* I imagine ASMR in a vicious circle, fueled by sexualized (Internet) culture, the force behind capitalist processes, and a desire to escape those processes without fully stepping away. A deficit in affective exchange lures people into the ASMR community, which is truly a place where members find relaxation, soothing, and sleep. Throughout my fieldwork, I continuously discovered the beauty of ASMR through the lived experiences of viewers and creators. This thesis has its roots in anthropology, thus cannot conclude on any physiological or neurobiological basis. However, through my collected ethnographic data, I can argue that ASMR has, to some extent, healing powers. The comments on my channel that display gratitude for a simple video that puts them at ease reflect these lived experiences.

Nevertheless, those experiences take place within a digital space that wants to make money. As much as YouTube wants to facilitate communities, hosting and protecting those communities is not the sole reason for YouTube's existence. Burgess and Green (2008) have rightfully noted that YouTube needs to implement a harsh, automated form of censorship to make the community suitable for the general public but, perhaps more importantly, advertisers. ASMRtists want to benefit from the commercialization of ASMR, but making ASMR appropriate for businesses and corporations is not a linear process. Due to its intimate and interpersonal character, ASMR is often clocked as sexual or pornographic (Poerio et al. 2018). The ASMR community begs the difference, as most creators and viewers do not experience ASMR as sexually arousing, but this did not stop YouTube and other corporations from misidentifying ASMR as such by demonetizing and censoring the content (Starr, Wang, and Go 2020). At the same time, the ASMR community also contributes to that sexualization. An increasing number of creators have been implementing sexualizing elements in their videos, consciously or unconsciously. Participants I spoke to argue that ASMRtists do this because 'sex

sells”. A sexually provocative thumbnail or a blouse that shows a little bit more skin is enough to incorporate sex in the innocent tingles of ASMR.

This thesis had no intention to critique the sexualization of ASMR as an affective experience. Questioning the intimate nature of ASMR’s affective characteristics is hardly a useful strategy to determine whether ASMR causes orgasms in other bodily places than the brain. The interpretation of whether ASMR is sexually intimate or not depends entirely on the various subjective narratives within and outside of the community that are constructed by the subject’s memory and intentionality (Leys 2011). In the end, affect is continuously shaped and reshaped in various settings, with an interplay between emotion, feeling, and affective components, making it impossible and useless to conceptualize affect as static and predetermined. In that respect, affective experience can be sexual and non-sexual depending on the subject and their experiences. Understanding ASMR as a non-standard form of intimacy opens up the road for other researchers to analyze ASMR beyond the sexualizing stigma (Berlant and Warner 1998).

Rather, I argue that ASMR culture is positioned in a climate that sexualizes everything (Attwood 2006). Therefore, this thesis aims to unveil the utilization of sexualization as a (sometimes unconscious) tool to alienate ASMR’s affects into capitalist commodities. Sexual intimacies and capitalist tendencies seem to collide once the ASMRtists have estranged the private self into the privatized setting where a gift becomes a commodity (Hochschild 1983; Tsing 2013). Alienation in ASMR does exclusively occur through explicitly sexual elements, but it does often seem to happen when boundaries between creator and viewer are loosened. Fest (2019, 2) suggests that if ASMR can provide the care we need in our late-capitalist condition, then “it can [only] do so thanks to platforms, structures, and styles economic interests already overdetermine[d]”. Through those economic trajectories, modes of privatization and alienation are built into ASMR by ASMRtists and viewers, even though ASMR is seemingly far away from those trajectories. Evidently, ASMRtists want to make money from their services because they offer custom videos and take sponsorship deals. The ability to employ and perform sexualizing behaviors in ASMR becomes both a source of alienation for affective laborers and consumers and a resource of exploitation for financial benefits. In that regard, the ASMRtist is as much a victim of the system as it is a contributor and a profiter.

Where once ASMR was the antidote to capitalist tendencies, now the community interplays with those very aspects it was supposedly far away from. ASMR is simultaneously supplied and commodified by the community, cultivating strategies to both make available and monetize new forms of affective labor. Imagining the ASMR community outside of capitalism is therefore impossible; it is born from that system. Ultimately, the landscape of the Internet, sex, and capitalism is everchanging, and thus, ASMR culture will also constantly remain in movement throughout fluctuating processes of commodification and sexualization.

On a final note, this ethnographic thesis explored the ASMR community as a whole, with a specific focus on the Dutch community. The particular lens on the Netherlands in conjunction with ASMR limits a global conclusion on the subject. Although ASMR is a global phenomenon as an online community, geographic variations must also be considered. Other research has contributed to other geographic regions in conjunction with ASMR, such as China (Starr, Wang, and Go 2020). An anthropological point of view could compare geographic regions, which was not the purpose of this thesis but would be a significant contribution to the field. The force behind affect appears to be situated on a blurry boundary between culture and biology, which gives reason to assume that ASMR balances the border between universalism and relativism and thus has both global and local manifestations (Sedgwick 2003).

This thesis would have a completely different outcome if I were not a female in my twenties. Several participants stressed that viewers would have responded differently to me if I was a man doing ASMR. As stated before, ASMR is a gendered form of labor, and females predominately perform in ASMR videos (Andersen 2015). My scope did not entail researching how ASMR is constructed and transformed through a gendered labor force. Specific focus on ASMR as a gendered form of work or performing ASMR as someone who does not identify as female could fill these blind spots.

Bibliography

- Andersen, Joceline. 2015. "Now You've Got the Shiveries: Affect, Intimacy, and the ASMR Whisper Community." *Television & New Media* 16, no. 8: 683-700.
- Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Attwood, Feona. 2006. "Sexed Up: Theorizing the Sexualization of Culture." *Sexualities* 8, no. 5: 77-94.
- Barratt, Emma L., and Nick J. Davis. 2015. "Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR): a flow-like mental state." *PeerJ* 3: 1-17.
- Berlant, Lauren, and Michael Warner. 1998. "Sex in Public." *Critical Inquiry* 24: 547-566.
- Bernard, H. Russell. 2005. *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. Fourth Edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bernstein, Elizabeth. 2001. "The Meaning of the Purchase: Desire, Demand and the Commerce of Sex." *Ethnography* 2, no. 3: 389-420.
- Bjelic, Tasha. 2016. "Digital Care." *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 26, no. 1: 101-104.
- Blue, Violet. 2018. "Why PayPal's Crackdown on ASMR Creators Should Worry You." *Engadget*, September 14, 2018.
<https://www.engadget.com/2018/09/14/paypal-ban-asmr-sound-art-therapy/>
- Boellstorff, Tom. 2008. *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*. Princeton Press University.
- Bonini, Tiziano, and Alessandro Gandini. 2019. "'First Week is Editorial, Second Week is Algorithmic': Platform Gatekeepers and the Platformization of Music Curation." *Social Media + Society* 5, no. 4: 1-11.
- Butler, Judith. 2016. "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance." In *Vulnerability in Resistance*, edited by Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay, 12-27. Duke University Press.
- Burgess, Jean, and Joshua Green. 2018. *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*. John Wiley & Sons.

- Constable, Nicole. 2009. "The Commodification of Intimacy: ." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 38: 49-64.
- DeWalt, Kathleen, and Billie R. DeWalt. 2011. *Participant Observation: A Guide for Fieldworkers*. Second Edition. Plymouth: AltaMira Press.
- Downey, Greg, Monica Dalidowicz, and Paul H. Mason. 2015. "Apprenticeship as Method: Embodied Learning in Ethnographic Practice." *Qualitative Research* 15, no. 2: 183-200.
- Dyke, Sarah. 2013. "Utilising a Blended Ethnography Approach to Explore the Online and Offline Lives of Pro-Ana Community Members." *Ethnography and Education* 8, no. 2: 146-161.
- Ebo, Bosah. 1998. "Internet or Outernet?" In *Cyberghetto or Cybertopia? Race, Class, and Gender on the Internet*, edited by Bosah Ebo, 1-12. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Ellis, Carolyn, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner. 2011. "Autoethnography: An Overview." *Historical Social Research* 36, no. 4: 273-290.
- Fest, Rachael. 2019. "'ASMR' Media and the Attention Economy's Crisis of Care." *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no. 59: 1-12.
- Gallagher, Rob. 2019. "'ASMR' Autobiographies and the (life-) writing of digital subjectivity." *Convergence* 25, no. 2: 260-277.
- Harvey, David. 2005. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hine, Christine. 2015. *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied and Everyday*. Taylor & Francis Group.
- Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 1983. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Howes, David. 2005. "Hyperaesthesia, or The Sensual Logic of Late Capitalism." In *Empire of the Senses*, edited by David Howes, 281-303. Oxford: Berg.
- Ingold, Tim. 2000. *The Perception of the Environment: Essays of Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*. Routledge.
- Jaramillo, Laura. 2018. "ASMR: Auratic Encounters and Women's Affective Labor." *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* no. 58: 1.
- Keilis, Jamie Lauren. 2019. "How A.S.M.R Became a Sensation." *New York Times*, April 4, 2019.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/04/magazine/how-asmr-videos-became-a-sensation-youtube.html>

- Lange, Patricia G. 2019. *Thanks for Watching: An Anthropological Study of Video Sharing On YouTube*. University Press of Colorado.
- Leys, Ruth. 2011. "The Turn to Affect: A Critique." *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 3: 434-472.
- Li, Xingyu. 2011. "Whispering: The Murmur of Power in a Lo-Fi World." *Media Culture & Society* 33, no. 1: 19-34.
- Lutz, Catherine, and Geoffrey M. White. 1986. "The Anthropology of Emotions." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 15: 406-436.
- Lysloff, Rene T.A. 2003. "Musical Community on the Internet: An Online Ethnography." *Cultural Anthropology* 18, no. 2: 233-263.
- Manon, Hugh S. 2018. "ASMR Mania, Trigger-Chasing and the Anxiety of Digital Repletion." In *Lacan and the Nonhuman*, edited by Gautam Basu Thakur and Jonathan Michael Dickstein, 227-248. Cham: Springer.
- Markham, Annette N. 2005. "The Methods, Politics, and Ethics of Representation in Online Ethnography." In *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, edited by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 247-283. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Massumi, Brian. 1995. "The Autonomy of Affect." *Cultural Critique* 31: 83-109.
- Massumi, Brian. 2002. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Duke University Press.
- McGranahan, Carole. 2019. "A Presidential Archive of Lies: Racism, Twitter and a History of the Present." *International Journal of Communication* 13: 3164-3182.
- Nardi, Bonnie. 2009. *My Life As A Night Elf Priest: An Anthropological Account of World of Warcraft*.
- Ortner, Sherry B. 2005. "Subjectivity and Cultural Critique." *Anthropological Theory* 5, no. 1: 31-52.
- O'Reilly, Karen. 2012. *Ethnographic Methods*. Second Edition. New York: Routledge.
- Page, Sam. 2017. "Whisper Porn, ASMR and 'Head Orgasms', Explained." *Men's Health*, April 18, 2017.
<https://www.menshealth.com/trending-news/g19545743/whispering-porn-asmr-head-orgasms/>
- Pink, Sarah. 2015. *Doing Sensory Ethnography*. Second Edition. Sage Publications.

- Poerio, Giulia Lara, Emma Blakey, Thomas J. Hostler, and Theresa Veltri. 2018. "More than a feeling: Autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR) is characterized by reliable changes in affect and physiology." *PLoS one* 13, no. 6: 1-18.
- Premack, Rachel. 2018. "There's a Massive Internet Community That's Obsessed with Videos of 'Brain-tingling' Sounds, and the People Who Make Them Earn Thousands of Dollars a Month." *Business Insider*, July 6, 2018.
<https://www.businessinsider.nl/asmr-make-money-on-youtube-2018-5/>
- Richard, Analiese, and Daromir Rudnyckij. 2009. "Economies of Affect." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15, no. 1: 57-77.
- Richard, Craig. 2014. "Origin Theory of ASMR." *ASMR University*, August 16, 2014.
<https://asmruniversity.com/origin-theory-of-asmr/>
- Santoro, Ninetta. 2014. "Using a Multiple Perspectives Framework: A Methodological Approach to Analyse Complex and Contradictory Interview Data." *Ethnography and Education* 9, no. 2: 127-139.
- Seaver, Nick. 2017. "Algorithms as Culture: Some Tactics For the Ethnography of Algorithmic Systems." *Big Data & Society* 4, no. 2: 1-12.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 2003. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performance*. Duke University Press.
- Seigworth, Gregory J., and Melissa Gregg. 2010. "An Inventory of Shimmers." In *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Gregory J. Seigworth, Melissa Gregg and Sara Ahmed, 1-25. Duke University Press.
- Sharp, Lesley A. The Commodification of the Body and its Parts. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 29: 287-328.
- Skoggard, Ian, and Alisse Waterston. 2015. "Introduction: Toward an Anthropology of Affect and Evocative Ethnography." *Anthropology of Consciousness* 26, no. 2: 109-120.
- Smith, Naomi, and Anne-Marie Snider. 2019. "ASMR, Affect and digitally-mediated intimacy." *Emotion, Space and Society* 30: 41-48.
- Strangelove, Michael. 2010. *Watching YouTube: Extraordinary Videos by Ordinary People*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Starr, Rebecca Lurie, Tianxiao Wang, and Christian Go. 2020. "Sexuality vs. Sensuality: The Multimodal Construction of Affective Stance in Chinese ASMR performances." *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 24, no. 4: 492-513.

- Terranova, Tiziana. 2000. "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy." *Social Text* 18, no. 2: 33-58.
- Tsing, Anna. 2013. "Sorting Out Commodities: How Capitalist Value is Made Through Gifts." *HUA: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3, no. 1: 21-43.
- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. 2015. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton University Press.
- Waldron, Emma Leigh. 2017. "'It Feels So Real': Sense and Sexuality in ASMR Videos." *First Monday* 22, no. 1: 1.
- Ward, Alex. 2020. "The Comforts of ASMR in the Coronavirus Pandemic." *Vox*, May 19, 2020. <http://vox.com/2020/5/19/21258977/coronavirus-asmr-anxiety-tingting-trigger-tingles>
- Wilson, Samuel M., and Leighton C. Peterson. 2002. "The Anthropology of Online Communities." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31: 449-467.