

The ASMR community challenging society's misconception on ASMR videos

ABSTRACT

For years now, there has been a growing interest towards ASMR, a new phenomenon which has emerged from web 2.0 and which has formed a large online community. ASMR is the acronym for Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response and was a term coined in 2010 by Jennifer Allen. Popular on YouTube, there are different kinds of audio-visual videos with millions of views created by various ASMR artists (also referred to as ASMRtists) and designed mainly for relaxation as well as other purposes. From the very beginning and up till now, there is a controversial debate going on around ASMR videos because people outside the ASMR community who watch and do not understand the purposes of these videos usually base themselves on the society's stereotypical image on ASMR and immediately assume that the content is sexual and related to a kind of sexual fetish which the ASMR community denied. Therefore, this paper will argue that the ASMR community is challenging society's misconception on ASMR videos because some ASMR videos provide a 'digital spa' experience instead of a sexual experience and are shared online by the ASMR community through various web 2.0 tools to show their real purpose thus breaking down the sexual stereotypes. Moreover, some ASMR videos are designed to improve the mental health of some people among the ASMR community rather than being a sexual stimulus and are at the same time contributing in building up a strong and supportive community. Finally, rather than stimulating sexual arousal, ASMR role-play videos bring back the viewer's first ASMR experience from his childhood which encourage him to fully embrace his identity as a member of the ASMR community.

KEYWORDS: Web 2.0, ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response), ASMR Community, ASMRtists, YouTube, Tingles, Sexual Stereotypes.

Introduction

Most people spending quite a lot of time on the Internet and on the various social platforms must have heard of the popular term ASMR. ASMR is a relatively new pop culture phenomenon which owes its success mainly from YouTube which was “central to the creation of the ASMR community” (Smith & Snider, 2019, p. 42) and from the various YouTube channels created by ASMR artists also referred to as ASMRtists. ASMR stands for Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response and is a term invented by Jennifer Allen in 2010. Looking forward at the ASMR community which is also known as the ‘tingle community’ or ‘whisper community’, there has been significant changes since its first introduction as this community is one of the many communities which has grown up with web 2.0 at a very spectacular speed. The main characteristic of ASMR videos is that the viewers usually “experience tingling sensations in the crown of the head, in response to a range of audio-visual triggers such as whispering, tapping and hand movements” (Poerio et al., 2018, p. 1) and with a large number of followers and subscribers on every social platforms, these videos are becoming more and more popular. Some people among the society still remain confused and cannot understand the reason why others watch these kind of videos (Kovacevich & Huron, 2019, p. 39) and when they browse about it on the Internet, they tend to misinterpret the content and immediately come to the conclusion that there are some sexual connotations as most of the ASMR creators are attractive women whispering closely to a microphone. As Starr et al. (2020) stated, “this popularity has brought challenges, as the nature and boundaries of ASMR performance are increasingly contested” (p. 3). Therefore, this paper will argue that the ASMR community is challenging society’s misconception on ASMR videos because some ASMR videos provide a ‘digital spa’ experience instead of a sexual experience and are shared online by the ASMR community through various web 2.0 tools to show their real purpose thus breaking down the sexual stereotypes. Moreover, some ASMR videos are designed to improve the mental health of some people among the ASMR community rather than being a sexual stimulus and are at the same time contributing in building up a strong and supportive community. Finally, rather than stimulating sexual arousal, ASMR role-play videos bring back the viewer’s first ASMR experience from his childhood which encourage him to fully embrace his identity as a member of the ASMR community.

‘Digital spa’ experience and use of web 2.0 tools

With all the facilities provided by web 2.0, some ASMRtists are producing audio-video content to create a ‘digital spa’ on YouTube, with the main purpose of providing the same state of relaxation as the few ASMR physical spa treatments rather than a sexual desire and by sharing these content on other social media platforms, the ASMR community is showing the real aspect of these videos thus breaking down the stereotypes. The ASMR community that is both the ASMRtists and the viewers have beneficiated from all the technological innovations since the emergence of web 2.0 and nowadays, ASMRtists are dedicated in producing high quality videos and sounds with professional video cameras and sophisticated microphones. Therefore, through the high-quality content being created, the main aim of the artist is to transport the viewers into the same trance-like state of relaxation obtained at ASMR physical spa treatments but this time the viewers do not have to leave the comfort of their home. As Garro (2017) stated, “in an age of smartphones and mobile listening, ASMR has brought viewers back to their house, searching for listening pods” as now they need “just the interaction mediated through an Internet platform with charismatic individuals who perform a variety of noise” (pp. 398-400). Moreover, the viewers also experience the sensation of hearing sounds close to their ears that stimulate a ‘tingling’ sensation which is not sexual at all as “these ‘tingles’ are typically accompanied by positive emotions as well as this feeling of deep relaxation” (Smith et al., 2017, p. 361). On YouTube, a large number of ASMR videos designed to provide this ‘digital spa’ experience can be found and most of them start with the frame focusing closely on the face of the artists who are mostly women. Looking straight at the camera and with a soft voice, they usually explain that they will be providing to the viewers this tingling sensation also known as ‘brain tingles’ or ‘brain orgasm’, in order for them to experience the pleasant feeling of deep relaxation at home. For the majority of people, this scenario and the terms used can be misunderstood as they are “misleadingly evocative of sexual or taboo activity” (Richard, 2016, as cited in Gallagher, 2019, p. 269) which then encourage people outside the tingle community to think that these types of videos are “like product of the world’s strangest fetish even if they’re not even remotely sexual” (Fagan ,2012, as cited in Gallagher, 2019, p. 269). Therefore, to prove that these types of ASMR videos differ completely from the stereotypical image the society has, the ASMR community is using the power of social media platforms to create an infrastructure on which they are working

together to show the true aspect of the ASMR universe. It is in fact the terms used by the ASMR community which involuntarily enhance the sexual stereotypes around these audio-visual content and bring confusion in the mind of all those who are not initiated in the community but as Lochte et al. (2018) claimed, the reason why “ASMR is often referred to as ‘brain orgasm’ and ‘brain tingle’ is because of the reported sensation of deep relaxation and pleasant tingling sensation in the head” (p. 302). In a way, by constantly sharing this type of content on the various social platforms, the community is actually challenging the popular discourse on these videos as they are showing to those having a distorted image on these videos that there is nothing sexual at all. For example, ASMRtists like Gibi who actually has 2.58 million of subscribers on YouTube, are fighting for their community in order to change the society’s misconception on ASMR videos. Gibi wants people outside the community to realize that ASMR is an “art, not a weird sexual fetish” (Wilson, 2018, para.4). This example shows that ASMRtists are trying to use their influence as well as their popularity to voice out for their community and to encourage all of them to empower themselves and fight against the sexual stereotypes. Another ASMRtist, Olivia Kisser, even claimed that “most people don’t think of a massage as sexual but if you make it that way then it is” (Mervosh, 2018), meaning that the debate around ASMR being sexual or not is based only on the society’s stereotypes and assumptions. Therefore, this becomes a motivation for both artists and viewers to educate the ‘outsiders’ (Smith & Snider, 2019, p. 42) and to establish the truth by sharing their experiences on the various social platforms thus bringing the interest in ASMR videos to another level. The ASMR community is using the various web 2.0 tools provided to create a ‘digital spa’ and to demonstrate that ASMR content do not trigger any sexual desire at all even if the terms used can be misinterpreted.

Mental health and community building

People suffering from mental illness among the ASMR community find a digital healing technique through specific ASMR videos and also have the opportunity of building up a strong and supportive community online. ASMR videos have long been stereotyped and referred to as sexual content but a large number of people among the community suffering from a psychological distress have publicly claimed and praised specific ASMR videos as a therapeutic tool providing a therapeutic response which help them to cope with their mental illness. As Del

Campo and Kehle (2016) stated, “the response is associated with several facets of happiness including positive emotions, relaxation, serenity and attenuation of symptoms of anxiety, stress, chronic pain and depression- in brief, an increase in happiness” (p. 100). Some ASMRtists like Maria of GentleWhispering which is considered as one of the three most popular ASMR content creator even reported that “they began producing videos after perceiving their own psychological benefits from viewing the videos of other producers” (Beck, 2013, as cited in Del Campo & Kehle, 2016, p. 100). Rather than seeing a professional therapist, some people among the whisper community prefer to have a digital therapy through ASMR videos and to benefit from the distant intimacy created between them and the creators. The aspect of digital intimacy which is formed is building up a connection without the need of being in contact physically and as Garro (2017) stated, “the therapeutic dimension of ASMR empowers both artists who adopt the healer role without specific medical and religious training and viewers who have a considerable level of control over the choice of healing content, the timing and the context where the amelioration takes place” (p. 400). As part of the digital therapy, the artist usually gives the feeling of being close with the viewer by actually touching the screen and by whispering closely to the microphone but the fact that they are creating an intimacy between the viewer does not mean that there is any kind of sexual connotations. As Kraft et al. (2017) stated, psychology and technology are merging together (p. 180) and studies demonstrated that the videos are viewed for the therapeutic benefits and “sexual arousal is not a reliable outcome...” (Poerio et al., 2018, p. 14). Aside from the potential therapeutic effect, there is also the aspect of social connectedness which is formed among the community. Through the comment section of every therapeutic ASMR videos, people have the opportunity to connect and relate to other ASMR viewers all around the world who are facing the same situation as them. As Lyford (2019) stated, “we don’t necessarily need to be together to feel together” (p. 12) and this is what the ASMR community is demonstrating. By replying other people’s comment and vice-versa, there is a network which is being formed and this is also showing that “publishing individual activities is the first step toward a potential coordination with others...making personal expression public gives the opportunity to organize collective activities” (Aguiton & Cardon, 2007, p. 55). Therefore, the ASMR viewers are building up an understanding and supportive community only by giving an additional support to each other through the comment section.

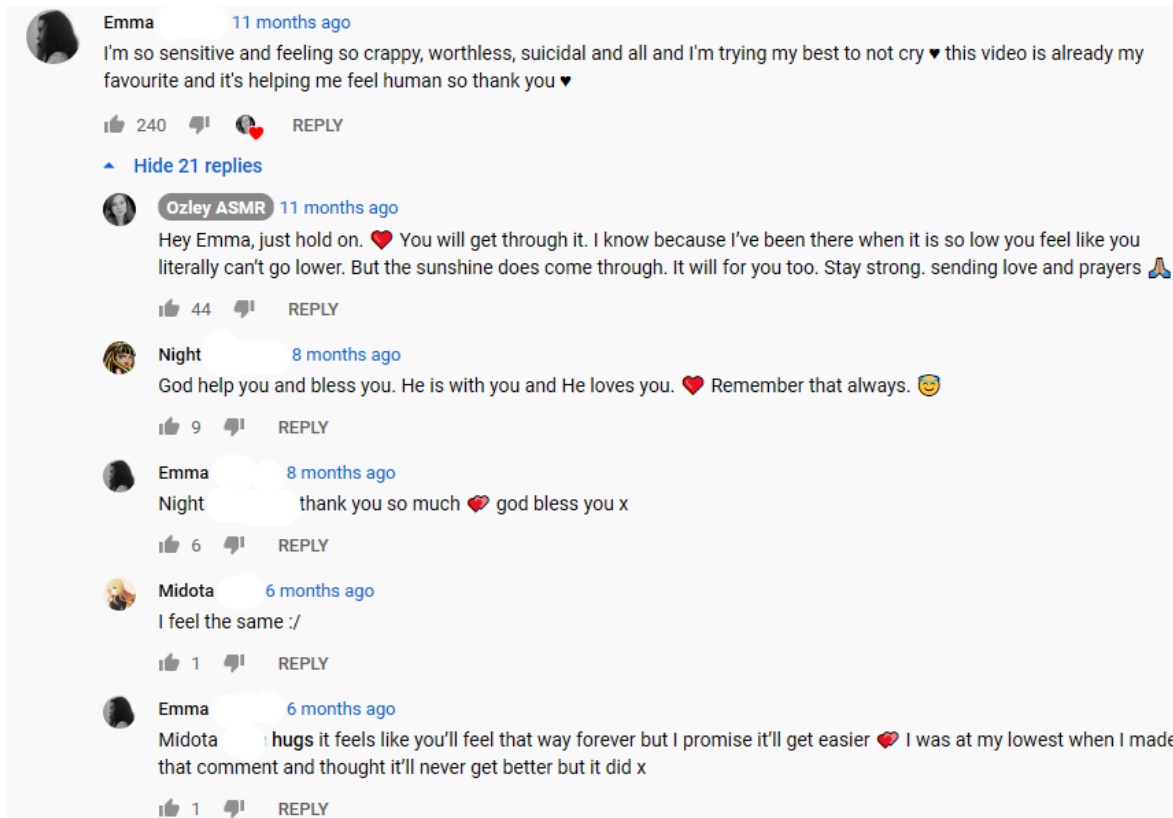


Figure 1

Screenshot of comments from a YouTube Video, by Ozley ASMR, 2019

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h0Xp66bFN6U>).

Figure one is an example which reflect the aspect of networking and how the viewers as well as the ASMRtist are building up a strong and supportive community even if the person is a stranger for them and it also shows how the support of others actually helps. People among the ASMR community suffering from any mental illness not only beneficiate from a digital therapy from the ASMRtists by are also having the opportunity of connecting with others who are in the same situation as them thus building a strong and supportive community.

Childhood memories, importance of community and identity

Rather than stimulating sexual arousal, ASMR role-play videos bring back the viewer's first ASMR experience from his childhood which encourage him to fully embrace his identity as a member of the ASMR community. To understand the effect of role-play videos on the viewers, people outside the ASMR community must dispel the stereotypical image that they have in mind because the fact that it is mostly women who produce these types of videos does not mean that they are designed to stimulate sexual arousal. On YouTube, role-play videos are considered as the most popular and most viewed videos among the ASMR community as ASMRtists engage themselves in the production of different kind of role-play scenarios where they act as if they are "giving the viewer a hair-cut, a makeover, a facial skin care treatment or an ear or eye examination" (Starr et al., 2020, p. 5). Through the various scenarios produced, there is the aspect of virtual caring which is depicted and which encourage the viewer to keep watching over and over again and as Barratt and Davis (2015) stated, during role-play scenarios, the artist considers the viewer as a participant and not as a spectator so there is this kind of close proximity which is being formed while being taken care virtually (p. 2). It is this aspect of virtual caring which is wrongly perceived in society as people assume that the scenarios contain sexual connotations but as many viewers claimed, this only brings back their first ASMR experience as the sounds created as well as the feeling derived from these ASMR role-play videos relate closely to a real-life situation in their childhood. As Ahuja (2013) stated, "those who claim awareness of ASMR usually describe a sensory pattern that has persisted since childhood" (p. 444). Not everyone understands and has experienced ASMR since their childhood and it is difficult and embarrassing for an ASMR viewer to share his experiences with people around him and to fully embrace his identity as a member of the ASMR community. Moreover, these experiences are at the same time strange and unique that it is hard to describe it to others especially if they still have a misconception on ASMR videos in general. There is always the fear of being considered as deviant and as Becker (1963) claimed, "one can describe anything that differs from what is most common as a deviation" (p. 4). Therefore, there is this willingness for the viewers to find people who shared the same experiences as them and it is only among the ASMR community that they are able to find this sense of community and that they are encouraged to fully embrace their identity as one of them without the fear of being judge.

As Kendall (2011) stated, “communities do not exist without some sense of community identity among participants” (p. 318) and for an ASMR viewer, being part of the ASMR community is a way for them to accept with confidence who they are without the fear of being considered as an outsider when they share their experiences. As Maria of Gentlewhispering with millions of views on her role-play videos said in an interview, “...now people are embracing it and seeing the potential” (Dang, 2016). ASMR role play videos aside from the stereotypical image the society has on them, are in fact helping ASMR viewers to embrace fully their identity as a member of the ASMR community.

Conclusion

Since the emergence of web 2.0, there has been significant changes in the way communities are formed and this can be seen through the ASMR community. Without web 2.0, the ASMR community would not have been able to evolve and become today’s huge online community that everyone is aware of. Not many studies have been conducted on the ASMR phenomenon but from the research done, one can understand that the biggest debate around the universe of ASMR is the society’s perception on ASMR videos and its community. People tend to misinterpret ASMR content and immediately assume that they contain sexual connotations and are a kind of sexual fetish. Therefore, this paper has been defending the point of view that the society has a misconception on ASMR videos because these videos have different purposes and are helping the ASMR community to embrace and empower themselves thus becoming a strong and supportive community which challenge the stereotypes and show the different aspects of ASMR by using the various web 2.0 tools available nowadays.

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