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Gendered Patterns in Popular ASMR Roleplay

by

Jason Wayne Begg

An Honors Capstone

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Dedication:

This work is dedicated to my project director Dr. Christina Steidl as well as her colleagues in the sociology department, Dr. Jennifer Sims and Dr. Robert Thomson. All of these excellently served as my professors for the past two academic years and in varying ways contributed to this paper either in helping me develop its earliest conceptions, refining it into a greater end product, or simply contributing to my growth as an academic writer and person. Thank you.

Abstract

Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR), as a physiological phenomenon and emerging art form has been more and more studied, with some research relating to gender expression and sexuality. There remains a gap for how ASMR is contextualized in its most popular and revealing settings. I conducted an ethnographic content analysis of twenty of the most viewed ASMR roleplay videos on YouTube over the past year. In not limiting my analysis to women's participation in ASMR and focusing on those videos most popular, I found that while women creators replicated feminine scripts of care catering to an audience made up mostly of straight women, men utilized heterosexual signaling to the same audience.

Introduction

Autonomous sensory meridian response, or ASMR, most easily described as a tingly sensation, is a rather newly discovered physical phenomenon that began to garner greater interest in the scientific and medical communities around 2016 with discussions centered around the sensation's explanatory pseudoscience common to those who experience it. Somewhat mockingly of this, a writer for *New Scientist* even used the colloquialism “brain orgasm” to elicit attention to the up-and-coming research on the topic (Oxenham 2016). It was not long however before medical researchers began attempting to isolate ASMR from other phenomena and in 2018 a team led by Dr. Giulia Poerio conclusively established ASMR as distinct from other kinds of aesthetic chills such as frisson (the shivers or chills induced through music), though the experience of tingles in the head and spine are similar (Poerio et al. 2018). While ASMR has similarities with synesthesia and some overlap has been demonstrated between the two, no such link has been found significant at this time (Barratt & Davis 2015; Fredborg et al. 2017). The experience of auditory triggers leading to a physical sensation has led some to describe it as an auditory-haptic experience—in other words, ASMR is a distant means of feeling physically touched (Hudelson 2013).

ASMR, the physical phenomenon, has been the subject of a genre of video and auditory art emerging on YouTube of the exact same name: ASMR, produced by ASMRtists. Their videos are intended to invoke the sensation of ASMR and while diverse, typically feature pleasing sounds or “triggers” designed to cause relaxation and usually sleep. The nature of ASMR as an apparent feeling of being touched by the ASMRtist however brings certain contentions to the discourse surrounding the topic, as it raises the question of who audiences want to feel touched by (Hudelson 2013). To this end, women's predominating role in ASMR as ASMRtists is widely presumed (Andersen 2015; Brand 2015; Hudelson 2020; Iossifidis 2016).

Women ASMRtists have repeatedly been examined specifically in the context of roleplay through analysis of structural and symbolic feminine expression (Andersen 2015; Iossifidis 2016; Waldron 2017). Despite this, the question of why it is that women are so widespread as ASMRtists remains somewhat open. If expression lies at the core of ASMR roleplay as these studies contend though, a better understanding of how gender plays out in ASMR will likely come from observation of behavioral patterns as they emerge between ASMRtists of differing gender presentations.

Observing these patterns is basic; in this research I intend to conduct an ethnographic content analysis of the most popular ASMR roleplays over the past year, and code behaviors by the gender of ASMRtists to learn more about ASMR and the purpose it serves to viewers. As an emerging art form, investigation into the relationships between gender and ASMR will be crucial as ASMR continues to gain in popularity, especially among young audiences that are highly present on platforms such as YouTube. The depictions of gender seen in our media have real consequences (Galdi et al. 2014) and in ASMR's case are often viewed when imminently sleeping, a process likely to be crucial to memory consolidation (Peigneux et al. 2001).

Investigating the patterns present in popular ASMR roleplay will allow me to examine the extent that popular videos affirm prior examinations of ASMR. From that basis I can help to establish a foundation for future research into ASMR's relationship with gender.

Literature Review

One of the major questions frequently raised in previous studies of women ASMRtists is what the relationship is between ASMR and sexuality (Anderson 2015; Waldron 2017). While ASMR does exhibit a degree of neurological arousal, it also exhibits simultaneous feelings of relaxation and so there is currently a lack of any medical evidence to substantiate ASMR as a physically sexual experience (Poerio et al. 2018). Additionally, most ASMR listeners disagree with the assessment of ASMR as sexual (Barratt & Davis 2015). However, authors Andersen and Waldron by conducting case studies into women ASMRtists have produced salient arguments that while ASMR may not present itself as an overtly sexual experience, physical proximity and a necessary naturalness preferred by most listeners of ASMR reflect an emotional similarity to romantic intimacy (Barratt et al. 2017; Anderson 2015). As such, it stands to reason according to some researchers that ASMR creators and viewers do form a sort of sexual relation (Waldron 2017). This would be in line with previous theory underlying touch's relation to sexual connection (Dunbar 2010). Andersen especially argues that the focus on actions like touching or whispering, and an occasional exclusive feature of lips and hands constitutes ASMR as a form of distant intimacy or eroticism, and that its form as nonnormative or depersonalized causes those involved to rationalize such intimacy as part of achieving a medically validated experience (Andersen 2015; Berlant & Warner 1998; Hudelson 2013).

If there is a potential for ASMR to be a form of distant intimacy or eroticism, then who viewers of ASMR associate or desire intimacy with may have a huge impact upon representation, behavior, and popularity between ASMRtists. ASMR roleplay videos demonstrate certain clues to how a reflection of viewer desires may manifest themselves onto ASMRtists, such as how settings rarely include rugged outside locations, or feature manual

labor, instead favoring clinical or domestic locations, both realms where heteronormative scripts of femininity are fully expected (Andersen 2015). It therefore seems that the ways in which this spatially distant form of intimacy is transgressive to standard sexual norms are mitigated by a reliance upon those very norms for a reduction of “weirdness” and greater success within a model dependent on views for profit (Andersen 2015). Despite this, examples of playing around with gender norms rather than strict adherence to them are evident in several case studies (Iossifidis 2016; Waldron 2017) suggesting that there is an audience for transgression. Without further study into audiences’ experiences however, it is hard to know if this does not conversely reify heteronormative gender roles to audiences. Regardless, patterns such as the aforementioned frequency of domestic settings in videos indicate that ASMR roleplay, as a whole, trends away from many masculinized tropes such as construction or gun-related content.

Aside from the ways in which ASMR is experienced and viewers’ resulting preferences, it may also be significant to note ways in which absolute representation among the viewers of ASMR shapes how ASMR’s popularity ought to be considered from the perspective of a researcher. Research utilizing the Big Five Personality Inventory, a personality inventory based around five broad factors, found that female samples more often had higher concentrations of personality traits associated with reliable and more intense ASMR experiences (Fredborg et al. 2017; Weisberg et al. 2011). It is no wonder then that studies mention the commonality of samples being predominantly made up of women when pulling from those who claim to experience ASMR (Poerio et al. 2018). If it is the case that women experience ASMR more frequently and strongly on average, this shapes our perspective on who is represented as the viewer when we think of the most popular ASMR.

Hypotheses

Given the likelihood that the majority of viewers of the most popular ASMR roleplay is made up of women, and likely straight women, and the fact that we know from prior research that feminine ASMRtists' roleplay liberally uses feminized scripts of care to downplay sexuality (Waldron 2017), it is likely the case that ASMR made by masculine ASMRtists either continues the trend of avoiding sexuality or alters course by welcoming it. The former possibility may be likely as it may bolster a sense of narrative consistency in avoiding sexual "weirdness" across all videos (Andersen 2015). The latter possibility although wholly different has potential because for the many viewing straight women, the homoeroticism present in feminine ASMRtists' videos is removed, allowing intimacy to be enjoyed without one of the major sources of "weirdness" (Andersen 2015; Waldron 2017). In either case, a great deal of new information will be revealed about the audience preferences of popular ASMR roleplay, as feminine and masculine ASMRtists likely have significant audience crossover due to the close proximity of their content.

Methodology

As established, the goal of my research is to document and connect patterns of gendered behavior among ASMRtists of differing gender expressions in popular ASMR roleplay. Roleplay was chosen as structural choices concerning role, setting, and delivery can allow for a deeper analysis of intent behind a video's creation than in another ASMR videos (Andersen 2015). Additionally, roleplay ASMR is likely to all fall within the category I have termed personified ASMR, that being ASMR containing the voice or physical presence of the video's creator within the video. I am more specifically targeting personified ASMR as videos not featuring a human or predominantly featuring a different human from the creator will likely not reflect a consistent image of popularity of specific practices.

In order to locate the source for my data, I created a new google account on a new installation of the Brave browser so as to minimize any possible impacts of google search algorithms. I did this twice over the course of two consecutive days: April 13 and 14, 2022. Each day I navigated to YouTube, signed into the new account, and searched "ASMR roleplay". I filtered my results within the past year and sorted them by those with the most views. I limited my results to the past year so as to only reflect preferences within a contemporary time frame, as gendered behaviors and expectations on the part of viewers are liable to change over time. I sorted my results by the most viewed to most accurately reflect those videos that received the greatest traffic in an effort minimize the influence of YouTube or its algorithms in guiding my discoveries. While sorting by most relevant is the default way viewers discover ASMR content, sorting by views actually accounts for this by depicting what videos viewers ultimately saw, regardless of sorting option when searching.

In total I viewed twenty videos as a portion of the total thirty-eight highest viewed videos in the English language. When deciding which of the highest viewed videos to watch, I elected to only view one video per channel, choosing the video with the highest views to collect data for, with three exceptions. Two exceptions were in instances where the highest viewed video of the channel was a “rapid/aggressive” ASMR video. I exclude them not as a selection on gender patterns, but rather as cases unrepresentative of the remainder of the data, both from the same artists and for the others. This group of ASMR content is widely acknowledged to be niche among viewers in comments sections and contains a more rapid progression that limits the roleplay an ASMRtist might engage in over the course of the video. There was one other exception to this rule; one video contained two ASMRtists in approximately equal portion that were both present in the top viewed ASMR videos. Therefore, I simply excluded both of their next most viewed videos. I collected data over the course of two days, evenly viewing and recording data from ten videos each.

Data Collection

For each viewed video, I recorded ethnographic jottings using Microsoft Word while viewing the video, and then, after viewing, recorded notes for each in the form of thick description, writing down each visual detail and action. This simultaneously performed the two functions necessary for my research which can be broken down into two steps.

Firstly, my task was ascribing and categorizing the gender of ASMRtists that I viewed. To this end the first categories I created were those of feminine and masculine to describe ASMRtists. For each video, I corroborated my own perception of an ASMRtist’s gender expression (based on presentation of features such as hair length and makeup) with the pronoun usage and gendered language of commenters, so as to diminish the effect of my own biases and

more accurately correlate my codes to the perceptions of viewers. During this process, I used standardized abbreviations to refer to ASMRtists such as “fem” and “masc” and avoided connotatively different words such as “boy” or “girl”. This was done to minimize the loss of information as I read it repeatedly and to minimize personal biases that may affect the remainder of my data collection process and following analysis. The lengthened terms, “feminine” and “masculine”, would serve as my independent variables that I would contrast to uncover more about the relationship between viewer demand and ASMRtist performance. It is worth noting that, within my end sample, there were no ASMRtists of an androgynous expression or referred to pronouns besides he/him and she/her. While I cannot draw conclusions regarding non-binary or androgynous ASMRtists’ content, its noticeable absence itself demands further research.

Second, I created smaller categories that parsed the distinctive characteristics and types of videos. This would be crucial for comparing otherwise similar content between the gender categories to observe differences in behavior. There were several categories, including distinctions relating to gender expression in titles, sexualized and romantic content, and specific roles and settings like healthcare. Once individual lines and important details were thoroughly coded, I was ready for analysis.

Ethical research demands consideration of the sources of data even in instances of publicly available data. As discussed in the theoretical background of this research, ASMR may be considered a form of distant intimacy and viewed as transgressive of typical ideas of intimacy (Andersen 2015). Some ASMRtists made sexual or romantic content that might subject them to online abuse or harassment if their content were detailed in a directly implicatory way. Specific data points will be shown as exemplary of my findings but will be presented in a way so as to not implicate any singular video or ASMRtist.

Results

Describing the Data

A basic concern with my data is the runtime and length of videos. Across all twenty videos there was a runtime of over ten hours of viewing time, and when averaged the result was roughly thirty-two minutes each. The lowest row indicates the average video length for each gender of ASMRtists.

Table 1: Video Length Breakdown

Corresponding Statistic	Gender of ASMRtist	
	Feminine	Masculine
Minimum	12:34	12:49
Maximum	1:09:21	52:11
Average Runtime	~33:54	~27:33

To be clear about my discoveries, the demographics of the data must be visible. To this end one can see in Table 2 a breakdown of subcodes by ASMRtist gender. Understanding this chart requires the definition of a few terms. Non-Visual ASMR featured only the voice of the ASMRtist, with a still image in all cases here. Deep roleplay is a novel term of my own making in this context; I use it to indicate videos of significant length, high cinematic and acting qualities, and a dedication to building a setting tuned to the roleplay. Notably I distinguished this category as entirely exclusive from non-visual ASMR, and any ASMR that primarily utilized a green screen. Sexual ASMR was that determined to specifically reference sexual acts, feature suggestive titles and language, and at minimum the simulation of profuse kissing. Romantic ASMR may overlap with sexual ASMR but may also contain a small quantity of kissing not

definitive of the video as a whole. Healthcare ASMR are ASMR videos characterized mostly or primarily by a healthcare giver roleplay. Power dynamics denotes videos I coded as possessing a power differential between the presenter and the viewer or other characters. This was not exclusive to sexual or romantic videos, but notably did not apply to healthcare. Healthcare ASMR could also be considered to be a kind of power dynamics ASMR, however, its absolute prevalence combined with a unique position further explored in the discussion have led me to categorize it separately. Makeup/grooming ASMR contains one or both of those activities as reoccurring elements throughout the video.

Table 2: Breakdown of Code Demographics

Video Subcode	Gender of ASMRtist Open Code	
	Feminine	Masculine
Non-Visual	1	3
Deep Roleplay	1	2
Sexual	1	3
Romantic	1	2
Healthcare	4	1
Power Dynamics	2	5
Makeup/Grooming	5	0

Structural Features in ASMR Roleplay

When speaking of the structural features of videos, I mean the factors of the videos' presentations that are unspoken cues created to produce certain effect. For instance, when speaking of masculine ASMRtists, three possessed titles or channel names that identified their

role as specifically a masculine, male, or boy figure to the viewer. These videos were non-visual, sexualized, and possessing power dynamics; it is expressly a sexual context that their masculinity is being presented to the viewer. These videos however are not the only ones that present their content as male. The singular healthcare roleplay performed by a male is explicitly titled a “...Male Roleplay”, something made particularly stark when contrasted with the implicit assumption by many that doctors are male until proven otherwise (Ofri 2012). Despite this explicit framing as male, this is the only masculine video that isn’t coded as containing power dynamics, but even in this instance it is a doctor engaging in an exam on you, the viewer. Power dynamics are otherwise present in the majority of masculine ASMRtists’ videos. Among these videos, one man is presented as an agent interrogating you in the presence of a firearm and using shocks, another is a magically inclined capitalist employing two silent women, yet another is titled “pinning you down” in a bathtub. The only exceptions to this dominant masculine ASMRtist figure in the most popular videos are a neutral doctor roleplay, and a submissive boy sexual roleplay. Cinematic devices are likewise used to great effect. For instance, in all visual masculine roleplays, the camera keeps a fair distance from the presenter at all times. His figure is visible and is not obscured using depth of field or any other blurring technique. Unanimously the masculine role players did not whisper, but instead chose to talk quietly, with few exceptions.

The stylistic decisions in the structural makeup of masculine ASMRtists’ roleplays differ strongly from those of feminine ASMRtists. Speaking of cinematic presentation, the camera is much closer to the presenters’ faces in feminine coded ASMR videos. Further the feminine ASMRtists almost unanimously whispered in their videos complimenting the small degree of space between the viewer’s perspective and the presenter’s face. Compared to masculine ASMRtists, feminine ASMRtists used depth of field to great effect, to blur the backgrounds

surrounding their faces or hands. When hands were emphasized, often their fingernails were long and painted. The closer, tighter cinematic experience produced in feminine coded ASMR videos coincided with a much larger degree of facial touching, grooming and makeup care of the viewer, largely absent from masculine videos entirely. Conversely, where active touching of the audience is less common or pronounced in masculine videos, power dynamics and sexualized ASMR are comparatively few, with only one video suggesting receiving a hand job from your stepsister, this being the only sexual video done by a feminine ASMRtist in the sample. The only examples of power dynamics are a romantic, non-visual ASMR where you are trapped by a “yandere” girl who is obsessed with you to the point of imprisoning you, and a deep roleplay with a servant helping you don a dress. Rather than so often depicting the viewer in the submissive role as in the masculine videos, of the only two feminine ASMRtists engaging with power dynamics, the viewer’s position differs. On a surface level, a similarity held between the feminine and masculine ASMR videos is the acknowledgement of one’s gender in the title. A number of feminine ASMR videos featured gendered language such as “the girl at the back of class”, but in instances such as these, it is not connected explicitly to the presenter’s sexuality or in stark contrast to the rest of the title. Instead, it’s simply a statement about the character, rather than “girl ASMR” or contrasted with the sexual feminine ASMR video where “stepsister” is explicitly linked to the sexualized context. Feminine ASMRtists often featured profuse compliments, smiling, eye contact, and generally positive affect towards the viewer.

In consideration of all of these observed differences between masculine and feminine coded ASMR videos however, it is only appropriate to wonder how the audience is framed. Videos frame viewer gender in several ways, the most common of which being subtle clues such as indications about the length and style of the viewer’s hair, with direct usage of gender terms or

pronouns being less frequent. An oddity compared to the rest of the results, viewer-gender identification is something agreed upon nearly unanimously among viewed ASMRtists of all genders—the viewer may be feminine but is most often completely ungendered. The only instance that broke from this pattern was the video concerning a hand job in which the viewer is referred to by masculine labels like stepbrother. In other words, a commonality shared between nearly all viewed popular ASMR is an acceptance of an audience that ranges from neuter to feminine. When this commonality shared between differently gendered ASMRtists is contextualized within great differences stylistically and structurally, there is great room for discussion of the content.

Discussion and Conclusion

Although previous case study analyses done by Waldron and Andersen were affirmed in these observations, the wide-spanning ethnographic approach also granted boons to my findings. Notably, the close observation across many different creators helped establish an environmental understanding of popular ASMR roleplay, rather than the roleplay of one particular ASMRtist. It was because of that that the work of masculine ASMRtists could be brought into immediate contrast with those of feminine ASMRtists, and that details such as how the viewer's gender is identified by ASMRtists can be folded into a broader picture.

How ASMRtists identify their viewers' gender is significant because it indicates their creative knowledge of who they are producing content for and how. The predominance of women, and presumably straight women at that, as viewers of popular ASMR roleplay is a key basis for fruitful discussion of the findings (Andersen 2015; Brand 2015; Hudelson 2020; Fredborg et al. 2017; Iossifidis 2016; Poerio et al. 2018; Weisberg et al. 2011). It is telling that all but one video identified the viewer as feminine or avoided precisely identifying the viewer's gender. The intention of this identification practice then may be to cater to a large audience of women viewers or at the very least avoiding alienating them by identifying them as men.

When taking into consideration the role of intimacy in ASMR roleplay however, the relationship between the viewer and ASMRtist becomes much more complicated. We have to consider how close feminine ASMRtists are to the camera that they whisper compliments and give the impression of physically touching the viewer while also applying a physical sensation—ASMR itself (Hudelson 2020). By doing this, they simultaneously engage with a kind of distant physical intimacy and with scripts of feminized emotional care (Andersen 2015). When considering that their audience is predominantly women, this double entendre performs a kind of

homoerotic interaction with a large swath of their viewers, but it also helps an avoidance of “weirdness” by playing out very traditional scripts (Andersen 2015; Waldron 2017).

“Weirdness” here then refers to deviation from heterosexual expression or enjoyment of intimate emotional and physical interaction. Several of the videos and especially makeup/grooming videos achieve this by contextualizing the viewer and ASMRtist as platonic friends, replacing homoromantic or homoerotic associations with a homosocial one. Perhaps the avoidance of explicit homoeroticism is also why more videos do not identify their viewers as women—until they do, the viewer could be anyone and same-sex interaction is unmentioned.

Of course, these normalizing practices extend further than prudently gendering their audience and following traditional gender roles. Medicalization plays a significant role in normalizing ASMR to those who use it, the thought being that something regarded as a normal physiological phenomenon could not possibly be intimate or even sexual (Andersen 2015; Poerio et al. 2018). This really converges with the omnipresence of healthcare as a theme in ASMR roleplay, with faux doctors continually at the ready to administer a cranial nerve exam. Not only does it allude to the normalizing practices present among ASMR viewers, but it also derives normalcy from a position of authority. Despite this, the acceptance of nurses, homeopathy, massage, and witchcraft all being accepted feminized roles to play pertaining to fictional healthcare present ideal opportunities for feminine ASMRtists to walk the line between authoritativeness and utilizing feminine scripts.

In this viewing environment predominantly made up of women, and presumably straight women, masculine ASMRtists play a unique role in normalizing their experiences. Half of the observed masculine ASMRtists’ videos were sexual in their content, granting this large audience of straight women the authority to more overtly enjoy intimacy in ASMR via heterosexuality.

Beyond this, nearly every masculine ASMRtist's video utilized power dynamics in order to exert authority over the viewer. When videos were not about sex combined with power dynamics holding authority over viewers, they portrayed Soviet interrogators, magical capitalists who employ women, or at least another doctor. In these videos, the different tone of voice and further distance from the camera than seen in feminine ASMRtists' videos established a kind of emotional distance often masculinized and given authority like a father figure. The half of videos by masculine ASMRtists that were sexual were also non-visual, further detaching the viewer from the masculine voice. It is intriguing that non-visual ASMR also seems to be a low-cost form of content creation in both time and resources, and yet two of the three other non-sexual masculine ASMR videos were also sub-coded as deep roleplay, requiring great monetary and labor inputs to execute. It really suggests that an ASMRtist's livelihood is so tied to how they play into feelings of intimacy and normalcy, when attracting views otherwise requires great creativity, effort, or alternatively a doctor outfit. Clearly masculine creators are in a very unique position in this nascent content creation space.

Future Directions

This research contributes to a better holistic understanding of how gender plays into ASMR, while raising new questions for future research as well. My methodology helped shed light on how in popular ASMR roleplay intimacy is shared by reifying norms of gender and sexuality across all popular ASMR. My focus on popular ASMR presents opportunities for replicating my research for less popular ASMR. This notably includes research opportunities regarding the situations of non-binary and other LGBTQ+ ASMRtists in navigating these perplexingly gendered and sexualized spaces, as well as a first venture into the experiences of ASMR for viewing men.

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