



ASMR, Digital Intimacy & Social Setting: Watching ASMR videos

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1 Inhoud

1	Introduction	3
1.1	The online/offline distinction.....	4
1.2	Research question and method	6
2	Theoretical framework	8
2.1	Social presence theory	8
2.2	Light communities.....	9
2.3	Goffman: dramaturgy, impression management & behavioral norms	11
2.4	The online disinhibition effect	13
3	Methodology.....	14
3.1	Mixed methods research	14
3.2	Data collection process	15
3.3	Methods of analysis	17
4	Data analysis	19
4.1	Semiotic elements and intimacy.....	19
4.2	YouTube as a multimodal text	22
4.3	Demarcation of community boundaries, norms, and language	23
4.4	Online-offline behaviours	26
5	Conclusion & discussion.....	33
	Bibliography	36
	Appendix 1	40

1 Introduction

Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) is a sensory condition induced by several visual and auditory stimuli, such as finger tapping and whispering, creating tingling sensations felt on the scalp sometimes flowing to the limbs. In recent years, ASMR has received increasing interest, particularly on digital platforms such as YouTube and Reddit where many videos and articles on the topic are shared. These ASMR videos are frequently viewed over millions of times, enabling the emergence of a niche branch of YouTube content accompanied by a new digital community. Despite the limited scientific literature on this social phenomenon, scholars have been increasingly focusing their attention on the subject in the past few years.

Some studies have explored ASMR as an online culture by defining and encompassing the cultural norms and boundaries, such as Smith & Snider (2019), Gallagher (2016) and Andersen (2014). Other studies (i.e. Barratt & Davis, 2015; Smith, Fredborg & Kornelsen, 2017; Poerio, et al., 2018) examined the various physiological and neurological effects that ASMR can induce. ASMR has been compared to other sensory conditions like synesthesia¹ in Barratt, Spence & Davis (2015), misophonia² in McEarlean & Bannissy (2018) and frisson³ in Del Campo & Kehle (2016). Some of the studies (i.e. Poerio, et al., 2018; Del Campo & Kehle, 2016; Fredborg, et al., 2018) have found that ASMR can elicit therapeutic and mindful effects to an individual's mental state. Yet another line of studies looked at the different personality traits that ASMR experiencers predominantly share. Fredborg, Clark & Smith (2017) did so by studying associations on the basis of the Big Five Personality Inventory, and Keizer et al. (2019) examined individuals who experience ASMR in relation to a personality trait called "sensory suggestibility".

Most of the existing research on ASMR particularly studied the topic from a neuropsychological perspective focusing on the affective and physical responses that specific audio-visual triggers can induce in people. Apart from a handful studies (i.e. Snider, 2019; Gallagher, 2016; Andersen, 2014) that conducted cultural analysis on ASMR, the topic remains limitedly studied from a sociocultural perspective. Diving deeper into the current line

¹ "a phenomenon in which specific external stimuli cause an internal experience in a second, unstimulated modality." (Barratt & Davis, 2015, p.2)

² "an audio-sensory experience in which triggering sounds cause outbursts of anger and disgust." (Barratt, Spence & Davis, 2017, p.2)

³ "a musically induced affect that shows close links to musical surprise and is associated with a 'pleasant tingling feeling', raised body hairs, and gooseflesh." (Huron and Margulis, 2011, p. 591)

of cultural research, the topic of digitally-mediated intimacy is addressed in Andersen (2014, p.685) demonstrating that ASMR videos can create a “suggestion of physical proximity and intimacy” despite the actual physical distance in time and space between the “ASMRtist” (i.e., the creator of an ASMR video) and “ASMRer” (i.e., viewers of ASMR videos). Andersen (2014) stresses that whispering is the most prominent trigger in ASMR videos and creates a sense of closeness both in terms of physical closeness and emotional connectedness. Gallagher (2016) built on the research of Andersen by analyzing the qualities of the online platform YouTube such as search algorithms, data mining architectures and online publishing platforms and how it is able to facilitate new terms, concepts, communities and moving image genres. The study of Smith & Snider (2019) delved further into the ASMR culture, primarily with regards to the specific standards, values, and norms that the ASMR community tries to uphold by doing boundary work. In their study, Smith & Snider (2019) argued that both the ASMRtist and ASMRers actively guard the definable scope of ASMR from misconceptions and misinterpretations, such as comparing the digitally-mediated tingles with sexual arousal.

What I find interesting and will further discuss in my research is how the social boundaries of the ASMR community interplay with the social setting in which ASMR is watched and spoken about. By social setting, I refer to the time, place, and circumstances in which the social interactions between individuals and groups engaging with ASMR videos occur. Many comments under these videos on YouTube express a high level of devotion and engagement towards the ASMR genre; comments about specific video's, triggers or specific ASMRtists that particularly stimulate their senses. Drawn from this preliminary observation, the ASMR community tightly share their personal sensory and emotional experiences with other ASMRers publicly online. However, the offline situational and social setting in which people are engaged with these videos is rarely addressed in both research and YouTube comments. In other words, few studies explore when, where, with whom and how viewers are watching ASMR videos and what may be the possible sociocultural explanations for such viewing practices.

1.1 The online/offline distinction

This thesis aims to look at both the online and offline dimensions of engaging with ASMR videos. It is therefore necessary to briefly address the debate around this distinction and to substantiate the decision regarding the implementation of this distinction in the current study.

In recent years, researchers have increasingly addressed the online/offline distinction

of social relationships, identity and (cyber)culture, which are typically drawn along the lines of four properties, these are: (1) virtuality, (2) spatiality, (3) disembedding, and (4) disembodiment (Slater, 2002). The latter element that contains the separation of the person's online identity from their physical presence is called into question by emerging video categories in new media such as ASMR videos, in which audiovisual triggers are felt in a physical setting: the human body.

Blommaert's collection of essays on social action in the online-offline nexus (2019) discusses Goffman's explanation of a social situation consisting of the infrastructural setting for interaction, implying the "hard" physical setting for interaction, and the sociocultural conventions governing the interaction. Blommaert more specifically defines the concept of infrastructural setting by "the material conditions affecting the situation and delineating the affordances available to participants" (Blommaert, 2019, Ch.2, p.8). He explains that the actions performed online are determined by the infrastructural or physical aspects of a social situation. To put it differently, the offline physical movement of individuals in combination with the use of technological operating devices, which possess inherent software with particular features in the online architecture, determine the actions of individuals on the online environment. Hence, the online and offline setting around engaging with ASMR videos are interdependent.

From this, I propose that examining both the online and offline sphere is necessary to obtain a full picture of the multidimensional social setting around the engagement with ASMR videos. Based on this argument, this study will investigate the interconnection between the ASMR community in the online sphere of social life and audiences' experience in the offline scenario.

Furthermore, this dual dimension focus, both on the online and offline dimensions, allows us to consider the intimate nature of the ASMR video which can arouse sensible sensations in the body of viewers. The sensuous experience that may flow from watching these videos distinguishes it from other video categories on YouTube. The ASMR video, therefore, might ask the viewer to pay a kind of attention which is geared to a different state of mind. Hence, the interaction between the online and offline sphere becomes even more prevalent in this case in which the physical body responds to audiovisual triggers of the video.

1.2 Research question and method

In this research, I build on previous research studies by further exploration of the sociocultural components of ASMR videos (i.e. the intertwining of technology and intimacy), the ASMR community (i.e. the social norms of this digital community and feelings of connectedness) and the (private) act of watching ASMR videos.

Captured in the following formulation, this bachelor thesis attempts to answer the following research question:

What are the viewing practices and social interactions around ASMR videos that are carried out online and offline?

Ensuing from this research question is a set of sub-questions, which will be answered using a mixed research design (i.e., multimodal semiotic analysis, written interview):

1. How is intimacy constructed through different audiovisual techniques in ASMR video?
2. How is online social interaction carried out in ASMR communities?
3. How are these videos consumed in offline physical settings?
4. How are ASMR videos discussed in offline settings?
5. What are the relationships between the online ASMR community culture and offline consumption behavior and social interaction?

In finding an answer to these research questions, this study adopts a mixed qualitative research design, consisting of an online observation and a written interview. The online observation includes two sources of data: ASMR videos and YouTube comments. By means of a multimodal analysis to study the video, I will focus on the various audiovisual semiotic elements of the ASMR video and how these are able to create a particular social setting by analyzing one of the most common types of ASMR video; the “personal attention” video. For the online interviews, I adopt the convenience type of sampling selecting individuals that regularly watch ASMR videos. Interviewees are asked to fill out an online questionnaire related to the social and situational settings around watching ASMR videos.

This study contributes to the study of ASMR videos, culture, and media studies in general by paying attention to audiences’ embodied experiences. With more insight into these elements of ASMR culture and watching ASMR, we can understand this digitally social community better and obtain knowledge about similarities, differences and interaction between traditional and contemporary standards as well as social norms in both the offline

and online environment. More in general, the study will also contribute to existing research on the overarching topic of the digital-self and the differences and similarities with respect to personal expressions and behaviors on the internet and in the offline world. Finally, this research could provide further insight into digitally mediated intimacy and in the online/offline distinction of identity, cultures, and relationships.

In the subsequent chapter (Chapter 2), further elaboration is provided on the theoretical background and existing academic studies on both online and offline social settings (around ASMR). To be more precise, I will introduce the concepts of social presence theory, light communities, Goffman's theories (i.e. dramaturgy, impression management), and the online disinhibition effect. These theories direct my analysis of the YouTube videos and comments, and my analysis of the written interview results. The methodological chapter (Chapter 3) introduces how I conducted multimodal semiotic analysis, discourse analysis and thematic analysis. The specific procedures and techniques that are used to identify, select, process, and analyze the data are furtherly discussed. In the data analysis chapter (Chapter 4), the results of this study are brought forward, summarized, and discussed.

2 Theoretical framework

This chapter is divided into four subparts and deals with the various theories that are relevant to examine the research data and answer the research questions. Introducing social presence theory first, which is critical to understand the characteristics of constructed intimacy in ASMR videos. Secondly, Blommaert's theory of "light" communities are applied to understand the community's dynamics, norms and group interaction. Furthermore, to gain knowledge about offline setting and members behaviors offline, I discuss Goffman's theories on dramaturgy, impression management, and behavior in public spaces. Lastly, the online disinhibition effect is explained, which aids in explaining behavioral patterns in online and offline interaction.

2.1 Social presence theory

ASMR videos distinguish themselves from categorically different videos on YouTube by their ability to create a sense of intimacy between the creator and the watcher without physical presence between the two. The degree to which a person is perceived to be salient (i.e. in a state of being there) in their computer-mediated communication or virtual environments is encompassed in social presence theory, initially conceptualized by Short, Williams and Christie (1976). Social presence is a quality of a communication medium in which mediums with high social presence are labeled as more sociable, warm, and personal. Gunawardena (1995) redefined the original definition into a more modern frame containing "the degree to which a person is perceived as a "real person" in mediated communication." Lowenthal (2010) summarized the definitions of social presence by posting a continuum. On the one end, social presence is constituted by interpersonal emotional connection between communicators and on the other end by whether someone is perceived as being "present", "there" or "real".

From Lowenthal's (2010) definition can be drawn that intimacy and immediacy are two main concepts that compose the construct of social presence. Intimacy can be established using various factors, such as physical distance, eye contact, smiling, and personal topics of conversation. Immediacy is defined as a measure of psychological distance that a communicator puts between himself and the object of his communication. Immediacy is otherwise referred to as giving urgency or importance to a social interaction which creates a sense of closeness and importance to the relationship in the users of the medium.

ASMR content creators on YouTube reinforce both aspects of social presence with the use of various (non-verbal) audiovisual techniques such as whispering, role playing, asking questions and performing intimate acts (e.g. massaging) remaining a short distance between them and the camera. As face-to-face media are considered to exalt the most social presence along the social presence continuum, ASMR videos are able to closely mimic real-life interaction by both verbal and non-verbal cues in communication such as facial expression, direction of gaze, posture, dress, and body language (Gallagher, 2016). Some ASMRtists create a sense of responsiveness that is present in live interaction by asking a question and consequent head nods, eye-gazes and other interactive gestures (Gallagher, 2016).

Since ASMR videos are able to establish intimacy and bodily tingles via intermediation of technology, social presence theory is at the core of this research study. This theory can help explain how and why the interaction between the ASMRtist and the ASMRer through an online video is, by some, felt just as in a “real” offline interaction. An experience in which the viewer becomes less aware of the presence of the medium as if the medium through which the interaction takes place has disappeared (for a moment).

2.2 Light communities

The ASMR video as a unique YouTube genre brings about a community of ASMRtists and viewers on the internet. It is therefore interesting to look at the different mechanisms and engagements that sustain this community. Baum, et al. (2019, p. 290) define online communities as “a group of Internet users (i.e., the community members) that interact with each other, share a common interest and exchange knowledge on that.” Like cultures, groups and societies; communities can serve as sources of identity. The identity of a person is shaped by a highly complex arrangement of socialization. This involves the interaction of various sub-identities of an individual through his/her membership in different (online) communities. These continuously shape the learning, thinking, and perceptual environment, which form the nature of experiences, value preferences, and knowledge systems (Afzal, 2008). Blommaert argues that identity is constituted of the co-presence of identity practices within the interaction of different sorts of communities, namely “thick” and “light” communities.

The classical Durkheimian notion of social groups encompasses the traditional characteristics of “thick” communities in which people coagulate around a shared focus creating homogeneity along the features of members’ identities. Examples of such “thick” groups of classical sociology would be the nation, the tribe, the family, the religious community. These “thick” communities consisted out of, as coined by Blommaert, multiple

disparate “light” communities that are brought together through mechanisms of cohesion and integration. Examples of “light” communities are the web-based networks, the student community, the workplace, etcetera.

Many features that are traditionally ascribed to “thick” communities are displayed by “light” communities. In “light” communities, people also converge or coagulate around a shared focus – an object, a shared interest, another person, an event. However, this focusing is occasioned in the sense that it is triggered by a specific prompt, bound in time and space (even in virtual space), and thus not necessarily “eternal” in nature (Blommaert, 2018). “Light” communities are not constructed out of “thick” bounds such as nationality, ethnicity, class, and so forth but rather by transient criteria of lifestyle, taste, and political inclination (Blommaert and Varis, 2015). Contrary to the limits of social formation in face-to-face interaction, the internet has enabled many translocally connected groups (a.k.a. “*communities of knowledge*”) to emerge through its infrastructural features (Blommaert, 2018). In other words, the internet has constituted online spaces in which members of a wide array of widely dispersed offline, initially “thick” communities, log in to interact (King, 2019). The separate and specific forms of knowledge gathering and circulation on the internet enables a far wider scope and depth of scaled and polycentric community formation. Thus, the internet generates both performed identities that are commonly associated with voluntary communities involving interpersonal interaction and knowledge exchange among users, and ascribed identities formed by involuntary communities through algorithmic functions of the online platform that are categorized in terms of third-party priorities (Blommaert, 2018). Although membership of such “light” groups is generally not indicative of one’s core identity, the practices performed in such groups are experienced by many as indispensable in everyday life.

Additionally, in “light” communities, people’s identities can remain diverse in several (online) social groups, despite (brief) display of uniform behavior when participating in the community’s joint activity (Blommaert & Varis, 2015). Despite the determining influence of “thick” structures, Blommaert & Varis (2015) substantiate the importance of the social valuation of cultural practices of “light” communities by the continuous formation of such “light” groups (on social media).

This study will explore the dynamic nature of membership and the unique practices that bring this community together. In addition, this will also examine the various ways in which members of the ASMR community do boundary work to maintain the community and distinguish their group from people who are not considered group members (Gieryn, 1983).

Inspired by the findings of Maly and Varis (2015) on the urban “hipster” communities and the role of the internet in shaping and policing norms in this community, it is also interesting to find out how the internet functions as a learning environment for the online ASMR community.

2.3 Goffman: dramaturgy, impression management & behavioral norms

Although the ASMR community actively engages in doing boundary work, for instance in the attempt to draw boundaries between ASMR and erotic acts (Smith & Snider, 2019), the ASMR video remains to establish ties with intimacy by the various audio and visual elements of the video such as whispering (Andersen, 2014). The audiovisual elements of ASMR videos therefore call for a setting in which ASMR is consumed. In other words, ASMR videos are of intimate nature and watching ASMR videos requires a setting which meets the standards of such a character.

The social interaction theory put forth by Goffman (1959) in his book “The Presentation of Everyday Life” – which is also referred to as the dramaturgical model of social life – allows us to better understand behaviors in different kinds of situational settings. In this theory of dramaturgy, Goffman compares an individual in different social settings with a theatrical setting involving an actor who pursues to convey an ideal impression to an audience with the ultimate aim of social acceptance. Similar to the varying roles of actors, individuals are constantly adjusting their behavior and actions to a particular situational setting. Individuals comply to the expected norms within different levels of society in which they control their body language, appearance, expressions, and manners. Connecting this theory to the research matter, ASMRtists are actors that often adopt the role of a “relative-like” nurturing figure in personal attention videos which aim to pamper the audience. This may also help explain the different impersonating techniques (e.g. whispering, petting, long eye stares) that are used to construct intimacy in ASMR videos by the ASMRtist.

Within his theory of dramaturgy, Goffman makes a distinction between the frontstage and the backstage. The former is the setting in which individuals present themselves to others where the individual is in constant awareness of being observed. The latter comprises the sphere where the individual steps out of his or her role and feels no urge to play a role other than him-/herself, a psychological process also referred to as “impression management”. In this stage, the fear of being judged has disappeared, providing room for freely acting out or expressing beliefs that are not revealed in the frontstage. Therefore, being backstage often includes the private sphere of home or within the vicinity of friends and family. Changing

one's clothes and performing intimate acts, as an example, are regarded as appropriate only within the private realm. The ASMRtist often performs intimate acts in videos by means of roleplaying that involves tactile actions, for instance by combing the hair of the watcher or tucking him or her in. Since these actions do not match the social standards in the public place, viewers may probably be encouraged to watch ASMR videos in the private sphere. For the same reason, the ASMR video might be talked about in another manner in different offline and online settings. In all likelihood, the possible sensual or sensory effects that the video may have on someone will therefore probably not be (thoroughly) discussed or even mentioned to a colleague at work but rather to a loved one.

In another book titled "Behavior in Public Places", Goffman takes a closer look at the specific norms of different social situations in which particular behavior of the individual is expected. Goffman describes the existence of "one over-all continuum or axis along which the social life in situations varies, depending on how disciplined the individual is obliged to be in connection with the several ways in which respects for the gathering and its social occasion can be expressed" (Goffman, 1963, p. 206). In other words, compliance with the specific norms of a social gathering depends on the individual's ability and need to respect those norms. Hence, personal clemency to abide by the social standards is crucial for the maintenance of the social norms. Social norms are often exchanged and maintained in conversation or debate. This feature of the norm-building process in a community, heightens my interest to observe social interactions between ASMR community members.

Goffman's theories assist in finding answers to multiple of the research questions. Primarily, these include the ones that involve viewing practices and social interaction in the offline sphere, as well as how various semiotic, audiovisual, and compositional elements in the video refer to (elements of) the private, backstage setting. The interactive behavior of the ASMRtist in ASMR videos includes such intimate acts (e.g., whispering, petting, and long eye stares) which do not fall under the behavioral norm in offline public places shared with strangers in the public setting. From this can be drawn that watching ASMR videos is more likely practiced in the private domain, by the individual alone. On the basis of Goffman's theories, it is also interesting to explore the (implicit) behavioral norms in consuming ASMR videos, and see to what extent the need to abide by, protect (e.g. through doing boundary work), and create new norms is manifested in the ASMR community.

2.4 The online disinhibition effect

Decades after the birth of Goffman's theories, the emergence of technology has constituted an online public place. Therefore, Goffman's theories about proper and improper behavior in different situational settings are not complete. What appropriate behavior is, based on a particular standard in offline public places, might differ from the public online environment. Despite the individual's adaptability to shift between the norms of the private and public sphere outlined by Goffman in the offline environment, in public cyberspace, individuals often self-disclose, act out, or express themselves more easily, frequently and intensely than compared to their expressions in the offline sphere. Researchers refer to this phenomenon as the "disinhibition effect" consisting of six factors that interact with each other, these are: dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination, and minimization of authority (Suler, 2004). Although the online environment is public, these various features of the online environment such as anonymity allow the user to put on a mask over their "real" offline identity, eliciting behavior that is different from their behavior in offline public places.

The online disinhibition effect can manifest in two seemingly opposing ways, namely by being more open, kind and generous to others online, or by rude language, hatred and threats. The former direction is referred to as *benign disinhibition* and the latter as *toxic disinhibition* (Suler, 2004). A preliminary observation of YouTube comments under ASMR videos indicate that benign disinhibition is most probably the case within the online community of ASMR. These comments reveal that people are very open about their personal intrapsychic problems such as anxiety and depression. In turn, responders to these self-disclosed comments react in sometimes extremely kind, accepting and generous ways. The online disinhibition effect might therefore explain the reasons why individuals express themselves more cordial and warm-heartedly towards others in online social interactions surrounding the ASMR community. The propensity to self-disclose within the ASMR community is strong in the online sphere, which awakens an interest to further explore self-disclosure in offline interactions about ASMR.

3 Methodology

This chapter presents the applied methodological approach including the adopted data collection methods, specific material for analysis and data analysis methods for this study. Firstly, the mixed methods research design that is adopted to conduct this study is further explained, consisting of an online observation and a written interview. Subsequently, the various data sources (i.e. video content, YouTube comments, and interview results) are presented, and the various data collection processes are specified. Finally, I delve into the various methods to analyze the data of the online observation and written interview, these include multimodal semiotic analysis, discourse analysis, and thematic analysis.

3.1 Mixed methods research

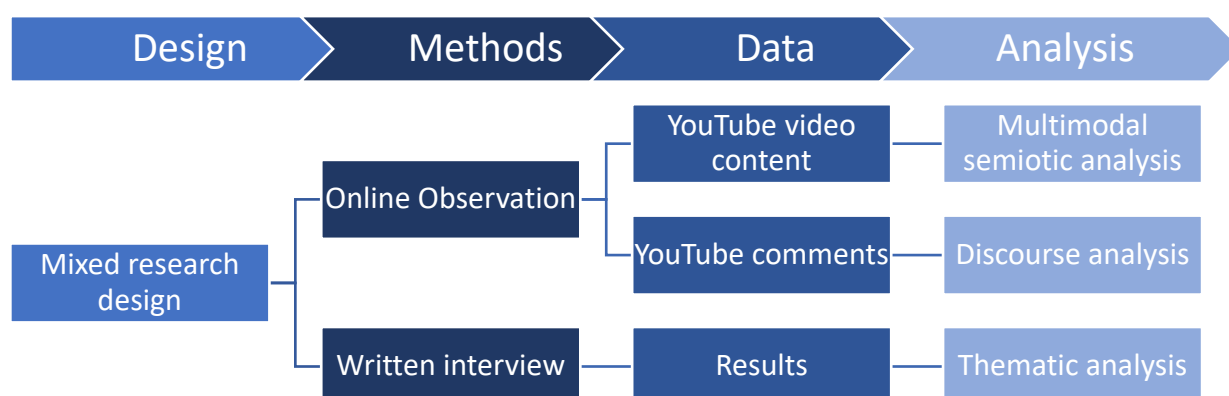
I adopted an explorative mixed research design including an online observation and a written interview that allows for an in-depth exploration of the ASMR community. These two methods of data collection are often applied in the field of digital sciences and humanities. The online observation addressed the first sub-question of this research, zooming in on the audiovisual and architectural tools with which intimacy is constructed in ASMR videos and online communication of the ASMR videos in the comment sections. The data that is analyzed for the online observation consists of: (1) the content of the ASMR videos, and (2) the comments below the ASMR videos. The discourse analysis method is applied to study the comments, and a multimodal semiotic approach is taken to analyze the videos. By examining the comment section, I attempted to answer the second sub-question of this research involving the online dynamics of the ASMR community. The written interview dealt with the (sub-)questions concerning the viewing practices of ASMRers, and (online) interactions with regards to watching ASMR videos. The interview data was analyzed through a thematic analysis, meaning that I identified key themes in the answers from the interview.

There are things that cannot be observed on the internet alone, for this reason I adopted the written interview to obtain a broader picture of the offline setting in which ASMR videos are watched and spoken about. The strong point of this mixed model of research design is therefore its dual focus covering both the online as well as the offline dimension. It discovers how online interaction practices and semiotic features interplay with offline behaviors around watching ASMR videos. The main focus of the online observation is on the online social dynamic between ASMR members deduced from YouTube comments and ASMR content. The written interview, on the other hand, delves deeper into the

individual viewing practices of the members of the ASMR community in the offline setting. By combining these two methods of data collection, this study aims to gain contextualized understanding about the behaviors, social structures and shared beliefs of a specific group of people, which is the ASMR community.

Furthermore, the combination of three data sets (i.e. video content, video comments and written interview results) helped me to triangulate data analysis. In specific, I can validate what semiotic practices from the video content are perceived as contributing to intimacy. Since the ASMR video is the central coagulation point of the online ASMR community, it is interesting to inspect the semiotic elements of several ASMR videos, and observe what possible impact the content of the video might have on individual viewing practices in the offline setting, as well as the formation of community norms. Secondly, in order to address the sub-questions revolving around the offline setting in which ASMR videos are watched, I adopted the qualitative interview as a second research method. In this phase of the research study, I attempted to gain information about individuals' preferences with regards to ASMR content, and underlying reasoning and motivations behind their behavior in the offline and online setting. It also helps me to gain insights on *how* ASMR viewers understand the dynamic of online ASMR communities, which is beyond my observation. Table 1 visually explains the research approach in this study.

Table 1.



3.2 Data collection process

For the first part of the online observation, I sampled four videos to observe. This research material will be examined using the multi-modal analysis. This is a purposive sampling. I opted for the analysis of the well-known “personal attention” videos in which the ASMRtist interactively and intimately communicates with the ASMRer. This kind of video is extremely popular among the ASMR community and takes many forms (e.g. mom, girlfriend, or hairdresser roleplay). The sampling aims to cover a broad spectrum of videos to achieve as

much heterogeneity as possible. This means that the selected videos differentiate in terms of attributes of the ASMRtist (e.g. ethnicity, gender, age) and with respect to viewing or popularity rates. The videos were searched by entering a variety of keywords related to ASMR in the search bar of YouTube, such as “roleplay,” “intimacy” and “personal attention.” Table 2 shows the collection of video material. Considering the time constraints of this study and the amount of data that needs to be processed, this study conducted multimodal semiotic analysis on the first ten minutes of each video.

Table 2.

Username	Subscribers	Title	Upload Date	Views
Gentle Whispering ASMR	1.84 mln.	~Simple Pleasures~ ASMR Soft Spoken Personal Attention	11 April 2016	18,845,717
Ricky Odriosola ASMR	146,000	ASMR - INTENSE Personal Attention (Male Whisper)	15 September 2019	50,565
Latte ASMR	1.12 mln.	Taking Care of You in the Sleepy Evening/ ASMR Friend Personal Attention	15 May 2018	2,154,742
Chynaunique ASMR	1.73 mln.	ASMR Bestfriend helps you sleep ROLEPLAY (Personal Attention, relaxing facial)	12 September 2018	1,727,832

Additionally, I selected the comments under these videos to observe how viewers interact with one another and how they feel about the videos. In specific, I have collected the first 20 threads of comments for each video. YouTube popularity metrics arrange the comments in a combined calculation on the number of thumbs up, reply and date of the comments. By following the arrangement of this metrics, I can observe the most exuberant interactivities under each video. This way of sampling the comments is in line with how viewers approach them, thus allowing me to follow the community dynamics in the way participants experience them.

The written interview is conducted through an online forum which is created via Qualtrics Survey Software as licensed by Tilburg University.⁴ The link of this Qualtrics interview was posted under a random selection of ASMR videos on YouTube, as well as on other ASMR forums such as on ASMR Tingles.com and Reddit. I also invited members of the

⁴ The full version of the questionnaire is included in this thesis as Appendix 1.

ASMR community to fill out the interview through direct messaging. The questions in the interview are thematized based on the theoretical framework and the sensitizing concepts that I have induced from the online observation. The written interview takes the form of open-ended questions. The questionnaire invites the interviewees to voluntarily leave their email address for follow-up questions or clarifications. Filling in the questionnaire will take interviewees approximately 15 to 20 minutes. Additionally, I tried to create a snowball effect by kindly asking individuals who already completed the questionnaire to forward the invitation to participate in this study to other ASMR watchers.

In compliance with Tilburg University ethics regulations, an information letter and consent form were added to the online written interview. Respondents are required to give consent before continuation of the interview. No personal identifiable data such as age, gender or occupation are collected, except for email addresses. This is to minimize data collection and protect participants' privacy. The respondents are also free to decide whether they want to share their email address with us for follow-up questioning. The discussion chapter of this study (Chapter 5) will deal with the limitations of this study.

3.3 Methods of analysis

The data processed in this study includes both visual and textual materials. Through online observation, the content of the videos will be analyzed by means of a multimodal semiotic analysis which seeks to interpret the particular meaning of signs, and their interaction with particular sign system displayed in the video (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001). The analysis covered all the visual and textual elements (i.e. title, description) of the videos, and focused on four different strata, namely: discourse, design, production and distribution.

The comments under the videos will be examined through discourse analysis by the approach of Jones et al. (2015). By adoption of this model, I pay attention to four things: texts, contexts, actions and interactions, and power and ideology. The scope of the analysis encompasses how meanings are created and exchanged in the verbal social context of the ASMR community. The technique of discourse analysis can be used to study the way that the unique semiotic systems (i.e., language within the ASMR community and YouTube) affect the kinds of meanings people can make in different situations, the kinds of actions they can perform, the kinds of relationships they can establish, and the kinds of people they can be (Jones et al., 2015). The model of Jones et al. (2015) allows me to examine linguistic signs and other visual signs (e.g., emoticons) in the social context of the ASMR community. In

addition to this, three particular characteristics of YouTube as a multimodal text are addressed and applied to the theory.

To process the interview data, a thematic analysis is conducted following the approach of Guest et al. (2010). I closely examined the interview data by identifying common themes – ideas, topics, and patterns of meaning that come up repeatedly in the interview results.

4 Data analysis

This chapter discusses the data analysis and findings of the study based on three models of analysis addressed in the previous chapter. The findings of the three data sources (i.e. video content, comments, and questionnaire results) are sequentially presented. First, the audio-visual and compositional elements of the video are discussed by means of the model of Kress & Van Leeuwen (2001). Then, before diving into the analysis of the comments, the various semiotic modes and characteristics of YouTube platform are addressed along the lines of the study of Jones, et al. (2015). Finally, the findings of the questionnaire are presented, and analysed. The analysis is structured in line with the theories previously mentioned in Chapter 2.

4.1 Semiotic elements and intimacy

In the following part, the selection of ASMR videos (mentioned in Table 2) are analysed through the four dimensional model of Kress & Van Leeuwen (2001) – including *discourse*, *design*, *production* and *distribution* – for the purpose of exploring in what ways the video constructs a mediated intimacy discourse. The various (spatial) attributes and features displayed in the ASMR video are contextualized in light of social presence theory and Goffman's theories, explained in Chapter 2.

Kress & Van Leeuwen (2001) define *discourse* as a socially constructed knowledge created by a specific social context. In this case more particularly, the social context of the online ASMR community constructs an intimacy discourse. A discourse is built upon, and realized by, three other elements, these are: design, production and distribution.

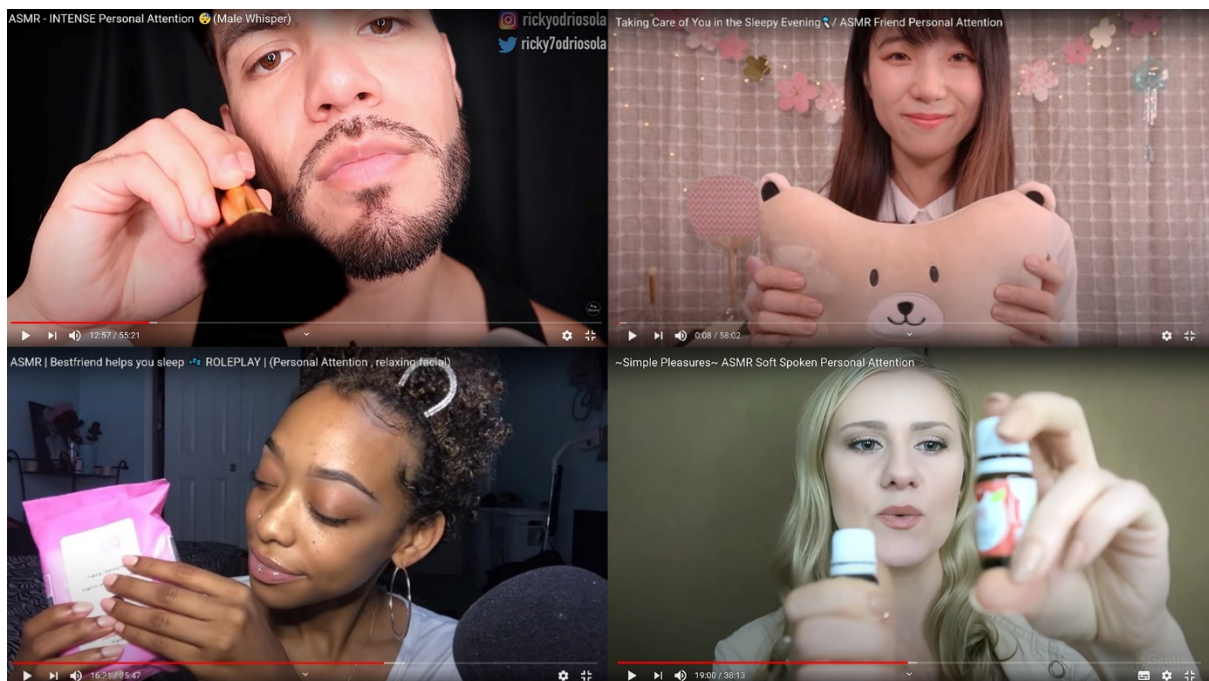
Design involves the choice and arrangement of the spatial setting to realise a discourse. Designers incorporate audience interpretations as they envisage the whole communicative process, its actors and the power relationships between them. ASMRtists are designers in the sense that they realise the intimacy discourse in the context of a given communicating situation with a targeted audience group. The ASMRtist make many (conscious) choices as to which semiotic modes (e.g. audio, visuals, objects, activities, language) to use and how to arrange them. Various spatial and composite elements in the selection of videos are typical of private space settings, which Goffman refers to as the backstage setting. I will now discuss these.

Firstly, all of the analysed videos were recorded indoors, in one's home which is typically the place in which private activities take place. The video of Chynaunique's is shot in her bedroom, the other three videos were filmed in front of a solid background. Latte also

added some small homey items, and personal belongings such as a pendulum, to the background setting in her video.

Display of daily objects in the background as well as the foreground signify the activities people conduct in private and intimate lives. Since most of these materials are all (consciously) picked to appear in the video, it also involves the arrangement of the spatial setting in order to intensify the intimacy discourse. As showed in Image 1, in their videos, Gentle Whispering included a comb and aroma oils; Ricky Odriosola a make-up brush; Latte a pillow, blanket and towel; and Chynaunique a brush, creme, tissues and lotion. These props are almost all used in backstage settings with which certain corresponding acts are performed, such as rubbing lotion onto the skin, brushing the hair and face of the viewer, and sleeping or relaxing on a pillow. These objects signify the impression of personal care, closeness, and intimacy. The shared actions that correspond to these objects are usually not performed in public settings where the involved actors are observed by others.

Image 1. Display of daily/homey objects (CW. Ricky Odriosola, Latte, Gentle Whipering, Chynaunique)



Design also covers the choice of how to arrange the composition of the video. In all videos, the ASMRtist is seated closely to the camera in the centre of the composition. This enables ASMRtist to create an illusion that there is almost no physical distance between the communicator and the viewer. As a result, the degree of *immediacy* of the communicating medium increases as the psychological distance between the communicator and viewer becomes smaller (Lowenthal, 2010). Also, part of the composition of the video are lighting

and editing. All the videos consist of (almost) unprocessed video footage contributing to the naturalness of the interaction, just as in an ordinary offline conversation. Little editing increases “the degree to which a person is perceived as a “real” person in mediated communication” following Gunawardena (1995) definition of social presence. The utilization of bright lighting in the video intensifies the attentional aspect of the video as the light highlights the ASMRtists in the composition. In some videos, such as in Ricky’s and Chynaunique’s videos, the lighting also reinforces the dark-light contrast between the background and them, which contributes even more to this “in-your-face” effect.

The verbal and non-verbal language used to construct particular narratives in the observed videos also assist in establishing a high degree of both elements of social presence (i.e. immediacy and intimacy) in the light of Lowenthal’s (2010) enclosure of the definition. *Immediacy* is expressed through sentences such as “You can just feel how soft this brush is” in Latte’s video while brushing the viewer’s “face” (at 51:00). *Intimacy* is verbally expressed with the use of affective phrases and words that appeal to the watcher’s emotion. These words and sentences are typically said by a close relative or friend, for example the following expression in GentleWhispering’s video: “Today I decided to have some one on one time with you” (at 0:14). These phrases often are expressed in an interactive dialogue with the ASMRtist asking questions to the viewer, leaving a silence for the viewer to respond. This method might also increase to the realness aspect of social presence, as construed by Gunawardena (1995), creating the illusion of spatial closeness between the creator and watcher through the medium. Non-verbally, intimacy is expressed through head-nods, intensely long eye-gazes directing to the camera and hand strokes to create the illusion of touching or caressing the viewer.

The third strata of Kress & Van Leeuwen’s framework is *production*. Production covers the materialization of the design, as well as the various mediums to execute the design. In the production phase, the selected semiotic modes are given concrete forms in reality and more importantly, this materiality also adds meanings to communication. In the ASMR video, the central semiotic mode of audio is primarily materialized by human voice, whispers and the sounds that stem from the play of objects. Other elements that can be found in ASMR video’s and fall under the *production* aspect of the ASMR video are the practical software and tools to create the video (e.g. the online platform YouTube, the high-resolution camera and binaural microphone model to record the video, specific editing software), the spoken language, the physical body that creates the video, and the material objects that are displayed in the video.

Kress & Van Leeuwen's final strata is that of distribution which extends the semiotic process to bring the communicated contents to the audience. In the context of ASMR video, distribution can refer to the regular video uploads of ASMRtists on YouTube, as well as the process to promote and sponsor the video. The regular update helps the artist to maintain a stable viewership, thus contributing to the community formation and bonding with members.

4.2 YouTube as a multimodal text

In order to gain a better understanding of the discourses and different semiotic modes used by ASMRers in the comment section of the YouTube page, it is important to first look at the different features of YouTube as an interactive platform, outlined by Jones et al. (2015). In particular, the characteristics that enable YouTube to be read as a text consist of: (a) multiple semiotic modes, (b) multiple authorship, and (c) a high dynamic. YouTube's combination of (a) *semiotic modes* (e.g. moving images, spoken words, music and sound, written words, icons) contributes to the creation and interpretation of the multi-modal texts as "*composite*" products. YouTube pages are the product of (b) *multiple authorship*, as the texts on them are created by uploaders and commenters. Besides user-generated input, a great part of the text on a YouTube page is machine-generated by the platform's default template and texts created by advertisers. Another characteristic that is noticeable to YouTube as a text is that it is (c) *highly dynamic* in the sense that the text of the page constantly changes in response to user and machine-generated input. YouTube's algorithms are therefore mechanically driven by the input of users, in the form of views, likes and comments. Thus, apart from the content of the ASMR video itself, these formerly mentioned architectural characteristics of YouTube already establish a certain degree of social presence that allows the ASMRer to come closer to the ASMRtist, for instance by the shared possibility of both actors to view, like, share and comment on videos and other comments.

In addition, these infrastructural characteristics can also contribute to the "lightness" of the online ASMR community in the sense that they enable many different *communities of knowledge* to develop (Blommaert, 2018). The YouTube platform in particular generates performed identities in voluntary communities like the online ASMR community, as well as ascribed identities through algorithmic functions of the platform. ASMR videos form the shared focus around which the online ASMR community converges. This ASMR video can be seen as the specific prompt that triggers the focusing of the online ASMR community. Any ASMR video is bound in time and space and thus not necessarily "eternal" in nature.

The remodelled Birmingham framework in Jones et al (2015) explains YouTube as a

text in the light of interactional analysis. Each time a video gets uploaded, the user publishing the video takes the first initiating “turn” in an virtual interaction that is to be followed up by responding turns in further textual communication (e.g. by viewing, commenting, liking) a video on a particular page with, in some cases, a large number of participants. The views, likes, and comments are response turns in the sense that these tools can be used to answer to (some element of) the initial turn, which is the video. The infrastructural design of YouTube is, therefore, constructed in a way that facilitates the video to be the focal point of both interest and interaction within the context of a particular online community.

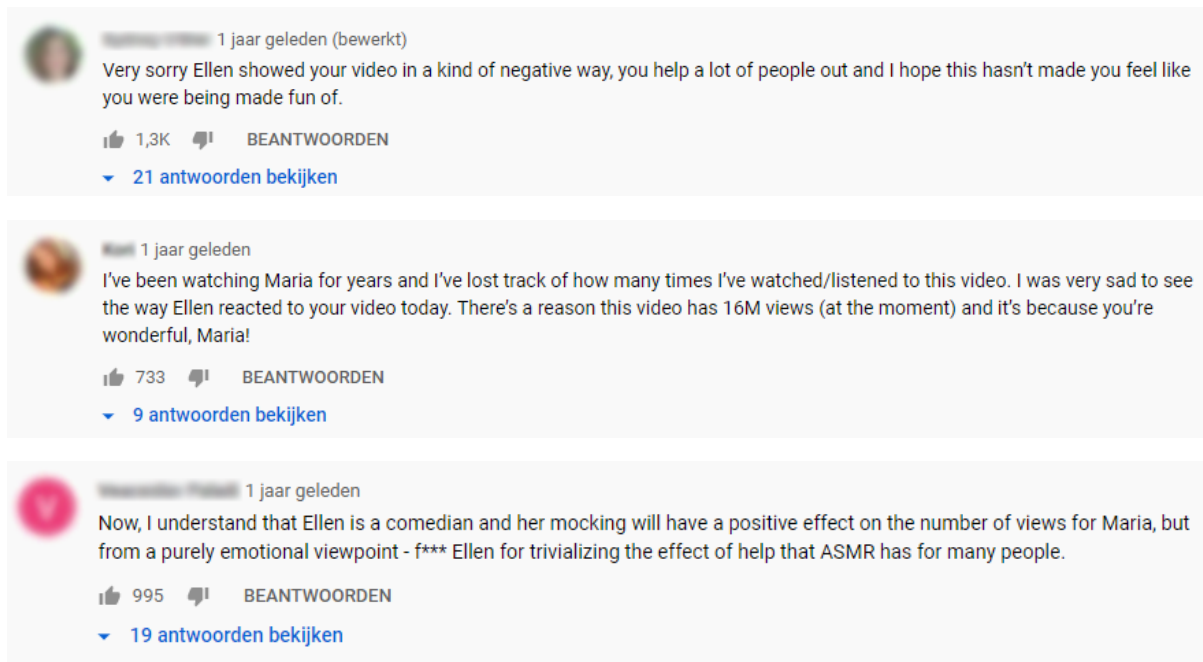
4.3 Demarcation of community boundaries, norms, and language

In general, the attitudes conveyed in the comment section are primarily positive messages or compliments that mostly touch upon the particular features of the particular ASMR video and ASMRtist. Mostly, these comments compliment the ASMRtist for their content, work, personality or appearance. These comments vary in how extensive they are. The few negative comments under the videos about ASMR or the ASMRtist, or other hateful comments are rejected by most of the users by responding or disliking the comment. In this way, people are excluded from the ASMR community in the sense that hateful behaviour towards people of the ASMR community, or mockery of ASMR in general is not accepted.

As an example, the ASMR community performs such kind of boundary work in the comment section under Gentle Whisperings video as users refer to an episode of the popular Ellen DeGeneres show in which this selected video of Gentle Whispering was broadcasted.⁵ DeGeneres framed ASMR and ASMRtist Gentle Whispering in a way that was not accepted by many ASMRers in the community. Consequently, the comment section under this particular video is to a large extent filled with compassionate messages towards ASMRtist Gentle Whispering, demonstrated in Excerpt 1. This particular intertextual reference targeting the specific Ellen Show episode can be viewed as a form of solidarity building across the community, strengthening ties between community members and creating insider and outsider community boundaries. The main message that seemed to underlie comments like these (Excerpt 1), and established a community boundary, was that of taking ASMR seriously.

Excerpt 1: ASMRers defending Gentle Whisperings’ ASMR work after the Ellen DeGeneres episode

⁵ The link to the referred part of the Ellen DeGeneres episode:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qCoADfv55s4>

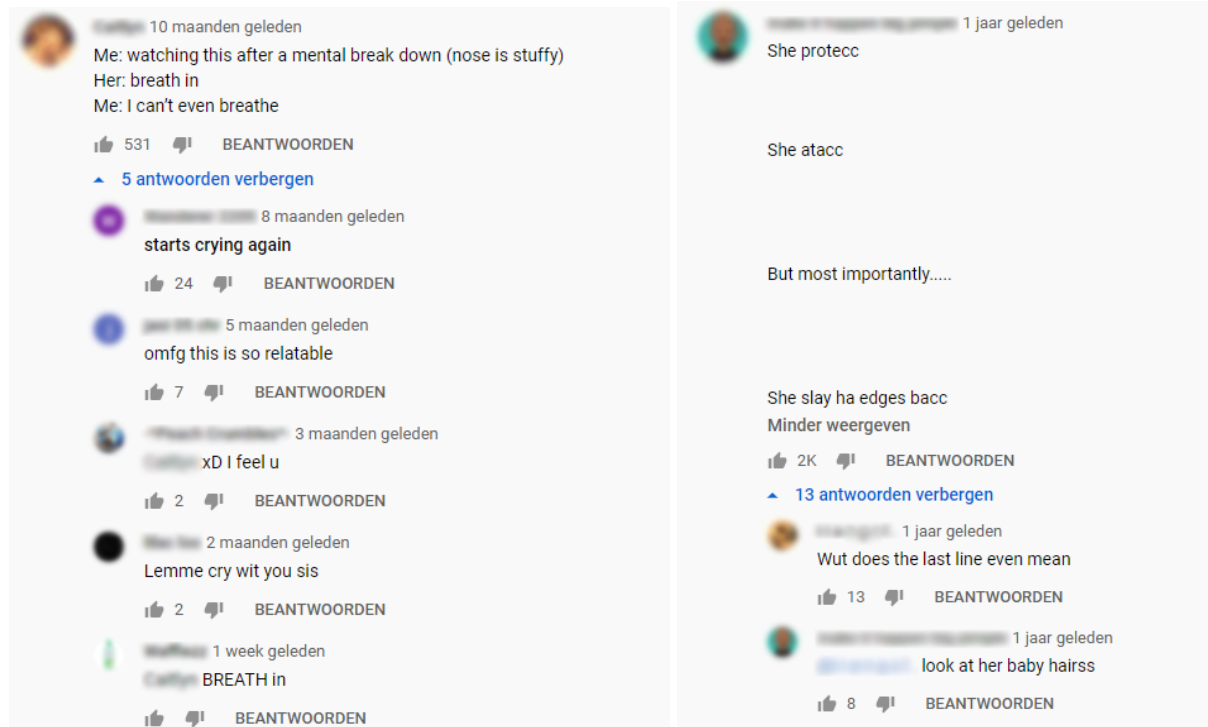


Many of the users in the comment section under ASMR videos attempt to initiate an interaction by writing up a situation or a feeling, most of the time with a humoristic tone, that relates to the content of the video and that they think is relatable for other people watching the video. These relatable types of comments are not only used among the ASMR community but are also often used among other genres of videos on YouTube.

These relatable situations and feeling are often expressed through formulaic expressions (Excerpt 2, left). Some other playful comments are also formulated with a template (Excerpt 2, right). These formulaic expressions belong to the memic-intertextual form within the current online discourse (Blommaert & Varis, 2014). According to Shifman, memes are “small cultural units of transmission (...) which are spread by copying or imitation” (Shifman 2011: 188). Comments like these (Excerpt 2) are resemiotizations of, and derived from, an original meme’s affordances (i.e. the visual architecture of the sign, and the speech act). The memic format becomes an intertextual link which are recognizable for knowing users who would see that these comments are variants from an original meme. The textual adjustments of the original meme redirect the meme towards more specific audiences and reset it in different frames of meaning and use. In this case, relate it to ASMR or (specific elements of) the ASMR video. The use of these formats seems to decrease in time while other trending formats replace them. These types of comments are found under all of the selected YouTube videos and, most of the time, receive most likes and comments. People respond enthusiastically and relate to the piece of writing by liking the comment and responding with similar linguistic responses such as “same”, “omg yes,” or “mood.” Through the using of

memetic comments, users refer to each other by addressing the other commenter, and express agreement which also contributes to solidarity building across the online ASMR community.

Excerpt 2: two comments that display memic formats that are commonly used in YouTube commenting.



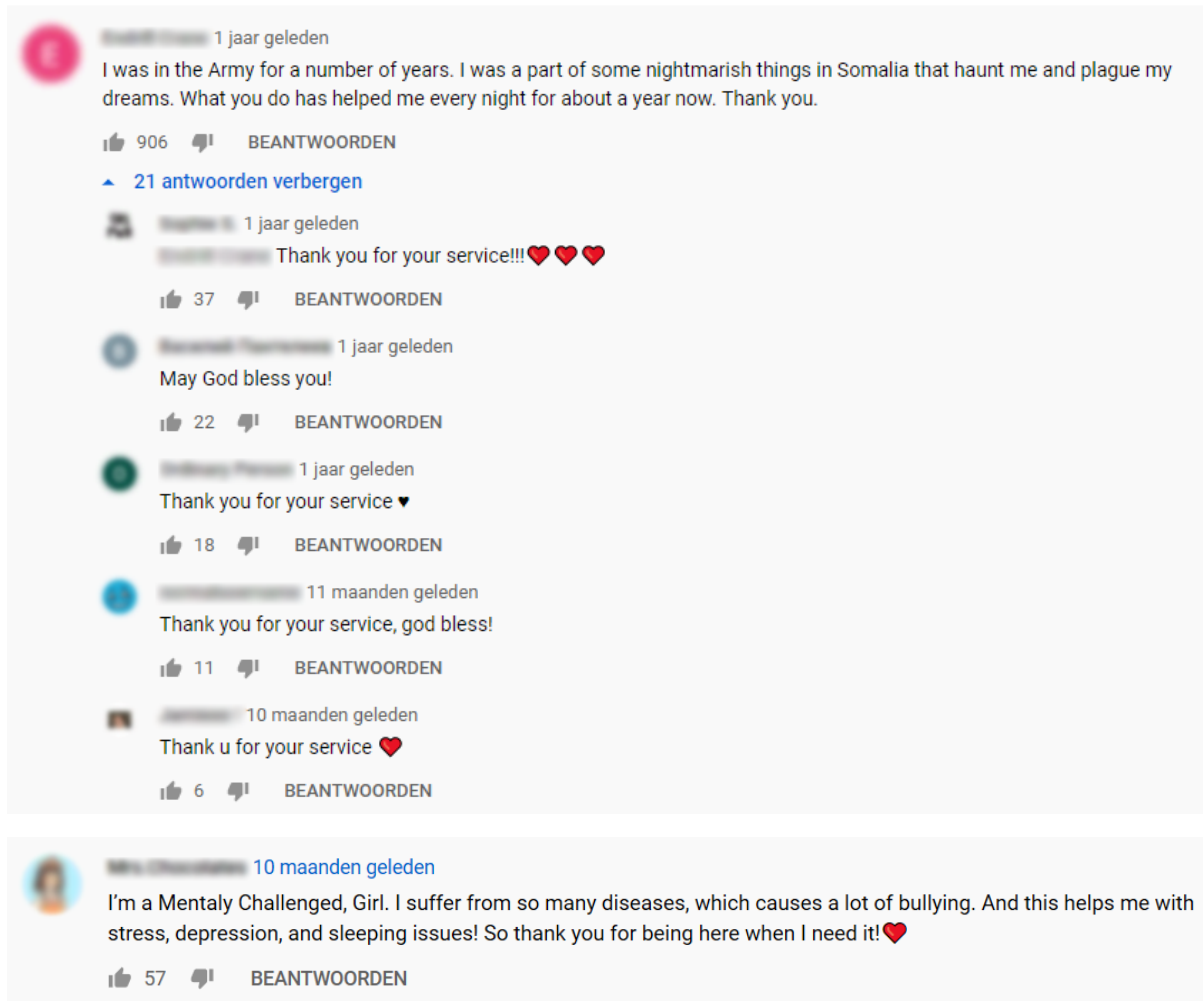
What is also noticeable is that some of the comments convey the same message in the same or in (somewhat) different words – for instance, that ASMR helps with curing insomnia. This repetitive pattern of commenting is observed under all four of the selected videos. I argue, therefore, that these kinds of comments establish community conformity. It also might endorse a particular discourse of the video, for instance the therapeutic discourse around ASMR by addressing how ASMR could help with curing both physical and mental issues, spreading an encouraging and positive message to everyone who reads the comment.

Other comments mainly have a comparative focus and address the detailed features that they see in the video (e.g. appearances of the ASMRtist, household tools, beauty products, language use). With this, users describe a particular feature or material object that is displayed in the video and relate it back to themselves, or a situation in their lives in some way. The attitude that these words convey are most of the time humorous and sarcastic but also sometimes self-sacrificing and self-denigrating. Sometimes, the comparative and relatable aspects are combined in comments.

What is also observed in the comment section is that users are encouraged to share their personal experiences online and interact warm-heartedly with other users in the

comment section. These sorts of comments could be linked to the online disinhibition theory in the sense that many online users publish a rather personal or impactful event in their individual lives. In Excerpt 3 below, an example of such a comment is shown. However, whether online ASMR community members are actually quicker to open-up about their personal experiences among the online ASMR community, than offline cannot be drawn from these observations alone.

Excerpt 3: Users sharing their personal stories



4.4 Online-offline behaviours

The online questionnaire that is adopted for this study (see Appendix 1) revolved around four major items that are relevant to answer the research questions, these include: (1) individual experiences with ASMR videos, (2) setting around watching ASMR videos, (3) interaction within the online ASMR community, and (4) evaluation of the online ASMR community. Necessary to mention is that the digital experience of watching ASMR constitutes of both online and offline dimensions. These are both addressed by means of the written interview results to mainly answer the last sub question of this research study. Conducting thematic

analysis on the interview results, I identified themes in the text data that were related to the research objectives. Once the data files were extracted from the Qualtrics software, cleaned, and put into a common PDF format, the analysis commenced with a close reading of the texts. The following paragraph delves further into the specific themes that were developed around each research objective, capturing core messages reported by respondents.

The first two questions of the online questionnaire zoom in on the ASMRer's personal experiences with ASMR videos. A common theme that is spotted among the interview results was comfortableness. It is found that the main aim for individuals to watch ASMR videos is to relax and get comfortable. As shown in the previous multi-modal semiotic analysis on the video, this comfortableness can express itself in both physiological and psychological ways but mostly by bodily sensations (i.e. shivers, tingles, sleepiness) and is commonly elicited by both audiovisual triggers (especially sound), atmosphere and language. The most likened sorts of ASMR videos among the sample were personal attention and roleplaying videos in which the ASMRtist created an atmosphere that the ASMRer felt relaxed, comfortable, and sleepy in. Other results derived from the specific triggers that made them feel comfortable (e.g. haircutting, tapping, mouth sounds). Examples of comfortableness are evident in these quotations:

- “A calm, comfortable feeling. A tingling sensation on my head, down one side of my face, sometimes down my spine and in my ribs. Once down my leg! Sometimes it rolls up and down my body, sometimes it stays where it is.”
- “I usually feel comfortable, relaxed. Specific triggers during the video make me feel tingles, for example the sounds of tapping on different objects, hair brushing, scratching on surfaces.”
- “Tingling in back of head, around eyes, in between shoulders, and down to mid back. Pleasant and comfortable sensation, often drowsy. Reduced blood pressure and slowed breathing. Close-up sounds, such as whispering around ears, seems to be the strongest trigger.”
- “I don't get tingles, but I do get sleepy and very comfortable. Certain sounds are very relaxing to me.”

With regard to the setting in which the individual watched the ASMR video, all of the respondents indicated that they watch ASMR videos by themselves, mostly in the evening or late at night right before going to sleep. Several of the responses also linked the time of watching to the purpose of watching, which was most of the time to destress, reduce anxiety

and/or depressing thoughts, and simply relax. The majority of respondents has not watched ASMR videos in public places for the reason that it does not suit the unique context of watching ASMR videos. A portion of the respondents wrote that it is awkward to watch in the public sphere, others say that the surroundings of public places distract them from trying to relax with the video. Some of the examples of the participants' perceptions of watching ASMR videos in public places become evident in these quotations:

- “I have never tried it. I feel like I wouldn't be opposed to it for privacy reasons (like I don't feel it's too intimate to listen to it in public), but I feel like the noises in public would bother me.”
- “I try to watch ASMR privately as much as possible, to the point where I watch it only in my room and refrain from ever telling anyone that I enjoy ASMR. I feel like there's an unspoken rule among us ASMR viewers that we must hide it, so I never watch it publicly.”
- “I feel self-conscious about it, like it's a weird thing to do.”
- “I don't like to watch them in public because it can ruin the atmosphere of the videos. It can be uncomfortable to try to relax in public like you would if you were home in bed.”
- “I have watched in public places. I believe in public it's more awkward to watch ASMR, but it does help with social anxiety and can help block out the sounds of city streets and people around you.”
- “It is a quiet private thing. I don't see the point of watching in public.”

It varies on or with which mobile device respondents watch ASMR videos (e.g. mobile phone, laptop, PlayStation, Xbox) and with or without the use of personal devices (i.e. headphones/earbuds). Among the results, the use of the mobile phone was still the most commonly mentioned. What I draw from respondents' answers, is that comfortableness when watching ASMR in the private sphere transforms into uncomfortableness or sometimes even awkwardness in the public sphere. I also deduce from the answers that many ASMRers feel the need to conceal the act of watching ASMR videos from other people (in public). Therefore, the theme of privacy is also significant. I relate this finding to Goffman's theory of dramaturgy where particular norms in public places ask for certain appropriate behaviors of the individual. The ASMR community somehow feels that watching ASMR videos in public is not appropriate and should instead be performed in a private backstage setting.

To continue with the three questions of the online questionnaire that touched upon the

personal interaction with the online ASMR community. The interview results show some variations as to the activity of liking and commenting of participants under ASMR videos. Results range from never liking or commenting under videos, to doing it often on platform such as YouTube and Reddit. I observe a small majority of the results saying that they like but do not comment under videos. The same variations are found among the results on discussions about ASMR (videos) offline. However, most of the respondents indicated that they most of the time discuss ASMR in a safe environment with friends or relatives. The theme of privacy and concealment comes back in these answers. What also becomes apparent is that there is a common view of how “outsiders” view ASMR videos/the ASMR community which, most of the time, consists of negative judgment and misunderstanding. Among the ASMR community, a shared fear of being judged by others (sometimes including relatives) for the reason of watching ASMR videos is quite prevalent. In some members this fear seems to elicit a feeling of shame of which I suggest, leads to deliberate concealment of their choice to watch ASMR. The perceived misunderstanding that outsiders have on ASMR (videos) seems to stress, and sometimes by itself, place the boundaries between the ingroup (the ASMR community) and outgroup. As a response to negative judgment or framing of ASMR (videos), group members either conceal their choices or express their boundaries to defend, maintain or dignify their choices, such as in the Ellen Show example in the discourse analysis section on the comments. The following quotations include this common “fear” of others judging ASMR (videos) and perceived misunderstanding of outsiders:

- “I only rarely discuss ASMR videos with the people really close to me (my boyfriend/best friend). I feel like there still is a stigma around it because a lot of people don’t really know what it is and think it might be weird.”
- “I usually do not discuss ASMR offline, because many people don’t understand ASMR and might think it’s weird.”
- “I hardly ever talk about them with people offline. Most people I know judge me for watching ASMR because they don't understand it.”
- “Other people think it’s odd.”
- “I have discussed ASMR and my experiences a little bit, but it is usually negatively received. Thus, I usually don't discuss it except with my close friend.”

It is interesting to discover how this “fear” might generate differences with respect to social interactions online and offline. In an attempt to discover the online disinhibition effect

in the results, I compared the results about offline interaction behaviours with online social interaction behaviours. By comparing the results, a portion of the interview results show that some respondents are more open about their personal experiences with ASMR in public cyberspace than compared to their expressions in the offline sphere. However, the inactive behaviours of most respondents in the online interactive sphere is consistent with their inactiveness in social interaction offline, and vice versa for active members. Furthermore, it is difficult to prove whether the online disinhibition effect is present for members of the ASMR community since the online platform provides a place where people of interest come together, and for the reason of recognition can be more expressive about themselves, their stories and personal preferences (regarding ASMR). Therefore, the online disinhibition effect does not show up strongly in the written interview results. Additionally, the following examples show that this “fear” is not always present in the results, or does not stop another part of the respondents from discussing the topic both online and offline:

- “I enjoy introducing others to ASMR and explaining why it can be helpful and the different types of ASMR there are.”
- “I have, but not often. When I was a kid, I thought the head-tingles I got from a haircut indicated I was weird or abnormal, because no one else knew what I was talking about. After discovering that ASMR was an actual thing a couple of years ago, I felt slightly more comfortable talking about it. I've gone so far as to discuss it with my stylist and she hooks me up when I get a cut.”
- “Yes because it’s just so satisfying I want to share it.”
- “I have discussed with friends, my parents and my boyfriend. Mostly to explain why I like the sounds and how they affect me just to help them understand.”
- “Yes, I talk about ASMR with friends and family. Half of the people tend to think it’s weird, the other half either watch them or never knew what ASMR was, but experience it. Nothing is better than when you tell someone about ASMR and they go, “Holy shit! I always thought that was just me! It has a name?!””

The above-mentioned quotations display the need of some members to promote the bodily sensation and (mentally) relaxing effect of ASMR that is pursued by the ASMR video. They are seeking for understanding outside the community. Once this understanding is recognized, such as in the latter citation a kind of community feeling gets elicited that is solely based on the shared bodily sensation.

There is no common thread, and responses vary as to the question how the participant

evaluates the ASMR community. A large part of the respondents, evaluate the community positively, stating that it has had an enormous positive impact on their lives. These respondents seem to view themselves as actual members of the group, recognizing the ASMR community. A small part of respondents views the community as toxic and displeasing, pushing themselves away from the rest of the group, some individuals seem to dismiss the existence of the community itself. The latter mostly indicate that they do not feel as if they are part of the community, the only thing they share is the common bodily sensation/relaxing feeling that the ASMR video generates. These respondents emphasize that there are not many communalities among the group other than watching ASMR videos for the sake of the (bodily/mental) effects of ASMR, this once again stressed the “lightness” of the group. Examples of such responses:

- “I try to distance myself from the people and the community and just focus on the video (the final product).”
- “The community? This community does not play a role in my life, other than seeing recommendations for other ASMRtists in comments.”
- “I wouldn’t say I’m a part of the community, I rarely ever interact with other people watching the videos.”
- “I don’t particularly feel like I’m part of the community, maybe because I don’t discuss it much.”

The results of the online observation and written interview seem to be connected to one another. As shown in the multimodal analysis, the intimate discourse that the video is attempting to create, elicits certain offline consumption behaviours, as demonstrated by the written interview, that are suitable based on norms and expected behaviours in different settings. Hence, the relationships between the online ASMR community culture and offline consumption behaviours are appropriately construed by the symbolic interaction perspective of Goffman. Concerning (online) social interaction, the majority of respondents of the written interview do not discuss or speak out their fondness, or preferences of ASMR in the offline setting, mainly due to fear of misunderstanding or condemnation. Most of the written interview respondents also do not necessarily feel the need to discuss ASMR online. I suggest that this is mainly due to the shared aim of the community to get comfortable, relax and/or experience bodily tingles through ASMR videos. Despite the lack of (online) social interaction about ASMR among most participants, most respondents evaluate the community as positive and encouraging, which implies that they do (often) passively engage with the

community, for instance by reading the comments under YouTube videos.

Especially the differences of respondents with regard to engagement in social interaction awaken the question how to decide whether there is talk of an actual community. In essence, a community begins and is built on communicative norms in which an (online) group of people share a system of making sense of the world based on shared expected practices, these include “standards or informal rules that prescribe and proscribe behaviours associated with certain types of people with certain types of relationships” (Hall, 2017). I have discovered by means of the written interview that the one communicative norm that most of the ASMR community members abide by is not sharing (i.e. discussing and watching) ASMR-related content with others, predominantly in the offline sphere. In the analysis of the comments, I have already explored the existence of active norms within the ASMR community on the grounds of certain markers that are used by members to establish the norms of the community, these include, inter alia; there tendency towards negative attributions, remedial work, group specific language, and identity-based humour (Hall, 2017).

Respondents’ answers increasingly varied as the questions progressed from focussing more on the ASMR video itself, and personal preferences to evaluating the community. Despite the member’s differences, they all seem to have the same purpose of watching an ASMR video, which is: to feel comfortable and relax, bodily and/or mentally. This can be connected to the Blommaert’s theory of “light” communities in which a heterogenous group of people comes together for the same video and for this similar purpose, that is; to feel comfortable and get relaxed. The “lightness” of the ASMR community is also expressed through the varied degrees in which people participate in the community, involve in online and offline social interaction.

5 Conclusion & discussion

This study explored ASMR culture on YouTube and investigated audiences' online-offline experiences with ASMR video. The ASMR community is a niche group of interest that is (mainly) developed and maintained through the online public platform YouTube. Similar to other digital cultures, membership of the online ASMR culture acts out both publicly (in this case online, through YouTube) and privately in individuals' offline lives.

Through the adoption of various audiovisual techniques and use of semiotic elements, ASMR videos construct a discourse of intimacy. ASMRtists deliberately choose to create an intimacy discourse by arranging the spatial setting of filming in a way that complies with Goffman's conditions of the backstage setting. More particularly, a private setting is realized by several aspects of the video, including: the set (i.e. place of filming), video composition, display of daily objects, and intimate (non-verbal) language and acts. Furthermore, the videos express a high degree of social presence due to both the high-quality digital mediums to record the footage (i.e. binaural microphones, high-definition camera), little video editing, and the ASMRtist remaining from a small distance to the camera. In addition to the ASMR video, the infrastructural characteristics of YouTube serve the degree of social presence that ASMRtist achieve to create in order to seem (even) more "present" to the viewer, for instance through the buttons of YouTube that encourage users to share, view, like and/or comment on videos. These interactive affordances of YouTube's architectural design help contribute to the formation of a "light" ASMR community in which people can swiftly and easily communicate with each other without actually "knowing" other members. They are connected and form a community through their shared interests in the mental/physical relaxing feeling that the video elicits.

The groundwork of each community is based on its communicative norms that are in this case also shaped by online and offline factors that influence each other. Through online observation of the YouTube comments under ASMR videos, I have shown that there are various community practices that members adopt in online social interaction to shape, defend and maintain the community's norms. More specifically, members search for recognition and in order to achieve that, they adopt different ways to bond with other members, for instance by means of using group-specific language (e.g. intertextual referencing, meme's affordances), performing boundary and remedial work and expressing humor based on the group's identity. For the ASMR community, a prominent boundary marker for members is the requirement to take ASMR and ASMR videos seriously. The sense of groupness is a

result of negotiation through communication. However, this study's findings indicate that not all community members seek for recognition through active (online) discussion.

Therefore, I suggest that we should not hold onto an idealized image of digital community, that is believed to be highly interactive and participatory. The audiences that only watch and never or rarely interact demonstrate that the community is not only negotiated and formed by users, but also by the platform's algorithm. Users often watch particular videos due to YouTube's recommendations which are generated through its algorithm. The inactiveness of members to engage in (online) social interaction about ASMR, as well as the shared purpose of watching ASMR videos, that is to feel more relaxed or get comfortable (through bodily sensations), seem to shape the features of the "lightness" of online ASMR culture. Moreover, group members can simply opt out of or "transcend" above the digitally convergent community place through the features of online engagement, such as the sense of dissociation and anonymity of being behind the screen, and characteristics of YouTube's infrastructural design.

This study has also found that individuals of the ASMR community feel the need to keep ASMR to their selves; watching ASMR videos is a covert activity for individuals in their offline lives. Members' need to conceal is for many members of the community underscored by a fear of being misunderstood or condemned by the outgroup. This complies to Goffman's theory of impression management in which the ASMR member acts according to the "traditional" behavioral divide between the backstage and frontstage. The embodied feature of this type of video appeals to the commonly accepted social norm to neither discuss physical nor psychological sensations, elicited by the video, with others. Therefore, the intimate-gear behavior of the ASMRtist, and the general intimacy discourse that is realized by the ASMR video conduits the watcher to adjust their behavior, both in terms of acts and interaction, in the offline setting. These findings are primarily in line with Goffman's theories of dramaturgy and impression management in which the individual seeks to conform to the group's norms, adapting their behaviors in different settings.

However, there could also be other possible, readily understandable explanations that contribute to the inactiveness of community members in the offline dimension, such as the feeling that the connectedness in the online sphere feels already sufficient for them. As a result, members do not feel the need to find social recognition (as much) in the offline dimension. Social interactive behaviors online did correspond with social interactive behaviors offline. This means that inactive members on the online platform, were also inactive offline. Therefore, the online disinhibition effect could not be precluded in this

research study. Applied to the online-offline nexus debate, this finding suggests that social interactive behavior in the online and offline dimensions are not that easy to separate or view independently from each other. Further research may shed light on this suggestion.

In media and culture studies, we traditionally assume a scenario of reading or watching as disembodied activities in which the mind and the body are separated. Reading books and watching TV shows are metaphorically imaged as a spiritual process, where readers and audiences get the meanings of the content. However, with the development of digital technologies such as augmented and virtual reality, technology is more and more embedded. The body becomes more involved in communicative practices, such as watching ASMR videos in which the ASMRtist is able to “touch” the viewer. This study on ASMR videos demonstrates the possibility of material communicative mediums to become closer to the body. In other words, the materiality of media consumption is illustrated by this study. I, therefore, deem it necessary to understand both the communicative norms online and offline – studying the “hard” physical setting for interaction behind a digital screen when engaging with ASMR-related content, and the sociocultural conventions governing the interactions – to create a multilayered picture of the “framework” behind ASMR culture. Besides studying all aspects of the setting around the viewer, I think it is as essential to study the medium and platform/software through which engagement takes place. To be more precise, this would include the particular characteristics and infrastructure of a medium. To understand YouTube community culture (in general), algorithms could explain certain interactive behaviors on the platform.

In sum, this and other of the few published ASMR studies have shown that the body is capable of reacting to the impulses of digital expressions, in this case ASMR video. In our contemporary society, technological advancements (e.g. virtual reality) are steadily emerging to come even closer to reality and the body, achieving sensory experiences in users. Therefore, this study recommends future research on digital cultures to pay considerate attention to the body, and how digital media are precisely positioned when people consume certain content. Moreover, further research should pay attention to both the infrastructural characteristics of the medium, physical setting, and personal experiences, in terms of mental and physical responses, when studying a digital community’s communicative norms and expressions on highly advanced mediums.

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Appendix 1

Format of the online interview

Questionnaire ASMR, Digital Intimacy & Social Setting – Watching ASMR videos

Filling in this questionnaire will take approximately 15 to 20 minutes.

1. What kinds of ASMR videos do you like the most? (e.g. personal attention, roleplaying videos or food videos, etc.)
2. What types of feeling do you have when watching the video? (e.g. tingling, comfortable, etc.) What content in the video do you think, invoke such a kind of feeling?
3. With whom are you watching the ASMR videos?
4. Can you concretely describe a scenario of you watching an ASMR video?
5. Have you ever watched ASMR videos in public places? How do you feel the public environment plays a role in your watching experiences?
6. Which device(s) do you usually use to watch the videos? Do you use a headphone?
7. Do you often like and comment under ASMR videos?
8. Do you also discuss ASMR videos and your own watching experiences with other people offline? Why or why not?
9. On which platforms do you watch and/or discuss ASMR videos?
10. How do you feel and evaluate the ASMR community?
11. What type of role does this community play in your life?
12. Are there any significant points about ASMR videos that I did not mention but you feel that are very important?

13. Do you have any questions or comments on this written interview?

If you are willing to, you can leave your email address so that we can contact you for further questions.