



Selected Papers of #AoIR2020:  
The 21<sup>st</sup> Annual Conference of the  
Association of Internet Researchers  
Virtual Event / 27-31 October 2020

## “EXACTLY WHAT I NEEDED FOR A GOOD NIGHT’S REST”: TRANSACTIONAL TINGLES AND ASMR AS EMERGING MEDIA GENRE

Jessica Maddox, Ph.D  
Department of Journalism and Creative Media, The University of Alabama

### Abstract

A young, brunette woman sits in a polished, modern bedroom. She wears thick, noise-cancelling headphones and sits behind a binaural microphone. She flutters her fingers next to the mic and begins to speak in a voice only a hair above a whisper. “Tonight,” she says, “I’m going to be humming you to sleep” (Gibi ASMR, 2019). The video, simply titled “ASMR | Humming You to Sleep,” has over one million views. Its creator, the whispering brunette in noise-cancelling headphones, is Gibi ASMR, a YouTube creator who has 2.48 million subscribers and is largely considered among the YouTube ASMR community to be one of its greatest “ASMRtists.” ASMR, or Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response, has become an international phenomenon in recent years, with YouTube creators hailing from around the globe. Additionally, the phenomenon gained cultural prominence when it was featured during a Michelob Ultra beer commercial during the 2019 American National Football League Superbowl, as well as in a feature-length film produced by Reese’s Canada that combined five prominent ASMRtists, whispering, and candy.

But what exactly ASMR is remains fraught with misunderstandings and cultural slippages. ASMR itself is a relatively new term, coined by scientists in 2010, but it describes an age-old biological feeling: the sensation of tingling on the scalp and down the spine. Biologically, it has been compared to fission or paresthesia, and ASMRtists refer to this feeling as *tingles*. However, tingles, combined with the whispering or soft-spoken voices used to induce ASMR in YouTube videos, has rendered ASMR the punchline of cultural jokes, a gag used by late-night comedy hosts, or a social experiment by traditional media outlets like *The Today Show* or *W Magazine* for viral social media videos (videos such as “Cardi B tries ASMR” or “Jennifer Garner tries ASMR are common) (Dickson, 2020). Many also dismiss ASMR as a strange sexual fetish, given the term tingles, and purponents of this view claim that the soft-spoken voices are just sensual (Dickson, 2020). But while specifically sexual ASMR does exist, ASMRtists themselves eschew accusations that ASMR is inherently sexual and insist

Suggested Citation (APA): Maddox, J. (2020, October) “*Exactly What I Needed For a Good Night’s Rest*”: *Transactional Tingles and ASMR as Emerging Media Genre*. Paper presented at AoIR 2020: The 21<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Virtual Event: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

there is more to the craft and the ASMR YouTube community. Additionally, not everyone is capable of experiencing ASMR, which may render the whispering videos odd and confusing.

To this end, this research is informed by the results of a three-year long participant observation and ethnographic study in YouTube's ASMR culture and community in order to define and analyze ASMR as an emerging media genre (see Lüders, Prøitz, and Rasmussen, 2010). While I have never created an ASMR video, I have been active participant in the community as a viewer for eight years. Similar to Nicholas-Brie Guarriello's (2019) ethnographic participant observation of YouTube gaming, this ASMR internet ethnography emerged "as an open event and [was] embedded in everyday online/offline interactions" (p. 1756). What began as a relaxation habit become a research activity, and between February 2017 and February 2020 I watched over 180 hours of ASMR videos. Most individual videos fall between 15-30 minutes, and I watched one video almost every day for three years. Upon conclusion of videos, I wrote memos on the video, which included summations of the video, top viewer comments, and reflections on the interplay of both, as well as my own experiences. Additionally, these video notes are supplemented by public social media posts from ASMRtists discussing their craft. This ethnography culminated in the Fall 2019 launch of the Zees app, which was created by most of the ASMRtists I had studied for three years. I continued my work for a few months post-launch to see what, if anything, would change in the ASMR community.

I argue ASMR is best understood as a genre, situated between the varying content possibilities of the text and the affordances of YouTube as media and platform. Genres "play a pivotal role in connecting micro-practices with macro structures" and are "an intermediary level between the levels of media and text, however influenced by both" (Lüders et al., 2010, p. 949, 952). The textual and the micro connect with the macro-level of YouTube, which enable and constrain capabilities of ASMR as a genre. Specifically, my research found ASMR draws on YouTube dynamics such as platform governance, algorithms, and monetization. It also draws on textual strategies and performances that are rooted in care, creativity, affect, and intimacy. Because other ASMR studies have examined the affect and intimacy of ASMR (Andersen, 2015; Gallagher, 2016), I focus primarily on the interplay between care and creativity with platform governance, algorithms, and monetization.

By analyzing the relationship between platform governance, algorithms, monetization, care, and creativity, I identify a key component of the ASMR genre as *transactional tingles*. I define transactional tingles as the interaction between ASMRtist and viewer, in which the viewer receives a form of relaxation in exchange for clicks, likes, and views in the internet's attention economy. Both parties (ideally) receive what they want out of the interaction – the viewer is relaxed, or has their anxiety alleviated, and the ASMRtist bolsters their digital presence through clicks and views, which may also result in financial capital. Far from conceptions and metaphors of pornography, ASMR and transactional tingles have more in common with the artist/patron system of the Renaissance era (Wolff, 1993), or the Kickstarter campaigns of the twenty-first century, in which entertainers draw on their audiences for financial support (Booth, 2015). Both models indicate how the ASMRtist and the viewer receive something in this mutually

beneficial interaction. The culmination of my ethnographic research was the announcement of the ASRMtist-driven app, Zees, which shows how creators of emerging media genres harness the affordances of participatory culture to push the boundaries of said genre, while maintaining committed to the key principles for creator and viewer. In this case, such a principle is transactional tingles, ensuring relaxation and anxiety and insomnia alleviation for others, and fair monetization policies for creators themselves. Transactional tingles remain regardless of where the ASMR content is housed in the internet's attention economy, and creators can eschew the limits of one platform in favor of pushing the boundaries on a genre.

## References

- Andersen, Joceline. (2015). Now you've got the shiveries: Affect, intimacy, and the ASMR whisper community. *Television & New Media*, 16(8), 683–700.
- Booth, Paul. (2015). Crowdfunding: A Spimatic application of digital fandom. *New Media & Society*, 17(2), 149–166.
- Dickon, EJ. (2020, February 20). An Oral History of ASMR. *Rolling Stone*.  
<https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/asmr-oral-history-whisper-video-soothing-sleep-youtube-954423/>
- Gallagher, Rob. (2016). Eliciting euphoria online: The aesthetics of “ASMR” video culture. *Film Criticism*, 40(2), 1–15.
- Gibi ASMR (2019, November 21). ASMR | Humming You to Sleep [video]. YouTube.  
Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KKrqPB3O46E>
- Guarriello, Nicholas-Brie. (2019). Never give up, never surrender: Game live streaming, neoliberal work, and personalized media economies. *New Media & Society*, 21(8), 1750–1769.
- Lüders, Marika; Prøitz, Lin; Rasmussen, Terje. (2010). Emerging personal media genres. *New Media & Society*, 12(6), 947–963.
- Wolff, Janet. (1993). *The Social Production of Art*. (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). NYU Press.