

The ambiguity of technology in ASMR experiences

Four types of intimacies and struggles in the user comments on YouTube

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Abstract

Autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR) is a tingling, static-like sensation in response to specific triggering audio and visual stimuli. Within recent years, ASMR has mostly been associated with videos on YouTube (technologically mediated ASMR) dedicated to make the users “tingle”, relax, and feel at ease. In this article, I explore the ambiguity of technology in relation to the ASMR experience and theoretically investigate how viewer-listeners might struggle to obtain an intimate and parasocial interaction in a technologically mediated ASMR context. The article introduces four types of intimacies as well as theoretical concepts of mediated intimacy, immediacy, and parasocial interaction, and I discuss these intimacies and concepts in relation to illustrative comments by some of the pacesetting power users of ASMR.

Keywords: ASMR, YouTube, mediated intimacy, immediacy, parasocial interaction

Introduction

Autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR) is a physiological response and multisensory phenomenon in which auditory and visual stimuli cause a relaxing, tingling, static-like sensation across the scalp, back of the neck, and sometimes other areas (Barratt & Davis, 2015). ASMR can be triggered in daily life, for instance by soft sounds, relaxing voices, light touch, massage, or physical grooming; but, within recent years, ASMR has mostly been associated with videos on YouTube (technologically mediated ASMR) dedicated to make the users “tingle”, relax, and feel at ease. The most popular ASMR triggers include whispering, personal attention, crisp sounds, and slow movements (Barratt & Davis, 2015). ASMR culture today centres on YouTube (Gallagher, 2018), and new ASMR videos are uploaded daily and include everything from sound assortment videos with auditory triggers to point-of-view (POV) role-play videos, in which everyday activities (like going to the doctor’s office or getting a massage) are reenacted and performed in a sonically and visually close-up, amplified ASMR manner.

Klausen, H. B. (2021). The ambiguity of technology in ASMR experiences: Four types of intimacies and struggles in the user comments on YouTube. *Nordicom Review*, 42(S4), 124–136. <https://doi.org/10.2478/nor-2021-0045>

Technologically mediated ASMR is part of the turn towards therapeutic tools, or self-medicating media, and is thus also part of the mindfulness movement (Fredborg et al., 2018; Gallagher, 2016; Nathoo, 2016), along with meditation apps and playlists offering soothing sounds and tranquil narratives in order to make the users relax and fall asleep. Studies have shown that despite the soothing qualities of ASMR, the ASMR community frequently struggles with the use of the technology involved (Klausen, 2016). However, the term “struggle” can be understood as a dual concept in this regard. This article could just as easily have explored the struggles that ASMR users have when turning to technology and seeking out ASMR videos on YouTube in order to feel better when struggling to fall asleep or feeling lonely, depressed, or anxious (Barratt & Davis, 2015; Poerio, 2016; Poerio et al., 2018). However, in this article, I discuss the struggles that can arise *after* the users have plugged in their headphones and typed in “ASMR” in YouTube’s search bar. ASMR videos are built upon “a technological assemblage that may include complex configurations of specialized microphones, high-definition cameras [...] computer software, telecommunication cables, radio signals, laptops, phones, tablets, headphones, and more” (Waldron, 2017: para. 3). The very construct of ASMR videos is thus inherently intertwined with and fully dependent on technology. Essentially, ASMR videos – and particularly role-play videos – seek to establish a form of intimacy, presence, and parasocial interaction through technology. However, this is not always accomplished, as we will see in some of the user comments later. In particular, some users struggle with technology and are reminded of the (nonworking or flawed) mediation of ASMR when watching a video on YouTube, while others struggle to uphold a willing suspension of disbelief.

I define struggle not as a way of fighting or resisting, but rather as a way “to experience difficulty and make a very great effort in order to do something” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021b). In this definition lies an ambiguity. Struggling in terms of experiencing ASMR is thus understood not as a question of either–or. I am not interested in whether or not ASMR causes struggling – rather, I am interested in the ambiguous nuances that are at play in experiencing ASMR through mediation.¹

In this article, I explore the ambiguity of technology and theoretically investigate how viewer-listeners might struggle to obtain an intimate and parasocial interaction in a technologically mediated ASMR context. The article introduces four types of intimacies as well as theoretical concepts of mediated intimacy, immediacy, and parasocial interaction, and I discuss these intimacies and concepts in relation to illustrative comments by some of the pacesetter power users of ASMR. A secondary goal of this study is to add to the existing limited body of knowledge regarding ASMR, mediation, and intimacy, and especially research dealing with the struggling aspects of technologically mediated ASMR (Andersen, 2015; Bennett, 2016; Harper, 2020; Manon, 2018; Poerio, 2016; Smith & Snider, 2019; Waldron, 2017).

Intimacies

Traditionally, intimacies have been associated with physical proximity, familiarity, privileged knowledge, emotional attachments, trust, and a form of closeness (Jamieson, 2013; Zelizer, 2005). According to the Cambridge Dictionary (2021a), the quality or condition of being intimate correspondingly includes three different meanings: physi-

cal, informational, and emotional. In mediated intimacies, there are constructions of intimacy in situations in which individuals not familiar with one another, and across distances, create feelings of intimacy and engage in intimate practices with one another (Andreassen et al., 2018).

ASMR videos – and especially ASMR role-play videos – take on the aesthetics of intimacy; what intimacy usually *looks* like, *sounds* like, and *feels* like in terms of several of the above-mentioned traditional ways of viewing intimacies, but in a mediated form. One could argue that ASMR videos establish a distant intimacy, an experience of intimacy in the absence of normal definitions of physical proximity (Andersen, 2015), through visual and auditory proximity, immediacy, and embodied animating.

More than 60 years ago, sociologists Donald Horton and Richard Wohl coined the term parasocial interactions to describe the illusion of face-to-face relationships between a performer on television and the audience – a kind of intimacy at distance. In 1956, they wrote: “We call [the illusion of intimacy in parasocial relationships] an illusion because the relationship between the persona and any member of his audience is inevitably one-sided, and reciprocity between the two can only be suggested” (Horton & Wohl, 1956: 217). John B. Thompson later called the mediated quasi-interaction that is relatively open-ended and predominantly monological, but constituting a form of interaction that creates distinctive kinds of interpersonal relationships, “non-reciprocal intimacy at a distance” (Thompson, 2005: 33–34). This is true of technologically mediated ASMR as well. Watching and listening to ASMR on YouTube “entails no actual touch; all participants are, in reality, alone” (Ahuja, 2013: 445). Most often, ASMR is recorded and consumed asynchronously in a two-dimensional audiovisual format. Even so, there is a continuous theme of intimacy intrinsically tied to ASMR (Andersen, 2015; Klausen, 2019; Waldron, 2017).

Four types of intimacies in ASMR role-play videos

In order to explain why this is the case, I will turn to the work of Misha Kavka and Rachel Berryman and apply their theoretical concept of intimacy on YouTube to ASMR role-play videos. Drawing on a theory regarding television as a technology of intimacy, along the lines of Horton and Wohl, Kavka (2008: 7) argues that “television fulfils its function as a technology of intimacy; by bringing things spatially, temporally and emotionally close”. Berryman and Kavka (2017) bring the theory up to date by regarding YouTube videos as a logical extension of televisual technologies of intimacy, in which immediacy and the feeling of proximity are evoked and encourage the formation of affective relationships between audiences and the content. So, despite the fact that the ASMRtist on screen is physically located in one place and the user in another, it might feel as if there is a spatial and temporal closeness that is inseparable from emotional proximity (Kavka, 2008). In arguing that YouTube videos can be viewed as a logical extension of televisual technologies of intimacy, I thus provide a classification which is partly inspired by Berryman and Kavka (2017), introducing four types of intimacies in connection with ASMR videos: spatial, temporal, social, and embodied.

Spatial intimacy in ASMR videos is one of the most noticeable features of the genre, as it has to do with proximity and physical intimacy (one of the meanings of being intimate in the Cambridge Dictionary as referenced earlier) – or the *feeling* of being

close despite physical distance. Usually, spatial intimacy implies being within touching distance, which is exactly what is reenacted in ASMR videos. More often than not, the ASMRtist on screen is positioned rather close to the camera (visual proximity) – often accompanied by a first-person point-of-view (see, e.g., Gentle Whispering ASMR, 2019; Tony Bomboni ASMR, 2019) – and the sound is amplified and close-up (auditory proximity), and recommended to be listened to through headphones. The ASMRtist typically reaches out to the camera (as if it were the viewer’s face) – and sometimes even asks for permission to do so. For instance, when “shaping, trimming and plucking your eyebrows” (WhispersUnicorn, 2016), the visual actions associated with grooming eyebrows are performed just above the camera, resembling where the eyebrows would be located from the customer-in-person’s point of view. Some videos even use 360° virtual reality (VR) technology, enabling users to “take a look around” in the video in order to create presence and immersion (see, e.g., Cosmic Tingles ASMR, 2016; Gentle Whispering ASMR, 2015). Combining VR with 3D binaural sound (a technique designed to elicit three-dimensional tactile sounds) makes it possible to create a parahaptic interaction; a form of embodied technologically mediated presence in which it feels as if one is being touched by sound (Klausen, 2019).

Temporal intimacy evokes immediacy, meaning the quality of placing the viewer directly in the same space as the objects viewed by “ignoring or denying the presence of the medium and the act of mediation” (Bolter & Grusin, 2000: 11). Being a time-based medium, a video links time with space and creates a sense of aliveness. The “here and now”, along with the (a)liveness (of the video and voice, see Scannell, 2010), creates a form of presence that is needed in order to obtain an intimate encounter (or experience).

Social intimacy basically has to do with the possibility of achieving a parasocial interaction through mediation, which has already been mentioned. It is also tied to both the emotional and informational intimacies (two of the three meanings of being intimate in the Cambridge Dictionary). Emotional intimacy is most tangibly expressed through the one-way direct addressing in ASMR role-play videos, in which the ASMRtist asks the imagined audience how they are and “looks them in the eye”. This could be called a form of embodied animating (Choe, 2019), in which a dialogue is constructed by a speaker that animates another’s voice in the presence of that other. ASMR interaction is thus built upon a dynamic of leaving open a linguistic, or rhetorical, and performative blank space. We, the users, are supposed to fill in our own answers, out loud or internally, as we see fit. And the ASMRtist leaves space and time for us to do so. With respect to the informational intimacy, one could argue that the exchange of information is just as much present in the comment sections as it is in the videos, where the ASMRtists share emotional and everyday information about themselves – for instance in the video *Whispered Cuppa Chat*, in which an ASMRtist shares a (whispered) personal life update (WhispersRed ASMR, 2017).

Embodied intimacy is an essential category in ASMR videos because ASMR videos are designed to trigger an effervescent, bodily response. As Paula Clare Harper (2020: 2) argues: “In ASMR, the intimacy is intensified through the primacy of the body: the sensuality and physicality of the content being created and consumed, and the centrality of its visceral, carnal effects”. In this regard, the (whispering) voice is particularly important in creating an experience of a social, intimate presence which is also tied to the temporal intimacy due to the fact that sound is transient and simultaneous at the moment of listening.

Methodology

As mentioned above, I explore in this article the ambiguity of technology in relation to the ASMR experience and theoretically investigate how a viewer-listener might struggle to obtain an intimate and parasocial interaction in a technologically mediated ASMR context. ASMR is a mediated phenomenon, a bodily and emotional response, and it is interesting to explore how this potential ambiguity is framed linguistically by some of its users in their comments. Based on prior empirical field research rooted in ethnographic, inductive methods inspired by grounded theory (Klausen, 2016), this article takes over where previous research left off. In the previous study (Klausen, 2016), 64 pages of screenshots of user comments on YouTube and Reddit were collected, and four categories stood out from the sample of linguistic framings provided by the users. One of these categories was called “mediated modes of expression” and consisted of comments concerning the technology through which ASMR was mediated. The majority of these comments were about the ways that technology helped to create an intimate encounter with the ASMRtist despite the mediation, although *only* when users attuned themselves to ASMR – a reservation which caused some users to struggle. What informed the starting point of this current article was thus the challenges that were found within the category of mediated modes of expression from the 2016 study, which has sensitised me (Blumer, 1969) to look at comments using the concept of struggling as an analytical lens.

In this article, I draw on theoretical thematic analysis (inspired by Braun & Clark, 2006) in interpreting symbolic constructions of social and cultural meanings – similar to Stuart Hall’s (1997) notion of cultural representation – that have to do with the theme of struggling. The comments included in this article have been collected deductively using an unobtrusive, or non-reactive, observation method. What has guided me towards finding the illustrative comments has been the overall theme of struggling in relation to the four types of intimacies introduced above, as what users often struggle with is obtaining one (or more) of these intimacies.

I am aware that comments online have limitations in terms of enunciation, both empirically and ethically. First, online material like YouTube comments is text-based, and the comments are limited in terms of the communicative clues that are present in face-to-face situations, such as body language, intonation, and facial expressions, as well as context and situation of use. In comments, only the actual textual message, along with the use of emojis and textual expressions of emotions, actions or the like, is available. Second, I only have access to the digital footprints of active users leaving behind a comment – and thus not to the majority of users, who only view and listen to ASMR content without leaving behind a visible data trace. This explains the necessity of calling the users making comments presented in this article “pacesetting power users of ASMR”. Third, most users on YouTube post anonymously (or under a pseudonym in the form of a username), giving rise to issues of authenticity (as discussed by Kozinets, 2010). However, regarding the latter, it should be noted that I am not concerned with whether the comments posted constitute an authentic textual transmission of the ASMR experience. Rather, I consider these comments to be an ineluctable part of the multimodal phenomenon that ASMR is; comprised of not only audiovisual material (videos), but also textual elements (comments), algorithmic options (suggested videos), and interactive calls for action (like, share, subscribe). Along with the other elements, the comments are part of what users are presented with when they seek out ASMR content on YouTube.

I have chosen to apply situational ethics and have focused on reasoned considerations regarding the specific situation (Tracy, 2013). More specifically, this includes careful consideration of the fact that the comments used in this study are publicly available and written under pseudonyms (YouTube usernames), with no personally sensitive information tied to either the username or the comment itself. In addition, with regard to levels of vulnerability, harm, and rights (Markham & Buchanan, 2012), I have assessed the comments one by one and found them to be not compromising for the users.

Sampling

Purposefully targeting and selecting comments from YouTube was the natural choice, as the platform, as mentioned above, remains a hotbed for online ASMR culture. For this study, I have specifically examined comments posted below POV role-play videos, as they particularly invite ASMR users to immerse themselves into an aesthetically intimate narrative that insists on a certain level of intensity, emotion, play, and empathy. I have selected illustrative comments meeting criteria of popularity (attention cluster videos with the most views from ASMRtists with most subscribers) and richness (videos that all contain distinctive features as described in the classification of the four intimacies as well as having active, resonant comment sections) from three ASMR role-play videos:

1. *ASMR Personal Attention to Help You Sleep* (ASMRDarling, 2018)
2. *[ASMR] Up-Close Face Touching & Gentle Ear Whispers* (Gibi ASMR, 2018)
3. *ASMR Get Your Groom On Brushing Soft Spoken* (Gentle Whispering ASMR, 2017)

All of the comments quoted in this article (and more) are preserved in screenshots. I have read and purposefully selected comments in 2019, after the videos had been published for some time. The selection of comments was inherently biased, as I wanted to analyse comments that had to do with the theme of struggling in relation to the theoretical classification of intimacies as mentioned above. I am aware that this method of sampling is highly reliant on my own preconceptions and analytical stance, and I grant that the method is ultimately based on my own judgment call. Yet, I find the method to be valuable and qualitatively sensible, as it is based on rigorous research on ASMR – something that I have been involved in since 2013. Moreover, being an ASMR user myself, I am highly immersed in the ASMR community and its practices. I will thus be inevitably biased going into the field, as the emotional, bodily, and social situation of the researcher – in the words of Nancy Baym and Annette Markham (2009: xix) – “has an impact on all the choices we make in the field, including choices about how we approach the field, collect and interpret data, and represent our work”.

Findings

In this section, I return to the four types of intimacies introduced above. Situating and contextualising comments gathered for this study, I analyse and discuss theoretical concepts of immediacy, telepresence, willing suspension of disbelief, and imagining – while returning to the notion of parasocial interaction and the question of how technology can be ambiguous in the case of technologically mediated ASMR. I am aware that introducing

major additional theoretical concepts here calls for elaborate discussions for which there is no room in this article. I have decided to refer to the concepts briefly in a deliberately peripheral way (for more elaborate discussions of the notions of immediacy and telepresence, see Klausen, 2016, 2019; Klausen & Have, 2019).

“Here and now” – Spatial and temporal intimacies

As all three role-play videos used close-up POV visuals and amplified binaural sound, many comments focus on spatial (here) and temporal (now) intimacy, meaning (the feeling of) being proximate and present, or live, despite physical distance and temporal displacement. As Kai Tuuri and Henna-Riikka Peltola note when describing ASMR videos: “the viewer can literally *feel* present in the experience, caressing hair or whispering in ears, although in reality the viewer is alone at the computer with headphones on [emphasis original]” (Tuuri & Peltola, 2019: 353). The theme of shared space finds expression in comments by users like Wolf Hound, who says: “We might just be people on our phones watching you, but it really feels like you’re here. The comfort that you give me is so soothing” (Gentle Whispering ASMR, 7 May 2017). The spatial and temporal intimacies expressed by Wolf Hound tap into a discussion of real versus virtual, here versus there, and then versus now, all of which seem intertwined, and perhaps even inseparable, in the case of technologically mediated ASMR. It seems to be the case that the better the (quality of the) technology, the stronger the tingles (Barratt et al., 2017). The user called MauraneShape also describes an experience of a mediated, immediate presence (Lombard & Ditton, 1997) or telepresence, that is, “the media-enabled feeling of ‘really being there’ with someone else, over a physical distance” (Senft, 2008: 56), when commenting: “I can feel the brush on my face” (Gentle Whispering ASMR, 7 May 2017), which then goes beyond the spatial and temporal intimacies and adds to it a dimension of (para)haptic touch (see Klausen, 2019). Another example is a user called Hilde Hewson, who leaves behind a comment expressing gratitude for being provided with a social service that is usually tied to the physical world: “Thankyou [*sic*] for the neck and shoulder massage...I needed it!” (Gentle Whispering ASMR, 7 May 2017). In these cases, the role-play videos succeed in providing spatial and temporal intimacies by allowing the ASMRtist to get close visually as well as sonically – and even emotionally, if the user allows this to happen. There is an implicit vulnerability at play here, and a belief that the ASMRtist will not abuse the trust that comes with gaining the immersive auditory (and emotional) attention of the viewer-listeners. For instance, the user called Ismail B writes: “Imagine if she [the ASMRtist] suddenly screams into the microphone” (ASMR Darling, 2 May 2018), which emphasises just how much trust is invested in the ASMRtist whispering and making close-up sounds that encourage the viewer-listener to turn up the volume in order to hear the nuances in the auditory triggers. If they wanted to, an ASMRtist could severely frighten – or hurt – the viewer-listener, as the ASMRtist has complete control. By contrast, the options of the viewer-listener for self-defence are reduced because they are reliant on their headphones.

This leads us to cases in which users do in fact struggle to immerse themselves in the ASMR experience, because they are suddenly interrupted by a loud advertisement, for instance, when they are trying to relax or fall asleep, as noted by the user called Lilly: “Me: turns up to full volume. Ad: SWEET CAROLINE BUM BUM BUM. Me: JESUS

CRAP” (ASMR Darling, 2 May 2018). The same goes for the user Kwauh Sauwnh, who is getting ready to immerse herself into an ASMR video when she is interrupted: “Me: ahhh finally the end of the day. time to relax. puts headphones in. volume up. HI AND WELCOME TO HEADSPACE! Hearing has left the chat” (Gibi ASMR, 10 May 2018). The users called K-Will and Peyton Alexandria also underline what it is like when faulty technology gets in the way of keeping one’s senses tuned in to an ASMR video. K-Will writes: “The struggle of waking up tangled in headphones” (Gentle Whispering ASMR, 7 May 2017). In this case, the user seems to have fallen asleep while listening to an ASMR video, and then finds himself both imaginatively and physically entangled with the enabling technology (the wired headphones plugged into his device). Peyton Alexandria also notes, “You know what sucks more than anything...having only one earbud working” (Gentle Whispering ASMR, 7 May 2017), which is a comment on the struggle to listen to binaural ASMR recording in which both earbuds have to work in order to reproduce the sound correctly, thereby creating tingles most effectively. With only one earbud, only half the sound is present and the immersion, immediacy, and intimacy that has been established thanks to technology is lost.

“Going along with it” – embodied and social intimacies

As mentioned above, I have specifically examined comments posted below POV role-play videos for this study, as they invite the users to play along with the situation being created. In order to do this, ASMR videos must rely on a willing suspension of disbelief – or a contract of fiction: an (implicit) agreement between the ASMRtist and user that the narrative of the video is fictional. In other words, such videos should be viewed and received on their own terms, and the users must “go along with it, even just a tiny bit, for it to work” (Bennett, 2016: 131). It is thus not only the performance of the ASMRtist that is crucial to the ASMR experience – and the contract of fiction – but just as much the performance of the audience, or users, who need to bring their imagination into play. Anthony Townsend and Brian Mennecke (2013: 69) note: “We know that virtual worlds are artificial. Nonetheless, in order to experience them as spectators/participants, we need to temporarily accept their reality, or, more precisely, suspend our disbelief of the artifice itself”.

ASMR is inherently a bodily, multisensory phenomenon, and the main aim of watching and listening to an ASMR video is to get the effervescent tingles. In triggering these tingles through a mediated outlet, a connection between the bodies on each side of the screen is established. Despite the technological assemblage, the embodied and social intimacies in relation to ASMR videos are closely connected, in that the embodied intimacy is more easily established when feeling a sense of social intimacy, as pointed out by Poerio and colleagues (2018) in their study of ASMR in relation to changes of affect and physiology. They concluded that ASMR videos were associated with increased feelings of connectedness due to the social and interpersonal context in which ASMR is triggered. Moreover, Smith and colleagues (2017: 362) showed that participants reported that “the intensity of their ASMR tingles was larger when the actors in the videos addressed the viewer directly rather than depicting a scene from a third-person perspective”. Therefore, in order to get the tingles most effectively, the user must entrust the ASMRtist and go along with the POV first-person role-play and direct style of ad-

dress, as well as honouring the contract of fiction, which means considering the videos as their own genre – a deliberate pretence of play, borrowing some of the aesthetics of intimacy as we know it.

Below I list a few examples of user comments that clearly state when the contract of fiction has been honoured – or not. Tokam Nich, for instance, reenacts the conversation from the video, plotting in his own answers, while maintaining the responses of the ASMRtist on screen. He writes: “‘so how’s life been lately’ – ‘pretty good, just bought a dog’ – ‘i understand, life just kind of really sucks sometimes’ – ‘wait... what? i love the little guy’” (ASMR Darling, 2 May 2018). The result is rather humorous, but it also illustrates how quickly the intended caring discourse can be disrupted, if the audience does not go along with the pretence. Another example is the user called Minny Patrick, who fails to suspend her disbelief when she states: “This camera must be having the time of it’s [*sic*] life” (ASMR Darling, 2 May 2018) on the video by ASMR Darling. Within this lies an ambiguity, as the role-play videos afford (shared) imagining and empathy (traits that are proven characteristics of ASMR users, according to Fredborg et al., 2017), yet these qualities are abandoned by some users in the comments. Ryan Martin almost poetically describes the ambiguity in creating intimacy through technology by leaving behind a comment that is ambiguous in itself: “Imagine having the responsibility and privilege of tucking in millions of people every night” (Gibi ASMR, 10 May 2018). Here, the user indicates the impossibility of tucking someone in in the traditional sense, as this usually requires physical proximity and simultaneity. However, the act of tucking in millions of people in fact becomes possible through mediation. The feeling that a video is being addressed directly to you, despite the fact that it is publicly available and watched asynchronously, can only be achieved if the viewer-listener is able and willing to suspend their disbelief.

As stated above, one way of establishing social intimacy is through direct addressing and embodied animating, in which the performer, or ASMRtist, acts as if a user were physically copresent with her. One recurring example of embodied animating in ASMR role-play videos is the linguistic and social act of asking for consent. As NerdyGothKitty (Gibi ASMR, 10 May 2018) and LaCross Baginske (Gibi ASMR, 10 May 2018) note, respectively, “I really love how Gibi always asks for consent before face touching” and “I love that she always asks before doing something to ‘us’ :)”. Another example is provided by the user called monica trejo, who plays out an interaction involving embodied animating in which she inserts her own responses to what Gibi ASMR asks: “Her: I’ll be touching ur [*sic*] face if you want me to? Me: Yes please. Her: Okay! Me: YAY” (Gibi ASMR, 10 May 2017).

Discussion

I have analysed comments that relate to the four types of intimacies – and struggles to create them – that are most often at play in ASMR role-play videos. However, when talking about intimacy – whether it be spatial, temporal, embodied, or social – some questions arise: What or whom are these intimacies directed towards – the ASMR user or their devices? And how can technology be seen as ambiguous in this regard? On the one hand, as noted previously, (mediated) intimacy is encouraged by using techniques such as binaural sonic recording and visual close-ups as well as role-play narratives that

remind users of real-life experiences, which are usually associated with physical touch. On the other hand, one could argue that no matter how parahaptic the ASMR experience might feel, there is no way to escape the physical distance and temporal displacement involved in the situation.

With regard to the latter, Hugh S. Manon (2018: 232) argues that ASMR emphasises a pseudo-interactivity delivering a constant reminder of “its own status as ersatz attainment”. Manon thus questions whether the ASMR users in the comments actually feel cared for, despite what they say, because this care is always directed towards an object. “It is not actual consistent care”, Manon argues, “that ASMR aims to produce, but instead a self-evidently artificial going-through-the-motions of what care is supposed to look and sound like” (Manon, 2018: 237). Emma Bennett (2016: 133) agrees with Manon to some extent in stating that the performance of care “is directed towards this hardware, these devices”. Emma Waldron (2017) also questions whether the intimacy in ASMR videos is in fact directed just as much towards the medium as the user, making the intimacy of ASMR videos deeply imbricated with the technological medium itself.

We normally feel that intimacy requires the close proximity of others and close connections involving friendship or personal knowledge. By contrast, ASMR videos offer only mediated proximity and one-way communication by virtue of the pre-recorded video format. The intimacy is, in more than one sense, mediated. However, as Waldron (2017) also argues, mediation does not necessarily imply inauthenticity. In fact, intimacy can be established despite the absence of some of the components that we usually associate with being intimate, as illustrated in the comments above. The lack of social and corporeal copresence even seems to be essential to the technologically mediated ASMR experience, as it “allows viewers to relax into the sounds offered by ASMR without having to account for, or navigate, social interactions” (Smith & Snider, 2019: 5). The ASMR experience is not like going to get a massage, because the viewer is not obliged to socially interact with the person in front of them on the screen. The user is thus free from the struggles that might accompany physical and social interaction; a struggle that is nonexistent in technologically mediated ASMR.

Horton and Wohl’s (1956: 215) notion of parasocial interactions and Thompson’s nonreciprocal intimacy at a distance are often characterised by “no sense of obligation, effort, or responsibility on the part of the spectator” – just as the previously mentioned quote from Smith and Snider suggests. The absence of a sense of obligation might seem to logically prevent the establishment of intimacy in ASMR experiences, as the spectator (ASMR user) is not committing themselves reciprocally to the situation. However, Horton and Wohl (1956: 215) continue, “if he [the spectator] remains involved, these parasocial relations provide a framework within which much may be added by fantasy”, which brings us back to the point about users having to play along and use their imagination if ASMR is to work fully and if tingles are to be triggered.

Conclusions

In this article, I have explored the ambiguous role that technology plays in relation to the ASMR experience, and have sought to theoretically investigate how viewer-listeners might struggle to obtain an intimate and parasocial interaction in a technologically mediated ASMR context. I have introduced a classification of four types of intimacies: spatial,

temporal, social, and embodied (inspired by Berryman & Kavka, 2017), using these as theoretical categories – along with the overall theme of struggling, with which I have carried out a theoretical, thematic analysis of selected user comments. The illustrative comments have been discussed in relation to theoretical concepts of mediated intimacy, immediacy, and parasocial interaction.

ASMR role-play videos seem highly reliant on several conditions when trying to create intimacy and establish a feeling of (co)presence. The users in the comments might be aware that the actions performed in the videos are mediated (there) and recorded (then), yet the tingles are very much an embodied, visceral (here), and live (now) experience. In order to intertwine them, two groups of conditions are particularly relevant. First, there are the “here and now” aspects in the form of spatial and temporal intimacies, including the (a)liveness of the voice and techniques such as binaural recording and 3D and VR visuals that create parahaptic interactions and telepresence (the media-enabled feelings of being touched and sharing a physical, emotional space). Second, there is the social intimacy in the shape of the linguistic and social blank space that is created so the users can insert themselves in the video through direct addressing and embodied animating to feel more immersed and interactively included.

However, the user must often trust the ASMRtist with turned-up volume (to be able to hear the close-up sounds) and imagination (by honouring the contract of fiction) in order to get the tingles. Faulty or disruptive technology – for instance loud ads or broken equipment – may cause users to struggle and remind them of the deep imbrication of body and devices. Nevertheless, if users are able to go along with the situation, the result is a performative intimacy that can be defined as a form of parasocial interaction in providing effortless and one-way communication, yet managing to establish a soothing, social, and embodied intimacy at a distance. The user feels seen, heard and even touched (emotionally as well as physically) – despite mediation – through empathy, imagination, embodiment, and a willing suspension of disbelief.

Note

1. (Research on) ASMR – as a mediated, yet bodily phenomenon – taps into a developing field of embodiment-based mediation research, which is prevalent across social sciences, cultural studies, psychology, and media studies. Academic work within the latter include, amongst others, Vivian Sobchack’s (2004) *Carnal Thoughts – Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, in which Sobchack shows how our experience always emerges through our senses. More recently, Meg-John Barker, Rosalind Gill, and Laura Harvey (2018) have explored how our intimate lives are shaped through different media in the book *Mediated Intimacy: Sex Advice in Media Culture*, and the anthology *Mediated Intimacies – Connectivities, Relationalities and Proximities* (Andreassen et al., 2019) showed how social media construct new types of intimacies.

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