

Auditory Regression and New Soundscapes: The Digital Intimacies of ASMR

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Abstract: In recent years, ASMR has emerged as a distinct sensory phenomenon, garnering attention from both academic and lay audiences. ASMR videos, distinguished by their unique auditory and visual elements, elicit a sense of pleasure and relaxation in viewers, and have amassed a significant global following. This paper explores the decline of “visual hegemony” and the rise of Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) in the context of the renewed interest in hearing, with the discussion centered around four key aspects, namely the role of ASMR as a trigger for digital intimacy, the foundation upon which it is constructed, the relationship between the creators and consumers of ASMR, and the unique connection between these two groups. In addition, the unique context of shared experiences and interactions in ASMR is explored in depth, emphasizing the interplay between human emotions, perceptions, and digital media technologies in audiovisual communication. New modes of sound propagation in evolving spatiotemporal landscapes are analyzed, providing insights into the construction of novel soundscapes for ASMR in the digital age. Through its emotional and spatial properties, ASMR has become a cross-modal sensory experience that explores new possibilities for interactive experiences in audiovisual media by incorporating richer perceptual systems and triggering mechanisms into the future of media pervasive perception. As a result, bloggers and audiences grow together and support each other in a digital intimacy typified by directionality, emotional imbalance, and high returns due to its potentially large realizable value.

Keywords: ASMR, Digital Intimacy, Auditory Regression, Soundscape, Media Perception,

1. Introduction

The rapid evolution of digital media is precipitating a shift in the manner in which individuals form and sustain intimate relationships with others through the Internet. The recent emergence of ASMR as a digital phenomenon has been successful in evoking feelings of relaxation and pleasure in its viewers via the use of targeted sound and visual stimuli, resulting in a substantial global following [1]. ASMR videos, distinguished by their unique aural and visual elements, providing viewers with an immersive experience that evokes a sense of intimacy and connection. This type of digital intimacy has gained increasing recognition, particularly in the context of the contemporary lifestyle, which is characterized by a fast pace and high levels of stress. Much of the research that has been conducted has focused on the physiological and psychological effects of ASMR, such as its potential role in

relieving stress and improving sleep quality. However, research on the social functions of ASMR in digital culture, particularly the ways in which it promotes digital intimacy through cross-sensory interactions, is still relatively limited. In view of this, this paper aims to explore how ASMR content can create a unique intimate experience through the design of soundscapes from the perspectives of auditory regression and media perception, thereby affecting the emotional connection of individuals. Through a qualitative analysis of mainstream ASMR video content, this paper provides insight into how ASMR creates a sense of intimacy and belonging through simulated auditory interactions. The aim is to elucidate how ASMR content creators utilize auditory elements to prompt a perception of digital intimacy in their audiences, and to explore the impact of this perception on the emotional and psychological states of their audiences.

2. Trigger of Digital Intimacy: ASMR and its Classification under Auditory Regression

2.1. The Retreat of “Visual Hegemony” and the “Return of Hearing”

Treicher, an experimental psychologist, found that humans acquire about 83% of their information visually and 11% auditorily. In the age of the Internet, images and videos are ubiquitous and visual stimuli increasingly dominate our attention. This ubiquitous visual hegemony overshadows other sensory inputs, making it difficult for users to disengage from the screen even if they can tolerate auditory silence. This overwhelming visual saturation led to a reassessment of the dominance of visual media, prompting scholars in the second half of the 20th century to explore the role of sound. Canadian scholar Schaeffer’s theory of the “soundscape” and Welsch’s notion of “auditory culture” reflect this shift toward valuing the auditory experience [2]. With the development of media technology and the growing interest in diverse sensory experiences, listening has become more prominent. This has led to the rise of auditory-based media, such as blogs, radio, and ASMR, which have cultivated a loyal audience in a resurgence of auditory engagement.

2.2. Classification of ASMR

ASMR, widely known as the head orgasm or brain massage, mainly uses video to elicit pleasurable sensory responses, with auditory stimuli being the primary focus and visual elements playing a secondary role. This response usually occurs in areas such as the scalp, back, and limbs. Triggers can be classified into three types. Auditory triggers include vocal elements, where various human sounds like whispering, soft speaking, and blowing are used to induce relaxation, and non-vocal sounds, which are created by interacting with materials such as tapping on surfaces or playing with objects like slime or sand. Visual triggers involve visually engaging content related to tasks or scenarios, such as cleaning or organizing, which provide both visual satisfaction and stress relief. Role-playing ASMR videos enhance ASMR by combining auditory and visual elements through simulated interactions that provide immersive experiences, such as personalized care or soothing conversations.

3. Foundations of Digital Intimacy: ASMR’s Auditory Implosion and Media Technology

3.1. Relationship Between Media and Human Perception

Humans have a unique ability to abstract their audiovisual experiences from the “here and now” and transport them across distances to the “there and then”, converting them into symbolic information. This ability distinguishes human communication from the mere material transmission of other animals. Over time, human communication has shown a trend toward increasing virtualization and disembodiment, as seen in the emergence of various recording and dissemination technologies that compress and reconstruct space and time, creating new disembodied experiences [3].

Prior to the digital age, McLuhan introduced the classic media extension theory, which posits that all media extend some psychological and physical capabilities of humans. Media function as extensions that amplify the power of human organs, senses, or functions. He argues that different media technologies affect sensory ratios in specific ways, influencing individual perception. For instance, while print media emphasizes vision, television disrupts sensory balance by engaging visual, auditory, and tactile senses more comprehensively. In a media landscape where vision often dominates, ASMR videos reverse this norm by prioritizing auditory experience over visual, further altering the sensory equilibrium and forming a new perceptual landscape. Paul Levinson's theory of remedial medium posits that the resurgence of auditory media serves to redress the functional imbalance between visual and auditory forms. The Weber-Fechner Law, suggesting that the human perceptual system strives for equilibrium by adjusting the intensity of stimuli, lends support to this notion [4]. According to this law, audiences must pay closer attention to ASMR videos featuring low and medium-frequency sounds, thereby maximizing the direct impact of sound waves.

The decline of visual hegemony and the resurgence of auditory focus align with Kittler's theory of media perception, where he describes the proliferation of auditory media as an "implosion", a brief, immediate shock that directly affects audience perception. This immediate effect stems from the close interaction between external sound technology and self-consciousness, creating feedback loops that blur the lines between transmitter and receiver [5]. And Schafer introduced the concept of soundscape to emphasize how modern media disrupts the auditory environment. He advocates the restoration of the natural soundscape through noise management and sound design, which makes ASMR video a natural product and the quintessential "new soundscape" of this aural renaissance [6].

3.2. Properties of Sound and Cross-Modal Interaction

The emotional properties of a sound lie in its ability to move people by constructing or preserving beautiful moments. McLuhan notes that unlike the eyes, which are focused and intuitive, hearing is fluid, inclusive, and diffuse, making it more susceptible to suggestion and control. The auditory system works by transmitting what is heard to the brain, stimulating emotional responses. This emotional quality of sound inherently attracts people, allowing them to construct exclusive private spaces through hearing or create a collective presence. Thus, whether auditory or visual, the allure of sensory experiences is always emotional [7]. The spatial properties of sound play a crucial role in creating an immersive experience for the listener. The deliberate configuration of sound direction, distance, environment, and layering enables the creation of an auditory space that is simultaneously tangible and abstract, akin to the experience of ASMR. Some creators employ binaural recording techniques, which simulate three-dimensional acoustics to provide an intimate listening experience. Binaural recordings are usually made with microphones designed to mimic the human ear, with the microphones separated by the same distance as the human ear. When the recording device is present at the same time as the sound source, it recreates the process of binaural listening, capturing sounds such as ear kneading, tapping and muffled sounds, which are then transformed into an intensely stimulating audio experience.

Additionally, ASMR videos are often shot in close-ups, visually compressing the sense of distance while expanding the sense of intimate space. Based on the emotional and spatial properties of sound, these videos facilitate cross-modal interactions between the auditory and other senses. In perceptual phenomenology, humans perceive the environment via the brain's integration of multimodal information. A single perceptual organ usually relies on the complementarity of the brain, i.e., the brain utilizes available sensory inputs to construct a complete perception of an object. Although ASMR viewers are not physically present with the performer or in a specific environment, the visual and auditory transmission of the video medium triggers a myriad of tactile effects. More than just a

tactile illusion or audiovisual overlay, ASMR is a cross-modal perceptual experience that allows it to create a unique sense of digital intimacy and proximity that other types of videos do not have.

4. Two Ends of Digital Intimacy: The Co-construction of Bloggers and Audiences

4.1. Bloggers: Proactively Offering Emotional Value

ASMR bloggers provide content and services based on emotional interactions with everyday life, such as listening, accompanying, and soothing, which remind people of positive concepts such as privacy, permanence, and security. Through video, bloggers create one-on-one privacy and a safe, relaxed and comfortable environment for communication. The combination of sensory, auditory and tactile interactions has a holistic sensory impact on the body and emotions, stimulating a sense of emotional belonging.

Firstly, the blogger employs a minimalist scene composition with a distinct and compelling focal point, enabling the viewer to perceive the ASMR creator's face-to-face touch from a first-person perspective and concentrating the visual focus. Second, the blogger guides the viewer to relax by whispering. Words such as "relax, enjoy, release, and sleep" are often repeated, suggesting that the viewer's head, shoulders, back or face is being stroked. Third, the blogger creates a sense of virtual contact. In the video, the ASMR creator typically reaches out and touches or scratches the camera to simulate touching the viewer's face, examining their body, and interacting with them in a way that feels real. The environmental backdrop created for role-playing enhances realism and visually removes any sense of discomfort for the viewer, blending the foreground with the background.

For instance, in the eyebrow trimming video posted by Heathered Effect ASMR, the blogger mimics the action of trimming and plucking stray eyebrow hairs, employs the camera to replicate the vantage point of the customer, and even asks for their opinion on the results. Similarly, in a Starling ASMR video, the blogger examines the camera's simulated eyes and vision, occasionally touching the powerful zoom camera. These videos allow the body to be perceived as a whole during the viewing process through hand movements, depth-of-field changes, and focus shifts, thereby regulating neural mechanisms through gentle and slow caresses. In these ways, the blogger takes the lead in proactively constructing an emotional value model of digital intimacy between the two parties.

4.2. Audience: Autonomous Choice of Sound Field

The growing size of the ASMR community is largely due to the richness and freedom offered by ASMR videos. For viewers, the triggers that produce tingling and shivering are different for each person, and the large number of videos allows viewers to choose the content that best suits their preferences and triggers their sense of comfort. This freedom also extends to how they interact with the gentle concern expressed by bloggers. Viewers can choose to remain silent, or they can pour out their thoughts and feelings audibly or silently, enjoying the pleasures of ASMR while calming their anxieties in a safe and anonymous environment. The consistent content updates from bloggers provide a sense of security to the audience. When bloggers appear regularly in the audience's feed, viewers gradually develop trust and dependence on them, hence increasing the audience's size and customer loyalty. ASMR bloggers and their audiences grow and accompany each other, co-constructing a shared sense of digital intimacy.

5. Behind Digital Intimacy: The 'Unique Connection' Between Bloggers and Audiences

The concept of the "media equation" suggests that media is equivalent to real life, and that people interact with it as if it were a real person, resulting in an unconscious engagement with the medium. Scene creation is an important condition for establishing a sense of companionship, allowing the

ASMR experience to integrate into everyday life. In classical theory, the relationship between the body and the medium is often seen as mechanical or stagnant, with the medium being an extension or absorption of the body, a technological prosthesis embedded in the body. Nevertheless, ASMR videos challenge this notion by showing that the medium is more than just a mediator or add-on that can break through the superficial barriers of the body and directly trigger physiological changes. In this process, the human body becomes attuned to fluid-mediated technology, rather than merely embedding technological objects. Traditional views have often perceived the relationship between media technology and the human body as “extended” and “embedded.” However, ASMR videos create a strong and special connection between bloggers and audiences, reflected in several unique characteristics.

First, ASMR videos are constructed with strong directivity by both ends: bloggers provide clear, purposeful content, and viewers watch with strong intent. Unlike lifestyle video blogs that offer a variety of experiences, ASMR bloggers’ content is coherent and focused, consistently delivering sound-based experiences. The design of this content encourages viewers to stay engaged with the video stream once they start participating. ASMR content is specifically targeted toward audiences seeking audio-visual sensory stimulation. For example, a survey of ASMR viewers found that over 60% watched ASMR videos between 8 p.m. and 8 a.m. [8], a time typically associated with recharging after a busy day or struggling with sleep or anxiety. Unsurprisingly, nearly 80% of viewers said they watched ASMR videos to help them sleep or relieve stress. The late-night timing and reclining posture amplify the perception of being massaged and soothed, allowing viewers to immerse themselves in the audio-visual experience without the need for information decoding. They shift from overthinking to simply enjoying the sensory stimuli, experiencing a pure sense of intuition.

Second, in ASMR videos, there is a psychological “tilt” between the blogger and the viewer. The blogger, in a high position, outputs emotional energy, while the viewer, in a low position, receives that energy. In other types of videos, whether entertainment or educational content, the emotional exchange between bloggers and audiences is balanced, with both sides on equal footing. However, ASMR videos are distinguished by their healing function. By emphasizing the idea that the medium is the massage, it maximizes the use of the web, the screen, and the speakers, offering the blogger the possibility of creating an audio-visual massage and the viewer the opportunity to participate in the massage at will. Viewers hiding behind their online identities turn to ASMR bloggers for solace. In the vacuum of attention created by the ASMR video, they temporarily entrust their emotions and bodies to the blogger to soothe their mental state. This exchange fosters a sense of trust that extends from the digital intimacy established between the two sides.

Third, the unique digital intimacy between ASMR content creators and their audience not only enhances the economic potential of the community but also showcases emerging marketing models in the fields of communication and media studies. The audience for ASMR videos continues to grow, with these videos quickly garnering attention upon release and maintaining long-term viewer engagement and profitability through the long-tail effect. Chae et al. point out that ASMR videos, as a marketing tool, can naturally integrate brand information and product displays while users enjoy the auditory experience, thereby avoiding traditional direct sales strategies and highlighting their potential in brand communication [9]. Antonova analyzed the effectiveness of ASMR elements in advertising, suggesting that the relaxation effect of ASMR and its indirect influence on the subconscious can boost the viewer’s acceptance of the advertising content [10]. In communication practice, IKEA launched three ASMR ads between 2017 and 2020, stimulating consumer desire through cleverly designed soundscapes. Besides, various fields such as automotive (e.g., Renault), beauty (e.g., SK-II), food (e.g., Dove chocolate, KFC), and e-commerce (e.g., JD.com) are also exploring ASMR as an innovative communication tool.

6. Conclusion

This paper discusses ASMR, a product of the retreat of visual hegemony and the return of the sense of hearing, and provides an insight into the basis for the construction of digital intimacy, the two ends of the subject of co-construction of ASMR, and the unique connection behind digital intimacy from the perspective of three aspects. The new type of soundscape constructed by ASMR videos in the network era is discussed in depth from three aspects: the construction basis of digital intimacy, the two ends of ASMR co-constructed subjects, and the unique connection behind digital intimacy. Under the emotional and spatial attributes of sound, ASMR becomes a cross-modal perceptual whole, where bloggers and audiences grow up together, accompany each other, and co-construct a sense of digital intimacy. It is specifically manifested in strong directionality, imbalance of heart position, and high realization value of profitability.

Future research on ASMR video media communication needs to sort out and integrate the theoretical resources of the two paths of sound technology-culture, and synthesize the background of the rapid development of digital technology, the in-depth study of the communication process of ASMR soundscape, and the interaction between human emotion and cognitive communication, as well as the intrinsic relationship between technology and culture in the sound practices. The following is an overview of the relationship between technology and culture in the practice of sound. In addition, it is essential to integrate the theoretical frameworks and research methodologies of cognitive communication science to investigate, at the micro level, the precise mechanisms through which viewers of ASMR videos elicit ASMR responses.

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