

Could Insomnia Be Relieved with a YouTube Video? The Relaxation and Calm of ASMR

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Abstract Giulia Poerio's public engagement work with Hubbub has featured her psychological research on autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR) – relaxing, tingling sensations that start at the top of the head and spread down the neck, spine and sometimes throughout the rest of the body, usually in response to certain triggers. Giulia's collaborative studies aim to examine the self-reported and physiological correlates of ASMR experience.

Keywords Autonomous sensory meridian response · Relaxation · Self-report data · Synaesthesia · Well-being

Recent figures suggest that over half of Britons have trouble getting to sleep at night.¹ If, you, like so many other people, struggle to nod off,

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then you may have tried various strategies to slip into a peaceful slumber – from classic remedies such as warm milk, a hot bath or a consistent bedtime routine to the more unconventional, such as cherry juice, acupuncture, or sleep shots containing an ostensibly sleep-inducing cocktail. But what if watching a particular kind of YouTube video could relieve insomnia? Millions of people are avid viewers of ASMR YouTube videos, which promote feelings of calm, relaxation and well-being. ASMR stands for autonomous sensory meridian response and describes a relaxing, tingling sensation that starts at the top of the head and spreads down the neck, spine and sometimes throughout the rest of the body. Although many people report experiencing ASMR in response to certain triggers (e.g. whispering and tapping) since childhood, the past decade has seen a growing number of YouTube videos dedicated to inducing ASMR in viewers for rest and relaxation. For many, these videos can provide a much-needed antidote to insomnia, stress and even relief from depression and anxiety.² ASMR videos are eclectic, but examples include: towel-folding tutorials, simulations of haircuts, massages and medical examinations, careful dissections of fruit and vegetables, the squishing of packets of Haribo sweets, and the fondling of bubble wrap. In this chapter, I describe what ASMR is and track the emergence of both the sensation and the online community over the past decade. I argue that we now need scientific research into the phenomenon and suggest how this could be achieved by drawing parallels with research on synaesthesia.

THE UNEXPLAINED FEELING: WHAT IS ASMR?

ASMR occurs in response to certain triggers that involuntarily elicit a tingly, relaxing and pleasant feeling. Although people's specific ASMR triggers are idiosyncratic, there appear to be a number of common ASMR audiovisual triggers, which include: whispering, soft speaking, tapping, scratching, crinkling, slow deliberate hand movements, watching repetitive tasks being completed and close personal attention. In a Hubhub public engagement event at Wellcome Collection in London, we invited members of the public to watch one of ten ASMR YouTube video clips and report on their experience of ASMR. A summary of the results from the 91 people who took part is displayed in [Fig. 15.1](#). Over half the people asked reported experiencing ASMR. Although this may suggest that ASMR is prevalent, the high rates of ASMR in this sample may be biased (e.g. people who experience ASMR may have been more likely to take part).

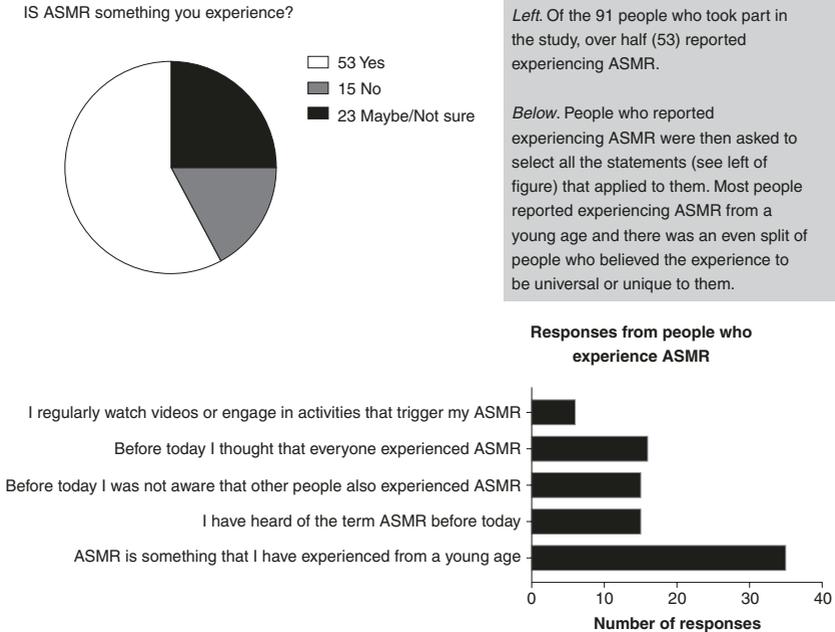


Fig. 15.1 Results from a public engagement event on ASMR at the Hubbub ‘Late’ at Wellcome Collection, September 2014

Discussions with people at events such as these indicate three broad reactions to ASMR. Some people know exactly what the ASMR feeling is (although they are not always familiar with the term ‘ASMR’), can recount various experiences of ASMR, and often report experiencing it from childhood. People in this category typically express one of two reactions to finding out about ASMR: surprise that not everyone has the experience (believing it to be universal) or relief to know that they are not the *only* person to experience the feeling. Sometimes people who have tried explaining the feeling to others report negative reactions, leading them to believe that they are somehow ‘abnormal’. Other people categorically do not experience ASMR, often find it bizarre and can find watching ASMR videos uncomfortable (e.g. see reactions to ASMR videos).³ A third reaction is uncertainty as to whether one does experience ASMR; ASMR, here, is typically likened to similar (but not identical) sensations, such as the chills that accompany certain songs and moments of inspiration.

THE RISE OF ASMR

Members of the ASMR community have linked certain literary descriptions to their own experiences of ASMR, quoting from, amongst others, Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath. I found a more recent description reminiscent of ASMR in Stephen Kelman's *Pigeon English*, which describes the sense of relaxation from watching a task being completed carefully:

I couldn't concentrate because I wanted to see what Poppy was doing. She was painting her fingernails. She actually used the paint for pictures to paint her fingernails with. I watch her the whole time. I couldn't even help it. She painted one fingernail green, and then the next one pink again, in a pattern. It took a very long time. She was very careful, she didn't make a single mistake. It was very relaxing. It made me feel sleepy just watching it.⁴

Both literary descriptions such as these and anecdotal reports suggest that the experience currently described using the term ASMR is not 'new'. It is, however, relatively new to the mainstream media and online community. The growing awareness of ASMR within popular culture has been largely due to YouTube, the online ASMR community (on various online forums such as Reddit), and 'ASMRtists' who create video content for people to induce ASMR. The first online descriptions of ASMR appeared on various forums (e.g. SteadyHealth.com and IsItNormal.com) from 2007 where people explained and discussed their ASMR experiences. In 2009, the first ASMR YouTube video was posted by WhisperingLife who, based on her own experience of relaxation through whispering, decided to create whisper videos for others to enjoy. The rise of YouTube videos was accompanied by a subreddit in 2011 called 'ASMR. Sounds that feel good'.⁵ Journalists soon noticed the growing online ASMR community and the first of many news articles on ASMR was published in 2012.⁶

Figure 15.2 shows the upsurge of interest in the term 'ASMR' using Google Trends.⁷ Since 2011, interest in the topic has risen dramatically. As an example of the popularity of ASMR, the most prolific ASMRtist on YouTube (GentleWhispering) had, in June 2016, over 650,000 subscribers and her most popular video had over 15 million views. As these figures show, the interest in and widespread use of ASMR is not trivial. Simple whispering videos have evolved into realistic role-plays,ⁱ which

ⁱ See Chap. 16.

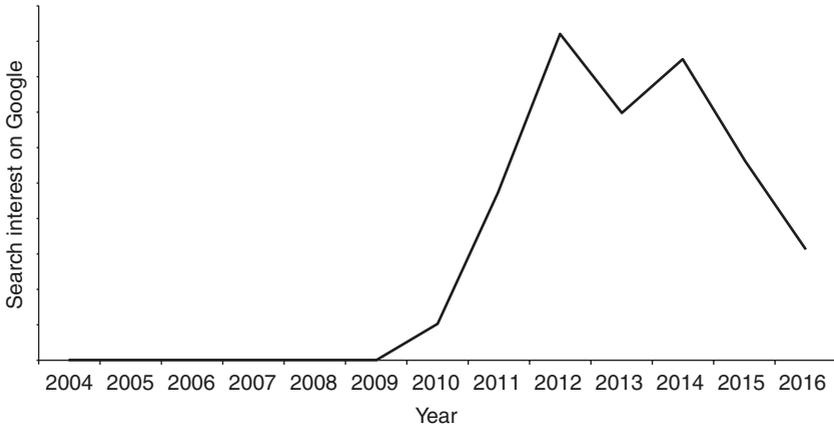


Fig. 15.2 Interest in the term ‘ASMR’ over time, using Google Trends (which analyses the amount of Google searches over a period of time); search done May 2016

simulate ASMR-inducing scenarios such as getting a haircut, attending medical examinations and receiving makeovers, massages or suit fittings. ASMR videos have become increasingly professional, with many ASMRtists recording with binaural microphones and high-tech audiovisual equipment. Some ASMRtists have created a 360 degree ASMR experience using 3D virtual reality; others conduct one-to-one Skype sessions for personalized ASMR; there is even an ASMR treatment spa. More recently, ASMR has been a source of inspiration for Pepsi and Dove/Galaxy advertisements, and has been incorporated into modern electronic music. I would argue that ASMR is more than just a bizarre internet craze that will subside over time: its appeal and continued growth is likely to reflect the fact that ASMR is a physiologically rooted experience, and one that people will be continually motivated to pursue.

THE SCIENCE OF ASMR

Despite widespread media attention, ASMR has gone virtually unnoticed by the scientific community. In March 2015, Barratt and Davis published the first exploratory survey (using an online questionnaire) of 475 people who experience ASMR.⁸ Their results indicated that the majority of respondents had first experienced ASMR when they were between five and ten years old; 98 per cent found ASMR videos relaxing; 82 per cent

and 70 per cent used the videos for sleep and stress relief respectively; and 80 per cent reported a positive effect of ASMR on mood. The most common ASMR triggers were whispering, personal attention, crisp sounds and slow movements. These results provided the first documented evidence consistent with anecdotal reports, and made the first step towards legitimizing ASMR as a scientific topic.

Despite this initial research, the ASMR phenomenon awaits more rigorous enquiry. In particular, research is needed that examines both ASMR experiencers and non-experiencers to quantify different reactions (physiological, neural, self-reported) to ASMR content. For the phenomenon to be scientifically validated, gathering more ‘objective’ evidence for ASMR, rather than relying purely on self-report data, is crucial.ⁱⁱ Research would profit from examining the physiological responses (such as heart rate) that accompany the ASMR experience, as well as its neural basis. Such research would provide much needed evidence for the proposal that ASMR is a phenomenon associated with a distinct and reliable pattern of physiology. However, acceptance of ASMR into mainstream psychological science is likely to be difficult, because the experience is not universal, does not have an established research base, and there may be scepticism around what the feeling is and whether it is amenable to scientific investigation. In the next section I argue that ASMR, much like anything else, is open to scientific investigation. One way to motivate and conduct research in the area is to link the ASMR experience to other accepted and similar phenomena and the research methods to investigate them; here I discuss synaesthesia as a pertinent example.

TASTING WORDS: IS ASMR A SYNAESTHETIC EXPERIENCE?

Synaesthesia, like ASMR, is a sensory experience that only some people have. It describes a ‘crossing’ of the senses where a sensation in one modality (e.g. seeing the letter ‘A’ – called the inducer) is automatically accompanied by, or elicits, an experience in another modality (e.g. seeing the colour red – called the concurrent). The most common forms of synaesthesia involve associating days and graphemes with colour. Other forms of synaesthesia include: sounds with touch, words with tastes, tastes with shapes and pain with colours.⁹ Paralleling ASMR experiencers, synaesthetes

ⁱⁱ Cf. Chap. 6.

express surprise upon learning that others do not share their merging of the senses, such is the primacy of their own perceptual experiences.

Synaesthesia has important parallels with ASMR. To the extent that ASMR involves audiovisual stimuli eliciting a tactile sensation and feeling of relaxation, it can be conceptualized as a synthetic experience – specifically, as a form of touch and/or emotion synaesthesia. Sound – touch synaesthetes report different sounds triggering tingling/prickling sensations in different body parts; mirror – touch synaesthetes report feelings of touch/pain/emotions that mirror another person’s experience (e.g. seeing somebody being hit on the head elicits the same sensation in the perceiver); and touch – emotion synaesthetes report certain textures evoking different emotions. Similarly, ASMR triggers (inducers) typically elicit tactile, tingling sensations on the top of the head, as well as associated feelings of calm and relaxation (concurrents). The link between inducers and concurrents in both ASMR and synaesthesia also appears to occur automatically and involuntarily. However, a point of difference between ASMR and synaesthesia is that, in ASMR, a wide range of triggers (e.g. whispering, tapping and close personal attention) elicit the same feeling across many different people, whereas in synaesthesia, different triggers elicit different responses and these responses differ between synaesthetes (e.g. the word ‘family’ may taste like a ham sandwich, whereas the word ‘six’ may taste like vomit). One possibility is that ASMR is a more common but as yet undocumented synaesthetic experience in which there is greater consistency among experiencers with respect to inducers and concurrents.

Aside from the notable parallels between these experiences, the development of the scientific study of synaesthesia and its acceptance into mainstream psychological science may suggest that the science of ASMR is not only possible, but also likely. Unlike the relatively new surge of interest in ASMR, synaesthesia has been documented for over 200 years, with the first scientific reports dating back to 1812. Advances in methods to document the existence of synaesthesia (such as neuroimaging and extensive testing of synaesthetic experiences)ⁱⁱⁱ have meant that, particularly over the last 30 years, synaesthesia has been recognized as a subjective experience with a distinct physiological and neural basis, one which can facilitate our understanding of normative perception and neural development.¹⁰

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. Chap. 2.

PEOPLE FIND IT HARD TO BELIEVE THINGS THAT THEY DO NOT EXPERIENCE

ASMR is only beginning to emerge into public awareness, but there is hope that its scientific journey will follow the same historical path as synaesthesia. The first step in this journey is likely to be the dispelling of scientific scepticism around the existence of ASMR. ASMR is not something that everyone experiences, meaning that some people find it hard to believe. Scepticism is a common problem with non-universal or unusual experiences. This issue may arise because people typically generalize from their own experiences; something that is not part of our experiential world is harder to accept as true. There are many examples of this ‘false consensus’ effect or ‘typical mind fallacy’. Would you believe that some people can recall every moment from their lives in the minutest detail, that some people do not experience any form of visual imagery, or that some people are visited by terrifying ‘shadow men’ intruders at night while paralysed and unable to act? These are all examples of scientifically documented experiences (hyperthymesia,¹¹ aphantasia¹² and sleep paralysis¹³) that, although atypical, are considered legitimate experiences for scientific study.

ASMR is fascinating whether you experience it or not. It is clear from the sheer volume of YouTube videos and associated viewing figures that it is by no means a niche experience. Anecdotal reports suggest that ASMR may offer potential to serve as a sleep aid, and a method of promoting well-being. What is essential, however, is the need to test anecdotal reports with systematic scientific enquiry, something that I and my research team are continuing to do. The onus will be on researchers to establish the physiological and neural underpinnings of ASMR, since this would demonstrate that ASMR is a reliable phenomenon in those that experience it. Once ASMR has been established as a scientific object of enquiry, it would then be possible to examine it in more detail – including exploring its origins (proximal and distal causes), concomitants and consequences, as well as its potential therapeutic and clinical benefits for rest and relaxation.

NOTES

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FURTHER RESOURCES

The videos of GentleWhispering, the most popular ASMRtist can be found at: www.youtube.com/user/GentleWhispering (additionally, a simple search of the term 'ASMR' in YouTube will provide thousands of videos).

A website dedicated to reviewing and sharing ASMR-related resources: www.asmrr.org.

General ASMR news: <http://asmruniversity.com/blog>.

BBC Radio 4 documentary ('Brain Tingles') on ASMR: www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06s9rzk.

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