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"I'm Very Much Myself": The Construction and Communication of ASMRtist Identities

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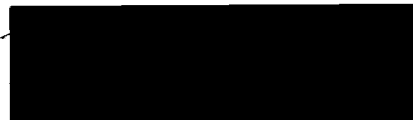
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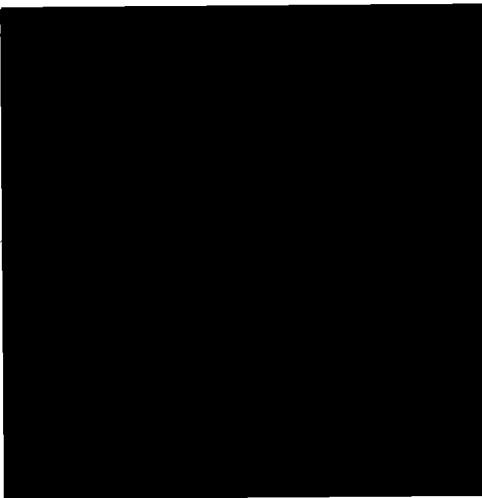
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The Construction and Communication of ASMRtist Identities

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Abstract

YouTube is an online space where people can form a self-presentation strategy and construct an identity through a personal channel. The Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) is a physiological response that has been described as “tingles.” Individuals on YouTube have created a multitude of ASMR videos to induce these feelings. In these videos, the creators tend to whisper into the microphone, softly touch the camera with their hands or props, or act out a particularly relaxing situation, such as a massage or haircut. This study examines ASMR videos and ASMR content creators as they construct and communicate their identities through their ASMR videos and their YouTube channels. Using Hecht et al.’s (2005) communication theory of identity, this study focused on the ways that content creators use their YouTube channels to construct and communicate their online identities. Through a content analysis, virtual ethnography, and interviews, this study discovered common themes in ASMR videos and several strategies in which ASMR content creators use to communicate their ASMR identities. I conclude that ASMR content creators use the layers of CTI to enact authenticity to legitimate and communicate their ASMR identity.

Keywords: YouTube, communication theory of identity, identity construction, ASMR, authenticity

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review

Most research on the construction of online identities has focused on social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter; however, YouTube, one of the richest social networking sites, has prompted little scholarship on identity construction or identity communication. What follows is an analysis of the ASMR community on YouTube, in which I explore the different characteristics of ASMR videos and the strategies that content creators use to communicate their identities to their audience. ASMR stands for Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response. On YouTube, members of this community make videos intended to elicit ASMR, or the physiological response often described as tingles. In Chapter One, I set up a conceptual framework through which I analyze the data collected. In Chapter Two, I outline the methods used in this research study. In Chapter 3, I analyze the data collected. And, in Chapter Four I present conclusions. In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss YouTube as a social networking site, the ASMR phenomenon, and literature on communicating identities and performance of identities.

Literature Review

YouTube as a Social Networking Site

Social networking sites have become an integral part of daily life for many people. Social networking, once a convenient way to reunite and connect with friends and classmates, has become a social phenomenon and has transformed the way people interact. A social network can be defined as a web-based service that allows an individual to create a personal profile with information about themselves and their interests within a constrained system (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). It displays a list of other users who the

individual is connected with, and allows users to navigate their list of connections and connections made by others.

YouTube in particular, with its growing amount of active monthly users, has become a “go to” place for people to pass the time, learn a new skill, express themselves, or be entertained. More importantly, it is one of the most popular social networks, coming in third behind Facebook and Google+ (Kosner, 2013). YouTube was created in 2005 as a grassroots, community-run video hosting website (Alleyne, 2008). The site grew rapidly, and in July 2006 the company announced that more than 65,000 new videos were being uploaded every day, and that the site was receiving 100 million video views per day (Reuters, 2006). Unlike other social media websites, YouTube focuses on video as a medium, rather than text or photos like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. On YouTube, users predominantly upload videos they find funny, moving or even videos of themselves to create an online identity, versus uploading images of themselves or posting text based statuses to explain what they are thinking or feeling.

YouTube has provided a platform for people to create a complex profile and “channel” that is their principal means for presenting themselves to an online audience. Due to the fact that details are included voluntarily on the user’s profile, the user has a choice about what to say about themselves and how to say it. The process of putting together a profile can be likened to the construction and formation of an online identity; once assembled, the profile “reveals details about [a user] as if shedding light on [his or her] personality” (Rybas & Gajjala, 2009, p. 16). This is especially true of YouTube “content creators,” or users who upload video that they produced (scripts, costume,

voiceover, lighting, etc.) rather than video that is repurposed online (television shows, viral video clips, music videos, etc.).

Most research on online social networking relies on the idea that anonymity allows people to present themselves as they wish to be seen. As explained by Gearhart & Kang (2010), the authors of social networking profiles “actively use their profiles for personal identity expression” (p. 16). Further, because users have the “luxury of time” when constructing their online identity, they have the opportunity to think about and reflect on the self they want to present to their online audience. Facebook profiles commonly show idealized versions of its users, reflecting the types of people that they wish to be through the selection of photographs and self-descriptions. Even more anonymous websites such as chat rooms and online roleplaying games encourage identity exploration and provide an opportunity for free expression without consequence (Manago, et al., 2008). YouTube differs from these more anonymous websites because it allows its users to show peers one of their identities through the videos they create, rather than tell them (Zhao, et al., 2008). Though scholars from various fields have looked at social networking sites to understand multiple aspects of the social networking phenomenon, including the practices, culture, and meaning of the sites (Boyd & Ellison, 2007), the research has not yet focused solely on identity construction through video creation on YouTube.

Previous research on YouTube showed that videos were either “privately public,” which did not expose the creator’s identity but were seen by many people, or “publically private,” implying that the videos that exposed users’ identities were relatively private because they were not widely accessed (Lange, 2007). However, more recently, the video

blogging (vlogging) phenomenon, or using video as the medium for blogging or a diary, has resulted in many videos that include first person content and reveal physical identities of content creators. In Lange’s (2007) terms, video bloggers these days could actually be considered “publically public”. In other words, video bloggers expose their identities (publically) to a wide range of many people (public) because they use video to verify their identity, which is intended to reach a mass number of people.

Because current video creators are publically broadcasting their identities through sites such as YouTube, research needs to examine the implications of this activity. Using Hecht et al.’s (2005) communication theory of identity, this study focuses on the ways that content creators use YouTube to communicate an online identity to their audience. Furthermore, I intend to understand this process through the examination of ASMR videos and the construction of the ASMRtist identity. An ASMRtist is a YouTube content creator who produces videos with the purpose of eliciting the physiological response called Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response, which will be discussed further below. The term ASMRtist was dubbed by the ASMR community itself and is widely used by both ASMR content creators and viewers. The term draws on the word “artist” suggesting that the ASMRtists create artful videos, crafted with skill and a creative hand.

For as long as I can remember, I have had trouble sleeping. With the rise of technology, and specifically YouTube, I began to rely on ASMR videos as a sleep aid. What began as a search for guided visualizations, quickly turned into an ASMR video addiction. While my intention for ASMR videos began as a sleep aid, I soon learned that I, too, experienced the warm tingles in my neck whenever an ASMRtists whispered closely into the microphone. To this day, I use ASMR videos as a sleep aid and because

of my academics have taken note of the communicative and performative aspects of the videos and channels. Researching these videos and the construction of ASMRtists’ identities will help determine the performative and communicative aspects and maintenance of online identities constructed through video production.

Technological advances throughout history have changed the way we communicate, and affected the way we socialize and interact and, by extension, the way we maintain relationships. I am part of a generation that still remembers floppy discs, cassettes, and vinyl records and I have fond memories of listening to music on my Sony Walkman. I also remember the day when I opened my first e-mail account in order to keep in touch with a friend who had moved away. Now multifunctional technologies are combining Internet access with the mobile phone, camera functions, music players and global positioning devices. It is as easy to access the Internet from your phone, as it is to take video with it. These new communication tools have become an integral part of our social lives and it is difficult to imagine how we would cope without them.

Social networking’s increasing popularity among youth and adults makes it an area worth studying to find patterns of human behavior and communication. When members create their profiles they are also working themselves into a virtual community, whether it be on Facebook, Instagram or YouTube. Much debate surrounds the notion that a community can be virtual (Lockard, 1996; Wellman & Guila, 1999). For example, Lockard (1997) claims that the notion of a virtual community is a myth - simply that it cannot exist and that virtual communities will always be just that: virtual. However, Parks (2011) addressed the controversy. After gathering common themes among definitions of community, Parks concluded that:

...a group may qualify as a virtual community if its members engaged in collective action, shared in rituals, had a variety of relational linkages, and were emotionally bonded to others in a way that conferred a sense of belonging and group identification (p. 117-118).

It is clear that social networks provide the functions essential to fulfill these community necessities. YouTube, for instance, allows for users to share in habitual viewing of videos, make relational connections with a variety of people and interest groups through the use of private messages and comments, and become bonded with others creating a sense of belonging through common videos and comments.

Social networking sites, such as YouTube, have become venues for self-presentation through complex online profiles. Although it did not begin as a social networking site, I would argue that YouTube should be categorized as both a social media and social networking site. Burke (2013) defines social media as the text that you upload, such as video, blogs, e-books, and photos. Further, she describes social networking as “all about engagement -- creating relationships, communicating with your readers, building your following and connecting with your online audience.” In this case, I would argue that although some of YouTube is not used to connect relationally with audience members, the ASMR community uses YouTube to create relationships, connect with people and communicate with their audience, thus making it a social network and social media according to Burke’s (2013) definition.

The YouTube channel has created a platform for people to share information about themselves with friends, acquaintances, and strangers. While authoring this profile, a process that requires continuing thought and attention, a user must decide what details

about their personal life they would like to share and, with just as much thought, what details they would like to omit.

As the user creates and structures his or her online profile, an identity is being crafted and represented through text, video, images, and channel art, which is similar to a profile “wallpaper” (YouTube, 2014b). All digitally imprinted on a user’s YouTube channel, this information becomes the user’s way of constructing a self to present to others in their network, or their “audience” (YouTube, 2014d). Most users carefully choose an identity based on the self they aim to present to a specific audience, and continual maintenance of the profile is often necessary (Gearhart & Kang, 2010). YouTube functions differently than other social network in that it offers multiple ways to construct and communicate an identity through videos, the “channel” and comments.

YouTube, Channels, and Comments

YouTube’s popularity is reflected in the abundance of and access to video recording technology and the changes made to new technologies, to accommodate an even easier access to the site. Most mobile phones have incorporated a direct application to access YouTube from their interface, and YouTube has incorporated a video editing software on their webpage and application to streamline the uploading process. When you become a YouTube member, YouTube assigns a personal channel to you. According to the help page, *How to Set Up Your YouTube Channel*, the channel has divisions designed to display short text updates in a discussion board, thumbnails of videos you've uploaded, members to whom you've subscribed, videos from other members you've picked as favorites, lists of members who are your friends and subscribers and a section where you can write a narrative about yourself and your channel (YouTube, 2014c).

YouTube also offers different bundles of courses in their new feature *Creator Academy*. This feature includes opportunities to take courses that are geared toward growing your audience, driving fan engagement, building your brand, creating great content or earning money with YouTube. This feature may drive ASMRtists to create an identity that is in turn their “brand” (YouTube, 2014e). Once your channel is set up, it is customary to visit others’ YouTube channels.

As detailed in the *Making the Most of YouTube* page, you can visit another member's personal channel by clicking on his or her user name or thumbnail. Here, you can view all of the YouTuber's videos and playlists, as well as all the videos he or she picked as favorites or liked. You can even see the other members to whom the YouTuber has subscribed (YouTube, 2014d). Personal channels let you explore YouTube as a social network rather than as a simple video database -- you can find users who like the same kinds of videos you do and find out what they are watching.

When you first create an account, YouTube makes it easy to turn your personal channel into an attractive virtual destination. After filling in your profile information, you can add a profile image and “channel art”, which is similar to Facebook’s “cover photo.” While you cannot change the layout of your personal channel, the options that you can change let you make your channel unique, and express your online identity - in addition to the videos you upload (YouTube, 2014a). Your YouTube channel home page is the first step in the expression of your online identity.

YouTube also allows for comments to be made on videos posted to the site, which are, aside from the video itself, one of the primary forms of communication on the platform. The channel owner has the option to limit comments on and the sharing of the

videos he or she posts. Most videos enable users to leave comments, and these have attracted attention for the negative aspects of both their form and content. In 2006, Time praised Web 2.0 for enabling "community and collaboration on a scale never seen before", and added that YouTube "harnesses the stupidity of crowds as well as its wisdom. Some of the comments on YouTube make you weep for the future of humanity just for the spelling alone, never mind the obscenity and the naked hatred" (Grossman, 2006). The Guardian in 2009 described user comments on YouTube as:

Juvenile, aggressive, misspelled, sexist, homophobic, swinging from raging at the contents of a video to providing a pointlessly detailed description followed by a LOL, YouTube comments are a hotbed of infantile debate and unashamed ignorance – with the occasional burst of wit shining through (Owen, 2009).

While YouTube comments may seem like a hotbed of Internet trolling, they can also provide insight into the thoughts, beliefs and communicative choices of audience members or other users. Furthermore, YouTube comments are a portal into understanding how viewers of ASMR videos construct their online identities and decide how to present themselves in the community. There are frequent commenters on YouTube ASMR channels who focus on different aspects of the video or experience. For example, some sexualize the creators, some criticize the video, and some praise the video.

On November 6, 2013, Google implemented a new comment system that requires all YouTube users to use a Google+ account in order to comment on videos and making the comment system Google+ oriented. The changes are in large part an attempt to address the frequent criticisms of the quality and tone of YouTube comments. They give creators more power to moderate and block comments, and add new sorting mechanisms

to ensure better, more relevant discussions appear at the top (Dredge, 2013). One of the most interesting uses of YouTube is to produce relaxing videos, also known as ASMR videos.

The ASMR Phenomenon

As noted earlier, the acronym ASMR stands for Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response. To those who are unfamiliar to this phenomenon, ASMR is described as a tingling sensation in your brain caused by certain sounds or visuals (O’Connell, 2013). If you have ever gotten shivers from a particularly good song, inspirational moment, massage or haircut, you have probably experienced something *similar* to ASMR. Rather than energizing, ASMR tingles relax or calm a person, often lulling them to sleep.

ASMR is a growing Internet phenomenon, with origins dating back to 2008 (O’Connell, 2013). The community of ASMRtists, those who experience ASMR, and those who watch ASMR videos is expanding rapidly, introducing new users every day to this unfamiliar sensation. In our noisy and fast-paced world, ASMR offers a world of momentary clarity. ASMR videos are usually long in duration (10-20 minutes) and contain soft, quiet sounds that are intended to induce relaxation. Some of the most popular sounds include the ASMRtist whispering closely into a microphone to mimic whispering in your ear, scratching items that produce soft sounds, and brushing the camera to mimic a makeup application. This relaxation produces a blissed, tingling feeling in your mind, usually felt in the back of the head and spine. Several users have called these reactions “brain-orgasms”, but it has been clearly stated that ASMR is not inherently or solely sexual. The sensation makes viewers increasingly relaxed and sleepy, almost like being in a trance.

ASMR does not affect everyone. For many individuals, it is a matter of finding their own “trigger.” From using ASMR myself, I feel more aware of the world around me. I pick up on little noises and sounds we tend to block out from our lives, such as the typing sounds of the keyboard or the rustling of fabric. Anyone can experience ASMR, they just have to be open to the idea of it.

In recent years, ASMR has exploded on the Internet and more specifically, on YouTube. YouTube has served as the community’s main platform for dispersing information about ASMR and attempting to elicit the phenomenon. Content creators, often dubbed “ASMRtists,” film videos of themselves performing stimuli or “triggers.” A commonly reported stimulus for ASMR is the sound of whispering. As evident on YouTube, a variety of videos and audio recordings involve the creator whispering or communicating with a soft-spoken intonation.

Many role-playing videos and audio recordings also aim to stimulate ASMR. Examples include descriptive sessions, in a style similar to guided imagery, for experiences such as haircuts, visits to a doctor's office, and ear-cleaning. While the creator acts out these make-believe situations, viewers and listeners report an ASMR effect that relieves insomnia, anxiety or panic attacks (O’Connell, 2013).

Identity Communication and Performance

The idea of identity has occupied the attention of philosophers and scholars for years (Ellis, 2010). Though a multitude of research has been conducted about constructing an online identity, the research has been relatively broad to date (Gearhart & Kang, 2010). Current research includes online identities as they relate to sexuality (Fox, 2007), self esteem (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011), and selective self-representation

(Gearhart & Kang, 2010), but little to no research has been conducted about the construction of a user’s identity through video creation on YouTube.

Communication Theory of Identity. Communication theory of identity (CTI) contends that communication is not just a product of identity construction, but also a factor in the construction itself (Hecht et al, 2005). In addition, CTI views identities as layered, combining community, communication, social relationships, and self-concepts. The layered perspective views identity construction and management as an ongoing process of communication with the self and others. CTI views communication as identity, stating "identity is formed, maintained, and modified in a communicative process and thus reflects communication" (Hecht et al., 2005, p. 262). CTI’s emphasis on identity as enacted, or as communicative, is its most unique feature, and according to CTI, identity resides in the personal, relational, communal, and enactment layers, which are made clear below.

According to CTI, there are four loci of identity and each loci takes into account individual and social aspects of identity. The four layers are the personal, enactment, relational, and communal layers. The current study understands these layers as locations that provide resources of identity people can draw from; in other words, individuals build identity through aspects of personal, relational, communal, and enacted layers of identity (Hecht et al., 2005).

The personal layer is a personal understanding of self, or, a personal definition of self, comprising of personal values, beliefs and attitudes. The personal layer can be thought of as similar to the concept of self-concept in Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), which derives, in part, from outside sources, but is an individual’s own

sense of self. In other words, you come to understand yourself through your perception of yourself, your perception of how others perceive you, and important relationships and group memberships, but the personal layer is ultimately your own definition of who you are (Hecht et al., 2005). The personal layer is evident in Urban and Orbe's (2010) study of U.S. immigrants who reported experiencing changes in their personal layer when they moved to the states and started integrating with their new culture. They maintained their core values and beliefs but also became accustomed to life in a new place, and Urban and Orbe (2010) found that having a culturally integrated understanding of self was important to some immigrants because it allowed them to feel like they fit in. Members of the ASMR community may also experience shifts in their personal layer as they balance core understandings of self with new values they learn through creating ASMR videos.

The relational layer refers to identity that is mutually created, negotiated, and formed in relationships. There are three levels of relationships that comprise the relational layer: general interactions (i.e., interactions between you and an acquaintance), interactions with important others (i.e., interactions with partners and family members), and relational units as a whole (i.e., marriages, partnerships) (Hecht et al., 2005). Kam and Hecht's (2009) study on grandparent-grandchild relationships demonstrates how different levels of the relational layer contribute to identity. In this study participants saw themselves as both individuals and members of relational units. For example, a grandchild may have an identity among peers that is altogether different from their identity within the grandparent-grandchild relationship; their identity with their peers might be that of a mature leader, whereas in the grandparent-grandchild relationship they are subordinate. Overall, Kam and Hecht's (2009) study shows the challenges of

negotiating identities that change based on the context of the relationship at hand.

Members of the ASMR community may have to negotiate relationships that are both turbulent and supportive, and they may also have to negotiate relationships – such as workplace relationships – where they have to hide their ASMR identity.

The communal layer is group identity and/or membership-based identity. This layer refers to belonging to shared communities that have commonalities, traditions, and histories that bond people together. For example, people can identify with many different types of communities, including nationalities, ethnic and cultural groups, religious orientations, political groups, sexual orientations, organizations, etc. (Hecht et al., 2005). Faulkner and Hecht (2011) studied, in part, the experience of being Jewish and LGBTQ, finding that some participants struggled to find support in either community. In the current study, the participants will be bonded together by their participation in creating ASMR videos, which might be a significant aspect of their communal identity in addition to various other communities they belong to too.

The final layer, the enactment layer, is what is expressed and performed through communication and behavior. When individuals express themselves, they effectively enact their self-concept as derived through relationships and shared communities. In other words, the enactment layer embodies parts of the other layers as well. The result is an expression, or a communication, of identity, and CTI argues that the expression, or enactment, is identity (Hecht et al., 2005). Going back to Kam and Hecht’s (2009) study on grandparent-grandchild relationships, a grandchild may enact a different identity when with a grandparent than they would when with a peer. In the former, the grandchild might be meek and subservient compared to being more outgoing when with peers. This, again,

shows how the negotiation of identity can change as it is "formed, maintained, and modified in a communicative process" (Drummond & Orbe, 2009; p. 262).

The Internet and identity communication. Each element of the social networking profile contributes to identity creation in that it allows the users to construct their identity through social interaction and communicate their identity through social networking site features. The authors of these social network profiles may choose to represent multiple identities congruent with their multiple social roles in “real life,” or may choose to represent only one of their identities (Gearhart & Kang, 2010).

The creation of the YouTube profile is the first step in creating a personal online identity, and this personal identity provides the foundation for social identity building. How people choose a specific identity to share with their network of friends and acquaintances often differs. Some may choose to construct an identity that is not congruent with the identity they present in face-to-face interactions. Naturally, a person’s friends on a social network are unlikely to let the user get away with any “false representation” should they see inaccuracies between the user’s profile and how the user acts and communicates in face-to-face interactions; however, with an ASMR identity, friends of the creator may perceive the identity performance just as that - a performance. It is important to note that individuals construct and present multiple identities, depending on the situation or interaction they partake in.

Another facet of interacting with others on the Internet is the act of relational maintenance. Often individuals use the internet to maintain or improve their relationships. Canary et al. (1993) derived five relational maintenance strategies, or approaches to keeping the relationship in a satisfactory condition. These strategies are

positivity, or being cheerful and upbeat, not criticizing the partner; assurances, such as stressing one's commitment and love; openness, which refers to directly discussing the nature of the relationship; social networks, or attempts to involve friends and family in various activities; and sharing tasks, which refer to doing one's fair share of chores and other work that needs to be done. While these strategies are not internet specific, they can be applied to virtual interactions.

Gearhart & Kang (2010) found that on Facebook, some subcategories of personal identity were more frequently expressed than others. This suggests a deliberate choice is made by the author of the profile about what to share and what to hold back, depending greatly on the type of audience that may view their profile, otherwise known as impression management. In addition, the researchers found that the authors of Facebook profiles expressed group representations, such as educational and relationship roles, position in peer communities, and contact information, more frequently than they expressed information reflecting views on political or social issues. This selective self-presentation lends itself to the construction of users' virtual identity.

Congruent with Gearhart and Kang (2010), Gonzalez and Hancock (2011) examined the effect of self-presentation and identity construction through Facebook profiles on self-esteem. While the researchers predicted a decrease in self-esteem from using Facebook the results revealed that, through viewing one's own profile, self-esteem was enhanced rather than diminished, similar to Hargie's (2011) notion that we use self-presentation online to deliberately enhance our self-perception. Gonzalez and Hancock (2011) also found that participants that updated their profile more often reported greater

self-esteem. These findings suggest that selective self-presentation in social media, which leads to intensified relationship formation, also influences impressions of the self.

Similar to this notion is the hyperpersonal communication model (Walther, 1996). Walther (1996) proposes that the study of computer mediated communication has gone through three separate phases: impersonal, to interpersonal, and finally to hyperpersonal. Within the concept of hyperpersonal communication, Walther argues that computer mediated communication can actually exceed face to face interaction in that it affords certain communicative advantages including edited self presentation, unity (perceived similarity of users) and argues that greater levels of intimacy can be achieved. Within the theory, Walther suggests that greater cues are achieved through computer mediated communication than in face to face due to the ability to manipulate messages and self-censor information, affording for greater control over what cues are sent (Walther, 1996). Through the production of ASMR videos, extremely edited self-presentation is achievable, in aspects of both visual appearance and fragments of personality, because messages sent about the self can be carefully thought out.

Fox (2007) examines the ways in which gay men construct and perform their identities through their digital profiles. He discusses the styles of persona used in podcasts and blogs created and maintained by gay individuals. Personas are one way in which users choose to create and maintain an online identity. The users/performers construct an identity by pulling from different cultural signifiers. This provides their audience with a combination of personality and identity traits that make up their perception of the performer.

Gearhart and Kang (2010), Gonzales and Hancock (2011), and Fox (2007) link identity to self-presentation. A user will create his or her identity based upon the image he or she wants to convey to a network of friends and acquaintances. This means that users may choose to share everything about themselves in an effort to present a self that is congruent with the self they present in face-to-face interactions; they may choose to omit certain information in order to present a different self to their audiences; or they may choose to use cultural signifiers to construct a performative identity that is not congruent with their face-to-face identity.

Self-presentation and performance among ASMRtists. When choosing an identity to present on YouTube, users are ultimately choosing how they want to present a particular self to their network. As Jones (2013) points out, every aspect of our online social profile or channel “come[s] together to create a database of information that new and old friends can access to form and reform impressions of us” (p. 497). A major assumption of self-presentation is that people are concerned with the opinions others have of them and that their self-presentation behavior can assist them in making certain impressions to their audience. YouTube users who watch and comment on ASMR videos speculate why ASMRtists create videos. Many suggest that money is a motive, as many ASMRtists partake in the YouTube partner program and make money off of the number of views their videos generate. Regardless of monetary compensation, ASMRtists want subscribers to reach a larger audience and gain popularity or social clout. Users make decisions about their online identities based on how they want other users, their subscribers, and their critics to perceive them. Additionally, carefully selecting aspects of an identity to display online is not only employed to manage how audience members

perceive the ASMRtists, but also to manage the traceable digital footprint that all online activity leaves. A digital footprint is the data left behind by users of digital services (internet, smart phones, etc.). This digital footprint can be traced with a simple Google search, and is most commonly used by potential employers to vet their potential employees (Donlon-Cotton, 2011). Because your digital footprint is permanent and employers are increasingly using it as a vetting tactic, one’s digital footprint has become a growing concern among Internet and social media users. According to a Pew study, approximately 84% of U.S. adults attempt to hide their digital footprint (Lunden, 2013). Regardless of their digital footprint, ASMRtists continue to produce ASMR videos, which can be seen as a form of performative resistance.

Although they refer to the audience members of chat communities, Schwämmlein and Wodzicki (2012) distinguish peoples’ reasons for partaking in a community as common-bond specific or common-identity specific, which I would argue is applicable to YouTube/video communities, as well. Common-bond specific communities are defined as encouraging interpersonal interaction among members. On the contrary, common-identity specific communities are defined by “a common topic or interest and support their members in performing a common task or attaining a common goal” (p. 388-389). Within the ASMR community, I would argue that members are attracted to the common identity of those who feel ASMR, placing a name to the phenomenon and providing camaraderie for its members. However, I would also argue that the community sustains members due to common-bond reasons. The ASMR video creators share personal information with their audiences through videos, Facebook pages, and other social networks. Many times, audience members ask personal questions in the comments

sections of YouTube and Facebook, as well as request videos of the creators answering a slew of personal questions. This indicates that audience members seek both camaraderie with common identities and relationships with personal bonds.

Contrary to the findings in Schwämmlein & Wodzicki (2012), the ASMR community, which I previously recognized as a common-identity community, provides off-topic information, or content aside from videos made strictly to induce ASMR. The authors indicated that common-identity communities often do not discuss topics that do not relate to the common identity factors tying the community members together. The ASMR community, however, does not limit the topics of discussion in videos and comments to factors of ASMR. They also discuss personal issues (divorce, stress, school, etc.), personal artifacts (“What’s in my Purse?”, house tour, etc.), or random personal information (question and answer sessions). Additionally, Schwämmlein & Wodzicki (2012) concluded that common-identity communities do not “reveal the goal to get in contact” (p. 401). The ASMR community, in contrast, encourages its audience members to comment or private message the ASMRtists for feedback, suggestions, or conversation in general. For example, in the information box below the video, most ASMRtists call for comments, messages, and subscriptions. They also list other forms of contacting them, such as emails, Facebook links, Instagram links, and personal web pages. Because the ASMR community does not conform to theories previously tested, it is important to examine the identity construction of ASMRtists.

The rise of social networking has provided new venues for studying communication behavior. YouTube specifically, with its social complexity and rapidly growing number of users, is an ideal network to study when trying to discover how and

why users act and interact in the online space. The YouTube channel allows users to communicate an identity through pictures, personal information, and videos, presenting a self to their online network, or “audience,” that may or may not be congruent with the self they present in face-to-face interactions. Because ASMRtists are an up and coming interest group using social media, they can help researchers understand what the artifacts of identity construction communicate and how users communicate their identity on YouTube. Looking at the details of channel creation and maintenance, such as what information is deliberately shared or omitted, the thought process behind posting ASMR videos, and the significance of sharing personal information, provides valuable data and reveals new themes related to this process of identity creation and self-presentation. Though other research has been conducted on the topic of identity creation and self-presentation, little of this research relates to the use of YouTube as a platform.

Using Hecht et al.’s (2005) communication theory of identity, this study is focused on the ways that ASMRtists use YouTube to construct an identity to present to their online audience. Additionally, this study will examine how ASMRtists talk about the YouTube identity they have created, and look further at how this identity reflects the self they are hoping to present to their online audience. The objective is to understand an ASMRtist’s process as he/she creates and maintains his/her YouTube ASMR channel.

Research Questions

As social networking continues to gain popularity, researchers will continue to advance their research in this field. This literature review examines multiple studies that have already been conducted on the topic of social networking, however a clear understanding of the relationship between a YouTube content creator’s, more specifically

an ASMRtist’s, identity creation, self-presentation, and his/her thinking behind the construction of these two elements has not been fully developed. This study is aimed to create that understanding and give insight into identity construction on YouTube. In order to achieve the goals of this study, I aim to answer the following questions:

RQ1: What content do ASMRtists include in their videos?

RQ2: How do ASMRtists use their YouTube channel to construct and communicate their identities?

This chapter detailed the previous literature on YouTube as a social networking site, the ASMR phenomenon, communicating identities and performance of identities. In the next chapter, I discuss the methods I employed to answer the research questions above.

Chapter 2: Methodology

This chapter details the methods I utilized for collecting and analyzing data for this study. In this study, I used qualitative research methods, including qualitative content analysis, virtual ethnography, and semi-structured Skype interviews. Through this analysis, I hope to better understand the ASMR community and how ASMRtists use their YouTube channel to communicate their identities. To do so, I consider the following research question:

RQ1: What content do ASMRtists include in their videos?

RQ2: How do ASMRtists use their YouTube channel to construct and communicate their identities?

Throughout my analysis, I consider these research questions, and I discuss my findings in the next chapter of this research study. However, I first discuss my rationale for using content analysis, virtual ethnography, and semi-structured Skype interviews as a means for collecting data. Next, I discuss the ways in which I employed these methods as a means of collecting data. Finally, I discuss my procedures for coding and data analysis.

Rationale

Content Analysis. I used qualitative content analysis to determine common themes found in the ASMR videos. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) define qualitative content analysis as, “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (p.1278). A content analysis is best used for research on a new phenomenon with little to no prior research on it (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Because ASMR is a new phenomenon, it is important to determine common characteristics among ASMR videos

to gain a better understanding of the concept itself, the community that experiences it, and the individuals that create videos to trigger it. In order to understand the daily functions of the ASMR community, I also employed virtual ethnography as a data collection method.

Virtual Ethnography. Ethnographies are commonly conducted in tangible environments, requiring travel and face-to-face interactions. A traditional ethnography would not be an effective way to study the ASMR community because this community is not formed or maintained in a physical place. Instead, it is a virtual community that exists in a place accessible by anyone with an Internet connection. Thus, because virtual ethnographies do not require physical travel but rather experiential travel, (Hine, 2000; Hine, 2008) a virtual ethnography will effectively observe the culture of the ASMR community, and how the culture impacts the construction and communication of identities and self-presentation. This method allows the researcher to experience the virtual community as it functions daily.

As both Hine (2000) and Beneito-Montagut (2011) point out, interaction between researcher and subject is essential for any ethnography, virtual or traditional. Interacting with the members and facets of a community allow for the researcher to check interpretations and to learn by trying to participate. Thus, it is best for the researcher to assimilate the “participant as observer” role when conducting a virtual ethnography. Achieving familiarity in the setting is essential as the researcher must be close enough to the subject or field of study to truly understand how it works (Beneito-Montagut, 2011). In order to supplement the observations of and interactions with the members of the

ASMR community that were facilitated by the virtual ethnography, I also employed interviews as a data collection method.

Interviews. Conducting face-to-face interviews requires travel or that participants live in close proximity to the researcher. In the presentation of their online ASMR identity, ASMRtists tend to leave out their location; therefore, when the selected ASMRtists consented to participate, I conducted in-depth video interviews through Skype, in place of face-to-face interviews, with those participants. Skype is a video chatting program available to those with access to the Internet. The program allows for users to interact through live video feeds and text chats (Skype, 2014). Additionally, ASMRtists are familiar with the technology required for video capture and are comfortable with the atmosphere of being on camera, given that they frequently film themselves, making this method appropriate. Furthermore, Skype interviews are cost efficient, allow for spontaneous response, and allow for non-verbal communication to be analyzed (O’Connor, Madge, Shaw & Wellens, 2008; Hanna, 2012).

Interviewing is a preferred method because of the freedom that it allows both the researcher and participants to develop questions and answers in a more holistic way. These interviews served as informant interviews, in which, according to Lindlof and Taylor (2011), the subjects inform the researcher about key features and processes of the settings under study. Though semi-structured interviews include an initial direction, the researcher is not bound by a formal structured interview format. This approach allows the researcher the ability to ask follow up questions or use “tell-me-more probes” to further elaborate on the answers they have already shared. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) define this process as using an interview guide, rather than a more formal interview schedule. This

guide includes topics or questions that the interviewer can ask differently for different interviewees (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

Interviews also require a commitment to developing a relationship between the researcher and the participant. The goal of interviewing is to understand a participant’s experience. Thus, it becomes paramount to establish rapport with participants (Fontana & Frey, 1994). This particular study asks participants to disclose information regarding their inner identities and how they choose to present themselves, which are personal topics. These personal reflections can best be solicited through increased trust between participants and the researcher.

Drawbacks of in-depth interviews emerge out of participants’ willingness to disclose enough information for the researcher to draw conclusions and the accuracy of self-report. When interviewing face-to-face or over Skype, as Sullivan (2012) points out, concerns of authenticity and self-presentation come about. However, in comparison to face-to-face interactions, Internet interactions:

allow individuals to better express aspects of their true selves— aspects of themselves that they wanted to express but felt unable to. The relative anonymity of online interactions and the lack of a shared social network online may allow for individuals to reveal potentially negative aspects of the self online. (Ellison, et al., 2006, p. 418)

Thus, interviews are an appropriate method for answering research questions that focus on identity, but Skype interviews are even more appropriate as it may allow for more transparent self-disclosure from the participants.

Sampling and Procedures

Content Analysis. After getting IRB approval, the sample of videos for thematic analysis was pulled from YouTube between January 10, 2014 and January 21, 2015. I identified ASMR videos through the search term “ASMR”, which was selected based on the assumption that ASMR videos include the tag “ASMR.” The initial search returned 3,110,000 videos. I coded 20 videos accessible in the search results. YouTube displayed 20 videos on the page on average, with the most relevant videos or videos with the most views appearing first. I sampled the first five relevant videos on each page. Videos that were not ASMR videos intended to elicit a physiological “tingle” response, were not deemed relevant. Thus, I only sampled videos that were specifically created for ASMR, instead of videos only discussing the topic of ASMR. Lister et al. (2013) used a similar technique for sampling of videos about anti-bullying public service announcements. Social media and social networking sites were considered popular media to send a message to many young people. Thus, because YouTube is the most popular video hosting website, Lister et al. (2013) assumed that the videos circulated on social media would be hosted on YouTube. This led to their analysis of YouTube videos, rather than other video hosting websites. The preliminary search results on YouTube for public service announcement search terms resulted in 107,840 videos. The researchers ended up choosing the first 60 relevant search results on YouTube as their sample, after typing in relevant search terms. In order to manage the significant number of videos that turned up with the search term “ASMR”, I sampled the first 5 relevant videos listed on each result page. This method ensured that I included videos with fewer views in the sample. Because videos are often listed on YouTube by view count (videos relevant to the search

term and with the highest view count are listed first), sampling only 5 videos from each page ensures that I reached YouTube pages with videos with fewer view counts.

Being familiar with the ASMR community and having watched several ASMR videos I developed categorical distinctions to code my data. Categorical distinctions divide texts into units that have something in common since they all belong to particular category (Merrigan & Hutson, 2009). I decided to include basic information about the videos in the codes, such as the title, channel name, video length etc. to identify any basic video trends. I also developed ASMR specific codes to understand the trends in video content particular to the ASMR community. These codes were developed out of my previous knowledge of the community and watching sample videos. I also ensured that coding categories used were mutually exclusive, in that one code cannot be categorized more than once (Merrigan & Hutson, 2009). Coding categories included: title, channel name, description, video length, date, subject matter, total channel views, gender, body type, hair color and length, presence of makeup, number of views, number of shares, number of subscriptions for the ASMRtist, number of subscriptions driven by the video, time spent watching, number of likes and the presence of an introduction sequence, binaural audio, whispering, camera touching, role-playing, special effects, sexual content, romantic content, props, costumes, and video editing.

Interviews. Of the 20 videos coded, four ASMRtists participated in semi-structured Skype interviews and their YouTube channels were observed as a part of the virtual ethnography. Each of the ASMRtists observed in the content analysis were contacted via email about the study and the opportunity to participate. ASMRtists whose emails were not available were contacted via YouTube private message. The initial

response to my invitations to participate in the study was low. Thus, I contacted twenty more ASMRtists based on the ASMRtist recommendations listed¹ on the previously contacted ASMRtists’s YouTube channels. Overall 4 users showed interest in participating and were subsequently interviewed.

By conducting semi-structured interviews, I asked participants questions in an environment that is comfortable for and familiar to the participant (i.e. online), to ensure that he or she was honest and open when sharing his or her answers, thus allowing me to collect rich data. Interviews began with non-directive grand tour type questions (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) that aimed to tap into the general ASMR experience. Along the way, I inserted tell-me-more probes, asking for specific information about the ASMR video creation experience or the participant’s specific approach to communicating their identity. I found out what brought participants to the ASMR community in the first place and being an ASMRtist, and how they let people know who they are as a person. My flexibility during the interview data collection process, in addition to the depth of data collected, made this qualitative approach an ideal method to address the topic of this research. The ways in which a YouTube channel contributes to the construction of an identity is not an area that is often discussed. Therefore, it was important for me to ask a variety of open and closed questions that yielded a wide range of responses from participants. Interview questions included:

Q1: How did you discover the ASMR community?

Q2: How did you come to making ASMR videos?

¹ The channel recommendations feature on YouTube channels allow for YouTube content creators to make channel suggestions for their subscribers or viewers. The content creators can fill up to ten slots with recommendations for additional channels. Often times the channels are similar in content to the original content creator.

Q3: What subcommunities do you see in the ASMR community?

Q4: Which do you fall into?

Q5: How do you decide what to focus on in your videos?

Q6: Did you ever have an idea for a video, but then decide against making it?

Q7: What is your process for creating an ASMR video?

Q8: How do you decide what to share with your audience personally?

Q9: What is too personal?

Q10: How do you decide how you want to look in your videos?

Q11: What factors impact your decision to edit your videos?

Q12: What makes your ASMR channel different from others?

Q13: What are the interactions with your followers/subscribers like?

Q14: What feedback do you value?

Q15: How do you analyze the comments you receive?

Q16: How do you see audience members fitting into your ASMR subcommunity?

Virtual Ethnography. As a part of my virtual ethnography, I made observations of the four interview participants’ YouTube channels daily for three weeks. Everyday during the three-week period, I spent one hour on YouTube observing the participants’ channels. In my observations, I focused primarily on the comments on the discussion board, description or biographical information in the about section, and the names of video and playlists featured on the channel pages. These functions on YouTube are a direct communication with audience members, aside from the ASMR videos themselves. When observing these functions, I made sure to keep an open mind and to take in all that I experienced and participated in, like Hine (2000) suggests.

While observing the participants’ YouTube channels, I took detailed field notes. The first day of observations, I took screenshots of each of the participants’ discussion, about, and playlist pages. From there, each day, I noted changes that occurred over the time I was away from the computer. Most of the changes occurred on the discussion board, as many subscribers interact with the ASMRtists with that function of the YouTube channel. While taking notes, I made sure to write down initial analyses of the interactions (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011), taking note of indications of identity communication.

A main tenant of virtual ethnography, as outlined by Hine (2000), revolves around the interactions between researcher and subjects. Although YouTube channels are not necessarily conducive for direct interactions between researchers and participants, I was still able to discuss aspects of the channels with the participants. Because I had already built a rapport with the participants during the interview process, I was able to ask them further questions regarding their YouTube channel as I made observations. This process allowed me to understand the ASMR community as it functions daily while comparing it to the themes in thematic analysis and interviews.

Coding and Data Analysis

During the video coding process for the content analysis, I watched each video in full to ensure accurate coding. I first obtained the basic information about the video prior to watching the video. For example, I recorded the video name, channel information, number of views, etc. before watching the video. When I coded the videos for content categories or for ASMR characteristics, I made sure to pause the video to ensure that I did not overlook any possible codes while recording the data. When I finished coding the

video, I re-watched the video to ensure that I did not overlook any possible codes. The data was then analyzed for frequencies or trends of content or characteristics.

Observation jottings and interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis. Each "text" was read and reread many times over in search of phenomenological themes, and I coded the data using open, axial, and selective procedures (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). First, during the initial readings, I analyzed the data by taking in everything as a whole. Second, during the axial phase of coding, as I became more and more familiar with the texts, I analyzed the data selectively by highlighting significant statements and phrases. I took these initial categories and classified them into groups, combined categories that were similar and dissected categories into multiple subcategories that were related. Finally, as themes came together, I analyzed the data in detail through multiple close and deep readings. Themes were chosen if they seemed to capture the essence of identity and communication of identity. In this final phase, I threaded data together in a cohesive manner. This phase involved comparing and contrasting participants’ responses with each other and the themes identified in the thematic analysis and relating them to communication theory of identity and self-presentation. I conducted observations and Skype interviews until theoretical saturation was reached (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

In any study, validity and verification are important issues that must be considered. However, instead of using quantitative-driven words like validity and verification, the current study’s qualitative approach aimed for plausibility and understanding (Wolcott, 1994). In other words, the questions I asked of my results were (1) do they seem plausible? and (2) do they add to our understanding of communication and identity? To achieve plausibility and understanding I utilized two validation

strategies supplied by Creswell (2012). The first validation strategy I used was providing rich descriptions, which ensures a thorough and comprehensive interpretation of the data and gives readers a more complete picture of the data. The second validation strategy I used was negative case analysis, or actively considering pieces of data that contradicted or did not support emerging themes and patterns. For example, one participant said many negative things about ASMR community members such as criticizing the idea of sponsor relationships, but all the while she maintained that she loved the community as a whole. This was in contrast to many people who had nothing but great things to say about ASMR community members, so it forced me to look at the community, and my data, in more detail to balance out those statements and represent the participants and the ASMR community in a reasonable way.

Conclusion

This chapter described the methods I employed in collecting data for this research project. I used qualitative content analysis in order to gain a better understanding of the ASMR community, its members, and the videos that are unique to it. To further understand how the community functions daily and how its ASMRtists communicate their identities, I also used virtual ethnography and interviews. In doing so, more qualitative scholarship can now be added to the discourse on identity communication through a YouTube channel.

Chapter 3: Results and Analysis

In this chapter, I discuss the results of my data analysis. I collected and then processed the data in response to the research questions posed in chapter one of this thesis:

RQ1: What content do ASMRtists include in their videos?

RQ2: How do ASMRtists use their YouTube Channel to construct and communicate their identities?

Two fundamental goals drove the collection of the data and the subsequent data analysis. Those goals were to develop a base of knowledge about the ASMR community in terms of typical video content, and to understand how ASMRtists use their YouTube channel to communicate their identities.

To set a context for the analysis that follows, I will introduce the four ASMRtists that participated. The first ASMRtist, ASMRAccent, is a woman from the United Kingdom. She started her ASMR YouTube channel in 2013. ASMRAccent tends to include a variety of types of ASMR videos on her channel, but her favorite “Series” that she publishes are her “Childhood ASMR” and “ASMR Spa Menu” which both feature role-plays and sounds videos. The second participant, asmArt, is a woman from the Pacific Northwest United States. She started her ASMR YouTube channel in 2011 and began making videos to fill a void that she felt the ASMR community had. asmArt is an artist in real life and often includes videos of her painting, crafting, or sculpting art for her Etsy shop. The third ASMRtist, SouthwestASMR, is a woman hailing from the Southwestern United States. She began making videos after contemplating it for about a year. With the encouragement from family and friends, she started her channel just over a

year ago. Although she is still considered new in the community, SouthwesternASMR’s videos are very popular, including her doctor role-plays and personal ramble videos. Finally, the fourth ASMRtist to participate, CareForYouASMR, is a woman who is originally from the Netherlands, but recently immigrated to Ontario, Canada. Over four years ago, CareForYouASMR discovered the ASMR community while looking for sleep aid videos. About a year later she began making videos and soon after that she quit her job to make ASMR videos full time. She aims to rotate the types of videos that she publishes for her viewers, so she can target a large audience of ASMR seekers.

I have split the remainder of this chapter into three sections outlining the results corresponding to the method used. First, I discuss the results of the content analysis to answer research question one, then I discuss the data gathered with the virtual ethnography, focusing on the comments from the discussion board, the information provided in the about section, and the names of videos and playlists, and finally I analyze four major themes that emerged in the interviews.

Content Analysis

In order to develop a base of knowledge about the ASMR community, I watched, coded and analyzed twenty YouTube videos with the tag ASMR. On average, the ASMR videos I analyzed ran about 34 minutes in length, ranging from 13 minutes to 63 minutes. Additionally, the videos sampled averaged around 316,509 views per video and 3,782 likes per video. The sample also indicated that the majority of ASMRtists are women (65%).

The sample provided a variety of types of ASMR video content. Of the twenty videos sampled, 45% were medical role-plays (9), 25% were videos with only sounds (5),

15% were spa or salon role-plays (3), 15% were show and tell videos (3), 10% were emotional support role-plays (2), 5% were a whispered reading video (1), 5% were tutorials (1), and 5% contained other content (1). The content/subject of the video sampled is summarized in Table 1. These descriptors are not mutually exclusive as some videos demonstrated more than one type of ASMR video content. For example, one video combined a medical role-play with whispered reading.

Table 1

Types of ASMR Video Content (n=20)

	Frequency	Percent
Medical Role-play	9	45
Sounds Only	5	25
Spa/Salon Role-play	3	15
Show and Tell	3	15
Emotional Support Role-play	2	10
Whispered Reading	1	5
Tutorial	1	5
Otherw1	1	5

The content analysis also indicated a number of common characteristics of ASMR videos. For example, 95% of the sample included the use of props such as makeup brushes or a stethoscope (19), 80% of the sample included binaural audio (16), 70% of the sample included whispered speaking (14), 70% of the sample included camera or microphone touching (14), 65% of the sample included some form of role-playing (13), 65% of the sample included video editing (13), 45% of the sample included an introduction sequence (9), 40% of the sample included the use of costumes (8), 25% of the sample included romantic or intimate content (5), 20% of the sample included special effects (4), and none of the videos included any form of sexual content. These results are summarized in Table 2. Again, these elements are not mutually exclusive; therefore most

ASMR videos sampled included more than one element.

Table 2

Elements in ASMR Videos (n=20)

	Frequency	Percent
Props ²	19	95
Binaural Audio ³	16	80
Whispered Speaking	14	70
Camera/Microphone Touching	14	70
Role-playing	13	65
Video Editing	13	65
Introduction Sequence	9	45
Costumes	8	40
Romantic/Intimate Content	5	25
Special Effects	4	20
Sexual Content	0	0

The video content I observed is unique to ASMR videos and, thus, the identity of an ASMRtist. As I discussed in chapter one, Communication Theory of Identity (Hecht et al.,2005) describes the following layers of identity: The personal layer is a personal understanding or definition of self. The relational layer refers to identity that is created, negotiated, and formed in relationships. Finally, the communal layer is group or membership based identity. This layer is often enacted through our participation in shared communities that have commonalities, traditions, and histories that bond people together. Because ASMRtists create videos of a certain type that are intended for the ASMR community, they are enacting an aspect of their communal identity.

² ASMRtists use a wide array of props depending on the content of their video. Common props include a stethoscope, makeup brushes, pen and paper, etc. The props are intended to either increase the reality of the role-play situation or to make relaxing sounds.

³ Binaural audio refers to a method of recording sound that uses two microphones, arranged with the intent to create a 3-D stereo sound sensation for the listener of actually being in the room with the performers or instruments.

ASMRtists communal identity, as a part of the ASMR community, is connected with the other layers of their identities. For example, the content that ASMRtists produce, and the way in which they produce it (special effects, accents, etc.), tells their viewers about their personal and relational identities.

The content analysis of sampled ASMR videos provided answers to research question one. Based on the results displayed in Table 1, I can conclude that ASMR videos seek to emulate a soft, safe environment for their viewer. Two out of the top three types of ASMR videos are role-plays in which the individual must be in close quarters to the recipient or patient. The simulation of these close quarters creates a level of intimacy that elicits the ASMR response. The preference for role-plays over other types of videos indicates that ASMRtists seek to provide simulated experiences from real life.

Additionally, because of the nature of the role-plays, I coined the term *caretaker intimacy* to define the type of intimacy experienced when in a situation with some sort of caretaker. For example, our parents enacted caretaker intimacy through close proximities, deliberate actions, and the feeling of being cared for. In addition to family, situations with medical personnel, hairdressers, or teachers can elicit caretaker intimacy by giving someone non-sexual and non-romantic attention. It is important to note the gendered nature of caretaking, though. The majority of ASMRtists sampled are women, which follows standard gender roles where women are the caretakers in most platonic and romantic relationships.

The data in table two reveal the common characteristics found in ASMR videos. As such, the top three common characteristics in the ASMR videos sampled are indicative of role-play videos. When ASMRtists create role-play videos, they usually

include at least one prop, binaural audio, and whispered speaking. Although, these characteristics are common in other types of videos, their presence in role-plays is much higher. Each of the top three characteristics in ASMR videos, based on the data, are used to create an authentic experience for the viewer. Binaural audio allows the viewer to feel as if the ASMRtist is actually moving from their left side to their right side. This indicates that ASMRtists seek to provide an authentic experience for their viewers. In addition to their videos, ASMRtists communicate the personal, relational and communal layers of their identities through their YouTube channel (Hecht et al., 2005).

Virtual Ethnography

In order to understand the ways in which ASMRtists use their YouTube channel to communicate and construct their identities, I performed a virtual ethnography of each of the interview participants’ YouTube channels. I focused specifically on the comments on the discussion page, description and biographical information on the about page and the names of playlists and videos featured on the channel pages. While I discuss each of these sections of the YouTube channel individually, it is important to note that the amalgamation of the channel pages and components is what helps the ASMRtist construct and communicate their identity.

Discussion Board

The discussion board function of a YouTube channel allows for content creators to publically interact with their subscribers, outside of a specific video (Fig. 1). Thus, this space acts as the podium in which the ASMRtist can communicate with a large audience at one time. Additionally, this space allows for the ASMRtist to enact their identities outside of their videos. ASMRtists often upload videos of themselves as some sort of

character; however, the communication on the discussion boards is congruent with the overall ASMR identity that he or she communicates, rather than the characters that he/she portrays in some of his or her videos.

Many times the participants used the discussion board for channel announcements, such as announcing upcoming videos and thanking subscribers. Because this is a form of one-to-many communication for the ASMRtist, it makes sense that he or she would use it to make announcements. For example, one participant, a twenty-something who recently moved abroad, used it to explain her recent absence from YouTube:



Figure 1. YouTube’s channel discussion board.

Hi everyone :D Thank you for all the messages! I'll get to is⁴ [sic] soon! You guys probably wonder when I'm going to upload a new video since it's been a while! I'm so sorry for the delay sweeties, really busy with the immigration papers but I managed to film a 30 minute Make up & Scalp Massage role play today so I am going to edit now and make sure that it'll be ready to be published tomorrow evening :D Didn't forget about you!

This sort of announcement, explaining her behavior, is an example of the relational layer of CTI (Hecht et al.,2005). The ASMRtist here had not posted a video on her channel in a couple of weeks. Thus, the comments on her channel discussion board were riddled with questions and comments about her absence. This ASMRtist used the channel discussion board to enact relational maintenance by checking in with and updating her subscribers. Interacting with subscribers is a different experience than interacting with viewers. Subscribers are individuals who indicated that they wanted to be notified whenever the ASMRtist made any updates to their channel, such as announcements or new videos. When a viewer becomes a subscriber, they become a direct supporter of the ASMRtist, and thus enter a new level of relations with that ASMRtist.

Additionally, she used the discussion board to discuss parts of her personal information, such as her immigration status. Sharing this personal information communicates aspects of the participant’s identity. For example, divulging information about her immigration to another country, not only tells her subscribers about her living situation, but it also contributes to a transparent quality of her identity. As Canary et al. (1993) suggest, openness, or disclosure and other communication, is a relational

⁴ Each commenter is cited by their username. All comments are left as they were written, including any incorrect grammar or word usage, offensive language, etc.

maintenance strategy. Because she shared that she is in the process of immigrating to another country, the participant also communicates that she is transparent in her communication or presents a “real” version of herself, as this is sensitive and private information.

Furthermore, the participants used the channel discussion board to build relationships with their subscribers, again enacting the relational layer of identity (Hecht et al., 2005). For example, SouthwestASMR makes a point to respond to all of the comments posted on her channel discussion board. The responses are usually short, such as, “Thank you so much! Thank you for all of your comments XX⁵,” “Thank you!! I’m glad you think so :-D,” and, “Hello and thank you for letting me know! It’s lovely to hear from you. X.” Shorter comments like this were common among the channels I observed. These comments are used to foster good feelings with subscribers and serve as relational maintenance, but are not detailed or personal enough to develop real relationships with individual subscribers alone. However, as Canary et al. (1993) postulate, openness (disclosure and communication) and assurances (expressing commitment) are two strategies for relational maintenance. As such, by communicating in general on the discussion board, the ASMRtist communicates a sense of openness and assure her commenters that she appreciates their contact.

In this case, the channel discussion board also serves to enact more than just the relational layer of identity. ASMRtists can use the channel discussion board to satisfy personal identity needs. As a reminder, CTI posits that the personal layer of identity is a personal understanding of self, or, a personal definition of self (Hecht et al., 2005). The

⁵ “XX” is a signature of ASMRAccent. It is often used to indicate “hugs”.

ASMRtists who respond to each comment enact a sense of self-validation. The personal layer is that inner relationship you have with yourself; your opinion of your self; how you view and define yourself (Hecht et al., 2005). Thus, when the ASMRtists responded to comments to create subscriber connections, they also pull from that experience to create an improved self-concept. For example, CareForYouASMR expressed apologies for lacking communication and not posting a video recently. This indicates that she experienced guilt for not keeping up communication. In this sense, by keeping up communication with subscribers, she would improve her self-image, enacting the personal layer of CTI (Hecht et al., 2005).

Comments of a sexual nature are also common on channel discussion boards and in video comment sections. Some of these comments are fairly innocent, such as the comment from EndergamingHd, “you are very attractive.” Other comments are incredibly vulgar, such as the comment from YouAreDeadByMe “can you tickle your anus?” The ways in which the participants respond to these types of comments varies, also. The removal of sexual comments on ASMR videos and ASMR YouTube channels is a common practice. As I perused the participants’ channels over a few days, I noticed a significant lack of sexual comments on the channel discussion boards and when one did pop up, it was either deleted or responded to within a matter of hours.

In contrast, some ASMRtists choose to respond to the sexual comments. These responses are usually shocking in some way. For example, in response to the comment mentioned earlier, “can you tickle your anus?,” the ASMRtist said, “yes”. While this is not an elaborate response, it is still an unexpected response for the readers and the original commenter. The responses to sexual comments also enact the relational layer of

identity (Hecht et al., 2005). By interacting with the commentator, ASMRtists communicate a facet of their ASMR identity to their subscribers. For example, the unexpected response to a vulgar comment communicates SouthwestASMR’s sense of humor. Because she did not delete the comment or chastise the subscriber, and instead responded with an unexpected “yes”, SouthwestASMR communicates facets of her ASMR identity, such as her sense of humor, her comfort with lewd comments, or how personally she takes comments.

Beyond subscriber relationships, ASMRtists tend to develop relationships and make friends with other ASMRtists. On the channel discussion boards, ASMRtists communicate with each other regarding content, the community, and/or subscribers. For example, I found this exchange on a participant’s channel discussion board regarding media coverage of ASMR:

I just saw you on the news! It was so cool! It's amazing that ASMR is getting that noteworthy to be spoken about on the news! Congrats!

This comment came from an ASMR content creator and sparked a dialogue between her and the participant. CareForYouASMR replied: “Wow that's awesome :D Where did you see me on which tv [sic] channel and program if I may ask?” The other ASMRtist responded: “It was one of the news stations for Detroit. I can't recall what channel though. Maybe FOX 2 news.” While this exchange is not significant in content, its presence is noteworthy. This exchange between the participant and another ASMRtist enacts the relational layer of identity (Hecht et al., 2005). By creating a dialogue, the ASMRtists now have another relational connection that stemmed out of their

participation in the ASMR community. Additionally, this is an interaction that the ASMRtist can pull from to incorporate as a part of their ASMR identity.

Also apparent on the discussion boards is the supportiveness of the ASMR community of the ASMRtists. When browsing the discussion boards, I took note of the frequency of positive communication. More often than not, the comments left for the ASMRtists were encouraging and supportive and affirmed the ASMRtist’s identity. Common comments fall along the lines of, “such a relaxing channel (:.” However, some comments are much more elaborate in expressing gratitude or encouragement to the ASMRtist. For example:

Oh my soul, your channel is incredible. I've been here nearly an hour and I will probably be for the rest of the night. So many instant favourites here - the globe and all the handmade objects, zzzzz... Love, love, love it!

These comments enact the relational layer of identity (Hecht et al., 2005). Once again, the comments on the discussion board allow for the initiation and maintenance of relationships between ASMRtist’s, and between ASMRtists and their subscribers.

Other times, the support came from the ASMRtist, encouraging other members of the community. For example, CareForYouASMR’s fellow ASMRtist solicited advice for making videos:

Hello! This one time you commented on one of my videos a while back and i was just wondering if you would be willing to give me a few tips for future videos!

Role Play, close up, whispers, etc. Thanks!!

Other ASMRtists use the discussion board on channels to solicit feedback or advice for their own ASMR content. CareForYouASMR responded, “Hello :D Yes of course I can

:) I'll watch it today again and I'll leave some feedback if I can find any! ^_^.” The way in which she added, “if I can find any” at the end of their response indicates a level of supportiveness outside of actually giving advice. The participant ASMRtist is seemingly implying that the commenter makes such good videos that she will not have any constructive criticism to give him or her.

A theme of mutual respect emerged from my observations of the YouTube channel discussion boards. In addition to the solicitation of advice between ASMRtists, ASMR content creators used the discussion boards to profess their appreciation and admiration for other ASMRtists. A commenter on asmArt’s channel discussion board stated:

Congrats on reaching 10k!! You and your videos are amazing and you deserve so many more subscribers! So don't ever stop making videos! No seriously... don't ever stop cause I'll cry! Lol I Love you!!

These interactions between ASMRtists on the discussion board also enact the relational layer of identity (Hecht et al., 2005). ASMRtists helping other ASMRtists is a cornerstone of the ASMR community because the entire premise of the community is to help others relax. Additionally, ASMRtists understand each other like nobody else would, because of the misunderstanding surrounding ASMR videos; thus, the reliance on each other for support and advice is paramount to the community. ASMRtists identify with other ASMRtists, through the discussion boards, because they take part in a misunderstood phenomenon.

The interactions between ASMRtists also enact the communal layer of identity. Because the ASMR community is misunderstood, ASMRtists band together to battle the

stigma that plagues the phenomenon. Through supportive and encouraging comments on the discussion board, ASMRtists create a welcoming environment, which becomes a part of his or her ASMR identity. In addition to the YouTube channel discussion boards, ASMRtists’ about section enacts the personal, relational and communal layers of identity (Hecht et al.,2005).

About Section

YouTube’s about page on each channel allows for content creators to specifically tell their audience about themselves. This area is a carefully chosen, deliberate communication of identity. As such, the about section is an enactment of the personal, relational and communal layers of identity (Hecht et al.,2005).

As is common with about sections, the YouTube about section can function as a space to share biographical information about yourself. Although, based on the data gathered, this is not the primary function of the ASMRtist’s YouTube about section, some of the participants used this area to tell their viewers a little about themselves. For example, SouthwestASMR used her channel about section to tell her viewers some demographical information about herself (Fig. 2)

SouthwestASMR also used this area to tell her viewers about her decision to start making ASMR videos. By using this area to tell her subscribers about herself, SouthwestASMR is enacting the personal layer (Hecht et al., 2005). Using this area, she can communicate certain aspects about her self-concept to her subscribers, which can help develop her self-concept further. This can then be pulled from to enact the relational and communal layers of her ASMR identity. For example, the way in which SouthwestASMR views herself (self-concept) will impact the ways in which she forges

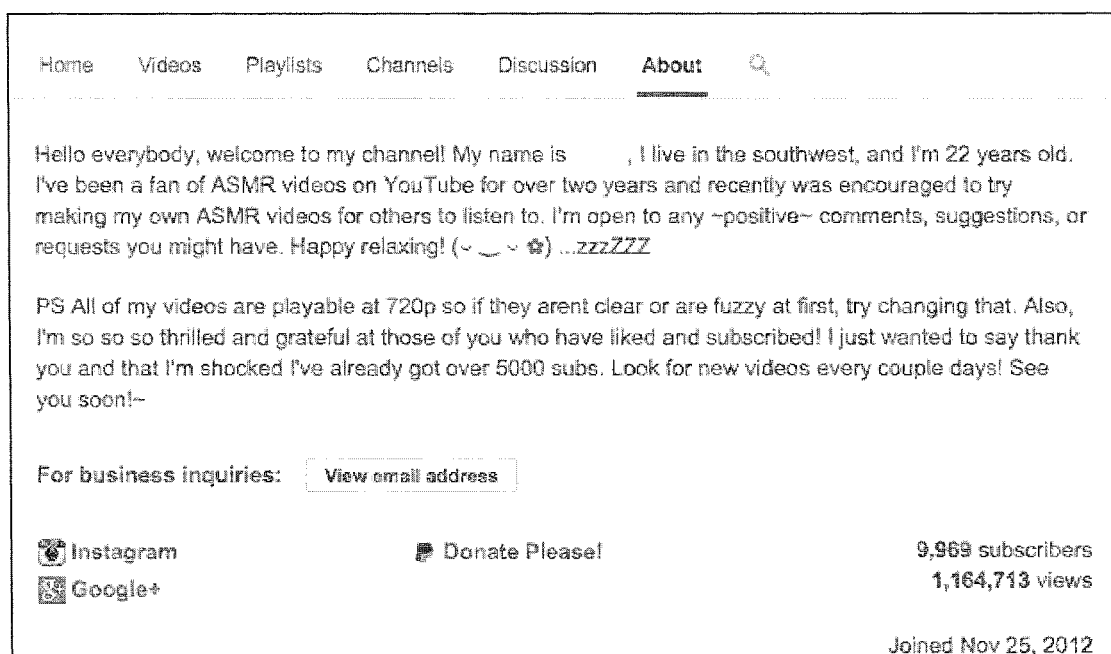


Figure 2

relationships with her viewers and fellow ASMRtists and how she views herself within the ASMR community.

In addition to using this section to tell their subscribers about themselves, some of the participants used the channel about section to forge relationships with their subscribers. For example, CareForYouASMR used her channel about section to provide alternate ways of contacting her, such as a more direct email address (Fig. 3).

Additionally, some participants went as far as providing a mailing address for their fans to contact them by. ASMRAccent provides a P.O. Box for her subscribers and fans to send her mail at (Fig. 4). Providing subscribers with a physical way to contact her, ASMRAccent further extends the olive branch of friendship, potentially creating deeper relational bonds with her subscribers. She can then pull from those interactions through mail to better understand her concept of self as an ASMRtist. For example, a fan

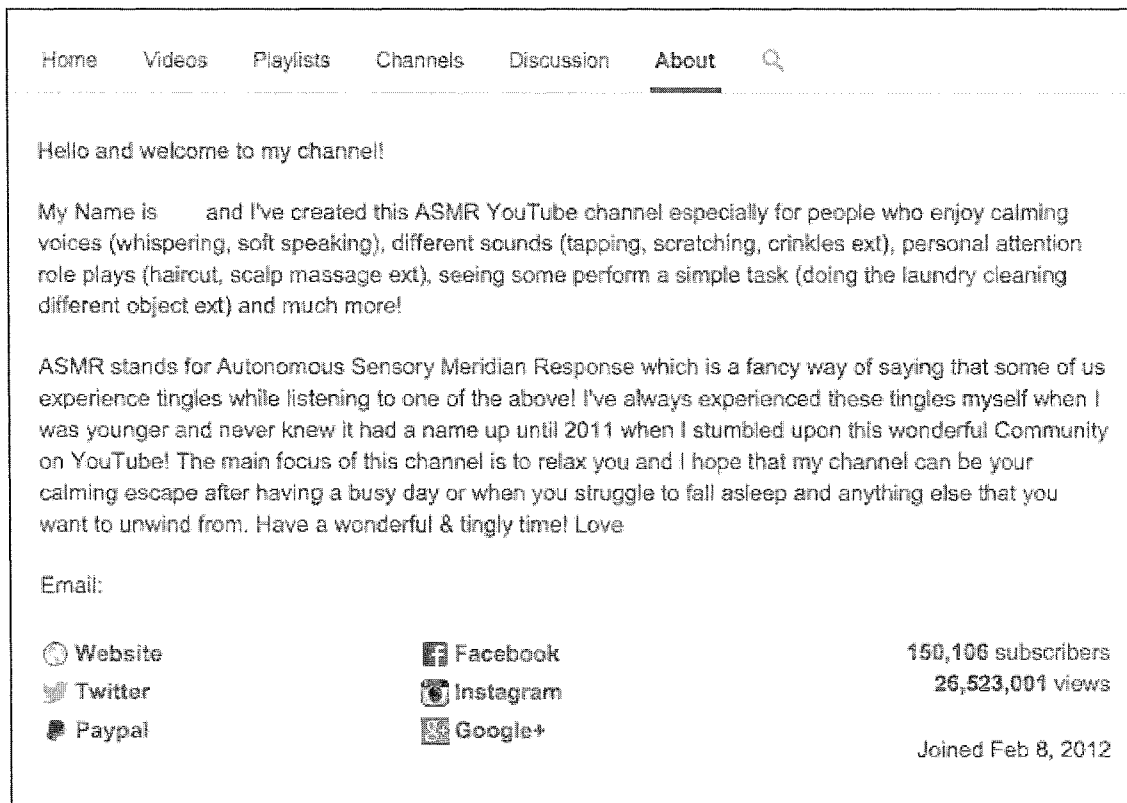


Figure 3

may write a letter to ASMRAccent to express his or her gratitude for her videos because they help him or her sleep much better. Knowing that her work is both appreciated and effective, ASMRAccent may feel validation and more competent as an ASMRtist, impacting her self-concept. Additionally, knowing that her work is appreciated and effective, ASMRAccent may feel as if she is a better person for helping others with their sleeping issues.

As another form of relational identity enactment, many participants included links to their other social media pages. These links to the ASMR community outside of YouTube encourages subscribers to make relational connections on other platforms. For example, all four participants included at least one link to another social media page (Fig. 2; Fig. 3; Fig. 4; Fig. 5).

The participants create an ASMR identity outside of their native website, YouTube, which allows for more relational connections and more relational resources to draw from to construct their ASMR identity. For example, an interaction on another social media website can inspire an ASMRtist to create a new type of video, adding to their self-concept or how they see themselves fitting into the ASMR community. Because of this interaction on another social media website, the ASMRtist could change an aspect of their ASMR identity.

CareForYouASMR, ASMRAccent, and asmArt included information about the content of their ASMR videos in their channel about section. For example, asmArt, who features videos of craft making on her channel, lists the different types of content in her videos (Fig. 5).

asmArt, who described herself as less concerned with others’ perceptions of her, used her channel about section to situate herself within the ASMR community, rather than tell her subscribers about herself. Discussing the content of her videos not only identifies asmArt as a part of the ASMR community, but it also differentiates herself from other ASMRtists within the community. Discussing the content of videos in the channel about section allows the ASMRtists to indicate to their subscribers how their videos are similar or different from other ASMRtists’ videos, enacting the communal layer of identity construction (Hecht et al., 2005).

Furthermore, some of the participants used the channel about section to tell their viewers about the ASMR phenomenon. Because there is much controversy over the definition and purpose of ASMR, some content creators found it important to articulate their definition of and purpose for the phenomenon. For example, both

CareForYouASMR and ASMRAccent provide detailed definitions of ASMR and what they intend their ASMR to do (Fig. 3; Fig. 4).

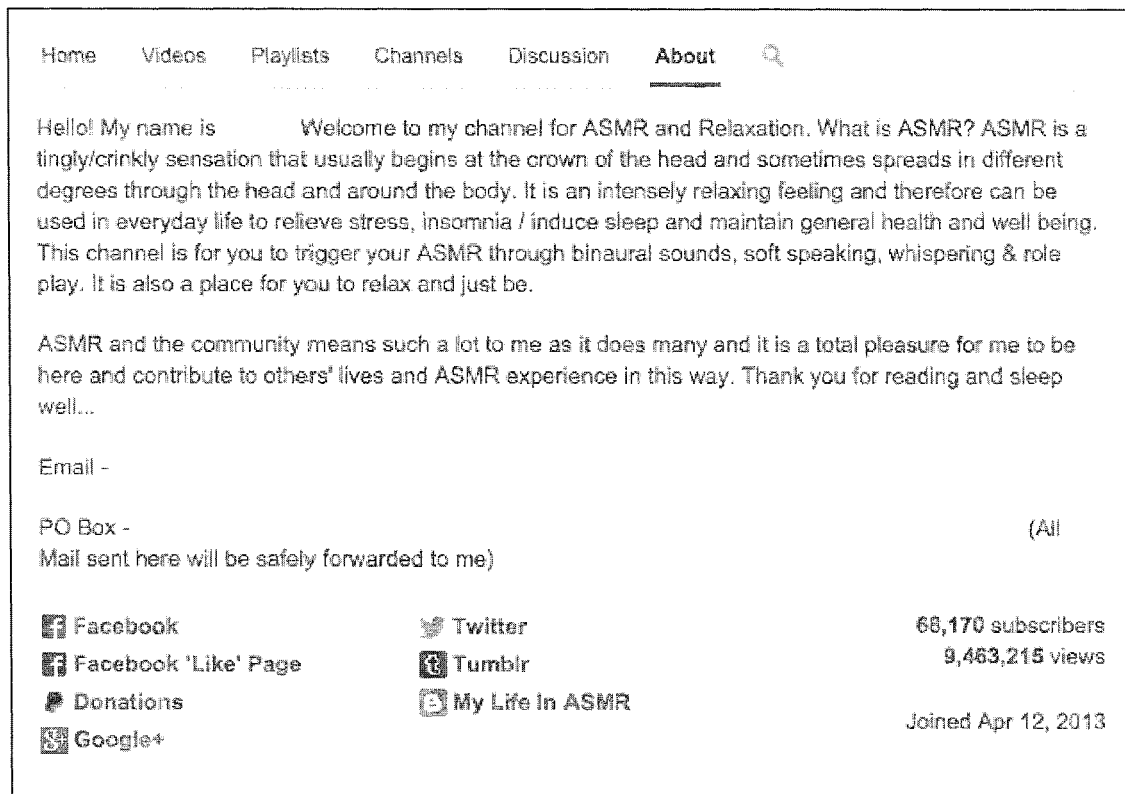


Figure 4

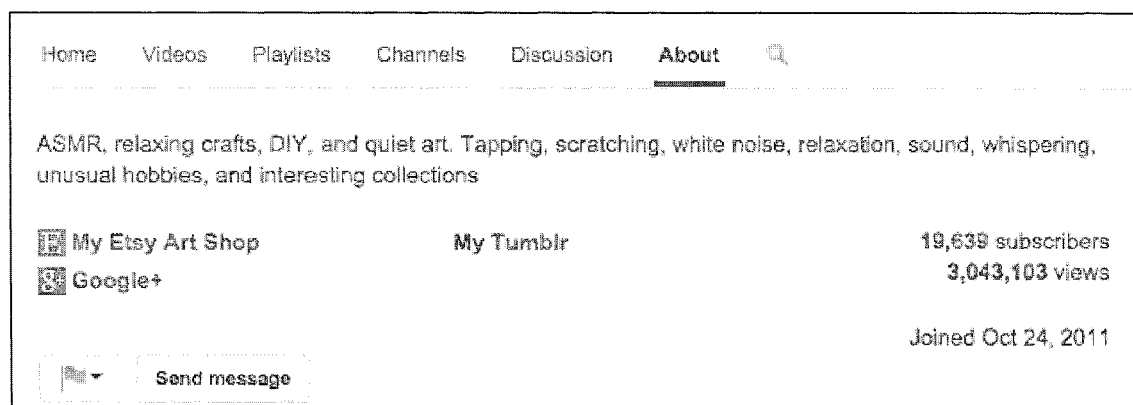


Figure 5

This articulation of ASMR and its purpose in the channel about section enacts the communal layer of identity (Hecht et al., 2005). By including a definition with their channel, CareForYouASMR and ASMRAccent directly identify themselves with the

ASMR community. When ASMRtists explain how they intend for their videos to be used, I imagine that it is partially because of the association of sexual fetishes with ASMR. Thus, when CareForYouASMR and ASMRAccent specifically tell their viewers how they intend their videos to be used, they are taking part in the communal resistance against sexual ASMR. Just as in the channel discussion board function, ASMRtists use the channel about section to combat the common ASMR enemy of sex.

Other functions of the YouTube channel are used to articulate aspects of the ASMRtists’ identities. For example, YouTube content creators have the option to make playlists for their subscribers to watch and listen to and have the option to name their videos however they would like.

Playlist and Video Names

The channel playlist page allows the YouTube content creator to create an unlimited number of playlists for their subscribers to watch and listen to. These playlists can include both videos that they themselves have made, or it can also include others’ videos from other channels (Fig. 6). The playlist function of the YouTube channel also allows for ASMRtists to enact their relational and communal layers of identity (Hecht et al., 2005).

Each channel on YouTube begins with one of two playlists, a compilation of “liked” or “favorite” videos. Thus, when an ASMRtist clicks the “thumbs up” button underneath another YouTube content creator’s album, the video is added to their “liked” videos playlist. Similar to the “like” videos playlist, when an ASMRtist “favorites” a video, the video is added to the “favorites” playlist on their channel. These playlists function as a part of the relational layer of identity. “Liking” or “favoriting” a video

creates a relational connection between the two YouTube users. Often, the “like” or “favorite” function is used specifically to create relationships. For example, an ASMRtist wanting to forge a relationship with another ASMRtist will “like” or “favorite” one of their videos to show approval or support. These small interactions can impact the way in which the ASMRtist sees their self-concept as well as how they see themselves in the community.

In addition, some of the participants indicated which videos they worked with other ASMRtists in. For example, asmArt included a playlist on her channel for “collaborations” (Fig. 6). In this playlist, asmArt included all of the videos in which she met up with other ASMRtists and created a video. Not only is this a literal enactment of the relational layer, in that it exemplifies the relationships that she has made with other ASMRtists, but also because it furthers those relationships built by respecting the other ASMRtist enough to include their work on your channel. As with “likes” and “favorites,” including videos with other ASMRtists is an unofficial “nod” towards the featured ASMRtist. As such, to work with one another and feature it on your channel is a relationship building and maintaining action.

A final way in which the playlist function enacts the relational layer of identity is through the actual wording of the playlist name. For example, CareForYouASMR uses “you” and “your” in the titles of some of her ASMR playlists (Fig. 7). The use of “you” and “your” directly targets the subscribers as the subject of these videos. When forging relationships, we often directly address the individual. Thus, the inclusion of the words “you” and “your” indicate the forging of

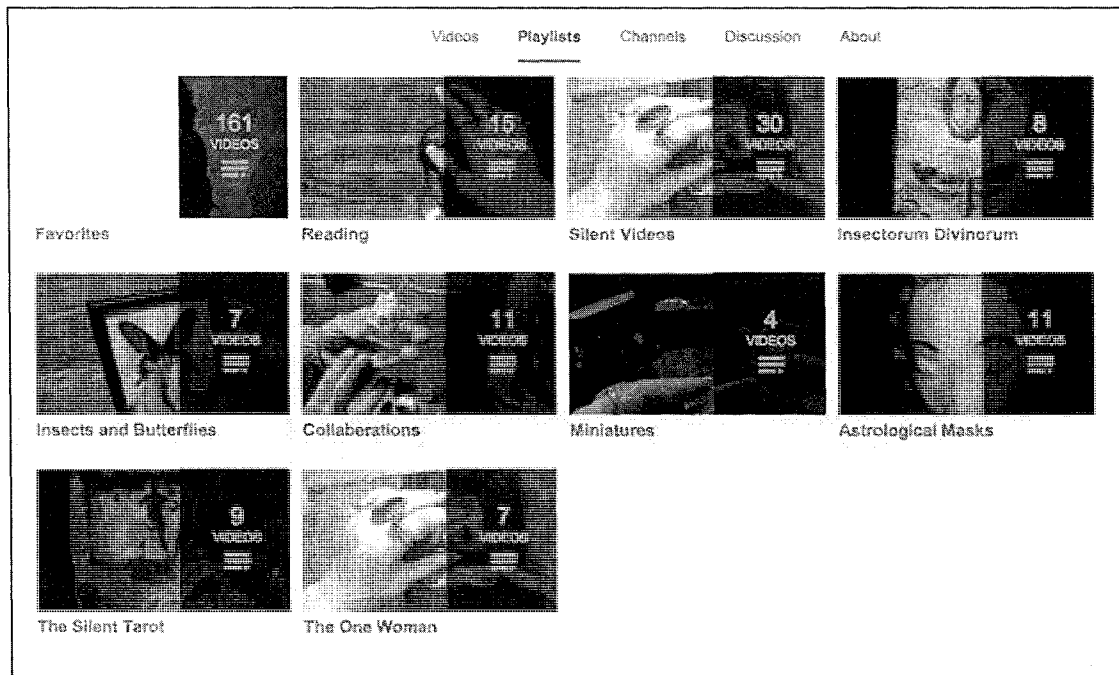


Figure 6

a relationship between ASMRtist and subscriber. Additionally, the direct addressing of viewers in playlist names interpolates the subscriber into the role of the video subject, for example the massage recipient, dental patient, or spa patron.

Many of the participants’ playlist names and video names often include the tag “ASMR.” This direct indication of the video or playlist as ASMR enacts the communal layer of identity (Hecht et al., 2005). Because of their connection to the ASMR community, ASMRtists are inclined to include certain content in their videos, such as whispering, gentle movements, or binaural audio. As such, ASMRtists use the “ASMR” tag to indicate their membership of the ASMR community.

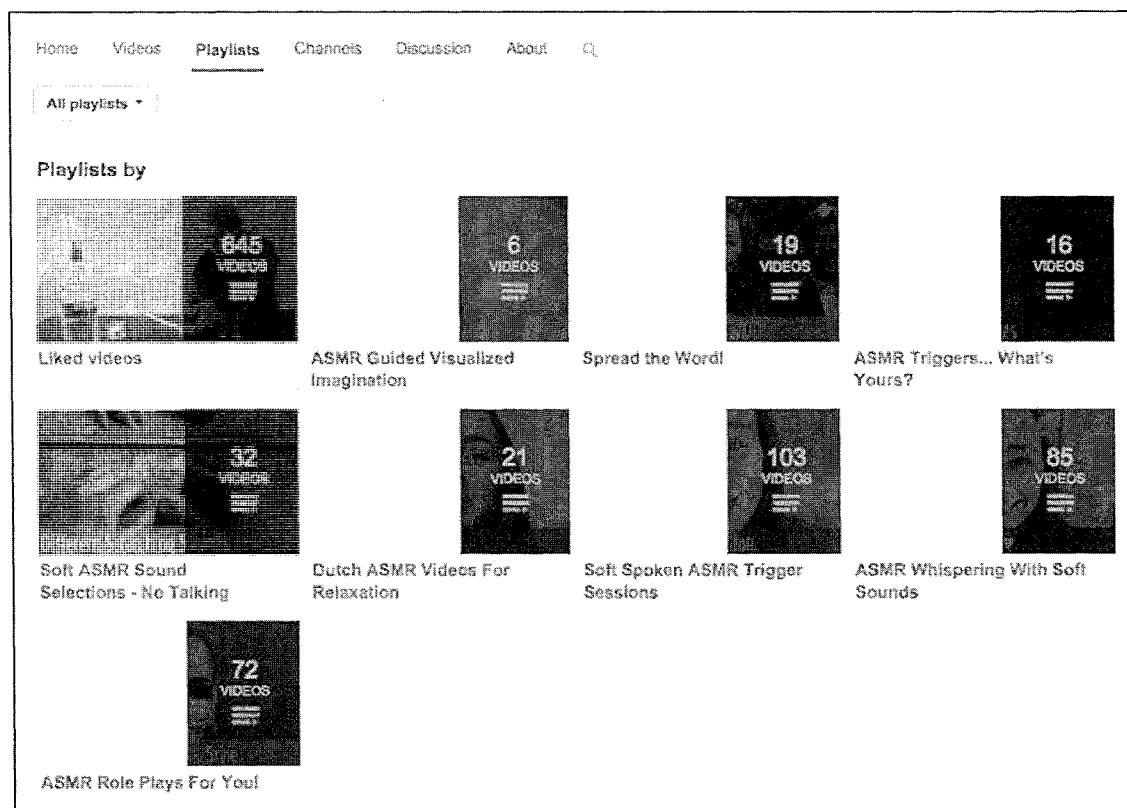


Figure 7

Interviews

In order to further understand the ways in which ASMRtists communicate their identities through their YouTube channel, I conducted 4 in-depth, semi-structured interviews and subsequent virtual ethnographies of interview participants' YouTube channels. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and occurred over the video chat software, Skype. Participants were 25-35 years old and all women. Two of the four participants were from the United States, while the other two lived abroad. All participants had varying levels of engagement with YouTube, meaning that some of the ASMRtists upload videos 3-4 times a week and reply to comments and messages everyday while others upload videos once a month and only reply to select comments sporadically. Although each participant shared some characteristics, they had differences in profession, geographic location, religious affiliation, relationship status, cultural

background, and social media used. The diversity of the sample contributed to the emerging themes within the data.

The results of these interviews help develop a cohesive understanding of how ASMRtists communicate facets of their identities to their followers through their YouTube channel and videos. Each interview was structured in such a way that would reveal important factors that contribute to an ASMRtist’s identity communication strategy on YouTube.

While coding the data, I found four important themes tied to creation and communication of identity through YouTube. The themes are as follows:

1. ASMRtists present themselves as “real” people.
2. ASMRtists present themselves as anything but sexual beings.
3. ASMRtists present themselves as emotional aids.
4. ASMRtists present themselves as affective individuals.

Below, I discuss each theme, supported in detail with observations and quotes from the interviews with the participants and from the virtual ethnographies of participants’ YouTube channels.

“I’m Real”

One of the most salient themes that emerged in the interviews was the insistence that who we see in a video is a very “real” representation of who they are outside of ASMR. This assertion is an enactment of the personal, relational and communal layers (Hecht et al., 2005). SouthwestASMR indicated that she likes to make videos informally:

My ASMR is kind of different from a lot of peoples because I’m really personal and in mine and I don’t use a script a lot of peoples videos are very um can be

very clinical or like sterile feeling because its scripted its like almost a teleprompter and its perfect...Um my unscriptedness is effective but almost in a positive way because its just more real and genuine like I’m not going to set up a completely blinged room with no air-conditioning because that doesn’t work with my lifestyle.

Generally, in the ASMR community, ASMRtists create videos, specifically role-plays, with props, binaural audio or elaborate set ups, as was indicated from the data in the content analysis. Thus, when SouthwestASMR mentions that she does not like to script herself or use a perfectly arranged and silent room, she makes the insinuation that the videos that do use a perfectly arranged and silent room are less relatable than hers. SouthwestASMR differentiates that aspect of her ASMR identity, such as not using elaborate equipment or settings, with other ASMRtists who do. This acts as a relational resource for her to draw upon when developing her ASMR identity.

By using an unscripted format for her videos, SouthwestASMR implies that the person that is seen on the screen is an accurate representation of who she is outside of her videos. This distinction can also enact the personal layer. For example, SouthwestASMR values simplicity and genuineness. Thus, when she uses a modest setting in her video and is unscripted, she is enacting her self-concept of being simplistic and genuine.

In addition to setting up their videos modestly to communicate “realness,” some ASMRtists try to communicate friendship through their videos and other channel functions. For example, ASMRAccent discussed what she decides to tell her viewers about herself:

I feel like I’m talking to my friends anyway. I don’t feel like I need to hold too much back. Obviously for security sake you have to hold back some, but I don’t mind sharing what I had for my dinner or what things I bought in the supermarket or you know something funny that happened that day. I mean that’s fine.

ASMRAccent decided to share the mundane details about her life, which creates a feeling of friendship. One of the strategies for relational maintenance, according to Canary et al. (1993), is openness. By being open with and sharing the little things with her audience, ASMRAccent performs relational maintenance to forge and maintain friendships on YouTube. This interaction clearly enacts the relational layer. Through her interactions with her subscribers, ASMRAccent decides what she wants to share with her audience through videos, such as a personal anecdote or what she did that day.

Additionally, some of the participants used messages and the video comments section to forge friendships and communicate their “realness.” For example, SouthwestASMR makes sure to respond to every comment on each of her videos:

I like to respond to like or like every comment I receive which is totally not required but its really important because I get so much happiness out of what like they’re saying and doing so they should smile and know that I like actually give a shit and you know.

By responding to each comment on her videos, SouthwestASMR communicates that she cares for her viewers and appreciates their interactions. This relational maintenance comes in the form of assurance. Because she replies to each comment on her videos, SouthwestASMR assures her subscribers of her commitment to them. Similarly, ASMRAccent also forges relationships with the message function on YouTube. She

mentioned that when she does reply to messages: “They’re very personal...the ones I answer and those I answer in detail. And then you become friends with people that way.” ASMRAccent indicates that she forges friendships with some of her subscribers through sharing personal messages.

Most commonly, the participants indicated that they try to be as relatable as possible. For example, SouthwestASMR thinks her inherent awkwardness makes her relatable and approachable:

I think that I do come across awkward sometimes and maybe ill prepared but I think we all are sometimes and that it’s kind of a relief to see somebody who’s in that position... I’m just independent and I speak my mind and I’m sarcastic and I go drinking and like I guess that’s scarier up front to some people but has totally affected like the people who watch my ASMR. Like its not for everyone I wouldn’t say its explicit by any means, but in comparison to a blond perfect Barbie like girl that has a perfect script, perfect lighting, perfect recording stuff. Like I am so imperfect.

SouthwestASMR allows her viewers to see a flawed version of herself, which she sees as making her more relatable to her subscribers. By enacting her self-concept, which is an imperfect, awkward, unedited woman, SouthwestASMR can forge relationships with her subscribers, enacting both the personal and relational layers (Hecht et al., 2005).

Additionally, SouthwestASMR is transparent with her audience by offering an unedited version of herself. Transparency is a strategy for relational maintenance (Canary et al., 1993), therefore, because she is transparent with her subscribers, she can forge meaningful friendships and maintain the ones she already has.

Emotional Aides

One of the main tenants of the ASMR community is the desire to help others. In addition to helping others relax or sleep, the participants indicated that subscribers often express that the ASMR has helped them through personal issues, as well. As such, the participants considered themselves to be emotional aides to some of their subscribers. For example, ASMRAccent talked about how people from all around the world have contacted her:

...but most mostly communication is emails and messages on Facebook because they come in everyday and those are long kind of explanations on their experience of ASMR and how in particular either my videos have helped or other peoples have helped or what just their experience is. They're very personal. So those are the ones I answer and those I answer in detail.

By taking the time to reply to the letters or emails from subscribers in need of emotional support, ASMRAccent enacts the relational layer of her identity. ASMRAccent negotiates part of her identity, such as her perceived friendliness or helpfulness, based on whom she is interacting with. As such, she can pull from those specific emotional interactions with her subscribers and identify different aspects of her personal or communal layers of her ASMR identity (Hecht et al., 2005).

Specifically, some of the participants mentioned that they want to be a resource for their subscribers to call upon when they need help. For example, CareForYouASMR mentioned that she likes to be that one person her subscribers can relate to:

So the way I try to help those people is obviously by making ASMR videos, but also by sharing my personal stories. Because I've noticed that in a lot of periods

in my life I’ve missed that one person that I could relate to. And I know how hard it is to not have that person. And because of that, because I know that feeling, because I’ve experienced it first hand, I know how important it is to have that one person. Even if its just online, but to have that one person that you can relate to and you can say, “Okay I’m not alone. There are more people who went through this or go through this still.” So that’s why I try to be very open about my life in general.

Similarly, CareForYouASMR shares information about her personal history with her viewers:

...the fact that I had an eating disorder and that my dad died when I was 16. Like how that went and how I got abused by my mother. The reason why I share it is because I know I’m not alone and why would I be ashamed of something a lot of human beings go through? I think that’s the problem now a days, there are a lot of people who are ashamed and the only reason why is because people don’t talk about it. Something only becomes taboo if you make it taboo. I don’t decide to make anything taboo.

By choosing to be open about her life, CareForYouASMR acts as an emotional aide to her viewers. Forging these relationships with her troubled viewers enables her to develop parts of her ASMR identity, such as being a pseudo-psychologist for her viewers. She can then pull from these interactions to develop her self-concept, as an honest and caring person, and her communal identity, as a part of a group of helpful people (ASMRtists).

Similarly, SouthwestASMR mentioned that she received positive feedback when being honest with her viewers about her past:

He said that it like changed his life and other people when I opened up about like abuse or like self harm or like eating disorders. Just things that people deal with but there’s, for whatever reason, a weird stigma around it. People respond with lots of positive comments either for support or mainly just relatability. Like they’ve also gone through similar problems when they were in their teens.

As mentioned in chapter one, Walther (1996) argues that, within the concept of hyperpersonal communication, computer mediated communication can exceed face-to-face interaction and thus greater levels of intimacy are achieved. Because ASMRtists interact through videos, discussion boards, or other forms of computer mediated communication, they have the ability to develop deeper, more intimate relationships with their viewers than if they were face-to-face. ASMRtists have the ability to self-select how they want to present themselves, potentially allowing them to feel more comfortable with being transparent with their audience.

This transparency is an enactment of the relational layer of their ASMR identity (Hecht et al., 2005). ASMRtists must negotiate what information to share during interactions with their subscribers, thus negotiating aspects of their identity. When she chooses to share something with her audience, that part is now a part of her ASMR identity.

Some of the participants also indicated that they have better self-concepts because they can relate to their subscribers. For example, ASMRAccent feels differently in her day to day life:

I’m a lot more confident and I don’t worry much what other people think of me because, well, how can I when I get a letter or an email from someone in Palestine

saying that when they’re fearing for their lives and they’re in an air raid shelter and they’re watching my videos and showing them to their children...how can I how can I be bothered by what someone thinks of me in the supermarket or something?

Because ASMRAccent serves as an emotional aide to some of her subscribers in Palestine, she sees a change in her self-concept. Not only does this interaction validate her work as an ASMRtist, but it also forces her to change how she sees the problems in her daily life. This relational interaction causes ASMRAccent to enact her personal layer of identity when thinking about the trivial aspects of her life.

Other participants felt like their participation in the ASMR community has made them a better person. For example, SouthwestASMR feels that she appreciates people more:

I realize how much people need other people like through ASMR. How much we just need people to give a fuck once in a while. I genuinely do I love everything. I love people. I love everyone and I want them to know...so my ASMR has made me nicer.

Similar to ASMRAccent, SouthwestASMR enacts her personal layer of identity when she sees a change in herself (Hecht et al., 2005). Because of the relational interactions she has with subscribers, Southwest ASMR changed the way in which she views herself. Additionally, because SouthwestASMR believes that people need to care about each other, she negotiates her relational layer of identity to accommodate that belief.

Affective Beings

Because of the affective nature of ASMR videos, it was important for the participants that they convey the right feelings to their subscribers. Many interview participants indicated that they needed to be in the “right mood” in order to film a video. For example, SouthwestASMR mentioned that she takes specific measures to ensure that she is in the right mindset to film a video:

I have to do something to relax myself so I’ll meditate or I have crystals, I’m one of those weird people who likes crystals, so I’ll spend a few minutes with my favorite crystal and breathe deeply. Or I’ll have a beer to calm down or I’ll talk to my best friend.

When she cannot settle into the “right mood,” SouthwestASMR indicated that she is experiencing some sort of unrest. Thus, focusing on getting in the “right mood” forces SouthwestASMR to examine her self-concept to resolve the inner conflict causing her unrest. Additionally, resolving this unrest with meditation, crystals, a conversation or alcohol enacts a portion of her self-concept, as it is a reflection of her self-concept.

Furthermore, participants indicated that their mood impacts the kind of content that they create. Thus, if she is in a particular mood, she may choose to make a different video than she planned. For example, ASMRAccents explains how her mood impacts her video content:

...and you’re not in such a great mood because of it but then you think, “but I was going to film tonight,” so you can either film that video feeling as you are, or you can bring yourself up. And sometimes you kind of just want to film a video that’s a bit more personal cause you’re not feeling up and happy that day.

During this situation, ASMRAccents implies that she can choose to perform the desired affective communication or choose to create new content based on her current mood. As such, she enacts the relational layer. Because she considers the audience’s reaction to, and satisfaction of her “emotional” content, she negotiates that aspect of her ASMR identity with her audience.

Many times an ASMRtist will refrain from publishing a video because of the tone of the content. For example, asmArt mentioned that she often thinks twice before posting personally sensitive content:

...I don’t think that those things need to be described in that it wouldn’t be relaxing if I did describe them. It’s a part of life sometimes, unfortunately, but it might be a bad trigger for someone I guess. And I don’t want to be a trigger like that for anyone else. I want to have positive tingly triggers and not make people cry because they’re remembering their own experiences when I’m reliving mine. Because I’ve accepted my shit and not everyone has and maybe they’re working on it and trying to work on it through these videos. So I want to be sensitive to them and not be like, “WHOO this is my past and my life and I’m better now but you may not be like sorry,” and be insensitive.

asmArt takes into consideration the experiences of her subscribers when deciding on what content to publish. As such, she is enacting the relational layer of her ASMR identity. asmArt negotiates facets of her ASMR identity, such as disclosing sensitive information, with the members of the community to develop her ASMR identity.

A significant way in which the participants identified themselves as affective beings revolves around the effect on them personally. Because ASMR tends to elicit

emotions in addition to tingles, ASMRtists must cope with others’ emotions in addition to their own. For example, CareForYouASMR talked about how she takes on others’ problems:

My problem is that I care too much. I’m too sensitive and I care too much. So for example, I always wanted to become a psychologist, but the reason that I did not become a psychologist is because you have a person sitting in front of you telling you all his or her problems and I’m the type of person that cares so much and I take it home and the more I think about it then I come up with advice...it will literally drag me down because its just so sad to see what happens to a lot of people and I don’t want anyone to go through sad times.

Taking on these emotions and problems of others impacts the personal layer that CareForYouASMR can draw from when developing her identity. CareForYouASMR’s self-concept, or the relationship she has with herself, may go through a transition when listening to others’ stories and problems, analyzing them, and giving sage advice. For example, if a participant were to express their suicidal thoughts to CareForYouASMR, she would most likely dwell on the matter until it was resolved. Because she will dwell on it, it will force her to call into question her self-concept as she prepares to intervene, give advice, or leave it alone. All three paths of action would cause a different shift in self-concept. As such, if she were to choose to leave the situation alone, she may experience a shift in her self-perception as a lazy or unsympathetic person; if she chose a different path she would experience a different shift in self-perception.

Anything But Sexual

A significant criticism of the ASMR community is the accusation that it is a sexual fetish. ASMRtists across YouTube enact as a part of their identity, that ASMR is not erotic or pornographic in any way. Any allusion to sex, romance, or sexualized bodies causes a slew of comments that are either critical or sexual in nature. As a result, some of the ASMRtists interviewed mentioned that they take swift actions against such comments. For example, ASMRAccent mentioned:

...if its related to the body...just rude and like disrespectful [comments] so I would take those down. I don’t really get them anymore because I don’t reply to them and I don’t argue with them you know? Every now and again I get something and I just take it away so it’s gone.

Another participant had similar sentiments regarding unwanted comments.

CareForYouASMR mentioned that she does not tolerate the mention of sex on her channel:

I only want to connect with people that know what I’m talking about or people that are interested in what I’m doing. And if you’re not or if you try to sabotage me or make it sexual or whatnot...well if that what it is for you, then fine I don’t want to have you on my channel.

The removal of sexual comments on ASMR videos and ASMR YouTube channels is a common practice. Because this is a common practice among many ASMRtists, and because the community’s insistence against a sexual ASMR, this functions as an enactment of the communal layer of identity. As a reminder, Hecht et al. (2005) describes the communal layer as a belonging to shared communities that have commonalities,

traditions, and histories that bond people together. Thus, both a commonality and tradition of the ASMR community is the resistance to being associated with erotica or pornography.

As was evident in the virtual ethnography, ASMRtist band together to combat the common enemy of sex. Because each ASMRtist contributes to the effort of diffusing sexual comments, they take part in and identify with the tradition of anti-sex sentiments of the ASMR community. As such, they enact their communal layer of identity and are able to draw from that when interacting with their subscribers.

Some participants commented that, instead of deleting sexual comments, they tended to respond with irrelevant, funny, or sassy remarks. For example, SouthwestASMR enjoys “trolling” her online sexual commentators:

So I respond sassily, but I try to remember that we’re all people so I don’t say anything hurtful back... Like in a playful way I’ll be like, “Hey I’m glad you took the time and you’re into me that you noticed, thank you.”

She mentioned that, at one point in life, she “trolled” different websites, and thus has a certain understanding when it comes to hurtful comments. Because she knows that the comments arise, usually, out of boredom or flattery, she tries to shock the commenter with an equally outrageous response. These comments are intended to either anger, embarrass, or flatter the ASMRtist. Instead of chastising the sexual commentator, like one may assume, the ASMRtist responded with an equally appalling comment.

When pulling from their communal layer of identity, ASMRtists make a decision on how they want to enact their response to the sexual comments. As is evident, different ASMRtists react differently to sexual comments, and is a unique enactment of their

identities. The way in which an ASMRtist reacts to a sexual commentator is also an enactment of their relational layer. Hecht et al. (2005) describe the relational layer as mutually created, negotiated and formed in relationships. As such, when an ASMRtist chooses to respond in a particular way, they negotiate part of their identity, communicating their stance on internet trolling, sexual comments, or sex in general.

And while the participants recognized that the comments aren’t usually out of malicious intent, they pointed out that sexual comments do more harm than good. For example, SouthwestASMR mentioned that the comments are hurtful:

Sometimes I’ll get comments of like a sexual nature and that really hurts my feelings...I get that their intentions were probably like good but that’s so not the point. If you’re feeling sexually aroused, then I’m doing the opposite of what I should be doing. You should feel sleepy and relaxed and just comforted and content and at ease and not “ready to go.” So, I get that they’re trying to be nice, but it kind of defeats the purpose of ASMR.

As SouthwestASMR points out, sometimes a sexual comment can be an insult to the ASMRtists work. Because the purpose of ASMR is to induce relaxation or sleep, an indication of sexual stimulation tells the ASMRtist that they were unsuccessful in achieving their purpose.

This sort of interaction can impact an ASMRtists self-concept, and thus their personal layer of identity. This layer is described as a personal understanding of self, or, a personal definition of self, comprising of personal values, beliefs and attitudes (Hecht et al., 2005). Through this communication, the ASMRtists may reevaluate their worth as an

ASMRtist or how they communicate their ASMR values, such as being professional, caring, or helpful.

Additionally, participants indicated that they do not publish a video that can be taken sexually. For example, asmArt told a story about a time she filmed a video and decided against publishing it on her channel:

I wanted to do a paper mache mask...and paper mache paste on a bust...well it looked pornographic. It looked like bukkake. It looked so bad. I was like, “not only does this make a horrible sound, but it looks really yucky. I cannot put this out there.”

The hesitation and subsequent refraining from publishing content that can be misconstrued as erotic is an enactment of the personal, relational and communal layers of identity (Hecht et al., 2005). On a personal level, asmArt comes to a decision about how she sees herself, which is clearly as a non-sexual ASMRtist. Relationally, asmArt pulled upon previous interactions on her ASMR channel to decipher if this video would elicit sexual comments or label her as making erotic ASMR content. Finally, asmArt enacts the communal layer of identity by abiding by the tradition and history of ASMR content, supporting the anti-sex values that ASMR insists upon.

Chapter 4: Conclusions

This study sought to answer two research questions. Research question one aimed to better understand the ASMR phenomenon and what kind of videos the ASMR community produces that elicit ASMR. I found that some of the most popular types of ASMR videos involve some sort of role-play. Medical and Spa/Salon role-plays are among the most popular types of ASMR videos, let alone role-plays. In these videos, ASMRtists emulated the experience that you may have when getting a yearly check-up, a haircut, or a massage. You, the viewer, are the patient or client, so the ASMRtist treats the camera as he or she would treat you.

Role-plays are some of the most popular types of ASMR because of their intimacy. I am not referring to sexual or romantic intimacy, but rather caretaker intimacy that coincides with close proximities, deliberate actions, and the feeling of being cared for. When we were young, it always felt nice for one of our parents to take care of us, whether we were sick, getting our hair brushed, or being taught how to do something. ASMRtists aim to emulate that same feeling, by reproducing the situations in which we experience caretaker intimacy.

A large part of being able to successfully mimic those situations, and thus caretaker intimacy, is the virtual reality of the setting and experience. As such, ASMRtists often use specific strategies to increase the perceived reality of their videos. For example, the most common characteristic of an ASMR video is the inclusion of props. When watching a role-play, the use of props dramatically increases the “reality” of the situation, and thus the credibility of the role-play. Similar to props, ASMRtists often use binaural audio to create a 3D sound effect. As such, when the ASMRtist is on the

right of the camera, the viewer can hear them explicitly on the right side of their earphones, and vice versa. This sound effect makes it feel as if the ASMRtist is in the room with you, increasing the “realness” of the situation and targeting the caretaker intimacy to elicit ASMR.

Understanding the types and characteristics of ASMR videos helped me understand the ways in which ASMRtists use their YouTube channel to construct or communicate his or her identity (research question two). To answer research question two, I collected and analyzed data through a virtual ethnography of participants’ YouTube channels and interviews with four women ASMRtists. Four major themes emerged from the data to help explain the ways in which ASMRtists use their channel to construct and communicate their identities.

The most salient theme to emerge revolved around the realness of the ASMRtist herself. Each of the ASMRtists indicated that the person they are online is very much congruent with the person they are in “real” life. Often times, like SouthwestASMR mentioned, ASMRtists may refrain from using the highest quality equipment or elaborate settings to communicate their realness. While this decision may impact the “realness” of her role-plays, it was an important part of expressing her “realness” to her subscribers. Additionally, multiple participants such as asmArt and SouthwestASMR, do not try to edit their flaws out of their videos. By enduring awkward, imperfect situations in their videos, asmArt and SouthwestASMR feel that they communicate approachability and relatability to their audiences. In fact, they believed that coming across as relatable adds to the ASMR experience. Because they are not “untouchable,” their viewers can feel as if they are talking to a close friend and be more relaxed.

Similarly, some of the participants view themselves as emotional aides to their subscribers. Often times, an ASMRtist will share a piece of sensitive information about herself with her subscribers, such as past addictions, eating disorders or abuse.

CareForYouASMR decided to share information about her past with her viewers in order to create relational bonds with subscribers who can relate to her. By sharing her difficult experiences, she marks herself a resource for some of her subscribers to call upon when they are in need of emotional support. Based on her experiences with sharing personal information, like past self-harm, SouthwestASMR finds it to be a positive experience, generating positive and supportive responses. One of her subscribers mentioned to her that she had changed his life because she shared that story, validating her identity as an emotional aide.

The affective nature of ASMR requires that precautions be taken to ensure the right feeling is conveyed in the video. Often times ASMRtists take extra measures to ensure that they are in the “right mood” before filming. Additionally, while there are times that ASMRtists share their difficult pasts, they are cautious before publishing the video – not for their own protection, but for their viewers’. asmArt, who had mentioned her difficult past to her viewers, also takes into consideration how her they will react to her stories. Negatively triggering her viewers is not a goal of hers, so she takes caution when deciding to post about sensitive topics. asmArt accepts her past as a part of her identity, but she also understands the potential repercussions for making that a relational part of her ASMR identity. Although some ASMRtists hold back to protect their viewers, others are concerned with emotionally protecting themselves. Because many ASMRtists view themselves as emotional aides, some distance themselves so they do not become as

affected by their viewers’ stories. CareForYouASMR mentioned that she often takes her viewers’ problems on as her own, so she takes caution when being an emotional aide.

The last significant theme that emerged from the data is the insistence that ASMR and its community members are not sexual. Because ASMR communicates intimacy, many critics associate it with sexual or romantic intimacy, rather than caretaker intimacy. Thus, ASMRtists find it especially important to indicate that they are not sexual beings and their videos are not sexual in nature. This articulation is found in the comments on the discussion board, the about section, and in their videos. ASMRtists combat the common enemy of sex by deleting sexual comments from their channel, explicitly stating what their channel is intended for and even refraining from publishing any videos or content that can be misconstrued as sexual in nature. For example, asmArt decided against publishing a video using paper machete because it looked too similar to a sexual referent. ASMRtists take on an anti-sex identity to stand by the community, but also as a reflection of facets of their personal beliefs about the presence of sex in ASMR.

Theoretical Implications

Expressing who we are as a person can be a difficult task, especially when using a social media platform. It is often assumed that individuals will use the medium to present a flawless or best version of themselves. The most famous online adage goes, “on the internet, no one knows you’re a dog” (Krotoski, 2012). However, as demonstrated by this study, some individuals attempt to present their most “real” self online. Through the data outlined in the analysis, it is clear that ASMRtists are very much concerned with authenticity. The pursuit of authenticity is apparent in almost all aspects of the ASMR community.

ASMRtists often strive for authenticity in their ASMR video content. With the use of binaural audio, props, and camera/microphone touching, ASMRtists can interpolate their viewers into the role of the patient or massage recipient. Taking these additional measures adds to the authenticity of their videos, both as ASMR role-plays and as a simulation of a face-to-face experience.

The ASMR community, through the making of more “authentic” role-plays, has established a culture in which certain video characteristics impact the authenticity of an ASMRtist. For example, the use of binaural audio is a major tenant of ASMR videos. The use of 3D sound effects, then, is expected to be included in most ASMR videos. When an ASMRtist does not include binaural audio, their authenticity as an ASMRtist is called into question. Deviating from the standard ASMR production level causes cognitive dissonance in viewers, as they are not getting what they expected.

In addition to the authenticity of the content creator as an ASMRtist, the addition of props, binaural audio and camera/microphone touching authenticates the ASMR experience itself. For example, using binaural audio creates a feeling of being in the same room as the ASMRtist, who is using props to touch the camera and microphone. When an individual can hear audio distinctively in each ear, which is similar to face-to-face interactions, the video they are watching becomes more real, and thus the experience more authentic. Similarly, touching the camera or microphone produces audio and visuals that very closely emulate that of a face-to-face experience.

In addition to the establishment of authenticity as ASMRtists and realistic video content, ASMRtists are concerned with presenting an authentic identity. This is to mean that authenticity is a part of their ASMR identity, not that their ASMR identity is

authentic to their face-to-face identity. For example, when CareForYouASMR tries to communicate authenticity, she is trying to communicate that she is an authentic person, not that she is the same person in her videos as she is in real life. Authenticity as a character trait includes being relatable, “down to earth”, or true to one’s self. While ASMRtists do not have to present an identity congruent with their face-to-face-identity in order to be authentic, they do need to present an identity that is seemingly honest about their “true” self. In order to communicate authenticity to their audience, ASMRtists employ a series of strategies, which are evident in the four themes.

This communication of authenticity as a character trait is an amalgamation of the personal and communal layers of CTI. In the personal layer, ASMRtists define their concept of self. Thus, when ASMRtists select authenticity as a character trait to present to their subscribers, they are defining their concept of self as authentic. In the communal layer, ASMRtists identify as a part of a community or group identity. Because authenticity seems to be a concern for many ASMRtists, it becomes a part of the group identity of the ASMR community.

By sharing information about their personal life, ASMRtists communicate transparency. Because they are perceived as a transparent individual, the ASMRtist may be viewed as being an authentic individual, or being true to themselves regardless of how good or bad their past was. Some ASMRtists enact their transparency by sharing sensitive information about their personal history. The perceived relatability that goes with sharing that information fuels their transparent persona, and thus their perceived authenticity.

Additionally, ASMRtists try to communicate authenticity in the tone of their videos. Because ASMR is concerned with communicating affect, ASMRtists are

concerned with the authenticity of their level of relaxedness. When creating ASMR videos, SouthwestASMR pointed out, it is hard to fake your level of relaxedness. As such, when an ASMRtist is not relaxed, it comes across as an inauthentic attempt at ASMR. To combat this, many ASMRtists take measure to ensure that they are in the “right mood”.

By replying to all comments on a page, embracing recording or acting flaws, or staging a less than perfect filming environment, ASMRtists communicate their authenticity. One of the participants mentioned that she likes to respond to all comments and messages that she receives. This, she thinks, communicates to her commenters that she cares about them enough to partake in a dialogue with them. Showing care and emotion can be considered a facet of transparency, and thus a facet of authenticity.

The pursuit of authenticity is creeping into the heart of most social media models and in the current Internet landscape is playing an important role in how we engage with one another and with web content. Previously, it was assumed that people could not be trusted to say who they were online. With television shows like *Catfish: The TV Show*⁶ and *To Catch a Predator*, those assumptions were a very serious reality. However, with the addition of social media sites that connect our online selves with our face-to-face selves, such as Facebook and Instagram, presenting an authentic self has become an important tenant of self-presentation online.

⁶ *Catfish: The TV Show* was a program that followed individuals who felt their online significant other was not being honest about who they really were. “Catfishing” is often described as presenting a fake identity online and the subsequent tricking of an individual into an online relationship under the pretenses that the person they are in a relationship is “real.”

Limitations and Future Study

The current study had many limitations that prevent any generalizations from being constructed. The small sample size provided a unique insight into four ASMRtists experience constructing and communicating their identities through the functions of a YouTube channel and videos, but did not allow conclusions to be made for all ASMRtists on YouTube. Also, the demographics of the study were homogenous as all of the ASMRtists were white, women, and between the ages of 25-35.

Aside from the small sample size, interviews with participants varied from one to the next. The interviews progressively became longer, more comfortable and generated more pertinent information. After reflecting on the experience, it was evident that my interviewing skills were gradually improving. Yet as interviews improved, the initial interviews lacked the depth of the latter ones. More foundational and more probing questions could have been asked to gain a deeper understanding of how the ASMRtists began their ASMR journey and how that impacted the construction and communication of their current ASMR identity. Though analysis was done on the data collected, the vary quality of the data limited this study. Even with limitations, the peculiarity of the ASMR community and the complexity of identity construction and communication online warrant future research.

Future studies could seek to discover the ways in which ASMRtists communicate affect to their viewers. Affect is a significant pillar of the ASMR community and eliciting a physiological response through sounds or video is an unexamined area of research. Additionally, this study touched on, but did not detail, the performative aspects of ASMR role-plays. Future research could expand upon the performance of ASMR characters

outside of their ASMR identity and how that impacts their self-concept or interactions on YouTube. Sample sizes should also be larger to allow for more nuanced generalizations to be made.

As noted in the limitations, this study’s population was homogenous. Thus, future research could seek to understand the differences between how men and women construct and communicate their ASMR identities in relation to power, caretaker intimacy, and traditional gender roles. Similarly, the distinction of medical role-plays as one of the most popular type of role-plays brings about questions of power and vulnerability in eliciting ASMR. Being in the patient position in a doctor-patient relationship is quite intimidating being that the doctor is in the more powerful position as the health expert making an evaluation of some sort. Furthermore, ASMR is a phenomenon that has no borders, with individuals experiencing it and making videos in an array of countries. Future research could examine the ways in which ASMR is transnational and how although different cultures are present in the creation of ASMR videos, that the goal of the sensation is universal.

Further exploration of the ASMR community and ASMR identity construction and communication can offer a deeper understanding of our presence online which in turn can help us better interact with the Internet and each other.

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