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Coping with COVID through ASMR

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ABSTRACT

Over the past several years, the genre of autonomous sensory meridian response, or ASMR videos, has exploded on YouTube with a multitude of channels dedicated to the creation of ASMR content with videos often getting millions of views. ASMR videos seek to trigger a tingling sensation through the use of specific aural and visual stimuli. These stimuli often involve whispering, scratching and tapping sounds. The recent COVID pandemic has helped spawn a new sub-genre of ASMR videos that approach the global situation in a number of ways ranging from roleplaying getting tested for COVID to simply attempting to debunk myths about the pandemic to help with people's anxiety. Given the reported increase in stress/anxiety caused by the COVID pandemic, this paper aims to explore how content creators have sought to capitalise upon the new situation in which society finds itself, through the production of COVID related ASMR videos.

KEYWORDS

COVID, YouTube, ASMR, Content, Stress.

Introduction

Over the past decade, a large Creator economy has developed in conjunction with the rise of digital social media platforms. Not only has this allowed individuals to be able to express themselves in a variety of ways, but they have been able to connect with audiences who share their values and interests. This phenomenon has been explored from a multitude of angles by other scholars ranging from the use of YouTube as a news platform (Sumiala & Tikka 2013) to the influence that celebrities have on fashion brands on Instagram (Herjanto et al. 2020). Across this wide range of literature, one common theme relating to the content creators themselves is that continued success is in part determined by the Creator's ability to evolve and adapt (Brandtzaeg et al. 2016; Deuze & Prenger 2019). Often these adaptations have been explored by scholars in the context of changing technologies such as platform algorithms (Fouquaert & Mechant 2021), or through the continual changing cultural trends in society (Chuah et al. 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic has forced all elements of society to adapt to the changes brought about by the disease, and this is certainly the case when it comes to the production of content on YouTube.

As a video sharing platform YouTube has seen continuous growth in its user base since its inception in 2006, making it currently the second most popular social media platform (Moshin 2021). This large userbase stems from the platform's ability to cater for a wide variety of interests and tastes, ranging from popular, corporate-controlled music channels to individuals who upload their own personal home videos to share with family and friends. One genre of

channels that has developed a significant audience over the past several years has been ‘autonomous sensory meridian response’ (ASMR) channels. With the pandemic influencing all forms of content creation, it is important to consider whether content that is often specifically geared towards helping people relax during stressful situations has adapted to create COVID-19 tailored content and if so, what form this content has taken. Given these questions, one can explore how both the most popular channels as well as the broader ASMR content creator community have adapted. However, before attempting to answer these questions it is first important to explain the phenomenon of ASMR and the perceived utility that such videos bring to their audience.

What is ASMR?

Autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR) has been defined as ‘a perceptual phenomenon in which specific stimuli, known as ‘ASMR triggers,’ frequently elicit tingling sensations on the scalp, neck, and shoulders, often spreading to the body’s periphery’ (Fredborg et al. 2018, 1). These tingling sensations are often associated with feelings of calm or having an overall positive effect on a person’s state of mind (Barratt & Davis 2015). The triggers that cause these effects range from audial and visual to being more tactile in nature. Despite the potential for a wide range of things to be considered ASMR triggers, the most popular trigger is believed to be audio-visual, typically in the form of whispering and close-up attention (Barratt & Davis, 2015). The sensations derived from ASMR are distinct from other forms of sensory experiences such as synesthesia or frisson. Firstly, other forms of sensory emotional experiences tend to only last for several seconds whereas from ASMR, these experiences may last for several minutes after the initial ASMR trigger (Del Campo & Kehle 2016). Secondly, audiences engaging with ASMR triggers are typically in control of their experience and can determine the intensity of the response that they feel, unlike those who experience synesthesia (Fredborg et al. 2018).

Work by Smith, Fredborg & Kornelsen (2020) identified 5 categories of triggers that stimulate ASMR. These were watching, touching, repetitive sounds, simulation and mouth sounds. Other work by Fredborg et al. (2017) identified similar categories of stimulus being: watching individuals interact with objects, watching individuals perform a socially intimate act, soft repetitive sounds, viewing simulated social interactions, and hearing whispering or chewing. The descriptions of these categories can be seen to be exceedingly broad and generic in that taken at face value, someone who is prone to experiencing ASMR could potentially be triggered by almost anything. Fredborg et al. (2017) did split these five broad categories into separate items in their study, such as for the category of ‘Watching’ which included “‘Watching others paint,’ ‘Watching others draw,’ ‘Watching others open a package,’ and ‘Watching others cook’” (Ibid, 7). These separate items were created through self-reporting by participants, and with currently no comprehensive content analysis across ASMR videos on YouTube it can be argued that it is appropriate to maintain a broad categorization approach towards an ASMR taxonomy.

A common theme that has been identified within ASMR videos is the concept of digital intimacy (Andersen 2014). This intimacy is created through what Zappavigna calls ‘ambient embodied copresence, that is, the use of visual and aural resources to invoke or simulate the perspective of the ambient viewers and their bodily copresence in the performed interaction’ (2020, 3). The concept of digital intimacy has been explored from a range of viewpoints such as how young people develop relationships through apps (Gardner, Davis & Gardner 2013), to its value in fostering a sense of authenticity on platforms like Instagram (Reade 2020).

The importance and value of digital intimacy has arguably shifted during the COVID-19 pandemic where physical proximity to other humans has been severely restricted. Everyday interactions such as going out to dinner or getting a haircut have been all but stopped and so a way to experience these intimacies is through digital content. Across most literature concerning ASMR content one of the commonly agreed upon genres of video is ‘Roleplay’. These videos generate a sense of digital intimacy by addressing the viewer with ‘expressions of care, interest and affirmation’ (Gallagher 2016, 1). Whilst engaging with this content cannot act as a full replacement of the original experience, given that such videos are associated with the easing of symptoms experienced through stress and anxiety (Barratt & Davis 2015) and given the rise of these symptoms during COVID-19 (Gritsenko et al. 2020; Vinkers et al. 2020), it is important to consider whether ASMR content creators have attempted to provide content to act as a substitute for the experiences that people are missing out on.

YouTube allows content creators to embrace a range of multimodal resources to simulate a dialogic interaction (Zappavigna 2020). Through the creative employment of communicative strategies to encourage participation in what is effectively one-sided role play, (such as by pausing as if to allow someone to respond to a question) the content creator cultivates a sense of direct attention, affirmation and intimacy. The affordances of YouTube as a platform, combined with the fact that a majority of people who experience ASMR find that ‘having close personal attention paid to them’ triggers their ASMR (Barratt & Davis 2015, 11), means that it is prudent to consider the extent to which such videos have been proliferated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

ASMR content on YouTube

ASMR content on YouTube can be traced back to around 2009 where there were roughly twelve channels that were dedicated to whispering content (Keiles 2019). Despite ASMR content beginning on YouTube as a niche area which was often discovered through discussion on internet forums or word of mouth (Del Campo & Kehle 2016), the total amount of ASMR content has exploded over the past few years. This growth can be illustrated via a simple comparison to Zappavigna’s 2020 work, where at the time of writing they reported approximately 97,600,000 results from a basic *Google* video search for ASMR (2020). At the time of writing this paper, the same search now returns 274,000,000 results.

Arguably, there are two types of channels that upload ASMR content. The first of these are channels where ASMR content is not the primary focus. An example of this would be *W Magazine* (2018) who as part of a series of interviews with celebrities, asked them to perform some ASMR. The second type are channels where ASMR content is the sole focus of the videos uploaded. Many of these have ‘ASMR’ in their name in order to indicate this focus. These dedicated channels are predominately run by women, with over five hundred such videos being uploaded each day (Keiles 2019). The scale of these dedicated channels runs from those with just a few hundred subscribers with videos receiving a few thousand views, to channels such as *Gibi ASMR* which have millions of subscribers and videos regularly achieving over a million views. It can also be argued that ASMR content is no longer a niche topic given that the popularity of this type of online content has even breached more traditional forms of media as seen in a Super Bowl advert in 2019 (Glas 2019).

As is the case from most forms of cultural content, YouTube channels are subject to trends and fads within wider society that subsequently influence the content they produce (Ferchaud et al. 2018). As Jamie Keiles has put it, ‘Any trigger that starts to find fans is endlessly taken up and reperformed — ripped off by different channels for ad dollars — at least until the next trigger takes its spot. One month, cranial nerve exams are in. The next month, creators are all shaving bars of soap, chewing bricks of raw honeycomb or eating buckets of KFC’ (2019). One of these recurring trends in content has been the roleplay of medical exams, which Ahuja believes is possibly due to ‘a natural confluence point of jargon, scrutiny, and personal contact’ (2013, 444). Given the recent COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent testing and vaccination process, this can lead one to speculate as to whether there has been an increase in the amount of ASMR content relating specifically to COVID-19. It is important to see whether this is the case due to the purported stress and anxiety with these processes (Shimaa et al. 2021) and the easing of these symptoms that ASMR can cause (Barratt & Davis 2015).

Methodology and sampling

In order to explore how ASMR content creators have capitalised on the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper will consider two questions. Firstly, how often have the most popular ASMR dedicated YouTube channels created COVID-19 based content? Secondly, among all ASMR videos on YouTube related to COVID-19, what is the type of content in those videos? To answer this first question a simple content analysis of the most popular ASMR channels on YouTube was conducted. The top ten channels (based on total number of subscribers) were selected, and each of the videos uploaded to those channels since 1st March 2020 were analysed according to whether or not the subject of the video related to or mentioned COVID-19. This was determined through whether the video’s title mentioned COVID-19 or related medical terms. The 10 channels that were analysed were: *Zach Choi ASMR*, *SAS-ASMR*, *Jane ASMR* 제인, *HunniBee*

ASMR, Gibi ASMR, Kim&Liz ASMR, ASMR Darling, ASMR PPOMO, Gentle Whispering ASMR, and ASMR Glow.

In order to answer the second question, a random sampling method was used wherein a search on YouTube for ‘covid asmr’ was performed. Of the videos present in the search results, the first hundred from channels with the word ‘ASMR’ in their channel’s name were chosen for the sample. This was to ensure that data was only taken from channels dedicated to ASMR content. It should of course be noted that that the notion of random sampling on platforms like YouTube are only as random as the platform’s algorithm allows (Ahmad et al. 2017). Due to the ‘black box’ nature of these algorithms (Finn 2019), and the revenue incentive of the platform to promote videos that will generate the most money from advertising (Postigo 2016), one can only say the sample is random within the confines of the platform’s algorithm.

Once the sample had been selected, each video was then categorised according to the type of content in each video. The list of categories used was based upon the categories set out by Fredborg et al. (2017). The categories used were interaction with objects, socially intimate acts, repetitive sounds, roleplay and whispering sounds. Within these final two categories, separate subcategories were also used. For roleplay, the additional subcategories were ‘medical’ and ‘other’. This was done to more clearly distinguish between the different types of roleplay. For whispering sounds, the subcategories were ‘explainer’, ‘personal story’ and ‘other’. ‘Explainer’ pertains to those videos attempting to give facts and explain the nature of the disease to the audience. ‘Personal story’ videos involve the content creator relating their own personal experience of having COVID or COVID-like symptoms to their audience. This was done because after an initial analysis of the sample it was determined that the broad category of ‘whispering sounds’ would not be sufficient to capture the range of videos that fell within it.

Findings

During the first content analysis of the top 10 most popular ASMR YouTube channels, across all ten channels a total of one thousand, seven hundred and sixty-three were uploaded between 1st March 2020 and 1st March 2021. Out of all of these videos a total of six, or 0.34%, made a reference to COVID-19 in their title. The largest contributing factor to this tiny proportion of COVID related content was that several of the channels (*SAS-ASMR, Jane ASMR 제인* and *Kim&Liz ASMR*) had each uploaded over three hundred and twenty videos on their channels, but all of these videos were dedicated to food-based ASMR.

These results highlight some key issues that future research into ASMR content must consider. The first of these is the risk of conflating ASMR content with ‘mukbang’ content. Mukbang is a type of audiovisual broadcast where the host consumes a wide variety of food (Kang et al. 2020). The term stems from the portmanteau of the Korean words for ‘eating’ and ‘broadcast’. This type of content rose in popularity in Korea over the past decade and has subsequently begun to be

produced and consumed by Western audiences (McCarthy 2017). Research around this content has largely focused on the potentially negative public health implications of the promotion of this style of eating (Kang et al. 2020; Kircaburun et al. 2020). However, during the first content analysis in this paper it became clear that several of the most popular ASMR channels could easily be classified as mukbang channels given that their content is solely dedicated towards the eating of food and the sounds that it generates. Under Fredborg et al’s taxonomy of ASMR content (2017), the category of ‘hearing whispering or chewing sounds’ clearly captures these types of channels. Given how ASMR content has grown in popularity over the past few years, with an increasing number of people experimenting with the genre, future research in this area may wish to consider developing a more nuanced taxonomy of ASMR content, beyond Fredborg et al’s model from 2017. This would enable researchers to more concisely select the specific genres and formats of ASMR. Alternatively, researchers wishing to explore the totality of ASMR content on YouTube may want to simply exclude all food focused ASMR channels, given their apparent homogeneity.

A second issue raised by this paper’s first content analysis is the extent to which ASMR YouTube channels need to engage with and acknowledge current trends and real-world events. There is currently limited evidence as to whether the addition of extra context of environments and triggers used, would enhance a viewer’s ASMR experience (Barratt, Spence & Davis 2017). Given that the top ten most popular ASMR exhibit very limited acknowledgement of real-world events in their content, this would suggest other factors are at play when determining the success of an ASMR channel. Given that several of the top YouTube channels looked at in this paper were uploading almost one video every day, this lends support to research which suggests that upload frequency plays a determining role in the popularity of a YouTube channel (Budzinski & Gaenssle 2018; Buckley 2020).

The data from the second content analysis pertaining specifically to COVID-19 related ASMR videos was as follows.

Table 1: The type of content found in COVID-19 related ASMR YouTube videos

Type of content		Number of videos
Interaction with objects		3
Socially intimate acts		6
Repetitive sounds		2
Roleplay	Medical	43

	Other	8
Whispering sounds	Explainer	9
	Personal story	12
	Other	17
Total		100

The data presented in Table 1 raises a number of interesting issues concerning the way ASMR content creators have capitalised on the COVID-19 pandemic. The first of these is that over half of the analysed videos relied upon a roleplay format to trigger ASMR in their audience. Building upon the work of Zappavigna, in which one of the core types of roleplay ASMR videos are ‘service encounters in domains such as shopping, medicine, and beauty’ (2020, 12), it is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic presented ASMR content creators an opportunity to play out typical medical scenarios that are associated with the disease, namely getting tested and vaccinated. These types of videos can be seen to draw upon several key concepts within the field of media production, namely digital intimacy and news values.

Digital intimacy can be broadly construed as personal connections that are mediated through digital technologies (Dobson 2018). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of intimacy achieved through digital technologies (particularly video calling software) has already been established (Watson 2021). The role that digital intimacy plays in both how creators produce their videos (Andersen 2014; Gardner, Davis & Gardner 2013) and why audiences choose to engage with it (Gallagher 2016) has also been acknowledged. Particularly when it comes to roleplay ASMR videos, this intimacy is established through the use of various ‘visual and aural resources to represent the ambient viewer’s perspective’ (Zappavigna 2020, 13), so that the viewer feels as if they are seated directly across from the content creator. Given that a significant number of videos within the sample are of a medical roleplay nature, it could be argued that ASMR content creators are capitalising on the COVID-19 pandemic by using it and its associated experiences as a backdrop for their roleplay content. This supports Ferchaud et al’s (2018) point that cultural content is often influenced by ongoing trends in society. Whilst it is difficult to assess whether these COVID-19 roleplay videos performed better in terms of engagement metrics compared to the other ASMR videos uploaded to the channels within the second sample of videos, a case could be made based upon Keiles’ (2019) work that if some channel’s COVID-19 roleplay videos were seen to be performing well, that other channels would attempt to copy this type of content.

It could also be argued that these videos are, in part, capitalising on some news values typically associated within the field of journalism, in order to reach as large an audience as possible. When reflecting on Galtung & Ruge's (1965) taxonomy of news values, values such as 'frequency' and 'reference to persons' can be used as explanations as to why COVID-19 roleplay ASMR videos were the most common among those found in the data sample. The value of frequency can be found with the medical roleplays often involving COVID testing or vaccination; common experiences to many people. The value of reference to persons, or what Harcup and O'Neill (2001) label 'relevance' can be seen as a result of audiences' need to identify with a video's subject matter, and due to the widespread nature of COVID-19 the reenactment of getting tested for it clearly exhibits this value. This in turn can be linked to the notion of digital intimacy through what Chris Peters calls the 'experience of involvement' (2011, 305), wherein audiences are more likely to engage with content they can be emotionally invested in. The 'personal story' type of content found in the sample can be seen as a clear example of this experience of involvement, as the content creators are relying upon the audience to empathise with the experience they have gone through, as it is possible that members of the audience have themselves gone through a similar experience.

The use of news values as a theoretical framework to explore COVID-19 related ASMR content is also useful when considering the 'explainer' type of videos found in the data sample. While making up less than 10% of the total videos analysed, these videos engage in what can be described as fact dissemination. An example of this is a video uploaded on the YouTube channel *AlexAuAsmr*, wherein the creator discusses the COVID-19 virus by 'talking about the background, some of the timeline of the virus, how it spreads, symptoms, prevention, and any other notable topics regarding the virus' with all of the information being sourced from 'reliable sources such as the CDC and the WHO' (2020). An argument could be made that one of the ways in which ASMR content creators have capitalised on the COVID-19 pandemic has been by engaging in the practice of citizen journalism through the form of ASMR. This style of delivering information is ripe for further study. Recent work by Bogueva & Marinova (2020) exploring the effectiveness of using ASMR content to engage with people on the topic of climate change found that some participants felt that 'it can influence positive climate change behaviours' (Ibid, 1). Given the recent turn in journalism to place greater emphasis on the role that emotions play in conveying information (Wahl-Jorgensen & Pantti 2021), future scholars could consider how the digital intimacy created within ASMR content impacts how audiences receive news content.

From the two data samples, it is clear that a distinction can be drawn between the most popular ASMR YouTube channels and all channels that are dedicated towards producing ASMR content. Even excluding mukabang channels, the former does not appear to have attempted to capitalise on the COVID-19 pandemic whereas the latter clearly has in some form. The distinction between

ASMR channels in general and those that are the most popular could be understood from a financial perspective.

Over the past decade the term ‘content creator’ has emerged as a ‘catch-all to describe digitally enabled cultural producers who create and circulate content on social media platforms’ (Arriagada & Ibáñez 2020). Now considered a legitimate career by many people (Miege cited in Deuze & Prenger 2019, 78), the importance of maintaining a consistent revenue stream through the production of digital content is vital to remaining within this field of work. While there are many factors at play in terms of determining the financial success of a content creator such as the frequency with which they upload content (Arriagada & Ibáñez 2020), when it comes to YouTube a critical factor is what content the platform allows to be monetised.

It has been well documented by both scholars (Caplan & Gillespie 2020) and the media (Alexander 2019) that YouTube content creators are anxious about the ever-present risk that their videos could become demonetised, resulting in a loss of their main income stream. When YouTube has made significant changes to the way in which videos can become monetised on its platform this has been commonly referred to as the ‘Adpocalypse’. The first of these occurred in 2016 when YouTube wanted to promote more family friendly content and has since gone through four more of these adpocalypses (Alexander 2019). During the COVID-19 pandemic social media platforms have attempted to restrict the spread of misinformation about the pandemic and in YouTube’s case, this has involved demonetising videos that discuss or mention the pandemic in order to disincentivise the creation of such content (YouTube 2020). COVID-19 was determined by YouTube to be a sensitive topic and ‘as such, all videos focused on this topic will be demonetized until further notice’ (Leung cited in Alexander 2020). The risk of losing revenue may be one of the reasons why the most popular ASMR YouTube channels chose not to try and capitalise on the pandemic to get more views. With these channels being run by full-time content creators, by performing ASMR roleplay that deals with scenarios linked to COVID-19 they would run the risk of having their videos demonetised and hence not be worth the time and resources it would take to create them. Given their already established popularity and large audience, there would appear to be little incentive to engage with or reference this particular ongoing issue within wider society.

Conversely, smaller, less popular ASMR YouTube channels who engage in what could be called YouTube hobbyism wherein they may do not seek or care about the monetary rewards of their labour, but simply produce content for the fun of the process and audience’s appreciation of that content (Abidin 2017), may capitalize on the COVID-19 pandemic by creating ASMR COVID role play content. If this is the case, then this would go against Keiles’ assertion that ‘Any trigger that starts to find fans is endlessly taken up and reperformed — ripped off by different channels for ad dollars’ (2019).

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to explore how ASMR content creators on YouTube may have sought to capitalise on the COVID-19 pandemic regarding the content they were producing. Based on a primary content analysis of both the most popular ASMR YouTube channels as well as a random sample of COVID-19 related videos uploaded to dedicated ASMR channels, several key insights can be made.

The first is that the most popular ASMR channels do not seem to have capitalised on the pandemic at all, given that only 0.34% of their content related to it. This is somewhat surprising given the extra stress placed on society by the pandemic, combined with the well understood stress-relieving effects of ASMR. One would have expected these channels to tailor some of their content to help combat COVID related stress that their audience may be feeling. The potential reasons for this lack of capitalisation are threefold. Firstly, some of the most popular ASMR channels have a very clear brand and are geared towards a very specific form of ASMR content, namely food-based chewing sounds. Deviating from this may have alienated their fanbase (Baysinger 2016). Secondly, given that YouTube was demonetising many COVID-19 related videos (YouTube 2020), there may have been little incentive for the content creators to invest their time in producing content for which they would receive little to no remuneration. The third reason may be that rather than directly capitalising on the pandemic by producing COVID-19 related content, these popular ASMR content creators were instead responding to the widespread media coverage of the pandemic by allowing their audience a form of escapism, away from COVID-19. One of the predictors of internet use is escapism (Papacharissi & Mendelson 2011), and by directly avoiding the topic these content creators could be seen as capitalising on the pandemic in some way.

A second point this article makes is that ASMR content creators who have produced COVID-19 related content have largely done so through the form of roleplaying scenarios, with 51% of the videos analysed using this format. Roleplay videos afford a certain sense of digital intimacy and given that having close personal attention paid to oneself is one of the main triggers of ASMR (Barratt & Davis 2015), the COVID-19 pandemic has allowed for novel scenarios to be acted out by these content creators. With COVID-19 related videos being demonetised on YouTube, this exploitation of the pandemic is not necessarily motivated by financial gain, suggesting the motives driving such content creation is an area that requires further research. Whilst work has been done looking at the reasons for digital content creation in general terms (Cantillon & Baker cited in Deuze & Prenger 2019), as well as platform specific such as in the case of Pinterest (Wang et al. 2016), there is currently little research pertaining to why ASMR content creators produce the videos they do.

Overall, it would appear that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the ASMR content creator community to varying degrees. While many dedicated ASMR YouTube channels have

capitalised on the pandemic by producing related role play videos, the most popular content creators have seemingly not felt the need to acknowledge this trend. In order for a fuller picture around the creation and use of ASMR during the COVID-19 pandemic, further qualitative research is required to understand both why content creators produced this specific type of content, and to what extent audiences find value in this content.

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