

Mediated Sexuality in ASMR Videos

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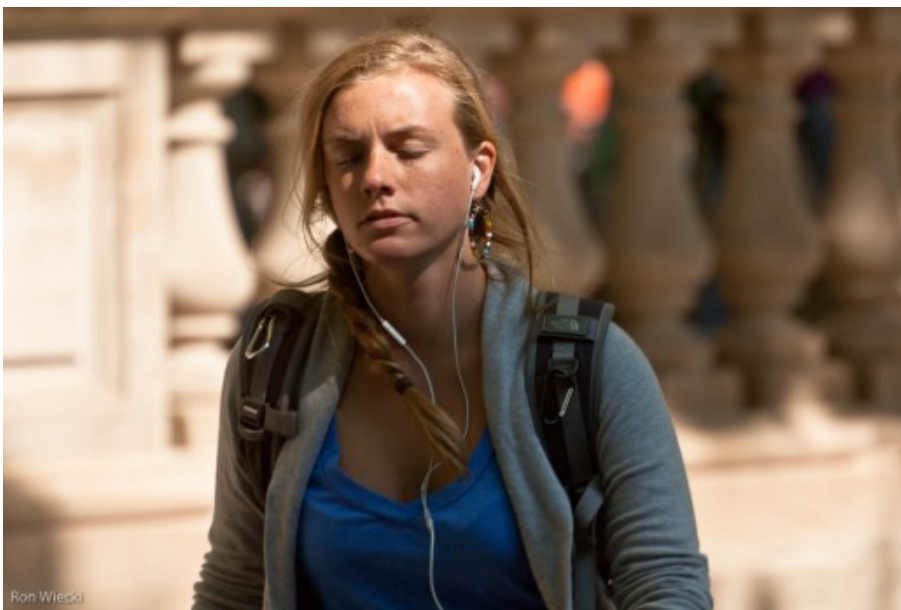
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Abstract

“Why does it feel so good when someone else is touching you?” she asks, fluttering her fingers up her forearm in demonstration. The cheerful blond woman smiles brightly. “Is it because of the physical contact itself?”

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Digital Media, Listening, Performance, Sexuality, The Body



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“Why does it feel so good when someone else is touching you?” she asks, fluttering her fingers up her forearm in demonstration. The cheerful blond woman smiles brightly. “Is it because of the physical contact itself? Or is there something else going on?”

This YouTube celebrity is Olivia Kissper, and she is about to demonstrate 40 different sounds that act as “triggers” for ASMR, or Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response. ASMR is a term coined by the community of internet users who experience a particular tingling sensation in response to certain auditory, visual, or haptic stimuli. The sensation often originates in the scalp and travels down the spine and is reported to be immensely pleasurable, as well as relaxing. “ASMRtists” now flood YouTube with a steady stream of high definition videos designed to trigger this sensation for viewers, either by whispering or making other sounds with the mouth, by tapping, crinkling, or scratching various household objects, or through role-play scenarios (which often incorporate some or all of the above). In answer to Olivia’s question, I suggest that ASMR “feels so good” because the technology affords listener-viewers the opportunity to imagine alternative sexualities outside of the dominant Western paradigm of heterosexual, two-bodied, genital, orgasmic, reproductive intercourse.

However, the online ASMR community vehemently asserts that there is nothing sexual about ASMR. Of course, that is not to say that [NSFW ASMR](#) doesn’t have a strong following on Reddit, or that there haven’t been strident debates on the topic (such as the one [sparked by comedian Russell Brand earlier this year](#)). But it does mean that the vocal majority of ASMRtists and their listeners perceive this experience as intensely pleasurable, yet outside the regime of sexuality. It seems that positioning ASMR as distinct from sexual fetishes is an effort to destigmatize what may otherwise be viewed as deviant or unhealthy sexual behavior.

The problem at hand, then, is not that ASMR may in fact *be* sexual, but that pervasive definitions of *sexuality* pertain to very narrow set of actions and gestures among a very narrow set of bodies and pertaining to a very narrow set of moralistic qualities. I argue that ASMR videos broaden the scope of what we understand as “sexuality” and provide a means for bodies to gain access to certain other bodies in particular ways, and thus serve as an outlet for people to enjoy those (sexual) pleasures alongside of what is deemed appropriate in the mainstream. By analyzing this video phenomenon, specifically through the videos of ASMRtist Olivia Kissper, I consider what is “real” about this mediated intimacy, and how this mediated intimacy can help us to reimagine sexuality.

<https://youtu.be/L5QjfnIHZ1A>

Pleasure

If ASMR is described by those who experience it as intensely pleasurable and relaxing, and if ASMRtists craft their videos with the deliberate intention of producing this automatic, visceral, pleasurable sensation, then it is indisputable that ASMR is, above all, concerned with the production of pleasure. In this way, it is not difficult to note the parallels between ASMR videos and pornography—another “body genre” (to borrow the term from [Linda Williams](#)) that employs

genre-specific techniques with the intention of producing an automatic, visceral, pleasurable sensation in the viewer. Bearing this in mind, it should not be overlooked that most of the bodies interacting with the objects in these videos are young, conventionally attractive, white women. As art historian [Joceline Andersen notes](#), ASMR often “relies on the heteronormative gender roles of care” (685). In other words, the popularity of an ASMRtist (with [few exceptions](#)) seems to be directly related to her sexual appeal and the degree to which she upholds Western standards of beauty.

Despite the fact that these videos may not be pornographic in the traditional sense, they are certainly sensual, if not sexual. This is exemplified by the way in which these ASMRtists attempt to evoke the sensation of contact with the viewer. ASMR is triggered not only by sound, but also by touch, and many ASMRtists strive to create perfect illusions of tactile sensation through the expert manipulation of visual and aural components. These are the kinds of videos that Olivia Kissper produces most often, such as “This FEELS SO REAL! Binaural ASMR SCALP MASSAGE with head massager, cicadas & WHISPERING.”

<https://youtu.be/a73aorFYf5g>

The tabloid-headline-esque style of the video’s title exemplifies the common practice of wordy titles for ASMR videos, so that viewers can tell at a glance if the video contains the specific triggers they are looking for, in this case tactile role-play and the auditory triggers of whispering and binaural recording. The quality of ASMR videos has steadily improved over the last couple of years, and most successful ASMRtists use high definition [binaural microphones](#) that record from two different “ear” locations, so that when the listener uses headphones, it produces the immersive effect of “3D” [sound](#).

At the beginning of this video, Olivia asks, “are you ready for the most blissful experience?” then leans in close to whisper: “Are you ready to treat your senses a little bit today?” She speaks very softly and slowly, her voice intonated by her Czech accent. She punctuates her speech with graceful, twirling hand movements, and she shows off her long fingers and perfectly groomed fingernails as she displays the head massager and taps on the different materials it is made of in order to display its texture.

As a rule, ASMR videos deliberately engage with texture: if not of objects, then of the voice and the mouth, sibilance and saliva amplified sensuously through binaural recording. ASMR, then, is exemplary of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s claim in [Touching Feeling](#) that, “what [texture and affect] have in common is that at whatever scale they are attended to, both are irreducibly phenomenological” (21). Here, the pleasurable affect manifests in the phenomenological tingles across the listener-viewer’s skin as Olivia taps her fingers along “your” hairline, runs her fingers through your hair, massages your scalp with her fingertips, and pushes the tines of the wire head massager down your head. If all goes well, you will feel like Kissper really is touching, stroking, and caressing you, and the experience will trigger “the tingles.” Performances such as Kissper’s produce the sensation of proximity, and are able to do so specifically through the digital technology that allows for the perfect storm of amplified aural, visual, and haptic stimulation. Here, the ASMRtist’s performance evinces the sensation of proximity and even direct contact with

another body. As sound studies scholar [Joshua Hudelson has described](#), in ASMR media, “sound is transduced into touch, and the taut membranes of the listener’s headphones become coterminous with his own skin.” The pleasure of these role-play videos derives not only from the physiological response to the mediated contact, but from the “[personal attention](#)” trigger (one of the top five most popular ASMR triggers [according to a recent survey](#)), as established through the use of second-person address. The demand for this element of intimacy is also growing in porn, according to [Ela Darling](#), whose new website [vrtube.xxx](#) (NSFW) features virtual, one-on-one 3D cam sessions.

Intimacy

Mediated intimacy is at play in all ASMR videos, in the sense that they are produced for personal use. ASMR videos that use binaural recording techniques must be listened to with headphones, which means that each individual among the hundreds of thousands of viewers of these performances experiences an intimate encounter with the ASMRtist. But that intimacy is turned up even higher in role-play scenarios, as in one of Olivia’s earliest videos, “Whispering, HAIR BRUSHING, Braiding & card reading ASMR.”

<https://youtu.be/BocY0GxNNho>

This video takes place in a softly lit bedroom, with eye level low enough to suggest that the viewer-listener is sitting on the bed. Olivia is dressed casually in a plaid shirt, which is, not incidentally, unbuttoned rather low. She begins the video by addressing the viewer-listener directly as “friend,” and providing some expository dialogue indicating that the relationship is one of good friends who have not seen each other for a long time. She tells the viewer-listener she wants to braid her hair, but before she does that, she wants to:

start with acknowledging you because I’ve realized recently that I don’t tell you certain things and I just don’t want to put it off anymore. And I’m gonna whisper it to you, um, because it is really important for me that you really get that, yeah?

However, despite the platonic relationship established in the expository introduction, the boundary-crossing proximity of Olivia’s neck and hair in the viewer-listener’s field of vision erotically charges the banal acknowledgements she whispers.



Image by Bill Strain @Flickr CC BY.

It is clear that the intimacy that I experienced with Olivia is mediated—the hair she is braiding is not my own, for example, I cannot actually touch the objects she offers me, nor would she recognize me if I met her walking down the street—but does mediation necessarily imply inauthenticity? If intimacy is affective (pleasurable) and phenomenological (tingly), then doesn't my experience with the mediated Olivia count as "real" intimacy? Dominic Pettman has suggested that love itself is a technology in "[Love in the Time of Tamagotchi](#)," and points to the fact that intimacy is often done better through digital simulation:

[W]ith the current technology, simultaneous eye-contact is not possible. [...] The video-chatter has the choice of staring at the image of their interlocutor, or straight into the camera, but not both at the same time. [...] In 2012, simulated avatars already have an advantage over other humans on video-chat, since they can better simulate such a vital interactional presence, precisely by better simulating this eye-to-eye event (110).

Although Pettman provides the example of a digital avatar in a game, I think the same could be said of ASMR videos, and that Olivia's eye contact is equally effective and affective. Olivia herself believes this to be true, [asserting on her personal website](#) that, "Because of our emphatic [*sic*] human connection and mirror neurons, our brain cannot tell the difference between a face-to-face interaction and online roleplay."

Care

The authenticity of the encounter between the ASMRtist and her listener-viewer is paramount in Olivia's work, especially when it comes to the concept of healing. It is no coincidence that spa treatments and medical exams are two of the most popular genres of ASMR role-play: both appeal to the pleasure of being cared for. Indeed, for Olivia, her videos are not just about producing pleasure for her viewers, but about *healing* them. This has become more evident in her recent videos, which belie her interest in science fiction, Eastern medicine and spirituality, New Age and metaphysical therapies, and what she calls "[transpersonal](#) healing." One of her more unique videos, "FUTURISTIC TINGLES! Binaural ASMR exam and transpersonal healing role play with binaural beats," exemplifies this philosophy. "FUTURISTIC TINGLES!" is quite different from the typical ASMR video in that it is less about stimulating particular senses or simulating particular experiences, and much closer to the abstraction of meditation exercises. It is not realistic, nor is it trying to be. But it is still acutely concerned with the phenomenological effect on the listener-viewer's body.

<https://youtu.be/PGLMHwpegHY>

This unique video, replete with computerized special effects, opens with a quote that draws connections between the placebo effect and the role of "caring attention" in [healing](#). The viewer-listener is then led through a complex scenario in which Olivia, as a virtual cyborg healer, examines them through their computer screen, and then leads them through a healing meditation

involving trippy visual sequences and binaural beats intended to trigger different, relaxing brain wave states. While the medical tests conducted in the first half of the video set the scene (and appeal to popular tropes within the ASMR genre at large), the second half is intended to produce actual healing effects within the body, not just simulate them. Olivia's point is not that alternative therapies such as binaural beats and ASMR *could* be supported by Western research if only the scientists *would* study them; on the contrary, her performances embrace the healing potential of those phenomena that *cannot* be substantiated by Western research.

But although Olivia advocates for the alternative healing qualities of ASMR, her most popular videos are still about spas and medical offices, not [reiki](#), [palm reading](#), or [ayahuasca](#), although she does have videos on all of those topics. The reason these two scenarios—doctor's offices and salons—are so much more popular than, say, scenes in which the viewer is ill or tired and being cared for by a lover or a parent is because we are more likely to already have access to those forms of intimacy in our day-to-day lives. But although our doctors and aestheticians may know our bodies more intimately than most people in our lives, they are still considered strangers, and interactions with them must therefore follow strict protocol, particularly regarding sexual encounter. We may not articulate the pleasures we enjoy at the doctor or the salon because sexuality is understood as necessarily genital, and definitively relegated to specific relationships only. Similar to Anderson's point that ASMR videos are productive of a "queer intimacy" (697), this essay shows how ASMR videos exemplify that there are alternative pleasures in these caring intimacies, and provide an outlet for enjoying those intimacies alongside of what is deemed appropriate in the mainstream.

Conclusion

Bearing these three components of Olivia's videos in mind—pleasure, intimacy, and care—what interests me about ASMR is that they really do touch us: the mediation of the digital recording allows the vibrations produced by Olivia's vocal cords and finger nails to literally penetrate my ear and resonate within my body. In this way, the technological mediation of ASMR videos facilitates, rather than hinders, contact between the performer and the viewer-listener, a point that speaks to the appeal of ASMR role-play videos in particular. ASMR refers not just to "the tingles" but to the affective conglomeration of physiological tingles and psychical pleasure and relaxation, as produced by the touch of the ASMRtist. And similarly, as Teresa Brennan suggests in [The Transmission of Affect](#), even my internal chemistry may literally be affected by "body movements and gestures, particularly through the imitation of rhythms (effected by sight, touch, and hearing)" (70). While the sexuality of this resonance is implied by the (problematically) gendered performances of ASMRtists such as Olivia Kissper, I suggest, somewhat provocatively, that ASMR is not just *like* sex, but *is* sex.

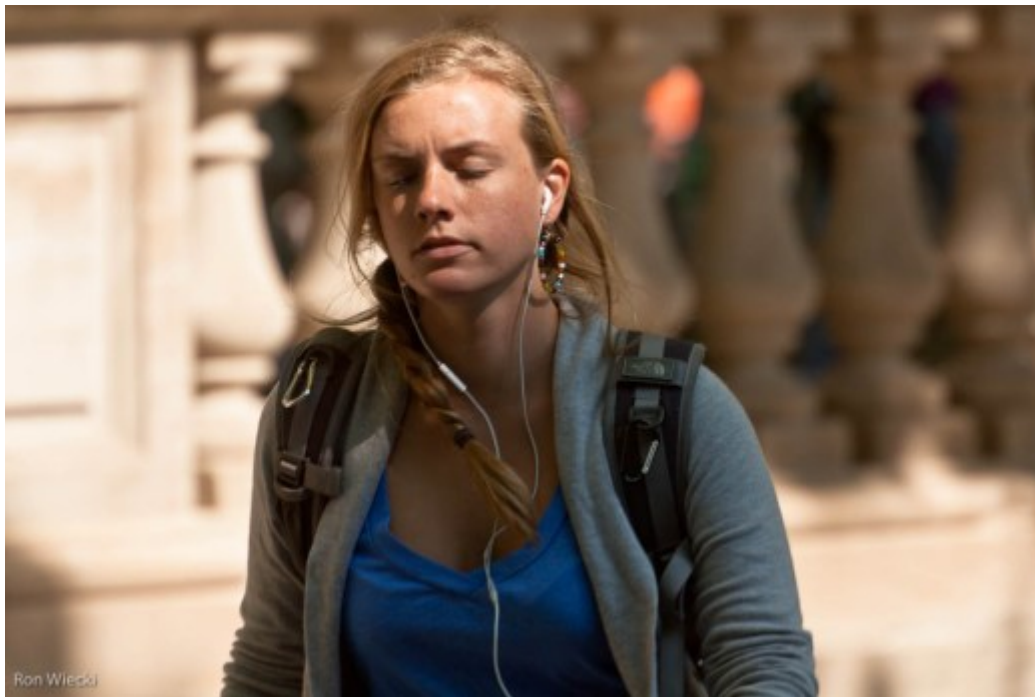


Image by Ron Wiecki @Flickr CC BY-NC-ND.

As “sex” is increasingly acknowledged as referring to a wide range of activities outside of penetrative, heterosexual, genital intercourse, it seems inevitable that its bounds will continue to expand, blur, and reconstitute themselves. Sexuality, therefore, should not be defined by the concrete gestures that constitute “sex” in a given time and place. Rather, sex could be understood as any embodied technique of pleasure, intimacy, and care, while sexuality could refer to an infinite scope of techniques within that category. In this way, by asking what sex *does* to the body rather than what it means for the subject, we may be able to cast aside sexuality’s moralistic conundrums and better attend to its affective aspects. What the current, dominant, Western definitions of sexuality often restrict, are the socially sanctioned opportunities for certain bodies to touch other bodies and, it follows, the ability to see the benefit of a multiplicity of intimacies. ASMR performances may be one means of transgressing the interdictions on when and how bodies may access one another, sowing the seeds for cultivating alternative, pleasurable, intimate, and caring modes of life.

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Image “In the Pink” by Koppenbadger @Flickr CC BY-NC-ND.

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Emma Leigh Waldron is a Ph.D. student in the Performance Studies Graduate Group at the University of California, Davis and a graduate of the MA Performance Research program at the University of Bristol. She is also Co-Editor-in-Chief at the online journal, [Analog Game Studies](https://doi.org/10.59350/y6ahy-2wc81).

Emma’s research focuses on affective communities that coalesce around intimate performances of touch. She is currently researching the mediated intimacy of ASMR videos on YouTube, and how

sex is represented in larp (live-action role-playing games). She is especially interested in how definitions and manifestations of sexuality are negotiated, reified, and transformed through these practices. Her work lies at the intersection of performance studies and media studies, and questions the role of embodiment in sexuality, intimacy, and touch. Her work is informed by feminist theory, queer theory, affect studies, and phenomenology. You can find Emma online at www.emmaleighwaldron.com.

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