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[Audio Artefact](https://soundcloud.com/user-218878328/engl-asmr)

ASMR: A History of the Tingles

Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR), the term known to describe a euphoric feeling and sensation of tingling when listening to and watching specific audiovisual videos, has become increasingly popular in the last few years. The physiological responses that come from these videos can be felt as tingles in the head that continue down the length of the spine—subsequently, since this phenomenon is still fairly new in its inception, real scientific evidence of how and why the body responses is ultimately lacking. Nitin K. Ahuja, Assistant Professor of Clinical Medicine in the Division of Gastroenterology at the University of Pennsylvania and third-year resident in internal medicine, describes ASMR videos as “a pleasant and poorly understood somatic reaction to specific interpersonal triggers—web-based manifestations include a variety of amateur videos designed to elicit the reaction” (Ahuja 422). This paper will outline a brief history of ASMR, the different types that have been circulating the internet, how auditory noises trigger physiological responses and touch on different forms of ASMR and “satisfying” audio visual content circulating the internet.

ASMR videos first came out on the scene in the early 2010s, and although they did not have a specific term to categorize them, they quickly picked up pace and popularity. One of the first ASMR YouTube channels, the [Gentle Whispering channel](https://www.youtube.com/user/GentleWhispering), whose given name is Marie, now has nearly 1.8 million subscribers and according to her YouTube channels description she states,

~• ASMR / TINGLES ~•~ WHISPER ~•~ COMFORTING ~•~ RELAXATION / MEDITATION ~•~ NATURAL SLEEP AID ~•~ SOOTHING VOICE / SOUND THERAPY•~ In this world of stress and chaos I wish my channel to be your secret island of relaxation and peace. I'm here to comfort you, to share my love and care with you, to make you feel relaxed and stress free through creative and soothing videos. Let me try and keep you company at hard times, let me calm you down and help you sleep on restless nights, let me be your friend and be a trigger for your tingles ( ASMR ) or simply help you find beauty and peace in places you might have never thought of looking. ♥ (GentleWhispering)

Marie is by no means the only ASMR content creator, but she is by far one of the firsts—with her very first video entitled “Whispering in English and Russian and flipping through a magazine” posted on June 3, 2011. Interestingly enough, the first time Marie mentioned ASMR in the title of her videos was on June 28, 2011 and not again until nearly three months later, on September 4, 2011. This proves that although there was a niche for meditative and relaxing videos, there was still a bit of novelty within the genre and lack of categorization or name to go along with this niche group of videos.

ASMR videos tend to be recorded videos with a large microphone with the video creator or content creator closely situated in front of the microphone—they whisper throughout the video, rarely every speaking in a regular tone or volume, and depending on the type of ASMR video they are filming, they might use household items to elicit the tingling sensation. A large portion of ASMR videos are one-sided role-play videos based on various scenarios, including personal grooming scenarios, spa and guided meditation scenarios, eating textured food, and tapping and scratching various items. Joceline Andersen compares ASMR to the children’s game “dot dot line line”,

Tapping fingers recreate spiders crawling, and a slow caress becomes the dripping of a slimy egg. The rhyme calls on a sensory experience of contact—with another person and by extension with the unusual or feared substances they tell a story about—to induce shivers, or shiveries, as the rhyme goes. The focused attention on the hands as they draw on the skin, the anticipation of described sensations, and the emotional investment in storytelling combine to create the shiveries. The shiveries is an affective experience that demonstrates the links between affect and emotion: without the story, the taps and pats are only a friend’s touch; without the touch, there are no crawling spiders, just a story. In the case of the children’s rhyme, role-play demonstrates the importance of emotional content in inducing a physiological sensation of the shiver. (Andersen 684)

It is thought that these responses differ from a game like “dot dot line line” and ASMR videos because of a lack of physical touch with the audio-visual version of the ‘game’, which adds to the difficulty of finding real scientific evidence that these triggers have any substantial effect on the body. Although there has yet to be unyielding scientific evidence of the tingles and responses associated with ASMR, “the ASMR community has tried to ground their discussions of the experience in scientific terms that suggest empirical proof of its existence… in fact, no research has been published by the scientific community, [but] the name ASMR, while borrowed from science, dates back to 2009 when the founder of asmr-research.org coined the term as “a more polite term for ‘orgasm’” (Andersen 686). Scientifically, autonomous responses refer to uncontrolled reflexes, similar to a tap on the knee and the swinging of the leg, breathing, or vomiting—all directed by the brain. Although usually seen as a gimmick or as a means of amusement, more scientific studies are being done to legitimize ASMR and the physiological responses it elicits. In a 2019 study done in China with a total of 807 Chinese participants, 435 of whom watched ASMR videos while the remaining 372 did not. This study assessed the intensity and duration of tingling in participants—evaluating two different types of ASMR videos and one control group. The participants’ arousal intensity was measured through a self-reported intensity measurement on a 9-point scale (0-8). Across the board, those who watched ASMR videos, regardless of the type of ASMR, felt more intense arousal than those who did not watch ASMR, including the control group. Mengjie Liu and Qiang Zhou quoted Smith and Snider in their academic research, “What ASMR evokes is the ability to pay attention to daily noise production and create an emotional response for the audience: these sounds are intimate because the listener has to be close enough to hear them.” (Liu & Zhou 2019).

Within this ever-growing genre of videos and sound, ASMR can be split into multiple distinctive sectors—all representing different purposes of watching or listening. One particularly popular division of ASMR videos is geared towards promoting sleep—similar to white noise. The triggers used in sleep ASMR videos tend to not include any or much spoken words from the content creator, rather majority of the sleep videos are slow and calming noises from everyday objects around the house. When looking up ‘Sleep ASMR Videos” many of them are intitled with ‘(no talking)’ so listener/watchers know what they are about to enjoy. It is the sounds the objects make that soothe people into a deep sleep rather than someone’s voice. It is the manipulation of humans on the sonic world that elicit these physiological triggers as without the human, there would be no sound coming from these inanimate objects—“by analyzing both sonic practices and the discourses and institutions that describe them, it redescribes what sound does in the human world, and what humans do in the sonic world” (Sterne 2). Another prominent division of ASMR videos are those of people eating textured food, including honeycomb, aloe vera, boba (tapioca) balls, and most famously, pickles. It is suggested that listeners use headphones while they watch/listen to ASMR videos to get the full effect of the sounds coming from the mouth of the content creator or objects they use as triggers. Headphones in this case are used as a means to make the tingles stronger and hear the noises more clearly but the question of secrecy and control comes into play as well—"headphones are an obvious method of exercising autonomy, control—choosing what you’ll hear and when… defensive; users insist upon privacy (you can’t hear what I hear, and I can’t hear you) in otherwise lawless and unpredictable spaces” (Petrusich). Although the mystery of ASMR and its effect on the human body continues, this paper outlines its popularity, the emergence of new studies coming to light and the role that sound plays in everyday life, from sleep to entertainment.

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