

# Examining ASMR Impact of Youtube Reviews on the Brand Recall and Retail Store Visit among Female University Students

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## ABSTRACT

ASMR is a novel stimulus, which can be explained by flow concept, has gained popularity among Millennials. Thus, this study examines the impact of ASMR on evaluation of reviews on Youtube and its consequent impact on brand recall and retail store visit as explained by Consumer Culture Theory. A survey was conducted on university female students representing Millennials aged between 18 – 25 years, who were exposed to either an ASMR or Non-ASMR cosmetic review. They were subsequently asked to rate the messages. It is found that ASMR was rated less than Non-ASMR in terms of information while ASMR was rated higher in terms of emotion, which are significant in the dimensions of fun, exciting, and thrilling. A follow-up qualitative study was conducted. The findings indicate that ASMR is successful in attracting attention and interest in the brand leading higher recall and visit to the retail store. ASMR is suitable for both new and existing brands, however, the message should be concise and straight to the point. Future studies could examine the need for using spokesperson in the ASMR clip, desirable characteristics of ASMRtists, brand elements that need to be presented, and subsequent brand impact such as purchase and engagement

## Keywords

ASMR, Youtube Reviews, Brand Recall, Retail Store Visit, Millennials, Flow Concept, Consumer Culture Theory.

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## Introduction

Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) was coined by Jenn Allen, the founder of the ASMR website (Cheadle, 2012). ASMR content are produced by “ASMRtists”, who engage in a range of activities including tapping fingernails on boxes or speaking in whispered tones in order to encourage viewers to focus on the sounds (Cheadle, 2012). According to Lochte et al. (2018) sound is one of the main components of ASMR content. As a result, “ASMRtists” have to make sure that they avoid loud noises opting to whisper softly. As for the second component, the visual must be slow and deliberate. The third component is the atmosphere, which has to be relaxing as explained by Barratt, Spence, and Davis (2017). Barratt and Davis (2015) explained that ASMR audio component combined with certain visuals trigger tingling sensations that elicit positive feelings can be explained by the concept of flow, which is a form of enjoyment.

ASMR content is usually found in YouTube, where influencer marketing is important, which is defined as using people, who are influential online to share brand content with their followers as a form of sponsored content. These influencers tend to be viewed as knowledgeable sources of information among their followers thus their views have both direct and indirect effects on the purchase decision (Tuten & Solomon, 2017). Thus, influencers are persuasive in the same way as celebrity endorsers, which can be explained by Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) positing that consumption is embedded in the context, symbolic, and experiences of acquiring, purchasing, consuming, and subsequent disposing of the product (Joy & Li, 2012; Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

ASMR thus makes use of social media marketing to create, communicate, deliver, and exchange offerings of value

(Tuten and Solomon, 2017). Kotler and Armstrong (2016) explained that in the context of modern marketing, it is imperative to create, share, and curate brand content as well as to distribute relevant content from other sources in order to create a continuous conversation with the consumer. This content has to be of value to consumers for it to be shared within their social network (Tuten and Solomon, 2017).

ASMR is particularly effective among Millennials, who tend to be more engaged with online communications through which they can be persuaded to buy products (Chu & Kamal, 2011). Millennials differ from their predecessors because they are more sophisticated due to their connectivity to the world through the Internet from a young age (Mundel, Huddleston, & Vodermeier, 2017). As a result, access to the Internet becomes an important part of their lives since it is the main source of their information (Pitta, 2012). They tend to form strong feelings and have relationships with brands that fulfill their needs (Morton, 2002). Therefore, selecting university students, which represent the Millennial demographics group is appropriate in examining the impact of ASMR on the brand.

As a result of its growth marketers have started to show interest in using ASMR as a communications tool. The very first ASMR advertising was done for Dove Chocolate in 2015 by BBDO (Beijing). The ASMR advertising that claims to have resulted in increase sales is the 25-minute IKEA ASMR selling “IKEA dorm room solutions”. According to a report on CNBC, IKEA had a 27 percent increase on dorm items over their previous year sales. Another ASMR advertising piece that has propelled the concept to become widely discussed among marketers is the Michelob ULTRA, organic beer, aired during the Super Bowl. Despite these success cases, there were also ASMR advertising that were not successful.

Therefore, this study aims to examine what type of brand consequences can be produced by ASMR messages, which is one of the major contributions of the study. The second contribution is the development of guidelines for using ASMR messages in branding. This includes tips on the length and elements necessary in the message. Finally, the study provides insights into the necessity in using spokesperson in the branded ASMR messages.

## Literature Review

ASMR has been broadly defined as sensory phenomenon wherein tingling sensations are elicited in response to certain auditory and visual triggers, which is in line with flow (Barratt & Davis, 2015). According to Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2014) flow has two components in terms of active performance, which are feelings of operating at peak performance and passive experience wherein the feeling of time passes at an altered rate. The relationship between these two states have been studied in the context of sports, education. Flow has been categorized in the field of positive psychology to examine happiness, creativity, subjective well-being, and fun. Suitable experiences would lead to happiness and impressiveness, which leads to the feeling of being part of that activity even if large sums of money have to be paid (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Thus, it would be of interest to study to understand the nature of ASMR as stimuli and the resulting audience experience. Barratt and Davis (2015) focused on the existence of the phenomenon and explaining how ASMR is enjoyable creating flow, where passing of time is felt at an altered rate through a fun experience. However, there is still a lack of research in understanding ASMR effects and consequent consumer physiological responses (Lochte et al., 2018; Poerio et al., 2018; Fredborg et al., 2018; McErlean, & Banissy, 2018).

Consumer Culture Theory explains consumption as being imbued in the contextual and symbolic experiences that result from the branded interaction such as brand recall (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Therefore, the consumption is rooted in the context, symbolism, and experience, which might lead to subsequent store visit (Joy & Li, 2012; Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Hower and Brownlie (2010) create meaning for the brand through their own social interactions. One of the social influences of the consumer in particular Millennials would be the use of product reviews. These reviews usually created by influencers on YouTube provide information, symbolic meaning, and vicarious experience of using the product.

Experience is particularly important in hedonic consumption, which includes tastes, sounds, scents, tactile impressions, and visual images describing consumption that satisfies emotional wants (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). Therefore, based on the definition of ASMR as utilizing both audio and visual components in creating arousal (tingling feeling) (Barratt & Davis, 2015), the study explores its effectiveness in communications. In addition, the study explores whether the concept of flow (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014) or enjoyment experienced by those exposed to ASMR has an impact on persuasion. As social media platforms are gaining popularity in creating capital in terms of knowledge and opinions in particular

through product reviews (Thaichon, Liyanaarachichi, Quach, Weaven, & Bu, 2019), it becomes the context for the study.

Therefore, this study expands on this research gap by examining the impact of ASMR messages on the brand.

The research objectives are defined as follows:

- 1) To examine the effectiveness of ASMR messages compared to non-ASMR messages in terms of functional information.
- 2) To examine the effectiveness of ASMR messages compared to non-ASMR messages in terms of emotion.
- 3) To explore the impact of ASMR messages on brand recall.
- 4) To explore the impact of ASMR messages on retail store visit.

## Research Hypotheses

Based on the aforementioned review, consumers experience the brand through all the senses. Therefore, the use of ASMR can simulate the sense of touch through the sounds of knocking or scratching, which is a part of the consumer perception of quality. Poerio et al. (2018) found that ASMR resulted in higher levels of excitement, thus audiences would be more receptive of the messages as explained by flow. In addition, CCT explains that consumer behavior from information search to purchase and subsequent actions are rooted in the experience, which is enjoyable in the case of ASMR (Joy & Li, 2012). As a result, the hypothesis would be defined as follows:

H1: ASMR reviews are rated better in terms of information than Non-ASMR reviews.

H2: ASMR reviews are rated better in terms of emotion than Non-ASMR reviews.

H3: ASMR reviews result in better recall of the brand than Non-ASMR reviews.

H4: ASMR reviews result in retail store visit of the brand than Non-ASMR reviews.

## Research Methodology

In line with Cash, Heisick, and Papesh (2018), students would be used in this study in exchange for credits in a marketing course in an international university. Participants would be randomly assigned to the different treatment conditions. There are 102 female university students representing the Millennials between 18 – 25 years of age involved in this study; 50 respondents are in the ASMR setting while 52 respondents are in the Non-ASMR setting. The stimulus was selected based on the ASMR characteristics defined by Barratt and Davis (2015). The clip used for the study had to have whispering, crisp sounds, together with slow and repetitive movements in a relaxing atmosphere. The candidate clips were drawn based on their viewership as a result candidate clips came from famous “ASMRtists” such as ASMR Darling, Gibi, and Tati. Three coders were used to identify the presence of the ASMR characteristics, similarity to respondents, and content that would match up with regular product recommendations. The result was the selection of a clip from ASMR Darling reviewing the Anastasia eyeshadow palette sold at Sephora, a cosmetic retail store. The coders also identified three more

clips, which had similar content for comparison in the study. The Non-ASMR clip was a regular review of the same product as the ASMR clip, which had the same actions in reviewing the product. The only difference was the sound, which is the main difference of ASMR.

The message context would be a 15-minute edit of content from Greta Thundberg’s speech to the United Nations with product reviews between the content to simulate the YouTube environment where ads can appear during the content. After the experiment providing their views of the Greta Thundberg speech, the participants filled out a questionnaire with demographics data, shopping behavior, and rated the product recommendation they saw. After one week a follow up questionnaire would ask whether they visited the retailer and made a subsequent purchase of the product category advertising they saw.

### Research Findings

Of the 102 respondents in the study, a majority are Thai (74.7%). Students from other countries include China, Myanmar, South Korea, and India. The demographic results show that the respondents frequently watched product reviews 2-3 times a week (34.58%) followed by everyday (14.02%) and once a week (14.02%). In addition, the respondents buy cosmetic products once in every 2-3 months are the majority (38.82%). This is followed by 2-3 times a month (24.30%), and once a month (24.30%). Moreover, most of the respondents use beauty bloggers as the source of information when buying cosmetics (59.81%). The average of the respondents is 19.96 or approximately 20 years of age. This confirms that they are in the range of Millennials. It is found that the ASMR group has better recall of the brand and the retailer than the Non-ASMR group. From observation of the two research conditions, it has been found that the ASMR group are interested in the content, which might explain the higher recall. This is similar to Poerio et al. (2018), which found that ASMR resulted in higher levels of excitement.

The research findings show that in terms of information, which includes effectiveness, helpful, and functional Non-ASMR is rated better (refer to Table I). Thus, H1 is not supported. In terms of necessary the ratings are about the same. In terms of the emotional aspect, which includes fun, exciting, delightful, thrilling, and enjoyable. Thus, H2 is supported. However, further examination of the dimensions in information, the aspect of necessary is about the same between the two groups, which is information. Interestingly, practical, which is also an information aspect is rated highly in ASMR. The three emotion elements of fun, exciting, and thrilling are significantly different between the ASMR and Non-ASMR groups with p-value less than 0.05.

**Table I:** Information and Emotional Dimensions Ratings

| Condition     | Non-ASMR | ASMR |
|---------------|----------|------|
| Effectiveness | 3.87     | 3.76 |
| Helpful       | 3.63     | 3.57 |
| Functional    | 3.87     | 3.70 |
| Necessary     | 3.31     | 3.47 |
| Practical     | 3.25     | 3.74 |
| Fun           | 2.88     | 3.74 |
| Exciting      | 2.73     | 3.66 |

|            |      |      |
|------------|------|------|
| Delightful | 3.17 | 3.45 |
| Thrilling  | 2.52 | 3.50 |
| Enjoyable  | 3.19 | 3.60 |

In the ASMR setting 66% of the respondents can remember the brand of the product (higher than Non-ASMR at 65%) while 96% can remember the brand and know the name of the retailer, where the product is sold (compared to Non-ASMR group at 94%). However, since the numbers are quite close there is no support for H3.

After one week, a subsequent follow-up qualitative study was conducted. The Non-ASMR group did not report going to the retail store, while those exposed to ASMR (38%) visited cosmetic stores in the following week and 73.68% of this group made a purchase. This shows support for H4. Of this number 36.84% visited Sephora compared to EVEANDBOY, a local cosmetic store that is more popular. The interesting figure is that the conversion or sales in Sephora is 57.14%, which is slightly higher than 54.55% in EVEANDBOY. Although this is not conclusive evidence but ASMR appears to trigger category needs, which may have stimulated respondents to visit the cosmetic stores and make subsequent purchase. This is in line with previous research, which found that satisfaction with the luxury’s brand communications would result in positive antecedents of favorable attitudes towards the brand leading eventually to purchase (Thaichon et al., 2019).

Respondents (100%) indicated that the sounds used in ASMR helps to draw the attention of the audience. In addition, all of them reported that the sound has to be accompanied by equally interesting or beautiful visuals. However, the human presence component is not necessary. When asked what sounds they thought would be useful in communicating about the product, they indicated that it should be sounds associated with the use of the product such as opening the lipstick, flipping the compact case, or knocking the bottle of perfume. They indicated that in the category of cosmetics, wherein packaging is important, it also helps to indicate quality. Based on their experience, the sound of materials such as glass or high-quality plastic can be used to convey perceived product quality. According to the respondents ASMR is better suited for advertising than product reviews. This is because they expect to hear the information clearly rather than having to listen to whispers and other sounds in the process. Therefore, using ASMR in advertising should be short in order not to bore the audience. With regards to whether ASMR was better suited for new or established brands, respondents explained that it worked for both in different ways. For established brands ASMR can be used as a means to complement other brand communications since it can make the brand more interesting. ASMR used in new brands can help to draw attention of the consumer to the brand.

Using the Tree Map analysis in Nvivo software to analyze the interview verbatim content, it is found that ASMR is related to the sound triggering thinking about the product then the brand. The thoughts are primarily related to the products mentioned in the clip that they have watched. The analysis reveals the importance of interesting presentation of the product, which grabs attention and subsequently provides information on how to use it. In addition, ASMR



should be complimented by nice visuals to stimulate positive liking feelings.

### Conclusions And Recommendations

Research findings show that ASMR strongly grabs attention and attracts the audience by generating interest in the product then the brand, which leads to store visit. This is in line with Chantamas, Sajampun, and Phunthasaen (2019) found that Millennials tend to search for product information and reviews on the Internet prior to going to the physical store. Although ASMR messages are slightly less effective than Non-ASMR messages in terms of effectiveness, practical, and functional, it is not statistically significant. The aspects of fun, exciting, and thrilling are statistically significant reflecting the strength of ASMR in eliciting emotions, which is in line with Consumer Culture Theory. Also, ASMR is suitable in triggering the product category needs. It is a novelty that suits the needs of Millennials. In the course of the ASMR communications the audience can enjoy the novelty whilst learning about the quality of the product and how to use it.

From the study the following recommendations can be made for using ASMR in marketing communications:

- 1) ASMR is suitable for generating attention and interest in the product category and brands but it is necessary to be complemented with visuals that facilitate recall.
- 2) ASMR is better suited for advertising but it must be short making its point quickly.
- 3) ASMR can be used to highlight the product packaging because of the sounds made, which could be used to denote quality.

### Limitations And Future Research Directions

As explained by Calder, Malthouse, and Schaedel (2009) when analyzing marketing communication messages, further research is always called for to examine different product categories. In addition, the convenience sampling design in using student samples might reduce the external validity of the study. Thus, future studies might collect data from those who are exposed to the ASMR reviews in "real" settings. In addition, the study used an ASMR clip with a ASMRtist, thus future studies might examine whether it is necessary to have a spokesperson in the message. Also, future research could explore the desirable characteristics of ASMRtists. Wilcox, Kim, and Sen (2009) found that products without brand image association (i.e. a clearly identifiable logo, symbol or any specific mark) are less apt to serve the social functions of self-expression and self-presentation. Therefore, future research could study the necessary branding elements that need to be presented in ASMR messages for positive brand consequences. The current study only examined the impact of ASMR messages on subsequent visit to the retail store, however future studies might examine effect on purchase intention or purchase. Finally, since ASMR messages are native to the online context, its impact on engagement with the brand online explored.

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